A Return to the Ground

Movement, Land, and Modes of Existence in Nkambeni, South Africa

Minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master of Arts (MA) specialising in Anthropology

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of land in Nkambeni, a rural chieftaincy in northeastern South Africa with a history of colonial and apartheid displacement and enclosures, to engage the question of being – approached here, following Bruno Latour, as modes of existence. Based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork, with farming and gardening as entry points, the dissertation argues that land reveals movement – conceptual, spatial, and relational – as central to the shaping of reality in Nkambeni. These movements are traced through the flows of knowledge, soil, and water, foregrounding tensions between modernist and otherwise ways of being. Such entanglements point to a compositeness, building on Francis Nyamnjoh's articulation of the concept, where existence does not emerge through commensurability but through continuous movements across difference. In response, the study proposes a methodological framework grounded in movement itself – not only as an analytic but as a moral and ethical orientation, where participation demands a form of 'becoming with' that entails an obligatory, often messy, and even violent reciprocity. Anna Tsing's 'multispecies attunement' is central to this approach, evoking a sensitivity to human and more-than-human entanglements through that which lay just beyond perceptibility in this ever-shifting landscape. It unsettles hegemonic framings of space and place as fixed, knowable, or enclosed, offering instead a methodology that remains accountable to the frictions and uncertainties of the field.

To this end, the dissertation rethinks land not as a passive backdrop but as an active participant in shaping being, revealing the limits of modernist dualisms that separate subject from object, human from non-human, substance from medium, real from symbolic, fixed from fluid. Here, two modes of existence emerged as central to this analysis: indebtedness and metamorphoses. The mode of indebtedness, revealed through the soil, animated ongoing movement across the compositeness of give and take, life and death, pointing to an entangled form of sustenance that unfolded in a polyphony of times. The mode of metamorphoses, revealed through, with, and as water, pointed to how power shifted and enabled transformation, transfiguration, and transubstantiation beyond fixed hierarchical binaries. These modes demonstrate – however partially sensed – how existence in Nkambeni, through movement, was shaped in ways that exceeded what modernist articulations of the world can encapsulate, even as it remained fixed within it. Thus, the study critically reflects on the ontological categories of space and place, time, and ideas of power embedded in fixed binary hierarchies. Here, the title, *A Return to Ground*, becomes a discursive and recursive motif that continuously questions the starting point from which to theorise being in a world, or worlds, where aspects of reality persistently remain just beyond reach.

Ultimately, the research contributes to emerging decolonial scholarship in the humanities by offering a recursive account of movement and compositeness as both method and encounter, enabling an exploration of ontological questions in postcolonial Africa. This study is not a mere rejection of modernity; it attends to its enduring effects while tracing how existence in Nkambeni exceeds its binary logics through composite, more-than-human engagements with land. Following land's generativity – through practice, weeds, soil, and water – it rethinks how difference and sameness are lived in composition. This intervenes in broader discourses on decolonial thought, the ontological turn, pluriversality, and ethics, by pushing the boundaries

from which ontological and epistemological claims can be reimagined – not as fixed, but as moving and entangled in compositeness.

Key words:
Movement, Land, Compositeness, Ontology and Being, Multispecies Ethnography, Nkambeni

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Introduction

Overview and Main Argument

In this dissertation, I explore land in relation to questions of being in Nkambeni, a rural chieftaincy in north-eastern South Africa, close to where I grew up. I argue that land revealed movement as a central part of shaping existence here. My research is based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork, where I employed participant observation and movement as methodology (see Chapter 1). Here, in a seemingly conflicting moment, I encountered movement in the field through my embrace of movement as method, while simultaneously embracing the method through my encounter with it – a convergence that, drawing from Francis Nyamnjoh (2017a,b, 2018, 2019, 2023), I describe as compositeness: a complement, in this instance, of encounter and method. This concept is central to my argument, shaping and shaped by the ways movement unfolded in Nkambeni, which I elaborate on below. Alongside Nyamnjoh's notion of incompleteness, compositeness frames my understanding of forms of life – including land itself – as provisional, entangled, and dependent on difference.

To develop the main argument, I draw on Bruno Latour's (2013a) articulation of modes of existence, extending it ethnographically through the lived dynamics of land in Nkambeni. By modes of existence, I refer to the various ways being is enacted, encountered, and made intelligible – not as fixed essences but as contingent, relational practices. Latour's work enabled me to think of ground, as my dissertation title suggests, not as a stable foundation but as always in motion, always in the making. This, in turn, shaped how I traced moments of movement: necessarily partial and incomplete; never fully capturing the unfolding dynamism I encountered (I return to this point below, as the partiality of these glimpses is central to my argument). My aim is to show how in Nkambeni, existence emerged through a continuous interplay and tension – or indeed compositeness – between dominant modernist ontology and ontologies of the otherwise (Povinelli, 2012), from which movement arose.

Fully attending to this unfolding compositeness, and rethinking the limits of modernist dualisms, it became necessary, following Anna Tsing (2015), to move away from a human-centred ethnographic approach and analysis (see also Stengers, 2010; Haraway, 2016; Latour, 2017; De la Cadena & Blaser, 2018; Nyamnjoh, 2018; Green, 2020). I was particularly drawn to Tsing's idea of multispecies attunement, which implores a finer sensitivity to the entanglements between human and beyond-human forms of life – entanglements inseparable from any serious engagement with land. This attentiveness was not incidental but essential; without it, the argument developed here could not take shape.

In addition, since the enquiry is necessarily incomplete, it required some form of theoretical anchoring, even if only as a guiding reference – what Matei Candea (2018) refers to as "theoretical scaffolding" – to support the exploration as I moved through movement. To this end, the dissertation reflects on space and place, time, and power through the lens of land, developing these concerns across the respective body chapters. I attend particularly to the ways, however partially, in which each is articulated within modernist thought and, drawing on the

notion of compositeness, trace how they are refigured through modes of existence in Nkambeni that move beyond modernist rigidity.

I introduce these core ideas here not to resolve them, but to offer an initial orientation for thinking with the research question as it unfolds. Following the introduction of the research question in the next section, I will clarify the key concepts that guide the project – movement, land, modes of existence, and compositeness – by showing how the study evolved from inception, offering brief a historical backdrop of Nkambeni, and reviewing the literature that supports these concepts. I will then outline the dissertation's structure and the "methodic process" (Nyamnjoh, 2015a) through which I illustrate, though necessarily partial, that movement formed part in shaping existence in Nkambeni.

The Research Question

The central research question of this dissertation is: What does land in Nkambeni reveal of its modes of existence?

This question formed the conceptual core of my ethnographic fieldwork, and it is from this that the title – *A Return to the Ground* – becomes critical. While I elaborate further on the title in the following section, it already gestures toward both a literal and conceptual centring of land – the ground – within my analysis. It also points to a deeper concern: what might be revealed by returning to the conceptual basics, to the often-unexamined assumptions held about reality – assumptions from which knowledge, and indeed being, emerge. This study is not aimed at overhauling how existence is conceptualised, but it does aim to present what can be seen just beyond dominant assumptions of reality.

While this research question guided my project since the proposal phase, as elaborated on below, its meaning changed through my ethnographic encounters, where the implications of asking what land reveals began to shift as movement – conceptual, spatial, and relational – became the ground from which the question could be approached.

A Grounding for a Move to Movement (How the Dissertation Came About)

I grew up in a town bordering Nkambeni called Hazyview.[1] As one might expect, growing up in the area meant I was informed by the various dynamics that shaped it – particularly the seeming juxtaposition between town and village. Hazyview represented the town, while Nkambeni – encompassing the villages of Majika, Tshabalala, Mahushu, and Numbi – stood in for the village. This distinction often played out through the associations of town with whiteness and wealth, and village with blackness and poverty.[2] While Hazyview was not exclusively white in terms of its racial makeup, nor particularly affluent, it was, in general, wealthier than Nkambeni, encapsulating certain ideas of what it meant to be white – such as formalised land ownership, access to more developed infrastructure, and proximity to tourist

[1] Chapter 1 explores how this positionality shaped the research process.

[2] This also serves as a reflexive statement on how my own positionality – as a white-presenting researcher – mirrored this dynamic (see Chapter 1).

economies (see Nuttall, 2001; Ahmed, 2007; Jonker & Till, 2009; Meny-Gilbert & Chipkin, 2013). These were markers not just of material difference, but of a perceived modernity tied to whiteness (Akuffo, 2009; Miraftab, 2012). With few exceptions, the village was home primarily to black residents, a pattern shaped by its colonial and apartheid history (expanded on below).

Despite being almost geographically indistinguishable, Hazyview and Nkambeni – town and village – operated under entirely different land regimes. Hazyview fell under a full municipal system, where governmental authorities oversaw service delivery, and land was administered according to private ownership statutes. In contrast, Nkambeni was a chieftaincy, under the authority of a chief – a hereditary royal figure – where land was held communally and administered by the chief and his council (see Okoth-Ogendo, 1989; Mafeje, 2003; Blocher, 2006). This included responsibilities over land tenure, burial rights, building permissions, water connections, and land claims. To complicate things further, the municipality did extend some services into the villages, such as limited water supply and road maintenance, creating a kind of overlap between governance systems. These complexities surfaced in the tensions between modernist, liberal, and neoliberal ideologies of land production – such as formal state regulation, private property, and market-driven development – and customary frameworks of land use – including communal tenure, traditional authority, and ancestral ties (Cotula, Toulmin & Hesse, 2004; Jimu, 2012).

Of course, the distinction between village and town was never entirely rigid, which I expand on in Chapter 1 when problematising the notions of space and place. Movement between (and indeed beyond) these spaces revealed that they were co-constitutive. Within this layered distinction (or often indistinction) – which I encountered repeatedly during my fieldwork, extending beyond the framework of my upbringing in the area – land emerged as a central site of tension. It was this tension that first animated my interest in exploring what land might reveal about being in Nkambeni. When I began to confront this interest directly, through background research, literature review, and the early stages of drafting a proposal, the possibilities of land's significance in this area – and the complexity of how to position it – became increasingly apparent, particularly in relation to its recent history.

In Nkambeni, land was the historical backdrop from which displacement, exclusions, enclosures, power, and, whether directly or indirectly, life emerged. As Babe Mona, one of my interlocutors and an induna on the chief's council for the area of Majika where I spent much of my time during fieldwork, explained when I asked him about the history of the area: "They [the apartheid government] moved us here because of the land." It was not the best soil and rivers for planting (see Chapter 2). Since the arrival of colonisers in the early 1800s, tensions and violent encounters surrounding land have persisted.[3] Despite being home to various migrating groups, predominantly the Vatsonga and emaSwati (Schoeman, 2020), this area was perceived as empty and readily available for colonial appropriation (Bentsi-Enchill, 1965; Ittmann, Cordell & Maddox, 2010; Schoeman, 2020). Following this initial encounter and the

[3] This is not to suggest that land tensions did not exist prior to colonisation; throughout history, land has always been a site of tension (Mafeje, 2003). However, the specificities of the colonial encounter and its aftermath brought the contemporary land struggles into sharper focus (see Césaire, 1972; Ittmann, Cordell & Maddox, 2010).

later implementation of the 1913 Native Land Act, which barred 'non-white' populations from legally owning land in South Africa, the area remained sparsely populated (Schirmer, 2007). It was inhabited by agnatic farming clusters, with a few white settler farming communities and towns emerging in the broader region. At this time, the villages in the sense recognised today were not yet established (Tempelhoff, 2012). The various rivers and streams in Nkambeni, including the Nkambeni and Sabie Rivers, played an important part in organising farming activity and land use here (King, 2007; Tempelhoff, 2012; Schoeman, 2020).

In 1936, the area, with the Sabie and Nkambeni Rivers marking the boundaries between what would become Hazyview and Nkambeni, was designated for "black relocation" and would later be officially incorporated into the apartheid homeland of KaNgwane, specifically as the northern enclave of Nsikazi (King, 2006; Tempelhoff, 2012). Subsistence farming continued under these conditions (King, 2007). In the late 1950s and early 1960s, under the apartheid government's Agricultural Betterment Program (Letsoalo & Rogerson, 1982; De Wet, 1994, 1995), these agnatic clusters were forcibly relocated into 'formalised' villages, losing much of their historical farmland – I expand on this through the oral archive in Chapter 2 (see Mkhize, 2023; Zeitlyn, 2012). This resulted in catastrophic economic consequences (De Wet, 1991) and the breakdown of long-standing social relations, reflected, for example, in the rise of witchcraft accusations in neighbouring areas with comparable histories (Niehaus, 2001). Around this time, the four villages constituting the Nkambeni chieftaincy – Majika, Tshabalala, Mahushu, and Numbi – took shape.

During this intensified state intervention in rural spatial planning, customary land use persisted (Schirmer, 2007). In the new villages forms of subsistence farming continued – often referred to simply as "gardening" by my interlocutors – even as it shifted from earlier agnatic farming traditions to household-based backyard cultivation (Coetzer et al., 2010; Browett, 2023).[4] Historical ancestral graves located outside the homelands remained a source of concern, as I will discuss in Chapter 2, sustaining spiritual and genealogical ties to lands beyond the boundaries of the village (see Chapter 2 and James, 2009; Noyes, 2014). At the same time, new spiritualities and ancestral relations to land emerged within the villages, shaped by the continued authority of the chief (De Wet, 1991; Mafeje, 2003; Adams & Turner, 2005), the necessary forms of belonging tied to space in the wake of displacement (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999; Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 2000; Hinkson, 2017), and the way magic and witchcraft produced ways to negotiate radically altered worlds (Geschiere, 1997; Niehaus, 2001; Ashforth, 2005). Contrasting development trajectories became increasingly evident between the areas inside and outside the homeland due to this land enclosure (City of Mbombela Local Municipality, 2019; Nattrass & Seekings, 2001; Twine, 2005; Browett, 2023).

The forceful reorganisation of rural life – through spatial separation and the imposition of village formations – remained in place until the end of apartheid. Yet, as noted earlier with the enduring racialised distinction between 'town' as white and 'village' as black, the injustices and violences of these divisions still haunt these spaces (Niehaus, 2023). Though no longer

[4] In Nkambeni, "farming" and "gardening" were used interchangeably to describe crop cultivation for consumption. Gardening never referred to tending lawns or flowers, as limited water access made such practices rare. Farmers generally had larger plots for sale, while gardeners used backyard spaces mainly for consumption, occasionally selling surplus produce.

maintained through formal segregation laws, they now surface through contestations over the authenticity of customary law within chieftaincies (Adams & Turner, 2005; Blocher, 2006), in neoliberal development trajectories (Escobar, 2011; Moore, 2015; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2018), and in the broader failure of late liberalism to redress historical injustices (Povinelli, 2011, 2021; Canham, 2023).

Beyond personal experience or ethnographic curiosity, it became clear that land – both physically and conceptually – functioned as a key site where historical and contemporary tensions converge. It reflected not only the persistent configurations of colonial and apartheid-era spatiality, particularly the racialised geography of white and black spaces (King, 2006, 2007), but also deeper conflicts between modernist and otherwise ways of being, a tension echoed across postcolonial landscapes more broadly (Mbembe, 2001; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002; Nyamnjoh, 2017a; Canham, 2023).[5] Here, land revealed itself not merely as solum, the legal topsoil to which rights are assigned, but the living and decaying soil shaped by historical encounters (Okoth-Ogendo, 1989; Canham, 2023). It encompassed water that, in its permeability, nourished the soil and formed boundaries (Strang, 2011; Fontein, 2015; Hastrup & Hastrup, 2015), the ancestors, magic, and witchcraft tied to place (Englund, 1996; Geschiere, 1997; Jindra, 2005; Chao, 2018), and the intimate entanglements of social relations, belonging, and identity (Mafeje, 2003; Tallie, 2019). Crucially, it sustains life through agricultural practices – both small-scale subsistence farming and broader rural livelihoods – providing food, supporting livestock, and maintaining cycles of planting and harvesting that are as much about survival as they are about forms of continuity, meaning, and being (Burow, Brock & Dove, 2018; Tsai, 2019; Ofstehage, 2020).

Within this articulation, I initially considered a hauntological lens as my theoretical framework – one attentive to the deep-seated historical layers embedded in land as they surface in the present (see Derrida, 1994; Gordon, 2008; Klima, 2019; Good, Chiovenda & Rahimi, 2022). However, the fieldwork led me in a different direction. While the past remained deeply entangled in contemporary land relations in Nkambeni, which I explore further in Chapter 2, it was the immediacy of the present that most animated daily life. Practices surrounding land – particularly farming, which became the entry point for my ethnographic engagement – shaped the dominant imaginaries of my field site. In this sense, although the hauntological continues to echo throughout the dissertation, it never fully materialised as an analytical frame.

The ways in which everyday life centred on land compelled a different question: what does it mean to *turn,* and indeed *return*, to the ground? This question moved beyond merely considering the land's historical situatedness as a site of tension in Nkambeni and developed into a broader conceptual provocation. As Tim Ingold (2011) argues, life and being do not merely emerge on or with the land, but – as both substance and medium – *in* the land (see also Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Ingold, 2000). If land, then, serves as the lens through which to explore the lived realities of my field site – a return to the very ontological foundation of modernist thought, which distinguishes substance from medium, object from subject – how

[5] This tension has also found broader expression across a rising Anthropocene discourse in anthropology and related fields, through articulations such as Haraway's (2016) *Chthulucene*, Moore's (2016) *Capitalocene*, and Yusoff's (2018) *Billion Black Anthropocene*.

might it open up the ground from – or indeed in – which to think? Here, *return* began to take on the discursive weight imagined by Foucault (1969) – not as a simple act of going back to land, but as a recursive movement that continually questions the assumptions that make certain conclusions possible. The prefix *re* in return signals the incompleteness of this act, suggesting an ongoing process rather than a settled endpoint. In this way, my engagement with land from the start and the notion of return it evoked, pressed upon the ontological ground from which knowledge, both situated and otherwise, arose in my field site and, indeed, in this dissertation.

This starting point – unfixed as it were – held two concurrent considerations guiding this research. One enabled the recognition of an unfolding, emergent nature of existence instead of the complete and singular assumption of being that underpins dominant modernist thought (Strathern, 1980; Latour, 1991; Barad, 2007; Viveiros De Castro, 2015). Here, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) conception of *becoming* as ontology, Nyamnjoh's (2017b,a, 2018, 2023) theorisation of incompleteness – and, by extension, compositeness, which I elaborate on below – and Latour's (2013a) formulation of modes of existence as a way of acknowledging possibilities of being beyond rigid distinctions and categories, became particularly productive (see also Descola, 2014a; Holbraad, Pedersen & Castro, 2014; Kohn, 2015). Together, they allow for an articulation of realities that are alive to flux, and to the multiplicity of internal and external forces shaping not just social imaginaries but being itself (see also Tsing, 2005). As Pillen (2016: 106) argues, such a framing – or as I articulate it, a return – offers a powerful means of translating the scale of lived experience across different realities (see also Lloyd, 2011: 839), as highlighted in various anthropological works across South Africa and Africa, such as that of Niehaus (2005, 2012), Geschiere (1997, 2013), Rowlands and Warnier (1988), and Moore and Sanders (2001).

The other consideration that emerged from taking ground as a starting point involved a rethinking of land – not as a passive surface or mere resource for extraction embedded in a one-directional social relationship, but as something capable of affecting, responding to, and shaping the lives of those living upon and with it in *return* (Viveiros De Castro, 2004; Descola, 2010, 2014b; Haraway, 2015; Bubandt, 2017; Højrup & Swanson, 2018; Green, 2020). Here, Tsing's (2015) multispecies attunement entered the discussion, foregrounding a sensitivity to the entangled, ongoing processes through which humans and beyond-humans remain in constant formation – composing and recomposing themselves through movement, encounter, and coexistence (see also Haraway, 2008; De la Cadena, 2015a; Govindrajan, 2018; Howe, 2019). Or, as she puts it, the "open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life" (Tsing, 2015: 23). This extends Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) conception of assemblages as fluid meeting points and relates to the notion of compositeness I discuss below. Through this consideration, a multispecies approach began to shape both my fieldwork and this dissertation. This becomes especially evident in the following chapters, each of which centres on a different more-than-human figure: a pesky grass-weed, soil, and water, respectively.

Of course, even in returning to the conceptual ground, it is not possible to entirely dispense with all assumptions (Moore, 1999), but it is possible to remain attentive to what might emerge when certain assumptions are unsettled. This forms the underlying aim of the dissertation. Central to dominant ontological assumptions, particularly in the sciences (see Klingman, 2023;

Herrera, 2018) – and, by extension, to conventional ethnographic practice, often imagined as a literal return to the ground via the field site – are ideas of fixed and universal space, place, and linear time, along with the power hierarchies embedded within them (Fabian, 1983; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Malkki, 2007). These concepts, co-opted by modernist ontologies, have been folded into dominant political economies and capitalist schemas that privilege the here-and-now, the visible and measurable, the linear and the physical as the defining coordinates of reality. Yet even over a relatively short, two-month period of ethnographic fieldwork in Nkambeni, moments surfaced that put pressure on these hegemonic imaginaries. As has been explored in various anthropological works (see Ingold, 2007, 2011; Cerwonka & Malkki, 2008; Oswin, 2008; Rose, 2012; Tsing, 2015; Tsing, Mathews & Bubandt, 2019), the very constitution of categories like time, space, and power – and the limits to which they can be stretched – remains a critical point of inquiry. This dissertation extends and contributes to these questions, as a matter of returning to the ground. In my fieldwork, by focusing on land, such categories did not simply allude to something else; they revealed something more – where difference and sameness converged.

It is within this convergence that the possibilities of *movement* emerged – not only as a conceptual core of this dissertation but as something deeply grounded in the lived realities of Nkambeni, which I lay out in Chapter 1 and continue to trace throughout the dissertation. I take movement here as a way of engaging with difference without reinscribing the kind of radical alterity that Kurzwelly, Rapport, and Spiegel (2020) caution against. Drawing on Deleuze's (1994) argument of the entanglement between difference and repetition, movement becomes possible through recognising difference – between points, knowledges, understandings, and beings (see also Nyamnjoh, 2017a, 2023). Thus, this framing suggests that recognising difference does not necessarily entail irreconcilability or total incommensurability (see Povinelli, 2001; Englund, 2024). Rather, as I encountered movement during my fieldwork and position it in this dissertation, it points to a compositeness – a way of "being-as-other" (Latour, 2013a,b) or "knowing-as-relating" (Blaser, 2010). That is, continuous engagements that are relational, boundary-crossing, and always open to redefinition and re-composition in multiplicity.

This gestures back to the discursive nature of returning to the ground: a recursive movement in which this theory did not emerge solely from fieldwork, my upbringing in the area, or the history of land in Nkambeni, nor from literature or post-fieldwork analysis, but through a continual return or movement to the other – a dialogic process, a speaking *with* rather than *about*. While this section offers a kind of origin narrative and theoretical grounding from which to begin attending to the complexities I encountered in the field, the framing of movement provided here is necessarily incomplete – it unfolds throughout the dissertation, continuously shifting and taking shape as the exploration progresses. Thus, what appears to be a contradiction takes shape: I position *movement*, always open and in flux, as a *grounding*, something seemingly fixed or stable. Yet it is precisely in the coexistence and complement of such contradictions – what I frame as composite – that a way of engaging with difference emerges, one that does not treat it as bounded alterity (Bessire & Bond, 2014) or reduce it to the anthropological "savage slot" (Trouillot, 2003). Such conceptual movement, as Ingold (2011) argues, like the act itself, resists containment (see also Ingold, 2007). Its contours remain

elusive, even though in certain moments I attempt to trace the inklings of how it operated in my field site – both physically and conceptually as composites – these efforts, as Nyamnjoh (2017a: 258) would say, are "temporary manifestations of what is otherwise a flow of constant change."

A Note on Compositeness

Nyamnjoh's (2017a, 2023) articulation of incompleteness provides the starting point for my use of compositeness in this dissertation. Such incompleteness should not be mistaken for a universal claim that assumes a common ontology. Rather, it is a provisional position from which to consider the possibility that no claim can stand alone as singular or complete. It unsettles the epistemological certainties of modernist ontology, which stakes its authority on claims of completeness, coherence, and singularity, as previously discussed, providing a way to explore possibilities beyond these rigid enclosures. This rigidity is most pronounced in the dualisms that underpin modernist thinking – binaries that presume meaning only arises in opposition: nature/culture, self/other, mind/body, subject/object, real/symbolic, substance/medium (Strathern, 1980; Latour, 1991, 2013a; Descola, 2014b). By beginning from incompleteness, these oppositions are rendered less absolute. Their boundaries become, in a way, porous. Tsing (2015) calls this entanglements or contaminations; Haraway (2016), relatedness; Stengers (2010), cosmopolitical contingency. Each point to the possibility of something more generative than oppositional binaries – a mode of thinking attuned to overlaps, friction, and transformation (see also Tsing, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 2018; Tsing, Mathews & Bubandt, 2019).

Throughout my fieldwork, I repeatedly came across such seemingly oppositional binaries – village and town, insider and outsider, presence and absence, location and dislocation, giving and taking, linear and nonlinear, life and death, power and powerlessness – each of which becomes an important entry point in the ethnographic chapters to follow. Yet, in my encounter with movement, these pairings were never really static oppositions. They were co-constituted, interdependent, and complementary – in other words, composite. This articulation is perhaps best illustrated through Nyamnjoh's (2017b) analysis of Amos Tutuola's (1952) *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, where the drinkard's life of endless drinking is only possible through the labour of his counterpart: the expert tapster who dedicates himself to tapping palm-wine. These roles, seemingly opposed, only acquire meaning through their relationality. Each is the condition of possibility for the other.

In this way, my encounter with movement in Nkambeni revealed the compositeness of what might otherwise be seen as oppositional; and, true to the nature of composition, it was precisely this compositeness that, in turn, enabled movement. It opened up the possibility for navigating between and beyond, rather than within, binary logics – which is why a multispecies approach, beyond reinscribing the human/animal, culture/nature dichotomies, became essential. Indeed, any theory of incompleteness falls short if confined to the human alone. It must extend to the pluralities of human and beyond-human beings whose lives are dynamically assembled through entangled encounters and tensions (Haraway, 2008, 2016; Tsing, 2015; Nyamnjoh, 2018). These are movements between one another, across boundaries, rather than within fixed

categories of species, spaces and places, temporalities, power, and ways of knowing (see Vaughn, Guarasci & Moore, 2021; Howe, Diamanti & Moore, 2023). It is from this position that I am able to begin my argument for a recognition of realities that exceed the *a priori* assumptions of completeness and singularity underpinning the hegemonic 'world' imagined by modernity (Blaser, 2010; De la Cadena & Blaser, 2018).

Along similar lines, César Giraldo Herrera (2018) argues that decolonising knowledge is not simply a matter of rejecting modernity. Rather, it entails a kind of reclamation – a recognition of knowledge as always in motion, enriched through cross-pollination and difference (Hountondji, 1997; Nyamnjoh, 2001). In line with this, the dissertation is not a wholesale rejection of modernist ontology; indeed, I engage deeply with it. In Nkambeni, the implications of modernist binaries, development discourses, and capitalist logics are not abstract – they are lived; as I will illustrate through the moments where space and place were fixed and bounded, time linear, and power reliant on binary hierarchies. To ignore them would be to miss the mark. Yet, on the other side of that same coin, otherwise ways of being and knowing continued to resonate in my field site – not only in face value 'otherworldly' registers such as *sangoma* (traditional healer) rituals, ancestors, witchcraft, magic, or unknown water creatures, but also in the everyday tensions that exceeded the clean lines of modernist rationality. It is in this coexistence – between movement and compositeness, rigidity and flexibility, modernity and the otherwise – that the ontological tensions I encountered begin to take shape. These modes of existence, as Latour (2013a) suggests, deserve to be taken seriously, even when they do not conform to modernist 'standards.' What I aim to offer, then, is not a definitive ontological claim, but the possibility of one – subtle, shifting, and never complete. An articulation that resists being beholden to modernity's illusion of total understanding, while never entirely escaping it either. From this tension, movement arose, shaping existence in Nkambeni.

A Note on Modes of Existence

In seeking to bring – even if just a trace of – an otherwise ontology, along with its cosmological and epistemological possibilities, into conversation with dominant modernism, I draw on Latour's (2013a) conception of modes of existence. Latour borrows this from Étienne Souriau's (2009 [1943]) articulation of the possibilities of multiple regimes – or modes – of truth, each with their characteristics, and conditions of felicity and infelicity, which must be understood, adhered to, and respected (Latour, 2013b: 287). Though this dissertation does not centre on semiotics, even within its discursive nature, this framing provides a tonal shift that enables ontological experiences – experiences of being, becoming, and existence – to be addressed in a way that avoids totalising explanations (Viveiros De Castro, 2004). It opens space to navigate alternative value systems or modes of existence without reducing them to mere alterity. Instead, it invites deeper engagement with difference: not as static or separate, but as entangled through movement. By focusing on two modes – indebtedness and metamorphoses – I gesture toward precisely this: how existence in Nkambeni was shaped across entangled realities wherein movement unfolded.

Yet, as others have shown, translating the otherwise ethnographically involves more than simply making room (Povinelli, 2012; De la Cadena, 2015b). Holbraad et al. (2014) argue that it requires an element of disfiguration (see also Viveiros De Castro, 2015; Descola, 2014a). Following Edward Said's (1989: 225) insistence that the "other" must not be treated as ontologically given, this entails tracing how boundaries are crossed and how "other ways of telling" arise through such crossings – in effect, a disfiguration of the modernist narrative itself (see Blaser, 2010). It requires, as Candea (2018: 219) notes, a "theoretical scaffolding" that he links to Latour's earlier work on Actor-Network Theory (1996, 2005, 2013a), which laid the foundation for his elaboration of modes of existence. Such a scaffolding approach allows one to begin with a provisional theoretical frame, apply it in the field, and, crucially, enable the empirical encounter to reshape or even disfigure the frame. Here, fieldwork does not simply affirm a theory; it reconstitutes it (Malkki, 2007). To this end, the reflections on space and place, time, and power presented in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, respectively, are not exhaustive theoretical models, but reference points. They illustrate the subtleties of compositeness as it operated through movement between modernist and otherwise ontologies. Differently put, they form the conceptual scaffolding through which I explore how movement unfolded in the everyday and entangled modes of existence I encountered in Nkambeni.

Dissertation Outline: Weaving Movement and Compositeness

In addition to this Introduction and the Conclusion, the dissertation is structured into three chapters, tracing what Nyamnjoh (2015a: 50) calls the "methodic process of critical, systematic questioning" that has come to define this project, while also embracing the "humility of doubt, the force of evidence, and the possibility of error." Writing with movement has been tumultuous, ever-shifting, and often elusive; thus, the humility of doubt became essential, allowing for moments of error where movement remained just out of grasp. Yet it was precisely in these moments – paradoxically or indeed in compositeness – that the central argument was reinforced: that existence in Nkambeni was shaped through and by movement.

This is particularly evident in Chapter 1, where I explore how I encountered and embraced movement in simultaneous contradiction. Rather than a conventional methods chapter where fieldwork practices are simply recounted, this chapter forwards the central argument of movement through and with compositeness by tracing how my changing methodological approaches through an embrace of nimble-footed and nimble-mindedness (Nyamnjoh, 2017a, 2023), ethical considerations, and my insider-outsider positionality came to form crucial "intersubjective" moments of encounter (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Centring my engagement with a pesky grass-like weed, I reflect on how knowledge arose through movement in my field site, making an ontological shift to point to the compositeness of fixed and unfixed space and place. This also evoked a morality of reciprocal obligations within movement, which the saying *tandla tiyagezana* ("hands wash each other") pointed to – where violence and prosperity, loss and gain, obligation and release, co-constitute rather than oppose one another.

Chapter 2 turns to soil and introduces the first mode of existence: the mode of indebtedness. Here, I show how soil in Nkambeni revealed the messiness, compromise, and exuberance of movement – how the compositeness between give and take, life and death, produced generative

life through entangled forms of sustenance. It takes the messiness and violence of movement further by pointing to the necessity of compromise within compositeness. These movements through the compositeness of exchange and life and death, revealed inklings of nonlinear time emerging even as it remained linear in my field site. Soil, then, exposed how Nkambeni's existence, shaped by movement, depended on harnessing life-sustaining forces across a polyphony of times.

Chapter 3 centres water, introducing the last mode of existence: the mode of metamorphoses. As a part of land, water opens an exploration of power in Nkambeni. This chapter puts pressure on dominant power structures relying on modernist dualist hierarchies, probing how, in my field site, powers that did not strictly adhere to these binaries, yet could not entirely escape them, came into being through movement. Magic, dreams, and witchcraft – which I encountered through water – emerge as ways to think through the transformations, transfigurations, and transubstantiations that movements of power brought about both within and beyond the material in Nkambeni. Even as the chapter stretches into conceptual terrain, such movements, in their compositeness, had distinctly material consequences – often where violence lay. By recognising the entanglement of the seen and unseen, I attend to the messiness and harm that accompanied these morphic powers, as made evident in irrigation practices and shifting gendered expectations.

In the Conclusion, I draw these strands together through the dissertation title – *A Return to the Ground*. Rather than offering a complete and settled understanding, the conclusion reflects the open-endedness that movement demands. In line with the discursive nature of *return*, each chapter speaks to the others, rubbing against one another in complement and friction. This is not to close off meanings but to make room for the possibilities of addressing the entanglements of otherwise ways of life in Nkambeni by being attuned to movement and its accompanying compositeness through land.

Each chapter weaves together ethnographic encounters and literature, drawing on conversations, shared experiences, sensory impressions, landscapes, and moments of "becoming with" (Haraway, 2008) my human and beyond-human interlocutors. Alongside my engagements with the grass-weed, the soil, and the water, Mandla, a farmer in Majika, became a central interlocutor, introducing me to key figures, guiding me through the intricacies of the chieftaincy, and occasionally assisting with translation.[6] Sedi, a farmer in Tshabalala, likewise became a close interlocutor, with much of our relationship forged through working together on the farm. Other human interlocutors – Nomvuyo, Blessing, Fankomo, Babe Mona, Ma Gertrude, Nikita, Pedni – and nonhuman ones – the Nkambeni ants and termites, the Nkambeni River, the Nchabane River, the tora plant – appear regularly throughout. Further informants such as Loazi, the Inhlukulo (Queen), Peter, Filemon, Frank, Minki, Lucas, Joseph, Mjabula, Nombela, Oscar, Pilato, Ma Siboyi, Ma Khoza, Ma Zola, Thabo, Themba, Thomas, and Winfred, contributed to this study and their narratives, insights, and presences are woven throughout this dissertation. Beyond these more tangible encounters, more elusive presences – ancestors, witches, premonitory snakes, dreamed crocodiles, and unseen water creatures

[6] I use my interlocutors' real names, as requested, except in cases like Sedi and Ma Zola, discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

encountered through the accounts of others – also shaped this ethnography, revealing the dense beyond-human entanglements that animated being in Nkambeni.

These layered and recursive histories, concepts, and encounters foregrounded in this introduction shape the discursive terrain upon which this dissertation unfolds. What follows, then, is not a search for definitive answers, but an ethnographic engagement with the ways land – as composite ground and figure; substance and medium – shaped being in Nkambeni through movement. Each chapter builds from this starting point, tracing how movement renders visible the composite modes of existence that emerged through land and, in keeping with the dynamics of compositeness, gave rise to movement in turn.

Chapter 1 – Knowing the Land: Methodology, Ethics, and the Groundwork of Movement

Summary Introduction

In this chapter, I outline why movement is a central concern in this dissertation and how the main argument that movement played a central role in shaping reality in Nkambeni emerged. I approach this through addressing the movements of knowledge in my field site, thereby tying it to broader conceptions of space and place.[7] As such, my methodological and ethical considerations are integral to this chapter, since questions of methodology are, at their core, about how knowledge is produced, and in anthropology, this is intimately tied to space and place.

When I was first invited to join a sitting of the Nkambeni chief's council, eager to learn everything I could about this place I had immersed myself in – its spatial dynamics, history, and the workings of the chieftaincy – I began by asking where the borders of Nkambeni lay. Sitting in a faded yellow-painted council room on a cold winter morning, the head secretary replied with a serious expression: "There are no borders." The rest of the council affirmed this with grunts and nods.[8] I was taken aback. I had assumed I had arrived at a place physically situated within a defined space – as traditional ethnographic fieldwork supposes. What was I then to make of such a statement? The council did not suggest that the chieftaincy stretched across South Africa or beyond. There was a recognised 'jurisdiction' of land under the chief's authority – Nkambeni comprised the villages of Majika, Mahushu, Numbi, and Tshabalala (City of Mbombela Local Municipality, 2019). Yet, their response pointed to something else: a non-restriction, a non-fixity of space and place constituting Nkambeni. It raised a critical question: if space and place are revealed as unfixed or undefined, then the longstanding anthropological 'attachment to place' must be reconsidered (see Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Brugger & Crimmins, 2013).

Here, my encounter with movement – specifically the movements of knowledge entangled with land in Nkambeni – animated this seemingly unstable articulation of space and place, concepts assumed to be fixed and immutable within dominant modernist thought. Of course, movements of knowledge are not unique to Nkambeni. As Hountondji (1997), Moore (2015), and Connell et al (2017) show, global knowledge systems have been shaped by European empire, neoliberalism, and colonial flows from places like Africa. Anthropology, too, has long moved past the notion of bounded cultures or societies. Yet in Nkambeni, the knowledge that

[7] Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) argues that "space becomes place when we get to know it better and endow it with value." But if knowing is always shifting, as I show in this chapter, what then of the process that turns space into place? While the space/place distinction may hold heuristic value, I use the terms simultaneously and interchangeably throughout this dissertation to reflect the fluid and overlapping categories I encountered in my field site. Although Ingold (2009, 2011) cautions against conflating place with space, as this risks overlooking the movements through which lives are lived, I use them concurrently to point precisely to how both space and place were always in motion – conceptually and materially – in Nkambeni.

[8] I recognise that rejecting 'borders' could also, at least in part, be rooted in a history of oppression and liberation, especially given apartheid enclosures and the global tensions over mobility (see Onoma, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2022).

emerged was still from *here* – situated – even as what counted as *here* was itself moving. This gave rise to a sort of tension within a seeming contradiction, an idea introduced in the Introduction that continues to unfold here. To state that "knowledge emerged through movement in my field site" points to this: movement implying fluidity, while "field site" suggests a fixed space or place. Building on Latour's (2013a) conception of "being-as-other" or what Blaser (2010) calls "knowing as relating," this tension becomes exactly the point. I argue in this chapter that the apparent opposition I encountered during fieldwork between movement (the not-here) and the field site (the here) should be understood as composite: not oppositional, but mutually constituted – even if held in tension (Nyamnjoh, 2017b,a, 2018, 2019). This means that in Nkambeni, a constant negotiation, or indeed movement, arose between fixed space and place on the one hand, and an unboundedness on the other.

To develop this argument, I foreground my engagement with a "grass-weed," as the farmers and gardeners called it, and how my attempt to assist in addressing this everyday farming issue revealed how movements of knowledge shaped my field site. I use this account as a critical reflection on my methodological approaches, emphasising how my encounter with movement, and the compositeness it pointed to, pushed me to be "nimble-footed and nimble-minded" (Nyamnjoh, 2017a) – attuned to the shifting realities of space, place, and, centrally here, knowledge. Aligning with the discursive motif of this dissertation, this reinforces my multispecies focus on the grass-weed – a method I extend to soil and water in the following chapters – highlighting the transformative nature of human-beyond-human entanglements through movement, encounter, and ongoing (re)composition (Tsing, 2015; Nyamnjoh, 2017b); or what Haraway (2008) calls "becoming with." In this case, it transformed the methodological and indeed ontological implications of my work.

This sets the stage for a deeper exploration of space and place, showing how being both fixed and unfixed in compositeness enabled the movement, I argue, shaped being in Nkambeni. I then turn to how I navigated this compositeness reflexively through my insider-outsider positionality. Finally, I examine the ethical implications of these movements of knowledge, drawing on the siSwati phrase *tandla tiyagezana* – "hands wash each other" – to explore the moral obligations of reciprocity I encountered, particularly how movement has implicated, and continues to implicate, me as the researcher. In addressing the dissertation's central question – "What does the role of land in Nkambeni reveal of its modes of existence?" – this chapter offers the conceptual entry point for the chapters that follow: that movement, entangled with land, gave rise to the modes of existence I encountered in Nkambeni, modes whose discussion will return – recursively – to how movement unfolded.

Tracing the Ethnographic Currents of Movement

The sound of a cowbell clinking as a herd passed along the Chief's Road reverberated through the morning air. Like an alarm clock, it signalled that Majika village was awake. Laughter echoed from unseen residents, music drifted from the car wash by the river, and a light breeze carried the sour yet oddly comforting scent of the pigsty from the river's side up to where we stood in the field. Mandla, Blessing, Nikita, and I were weeding between the rows of spinach, while Nomvuyo, just to our right, tended to her cabbages. As always, the sprinklers were

clicking in continuous rotation, combating the dryness. I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork over June and July, winter in South Africa. This time of year saw almost no rain, and despite the season, the Lowveld sun burned hot.[9]

The weeding was a labour-intensive task, exacerbated by the unseasonable heat. The main culprit of our efforts, with its long, narrow green leaves resembling grass, hence why the farmers here referred to it as such, was resilient. Its tuber, a round, hard, nut-like bud, was buried deep within the soil. To remove the grass-weed properly, we had to loosen the soil with small garden forks to ensure the tuber did not remain behind; otherwise, it would simply regrow. We focused only on the ridges of the furrows where the spinach was planted, leaving the valleys covered in a thick carpet of weeds.[10] In about an hour, I cleared only two meters, while Mandla, Blessing, and Nikita, more practised at the task, covered around three.

Walking through Nkambeni – sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied – I often overheard murmurs about the nuisance of the grass-weed. Farmers, especially near rivers, complained about the time and effort it took to remove. Many were unsure how to manage it, while those unaffected were determined to keep it away from their land. While knowledge-sharing around crops was strong in Nkambeni – especially around pesticides for tomatoes and cabbages or effective fertilisers – chemical treatments were avoided out of concern for the soil and other plants. The grass-weed posed a serious problem. Wherever it appeared, the spinach suffered: its usual deep green leaves faded into a pale-yellow hue. The weed's undesired mobility – the way it crept, uninvited, across spaces – made it an invader, a coloniser of sorts. Yet despite its invasive effect, the grass-weed was not quite alien (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001); if anything, the spinach carried the weight of foreignness (Ribera et al., 2020). As I elaborate below, the weed was indeed endemic to the riverbanks of this area. It was this tension embodied by the grass-weed – at once an invading presence and a belonging native (see also Nyamnjoh, 2006) – that first revealed the compositeness I would continue to encounter in the field through movement.

Working on the farms through weeding, trimming leaves, moving sprinklers, spreading manure or fertiliser, planting, and taking frequent breaks with my interlocutors – an important part of farming life – became my primary form of immersion via participant observation. I chose farming as an entry point after a pre-fieldwork scoping drive brought into view how widespread small-scale business farming and backyard gardening remained across the area. This, coupled with the region's deep historical ties to farming (see Introduction), and where farming formed an important part of the economy (National Treasury, 2020), made it a compelling ground to engage with land as something lived with daily. Here, I experienced moments of "becoming with" (Haraway, 2008) – with the land, my field site, and the many beings, human and beyond-human, who inhabited it (also elaborated on in Chapter 2). As we weeded, soil clung to my hands, dirt gathered under my nails, and ants and insects crawled across my skin. Dry dust filled my nostrils, sometimes triggering sinus attacks. I heard gravel crunch beneath our boots, and swatted away flies drawn to our sweat and the strong scent of chicken manure spread across the fields. In these moments, I was not merely a fixed – or even

[9] This is a summer rainfall region.

[10] A furrow is a ploughed trench with a ridge (the highest part) and a valley (the lower part).

invasive – presence; instead, as I discuss later in this chapter, particularly in relation to my entanglement with the movement of the grass-weed, my insider-outsider positionality, and the obligatory reciprocity that movement entailed, I too was a composite being, shaped by the ever-changing textures of the field – reflecting, or indeed embodying (Field-Springer, 2020; Fuchs, 2021), the movement and compositeness I encountered.

In this process of "becoming with," I turned to "thick description" (Geertz, 1972) as a method of gathering data, jotting handwritten notes in a black-covered notebook that, like me, bore the marks of the field – stained with soil and water, its pages worn and warped. Each evening, I expanded on these notes, typing them up and linking them to photographs I had taken. When I forgot to take pictures, Sedi, Nomvuyo, or Mandla would remind me – "for you to remember it better" – making photography, at the behest of my interlocutors, a valuable companion to my written notes (Crowe, 2003). I ensured continuous informed consent throughout (ASnA, 2005; ASA, 2021). While the security of my notes was not a significant concern, since my fieldwork did not carry high political stakes, I nonetheless saved all typed notes and photos on password-protected devices. I carried my active notebook, while full ones were stored safely.

From the outset of my fieldwork, I wanted to incorporate movement as a method. I employed "Walking the Village," drawing from De Certeau (1988), as an immersive engagement with space and a way to meet new research participants (see also Gibson, 1979). As mentioned above, walking enabled me to observe how certain concerns, like the persistence of the grass-weed, resonated across my field site, rather than being isolated experiences. Yet it was movement beyond Nkambeni that proved most revealing. It shifted my view of movement from a supplementary immersion method to a central analytical tool – gesturing towards Nyamnjoh's (2020a) nimble-footed and nimble-minded scholarship – revealing how my field site exceeded bounded notions of space and place. This opened up the possibility for me to recognise how knowledge moved both within and beyond the boundaries (or, indeed, lack of boundaries) of Nkambeni.

When I heard about Peter, an environmentalist and grass specialist living in White River – a town 40km from Majika, the village in Nkambeni where the grass-weed was most prevalent – who might be able to identify the troublesome plant and suggest solutions, I seized the opportunity. Since I already relied on lifts and public transport to move between my family's house in White River and various parts of Nkambeni – the villages spread out over a considerable distance, making walking impractical for daily travel – I figured, why not use this mobility to give back to the farmers who had generously taken part in my study? While this ethical imperative (SASI, 2017) was my primary motivation at the time, I had not yet realised the extent to which I was already imbricated in existing movements of knowledge that stretched beyond conventional understandings of Nkambeni as a fixed and bounded space and place.

I dug up a grass-weed in Majika and took it to Peter. When examining it, he immediately stated, "This is not a grass. No grass has a tuber. All grasses have parallel veins, which this plant does not have." This took me by surprise; the movement of the grass-weed revealed an unexpected form of knowledge. He identified the plant as a *biesie*, an Afrikaans term for a rush – part of the water reed family – explaining why it grew on farms near the rivers in Nkambeni,

including Mandla and Blessing's. They, however, remained unconvinced by the new classification. "But it looks like grass," Mandla and Blessing insisted. Still, within this rejection of the new classification, the explanation that the plant thrived in this riverine environment gave rise to a particular understanding of familiarity, with Blessing remarking, "So this is its space – now how do we deal with that?" While the new knowledge was not fully incorporated into the setting, it complemented what was already there – even in friction, the grass-weed, though remaining a grass, was not, after all, merely invasive. The presence and flow of the river in this space made it possible for the plant to shift from being a foreigner to something that belonged here, to this land – the place alongside the river (the river's significance is further explored in Chapter 3). Even though the plant remained an unwanted grass, this movement revealed how it could navigate between categories of native and alien, unsettling fixed distinctions through compositeness.

Despite his expertise, Peter could not advise on addressing the grass-weed issue. This prompted another journey a week later: I took a grass-weed first to Winfred, a botanist at the Lowveld Botanical Gardens in Mbombela, about 60km from Majika. She only confirmed it was common along the region's riverbanks – reaffirming its local embeddedness – but referred me to Oscar, a horticulturalist at the Agriculture Research Council. Oscar identified it immediately as *Nutsedge*. "They thrive in acidic soil, with a pH of around 4, which encourages weed growth," he explained. The problem, then, was not just the weed's aggressive spread but also the soil's acidity, which affected the crops. Oscar noted that this explained why the spinach leaves on the farm had a yellow hue – "If the soil is too acidic," he cautioned, "the plants don't respond to fertiliser." His advice was simple: amend the soil with calcitic lime, a relatively affordable solution, to raise the pH, which would both promote crop growth and suppress weed growth.

This movement of the grass-weed revealed a layered causality: the weed was not the sole culprit but part of an entangled condition in which both it and the soil in Nkambeni were co-implicated; composite. This was also apparent in the abovementioned entangled relationship between the grass-weed and the river. The particular soil and the river in that place influenced not only the plant's growth but also its mutability to be classified as either native or alien, as symptom or problem. This pointed to the deeper compositeness of being in Nkambeni tied to the roles of space and place, where the very act of making sense of place – of the belonging or the invasiveness of the weed; of the soil allowing weeds to thrive or not – was, in seeming contradiction, shaped and reshaped through knowledge movements beyond space and place. When Mandla and Blessing heard the diagnosis, they were thrilled – finally, a tangible intervention emerged.

Here, movement took on a different dimension in my research. It was not just about movement within space and place – as I initially thought with "Walking the Village" – but beyond the supposed 'boundaries' of Nkambeni. This methodological insight aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) assemblage theory, particularly their articulation of symbiosis (see also DeLanda, 2016). They position it as a space where different species, and as it is intended to convey, different worlds, interact without fully merging; or what Tsing (2005) terms "friction." This puts pressure on the very articulation of bounded space and place, without

entirely dispensing with it. In other words, relationships between these worlds – the farmers in Nkambeni, the environmentalist in White River, the botanist and horticulturalist in Mbombela, and so on – and the obligations that accompany them are not fixed or absolute but always shifting in compositeness.

Through my encounter and movement with the grass-weed and the knowledge movements it set in motion, I became aware of the multitude of other knowledge flows shaping my field site, ultimately revealing the centrality of movement in its very constitution. For example, I first encountered notions of organic farming in Nkambeni from Joseph, who worked for the Siyazisiza Trust – a charity that supported young farmers in establishing their businesses, of which Nomvuyo was a participant. Joseph proudly explained that most of the produce from the farms in Nkambeni was organic, using only manure as fertiliser and no chemicals (except for the tomatoes and cabbages). Yen-Ling Tsai (2019) illustrates that such notions of the organic are saturated in broader capitalist flows of food expectations. Joseph added to his claim of organic produce, "Our way of farming has always been organic." This underscored the friction, as Tsing states, of the movements of knowledge beyond the bounded or fixed notions of what Nkambeni as a space and place occupy, to situate the very knowledge from beyond within that space and place. Nkambeni, through movement, became both here (always organic) and not-here (broader capitalist expectations of organic).

The notion of "African magic," as articulated by my interlocutors, provides another example to examine this. This articulation – "African magic" – denoted a form of indigeneity tied to my informants' understanding of being "African" within their space and place (see Geschiere, 1997; Moore & Sanders, 2001; Samba, 2012). It was a force that could be wielded through the land to bring about specific outcomes, such as crop growth or premonitions about the best places to position water pumps (see Chapter 3). This was just as present in their relationships with the land as the global flows of Christian prayers for rain, or scientific knowledge about the land – particularly in the knowledge of how fertilisers must be mixed to achieve the correct ratio of Nitrogen, Phosphorus, and Potassium depending on the plant's needs. I had to sit through a long, detailed lesson as Sedi and Nobela, farmers in Tshabalala, carefully explained this process of mixing fertilisers, illustrating how each element played a crucial role in the plants' growth. Pointing this out is not intended to pit magic, Christianity, and science against each other, as Geschiere (2021) cautions, but rather to emphasise how movement – as a "form of relating" (Kohn, 2015: 320) – pointed to the co-existence and, indeed, the compositeness of differences, in which they were not commensurated but held together, entangled, and interconnected through communicating "by differences" (Viveiros De Castro, 2004: 10).

In this context, I could no longer situate the question of knowledge in purely epistemological terms; I had to approach it from an ontological perspective (see Stengers, 2011a; De la Cadena, 2015a; Green, 2020). In other words, I had to consider what worlds of movement contribute to knowledge creation, rather than merely examining knowledge production in isolation. This shift is not necessarily a novel one. As Bernard Fonlon (2009: 36) reminds us, "it is the essence of science that we know not merely the fact but the reason for the fact" – that is, *how* and *why* the fact became and is the fact. Yet debates about knowledge often take for granted the worlds, and their associated conditions and structures, through which facts are shaped (Povinelli, 2001;

Pedersen, 2011; Kohn, 2013). Worse still, they sometimes fall into a relativist stance, where the "other" is allowed to exist only within the hegemonic framework of a modernist world (Latour, 2013a: 20; see also Merz, 2004). To this end, I had to navigate my fieldwork not by making authoritative claims about the world, but by embracing a heuristic approach that allowed me to remain attuned to the relationality of encounters in the field (Heywood, 2018: 225; Pedersen, 2012; Kohn, 2015). By embracing movement in my methodology – even if I only came to recognise this later on through the movement of the grass-weed – my fieldwork shifted away from reinforcing a modernist ontology of being-as-being to be open to the recognition of "being-as-other" (Latour, 2013b,a); or "knowing as relating" (Blaser, 2010: 238) – in essence, compositeness. This enabled me to directly engage with the movement that made up my field site, both within and beyond space and place. My fieldwork data analysis, later, also emerged through movement: an embodied, iterative, and rhizomatic engagement with land (see Douglas-Jones & Sariola, 2009).

On Space and Place

Mandla and I made our way to Madala S'komu, the old village of Majika, where Loazi invited me to visit his aunt, Ma Gertrude, at their family home. They had farmed there, on and off, since the 1980s. As we reached her yellow-brown porch, she stepped out, dressed in a cloth wrapped around her waist and a neatly tied headscarf. She carried a weight of tradition that made her seem older than she was. Mandla's demeanour shifted immediately. He removed his hat – mine was already off – holding it in front of him. His posture softened; he slid his left foot behind his right in a quick, respectful bow. When he spoke, his voice was lower, his words slower, careful not to seem too familiar. He greeted her as "*Magogo*," pausing briefly – a sign of respect – before introducing himself, stating his name and emphasising *where* he was from, gesturing toward his family's farm over the hill. Then, he turned to introduce me. "This is boet Jack," he said, explaining that I was from Cape Town and where – the place – I was staying during my fieldwork. In Nkambeni, place mattered. When I introduced myself to the induna of the section of Majika where I spent most of my time, I had to declare both where I was from and where I was staying, ensuring the chief's council knew my presence. Everyone I met during fieldwork wanted to *know* the same: Where I was from and where I resided. Such knowledge, Mandla explained, offered a way of understanding a person.

At first glance, this required declaration of place in Nkambeni might appear to signal a fixed identity rooted in space – much like surnames often serve as markers of place of origin, lineage, or belonging (Scott, Tehranian & Mathias, 2002). Yet, the declaration itself was not fixed. Take Nomvuyo, for instance: Though raised in Mahushu, she lived in Majika during my fieldwork and introduced herself not from Mahushu, but from where she resided at the time. Pushing this further, when movement is recognised – particularly in its ontological dimensions, as my fieldwork did – a deeper significance emerges, extending beyond bounded notions of belonging or origin within space and place, even as it remained entangled with them. These declarations, rather than signalling a fixed tie between place and identity, pointed exactly to the movement *from* that declared space and place. This was brought into sharper focus by my encounter with the grass-weed. Everyone I showed it to asked where it came from – not simply to identify it,

but to understand why it posed a problem. As I discussed before, the place of origin and conditions like water and soil quality in that space shaped how knowledge of the weed was formed and flowed. This revealed a tension brought forth by movement in the field: between fixed understandings of space and place, and the very movement that unsettled them. In Nkambeni, movement was not in opposition to place; rather, it was generative of place-based knowledge, even as it simultaneously put pressure on the fixity of such concepts. In this way, space and place were not static containers but constantly reconfigured through the very act of moving beyond, and with, them.

This aligns with Ingold's (2009) argument that life is not grounded in an abstract notion of space – and, as I argue here, not in a fixed notion of place either. Ingold advances this argument by critiquing modernist logics, positioning knowledge as central to shaping space and place (see also Ingold, 2007). He posits that modernity confines knowledge within enclosed boundaries, treating space as something merely occupied as place, rather than recognising existence – and the inhabitation of worlds – as "woven together from the strands of their coming-into-being" (Ingold, 2009: 21). This resonates with my earlier point on knowing as relating, or being-as-other, where the entanglements of movement and becoming in my field site revealed that knowledge was not produced in isolation but through continuous flows – or, as Nyamnjoh (2023) puts it, in complement motion.

Such articulations of space and place as both fixed and unfixed, which first became evident in the chief's council's response to my question on Nkambeni's borders, also emerged through the distinction between 'town' and 'village' – as touched on in the Introduction. Although Hazyview, where I grew up, was seen as 'town' and Nkambeni as 'village', the two remained entangled. For instance, some parts of Nkambeni, especially the village of Majika, lay geographically closer to the centre of Hazyview than areas officially considered part of the town. When I pressed Nobela – a retired military man who farmed with Sedi in Tshabalala and openly acknowledged that his worldview was shaped by the rigid principles of military discipline, precision, and territorial clarity (see Mbembe, 2000; Foucault, 2007; Isin, 2012) – about this difference, he looked at me puzzled and said, "There is no distinction between the two. If you move from one to the other, it is the same." Yet in everyday articulations, Nkambeni was still referred to as village, and Hazyview as town.

The road connecting Majika and Hazyview, Egedeni – meaning 'the gate' – exemplified this tension, revealing the compositeness of separation and entanglement, where movement arose. When I asked Blessing why the road is called Egedeni, he shrugged and said it was "because it's the gateway between this area and everything else." Many of my interlocutors echoed this sentiment. But when I met Filemon, an elderly cattle herder who was born and raised in the area – before the apartheid-era villagisation – a different account emerged. He explained that in the late 1970s, the apartheid state attempted to enclose all the homelands – Nkambeni being part of the KaNgwane homeland (see Introduction) – and fenced the area off (see Evans, 2021). Only at the road, Egedeni, were there gates – hence the name. The road thus came to carry both the logic of segregation – the fixity of 'village' as a space and place – while simultaneously, in its composite nature, marking the movements that extended beyond it.

This reflected a field site that resisted confinement within space and place, even though it remained grounded in them. Relating this to my methodology, by embracing movement, my field site, *Nkambeni*, became both the fixed space and place of Nkambeni 'proper' – its villages and surrounding area – and the movement itself.[11] It echoed the nimble-footed and nimble-mindedness I adopted, to recognise that the field site followed me as I moved, even as it stayed in the same place. This was evident in my encounter with the grass-weed, but also, as Ingold (2011) might suggest, in the soil that clung to my boots as I walked through and beyond the village, and in the black-jack weed – a sharp black seed that sticks to clothing growing wildly on many farms in the area – which I had to painstakingly remove, one by one, from my shoe laces, socks, and trousers each day. It underscored the compositeness I encountered, and how I too was drawn into its entanglements through movement, both in and beyond space and place.

A Nimble-Ethics, Positionality, and Reflexivity

The compositeness of the field site – embedded in fixed space and place, even as it extended beyond them – required me to adopt an ethics attuned to movement. Here, I did not overlook the importance of practical, prescriptive ethics – such as ensuring continuous informed consent, protecting my interlocutors, and anticipating potential harm to both them and myself (ASnA, 2005; ASA, 2021) – but I had to think beyond that as well. This aligned with what Posel and Ross (2014) describe as a continuous negotiation with ethics, which became particularly evident in how I navigated my insider-outsider positionality (see Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020).

In Nkambeni, I found myself in a space both familiar and unfamiliar. Though I had grown up nearby, the chieftaincy remained largely unknown to me, glimpsed only in passing – whether while driving along Egadeni in my youth or through schoolmates from the area. This tension signalled the ambiguity of an unconfined insider-outsider positionality (see Nyamnjoh, 2017a, 2006), while also bringing into relief the limits of 'ethnography at home' (Motzafi-Haller, 1997; Qamar, 2020), putting pressure on the assumption that proximity equates to epistemic intimacy. If anything, it underscored the movement through compositeness I encountered in the field, where space and place – or 'home' – was not a fixed or singular terrain, but unevenly lived, traversed, and understood. When I told Sedi I had grown up in Hazyview, he exclaimed, "Oh, you're one of us!" And yet, I was not from there; I was from 'town,' not the 'village,' even as they were composite (see also Introduction).

Such embodied compositeness allowed my insights to emerge not from a fixed standpoint but through shifting between perspectives and spaces of knowledge, as I navigated the entangled, biographical, racialised, and classed logics that structured both spaces – 'village' and 'town'; 'outsider' and 'insider.' In this context, 'here' was not singular or stable but something that took shape through my movements, frictions, and encounters across different modes of being, and the registers of knowing they produced. My white-presenting body was a

[11] This resonates with Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt's (2019) "patchy ethnography" which recognises the fragmented, uneven, and contingent nature of existence, instead of a bounded field site. See also Rajan's (2021) "multisituated" anthropology.

marker of this tension, making visible the contradictions and, thus, the compositeness I carried in the field. On the one hand, this positionality granted me access to specific networks – such as Elvis, a family acquaintance, who introduced me to farmers in Nkambeni, forming the initial basis from which I was able to build my own connections, and linking up with the environmentalist in White River. On the other hand, in a predominantly black field site where racial tensions from apartheid still lingered, I was met with caution. Yet, within these very moments of being perceived as an outsider, my insider familiarity allowed me to access histories and meanings intuitively – moving between recognition and dissonance, between proximity and distance. Here, recognition never slid fully into assumption; instead, it revealed the moving and composite nature of my positionality, where moments of resonance did not equate to complete belonging, nor did they foreclose the need to remain attentive to what I could not immediately grasp (Britton, 2020).

By embracing movement in my methodology, ethics, positionality, and reflexivity, I was able to balance these seemingly opposing binaries, showing that knowledge in the field was not something I simply encountered, but emerged through negotiating difference – or, more precisely, through recognising compositeness. This underscored the need, as Edith Wyschogrod (2000) argues, to shift from a purely modernist conception of grounding ontology in a "pre-existing metaphysical foundation" to grounding it in ethics – and, to some extent, in methodology which ethics inform and give rise to.[12] In Nkambeni, the movement of knowledge – and the simultaneously fixed yet unbounded notions of space and place that shaped it – reflected the discursive nature of the *return* that the dissertation title points to (see Introduction). My field site, and by association, knowledge, emerged through the tensions and compositeness between the known and the unknown, the here and the not-here, what I assumed and what I had to (un)learn. There was a reciprocal nature to my entanglement as a researcher within the field, where my insider-outsider positionality pointed to ethical complexities which required an embrace of movement while simultaneously shaping it in return.

Tandla Tiyagezana

We were laughing and chatting while weeding in Majika. Nomvuyo moved closer, joking that I was becoming one of the labourers and they would eventually need to share some of the profits with me. I chuckled, replying, "Please no, I'm helping to give back and learn by being here with you and listening to what you share with me." Although I was not the most skilled worker, Sedi would dismiss my concerns, saying, "Everything helps." Nomvuyo, continuing her teasing, responded in a satisfied voice, "Yes, *tandla tiyagezana*," nodding and laughing. She enjoyed laughing. Curious about the meaning, I asked her to clarify, as my siSwati, though familiar, was not entirely fluent (see Englund, 2006, 2024).[13] She explained it was a proverb

[12] This also relates to Latour's (2013a,b) notion of "ontological dignity," where beings are not reduced to predefined categories but are approached through the obligations articulated by their own modes of existence.

[13] In my field site, siSwati was the lingua franca, though most people also spoke English or Afrikaans, which I am fluent in. Conversations were mostly in English, but when in siSwati, I relied on translations – from Mandla, Nomvuyo, Fankomo, or Blessing. I always tried to go beyond translation, using thick description to grasp deeper meaning (Sturge, 1997). While my lack of siSwati fluency is a limitation, full proficiency was beyond the scope of this Master's project.

meaning, "When washing hands, one hand washes the other." To illustrate, she walked over to a hosepipe watering the crops a few meters away, tucked it under her right arm, and slowly rubbed her soil-covered hands together under the flowing water. In the same gentle rhythm as the lapping stream, she repeated with emphasis, "*Tandla tiyagezana*."

While "one hand washes the other" is a common English saying, implying mutual assistance leading to a shared outcome (Simpson & Speake, 2008), in a field site shaped by movement, *tandla tiyagezana* extended beyond this. It evoked what Harri Englund (2015: 253) frames as a matter of morality rather than mere ethics – a sense of obligation rooted in sentiment, recognising contingency where movement is ever-present (see also Molefe & Magam, 2019; Nyamnjoh, 2015b). This resonates with Haraway's (2008) notion of "response-ability" – the moral obligation to respond that emerges through ongoing interactions and entanglements. For Haraway (2008: 72), responsibility is not given in advance but arises through the situated movements between beings.

My movement with the grass-weed beyond Nkambeni 'proper' – the fixed space and place – came to reflect this. When I dug up the weed to take to the environmentalist, I cared for it attentively: spraying it to keep it moist, sealing it to protect it from damage (see Lonkila, 2021). This care became a responsibility, a moral obligation where Nkambeni lingered with me – not just through material presence, but relationally (see Rose, 2011). *Tandla tiyagezana* was not only about reciprocity or giving back, but about recognising the entangled responsibilities that emerged through movement both within and beyond space and place – how I carried the weed between worlds, while acknowledging that movement already shaped me and preceded me in my field site. In *becoming* part of this movement, I found myself embedded in a fieldwork morality that demanded more than observation – it required an openness to "washing the other hand." In essence, an obligation of entangled indebtedness, which is the central concern of Chapter 2. Through such mutuality, knowledge did not passively present itself; it emerged as something contingent, something relational – through *response*.[14]

However, as Haraway (2008: 71) cautions, such a response always carries risk. In moments of contradiction and encounters with difference – particularly within Nkambeni's compositeness, where seemingly opposing dualities are mutually constituted, and in my insider-outsider positionality – the potential for violence lingers (see also Ferguson, 2015). This becomes more apparent in the following chapters, so I introduce it here as part of the conceptual and ethical groundwork for engaging the two modes of existence explored in this dissertation. One afternoon, after helping Sedi clear a plot of land with a hoe on the Tshabalala farm, I developed several blisters on my hands. As I washed them with water, the burning sensation felt like an embodied wounding of – a violence to – *tandla tiyagezana*. It revealed what Govindrajan (2018) calls the "messiness of relatedness" (see also Haraway, 2016). In that moment of pain, I could only ask: What does it mean to be implicated by the violence that movement brings? Part of what made this question linger was the discomfort – and simultaneous comfort – of not being entirely from 'outside.' Although I had moved away to study in Cape Town and had grown up nearby rather than within Nkambeni, my familial and geographic ties kept me traceable, however partially, to the land – the space and place. This

[14] See also Isabel Stengers' (2011b) "ecology of practice."

rootedness and simultaneous composite detachment offered both a bridge and a burden in these moments of exchange – of response – in which I was already imbricated in the moral obligations of the field through movement.

Of course, I can never fully grasp the lived violences endured in Nkambeni – the legacies of apartheid and colonialism, or the ongoing neglect of late liberalism and neoliberal capitalism (see Introduction and Chapters 2 and 3). Yet the blisters I acquired from clearing the land underscored that I could not remain outside the ways in which knowledge moved in the field site either, even when those movements were fraught or painful. It demanded reckoning with what Nyamnjoh (2018) calls the cannibalistic reciprocity of knowledge exchange – where giving and taking are inseparable from, composite to, the ongoing, incomplete, and moving processes of being and becoming. In this context, my response was to pursue an inclusive moral sympathy (Nyamnjoh, 2015b) – *tandla tiyagezana* by another name. This demanded a moral recognition of contingency: the dignity in reciprocal entanglements. I took knowledge from the field, from my interlocutors; but the field also took me up, swept into the movements of knowledge that shaped reality in Nkambeni – both during fieldwork and afterwards.[15]

Post fieldwork, this moral obligation (re)surfaced in writing this dissertation, specifically in using my interlocutors' real names.[16] This extended both the dignified acknowledgement of reciprocity in the movement of knowledge and the violence that naming can entail (see Lévi-Strauss, 2011 [1955]; Derrida, 1967). Following ethical guidelines (ASnA, 2005; ASA, 2021), I discussed this with each of my interlocutors, outlining the potential implications and harm of being named in academic work: the risk of misinterpretation, the possibility of attracting unwanted attention, and the permanence of their association with the research in public domains (see also Vorhölter, 2021). All, except Sedi and Ma Zola, insisted on being named.[17] As Nomvuyo stated, after reflecting for a while, "I want people to know that I partook in the research. That I shared what I know." Naming became a way to claim presence in the knowledge-making process. It affirmed the entanglement of dignity and reciprocity that underpins the moral obligations discussed here, illustrating how knowledge continues to move beyond fixed space and place. And yet, in a moment of compositeness, naming my interlocutors also situated the research within the particularities of the space and place from which they spoke, revealing again how fixity and movement were co-constituted in Nkambeni.

Summary Conclusion: When the Ground Does Not Hold Still

By centring the methodological and ethical considerations that shaped my fieldwork, this chapter has illustrated why movement in Nkambeni emerged as the central concern of this dissertation. In doing so, the chapter fulfilled two roles: first, it presented the methods and ethical orientations required for a master's dissertation; second, it offered a conceptual starting

[15] Malkki (2007: 173) argues that "the object of knowledge is never inert." Knowledge emerges through constructed processes, often violent, which my ethnographic research formed part of, making this violence inseparable from the movement of knowledge.
[16] I also remain in regular contact with my interlocutors, a conscious effort to maintain strong bonds and keep them informed about the outcomes of the research (ASnA, 2005; SASI, 2017).
[17] 'Sedi' and 'Ma Zola' are pseudonyms.

point from which to engage the main research question: What does land in Nkambeni reveal of its modes of existence? By foregrounding my methodological journey, particularly my encounter with the grass-weed, I showed how I was taken up by movement and in compositeness embraced movement through my methods and ethics. This invited a shift toward a multispecies approach that not only extended beyond the human but also required a nimble-footedness and nimble-mindedness in how I moved through, listened to, embodied, and made sense of the field. I did not arrive in the field expecting movement to become central; rather, it emerged through happenstance and was affirmed through repeated encounters – with plants, people, proverbs, and roads – that pointed toward the centrality of movement in shaping being here.

This centrality of movement placed a certain pressure on longstanding anthropological preoccupations with space and place, which have often been treated as fixed or bounded under modernist logics. In Nkambeni, such fixity was not entirely rejected – but it was not merely accepted either. Instead, movement revealed a compositeness to my field site: space and place were simultaneously fixed and unfixed, named and unnameable, delineated and porous. My interlocutors' declaration of a space was tied to a movement away from it; the drawing of a boundary was not totalising. This was particularly evident in the chief's council's reply about Nkambeni's borders and the ambiguous line between 'village' and 'town' evoked by the main road, Egadeni (the gate). These examples resisted neat spatial logics and instead exposed the contingency and contradiction of fixed and unfixed space and place in my field site.

These tensions also shaped – and were shaped by – my insider-outsider positionality, as I engaged and navigated compositeness through this relation to the field: not being from here yet also being of here. This positionality's ethical and methodological implications unfolded through my encounter with the proverb *tandla tiyagezana*, which framed the reciprocity, dignity, and obligation in the movements I was drawn into. As I have shown, this proverb was not simply an ethical question but a moral invitation into a world where knowledge was shared, demanded, negotiated, and always on the move. It implicated me, the researcher, in the very movements I sought to understand. This complicates the separation between field and analysis, data and theory, method and ethics, underscoring the discursive nature of this dissertation. Knowledge here was, or indeed is, not static; it is continuously produced through compositeness in the ongoing and unfinished movements of the field.

In attending to the entangled moral worlds of movement in Nkambeni – which implicate me but also exceed me – this chapter has shown that my methodological and ethical position remains, to a certain extent, unresolved. In an act of *returning* to the ground – the conceptual ground – *tandla tiyagezana* spoke not only to mutual care but also to mutual risk. It revealed knowledge to be unsettled, open-ended, and marked by the responsibilities, frictions, and violences of relations across differences – of being-as-other; of knowing as relating; or, differently put, as movement through compositeness.

This focus on movement is not intended to exceptionalise Nkambeni. As pointed out, scholars like Nyamnjoh, Mbembe, Deleuze, and Ingold have advanced strong arguments for taking movement seriously across contexts. Yet the particularities of how I encountered movement in and with Nkambeni – and how compositeness gave rise to and was revealed by

that movement – are what is at stake here, forming the grounding from which this dissertation proceeds. From this foundation, I move to the following two chapters exploring indebtedness and metamorphoses as modes of existence in Nkambeni. These chapters are not exhaustive; rather, they offer situated moments to think through the implications of movement, compositeness, and the shifting dynamics of space, place, time, and power, through the lens of land.

Chapter 2 – Giving, Taking, and Moving with the Soil: Indebtedness as a Mode of Existence

Summary Introduction

In this chapter, I trace soil as one facet of land, to argue that movement – through the compositeness of giving and taking, life and death, loss and gain – gave rise to a mode of indebtedness in Nkambeni. Building on the previous chapter's focus on the compositeness of fixed and unfixed space and place, this chapter offers another subtle entry point into the central argument — that movement shaped existence in my field site — by approaching it through the shifting contours of time(s). In doing so, it contributes to my central question: What does land in Nkambeni reveal of its modes of existence? Here, indebtedness emerges as a mode of existence, pointing to entangled forms of sustenance – "being-as-other" – that unsettle the singular claims of modernist progress and linear time. Through movements of exchange in composition, re-composition, and – as will become evident in this chapter – decomposition, soil in Nkambeni emerged as an active participant in a "polyphony of times" (Tsing, 2015: 3), where the past, present, and future co-existed in layered, non-linear ways, even as they unfolded linearly (see also Nyamnjoh, 2020a).

Drawing again on Tsing's (2015) multispecies attunement, I centre soil as the protagonist in this chapter. This not only responds to Achille Mbembe's (2017) call to reanimate things deemed lifeless by modernity – such as soil or, as is relevant here, death – but also opens an ethnographic route to highlight the plurality of times that persisted at the margins of modernist ontology in my field site (see also Kohn, 2013).

With this in mind, I weave together multispecies ethnographic accounts, literature, and – since time is the central 'theoretical scaffold' in this chapter (see Introduction) – historical narratives drawn from oral archives I encountered during fieldwork. The latter is informed by Jacques Derrida's (1995:14) idea that "there is no archive without outside," which, in addition to his focus on power dynamics and hierarchies within the archive, I interpret as suggesting that lived and spoken histories are just as much part of the archive as written texts (see also Zeitlyn, 2012; Canham, 2023). As Sedi pointed out when I asked him about stories of his family's land and the land around it: "There are no stories about the land, only history." By tracing these various entanglements with the land – however faint or pronounced – I show how soil moved through dirt, ants, the ancestors and times to give form to the discursive *return* suggested in the dissertation's title, positioning giving and taking as necessary composites: where gain relies on loss, and loss on gain; where death relies on life, and life on death, each indebted to the other. This perspective moves away from a purely static or fatalistic view of death within linear time and toward understanding how movement, often through death, constituted subsistence and existence as indebtedness in Nkambeni. Such indebtedness was not economic but, as touched on in the previous chapter, an orientation of "becoming with" (Haraway, 2008) the soil, and, in turn, the soil with others – an incomplete, ongoing process through which soil was mobilised to produce life via farming, ancestral presence, spirituality, pothole-filling, life courses, and material identity. Yet, echoing *tandla tiyagezana* ("hands wash

each other;" see Chapter 1), it also required and demanded something in *return* – through burial, fertilisation, reclamation, accountability, and, importantly, compromise.

I begin this chapter by outlining a brief theoretical framework that builds on the Introduction and the previous chapter, from which I will address this mode of indebtedness and its entanglements with soil and movement in my field site. Through this, I consider how death and ancestors were related to the soil as "necessary partners" (Rose, 2012: 127) – how the dead were taken by it, and how, in compositeness, this produced generative energy flows that sustained life. Yet – like *tandla tiyagezana* – this generativity was violent and messy: death was as painful as life-giving; farming brought both abundance and despair. I attend to this messiness by centring compositeness and the forms of compromises that arose from the soil's own entangled existence – its subsistence tied to its capacity to collect debt, just as others depended on it to sustain their indebted lives. Such compositeness only became possible through movement that both gave rise to and emerged from it, and, as this chapter explores, the movement across multiple, often seemingly contradictory, times. Here, I will trace some of these times to illustrate that, through the lens of land, the compositeness of multiple times pointed to how movement within the mode of indebtedness shaped existence in Nkambeni.

Becoming With the Soil

As Sedi and I made our way down a two-track dirt road on the farm in Tshabalala, the steady crunch of our boots filled the air. Each step produced a crisp, crusty noise, leaving temporary traces of our footsteps on the soil, only to be swept away moments later by a light, dust-carrying breeze. It was early morning, and the cold winter dew clung to our bones. Though we had not started working yet, the dirt was already beginning to claim us – dust settling in my hair, lining my nose. By the end of the day, after hours of farming, planting, and irrigating, the soil would be everywhere – beneath our nails, coating our skin, becoming a part of us. Ahead, a white butterfly with red-tipped wings flitted from one swaying grass seed head to another. Everything was moving; not just us walking or the butterfly flitting, but the farm itself – far-off bird sounds gliding through the air, the two-meter-tall maize nodding, the chilli seedlings growing ever so slowly, the water flowing through the pipes, and, more than anything, the ever-shifting soil, the dust, the dirt.

"Dirt is matter out of place," argues Mary Douglas (1966: 26) – a contravention of a "set of ordered relations" that pressures the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable. While Douglas situates this argument within systems of symbolic purity, a point I will return to later, I extend her understanding of dirt as "out of place" beyond notions of the unwanted or alien, to emphasise its mobility, as the grass-weed in the previous chapter similarly revealed. Dirt, then, is not merely fixed in a stable location but, in compositeness, perpetually in motion. This understanding of dirt and, by extension, the soil in movement – out of place, yet situated within – positions it as a force capable of "confusing or contradicting cherished classifications" (Douglas, 1966: 27). Pushing further these entanglements of compositional thought, could it be, then, that the soil, too, comes to see human interventions – colonial agriculture, chemical saturation, or depletion through cultivation or fertiliser use – as dirt? Rather than being merely acted upon, the soil through dirt responded, resisting neat categorisations (see also Green,

2020). This composite movement of dirt thus became a condition of refusal, of reordering – what Tsing (2015) describes as "entangled collaborations" through contamination. Indeed, farmland is not merely acreage, "it is relationships embedded in the soil" (Green, 2020: 129). Within such entanglements, an ongoing exchange emerged, as collaborations and relationships are always underpinned by some form of give and take (see Haraway, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2018; Tsai, 2019). However, the soil's ability to unsettle cherished classifications through movement – reflecting the central motif of this dissertation – reconfigured give and take in Nkambeni not as opposing binaries, but as composites, from which the mode of indebtedness unfolded.

This mode of indebtedness should not be interpreted as a burden or reduced to debtor-creditor relations (see Peebles, 2010; Graeber, 2011). Unlike capitalist notions of fixed debt, indebtedness in compositeness was fluid, reflecting ongoing exchanges not confined to monetary terms. Nor was it embedded in social value gained through exchange – à la Malinowski (1922) – since, in Nkambeni, it was not premised solely on human interactions but on collaborating entanglements with the soil. In this context, indebtedness, as a mode of existence, signified the continuous movements of giving and taking, ensuring that what was used and expended to sustain life – all life (and even modernist perceived non-life) – was returned in kind.

This framing of indebtedness is perhaps best illustrated by one of my interlocutors, Fankomo's, description of *black tax*.[18] When I asked him why he returned to Nkambeni after his university studies to look after his family, he explained, "You know, black tax – here, you have to come back and take care." Fankomo's sentiment encapsulated a relational understanding of obligation and reciprocity that diverged from a modernist conception of debt as a linear, individualistic notion rooted in the language of guilt, sin, and redemption (Graeber, 2011). It pointed to Haraway's (2008) "becoming with," where entangled rhythms of conjoined obligations and processes arose through which life was made. In Nkambeni, this was grounded in relationships with the soil, where to "come back," as Fankomo puts it, or a return to the soil – in its compositeness as both fixed and unfixed space and place (see Chapter 1) – underscored the entanglements formed with it.

Such "becoming with" was most apparent in the way death and decay played out in the mode of indebtedness. As Pilato told me a few weeks after his sister passed away, "We have always lived with death here." In Nkambeni, death, as composite to life, became a generative condition that, like dirt, disrupted modernist ideals of progress and stability. Moments of inhospitability, when viewed through the mode of indebtedness, revealed a "permanent work in progress" (Nyamnjoh, 2023: 8) where being was continually enacted through movements of giving and taking – and, as I extend it here, through life and death. These movements disjoined time from the rigid, cherished linearity, manifesting a polyphony of times – heterogeneous interplays and tensions of multiple times that formed a "mosaic of temporalities" (Tsing, 2015:

[18] I use "black tax" here as an analogy, following Fankomo's description, rather than fully equating it to the mode of indebtedness in Nkambeni. Black tax refers to the financial support Black professionals provide to extended families in post-apartheid South Africa, stemming from historical inequalities, limited generational wealth, and the complex dynamics of power, race, and class (see Mangoma & Wilson-Prangley, 2019; Manqoyi, 2018). While not drawing a direct comparison, black tax shares an interplay of care and burden (Mhlongo, 2019), which I explore as an aspect of indebtedness.

3). This, in turn, facilitated the emergence of responsibilities (Hatley, 2000: 61) – not as fixed or prescribed, but as continuous formations shaped by these ongoing movements. As James Hatley (2012) argues, from the moment of birth, one is already indebted to those who came before – whether human or beyond-human – those who nourished, and those whose lives – and deaths – laid the groundwork for one's existence (see also Nyamnjoh, 2002; Rose, 2012).

Soil in Motion through Give and Take, Life and Death

Ahead on the two-track dirt road Sedi and I were following, stood an old mango tree, its canopy casting shade over several graves. Each grave was marked by large, round red and grey stones, tightly packed in oval shapes. One grave, however, stood apart – closest to the road – outlined with two layers of cement bricks, filled to the top with soil, and crowned with untamed wild grass. It was Sedi's mother's grave; she had passed away two years earlier. The other stone-packed graves were older, ancestral. There were no headstones, elaborate adornments, or inscriptions – only stones and bricks. Behind the grave site lay Nobela's maize fields, with a pile of fertiliser bags stacked nearby. It hinted at the ongoing movements of cultivation – a reminder of the soil's demand for continual care and the composite relationship between the soil's nourishment and depletion through fertilisation. With the area overgrown with shrubs, the graves – and the dead – had become an unassuming part of the land. On the farm, the soil was as much a place for burial – for the ancestors – as it was for cultivation; here, life and death were always present together, becoming, as Deborah Bird Rose (2012: 127) argues, "a necessary partner."

As we worked on the farm, Sedi explained that after villagisation in the 1960s, when the Apartheid government forcibly relocated countless agnatic farming clusters into unified villages (Letsoalo & Rogerson, 1982; De Wet, 1994), many people stopped subsistence farming. While gardening practices continued in the newly formed villages, those displaced from their farms were forced to seek jobs in the mines, cities, or nearby towns – sentiments that resonated throughout my field site (see also Introduction). Though Sedi was too young to have lived through these histories, his grandfather had recounted them to him. "If they could," Sedi continued, "the people would return to the farm only to bury the dead." Despite villagisation, an enduring connection to the land through burial persisted.

Since the end of apartheid, these entanglements have remained, where family graves have often served as crucial evidence for reclaiming land lost during the era of forced removals (James, 2009). This applied both to land outside the chieftaincy – such as Babe Mona's family's claim over land now part of Hazyview town, which was submitted to the national government with evidence of his great grandfather's grave on the land – and within the chieftaincy, where multiple cases of burial land has been reclaimed through the Chief's council after years of disuse. While many surrounding chieftaincies in this part of Mpumalanga ceased entertaining such land reclamations, Nkambeni's chief has not. His wife, the Inhlukulo,[19] proudly shared this with Mandla and me outside the council chambers, explaining, "He feels obligated to entertain them, especially when ancestral graves are at play. For him, the ancestors must be

[19] *Inhlukulo* translates to "queen" in siSwati.

respected through the land." This aligns with Gabriel Setiloane's (1978) argument that land is not only for the living but also for the living dead, emphasising that the ongoing exchanges between life and death sustain the vital relationship with the soil. Joseph's description of land being in "family lineage" and Loazi's assertion that "people know whose land it is even without registration; it is *family land*," also brought these ancestral entanglements to the fore. Death did not sever the connection between ancestors and the soil but enabled them to live through it. It revealed a space where life and death converged within ongoing movements, "and not a matter of permanent severance" (Nyamnjoh, 2017a: 257).

During a Saturday morning drive through Mahushu, one of Nkambeni's four villages, signs of death were everywhere. It was not just the many funerals I passed – held only on Saturdays in this area – but also the remnants of summer's maize scattered across the winter landscape, their dry, brittle stalks jutting from the ground like spikes. These scenes repeated themselves across Nkambeni. Sedi's farmland bore the same desiccated remains; as did Ma Gertrude's family land. It was at Ma Gertrude's that the indebtedness behind this practice became clear. "We keep the dead stalks to fertilise the soil; to give back," she said matter-of-factly. Leaving the dead maize to dry and decompose in the soil, instead of clearing it, was a way of returning what was taken during planting and harvesting – reciprocating the nutrients, healing the soil, fertilising it. This long-standing practice was followed almost unquestioningly. "My parents did it," Mr. James, a seasoned gardener in Majika, explained. His response reflected the naturalness of the act – the act of returning what was taken from the soil; the soil claiming what was indebted to it.

Here, the soil as life-giver became indistinguishable from the soil as life-taker. It revealed the soil to be generative, where it took from those who had once drawn from it to live, not merely to restore it but to make it available again, sustaining those who remained. This aligns with Rose's (2012: 131) argument that metabolic processes always rely on energy flowing through death across species and systems. Here, birth and death, cultivation and fertilisation, growth and decay, were not fixed endpoints in a linear conception of life(time), but rather movements, where, as Nyamnjoh (2017a: 257) suggests, one can be dead in one context as a way of becoming alive in another. As Hugo Ka Canham (2023: 10) argues, if ancestors and the dead are a source of life and meaning, then life-knowledge and life-energy are tied to death. In Nkambeni, the dead sustained the enduring connection with land despite dispossession, became central to the reclamation of ancestral soil, played a vital role in human-land identity formation, and generated life as part of the energy flows coursing through the earth through farming. In the mode of indebtedness, life and death were thus not oppositional but composite, each necessary for the ongoing vitality of the soil and those entangled with it. Where Hannah Arendt (1958) contends that death marks a departure in the modernist ontology; in Nkambeni, death signified a return – a return to the soil in continuous, open-ended movements.

This is not to overemphasise death as a defining ontological state in this area, but to highlight the indebtedness shaped by movements through the soil, of which life and death are but parts within Nkambeni. Put differently, the focus is not on death as being, but on the broader relational processes in which life and death were intertwined through the soil. A story that Sedi told me exemplified this. "Before the villages," he explained as we planted a small patch of

land, the old furrows repurposed for the new crops, "my grandfather lived in mud houses on the farm. He had a house for each of his three wives, separate from one another." He gestured to the locations where the houses once stood. "What happened to them?" I asked. "They flooded away with heavy rain or something," he replied. As he spoke, water from the hose slowly filled the furrows, softening the soil so we could press the new seedlings firmly into the ground. "You know the soil," he added, referring to the mud used to build his grandfather's houses. "It will not last."

Here, the soil was recognised for its mutable and shifting nature – its inevitable decay. Yet this impermanence, like a state of being alive, did not imply a lack of value. In my field site, value and respect for the soil were ontological necessities. This was evident not only in expressions like the well-known "sons and daughters of the soil," which I regularly encountered in Nkambeni and is common across Africa (see Mafeje, 2003; Geschiere, 2011), but also in the area's funeral rites. Leading up to burial, close family members of the deceased sleep on the ground in the room where the coffin is kept as a mark of respect – a return to the ground, the soil, to mourn the deceased, who will soon also be returned to the soil through burial. While Sedi's grandfather's houses no longer stood, the soil remained, having merely shifted into another state. This ongoing interplay reflected the compositeness between life and death, give and take, in Nkambeni – a departure from a modernist, conquering ontology that strives for eternal permanence or views death with disdain as a definitive end. Here, life, to take, and death, to give, were intertwined within movements of indebtedness: life returned to the soil, and through the soil, life was sustained.

These movements did not exist independently but were deeply intertwined with the past and the future. Indeed, the soil – the dirt – as a boundary-pusher, revealed how, as Povinelli (2011: 132) asserts, the history of social events shapes the distribution of life and death in the present moment. This recalls Douglas's argument, which I discussed earlier, on symbolic purity and the role of discarding the impure – dirt – in structuring social order. Such conceptions were central to the apartheid-era forced removals experienced by those living in Nkambeni. Babe Mona explained, "It was because the land, the soil, was bad here, sandy, that we were moved here."[20] Sitting on his small porch with pink and beige flower-patterned tiles, he paused before adding, "You cannot grow on sandy soil." Not only were the ancestors of those living in Nkambeni discarded as dirt, relocated, and displaced, but many lost large tracts of arable land and were left to contend with the discarded sandy soil, the dirt, in their new locations.

This history of forced removals did not remain a distant memory; it was embedded in the sandy soil, ensuring that the mode of indebtedness remained entwined with the legacies of those once displaced. Yet, the widespread enduring generational farming and gardening in Nkambeni revealed more than just social adaptation, reflecting an ontology shaped by histories and layered times through processes of indebtedness. Here, the soil carried both the scars of displacement and the enduring practices of sustenance demanded by the soil through collaborative entanglements, where the boundaries between loss and gain, give and take, life and death were continually negotiated and redefined. Peter, the environmentalist I took the grass-weed to (see Chapter 1), explained it as such: "The soil is like skin. When it's tilled, it

[20] Majika is also known as Sand River (see Introduction).

gets bruised. To heal that bruise, it must be handled with care and given what it needs, allowing more diverse plants to grow and helping the soil stabilise again." Through the mode of indebtedness the past and present converged within the sandy soil to shape ongoing life. Mandla's comment on Majika's more formal name, *Sand River*, illustrated this poignantly: "We are people of the sand," he said, nodding his head in quiet reflection. Echoing the common African saying touched on above, this statement was an embrace of the soil in Nkambeni, with all its history and its messiness.

The Messy Terms of Entanglement

The rot was overpowering in Sedi's maize lands – a smell of decay lingered on everything. It clung to the air. We breathed through our mouths as Sedi led me to the source: a blackened, rotting maize head. "A worm ate it," he explained. "It enters the plant when it's young, waits for it to grow, and eats it when it bears fruit." The recent irrigation drenched the soil with a strong musky, damp scent, but even that could not mask the stench of death.

Echoing the violence of *tandla tiyagezana* (see Chapter 1), the mode of indebtedness in Nkambeni was messy. Even though giving and death could constitute a form of life-taking through indebtedness, it did not mean it was without pain. As Nomvuyo told me after her aunt's funeral, her eyes heavy with sadness, "It hurts when you lose someone, even if they live on." While the mode of indebtedness held the potential for reparative life, as I discussed in the previous section, it also had moments that *smelled* – compost, rotten fruit, bodies, manure, sweat.

On a particularly warm day in Majika, Mandla and Blessing were struggling with their broken water pump, which had stopped working three days earlier. Sitting under the sparse shade of a low bush, Mandla exclaimed in a voice of equal parts frustration and exhaustion, "Everything is dying! Everything is shit. Farming can be shit. I hate it! But sometimes it's good… but sometimes shit." Life, dying, and farming bore the weight of despair. These moments of hopelessness revealed that indebtedness extended beyond triumph, pushing against what Nyamnjoh (2017b) might call the modernist "winner takes it all" mentality. For Govindrajan (2018: 4), to be entangled in each other's making – much like the mode of indebtedness – involves not only care and connection but also indifference, pain, and disgust. Here, to deny violence was to overlook the "sustenance, possibilities, and contradictions" in becoming through entanglements (Nyamnjoh, 2018: 60). As Sedi put it, "It's a win and lose, farming. Sometimes you win, but sometimes you lose." Within the compositeness that shaped movement in this mode of indebtedness, compromise was central, demanding a recognition of violence's messiness.

Mandla and I met Pedni one quiet afternoon as we walked through the village. His white house sat just off the newly paved road, surrounded by vegetables, peppers, chillies, and tomatoes. He greeted us warmly and gave us a tour of his garden. As he guided us through the plants, he gestured toward a smaller garden patch behind the house. "I had to pull everything out," he said with frustration. "The termites ate through the roots." Intrigued, I asked if termites were a common problem. "Come see!" he exclaimed and led me into his house. Inside, the

evidence was unmistakable. Along the bottom of the walls, dirt spilt through the cracks in the concrete. Hard-packed, dark brown soil formed columns that stretched upward like fingers, reaching toward the ceiling. The soil seemed to be consuming the structure; reclaiming it. Having seen this, I began noticing it everywhere in the chieftaincy. Through termites, the soil overtook fences, poles, and houses, slowly but insistently collecting what it was owed.

There was a certain degree of acceptance – or compromise – in allowing the termite to continue nesting; the soily columns reclaiming. Although complaints were voiced, they were akin to lamenting the sun on a hot day; little could be done to change the situation. This compromise did not signal complacency or capitulation; rather, it demanded a balance between giving and taking, life and death in the mode of indebtedness. This balance enabled the compositeness of these movements, where seemingly conflicting demands sustained each other – a living *with* the 'smell.' Compromise was a necessary negotiation, involving concession and moments of loss, death, and giving in order to take, sustain life, and ensure subsistence.

Of course, as must be clear by now, such indebtedness did not flow in one direction. In Nkambeni, just as the soil reclaimed what it was indebted through the termites inhabiting built structures, so too was that very termite-worked soil mobilised to sustain infrastructure, and livelihoods. In Majika, Thomas worked daily to fill the many potholes in the tarred Chief's Road. He began his week on one end of the road and worked his way to the other by week's end. To fill the potholes, he sourced soil from the numerous termite and ant heaps scattered across the village. "This soil is thick because the ants have worked it," he explained, making it the perfect material to patch potholes, even if only temporarily. Drivers often stopped to give him money – his income. Thomas had identified a gap left by the government's neglect of the roads and filled it, quite literally, with soil from the termites. It pointed to the compromise within compositeness, balancing what must be given and what could be taken through the soil, shaping and supporting existence in my field site.

These movements of giving and taking embedded in the soil required no arbitration; the obligation to act – or not act – arose from the mutual sustenance exchanged, even in moments of compromise (see Stengers, 2005, 2010). Unlike a Hobbesian social contract, this mode of indebtedness was not a fixed agreement between the soil and those living from it, where exchange was negotiated according to strict apportionments to ensure balance. Instead, balance or compositeness – and indeed compromise – emerged from the messiness of indebtedness itself. The obligation of giving and taking as composites was "a state of nature" in Nkambeni – to reappropriate Hobbes' (1901 [1651]) phrase. Put differently, it was the presence and acceptance of messiness in the relationship with the soil that gave rise to a mode of indebtedness, constantly negotiated through movements of give and take, life and death, loss and gain, all in compromise. Drawing on my encounter with the maize-eating worm and my earlier discussion on apartheid forced removals: colonialism and apartheid, like the worm, crept in slowly and tactically, leaving behind an insurmountable toll of death whose impact persists even years later. Yet, as I have shown, death was not the end of life. In Nkambeni, the soil became the site through which life continued to emerge in the very messiness of indebtedness.

The Footprints of a Polyphony of Times

Standing in Sedi's macadamia orchard, with bees buzzing and a gentle breeze rustling the trees, he demonstrated his irrigation method. Water was trickling out of a hosepipe at the base of the tree trunk. He explained, "The water must be *low* if you want it to penetrate deep. If it's too high, the water will just spread on top" – he gestured outward with open hands – "and take away all the soil and nutrients." This irrigation method, rooted in a 'low' time, takes him a month to water the orchard's 40 trees. He added with a smile, "This is slow work." It echoed Mandla's comment on a particularly hot day when we were weeding in the cabbage fields and trimming the leaves to strengthen the heads. "On the farm, you use your pace, not power," he cautioned me. "If you use power, you won't make it through the day."

As I have evoked throughout the chapter, time – or rather, the plurality of times – played an important role in enabling the movements that gave rise to the mode of indebtedness in Nkambeni. This was evident in the various movements of growth and decay, life and death; the intersecting timescales of human and beyond-human activity; the immediacy of obligations – to act or refrain – and the seemingly contrasting temporalities of care and neglect, giving and taking. While movements of life, death, and exchange are often viewed as cyclical – typically in opposition to linear time, as Geertz (1973) suggests – here, through exchange, they were layered, unfolding alongside linear time in a compositeness that gave rise to a polyphony of times. This, in turn, shaped the ontology in which life and death, give and take, could function as composites rather than merely oppositional or cyclical binaries. Alongside 'low' and slow times, as seen in the extract above, other *times* also shaped being in Nkambeni: modernist notions of progress, feelings of stagnation, and 'no time,' each revealing fragments of the polyphony of times animating the mode of indebtedness.

Farmers and gardeners in Nkambeni often struggled to access tractors for ploughing. When I asked Loazi why they did not use their cattle instead, he laughed and said, "No one does that anymore. Technology has changed." His response revealed an attachment to an idea of progress that was not merely about efficiency or convenience; it reflected a deeper valuation of modernity, where other ways of being and doing were, on a surface level, viewed as incompatible with a linear movement of progress – a time that moves forward from a lesser to a higher state. This presence of progress was also apparent in the changes in burial practices in Nkambeni, evident in the extract I discussed earlier on the different types of graves on Sedi's family farm. He pointed out how older graves were simply dug, filled with soil, and covered with round rocks. Newer graves were lined with large concrete bricks from bottom to top, with only the middle portion filled with soil. While there were various public health, infrastructural, and social reasons for these burial shifts (see Lee, 2011), when I asked Sedi why this change had occurred, he shrugged and answered simply, "Progress."

In a seeming contrast to the above presence of time as progress in Nkambeni, Mandla, out of the blue, told me one day, "It's what makes us fail to progress – that we fail to manage our time." The statement caught me by surprise. It opposed his earlier emphasis on slow-paced time, marking a shift from one time to another. This tension was also evident in a conversation with Thabo, a man Mandla and I briefly met in the old town of Mahushu. After a long discussion about the various changes the area had undergone – new boreholes, water pipes,

roads – Thabo was eager to welcome me back in the future, adding as I left, "You'll see when you come back in a year, it will look the same. As if no time has passed." These conceptions of stagnation and "no time" coexisted with times of progress and fast change, just as they coexisted with slow and "low" times. While these different times may seem contradictory at first, they reveal how the mode of indebtedness in Nkambeni operated: through movements between times in compositeness.

These multiple times, shaped by the entanglements of soil, history, and lived experience, demanded a continuous negotiation of giving and taking, life and death, obligations, losses, and repairs across multiple times. It was underpinned by an open-endedness, rather than rigid dualistic assertions of progress or stagnation, even though these assertions were present within the compositeness of my field site. This was particularly reflected in the fertilisation practices. There was a clear consensus among the farmers that artificial fertiliser was best. Such fertiliser did come with a high cost, often making it inaccessible, and it had to be reapplied repeatedly to sustain the soil, as suggested before. But, when applied consistently, it accelerated crop growth more than any other type of fertiliser – something that could be described as progress in a modernist sense (see Green, 2020). Yet, whenever the topic of fertilisation arose during my fieldwork, most farmers and gardeners would add, "You must look at the soil and maybe give it cow manure." Mjabula reinforced this point by noting, "You know we have always used cow manure, because it lasts five years."

These entanglements with the soil revealed an attentiveness to different times rather than a rigid adherence to any single one – the soil demanded it. Thus, the mode of indebtedness, grounded in movement between multiple times, did not reject modernist progress but rather situated it within a composite multiplicity, where progress was merely one strand. This enabled not just the cohabitation of different times, but the active negotiation through indebtedness: moments when progress was present and moments when it was absent; moments when slow time was necessary, when taking predominated, or when giving prevailed; moments when dirt was simply dirt, or when it exposed the permeability of rigid boundaries; moments when death sustained and moments when death signified loss and despair.

When I asked Filemon, the elderly cattle herder who had lived in the area since before villagisation, why he reared cattle, he smiled and said, "My father was a herder, his father was a herder, and I am a herder. I am following in their *footprints*.[21] I was born on this land, and I will die on this land." Stepping into ancestral footprints marked a gesture of *return*, of giving back – for what came before and what was yet to come. This interplay, shaped by the soil and the presence of ancestors, made *being* possible through ongoing negotiations between give and take; life and death. While Derrida (1994) places the afterlife – life that was, yet still lingers – "out of time" (see also Gordon, 2008), here it remained in time, though not in the linear sense through which life and death are conventionally understood, but within the contradictory layering of times that movement through compositeness evoked. Filemon's statement, which wove together these multiple times, revealed the reality of being entangled with the soil, where the obligation of the mode of indebtedness – drawing on Rose (2012: 138) – enabled my

[21] Though "footsteps" is more accurate in English, Filemon and I spoke in Afrikaans, where he used "*voetspore*," which more directly translates to "footprints" or "foot tracks."

interlocutors "to be responsive to the dynamic exuberance of life." These movements across multiple times epitomised such exuberance through the soil, as indebtedness was not merely a weight of the past but an ongoing compositeness between life and death, presence and absence, continuity and rupture, giving and taking.

Summary Conclusion: Being as Return Through the Soil

By tracing the entanglements with soil in Nkambeni, I pointed to how indebtedness, as a mode of existence, emerged not as a static burden or economic transaction, but as a relational process grounded in movement and reciprocity. This unsettled the dualistic boundaries of give and take, life and death, loss and gain, revealing them not as opposites but as composites through soil's shifting presence. Soil, as dirt and decay, as nourishment, and through the ancestors, moved between these boundaries, animating a polyphony of times which gave rise to a form of being where indebtedness became the condition for sustenance and subsistence. Practices such as leaving maize stalks to fertilise the soil, reclaiming land through ancestral graves, and the entangled exchanges of termite-worked soil exemplified how life in Nkambeni was sustained through reciprocal movements – where what was taken had to be returned; just as the soil reclaimed what it gave to produce life. Life and death, in this sense, became not only central themes within my discussion of the mode of indebtedness, but also material expressions of give and take – moments where the relational movements of drawing from and returning to the soil were rendered most visible. In this way, "becoming with" the soil was never neat; it involved compromise, obligation, and loss, pointing to the generative messiness of entanglements. These movements put pressure on modernist ideals of linear time and rigid separation, revealing how in composite to these modernist notions, times in Nkambeni unfolded through slow time, 'low' time, no-time, returns, and ancestral continuity – sometimes as progress, and at other times in the quiet persistence of footprints in the soil.

Here, the 'sandy' soil not only carried the scars of colonialism and apartheid, but also absorbed, transformed, and gave rise to new life in the very conditions that once sought to discard it. As I illustrated in Chapter 1 through *tandla tiyagezana*, these exchanges demanded recognition of violence and rupture. Yet, it was precisely in this messiness, in compromise, that the potential for generative life was sustained. The mode of indebtedness, then, could not be confined to a linear past that demanded nor to a present that simply responded. Through the soil's mutability as dirt – the calls for return, for care, for balance – it moved between times, through which, in compositeness, indebtedness and a polyphony of times co-produced one another. Just as the soil in Nkambeni revealed that life depended on death, and that return was not regression but sustenance, so too did the mode of indebtedness it gave rise to demonstrate how being took shape in the fertile, decaying, and ever-moving ground.

Moving into the next chapter, I turn to the mode of metamorphoses, which builds on the compositeness explored here. Where indebtedness emerged through the entangled movements of give and take, life and death through the soil, the next chapter follows how movement in Nkambeni enabled transformations through water – how power shifted, shaped, and refigured being. These modes were not self-contained but entangled; they operated in compositeness, illustrating how land revealed movement as central to shaping existence in my field site.

Chapter 3 – Where Water Moves, Power Shifts: Metamorphoses as a Mode of Existence

Summary Introduction

In this chapter, I wade into the flows and presence of water as another facet of land. In Nkambeni, the question of land was always, in some way, a question of water. "The issue is finding land with water," Joseph, from the young farmer's charitable trust, told me. "I have a few hectares just on the other side of the hill there," Lucas said, pointing toward a small, rocky outcrop a few kilometres away. "And there is water – a river close by." When I first met Mandla, he, too, emphasised water's importance, proudly stating, "My land is next to the river." Like soil, water was an inseparable part of land. Even the formal name of Majika, the village in Nkambeni where I spent most of my time, *Sand River*, signified the convergence of soil and water within the question of land. And when it came to land, water embedded power.

Following my discussions in Chapters 1 and 2, where seemingly opposing binaries, particularly those between fixed and unfixed space and place, and linear and nonlinear time, were shown as composite, this chapter turns to the movements of power through water, accompanying such compositeness. It reveals that power and the beings it gave rise to were not fixed within hegemonic dualities but, as Nyamnjoh (2020b: 94) suggests, reflected "an idea of power that is disabused of the illusion of permanence." A power that brought about continuous transformations, transfigurations, and transubstantiations as it moved through Nkambeni in the composition and re-composition of the seen and the unseen, stability and instability, violence and safety, powerlessness and empowerment, and, importantly, binary gender expectations.

In addressing the primary research question of the dissertation – "What does the role of land in Nkambeni reveal of its modes of existence?" – this chapter puts forward metamorphoses as another mode of existence. I argue that this mode points to the morphic realities of my field site, made possible through the movements of power mentioned above. My main argument throughout this dissertation is that land revealed movement as central to shaping reality in Nkambeni. Thus, the chapter contributes to this argument by focusing on water – not simply as a resource or symbol, but as a moving force which continuously shaped and reshaped being through river flows, unreliable municipal supply, consumption, washing, magic, crop irrigation, dreams, witchcraft, premonitions, medicine, and drought (see Swatuk, 2010; Kongo, 2022; Solomon, 2022). As I have previously done, I will again decentre the human in this analysis, positioning water as the protagonist (Tsing, 2015). In doing so, water's shifting and transformative power will come to the fore, not only in shaping my human interlocutors' worlds but also in extending beyond them.

I illustrate my argument by weaving together multispecies ethnographic accounts and relevant literature, beginning with a brief theoretical framework to engage the mode of metamorphoses, which I bring into conversation with Nkambeni's unreliable municipal water supply. This serves as a starting point to explore how, through compositeness, power moved through water – and water through power – unsettling fixed notions of power tied to 'scarcity

in the pipes,' not only materially but also through unseen forces like health rituals, witchcraft, and an unknown presence in the river. This subversion of "modern water" (Linton, 2010) sets the stage for an incident involving the breakdown of Mandla and Blessing's water pump, where dreams, premonitions, and magic revealed water's transubstantiating force – a moment of "becoming with" (Haraway, 2008) in which power was shaped and shifted beyond rigid modernist binaries.

The discussion does not dismiss material consequences but shows how the violence that emerged from such breakdowns – violence akin to that introduced in Chapter 1 through *tandla tiyagezana* ("hands wash each other") and in Chapter 2 through mutual indebtedness – only becomes legible when the compositeness of the material and the invisible is acknowledged – thus where modernist articulations of the 'real' and what is considered beyond it, converged. With this in mind, I turn to gender expectation in my field site, where fixed dualities coexisted with the morphic, as revealed in the ambivalence of washing as both a domestic routine and a transformative act through ritual. This is further explored in an account of *magogos* (older women) who plant tora along riverbanks – spaces of transgression, fear, and reverence – revealing how power transubstantiated through the entanglement of water, women, plant, and place. By tracing water's flows, I will show how these power movements in Nkambeni destabilise fixed forms, making visible metamorphoses as a mode of existence.

Waters of Transformation

The Nkambeni River, flowing beside Mandla and Blessing's family farm, shimmered blue-brown in the sunlight. Its white rapids churned as water rushed past in endless movement – always passing, yet the river remained. I had come to visit Nikita's crops near the riverbank. In return for helping Mandla and Blessing, they had made space for him to farm. He carefully irrigated his thriving cabbages, chillies, and tomatoes using a hose connected to the farm's pump submerged in the river below. Nearby, on a rocky patch, lay remnants of a *sangoma* (traditional healer) cleansing ritual – burnt candles, chicken feathers, wet ash, and shards of glass – marking the river's pull across different worlds: a source of irrigation, a place of ritual, healing, washing and a reminder that multiple lives and needs converged along its shifting edge.

Mandla joined us in a patch of shade, and soon the conversation shifted to the river's role in rituals. Some, he and Nikita asserted, were scams; others held real potency – especially those performed by women seeking power over their husbands, as explored below. What struck me most, however – exposing the transformative power of water clearly – was when Nikita declared, with a look that suggested disbelief at my ignorance, "Everyone in National Parliament seeks the *sangomas* for magic. Even Ramaphosa."[22] I looked at him, puzzled. "They boil him," Mandla said, picking up the thread. I asked what he meant. "Yes," he nodded. "They take him to the river – just like that," gesturing toward the water where the ritual remnants were scattered. "They boil him there, wash him, bathe him – to give him power, to transform him,

[22] I conducted my fieldwork during the 2024 national election, as results were being announced – Cyril Ramaphosa had just been re-elected president, and the hung parliament that followed was a source of widespread intrigue.

to make him strong." They leaned back, satisfied that they had told me the truth of the matter. This echoed long-standing observations on the entanglements of witchcraft, magic, and political power in Africa, where transformation, transfiguration, and transubstantiation have played critical roles (see Rowlands & Warnier, 1988; Geschiere, 1997; Moore & Sanders, 2001; Niehaus, 2001; Ashforth, 2005).

I introduce this account not to make a political statement about the intersection of state power and witchcraft, but as a starting point, to highlight how power transformations through water shaped being in Nkambeni. Such transformations often unfolded in the realm of the magical or the unseen, but, in compositeness, they were also present in the ordinary, through farming, irrigation, rain, or washing. Here, "transformation" should not be regarded in the charged, institutional sense that the term often carries in post-apartheid South Africa (see for example Albertyn, 2007; Andreoni et al., 2021), but to evoke the capacity to morph, shift, and reconfigure in the rhythms of daily life. One way to think about this morphic ability is through what Nyamnjoh (2017b, 2018), drawing on Tutuola (1952), describes as the figure of the "complete gentleman": a skull that borrows body parts to become human – to be made and remade through what it gathers. As Tsing (2015: 28) suggests, it is through openness to powers beyond self-containment that "transformations through encounters" are revealed. In Nkambeni, such compositeness emerged through movement – through a capacity to extend and, crucially, to transform – a dynamic revealed through water in this chapter, just as it was through knowledge in Chapter 1 and soil in Chapter 2. These were not singular events but ongoing metamorphoses: shifting states of being that allowed for the emergence of new forms and, just as significantly, the possibility of return (see Nyamnjoh, 2017b).

To frame these movements of power through water, I draw on Latour's (2013a) formulation of *metamorphoses* in his inquiry into the modes of existence of the "Moderns," particularly his articulation of the "invisible."[23] For Latour (2013a: 202), the invisible refers not to that which is simply hidden or absent, but to that which, though not always seen, nonetheless constitutes reality through its capacity to morph across states: material and immaterial, tangible and intangible, scientifically provable and unprovable, observable and unobservable. As he argues, the invisible is not opposed to the "visible material world" but instead corresponds to a different template of existence in which matter is not the sole criterion for being (Latour, 2013a: 200). It also echoes Merz's (2004: 577) description of imagination within discourses on witchcraft and magic, where "the problem of the inseparability of the seen and the unseen no longer poses a problem." This brings to the surface the compositeness of the natural and the seemingly supernatural, objective and subjective, scientific and superstitious, visible and invisible, real and unreal (Nyamnjoh, 2001: 29) – not in contradiction to modernist thought, but as a complement to it.

Within such compositeness, the formations and transformations of power in Nkambeni, both physical and invisible, were brought forth through water's ability to defy jurisdictions by crossing borders and boundaries – flowing between human and non-human bodies as liquids, solids, or vapour (Bakker, 2012), traversing socio-environmental ecosystems that blurred the

[23] Latour's (2013) study of the "Moderns" shows how Western modernity defines itself through binaries – like nature/culture and human/animal – while constantly transgressing them.

divide between nature and culture (Hastrup & Hastrup, 2015; Green, 2020; Kongo, 2022), destabilising the boundary between materiality and abstraction (Ballestero, 2019; Khan, 2022), and even moving on metaphysical levels between being human and being more-than-human, as this chapter shows. As Joost Fontein (2015) demonstrates through his ethnographic work in Zimbabwe, the volatile nature of water and the contested performances of power that accompany it render their entanglement fluid, unpredictable, and constantly shifting.

I first glimpsed how the mode of metamorphoses gestured beyond modernist notions of power as fixed within binary hierarchies through Nkambeni's irregular municipal water supply. Areas in my field site with municipal pipes received water about once a week, some only every few months, while newer village sections, developed in the last 15 years, lacked household connections entirely. The flow (or lack of flow) through these pipes depended on municipal workers manually opening and closing taps across different sections, providing only a few hours of water at unpredictable intervals – the time it took to drive between sections and return to shut off the supply. From a modernist perspective, power in this context could be framed as a top-down structure embedded in 'material' or 'objective' infrastructure and governance, with water as an external passive force – through the link between water access and political rule (Bichsel, 2016; Chitonge, 2020), the colonial and apartheid histories of South African water control (Swatuk, 2010), the long-standing commodification of water (Escobar, 2011; Solomon, 2022), or even biopower, where the irregular municipal supply structures controlled bodies and daily rhythms (Foucault, 2007; Cisney & Morar, 2020). Yet, in practice, while these power structures were impactful, they did not fully determine the everyday experience of water access or the role water and power played in Nkambeni. Many residents, for example, bypassed municipal taps entirely, drawing water from rivers, linking directly into main supply lines, or using water tankers that delivered water to homes for a fee (see also Kongo, 2022). 'Scarcity in the pipes' was thus only one facet of water's presence.

This was further evident in how health and well-being in Nkambeni – though typically linked to water access (Strang, 2019) – were not necessarily dependent on the municipal supply. Water's power to bring health moved dominantly through *sangoma* washing rituals, the drinking of sacred tea made of the white-water from the river rapids in the prominent Zionist Christian Church, and the use of *muti* from "medicine men," as Loazi called them. Just as water was essential for crop growth – Ma Khoza and Ma Siboyi, two sisters I met on a village walk, lamented the lack of municipal water for irrigation as the cause of their undersized sweet potatoes – so too, it carried the potential for invisible forces beyond its material access. The two sisters subtly added that witchcraft might also be at play in stunting the crop.

Accounts of a powerful river presence in Nkambeni also suggested that water itself embodied such forces, which moved power beyond the expected fixed boundaries of subject and object, seen and unsee, in modernist ontology. Ma Gertrude recounted an incident at the Nchabane River in 2016, where a young boy died after entering a place believed to be inhabited by an unseen, fearsome presence. Once a site of baptism and 'Christian rebirth' (see Austnaberg, 2010), the incident and the unseen water presence have since rendered this part of the river a place of fear and caution, largely avoided except for the careful washing of laundry. "Now, we're too scared to go there," Ma Gertrude admitted. What emerged was a fluidity to

power – where water's power was not merely fixed in infrastructure but moved in compositeness, both materially and immaterially, across the visible and the invisible. It resisted what Jamie Linton (2010) describes as "modern water" – a specific, reductive manifestation that defines water solely by its material conditions as a passive resource and disregards its broader social, ontological, and transformative entanglements (see also Strang, 2004, 2011; Loftus, 2011; Green, 2020; Solomon, 2022). In Nkambeni, water's irregularity did not merely signify a lack or failure of state control within fixed binary hierarchies but pointed to a redistribution of power that moved through compositeness, altering and shaping being.

Power and Dreams When the Water Withdrew

It was early July, during an especially hot winter week, when Mandla and Blessing's water pump broke – an incident I also mentioned in the previous chapter. Like many farmers in Nkambeni, they relied on a pump from the river, though it was not linked to formal water rights – such concerns held little weight here. The farm was dry, with the spinach leaves showing signs of stress. In the meantime, they had borrowed a temporary pressure pump that worked only in bursts; an inefficient and frustrating watering process. Three days into the pump failure, two men arrived to help Mandla and Blessing repair it. The four men worked tirelessly on the broken pump, testing and replacing parts, while the tension in the air grew, punctuated by grunts of frustration.

After numerous failed attempts to fix it, the men gave up and decided on a new course of action. Blessing travelled to the nearby town of Bushbuckridge, where a family member had a pump they could borrow for the time being. Meanwhile, Mandla and I sat in the shade of an old bushveld thorn tree, sharing a beer to ease the day's stress. "It was magic!" Mandla declared with a deep sigh, referring to the broken pump. "Four pumps have broken in two years. Eish," he shook his head in dismay, emphasising that this was no coincidence. Then, looking at me intently, he added, "You know, I had a dream last week about a large crocodile in the river. It was trying to attack me. A warning. I should move the pump from the river to the stream on the other side of the farm." The dream, along with the possibility of magical forces influencing the pump's failure, weighed on Mandla. In the distance, a whirlwind lifted dry soil into the air, swirling it over the crops as if the land was taunting us with its dryness. "And even Blessing," Mandla added, a note of unease in his voice as he gazed into the distance. "A snake nearly bit him at the river. On Monday or Tuesday, he went to fetch water, put the bucket in, and a snake lunged at him." He mimicked the striking movement of a snake with his hands. "Blessing pulled out quickly. Yoh! We should move there."

In Nkambeni, as I have touched on, the river offered power through water – power that sustained the farm, nourished the crops, and structured daily life. Mandla and Blessing's costly and hard-won pump was more than a piece of equipment – it was a threshold to a livelihood enabled by water's power, and in compositeness, the power to access it. When it failed, so too did Mandla and Blessing's power over water and the power it provided as a life-sustaining force. As Pedni put it during a visit to his home, after the municipal supply was cut and the once-steady flow into his garden slowed to a trickle: "When we don't have water, we don't have the power to farm." Yet, in a reflection of my discussion on the 'scarcity in the pipes'

above, the breakdown of the pump did not merely disrupt the flow of water nor Mandla and Blessing's access to it; when considering magic, the dream, and the premonition, it revealed how power moved beyond fixed hierarchical binaries through water.

Within such movements of power, Mandla's dream of the crocodile and Blessing's encounter with the water snake – much like Ma Gertrude's account of the unseen water presence, discussed earlier – were not simply symbolic. These experiences were formative – powers – shaping how the pump's failure was interpreted as magic and subsequently how they responded to it. They were not forces outside the real, but entanglements – not external to the lived world, but of it; not merely images, but beings through which water's agency materialised. In these moments of "becoming with" (Haraway, 2008), the human, dream, magical creatures, pump, and the river revealed themselves as composite, enabling movement between them through water. Mandla responded to the dream by proposing to move the pump; his actions were shaped by the water-creatures, just as in compositeness, the creatures' significance was shaped by Mandla's own experience of the pump's failure. Thus, the broken pump became a site where power was not simply lost in the breakdown, but transformed – as water, a living and dreaming force, withdrew itself from the modernist inclined human command to take back control. The crocodile in Mandla's dream and the snake Blessing encountered were the water's *power* to act, provoke, and demand relation. To this end, human and water began to fold into one another (see Kohn, 2013; Bubandt, 2017), where magic and the dream, through water in the invisible, broke down the boundaries between perception and substance, intention and causality.

In this entangled view, water's power and human actions were transubstantiated or morphed – each becoming the condition of the other's expression. It pointed to the mode of metamorphoses, where in the movements of power, being human and being more-than-human were revealed as composites, enabling transformations into and through one another (see Nyamnjoh, 2018). In other words, the shift in power from Mandla and Blessing to the water marked not only a point of strain on hegemonic, human-centred agency – wherein water, supposedly inanimate, emerged as an active agent – but also gestured toward the compositeness where water and human, substance and medium, matter and meaning, object and subject, were never entirely separate to begin with, even as these binaries continued to exist through water as resource. This evoked what Edgeworth (2011) describes as a "wrestling of control" – a dynamic less concerned with domination than mutual transformation through tension and contradiction (see also Clark, 2010). In these entanglements, power was not held or lost in discrete moments but, through constant movement, transfigured across both the material and the invisible in compositeness. Water, as both sustenance and agent, "modern water" and beyond that, emerged as a participant in an unfolding relation of power – uncertainty and potential – in my field site.

The Violence of Water in Messy Entanglements

Recognising these movements within the invisible does not mean that the material consequences of power shifts were any less pressing. The deterioration of infrastructure (Anand, 2020), the drought and wilting crops that followed the breakdown of Mandla and

Blessing's pump, or even Ma Gertrude's account of the unknown water presence that took the life of the young boy, were all marked by violence. Indeed, the violences that *tandla tiyagezana* (see Chapter 1) gestures toward is the violence that emerged through these shifting power relations and the tensions they gave rise to – violences that become more perceptible when attending to the simultaneous operation of the mode of indebtedness and the mode of metamorphoses within the same field of relations. No hand can be washed by the other without yielding some power to it. Yet even this yielding is never final; it is always momentary. Once one hand has been washed, the power shifts again, as the previously passive hand now takes up the power to wash the other, and so it continues.

This is not to suggest, for example, that Ma Gertrude's account of the boy's death or the wilting of Mandla and Blessing's crops were some necessary exchange – a 'debt' owed to the water. To interpret it this way would be to misread the composite, reciprocal movements of give and take that characterise the mode of indebtedness (see Chapter 2). Rather, recalling the compromise that compositeness entailed (Chapter 2), and acknowledging water as a force in and of itself – active within the shifting configurations of power in Nkambeni – necessitated a recognition that water was also a force *to be reckoned with*. As I noted in Chapters 1 and 2, within compositeness, moments of loss, despair, and violence are not anomalies but part of the entangled conditions of being (Haraway, 2016; Govindrajan, 2018; Nyamnjoh, 2018). In the composite nature through which power moved in my field site – with, through, and as water – moments of powerlessness were contingent upon simultaneous moments of power. Yet this violence became legible only when the material and the invisible were considered together, each necessitating the other. For instance, the breakdown of the pump, discussed above, encapsulated both the rising agency of water and the diminishing power of Mandla and Blessing to access it – a metamorphosis through the compositeness of the seen and the unseen. As Bakker (2012: 616) argues, it is precisely water's defiance of jurisdiction that implicates it in contested relationships with power.

Traces of this could be found across my field site. Shaking his head in frustration, Sedi lamented how the unseasonably hot winter, combined with a rainless season, was "draining all the power from the crops." Yet when rain finally did come one day, he complained that it arrived at the wrong time, bringing illness to the tomatoes. In this area, tomatoes needed to be planted during winter, when it was dry, to prevent the spread of disease (see Getahun & Habte, 2017). While some of my interlocutors, when prompted, attributed these weather changes to global warming, this was not how such transformations were initially or intuitively framed. Global-scale narratives, while prevalent, remained distant; what came into focus in everyday life was the contradictory power that water wielded – a power that became water itself, feared and revered, moving in compositeness. Mandla's tomatoes faced a similar fate to Sedi's, becoming infected after the unexpected rainfall. One afternoon, as we gathered the few remaining tomatoes that had not yet succumbed to what he called "the rain's poison," he reminded me to wash my hands immediately after touching them. "If we touch anything else, we'll infect it too," he warned. This exemplified how power movements operated through water, entangled in the violence and messiness of compositeness that embedded them: water was at once the agent of destruction and the means of containment – just as rain spoiled the crops, washing with water could halt the spread. In compositeness, water wielded power in contradictory

currents – a force whose shifting flows carried the violence of loss, breakdown, and uncertainty and the potential to renew, cleanse, and begin again.

Foucault (1982) argues that "norm" is shaped by "disciplinary" power, yet in a field site where water revealed the constant, shifting movements of power, what became of norm? Here, messiness emerged as the norm – a messiness that coexisted in compositeness with, rather than in opposition to, the hierarchical power structures of modernist thought. When water flowed through pumps or municipal pipes, it was simply part of everyday life; when absent, it became a disruptive force, carrying the threat of death and devastation through transformation. In washing laundry or bathing, water served as an ordinary medium of cleanliness. Yet in ritual washings, its presence could transfigure normative forms of power, as the next section will illustrate. This tension was also present in Sedi's earlier reflections on rain: in the dry season, rain was typically welcomed, yet even then it harboured the potential for destruction. Like magic and dreams, water moved beyond my interlocutors' control. The idea of 'disciplinary' power within fixed hierarchical binaries – the hegemonic norm – was unsettled through its flows.

Ambivalent Washing and Tora Plants

There was a tangible fear among my male interlocutors about the ways women could use magic to wield power over them through water. At the river, four women – wearing cloths wrapped around their waists like skirts and headscarves – performed a washing ritual, the air thick with the scent of burning wood and the sound of a chicken being slaughtered. The steady beat of a drum struck with a PVC pipe echoed through the space, accompanied by their rhythmic chants. "The women," Blessing told me as we watched the ritual from afar, "come and wash here so that men will love them better." He shook his head emphatically before continuing, "Eish... When she returns to the house after bathing, it's not the same man. The man is not the man of the house anymore, not wearing the shoe anymore – the woman is." This gestured to a transformation and transfiguration. Blessing added, "The man will cook, do the laundry now, even wash her underwear." His unease was visible, and Pilato, busy with woodwork close by, confirmed this with a few uneasy yet agreeing grunts.

Nomvuyo later elaborated, offering a female perspective. I asked her why women performed these rituals. "They want to be the superpower of the house," Nomvuyo replied. While she, like most of the women I spoke to, disapproved of the ritual's intention, she admitted with a hint of satisfaction, "It does make women strong. When the husband is working, he will only work for the woman." She confirmed that she would never perform this ritual, asking, "What if I lose interest in the man? Then he'll always follow me around like a puppy." No one in Nkambeni openly admitted to performing these rituals – there was an uneasiness, a violence, a messiness to it – though suspicions ran high toward those believed to have done so. Even Ma Zola, the *sangoma* who led the cleansing ritual I described above, insisted that she had never assisted women with such practices – she only performed rituals for prosperity and health. However, the traces of ritualised washing for the obedience of husbands were evident in the anxieties, fears, and subtle shifts in power I encountered in the field – producing, as Warnier (2018: 9) would put it, the tangible elements that substantiate it, "the mirror image of the elusive

witch." These accounts revealed how power in my field site moved through contradiction in compositeness, operating with, through, and as water – at once fixed within binary gender expectations and continually shifting.

In Nkambeni, like most rural areas in South Africa, strong gender expectations permeated everyday life, particularly within the domestic sphere, where fixed norms and power dynamics surrounding women's reproductive and domestic labour roles were evident, even if they did not always play out statically (see Guy, 1982; Ngwane, 2003; Ross, 2009).[24] As Blessing and Pilato articulated above, women were expected to do laundry, cook, care for children, and support their husbands – something Fankomo also affirmed when he said, "You know, here I am not allowed to cook, it's the wife's job. Only when I am alone can I cook." Pointing this out is not to delve into a critical evaluation of the gendered division of labour in my field site but to show how, through water, women could acquire a particular kind of power beyond these seemingly fixed expectations – power that relied on unsettling the binaries between the mundane and the extraordinary, the real and the symbolic, where transformations were achieved through compositeness. It is similar to the Mami Wata ("Mother Water") or mermaid phenomena found elsewhere in Africa, where the recognition of water's dual nurturing and destructive forces reveals its potency for transformation and transfiguration (see Drewal, 2009; Alexander, 2012).

This was particularly evident in the ambivalence that *washing* encapsulated in Nkambeni. Here, water was both a household necessity – used for cleaning and laundry – and, as the tensions surrounding the *sangoma* washing ritual illustrated, a force to be feared. This very fear and the ambivalent meaning of washing that carried it became a medium through which power and control could shift within the household through water. For Blessing, the idea of a man doing laundry, particularly washing his wife's underwear, was unthinkable; yet the possibility of such a transformation lay within water's power. Here, a composite dynamic arose from the act of washing. Washing – typically associated with female domestic labour in my field site – was transformed and transfigured into something taboo, something capable of compelling obedience from a husband and instilling fear of potential power shifts within broader gender dynamics, even as it remained an ordinary, everyday medium of care and cleanliness within the household. It echoed Merz's (2004: 573) argument that acts of witchcraft or magic, as moral orientations, are not reducible to categories of either good or evil but embody both (see also Englund, 1996; Geschiere, 1997; Nyamnjoh, 2001). In this sense, the ritual use of water – at once a cleansing and threatening force – revealed how acts like washing could serve as sites for redistributing power, rather than mere domestic routine (see Abu-Lughod, 1990). In this way, power morphed, transforming both the act of washing and the women enacting the washing – another transubstantiation through water's movement.

This was similarly evident in the account that Mandla and Nikita shared with me about the cooking and washing of politicians for power, and the river baptism rituals of the evangelical Christian churches in the area (see Austnaberg, 2010; Wouters, 2014). In both cases, water

[24] I did not encounter transgender or non-binary individuals during fieldwork, so I focus on gender expectations as they appeared in local contexts to trace power through water, not to reinforce gender binaries. Future research could explore those who transgress gender norms, aligning with the transgressive dynamics discussed here.

brought about transformations beyond being merely symbolic. Through acts of ritual washing, an alteration took place – bodies were not only cleansed but transfigured, reconstituting the power they embodied. The gender expectations in Nkambeni, which appeared at first as static representations of power through opposing and rigid binaries, were, through water and the ambivalence of washing, rendered malleable and accessible. Geschiere (2013) describes this as "blending for potency." In this way, power did not reside purely in the invisible (Warnier, 2018), but was transformed through it; through the way water moved in its compositeness to bring forth liberation, empowerment, and even manipulation. This pressured modernist notions of power through its dualist articulations between substance and medium, subject and object, cause and meaning as fixed, inherent, or untouchable. Through the movements of washing – whether in ritual or daily use – water positioned these dualities as composite, shaping how power was exercised and contested in Nkambeni.

This morphic power of water was also visible in the tora plant. Ma Khoza, an elderly women or *magogo*, as my interlocutors referred to her, was the first to show it to me – she planted it close to the river in the wet clay soil. Tora had broad green leaves that gave it a tropical appearance, with a large, palm-sized tuber growing underground. The tuber resembled a potato but had a texture similar to a coconut. The root vegetable was a delicacy among *magogos* in the area. It was seldom grown in the elderly women's yards; instead, it was planted in the watery mud along riverbanks or in shallow streams – spaces that were open to anyone and generally not socially acceptable or permitted for cultivation. On one of our many walks through the village, I asked Mandla, "But if they don't plant it in their yards, won't people just take it from the streams?" He looked startled. "Who would steal from a *magogo*?" he asked. His response hinted at a particular power dynamic, but I pressed further, enquiring, "Even if they're hungry?" "No. If you're hungry, make a plan," he said firmly. After a brief pause, he added, "There's witchcraft. When people are older," – referring to the *magogos* – "they know things."

Tora, much like the washing rituals for obedient love, pointed to, and indeed became, a transformative power accessible through water. Even in the fragility of old age, the *magogos* wielded influence and asserted dominance through and with the tora plant and the fears surrounding it. No one would dare steal the plant unless they wished to be cursed. This also revealed a power of transgression, as the elderly women of Nkambeni planted their crops in spaces where no one else dared to plant – echoing the argument I made in Chapter 1 on the transgression of space and place, even as it remained fixed. Here, authority over water was not governed by access to water within one's own yard – fixed space and place – or even by fear of theft due to the absence of fences. Instead, the very act of the *magogos* planting their tora at the water source – crossing the boundaries of where planting was deemed acceptable – marked a shift, a metamorphosis, in power. In this act, vulnerability and fragility were transfigured into strength and authority through water, the invisible, and transgression.

This aligns with Olatunde Lawuyi's (1998: 187) argument that witches like water, "stand at the confluence of powers via the interchange of inputs and outputs across boundaries" (see also Samba, 2012). While I do not position the *magogos* as witches, Mandla's remarks about the witchcraft-like possibilities often imagined in relation to them suggested a similar confluence

of shifting powers and ambivalent potential. Through compositeness, power emerged simultaneously from the *magogos*, their act of planting, and from the watery riverbed that embodied their transgression – a transubstantiation, as I have illustrated before. These transformations underscored the morphic quality of water's power in my field site and how it disrupted fixed hierarchical binary power. This disruption occurred both within formal patriarchal structures, where, as Blessing noted in the account above, the man could potentially cease to be the man of the house, or the frail *magogo* could potentially be a powerful witch (see Rangan & Gilmartin, 2002; Rice, 2017), and within the relational entanglement with water in its generative and destructive capacities, its mundaneness and its extraordinary potential (see Strang, 2005). It revealed how power shifts occurred through the ambivalent and composite nature of washing, the transgression of stable spaces and places, and the constitutive interplay of the material and the invisible within the movements of water in Nkambeni.

Summary Conclusion: Power in Motion

In Nkambeni, water emerged not as a mere resource or symbol, but as an ever-moving force whose power flowed through both the material and the invisible. These movements of water entangled life in Nkambeni – whether through irrigation, livelihoods, gender expectations, the fragility of age, ritual washing, transgression, dreams, magic, tora, meaning, agency, identity, contamination, or safety – opening up space for transformations, transfigurations, and transubstantiations. This revealed a pressure on modernist insistence of power through fixed binary hierarchies by encapsulating the weaving together of human and beyond-human realms, of material necessity and the possibilities of the invisible. It was thus not only that water, as protagonist, made the movements of power in my field site visible, but power moved through, with, and as water: power in its undoing and its renewal; in what was perceptible and what remained imperceptible; in the messiness that revealed metamorphoses as a mode of existence in Nkambeni.

This revealed water as a force that moved both beyond articulations of "modern water" – merely passively contained within infrastructures or fixed epistemic meanings – while, in compositeness, remaining within it. It gave legibility to the violences that arose from movements of power, while also revealing how hegemonic logics of control and containment falter in moments of disruption – like the 'scarcity within the pipes,' the broken pump, the poisonous rain, the unknown water presence, or the planting of tora – giving way to new forms of power and empowerment. Here, vulnerability coexisted in compositeness with strength, fear with reassurance, violence with generativity, and each act – whether the mundanity of simple laundry washing or extraordinary practices of cleansing rituals – carried the possibility of metamorphoses through both emergence and return.

This mode of metamorphoses necessitated the recognition of an expanded understanding of power as something not solely exercised through human intention or institutional mechanisms, but as continuously composed and recomposed through movement in relation to beyond-human forces. It reinforced the dissertation's overarching argument that land revealed movement as central to shaping existence in Nkambeni: like soil, discussed in the previous chapter, water acted within the unfolding of social and cosmological life in my field site, not

only reshaping material conditions but also the ontological modes through which being emerged and the epistemological frameworks through which life was lived and contested. In its ever-shifting movements, water in Nkambeni continuously redrew the boundaries of the possible, revealing power not as merely situated within fixed binaries but as an unfolding, entangled, and shared process of metamorphoses – compelling a reconsideration of how movement conditions possibilities for existence in contexts shaped by ongoing transformations of power.

In the next chapter – the Conclusion – I carry this argument forward, returning to the discursive thread of the dissertation – a return to the ground – to draw together how the power-shifting capacities of water, alongside the movements of exchange and knowledge I previously traced, gave form to the compositeness in Nkambeni, not merely an analytical lens but a lived condition, through which movement shaped reality in my field site.

Conclusion: A Discursive Return

Land in Nkambeni was layered with the histories of colonial and apartheid displacement and enclosure, entangled in the governance structures of chiefly custodianship and neoliberalism, shaped through livelihoods and habitability, rituals and burial practices, magic and ancestral ties, and contested through formations of seemingly contradictory binaries. These entanglements converged not as a neat object of study, but as terrains of tensions. Yet these tensions pointed to a compositeness – open-ended conditions of possibilities for the other, from which entanglements with the land, as soil, water, and practice, took shape. They were not static conditions but unfolded through movement, which both generated and was generated by such compositeness.

The dissertation mirrored these rhythms: its discursive motif – a return to the ground – emulated a recursive movement between theory and fieldwork, conceptual prefiguration and ethnographic encounter, analysis and writing, and perhaps even reading and re-reading. In this way, Nkambeni came to signify more than the situated field site; it articulated the very movement I encountered (see Chapter 1). This reinforced my central argument – that land revealed movement to be a central part of shaping existence in Nkambeni – by giving form to Nyamnjoh's nimble-footed and nimble-mindedness, informing my fieldwork and, in turn, shaping the writing itself. Land, then, was a historical and empirical site, and also – as a point where object and subject, substance and medium, culture and nature, real and symbolic, sameness and difference, converged – a ground through which to unsettle modernist assumptions and point to something more, however subtle and incomplete. Thus, '*A Return to the Ground'* framed both ethnographic encounter and ontological provocation – an ongoing process interrogating the very foundations from which knowledge emerged.

Recapitulation of Findings

Across the three ethnographic chapters, I presented different vantage points on the entanglements between movement and the shaping of existence in Nkambeni. Chapter 1 began with a reflection on my positionality, ethics, and methodological commitments, foregrounding how I encountered movement – both embracing it by happenstance and by being carried along with it in the field – through my engagement with the grass-weed and movements of knowledge; or "knowing as relating." These movements revealed space and place as both fixed and unbounded, where I encountered movement (the not-here) and the field site (the here) as composite. This was shaped by an ethical and moral obligation of reciprocity – *tandla tiyagezana* – which pointed to a messiness within such composite movements, a violence of contestation and contingency, made visible through my shifting insider-outsider positionality. From this, an acceptance had to emerge: an obligation to 'wash the other hand.'

Building on this, I explored the mode of indebtedness in Chapter 2, focusing on the generative movements between give and take, life and death as they unfolded through the soil within entangled forms of sustenance; or "being-as-other." Within these movements, soil – the

protagonist of this chapter – emerged as an active participant in a polyphony of times. Here, multiple times – slow, 'low', no-time, progress, stagnations – co-existed in layered, non-linear ways, even as they unfolded linearly. The movements between such linearity and non-linearity of times opened space for generativity within the compositeness between loss and gain, care and neglect, continuity and rupture, while also attending to the violences entangled in these possibilities through the necessity of compromise. Amid this messiness, I pointed to the soil's own entangled existence: its subsistence bound to its capacity to collect debt, just as others depended on it to sustain their indebted lives.

In Chapter 3, I turned to the mode of metamorphoses, where transformations emerged within the movements of power in, through, and as water: in dreams, broken pumps, an unknown river presence, *sangoma* washing rituals, and the transgressive planting of tora. It revealed water not simply as a resource or symbol but as a moving force that continuously shaped and reshaped power within Nkambeni. This pointed to the possibilities of an expanded understanding of power beyond modernist fixed binary hierarchies, even as such hierarchies remained operative, animating transfigurations and transubstantiations that revealed an entangled multiplicity of being. As noted in the Introduction, movement and compositeness depend on difference. It was here, in Chapter 3, that I showed how the violence of transforming power became legible only through a recognition of coexisting difference. By tracing various inflexions of movement across these three chapters, I illustrated how it shaped the fundamentals of being in Nkambeni, particularly through the ontological articulations of space and place, time, and power. The latter was not merely a force acting within reality, but a morphic capacity through which reality came into being.

Attending to these ontological fundamentals required drawing on Tsing's call for a multispecies attunement to the possibilities of entangled life – a "becoming with" as Haraway suggests – through which movement could not only be recognised but, at least momentarily, its exuberance made perceptible. Compositeness, in this sense, was not merely a conceptual or illustrative tool, but a lived condition in Nkambeni. My own beginnings – growing up nearby, navigating an insider-outsider positionality, and negotiating the distinctions between town and village – laid the initial ground for recognising this. Through ethnographic fieldwork, that early confrontation with difference transformed into an awareness of lived compositeness. This became the ground from which movement could be traced, through which it unfolded, and to which it gave meaning. Movements of knowledge, the 'washing of hands,' obligation, space and place, give and take, life and death, humans, ants, times, dreams, magic, rivers, rituals, tora plants, power, violence, messiness – each of these moments, situated within land, revealed movement as a central part of shaping existence in my field site.

Contribution to Knowledge

To return to the main research question – "What does land in Nkambeni reveal of its modes of existence?" – it reveals movement as constitutive. From the outset, movement underpinned the modes of indebtedness and metamorphoses, yet the very reason I explored them in this dissertation was to reveal movement itself. Just as, in a reversal that speaks to the paradoxes of compositeness, it was my encounter with movement – its unpredictability, its emergence – that

allowed these modes to be made visible at all. This reflects the discursive and recursive nature of the dissertation through *return*. Such return was never linear, but always in conversation – between what was known and what was unknown (Chapter 1), between what had to be given to take and what had to be taken to give (Chapter 2), and between what was discernible and what remained indistinct (Chapter 3).

To this end, and in the spirit of Nyamnjoh's incompleteness, this dissertation remains open-ended through movement and compositeness. That is why I drew on Latour's articulation of modes of existence, not to totalise ontological experiences but to open possibilities. As a growing ontologically inclined anthropological discourse has shown, the existence and possibility of a "world of many worlds" (De la Cadena & Blaser, 2018) are far more complex than modernist claims to singularity and completeness allow. Thus, to return to the ground was and is also to return to the question of attending to these complexities without assuming their legibility. In this dissertation, however incomplete, movement became a way to do precisely that. It did not reject modernity but attended both to its workings and to what exceeded it – recognising the implications of oppositional binary thinking in Nkambeni, while tracing how such binaries, through movement, were lived as composite. While this question of returning to the ground was rooted in the specificities of land in Nkambeni, through movement it also reached beyond it – pointing to modes of existence that unsettled colonial inherited understandings of space and place, time, and their embedded power, while revealing how theoretical concerns and lived realities are not, and need not be, separate or detached, but deeply entangled; or composite.

In this way, my modest research project in rural South Africa speaks to broader discourses – on more-than-human anthropology, decolonial thought and methodologies, cosmopolitics, and ethics – discourses from which, in a globalised world, Nkambeni is by no means isolated. Here, the conceptual – and, as Chapter 1 illustrated, methodological – framework of this dissertation, which foregrounds movement, compositeness, and entangled being, pushes the boundaries of the ground from which ontological, and by extension epistemological, arguments can be addressed. It reveals the possibility of a convergence between *difference* and *sameness* that does not foreclose the other. By centring recursive and entangled relations among humans and beyond-humans, it also offers an alternative vocabulary for the generativity of land and existence within postcolonial geographies and shifting ecologies – through weeds, soil, and water – in precarious and ever-transforming worlds.

Directions for Future Research and Final Reflections

Beyond its immediate contributions, this research also opens up conceptual pathways for further inquiry – directions I plan to explore in my doctoral studies. For instance: Can movement as methodology be expanded within ethnography, not only as a form of immersion but also, as this dissertation has alluded to, through complement detachment? How might such an approach help address the complexities of difference anthropology still grapples with, and what implications could it have for rethinking positionality and scientific objectivity within anthropological research? Can movement point to how rural areas like Nkambeni – often dominated by unrecognised informal economies, high formal unemployment, and limited state

support – emerge as sites, both situated and otherwise, of social and environmental resilience or sustainability? And in what ways could environmental change – such as the increasingly warmer winters I often alluded to in my ethnographic accounts, a growing dependency on pesticides for farming particularly in the rainy seasons, the escalating need for fertilisers to sustain the soil, and the intensification of droughts – reshape the modalities of movement and existence?

Of course, these are not gaps in my research, but emergent lines of inquiry that a master's project could only begin to sketch, yet for which I have laid a solid foundation. This is not to deny the role of humility or the possibility of error in my approach; quite the opposite. In its ever-shifting presence in my field site, movement permitted only momentary articulations – always partial, always fleeting. This is why my return to the ground is not a fixed conclusion, but a discursive act: recursive, open-ended, and attentive to the conditions of its own making. In other words, within compositeness, movement enabled the coexistence of certainty and doubt, accuracy and error from which the articulation of a reality, however subtle, could take shape: one that resisted being beholden to modernity's illusion of total understanding, while never entirely escaping its grasp. In this tension, the decolonial potential for a nimble-footed and nimble-minded scholarship resides – a potential to which the ontological approach of this dissertation, grounded in land and situated in Nkambeni, contributes.

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