

Representing Aspiration in South African Television:
Negotiating space, movement, and value

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ABSTRACT

The rural South African environment in its many representations across television and documentary forms part of a continuously complex conversation. The ways in which fictional shows such as *Generations* (SABC1), compared to shows like *Giyani: Land of Blood* (SABC2) and *The Herd* (Mzansi Magic) have approached the representation of the rural environment, creates a new lens from which to look academically at the representation of rural areas in South Africa. Furthermore, the representation of aspiration in *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* speaks to a unique shift in the treatment of the fictional stories we've seen in the past in local television shows. This paper analyses these two shows in conversation with my documentary film, *Ndhawu* which facilitates a conversation around space, identity and aspiration. This qualitative investigation seeks to look critically at the content of *Giyani: Land of Blood*, *The Herd* and my documentary film *Ndhawu* through textual analysis. This analysis, and the critical reflection on *Ndhawu*, will be stepping stones to supporting the argument that there is a new type of representation that we not only see of rural South Africa, but also of the aspirations of the inhabitants of those areas.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Whether it be urban, rural, modern or transitional - environment often seems to influence how we interact and imagine a “better life.” In this paper, I firstly explore how the characters within *Giyani: Land of Blood* (a telenovela) and *The Herd* (a television drama) communicate ideas of aspiration in their fictional worlds. Secondly, I analyze the relationship these characters have with their physical environments through textual analysis, and lastly, I look at how aspiration is represented in the larger narrative of each show. Along with these two case studies, I embark on a critical reflection of my creative media production documentary film: *Ndhawu*. The line of investigation for all three is rooted in exploring how the assumed primitive stereotype of the rural environment (specifically the African) has been debunked in these case studies. The primitive stereotype in the context of this study, speaks to how both television and documentary have engaged in the infantilizing of Africa for most of their history, particularly characters that exist within the rural landscape and how they interact with the world around them (Ukadike, 1990).

A common trope is the rural character arriving in a bustling city environment, presented as unaware and naïve to the dangers of the world. The character then finds motivation to engage in upward social mobility, positioned as a goal that they could not possibly achieve coming from their previous rural environment. This trope is commonly seen in one of South Africa’s most popular soap operas, *Generations* (Tager, 2010). I argue in this paper that *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* illustrate the opposite. Additionally, my documentary film, *Ndhawu*, speaks specifically to the experiences of three young, Black, African students who have traversed various environments, both rural and urban. I will now extrapolate on my motivations for looking at these characters, and how their environments have come to be linked to their ideas of aspiration.

My interest in the topic of aspiration and the representation thereof in film and television began from having studied academic theory at an undergraduate and Honours level. Having completed my Honours degree and now working in the television industry, I recognized an emergence of dynamic new television shows that seemed to have a different tone to shows pre-2010. *The Herd* first aired in July of 2018 and *Giyani: Land of Blood* in April of 2019. *The Herd* details the life of a man from a fictional rural area in KwaZulu Natal, who struggles financially to maintain his family, soon after his first daughter is born. With the help of a ‘witch doctor’ – he makes a plea with the spiritual world for abundant wealth and prosperity in his home. *Giyani: Land of Blood* sees the redistribution of a banana plantation in the fictional village of Risinga - back to the people who historically occupied the land. The show details how the plantation became the cause of much wealth and celebration, but equally a great deal of conflict. I became interested in how these two shows represented rural areas, not only as a site of the story itself, but also how the characters were represented in relation to these rural areas. In March of 2019 the Broadcast Research Council of South Africa (BRCSA) recorded the viewership of *Giyani: Land of Blood* at 1 754 986 (BRCSA, 2019). In August of 2018 the council also recorded *The Herd* at a viewership of 1 169 549 (BRCSA, 2018). The high viewership numbers not long after both their premieres clearly speaks to the popularity of each show, which in turn spurred on my own interest in what kind of approach to representation each show was taking.

I have come to realize the following: firstly, that the academic study of film and television is quite far removed from industry itself, and secondly that assuming the intentions of the creators themselves does not serve a purpose in the greater discussion around the cultural significance of their creative projects as stand-alone works. This concept, otherwise known as “intentional fallacy” (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946), is important in the context of this paper because it makes a significant separation between the analysis of a

stand-alone text and what the creator might have initially intended. The textual analysis for the purposes of this paper is focused on the shows themselves, regardless of what the creators might have intended.

In various academic works, particularly that of Alexia Smit, South Africa has been characterized as a television-watching nation. Smit argues that South African television moves with its viewers through their years of growth, reckoning and imagining of their future (Smit, 2016). This paper seeks to investigate just how that imagining of the future is represented in both *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd*. The presence of the traditional television set within the homes of millions of South Africans speaks to the level of cultural impact that television products have, not only at a popular culture level, but also on how ideas of aspiration, wealth, and a distant future might be imagined. Television shows in South Africa, much like across the globe, operate as vehicles of entertainment. The use of fictional television as a site of the representation of prevalent social issues seeps into the question around aspiration, values, and environment. Although the creators of each of these products (read 'shows') might have had a mixed bag of intentions dictated by their own interests – the final product itself takes on a new meaning when it enters the public space for public consumption and engagement. In the following Chapter 2 I look at some of the literature that is the basis for this paper in order to use the theory to guide my textual analysis of all three of my case studies.

Tomaselli argues that textual analysis, although important, cannot fully contextualize either film or television content (Tomaselli, 2008). A close understanding of the way a film or television show operates in its social setting is also important. In Chapter 3 of this paper, through the analysis of the case studies, I demonstrate the intricacies of representation and how impactful this type of representation is. I argue what the implications of representation are by drawing on a pre-existing television show - SABC1's *Generations* - as an example of the primitive stereotype form of representation. Additionally, I seek to look at how the representation of values of aspiration has been shifted through the format of the

television drama, telenovela and soap opera. A look at the stylistic and thematic choices made in *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* will give a greater sense of what is being done in these shows to represent certain goals that we see the characters attempt to achieve and how those goals are visualized, and by extension, linked to aspiration. These three elements will be investigated through a purely qualitative method. This method includes an analysis of stills from *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* that speak directly to the representation of aspiration, the rural and upward social mobility.

In Chapter 4, I do a textual analysis of my own documentary film, *Ndhawu*. The textual analysis is supported by the relevant literature paired with a visual analysis of stills from the film. I discuss the motives for the film, and how it is linked to arguments around environment, representation and aspiration. The themes in the film, which are elaborated upon, investigate through interview the relationships that characters have with their physical environment. My film seeks to unpack how identities are structured around physical space and what that space might or might not mean for an individual. The point of my documentary is to look for answers around the characters' relationship with their physical environment, using a film essay-like approach. Additionally, the analysis of my own film links to my argument in this essay, which seeks to expand on the current discourse of not only representation of rural South Africa and its inhabitants, but specifically the types of aspirations represented there through the format of television and documentary.

CHAPTER 2: THE RURAL IN TELEVISION AND DOCUMENTARY FILM

This chapter examines how South African television dramas based in rural areas have changed ideas of aspiration based on their content. Namely locating in context the following: the idea of the primitive; the representation of rural life on television; and aspiration politics in South Africa. These three pillars are integral in moving the question of this paper forward. My documentary film, *Ndhawu* is very much inspired by the

consistent potential that documentary film has to offer testimony as an impactful tool in unpacking the truth (Saragas, 2015). The analysis that will take place in Chapter 4 in this essay uses an analysis of technique and conceptual choices to support why talking head interviews play such an important role in the thematic intention of the documentary film as a whole. Grierson's contemplation on documentary film as an imperative to the expression of a nation and furthermore that filmmakers themselves must be in tune with the times in which they are creating (Grierson 1971), is the premise in which the film approaches the conversation around environment, identity, and aspiration.

2.1 South African television series in post-apartheid South Africa:

Following the entrance into the era of democracy, it was paramount for the African National Congress (ANC) to institute a level of nation-building – and television was the ideal vehicle for this exercise. The need to collectively orientate a previously battered nationhood, placed South African television in a precarious position, particularly in the types of decisions not only the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) had to make, but also smaller production companies with regards the content that would be commissioned for creation. A good example of this was the rise of many edutainment shows in the early 2000s, particularly that of *Soul City* (Tufté, 2006). The need to entertain a nation became increasingly connected to modes of educating the nation at the same time. Ives argues that the task of the South African television industry became not only to enhance the narrative of the rainbow nation, but to also attempt actively to heal old wounds through television programming (Ives, 2007).

Ives then goes on to write the following, which also speaks broadly to the state of South African television following the entrance of democracy in 1994:

Television, with its depictions of the dramas of everyday life, provides a compelling medium for influencing a normative national consciousness. Through the use of

language, image and sound, television (re)produces a vision of the world for its audiences. These productions link television with the political economy of nation building. The medium can work to socialize people, foment material desires, and normalize consumer relations. In South Africa, many locally produced television programs portray a Black middle class focused on material consumption and individual gain. These depictions, largely uncomplicated by issues of lingering racial and economic strife, serve the government's attempts to construct a neoliberal post-apartheid national imaginary. (Ives, 2007)

The above reasoning comes through in the context of the chosen case studies for this paper. In Chapter Three's analysis of text, the reasoning will speak towards Ives' extrapolation on the creation of a particular imagination based on the Black middle class and material gain. This comes through clearly in the *The Herd* in the way that wealth, in the agricultural form, is used as a barometer of Black success.

Television in post-apartheid South Africa is also coming from a deeply tenuous place in terms of representation. Apartheid-era programming often depicted caricatures of Blackness (people) through the constructs of the rural, lacking in education, perpetually traditionally dressed and seemingly sustained in a distant rural past (Ives, 2007). The lack of overlapping between the rural and the urban, not only in character representation, but also in the geographical location of the stories on television and the migration of those characters, seemed to have denied the reality of that experience. It's important to note that although the conversation around the rural and the urban premises Blackness and Black characters as the forefront of this paper, the subject becomes that not by the intentional exclusion of other experiences (Coloured, Indian and white) but because of the reality of spatial apartheid and the disproportionate effects on Black South African life – and in turn how that has become represented on television.

This in turn gives reason to why telenovelas and soap operas such as *The Herd* and *Giyani: Land of Blood* are significant in the present day. Following a history that had split audiences, and by extension, split programming, there is a need to highlight and add to the present

rhetoric around South African television formats and the type of content they are producing. Their format, content and use of technique does a great deal for representation. In the context of what Ives writes about the climate of South African television in post-apartheid, and where it has journeyed to, I will give evidence as to why *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* stand at unique points on the merits of their approach to representation of the rural space as a site of aspiration.

With South Africa's political history in mind, one can assume that the place of visual mediums such as documentary and news would take centre stage in the media age of South Africa, with the main goal being the achievement of reconciliation and an ever-changing national identity. Barnard speaks to how the rhetoric of sitcoms, soapies and telenovelas, in the context of South Africa, is charged with social issues that mimic everyday South African life (Barnard, 2006). This supports the argument that South African television shows might indeed be relevant in the conversation around having the ability to express values and shift them based on the treatment of their content (by extension the representation of characters and environments). Barnard writes:

South African television's depictions of South African characters and people of different classes, races, sexualities, ages, genders and political persuasions is in marked contrast to, for instance, media in the USA, where TV networks are still under fire for their failure to adequately represent people of colour in prime time, and where inter-racial romantic relationships are almost non-existent among lead characters on prime-time network programmes of any kind. (Barnard, 2006, 41)

This gives weight to the argument that indeed South African television shows interact with the treatment of their characters in a way that considers the societal context of how those characters have come to be. This for example often has to do with representations of class or race that are heavily politically charged, even in the context of a fictional television production.

2.1.2 Class and the “primitive” rural space:

Mbinjama argues that it is simply untrue that young people in areas that are completely rural or partially rural operate at a decreased level online than those in more urban areas. She also argues that there is little research on the online viewing, connectivity, and access patterns of people in these areas as well (Mbinjama, 2013). This type of conversation around the rural space being synonymous with being less than modern and stuck in one unchanging temporal space, also permeates into the sphere of television from a content production perspective. In the strict sense ‘primitivism’ is defined as the following: “A term used to describe art that employs ‘primitive’ elements or forms. Today the term ‘primitive’ is often deemed as degrading when applied to non-Western cultures, so is frequently placed in quotation marks” (Primitivism, National Galleries Scotland). For the purposes of this paper, ‘primitivism’ will be employed loosely in regard to the representation of characters within television programs through the lens of being one-dimensional - and by extension - primitive. The ideas around the ‘primitive’ are synonymous with the representation of the rural space, as I will illustrate in my textual analysis. The representation of a continuously culturally static, isolated and traditionally-inclined character that we are used to seeing, is flipped on its head in both the shows that I have chosen to analyse in this paper. The ‘primitive’ type of representation often strips the represented person of any personal agency for themselves and/or presents them as at odds with the modern world. This usage of the concept of the ‘primitive’ will be important in understanding and locating the significance of both *The Herd* and *Giyani: Land of Blood*, in the way they approach the representation of the rural South African space, including the characters who occupy that space.

2.1.3 Representation of rural life on television:

Rural representation in South African television is a space not widely written about, particularly when it comes to the stylistic treatment of characters in those spaces. ‘Stylistic treatment’ refers to the decisions that creators make in the way they represent those characters in relation to the environment of the diegetic

world of the show, and how the character relates to other characters, inclusive of how that character performs aspiration. Along with the stylistic treatment of the characters, this paper is also interested in looking at the types of values that those characters - in comparison to their polar opposites – practice, which often come in the form of characters based in a highly urban-cosmopolitan area.

Smit argues that South Africa’s political and social separateness trickles into the content of television itself. The fractured nature of the country somehow finds its way into the representation of characters onscreen:

“While television is quite literally a medium of connection, it is also on television where people may need to negotiate with distance, dissonance and dislocation. In a nation still experiencing the fracturing legacy of the apartheid regime, representations of local intimacies are shot through with trauma and loss along with negotiations of identity and power.” (Smit, 2017)

This paper grapples with conversations around aspiration, identity and also power in the form of a textual analysis of *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd*. This analysis shows quite clearly how even in the representation of rural characters in rural areas, there is a constant negotiation with power and identity that connects directly to conversations around aspiration. These conversations find fruition in various manners.

A good example of this type of character contrast and negotiation that foregrounds the rural-urban space relationship, would be Mfundu Vundla’s soapie - *Generations*. The show details the fictional lives of middle to upper class Black South Africans in a bustling and rapidly changing country. The common trope is often that of wealth, aspiration and upward social mobility. In October of 2021, the show was recorded by the Broadcast Research Council of South Africa to have a viewership of 5 926 095 (BRCSA, 2021). Thabethe offers the following on the soapie that first aired in 1994: “In *Generations* beauty is defined in terms of thinness, light complexion and long, fine-textured hair; most

Black African women characters have these beauty features in this particular soapie” (Thabethe, 2008). Thabethe’s reflections on the soapie are quite key because they speak to a common theme that has often appeared in shows such as *Generations*. Audiences are often presented with a stereotypical ‘small town’ character that arrives in the world of the Black middle and upper class in the diegetic world of the show. We typically see an initial confusion about the presence of this small-town character in the ‘big city.’ What usually follows is of course the assimilation of this stock rural character into the world of the urban city life. The significance here, particularly in what Thabethe is saying, is how the rural character becomes actively engaged (consciously or subconsciously) in value shifting. A character arrives in an urban space and suddenly finds themselves having to play out new values that speak to the reality of their current environment. There begins a negotiation with their personal values coming from a faraway place and now having to grapple with the relevance of those values in their current environment. The way that Black women characters in *Generations* at the time were represented in a sexualised and Western beauty-centric manner, also speaks to the signifiers that were markers of success and aspiration. This extends to the type of environment in which those values would find fruition, particularly because of the importance of assimilation in foreign environments - in this case the foreign environment being the city to the character coming from a rural environment. This links clearly with my documentary film on a thematic basis. These participants also negotiate their identities in various physical spaces with the clear presence of change. There is a constant back and forth around ideas of what is possible and what isn’t in their various environments, and what can be done to aspire to more.

2.1.4 Aspiration politics in the social scheme of South Africa:

South Africa as a nation has often found itself in a state of near-constant national re-imagination. From the entry of the concept of the Rainbow Nation, spearheaded by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to the aggressive public negotiations with having to re-imagine that ‘rainbow’ (Mofu, 2020), the conversation still points back to the concept of aspiration. Aspiration, as it relates to class, is also important when it comes to the context of the

fictional characters in both *The Herd* and *Giyani: Land of Blood*. James writes about the aspiration to middle-classness upon which many South Africans base their pursuit of success, and how that creates signifiers of that supposed middle-classness, such as monetary and material wealth (James, 2018).

When one looks at South African show formats, like the earlier-mentioned *Generations*, it must be clearly noted that the conversation around upward social mobility is almost built into the narrative structure of many characters. Taking what we know historically of characters from *Generations*, the maintenance and protection of a Black middle-classness is the consistent theme throughout the entire show (Thabethe, 2008). The characters generally have the goal of upward social mobility written into their character storyline, either as the driver of their story, or it becomes the main driver in the future of the character. There is a notable contrast between a more established format such as *Generations* in comparison to the newer formats of *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd*. The contrast in question is how each of them approaches representation, particularly that of aspiration.

There is scarce writing on South African television and how it represents aspiration, and even less on how that aspiration is enacted in the context of fictional content. A relevant piece of work that links to what I am arguing in this paper is that of Johnson (2001), who writes about the effects of television in rural India in a way that speaks to the level of impact that television has firstly as a technological medium, but secondly as a possible influence on societies. A key point of interest is how the representation of the urban city space on television was impacting men and women in the rural village. Although Johnson doesn't draw the direct line between television being the active influence in the migration of young people from rural India to urban centres like Mumbai, his research reveals a clear link (Johnson, 2001). The work I have chosen to investigate in the form of *The Herd* and *Giyani: Land of Blood*, is squarely focused in the fictional realm of television, but it speaks to representation of a

particular type of aspiration, that by contrast seemingly offsets the need to migrate. In Chapter 3, I will use a textual analysis of the case studies to break down how the choices made in the production of these shows speaks to this specific type of representation of aspiration.

CHAPTER 3: THE HERD AND GIYANI: LAND OF BLOOD AS CASE STUDIES

Both *The Herd* and *Giyani: Land of Blood* are points of interest in this paper specifically because of their approach to representing aspiration. Which is to again investigate how rural areas are represented in South African television and how that representation feeds into shifting character values and aspirations. What makes these two shows important is that they are relatively new in the landscape of South African television dramas, series or soapies. Their entrance into the schedule of many long-running South African television shows provides an interesting juxtaposition in how they approached the treatment of their content. The very first clear understanding from a qualitative standpoint is that the production value of both shows is significantly high in comparison to their counterparts across platforms and channels. Secondly, the show structures dictate that the character stories unfold in one physical environment, which is the rural area in each show respectively.

In 2018, MultiChoice's *Mzansi Magic* channel launched the much-anticipated show, *The Herd*. The premise of the show is put succinctly in the *Mzansi Magic* show description: "Love, power and the pursuit of material wealth can drive a man to sacrifice his soul. *The Herd*, a new drama with an enigmatic supernatural storyline, will explore the extent to which people will go to obtain their heart's desires" (Mzansi Magic, 2018). The characters grapple with internal conflicts that shift their ideas of what is wrong and right. The values shift from wanting to merely survive to valuing wealth as a social currency. *The Herd*

works well for this paper because of the way the values around wealth, whether material or interpersonal, manifest themselves within the confines of the rural space. We see characters doing something different to what is often the case in South African television – which is to set the rural area as the centre stage for the expression of an abundance of wealth. The positioning of the physical environment in the show also utilizes an interesting aesthetic (through camera technique) that creates a new lens when looking at rural South Africa as a place to be inhabited, and more so what one associates with that environment.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation's channel - SABC2 - debuted its first Xitsonga soapie titled *Giyani: Land of Blood* in 2019. The channel released the following description of the telenovela:

Giyani – Land of Blood brings to life the ageless themes of love rivalries, forbidden passion, stolen land, and corruption. The story is centered around the conflict between the Mudau and Baloyi families. Set in the fictional village of Risinga, *Giyani* has harnessed the considerable skills of well-known industry veterans as well as undiscovered talent to deliver the gripping storylines that are sure to keep audiences transfixed. (SABC, 2019)

The Tshedza Pictures production, *Giyani: Land of Blood*, does something quite significant in the landscape of existing South African television shows. From the onset it grapples directly with the class question, the pursuit of wealth and the overarching theme of land reclamation in South Africa. In terms of the physical environment, there are two themes running within *Giyani: Land of Blood*. Firstly, this narrative takes place squarely within a fictionalized rural area that could be located in the province of present-day Limpopo. Secondly, the theme of reclamation of land rights in post-apartheid South Africa also comes into play, particularly because it links with one of the overarching themes of this essay – which is the relocating of aspiration. Aspiration, which was extrapolated on earlier in this paper, also speaks to the reality of class in these shows, and how characters go

about seeking out the type of aspiration that is not located in the rural area and how much that has to do with the legacy of apartheid spatial planning. The show is able to invert ideas of how characters express wealth, whether material or inter-personal, through the decisions that the characters make. The centralizing of wealth and success around the ownership of a farm in a rural part of South Africa - as opposed to the usual migration to Johannesburg to define wealth through the societal structures of an urban city life - is quite impactful when contrasting *Giyani: Land of Blood* with shows such as *Generations*.

3.1 JUSTIFICATION OF CASE STUDY

In July 2019, *The Herd* surpassed over eight hundred thousand viewers on DStv's channel Mzansi Magic (Mlambo, 2019). The number of 850 053 viewers for a show that had recently started proved the success of the pilot of a new concept. The significance of this achievement makes this show a point of interest because of the high number of viewers who tuned in. At the time, the show with the highest viewership was still Mfundu Vundla's *Generations: The Legacy* (Mlambo, 2019). The type of content coming out of a show like *Generations* makes *The Herd* significant because much of the interest in *Generations* rests within the idea of Black middle class South Africans chasing monetary aspiration and expressing that aspiration through material wealth manifestation. The basis of that pursuit is also often based in the migration from rural, or less developed areas, to Johannesburg (The City of Gold). The pervasiveness of this type of positioning of the Black South African middle class - juxtaposed with *The Herd* - is interesting because of how it uses character, technique, aesthetic and theme to invert the ideas of aspiration and furthermore, what kind of physical space those aspirations can inhabit (between rural or urban). The definitions are deconstructed and reconstructed in terms of what the signifiers are of success and aspiration, particularly as it pertains to leading the 'urban' or 'city' life.

Giyani: Land of Blood is significant because of the multi-layered aspect of being a purely Xitsonga production, remaining the first of its kind despite having been cancelled by

SABC2. The show's initial air date of April 2019 ushered in quite a different tone of content in comparison to its counterparts on the television drama/telenovela circuit. Hlaithwa writes:

Giyani does not beg for its spot in South Africa's night-time soap opera schedule among *Muvhango*, *Skeem Saam*, *Uzalo*, *The River*, *Isibaya* or *The Throne*. This is because it does not mimic the cinematography, writing, pace, placing or themes of its contemporaries. Instead, it adds to one of the most significant components of all these shows by capturing and disseminating the country's linguistic and cultural diversity. (Hlaithwa, 2019).

Giyani: Land of Blood's investigation of land reclamation in rural areas gives clear illustration to the real-life manifestation of what the land question might look like in everyday South African life. What is also clear is how the ideas around wealth find expression in the village of Risinga. Later in this chapter I will locate, deconstruct and interpret actual references (stills from the pilot episode) to illustrate how the above is done in terms of the final text (the pilot episode).

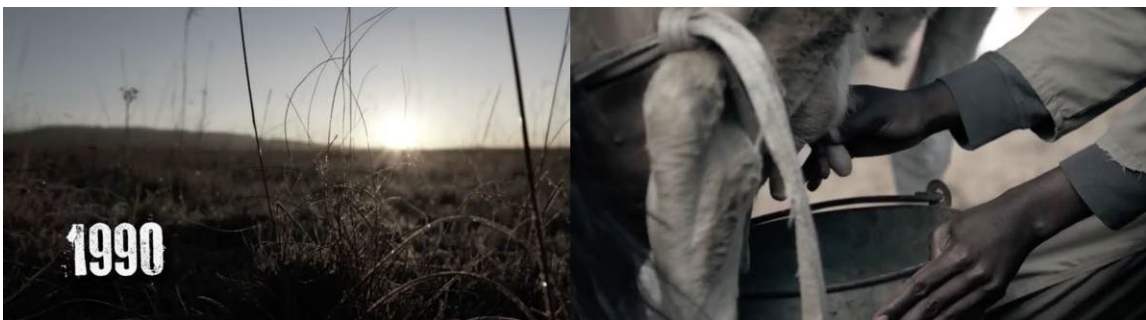
Both *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* are key texts in supporting the argument that there is indeed a new way of representing South African rural areas and the people that live there, and in addition to that there is a fresh lens on the representation of aspiration. This fresh representation has the potential to add to the discourse around how television shows and documentaries can reflect, and possibly influence, the values of its viewers. Upon analysis of specific textual evidence, it will be clearer how these television shows are relevant in supporting the argument in this paper confined to new representations of the rural space and aspirations within it.

3.2 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

For the purpose of this textual analysis, multiple references have been selected from both *The Herd* and *Giyani: Land of Blood*. Each of these speaks to the core question, which grapples with how South African television shows have changed the representation of aspiration. The chosen medium of analysis is textual because it is important to investigate this aspiration based on what is being represented in the actual television shows themselves as primary evidence. The choice of textual analysis seeks to highlight the need to continue to form counter narratives to ones that have historically been represented on screens for the purposes of nuance. Therefore, a textual analysis is the most sensible qualitative course of action because I seek to add to the larger discourse around representation, and in this case that of aspiration of rural areas and the characters therein.

3.2.1 THE HERD

From a technical perspective *The Herd* relies heavily on the use of exterior camera shots, particularly in the first episode when viewers are introduced to the diegetic world of the show. The main characters, namely the Mthethwa family, are positioned within the nexus of what signifies power in the context of the show. In this case that would be agricultural land. They are constantly positioned within the physical farmland and surrounded by cattle. The clear goal for the main characters is to achieve success in the form of monetary gain but also land ownership (the farm). In this way the exterior world of the show becomes of high importance when communicating the signifiers of power. The camera technique and cinematography compel the viewer to seriously consider the rural space as a site of power, success and wealth.



(Figure 3.1: The opening scene of The Herd)

What is also interesting is that from Episode One of *The Herd*, we understand the dire situation that Nyambose (the patriarch of the family and the main character in the show) and his family find themselves in as they experience extreme poverty. The lack of resources is depicted by barren land, a cow that fails to produce milk and a conversation that takes place between Nyambose and his first wife (Figure 3.1 and 3.2). Milk coming from a cow is a signifier and synonymous with life, prosperity, progression and sustenance in the show. The lack of that milk is illustrated in the form of a medium close-up shot of Nyambose milking the cow to no success. This depicts to the viewer how dire the situation actually is. This first episode sets up quite clearly how severe the conditions are and what the signifiers of poverty are in the context of a rural area.



(Figure 3.2: Nyambose and his first wife discussing their financial issues.)

Along with the illustration of abject poverty that is presented in the first episode, *The Herd* also approaches conversations around aspiration and upward mobility within the same episode. The action that Nyambose takes of going to a traditional healer – MaMngadi – illustrates his version of seeking greener pastures. The scene in Figure 3.3 speaks directly to the theme of aspiration and value shifting. We see Nyambose take a different approach to imagining what is possible for his life, even in the confines of a rural area. This scene operates as a premonition by the traditional healer (MaMngadi), but also as a call to upward social mobility dictated by the societal standards of what is success in the confines of the environment that the characters find themselves in. In this scene we see the re-

location of values that Nyambose goes through as a character. We see him shifting his understanding of success, aspiration and power in one single moment that changes the arch of his story in the rest of the show.



(Figure 3.3: A young MaMngadi performing her ritual.)



(Figure 3.4: Left – The title sequence for the show. Right – Nyambose looking out at his cattle and land, which also signals wealth.)

The Herd represents aspiration and wealth in a different type of context. Much like *Giyani: Land of Blood*, this show utilizes exterior shots to illustrate the wealth of the characters. Nyambose is consistently situated within the long shot gazing at his cattle, or in a medium and close-up shot with the cattle in the background (Figure 3.4). The cattle become the signifier of wealth. The manifestation of wealth and aspiration exists within the reality of owning cattle. The shots that have Nyambose standing alone with his cattle occur at least once in an episode. This stylistic choice that positions Nyambose as the sole wielder of

power, makes quite clear to the viewer what power looks like in the context of the show. The presence of these shots puts Nyambose on a pedestal and elevates his position. We get a clear sense by the end of the first episode that he has ascended and achieved his personal aspirations of wealth, security, and ultimately power that we see in the first episode.



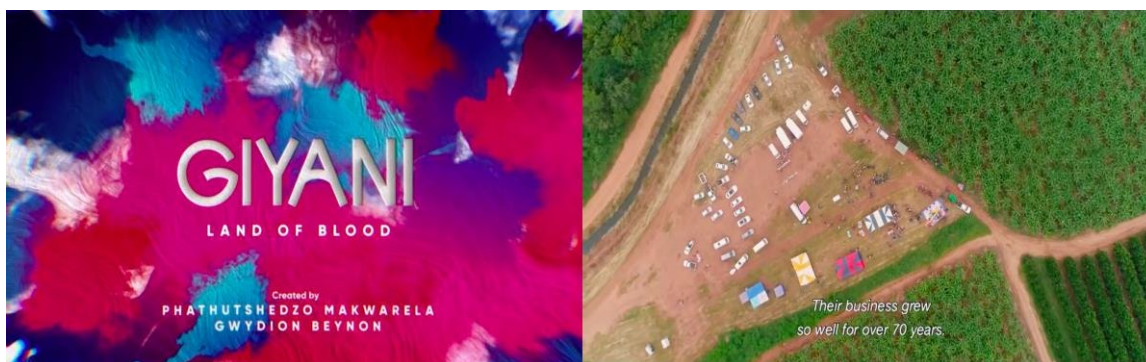
(Figure 3.5: Left: Nyambose's house in rural KZN. Right: Kayise arriving back home in her graduation gown.)

An important progression in the first episode is the return of Kayise, Nyambose's daughter. The premise of her return is that of bringing back a university degree, which in the context of Black South Africa is a signifier of success because of the potential that receiving an education in the form of a university degree offers. This success speaks not only to Kayise herself, but to Nyambose's original commitment to upward social mobility. His daughter returning with a degree could be argued as the connecting loop in his journey to self-defined success. We see within the first episode all he has achieved and what can be considered as total success because at the end of it, he has succeeded in equipping his offspring with the tools to do the same for themselves.

3.2.2 GIYANI: LAND OF BLOOD

Giyani: Land of Blood employs long exterior shots to illustrate the diegetic world of the show. The use of wide angled establishing shots to illustrate the agricultural/natural landscapes, is a unique stylistic choice made that illustrates not only what the landscape

looks like but the richness of the land itself. The viewer is consistently reminded that they are within a rural area by the use of natural shots of expansive spaces, that locate and almost remind the viewer of the physical environment they are viewing. The aerial shots also situate the characters quite clearly in terms of class and power (Figure 3.6 and 3.9). From the first episode it is clear that the characters are situated within the aisles of power, particularly because of the presence of signifiers such as land ownership. The characters in the show are constantly highlighted in light of their social status.



(Figure 3.6: Left – The title sequence for the show. Right – An aerial shot of Risinga village.)



(Figure 3.7: Left – The affluent Mudau family house. Right – The less affluent Baloyi family house.)

There is a clear manifestation of wealth within the fictional village as the main characters have a high stake in terms of ownership of land, property and investments. The signs of opportunity and wealth are consistently shown off through cutaways of expansive farming

land and the positioning of characters within that geographical space. In Figure 3.7 we see the reality of two different existences within the show - one of the wealthy and one of the poor. What is interesting is that this storyline takes place only within the rural area that relocates aspiration not in the leaving of that space, but rather of success being in close proximity, which is evidenced by the physical manifestations of wealth with which we see the characters interacting. The constant filming of the Mudau family within their newly bought Tiakeni farm continually exposes the viewer to an expansive amount of wealth that signifies power. In Figure 3.8 we see a medium shot of the Mudau couple counting money they have obtained, albeit illegally. This itself debunks the common rhetoric of the rural character as laid back, unassuming and a victim of circumstance. The Mudau family is often seen walking within lush green pastures, an active agricultural space and interacting within their business as sole controllers and benefactors, as opposed to 'village bumpkins' living day by day.



(Figure 3.8: Left – Richard and Gladys Mudau counting money. Right – The Mudau aunts confronting Richard and Gladys Mudau about the newly acquired farm.)



(Figure 3.9: Left – Characters reflecting on the massive achievement of claiming land back. Right – An aerial shot of a the Tiakeni Banana plantation with expensive Mudau cars driving in between. A huge sign of wealth and power.)

3.3 CASE STUDY CONCLUSIONS

Both *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* offer textual evidence that shows the ways in which each show approaches representation of the rural. This type of representation is significant because there are two interesting points of discussion. Firstly, the treatment of the characters as active agents in their own destiny paints a beneficial picture of characters within rural South Africa. This type of representation shows characters that are steadfast in the decisions that they make within the confines of the rural area, but also quite unique in the larger discourse of representation, and particularly that of rural South Africa. The representation of what these characters want and where they visualize these wants taking place is an interesting juxtaposition, specifically in contrast to shows like *Generations*, which often see those characters fleeing the rural area because of a lack of opportunity. This type of representation offers something new for television stories that take place in rural areas. Secondly, the treatment of the rural environment through camera technique provides a new lens of viewing. The references offered earlier in this chapter depict stylistic choices that are more interested in providing a visually fluent treatment to the space that gives the rural a revitalized appearance, as opposed to the barrenness that is often the trope. The emphasis on the lushness of the physical environment that we see in both shows represents the commitment to representation that is intentional. In the context of South African television, both *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* are impactful

because of their respective approach to the positioning, treatment and representation of both the characters and the rural physical environment.

CHAPTER 4: NDHAWU - THE DOCUMENTARY FILM: REFLECTIONS ON THE FILMMAKING PROCESS

Ndhawu is a Xitsonga word which, directly translated, means “space or place.” As a young boy I often moved around in various physical environments based on the movements of my family. In all those experiences I found that a piece of my identity was recreated based on each physical environment that I occupied. From the rural village of Tzaneen, Limpopo, to the icy terrains of Yellowknife, Canada – I have moved to vastly different environments in my personal life. In each physical environment I found myself at odds but also in conversation with the space that I was occupying. In Yellowknife, Canada for example, there was an active need for me to reconcile the images I had seen of the “snowy Americas” on television with what I was actively experiencing in real time. Having left that environment and then returning to South Africa also created a huge level of identity confusion because of having to adapt traits and characteristics I picked up in Yellowknife with South Africa in the early 2000s.

Documentary is often seen as operating separately from typical television conventions, particularly because of the aspect of non-fiction. I argue that both, particularly if similar in textual content, can be beneficial in further understanding aspects of representation, and in the case of this essay, the representation of the rural space and its characters. Beattie argues that documentary films form part of the conversation around media in a way that is similar to television (Beattie, 2004). I found it important to implicate myself in the process of having the conversation around identity, aspiration and space – which is not to say that the documentary is participatory in mode, but rather a reflection in hindsight. I found that I could not create a piece of work and remove myself as a filmmaker

because my perspective in the role was firstly, hugely influenced by my own personal experience of constant movement, and secondly, because I could not espouse generalizations around how space and environment affect identity and aspiration, solely based on my own personal experience. The film, therefore, operates as an addition to the conversation around not only how physical environments, movement and space affect our identities – but how those spaces can influence our own ideas of what we aspire to. This is similar to what we see being done in *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* because how the characters relate to their environments within the world of the show is linked, through findings of the textual analysis, to how their aspirations are represented.

Plantinga argues that the definition of documentary ranges, particularly when attempting to define the type of documentary in relation to sub-genre (Plantinga, 2005). In terms of the structure and the strict definition in form, *Ndhawu* can be described as a hybrid documentary that utilizes documentary techniques like the standard talking head as the crux of the visual project as well as the use of poetic montage editing, the use of sound and the intercutting of conversations taking place at different times about the same subject matter. Techniques include those drawn from the strictly defined mode of the expository documentary (use of voice-over and visual evidence) but expand upon this form of address. I utilized the camera not only in the world of the subjects, but in the world of the physical space itself, which I consistently found altered the space. This is to say that by placing the camera within barren areas, unoccupied spaces, and vast expansive land – I was attempting to create conversation between the physical camera and the space it was filming. The point of this specific decision was to emphasize how the thematic intentions of the film that speak to heavily engaging with space as not only in its physical manifestation, but also to the relational aspect between space and personhood. I was interested in what could be interpreted in expansive spaces and how those shots could be in conversation with the ideas expressed by the different subjects and my own voice-over. The figures below, when seen in the context of the film itself and the conversation that the subjects are having in the film,

create a personalized story. *Ndhawu*, seeks to plug into a larger conversation around aspirations and how they manifest physically. The contrasting between my film with both *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* support the argument about a new lens on rural representation, particularly because of the way that the three formats reflect ideas of space, environment and aspiration.



(Figure 4.1: Left – Rural lands in the Eastern Cape. Right – A cemetery in Limpopo).

With *Ndhawu*, I was primarily interested in investigating what kind of relationships people have with the geographical areas in which they were born, where they migrated to following that and where they desired to go in future. Peace, Holland and Kellaheer (2006) propose that there is a key relationship between identity and the environment - that there is indeed something to be said about how the individual, over time, interacts with their surroundings:

We set out to understand the relationship between environment and identity in later life...The dynamic between person and place varies but later in life we recognize two important factors: first, as people age their spatial experience may change. Second, older people bring the experience of time to this dynamic. (Peace, Holland and Kellaheer, 2006)

As a filmmaker I was drawn to questions of environment, identity and space because of the manner in which documentary film has the possibility to investigate these elements so eloquently. The use of film technique in poetic documentary with the aim of making it facilitate a conversation about space, aspiration and identity - I found to be particularly significant.

As a filmmaker I was faced with the challenging position of choosing participants for this documentary. The largest of the challenges was deciding who the focus would be on to best serve the conversation happening in the film. My subjects consist of three students from the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Each of them comes from vastly different backgrounds, but their experience does find its connection on the physical campus of the university. An extension of that connection would be the clear access to higher education, which would also speak to what is possible in terms of how they imagine/represent their future aspirations, particularly as it relates to class, privilege, and access. The choice to focus on Tshepiso Mashinini (MA in Development Studies), Zimpande Kawanu (MA in Creative Writing) and Wisani Mushwana (MA in Creative Writing) is two-fold. The first reason is that they have all done a considerable amount of moving across provincial (and sometimes international) lines for various reasons. The second reason is that all three of them had a keen interest in not only reflecting personally on their imaginings of their own futures and aspirations, but also to adding to the conversation I was creating in the form of *Ndhawu*. The documentary thus focuses on these three individuals from various backgrounds (physical and social):

- Tshepiso Mashinini was born in Johannesburg and raised in the city for most of her life, until she moved to Cape Town, South Africa to attend the University of Cape Town.



- Zimpande Kawanu was born in Zambia but moved between Zimbabwe and South African for his primary and high school and then to Cape Town to



attend the University of Cape Town.

- Wisani Mushwana was born in the province of Limpopo and spent much of his life there until he moved to Cape Town to attend the University of Cape Town.



These three characters were picked for the film because of their experiences as young Africans moving between different physical spaces. My documentary aims to investigate how they relate to their physical environment and what type of effect that environment has on them, if any at all. The use of sit-down interviews, b-roll footage and montage editing emphasize the reflective nature of the topic. Each of the subjects speak in relation to the moving images and cutaway images from various environments. The documentary also contains three key quotes that speak to the ideas of home, movement, space and identity. The decision around this was to contextualize the conversation consistently throughout the film. In this way the conversation solidifies itself in imaginings of aspiration, space, and identity. The film is separated into three clear sections. Firstly, the history of each of the subject's ideas of home. Secondly, the places they have been to in their young lives (including rural and urban), and thirdly how their environments have impacted their personal ideas of success, aspiration, and the ideal space to settle in. The grappling that is happening in this documentary is about the interaction between environment, identity, and ultimately the ideas around values and aspiration.

The approach of the film, premised with the intention being a hybrid expository/poetic documentary film, has each of the participants speaking to their connection to the various places in which they were born. The frequent use of talking heads also speaks to how information-heavy the documentary is because of the themes unpacked within the film. There are thematic links between *Ndhawu* and *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd*. To be precise, the experiences that Wisani Mushwana speaks about within my documentary film are similar to the experiences of the characters in *Giyani: Land of Blood*. Mushwana speaks about service delivery struggle and the impact of that struggle on the rural space, and by extension, how that has almost forced him to imagine a life outside of where he grew up. This narrative is similar to what we see in the fictional village of Risinga, where the conversations around class, service delivery and wealth are rife. The larger difference, however, must be acknowledged. The experience of the community in the show is juxtaposed with the polar opposite experience of the Mudau family, who live lavishly and almost acquire even more wealth whilst still being located in the rural area.

The significance of the television show case studies I chose in this paper speak to precisely that reality. For example, Tshepiso Mashinini speaks about how although she grew up in an urban city environment, she has throughout her life idealised the rural space as a place she would like to settle, whereas for Wisani Mushwana, who grew up in a rural environment, it was the complete opposite. This comparison shows the complexity of aspiration. The juxtaposition of the experiences of the characters within the shows and in the subjects in *Ndhawu*, highlight that complexity.

The interviews seek to unveil what kinds of feelings each of the participants has towards their place of birth and how, if at all, those feelings might have changed over time. *Ndhawu* is interested in how physical space (and each spaces' social identity) might link to how people themselves identify as individuals within a larger society. *Ndhawu* as a documentary film operates within the confines of the essay film that is hybrid in genre, whereas the analysis of *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* departs from the point of investigating the telenovela or the soapie in its representation of environment, identity and space. Both of these projects undertake an investigation of how the physical

environment plays a role in influencing the individual not only in terms of the relationship they have with that environment, but also how the environment informs their value system. In the same way that characters in both shows develop value systems with consideration of their physical environment, the participants in *Ndhawu*, have a vested relationship with their environments that inform their value systems as well. What makes this comparison possible is both documentary and television as key players in the conversation around visual media, and by extension finding similarity on the basis of theme.

What comes out in the end is that between Tshepiso, Zimpande and Wisani, they all have an extremely different experience of the spaces they have occupied over the years. Tshepiso's experience with her environment is heavily intertwined with her identity as a woman. Zimpande's experience with space speaks to ideas of exploration and the search for identity elsewhere. Wisani's negotiation with space and environment is very much linked to the class question and the ability for upward social mobility. The voice-over done by myself aims to offer a reflexive approach to the discussion taking place in the film. All three participants do an interesting job of articulating their experiences which speak directly to the type of values that they have either picked up or are constantly creating for themselves. It is clear that a hybrid approach to *Ndhawu* is ideal in light of the thematic content of the documentary. In reflecting on the format of documentary film as a medium, the making of *Ndhawu* has proven to be the ideal site of conversation for topics such as environment, space, identity and aspiration. At the end of the process, it became clear that documentary film, outside of making a claim to truth-telling, remains a significant site for reflexive engagement and the giving of personal testimony.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The conversation around aspiration in both *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* have consistently been upward social mobility, success measured by the acquisition of material wealth (companies, land, money) and the aspiration to upper class status. These values

are similar to those we have historically seen in shows such as *Generations*. The difference is that both *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* depart from the idea that these values can only be achieved in the confines of the urban city space. The characters in these shows depart from the norm of travelling to the city to give expression to these values. In this way the representation of success and aspiration is re-invented in a way that gives a new lens to the representation of characters within rural areas. This type of representation becomes more meaningful in contrast to the type of representation we see of rural characters within shows such as *Generations*. The analysis gives more weight to how we characterize not only characters in rural spaces, but the rural environment itself.

My documentary film also speaks to the ideas of environment and how experiences can dictate how people interact with spaces. The participants in *Ndhawu* are able to meaningfully grapple with the concept of space, identity and aspiration. The thematic similarities between *Ndhawu* and the two case studies, speaks further to the connectedness of documentary film and television as sites of the thematic exploration of social issues. What is also clear is that *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd* have the material, based on textual analysis, that is evidence for the initially posed question of whether fictional South African television shows are beginning to characterize rural spaces differently through representation. The existence of these shows does indeed illustrate how they can use technique and narrative choices to reshape ideas of aspiration by being intentional with the content on the shows. The representation of particular spaces and people also become signifiers of ever-changing value systems. Whether it be in documentary film or television, there is space for further consideration of the way in which representation evolves as societies evolve. The formats of documentary and traditional television are also an extension of that. In this way, it is possible to consider that South African television shows like *Giyani: Land of Blood* and *The Herd*, based on evidence, have departed from the past representation of rural spaces and ideas around aspiration. This naturally opens way for possible conversation about telenovelas and soapies as value shifting agents, and documentaries as an ideal visual format to explore these themes.

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