

Between Two Trees: On Rediscovering Reconciliation in Post-1994 South Africa

Vuyani Vellem

University of Pretoria

vuyani.vellem@up.ac.za

Abstract

A veiled logic minimises the gift of reconciliation from the poor when we examine the concepts of “reparation” and “deficit” in our discourse of reconciliation within South Africa. Instrumental rationality renders *umkhondo*—the footprints, the hints—of reconciliation elusive. The *kaffir boom*, a tree of victory and violence, subsumes *umsintsi*, a tree of defeat, a tree of a black person if the symbolic significance of the two names for the same tree is brought to attention. The interpretation of reparations and deficit through hegemonic, Western theological lenses cheapens and robs reconciliation of justice. Who then, is in *Vlakplaas* today—in post-1994 South Africa? Is silence penitential or does it signify arrogance by the beneficiaries of apartheid and colonialism? The myths that conceal the distorted logic being used to define reparations and deficit are no longer helpful. This article contends that black Africans need to craft their tools of reconciliation by resisting a bifurcation of their spiritual resources from the discourse of reconciliation.

Keywords: Post-1994 South Africa; Vlakplaas; reconciliation; reparation; deficit; *umsintsi*; “*kaffir boom* (tree)”

Introduction

Zakes Mda¹ makes an important point that is pertinent for our conversation in the opening of his book. A tree called *umsintsi*, he explains, is named a *kaffir boom*, “the tree of the non-believers” and named “coral tree” by colonists!² The major question for us in this article is reconciliation. Reconciliation is metaphorically the same tree—ostensibly with two names! Reconciliation is the same tree, but with two epistemological perspectives, the ambivalence about constructs of meaning that have occurred in South Africa since the colonial and apartheid regimes and remain a challenge in South Africa post 1994.

1 Zakes Mda, *Little Suns*, (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2015).

2 Mda, *Little Suns*, 7.



Mda's work, woven within the ambivalent and violent historical encounter between white people and black people in South Africa, retells the story of war between the Amampondo and the British colonialists in the Eastern Cape. It is *inter alia*, a story of how Hamilton Hope, who was the magistrate then, undermined local kingdoms of AmaXhosa and Basotho in this region. Hope's intent was to subjugate these kingdoms and their people under British control. *Little Suns* (Mda 2015) is a novel that therefore brings to mind the "Seven Frontier Wars" in the Eastern Cape, Bamabatha rebellion in KwaZulu-Natal, Sekhukhune's battles with the colonialists in Limpopo, King Moshoeshoe in Lesotho, Queen Nzinga of Angola; and the social order that prevailed after the conquest of the black African person. I find Mda's work apt to introduce our conversation on reconciliation in South Africa.

We need to remember that one of the legacies of colonialism is in naming. The things colonialists named are things that black African people had names for, like the *umsintsi* tree. Reconciliation has been given a different name by others, while some name it yet something else in South Africa. Naming is metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, cultural, religious and spiritual. In Mda's work, it is even more significant to note what Hope represents as a magistrate: the British legal system. Mda caricatures Western jurisprudence in this novel. So pertinent is the book that our conversation on reconciliation, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)—itself a product of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995—is introduced by insights that Mda eloquently builds into the plot of his novel. One of the key motifs in Mda's book, for example, is in the word *umkhondo*—a difficult word to translate. He uses this concept to thread the search in the novel for a woman, Mthwakazi, by her lover, Malangana, throughout; a steady journey of a search of *umkhondo* in search of lost love. *Umkhondo* could be described as an indication in search of something or someone. Even though Mda does not necessarily write about reconciliation, naming, jurisprudence, violence, the search for lost love, *umkhondo* and the crippled figure, Malangana, he provides us with metaphors and insights we can employ in our search for reconciliation "Between two Trees."

This article is a search, therefore, a journey as in the search for *umkhondo*—*umkhondo* of reconciliation in South Africa—the footprints, the hints of an unending search for reconciliation between a crippled black person and a white beneficiary of colonialism and apartheid. In our search for *umkhondo* of reconciliation, it is necessary to remember at this very point that the TRC was not a theologically instituted commission. Maluleke said almost two decades ago: "This juridical reality, one hopes, need not mean the imposition of legalistic and amoral fetters on the TRC commissioners."³ The TRC was a juridical rather than a spiritual instrument. Naming and the juridical aspects of colonialism are related to the dismantlement of the spiritual dispensation of black African people. The denial of the being of a black African person was expressed in naming. How we "name" reconciliation in South Africa could be the perpetuation of the destruction of the ontological and epistemological heritage of black Africans in our search for reconciliation.

3 Tinyiko Maluleke, "Truth, National Unity and Reconciliation in South Africa," *Missionalia* 25, no.1 (April 1997): 60.

Colonial jurisprudence, following Mamdani, bifurcated the meaning of life in the colonial structure of power. The two names, “*umsintsi*” and “*kaffir boom (tree)*” in Mda’s work, symbolise this bifurcated state of life and subjugation of the world of the black African people on racial and tribal terms. The juridical nature of the TRC could have been bifurcated from the spiritual heritage of South Africans, let alone black African people who had their own spiritual resources they should use in their quest for reconciliation with others.⁴

Where do we draw our resources from, given our repugnant vestiges of the colonial and apartheid orders, such as the drawing of lines, the demarcation of spaces and borders as in the Berlin Conference? Mission station bifurcation between the lands of the “Red-blanketed” and the schooled ones, *Amaghqoboka* or *Amakholwa*, is another example. We now know that the bifurcation of the social order meant “recognising” others without necessarily granting them “full citizenship” in the white colonial order and the apartheid city.⁵ This “recognition” without “full membership” or “citizenship” remains a physical and psychological pain pervasive and residual more than two decades since the dawn of democracy in South Africa. This is possibly perpetuated by using black African names or symbols today in our public life. Rolihlahla Mandela became Nelson Mandela to be “recognised” in a mission school, much as all other blacks had to have “Christian” names for recognition in a white man’s world. According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Modern knowledge and modern law represent the most accomplished manifestations of abyssal thinking.”⁶ In other words, modern epistemology and law are abyssal forms of thinking. He continues:

They [modern knowledge and modern law] account for the two major global lines of modern times, which, though being different and operating differently, are mutually interdependent. Each once creates a subsystem of visible and invisible distinctions in such a way that the invisible ones become the foundation of the visible ones.⁷

Indeed our view is that there is one line, reconciliation, but there are two sides to this line, one invisible and abyssal, while a foundation on whose basis the other becomes visible. Abyssal thinking is the abyssal bifurcation of the social order created by colonialism and apartheid as its zenith. De Sousa Santos explains this order by appealing to Pascal’s *Pensees*:

4 David Mosoma earlier made this point in his work “Restitution/Reparation: A Commitment to Justice and Peace,” *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 5 (1): 1991. Itumeleng Mosala, in one work edited by Charles Villa-Vicencio and Fanie du Toit, titled: *Truth and Reconciliation*, (Cape Town: David and Philip, 2006), 146–152, discusses this matter. Mosala says the TRC neglected issues related to culture, spiritual resources in our argument. Cf. also Tshepo Lephakga, “The History of Conquering of the Being of Africans through Land Dispossession, Epistemicide and Proselytisation,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 41, no. 2, 2015: 145–163.

5 The use of the terms “recognition” and “membership” connote recognition in a household (*oikos*), not membership in the household and this idea is inspired by Manning Marable, “9/11: Racism in a Time of Terror” in *Implicating Empire: Globalization and Resistance in the 21st Century Order World*, edited by Stanley Aronowitz and Heather Gauntney (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 3–4.

6 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges,” www.eurozine.com (accessed 7 May 2017), 46.

7 De Sousa Santos, “Beyond the Abyssal Thinking,” 46–47.

Three degrees of latitude upset the whole jurisprudence and one meridian determines what is true ... It is a funny sort of justice whose limits are marked by a river; true on this side of the Pyrenees, false on the other.⁸

In this article *umsintsi* is the symbolic expression of black epistemology on reconciliation and the “*kaffir boom*” a representation of Eurocentric views of reconciliation. *Umsintsi* is a “false” name, a “false” symbol of reconciliation since what is “true” about reconciliation is on the “*kaffir boom*,” the tree of the non-believer. Between these two trees, one is visible and another is invisible, yet this invisible one, *umsintsi*, forms the foundation of the visible one, the “*kaffir boom*”! *Umsintsi* is in the abyss! What sense does this make because there is one tree here merely with two different names? Naming obliterates the tree of AmaXhosa, the knowledge and jurisprudence of AmaXhosa, while the knowledge and jurisprudence symbolised in the name “*kaffir boom*” becomes the norm in defining what it means for South Africa to reconcile.

This article reworks a paper presented at the National Conference of Chaplains for Correctional Services in Port Elizabeth two years ago. I was specifically requested to elaborate on the chapter I had published in Ernst Conradie’s work, *Reconciliation: A Guiding Vision for South Africa?*⁹ The title of the chapter is “Rediscovering Reconciliation: A Repose to the Call for Reconciliation as a Governing Symbol in Post-1994 South Africa.”

One of the most worrying matters about Conradie’s views is his interpretation of reparation in connection with the notion of a deficit. I argued that Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) should be viewed as a response to the deficit that has remained unquantifiable and residual in light of the extremes of human degradation caused by a racial discourse that dominated and continues to dominate our public life.¹⁰ How, indeed, do we quantify the lie that Almed Timol killed himself, when it was suddenly discovered that he did not? The twisted logic that reparation is calculable, while the deficit caused by a *longue durée* of racial logic, does not become clear when one sees how denigrated a black life has been—even in what we perceive to be calculable. “[The] deficient calculations and measures adopted to deal with reparation”¹¹ show that for others, what can be calculated and measured continues to be disguised as that which cannot be calculated or measured because in essence, racism continues to defend itself by anticipating the worst from its victims. In other words, the deficiency of reparation is caused by a hidden spirit of fear and thus anticipation of savagery, revenge and mistrust of the victims by beneficiaries of racism; by presenting exactly that which is calculable as incalculable. This article expands on such thesis as argued earlier. First, we look at the calculating “tree” of reconciliation once again, as an elaboration of the same thesis argued earlier and second, we pose a question about how we as black Africans

8 De Sousa Santos, “Beyond the Abyssal Thinking,” 50.

9 Ernst Conradie (ed.), *Reconciliation: A Guiding Vision for South Africa* (Stellenbosch: SunMedia, 2013).

10 Vuyani Vellem, “Rediscovering Reconciliation: A Response to the Call for Reconciliation as a Governing Symbol in Post-1994 South Africa,” in *Reconciliation: A Guiding Vision for South Africa*, edited by Ernst Conradie (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2013), 103.

11 Vellem, “Rediscovering Reconciliation,” 105.

need to fashion our own terms of reconciliation. A conclusion then follows to state our tentative thinking about *umkhondo* of reconciliation.

The Calculating Tree of Reconciliation

Allan Boesak, presenting a lecture at Monash University, South Africa, said:

Two names have become symbolic, indeed paradigmatic for what I regard as a tragic error, and the dilemmas it now causes for South Africans: Eugene de Kock and Nelson Mandela. This is how I see our mistake and our dilemma: South Africans, I argue, have hidden all our culpability for the injustices of the past behind Eugene de Kock, and we simultaneously have hidden all our responsibility for justice in the present behind Nelson Mandela.¹²

Concealed and unveiled culpability for justice behind these two men has made us as South Africans underestimate the gift of reconciliation; more so by calculating what we think is to our benefit and entitlement. Stated otherwise, both reparation and deficit are hidden in these two figures, De Kock and Mandela. Maluleke had said this previously:

Basic to the entire TRC process in South Africa is the pursuance of the notions of “national reconciliation” rather than vengeance or justice in the judicial sense of the word. What remains to be seen is: whether the delicate balance hoped for will be successfully achieved; whether reconciliation without justice—which tends to be punitive or “vengeful” justice—is possible; whether story-telling and the hope for some undisclosed type or amount of reparation will be enough for victims; and whether the TRC process will be able to unleash a process of national reconciliation.¹³

Justice already seems to be jettisoned out of the window because justice was and perhaps continues to be equated with vengeance, either overtly or subtly so in South Africa today. Reparation, which can be calculated, is undisclosed and if it will be enough for the victims, remains unknown. Yet, as we follow Boesak above, De Kock and Mandela become the “full” measurements, calculable representations of what is bad and what is good in South Africa post 1994:¹⁴ our responsibility for injustice is hidden behind De Kock and that for justice behind Mandela. This, for us, is the calculating tree of reconciliation with hidden antics; it hides, does not disclose and even says nothing, in other words, remains secretive about what the victim will receive as reparation—exactly that which can be calculated. In this recent story about De Kock, we discern the same.

Eugene Alexander de Kock was sentenced to prison for 212 years in 1996, but he spent only 20 years of that sentence in jail. Sidimba writes:

De Kock was paroled in 2015 after spending 20 of his 212-year jail sentence for six counts of murder, attempted murder, conspiracy to commit murder, assault, kidnapping, illegal possession of firearm and fraud. Department of Correctional Services’ Singabakho Nxumalo

12 Allan Boesak, “Demons, Angels and the Search for Reconciliation,” lecture presented at Monash University, 7 May 2012, 3.

13 Maluleke, “Truth, National Unity and Reconciliation in South Africa,” 60.

14 See also Maluleke’s argument that Tutu and Mandela now “define and encapsulate hegemony,” in “Dealing Lightly with the Wound of my People,” *Missionalia* 25 no. 3 (November 1997): 339.

said when the parole decision was taken, De Kock requested that the conditions of his release not be made public.¹⁵

Sidimba does not really say much about the difference between 212 years and 20 years, as he reports mainly about black workers at *Ons Tuis*, the name of the home where De Kock was apparently housed after his release. He focuses on the black workers who “confronted their bosses over the veil of secrecy, surrounding his presence at the facility.”¹⁶ He further reports: “Another worker said: ‘They think we do not know our history. They think we’re stupid,’”¹⁷ this said with reference to the employers of *Ons Tuis*. This story is illustrative of a number of things but we need to glance at one, which is the concept of reparation and its link with yet another concept, namely deficit. How veiled is this concept, deficit? To what degree does it help us unveil the extent to which we have hidden our culpability for justice?

Boesak might castigate us if De Kock is presented as the supreme “Prime Evil” among the whites and Nelson Mandela, the most deified of blacks that the encounter between white and black might have ever seen! Treating De Kock as the worst white individual representing the ugly face of apartheid is a misnomer, according to Boesak. Could this story then be representative of the white population as a whole, including the deification of Nelson Mandela? Our view is that this case points to a number of things about whiteness and blackness in South Africa, especially in relation to reconciliation.

First, there is an undeniable veil of secrecy with regard to the negotiation discourse for transition into democracy in South Africa. There are pacts that were made, which have not yet been completely disclosed in the construction of the vision for South Africa post 1994. In his most recent work, Boesak devotes a section to what he coins as “Secret Talks, Sacrificial Struggle, and the End Game.”¹⁸ About this, he says:

Contrary to this imperial myth, the so-called endgame of our struggle for freedom was not played out in the secret deals, pre-negotiation settlements, and elite conspiratorial pacts concocted by the political aristocracies from both sides, as for example political philosopher and political broker Willie Esterhuysen would have it.¹⁹

Boesak clearly ascribes the failure of our democracy and the TRC itself to these pacts. There was a “Gnostic” taint about the negotiated settlement in South Africa as the masses of this country entrusted their leaders, especially the African National Congress (ANC) to handle this process on their behalf. That the parole conditions for De Kock, which were not made public, in a case that is directly related to the TRC’s processes, is telling. Full disclosure—not contrition, not remorse, not confession and not repentance—was the only condition legislated for full pardon. Even though in De Kock’s case of parole it appears to be a reverse of the TRC’s discourses, in the sense that the conditions of the parole are not disclosed, there are

15 Loyiso Sidimba, “De Kock Spooks Black Workers,” *Sowetan Newspaper*, 21 July 2017: 2.

16 Sidimba, “De Kock Spooks,” 4.

17 Sidimba, “De Kock Spooks,” 4.

18 Allan Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters* (Uncorrected Proof Manuscript), (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017), 13–16.

19 Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides*, 13.

similarities though; it is still a pact between an ANC-led government and the Afrikaner, we may argue. If full disclosure is a condition for pardon, why not for parole after only 20 years of a 212 years of a jail sentence?

Second, and more importantly, there are histories and “herstories” here, the workers remind us. They are not stupid! They know their history and if the employer colludes with De Kock to find a home where he was to be served by the same blacks he maimed at *Vlakpaas*, the black workers are not willing to accept this. The workers know who murdered blacks, they know the conspiracy theories prostituted against blacks, they know who assaulted and maimed them, they know that it was the system that kidnapped their own children, and the role of the gun in wars that led to their land dispossession. No amount of fraud, no matter how sophisticated, will mislead them; they are not stupid, as Sidimba reports in the article cited above.

A detour is necessary here. One has to remember that mimicry has been one strategy of agency among the oppressed. “Sly Civility, a mimicry that was the same but not quite,”²⁰ in its own limited way provided agency for the oppressed. If we turn this around it might suggest that the poor have always seen the TRC itself as foolish, as a mimicry of justice, the demonisation and deification of individuals. Reconciliation, if the report above shows anything, is contested in South Africa. It is fraught with veils of secrecy, histories and “herstories” that are contested; calculations, miscalculations and fraudulence to say the least, the TRC representing all these contradictions. According to Boesak, these contradictions are imperial myths. These contestations are epistemological at the core, hardly resolvable without colonial difference as an analytical prism. Maluleke said this 20 years ago:

The announced reparations strategy encompasses five categories: urgent need grants, annual pension-type grants of between R17 000 and R23 000, symbolic reparations, community reparations and institutional-reform reparations. It is estimated that these will cost about 3 billion Rands—about 0.25% of the South African annual budget. It is perhaps instructive that what a “victim” will receive in an annual payout is less than what a commissioner now earns per month.²¹

That victims receive less, that symbolic reparations remain contested, that community reparations still have a long way to go—let alone the transformation of institutions, the higher education sector in particular—point to immense contradictions that perhaps cannot be resolved without epistemological transformation in South Africa. Johnson probably captures this epistemological contestation when he says:

More worrying still was the fact that the TRC was heavily influenced by Mr Justice Albie Sachs, who expounded the notion that there were four different kinds of truth. First, there was factual and verifiable truth, that is, the only sort the law courts dealt with. Secondly, there was

20 Pratap Bhanu Mehta, “After Colonialism: The Impossibility of Self-Determination” in *Colonialism and its Legacies*, edited by T. J. Levy and I. M. Young (New York, London: Lexington Books, 2011), 12 of 56. In our South African case, an equivalent, the so-called “Hidden Transcripts,” even though critiqued by Tinyiko Maluleke, has been known. See Maluleke, “The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans,” *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa* 108 (2000): 19–37.

21 Maluleke, “Dealing Lightly,” 340.

“personal or narrative truth.” Everybody has his or her own truth and listening to this led to “the creation of a narrative truth” that “captured the widest possible record of people’s perceptions, stories, myths and experiences.” Thirdly, there was “dialogue or social truth,” “the truth of experience that is established through interaction, discussion and debate.” Finally there was the “healing truth,” which was “the kind of truth that places facts and what they mean within the context of human relationships, both among citizens and between the state and its citizens.”²²

Johnson dismisses these views as “hearsay” and “transparent nonsense.”²³ The main critique, as the title of his work suggests, is the hegemony of liberation reason and in relation to the TRC he punctuates the biases that F.W. de Klerk and Mangosuthu Buthelezi suffered at the hands of this Commission. The bias of the TRC sought to create a certain narrative and this cannot be disputed. Sachs’s characterisation of different types of truth might not be far-fetched, though, if one remembers how Jesus was silent before Pilate. If according to the Gospels, Jesus is the way, *hodos* then in Jesus’ ways are different manifestations of truth. Truth might not be disembodied from the excruciated body of Jesus; truth might be the content of the subversive messages he taught against Empire; truth might be silence too; and truth might not even be neutral. The trouble, though, is Johnson’s own disguised hallowing of the hegemony of Western canons of knowledge in his entire work, revealed by what he says later:

Just as with every other country, the South Africa of today is organically built on what went before. What was built was very impressive—by far the most developed industry and infrastructure in Africa.

For us this is even more telling, as he continues:

To use the SACP’s famous formulation, white rule was colonialism of a special type. And, as Marx was the first to admit, colonialism was in many ways a progressive, modernising force.²⁴

What is far-fetched for Johnson might not be the same to a black South African. His truth might not be the same as the truth of a black African person. The same tree is named differently and this is epistemological. In relation to the modernist view that saw black Africans as a people without history, they know their history, the workers said above. Johnson says Marx’s validation of their colonisation—the colonisation of those deemed not to have any history—is unquestionable simply because Marx says so? That it was even impressive because it was of a “special type” is even more of an affront. Mahmood Mamdani’s critique of South Africa’s exceptionalism is important to remember. This exceptionalism is perhaps the glorification of what seems to be the best that the West could have bequeathed on us as black Africans; the vexing sympathies of beneficiaries of colonialism who cannot empathise with our history of conflict, its violence and injustices. Yet, apartheid is no exception; it is but a climactic expression of the racist conceptions of

22 R. W. Johnson, *South Africa’s Brave New World: The Beloved Country since the End of Apartheid*. (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 274.

23 Johnson, *South Africa’s Brave New World*, 274.

24 Johnson, *South Africa’s Brave New World*, 575.

modernity that engineered the perception that the humanity of a black person is suspicious and doubtful. A black person is a thing destined to become a perpetual servant of the superior master. Twenty-three years after democracy, this developed industry and infrastructure in South Africa is still a monopoly of one section of the population!²⁵

Third—and this is still in conversation with what the workers say about De Kock’s story—can they not calculate the difference between 212 and 20? How different is their calculation from that of the pact between the TRC and the “sympathetic” calculation of whites? Is the forgiveness that tacitly prevailed as a result of the TRC process a miscalculation by a black person, or an indication of the incapacity of the black to calculate, or do they also know what calculation is in their own way? The coevalness or coexistence of the decolonial turn with the fiasco of the post-1994 South African pact, dissimulated in the feelings of disappointment and anger by the youth. They object to a pact that seems to deny their knowledge of history and their capacity to calculate; which sums up the conversation intended here. The lines drawn by a hegemonic view that reconciliation does not coexist with those that are made invisible, are ruptured by the visceral politics we see in our midst. Abyssal thinking in the TRC and the reconciliation process in South Africa is painfully undeniable if those represented by the *kaffir boom* are not acknowledged, and if the colonialists who decide what modern law is, continue to efface *umsintsi*, the abyss of modern racist discourse.

Let us look at this matter in the following way: when the steam engine was developed, there were blacks in the plantation. After the invention they were simply thrown back into the lowest deck of the ship that brought them from the other side of the Atlantic. When electricity energised production, blacks who provided this energy previously, were then discarded and thrown back into the lowest deck of the ship. When the computer began to run automated production, blacks became the most precarious commodity and still they were thrown back into the lowest deck of the ship that stole their bodies for cheap labour across the Atlantic. In this history and “herstory”, the plantation could be the “mission station” in South Africa, the buffer zone between the land of the civilised and one of the red-blanketed. In what is now called the Fourth Industrial Revolution, blacks are left still in the lower deck as the ship of “progress” and Western civilisation is still on course, discarding the knowledge, history, and calculation of the black mind. This argument is not difficult to validate with statistics, as some might argue. Ours is, rather, an epistemological argument, it is about the thread of an ongoing civilisation based on the invisibility of the other in its visible progress on the other side of the line. Abyssal thinking is debunked by Lorenzo Fioramonti in his argument for well-being economy when he asks: “If science is not to address human needs and aspirations, what is it for?”²⁶ The TRC’s calculations evidently show that a victim is less important, as Maluleke argues:

25 Note the Oxfam Report that was recently published and the fact that today, the eight richest people in the world are white; this says it all. It is now apparent that Stellenbosch is the most unequal city in the world. To avoid racism in dealing with inequality is so misleading because the accumulation of wealth by whites is not unrelated to slavery generally, cheap labour and apartheid in South Africa in particular.

26 Lorenzo Fioramonti, *Well-being Economy* (Johannesburg: PanMacmillan, 2007), 15.

Questions raised about the quantity and quality of reparations are often answered with the suggestions that “no amount of money can make up for the suffering of victims.” One wishes that this argument would be used with respect to the general financial cost of the TRC and its own “grave train” [Mda 1997]—otherwise one detects a double standard.²⁷

The “science” of the TRC is an epistemological “tree” of double standards, indeed as no amount can deal with this deficit, yet reparations that can be calculated are a grave train for some and “grave-less train” for others. I have argued elsewhere that it took 15 years for the Diepsloot community to be incorporated into the Johannesburg municipality and to be recognised as a community.²⁸

At Thabo Mbeki Village, a few kilometres from Diepsloot, in a forest of zinc, lives a community evicted from the land that buried their forebears and their umbilical cords, since 2004. Their incorporation into the Johannesburg municipality still has to happen, yet they have participated in both local and national elections.²⁹ In South Africa, black consciousness, or the paradigm of liberation theology is deliberately distorted by many as a radical discourse that seeks too much from the oppressors and from the beneficiaries of apartheid and colonialism. BTL is distorted as a paradigm that provokes blacks to seek entitlement for mistakes that were ostensibly and agreeably committed, in other words, pains inflicted whose measure is difficult or even impossible to calculate. De Kock is being blamed for all that is bad in the history of South Africa and Mandela is credited for all that is beautiful about post-1994 South Africa. This is deception, we argue. Liberation emerges when the oppressed begin to ask for very little, only enough left for them to live in their struggles for survival with dignity. The quest for liberation occurs when the black calculates very little, to live.

Think about what triggered the Soweto uprising in South Africa. Was it really as a result of the defence of a very small thing: “Oh really, now you want to impose your language on us?” is what that generation asked. They probably said:

But since 1954 when you introduced Bantu Education, we tried to speak, in 1960, we just tried to demonstrate that carrying these things, “*dompasses*,” everyday everywhere was just inhumane, we were massacred! Worse, our political organisations were banned thereafter, please! The little you could now do is to stop your plan to impose Afrikaans on us! You have for centuries taken our minds!³⁰

Very little indeed! There is no paradigm of liberation in the world that emerged because of a huge demand that was impossible to meet by the oppressor; one still has to encounter that. From the perspective of this paradigm then, black people in South Africa are not demanding too much for reconciliation to take place, rather they have already forgiven too much, as Desmond Tutu once said after years of silence since the TRC discourse in South Africa was

27 Maluleke, “Dealing Lightly,” 340–341.

28 Vuyani Vellem “Life-giving Assets at a Johannesburg Informal Settlement: Black Faith and the False Gods of Multiculturalism in the 21st Century,” in *Churches, Blackness, and Contested Multiculturalism*, edited by Drew Smith, William Ackah and Anthony Reddie (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 241–252.

29 Vellem, “Life-giving Assets,” 241–252.

30 This is not a quotation but the author’s own imaginary rendition of the little that is demanded in the struggle for liberation.

started. A few years ago, Tutu said magnanimously,³¹ a lack of magnanimity to be precise on the part of those who benefitted from colonialism and apartheid was, in our own words, a sign of thanklessness and deep cruelty.

The cardinal point here is that we calculate reconciliation incorrectly in South Africa. What then are these miscalculations that are often deliberate and obstinate? Frantz Hinkelammert says:

We are like two men, each of whom is sitting on a branch of a tree. They compete to see who can saw his branch faster. The more effective competitor is indeed the one who can saw through the branch he is sitting on faster. Although he is the first to fall, he still wins the completion in terms of efficiency.³²

Imagine the branch on which the one sits who can saw faster, as the black body in the lowest decks of the ships that transported him with a woman as that branch. Hinkelammert uses this powerful metaphor to explain that instrumental rationality coupled with its totalitarian character, is irrational rationality. The calculations drawn from this rationality are fatal, genocidal, epistemicidal and spiritualicidal miscalculations. Evidence in this regard is plentiful. The earth has become a wasteland as the Accra Confession clearly suggests. We live on a “broken planet.”³³ In addition, the histories/“herstories” acclaimed in this rationality are largely based on the erosion and effacing of those of the global South; those of the black worker in *Ons Tuis*. Yet, as we see in the report above, the workers cry: “De Kock must go, who will be the next *Vlakplaas* victim among us?” They are able to calculate and ask their own questions. The oppressed have agency. The question is: Who is being victimised again by the TRC, who is next in South Africa post 1994? Sawing the branch faster, as Hinkelammert tells us above, which means, *ukugawula umthi ngokukhawuleza* in isiXhosa, implies very quick calculations on softer matters in life, reconciliation being one of them. If we were to use the metaphor of a covenant as distinct from the contract—the contractual obligations signed up at Groote Schuur, Pretoria and during Codesa and the TRC itself—we would then have to recognise that covenant suggests a softer side of the contract. Those softer issues that take time to build, whose tree must be nurtured and taken care of carefully, and which is fragile but indispensable for living together, the “software”³⁴ of reconciliation, cannot be sawed fast. To saw this branch, the software, the tree of reconciliation as fast as if we think we might be in competition, is like sawing a branch on which one is sitting. We should rather plant faster than saw faster! A number of examples to show how dangerous it has become because of the fast lanes we opted for in South Africa—in sawing the tree of reconciliation—are openly there for us to see.

31 Vuyani Vellem, “Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: A Reflection,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* Volume XXXVIII, (2012): 345–360.

32 Ulrich Duchrow and Frantz Hinkelammert, *Transcending Greedy Money: Interreligious Solidarity for Just Relations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 119.

33 Fioramonti, *Well-being Economy*, 2.

34 In most of his works, Mitri Raheb uses the term “software” to explain the fragile, mundane aspects of Empire. One could use *ubuhlanti* to signify the same, meaning the distinction between the hardware of a system and its software.

In 2016 the intensity and ferocity of the debate on racism, which has not been tackled at its foundations after many years since the dawn of democracy, has become a serious challenge for public life in post-1994 South Africa. This might also be true of the United States of America, if works such as the most recent one by Eddie Glaude, *Democracy in Black* are brought to mind. The anger and disappointment expressed by the youth in the #FeesMustFall Movement is another sign. Sawing the branch fast is perhaps even more explicit in quick ways of making money and wealth and the corruption we see in the ANC-led government today.

The modernist rationality with its promises and claims of objectivity hides what BTL many years ago said are the presuppositions, prejudices and interests of modernity, which are unfortunately hidden on the excruciated bodies of the black person. At core, the rationality of modernity, its calculations and assumptions, employed as hegemonic lenses of reconciliation knowledge in South Africa, hide the interest of those who employ them without honestly engaging the same of the black person. It does so by claiming: “Let us reconcile, the damage is incalculable.” We are often told: “No amount of money can make up for the suffering of the victims of apartheid.” A thesis that is deployed in this regard is one that employs the notion of deficit with that of reparation. Deficit accordingly implies that there are certain wrongdoings that cannot be undone.³⁵ Even though reparation can cover some of the offences, in other words return what can be returned for justice to be done, deficit increases exponentially, thus making it impossible for some injustices to be undone through acts of reparation.

Clearly, by appealing to Boesak and De Young, Conradie is at pains to give credence to this theory. He nonetheless acknowledges it as a concept derived from finances, as if in the discourse of radical reconciliation, represented by Boesak and De Young and related to Bonhoeffer’s ethics, there is no equivalent concept or notion to deficit itself, or even the admission of the possibility of wrong doings that cannot be undone.³⁶ Typical of the rationality and presuppositions of modernity, eloquently expressed by Orthodox Christianity, the difference between these two, namely, Radical and Orthodox theologies, is concealed in Conradie’s exposition. Boesak and De Young do not represent a theology that is uncritical to the assumptions of modernity and its constructs, the very implied objectivity on the notion of deficit as a mathematical or financial category.

Not that they cannot calculate. What they probably represent is a paradigm that will radically reject cheapened reparations and ipso facto, a cheapened form of deficit claims; essentially, the lop-sidedness of the application of this notion of deficit or calculative rationality in general as cheap grace. Cheap grace is used to evade the cost of discipleship. Cheapened deficit claims create heroes and heroines, vassals and demonised individuals, not martyrs. Cheapened deficit claims create out of millions, perpetual martyrs and mass killings, serving De Kock as in *Ons Tuis*. Cheapened deficit claims are deployed to justify non-payment of

35 Conradie, *Reconciliation*, 43–44.

36 Conradie, *Reconciliation*, 44.

reparation, to veil what can indeed be paid, which has hitherto not been paid. It is thus not the absence of the idea of a deficit in our history but the cheapening of the deficit we expose, associated with the TRC and some hegemonic discourses in this regard. The blind if not hegemonic application of this concept—let alone its relationship with and espousal by the beneficiaries of colonialism and apartheid—subsumes the capacity of the black worker in *Ons Tuis* to know their history and to calculate. Who next must be the *Vlakplaas* victim, this logic simply portends.

What should have gone to reparations in South Africa, probably must have been around three billion Rands, alluded to above. By the time of the TRC, what a victim was meant to receive as an annual payment, a Commissioner of the TRC earned per month. In addition, some of the people who went to the TRC for amnesty had already received their golden handshakes. We would be charged for exaggeration when we say with the track record of reparations in South Africa up to this day, the victims have received almost nothing. The thesis argued and expanded on here is based on the understanding that liberation asks for very little. That the TRC offered the victim very little is true. Ahmed Timol's case in our public space today bears testimony to this. What is the truth when the records of the case are missing, the autopsy reports distorted, the revelations about fraud as they are revealed in this case? Veiled, deceptive, and secrets still alive?

To justify the non-payment—of what could have been paid—by saying it is because the damage and pain caused is incalculable, is irrational and hypocritical at the core. In fact, what is hidden in this rationality is that the very little that has been accepted by the victim accounts verily for the unutterably incalculable gift of forgiveness and reconciliation to all by the victims. To employ the very rationality that calculates, we must contend that forgiveness in South Africa trickles up from the broken bodies of the victims and the poor. Yes, the notion of “economic growth” became a mantra in South Africa post 1994. Lorenzo Fioramonti puts it this way:

A rising tide lifts all boats: while the rich get richer, the poor are also expected to benefit from what trickles down. Rampant inequality thus becomes socially acceptable because we hope the growth of the economy will eventually make everybody better off. We are thus coaxed into the false dream that growth is a win-win. The reality is that very little trickles down from the rich to the poor. In fact, it mostly works the other way around: wealth trickles up from the poor to the rich, because economic growth turns common resources that everybody can use, from land to water, into private goods that must be sold in the markets. Informal settlements are replaced by shopping malls and public spaces are privatised. The result is that the poor who struggle to operate in the new “growth economy” where everything has a price and money dominates social relations, are kicked out of the system.³⁷

Reconciliation in the TRC's discourse and democratic South Africa, trickles up from the bodies of victims. *Umsintsi* of reconciliation, the software of African spirituality in the twenty first century, is the locus from which the resources for reconciliation could be unearthed and rediscovered. Those resources, which are not easy to calculate, but remain

37 Fioramonti, *Well-Being Economy*, 4–5.

expressive of the resilience and life-affirming praxis of the poor, when discovered, will show that the cohesion that exists in our land, no matter how fragile, is anchored on already existing forgiveness, kindness, love and hope by the poor and previously disadvantaged. Theirs is magnanimous, hopeful, waiting while the saw continues fast on their bodies. We are forgiven already, reconciled already in South Africa, yet we continue to give very little in reciprocation to the gift of reconciliation we cannot measure. Magnanimity!

Umsintsi: Fashion your Bows from your Own Tree

The deification of Nelson Mandela, especially the interpretation of Mandela's meaning for reconciliation in South Africa, is the continuation of the deification of an authoritative religiosity that perceives Western canons of knowledge as salvation, including democracy, the notion of nation-state and many other constructs of modernity. Democracy as a Hellenocentric construct has substituted the "deformed" notions of Reformed religiosity resulting from the scathing criticism of apartheid theology, especially by the liberation paradigm. We all know that democracy is not a Western concept. John de Gruchy affirms this when he says:

The democratic vision has its origins not so much in ancient Athens, the symbolic birthplace of democratic system, as in the message of the prophets of Israel, especially their messianic hope for a society in which the reign of God's shalom would become a reality.³⁸

The following explanation by Sachs is equally illustrative of this point:

Democracy in South Africa will look at the rich and varied experience of Western countries in overcoming the rich and varied forms of absolutism and tyranny, which Western countries have thrown up over the centuries. It will pay special attention to the institutional mechanisms which have been created to guarantee human-rights, as well as to ways and means of encouraging a rights culture in society as a whole. It will seek to ensure that in terms of language, symbols and personality it has a character that roots in Africa. The fact that religion plays a big role in South African life will find appropriate acknowledgement in the constitution, without creating a state religion or giving any religion preference over others.³⁹

Both these quotations are slightly problematic. While John de Gruchy rightly cautions against a shallow view that traces democracy to Athens, he nonetheless excludes *Ubuntu* of African roots of democracy as an equal birthplace of this polity and vision. We engage Sachs's views with insights from the Kairos Document (KD). The KD is a product of the struggle against forms of tyranny associated with some notions of its validation, i.e. tyranny, by either religiously accentuating the *status quo*, or by massaging it religiously. Better described as "Church Theology" in the KD, this lukewarm theology exemplifies the limit of the critique of tyrannical forms of power by epistemological frames that fail to transcend their own biases and prejudices; if not self-referential forms of logic rendering the subaltern perpetually as those who cannot speak. Tyranny was challenged in South Africa and the KD as a product of Black Theology of Liberation remains one such illustrious example to this day. Whether this is incorporated in the new democracy in South Africa—before we are pointed to those

38 John de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), 7.

39 Albie Sachs, *Advancing Human Rights in South Africa*, (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1993), 192.

Western countries that dealt with tyranny before—remains a question. More importantly in Sachs's view is the dubious place that African language, symbols and personality of democracy are accorded despite the suggestion that democracy has a character that roots it in Africa. If the roots of democracy are in Africa, where are the root philosophical and epistemological categories in our democratisation? What are the epistemological tyrannies we face in post-1994 South Africa today?

Achebe in his famous work tells the story of a lively boy who became part of Okonkwo's family. His name was Ikemefuna. This description by Achebe is fascinating:

[Ikemefuna] could fashion out flutes from bamboo stems and even the elephant grass. He knew the names of all the birds and could set clever traps for the little bush rodents. And he knew which tree made the strongest bows.⁴⁰

When things fall apart, as the title of the work by Achebe goes, we need to know which trees make the strongest bows. *When Things Fall Apart* is a story of a paradox created by the powerful nations that colonised and plundered the African continent to this day. These nations chopped and sawed the African tree, effacing it from its soil. One challenge that remains pervasive to this day derives from the clones of these powerful nations created out of the African persons who are left incapable of fashioning their own bows from their own trees. Those who know which of the trees can make the strongest bows, might fall down while at battle with the foreign spirits of Africa's darkness, but others who are lucky, wrestling for their people, cannot but share their prophetic vision to their own people and point them to the tree; Cone's⁴¹ *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. This vision requires a bold reading of the signs of our times. Do we know trees from which we can make our strong bows?

In discussing reconciliation in South Africa, especially the role that the TRC played, we cannot forget that among other things which made the South African version of TRC unique, is the fact that in the whole world, no other Commission featured submissions by politicians and thus political parties in addition to the fact that the Commission itself was politically instituted. South Africa was the first. Antjie Krog argues this point in her well-known work, *Country of my Skull*. The relationship between politics and reconciliation in South Africa thus remains one of the most fascinating aspects of this discourse. Certainly, it is both fascinating and potentially dangerous. In our case, ostensibly during the transition to democracy, the vision of church-state relations is implied in the Constitution of our land. While many will agree that ours is a secular state, the role of religion nonetheless, in so far as it is recognised in our Constitution, remains central in post-1994 South Africa as Sachs also opines above. Any model that maintains tension between the state and the church will probably serve our people well. There are worrying signs of the domestication, the "capture" of the church in South Africa.

40 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (introduction by Biyi Bandele) (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2001), 5 to 6 of 22.

41 James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

The very politicisation of reconciliation and the symbols of the church in the processes of the TRC are suggestive. The extent to which the TRC captured theology and its imaginary on matters of reconciliation, is one problem that still needs further probing: the politics of reconciliation theologised and thus the relationship of democracy to reconciliation, equally theologised.

Did the TRC play a role in making us believe that democracy as espoused from the West is salvific? Tshepo Lephakga in his PhD thesis engages Boesak and De Young's radical reconciliation approach, political piety to be precise, to critique the TRC. Among other things, he says:

The TRC identified many of the individual perpetrators of gross human-rights violations and also many of the individual victims of these violations. In other words, the commission focused on individual perpetrators and victims and ignored institutions. Consequently, it ignored the gross human-rights violations perpetrated collectively and systematically against millions of black people under white political domination and racial capitalism. As a result, the inability and/or unwillingness of the TRC to systematically analyse South Africa's history of unequal power structures is puzzling. By trying to uncover the truth about only one form of victimisation under apartheid and ignoring another, the TRC failed dismally in its quest for truth and reconciliation.⁴²

Clearly, the omission of structural wrongs by the TRC, as Lephakga argues, includes the exclusion of the structures of knowing, epistemological and spiritual differences between the victims of oppression and the perpetrators, including the beneficiaries of apartheid. To employ the logic of deficit, a pietistic logic of deficit and cheapened claims of deficit to conceal this reality is not only disingenuous, but epistemologically unjust and spiritually harrowing. To rediscover reconciliation, we thus have to disclose what this logic is concealing; the sawing of the branch and the effectiveness of the sawing while sitting on the backs of the poor and the victims of apartheid, their spiritual and faith resources. The debate is on which tree or which name of the tree should we frame this discourse. Krog explains this dilemma very well when she alludes to the views expressed by some at the launch of Kader Asmal's book, *Reconciliation through Truth*:

This is an old debate, but these writers give it a new dimension. They spell out that, contrary to the claim made by Commissioners, there is no imperative in the legislation not to make any distinction between the perpetrators and the victims of the two sides. It is not a question of bad apples on both sides, says Kader Asmal, it is a question of a bad tree, a weed, on the one hand, and an apple tree on the other.⁴³

Which tree? Some of the things Krog had to say about this debate are telling:

As the Crocodile flounders, a secretary, Mrs Hartman, focuses attention on its last remaining teeth: Mr Botha is deeply religious, she tells a journalist. He knows his Bible. He will speak when the time is right. She also says: "Mr Botha walks around with a big smile on his face. He says people also said bad things about Hitler."⁴⁴

42 Lephakga, "Dealing lightly," 268–269.

43 Antjie Krog, *Country of my Skull*, (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), 58.

44 Krog, *Country of my Skull*, 58.

With Mr Botha's Bible on the one hand and the Bible of the black workers in *Ons Tuis* on the other, can one reconcile without one's fashioned bows from one's tree? Krog also says this: "De Klerk is not there to look the past in the eye. He is there to minimise the damage and to play on the sentiments of his voters."⁴⁵ Is there no theology that is there to minimise the damage?

Penitential Silence or Arrogance?

Calculative rationality minimises what the victims have offered for our peace in South Africa. Clodovis Boff⁴⁶ once used the Catholic notion of "penitential silence" as one among the most important elements required for genuine reconciliation. Penitential silence is a self-explanatory concept. It is silence not with shame, but with repentance. This would entail, among others, actions of repentance intended to demonstrate if not communicate acceptance of guilt. This implies a conscious choice by the perpetrator to refrain from talking, but more importantly, accepting that any attempt by the perpetrator to "speak" through veiled and secret aspirations for "parole," seriously impinges our endeavours for justice. Don't we need to be silent and "act" reconciliation like the poor of this land? If talking is all that remains, then it is talking that needs to be done, however, no one listens to the black workers who know their history; they are not stupid. Reconciliation rises in the thick of darkness in squalid conditions. *Iinduku Zenu, ni zikha kowuphi umthi?* Out of which tree do you craft your bows? Without epistemological transformation, there is no reconciliation.

Un-concluding Thoughts

The main point in this paper was to further elaborate on a thesis already argued elsewhere. Between two trees lie names, abyssal lines and epistemologies in contest. In search of *umkhondo* of reconciliation a revolution of values is inevitable and spiritual bifurcation—as in the *kaffir boom* and *umsintsi*—might spell disaster for our fragile democracy. The TRC drew lines, modern law is abysmal and it is based on the invisible tree, *umsintsi*, that is kept in the abyss by the "*kaffir boom*." The poor know who the victims of cheapened deficit claims are, as reconciliation trickles up from their maimed bodies.

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45 Krog, *Country of my Skull*, 126.

46 Clodovis Boff, *Feet on the Ground Theology: A Brazilian Journey* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987), 97.

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