

A documentary film by Yoruba Richen

Third World Newsreel  
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# PROMISED LAND

Yoruba Richen, 2010, 57 minutes, English  
with English subtitles, US/South Africa

## One line description

An inside look at the critical story of land reform and racial reconciliation in the new South Africa.

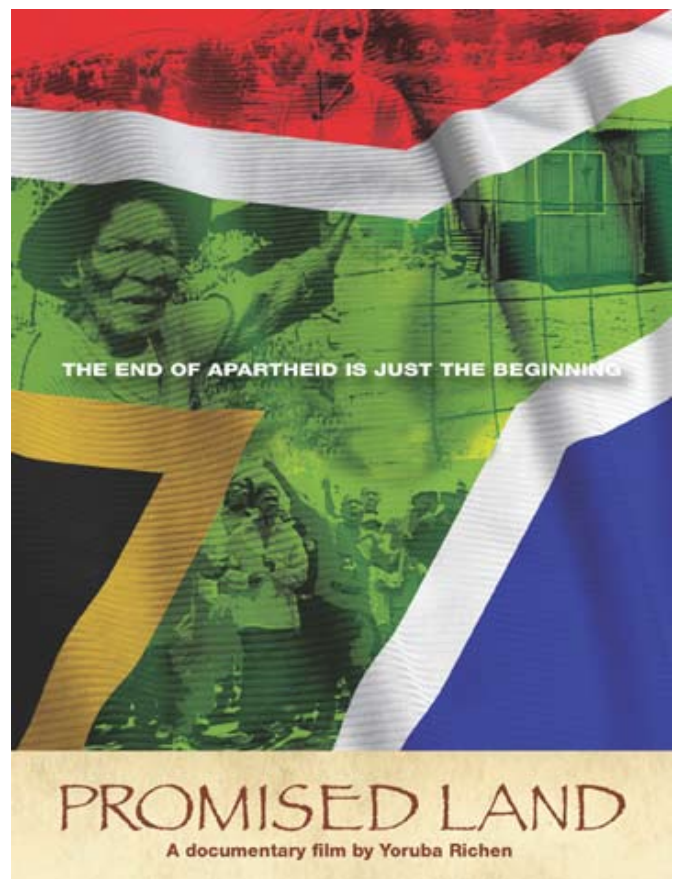
## Short description

Though apartheid ended in South Africa in 1994, economic injustices between blacks and whites remain unresolved. As revealed in Yoruba Richen's incisive *Promised Land*, the most potentially explosive issue is land. The film follows two black communities as they struggle to reclaim land from white owners, some of whom who have lived there for generations. Amid rising tensions and wavering government policies, the land issue remains South Africa's "ticking time bomb," with far-reaching consequences for all sides. *Promised Land* captures multiple perspectives of citizens struggling to create just solutions.

## Long Description

*Promised Land* tells the story of two bellwether legal struggles over land in today's South Africa. In one, an impoverished community seeks the return of 42,000 acres of rich farmland now in the hands of white farmers and developers; in the other, an extended, middle-class black family claims 3,800 acres owned by a few white farmers. The black South Africans have family and tribal traditions and the ugly history of black expulsion from the land to make their case. They also have the government led by the African National Congress (ANC), which promised upon taking power in 1994 to redistribute a third of the land within 10 years.

On the other side are white landowners, whose deeds and bills of sale buttress their passionate belief that they should not be made to pay individually for the collective crimes of apartheid. In this belief, surprisingly, they are supported by the same ANC-led government that promised to redistribute the land. The contradiction in government policies, a compromise strategy meant to appease white fears during the transition to democratic rule, has worked out mostly to the disadvantage of black South Africans. A decade and a half after the inauguration of black majority rule, less than 5 percent of the land has been redistributed. *Promised Land* is a timely alert that the



patience of South African blacks, waiting for economic as well as political enfranchisement, is running out — that the hour hand has advanced dramatically on South Africa's "ticking time bomb."

With behind-the-scenes access to landless blacks, white landowners and beleaguered government functionaries, *Promised Land* is a gripping insider's account of the social and human stakes in South Africa's struggle over land. When filming for *Promised Land* started in 2004, there were some 22,000 active land claims filed by South African blacks that were awaiting resolution. Many of them had been "in process" for years and were finally being decided.

In *Promised Land*, the 9,000-member Mekgareng community wants the government to return the 42,000 acres from which it says its forebears were expelled 40 years ago. The group is opposed by 260 white owners. Leading the landowners is Johan Pretorius, who has deeds for his land dating back to the 1850s, well before the community's expulsion and even before the Native Land Act of 1913 (which banned black ownership of land). The Mekgareng have only one letter making reference to their forced expulsion. Though they are poor and lack the resources of the wealthy landowners, the Mekgareng have dynamic and able leaders, including Philip Rafedile and Solly Selibi.

The 1,000 descendants of Abram Molamu, led by Kathy Motlhabane, Steve Bogatsu and Pinky Gumede, have the advantage of being educated and having the means to afford lawyers, but they face the determined resistance of Hannes Visser, a farmer and meatpacker. Molamu originally purchased farmland in the Lichtenburg area in 1895; his sons later divided up the land but were forced to sell it to the government in the 1940s. The land was subsequently owned by a succession of white farmers. Visser believes the question of whether the Molamu family sold the land to whites willingly or under compulsion makes no difference in his case, since he acquired his property in 1968.

The individual dramas of the antagonists in both cases — equally passionate about their rights to the land — take place against the larger drama of a black African government trying to temper the economic expectations and frustrations of the black majority. *Promised Land* portrays a government fully aware of the potential for social conflict and reluctant to stoke the fires. With regard to land reform, the ANC has committed itself to a market-based “willing seller, willing buyer” model. In actuality, however, there are few willing sellers. In the view of many critics, the process instituted by the government ostensibly to encourage legal claims has only served to slow and even bury claims. In any case, few landless blacks can match the legal proofs of ownership possessed by the land’s current owners.

Roger Roman is one white landowner in *Promised Land* who defies the norm in these growing conflicts. Faced with joining his fellow landowners in evicting black “squatters,” including one man who had lived his entire 103 years on the land, Roman did an about-face. He went on a hunger strike to protest the eviction, gave his land back to the descendants of its original inhabitants and founded the organization Land for Peace.

The political compact made by the ANC with the apartheid regime, which exchanged majority rule for a suspension of questions about economic justice, was intended to save untold numbers of lives. But as black majority rule nears its 20th anniversary, South Africa’s blacks are organizing themselves to right

the economic injustices of their history. As shown in *Promised Land*, under pressure from Molamu’s descendants, the government for the first time forces a white landowner, Hannes Visser, to sell property — in this case a farm and meatpacking plant that has employed many blacks. While Visser tries to rebuild his life, the forced sale of his land ignites a political uproar that pushes South Africa’s ticking time bomb closer to zero hour.

“It’s going to put me back quite a long ways; I won’t have sufficient funds to buy another farm,” says Visser. “I can’t prophesize, but it’s only in the future that we will see whether this process is a successful process or is it a wrong process, where we’re undoing wrongs in the past by repeating the wrongs in the future. . . . But when the whistle blows, irrespective of if it had been a fair win or not a fair win, the game is over. So you start a new game.”

Government official Blessing Mphela notes that the challenges for blacks continue after redistribution. He says, “As we are restoring land to our people we’ve got to recognize that [as] part of the apartheid racial dispossession of land they’ve lost their skills in using the land, because we are talking about four, five generations down the line.” Kathy Motlhabane, one of descendants of Molamu who now own the land, notes, “It’s exciting but you know what? It’s also fearsome because it’s a big challenge. I think the most difficult thing is post-settlement. When the land has been given, what next?”

“To me, the land struggle in South Africa is emblematic of how all post-colonial societies are dealing with race, reconciliation and reparations,” says director Richen. “Though there was great tension and mistrust among the Mekgareng and the Molamu descendants on the one hand, and the white landowners on the other, all sides freely shared their lives, feelings and opinions with me. I believe they did this because they share a desire to tell the story of their country in transition, reflecting a shared belief in South Africa’s future.”



# Filmmaker's Statement

My first experience working in journalism was as a teenager interning for the public television series South Africa Now. This was in the 1980s at the height of the anti-apartheid movement, and South Africa Now was one of the few outlets bringing news from the country during the State of Emergency — a time when the government had banned foreign news outlets. I remember sitting in a dark, dank room in SoHo for hours transcribing interviews and organizing tapes. I was fascinated by this unfolding freedom struggle and struck by the similarities to the U.S. black civil rights movement, which had peaked before I was born. This began my lifelong interest in South Africa.

I remember the day when Nelson Mandela was released and how practically my entire neighborhood walked to nearby Yankee Stadium to hear him speak when he subsequently came to New York. The sense of possibility and jubilation was more than palpable — we, as part of the African Diaspora, felt like we had won the freedom struggle, too. I remember in 1996 at the U.N. Conference on Women, South Africans describing what it was like to vote in the first multi-racial elections. I became heady thinking about what it must feel like to be part of building a country. It seemed like the dream of South Africa had been attained.

Then I began hearing about the harsh realities — entrenched poverty, HIV and land inequality. It was 2003 when I began reading about the land problems in the country. I was particularly interested because it had been ten years after the fall of apartheid and whites still owned most of the land. Land reform, which had been one of the pillars of the freedom movement, was stalled. I wanted to find out why. When I began to read the stories of landless black claimants who were spending years trying to prove that they were the original inhabitants and the white farm owners who were contending

with the reality of having to give up their land, I thought it would make for a revealing documentary. To me the land struggle in South Africa is emblematic of how all post-colonial societies are dealing with race, reconciliation and reparations.

I left my job at ABC News in 2004 and received a fellowship from the International Reporting Project (IRP) to travel to South Africa and begin the film. The first person I found was Roger Roman, the white farmer who had willingly given up his land as an act of reconciliation. Roger is a fascinating character who had undergone a personal transformation about his responsibility as a white person who had benefited from apartheid his entire life. It was then that I decided that I also wanted to and tell the story of the white farmers who were on the other side of this land struggle; I knew the story would not be complete without their voices.

And though there was tension and mistrust between the two sides, the Mekgareng and the Molamus and the farm owners whom they were battling shared their lives and their history with me. I believe they did this in order to tell the larger story of a country still in transition, reflecting a shared belief in South Africa's future.

— Yoruba Richen, Director/Producer

## BIO

Yoruba Richen has been working as a journalist and a documentary filmmaker in New York City for the past 10 years. Her work focuses on illuminating issues of race, space and power. In 2007, she won a Fulbright award in filmmaking and traveled to Salvador, Brazil where she began production of *Sisters of the Good Death* - a documentary uncovering the origins of the oldest African women's association in the Americas and the annual festival they hold celebrating the end of slavery. Before coming to Brazil, Yoruba was a producer for the independent television and radio program *Democracy Now* with Amy Goodman.

In 2004, she awarded an International Reporting Project fellowship and traveled to South Africa to produce and direct *Promised Land* - a documentary about race, reconciliation and land reform in post-apartheid South Africa. Portions of *PROMISED LAND* were broadcast on the PBS program *Foreign Exchange* with Fareed Zacharia and screened at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. In 2006, the film won the Fledgling Fund Award for Socially Conscious Documentaries presented at the Independent Feature Project in New York City.

From 2001-2004, Yoruba was an associate producer for Brian Ross, the Chief Investigative Correspondent at ABC News. She was also an associate producer for a number of films including the BET series *Biographies in Black* and the feature film *Brother to Brother*. Yoruba was the co-producer of *TAKE IT FROM ME*, a documentary exploring the effects of welfare reform on New York City women. The film was broadcast on the PBS series *P.O.V* in 2001. She received a B.A from Brown University and Masters in City Planning from University of California, Berkeley.



## SCREENINGS

*POV Documentary Series, PBS, 2010*

*Full Frame Documentary Festival, 2010*

*Stranger than Fiction Documentary Series, New York, 2010*

*Another World is Possible Progressive Film Festival , US Social Forum, Detroit, 2010*

*Afro-Carioca Film Festival, Rio de Janeiro, 2009*

*Harlem Stage, New York, 2009*

*Harlem Screening Series, New York, 2010*

*Philadelphia Independent Film Festival, 2010*

*POV Community Screenings, 2010*

## AWARDS

*Fledgling Fund Award for Socially Conscious Documentaries*

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## REVIEWS

*"Redistributing white-owned land is a combustible topic in South Africa. Richen succeeds in framing the issue in personal as well as historical perspectives, acknowledging that for questions of collective guilt and righting historical wrongs, there are no easy answers."*

- *Indyweek, Durham*

*"Director Yoruba Richen marvelously represents each side of the issue, daring you to select one side over the other. What she makes clear is that reform needs to happen quickly but intelligently and fairly, and with recent news of violent racial uprisings in the midst of land claim disputes and the upcoming World Cup, the film couldn't have premiered at a better time."*

--*The Isolated Movie-goer Blog*



## South Africans Struggle To Reclaim 'Promised Land'

July 7, 2010

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128362017>

NEAL CONAN, host:

When apartheid ended in South Africa in 1994, it marked the beginning of a huge period of change for blacks and whites, but while blacks today may have political power, many of the economic imbalances of the old South Africa remain, nowhere more so than on the issue of land.

A post-apartheid law allows blacks to claim land they'd been forced to leave. But more than a decade later, the process is painfully slow and fraught with mistrust, missing documents and enmity on both sides. Filmmaker Yoruba Richen went to South Africa to document two such cases. Her documentary, "Promised Land," began airing on public television stations last night as part of the "POV" series.

If you saw the movie or if you have questions for Yoruba Richen about land claims in South Africa and her film, give us a call: 800-989-8255. Email us: [talk@npr.org](mailto:talk@npr.org). You can also join the conversation on our website. That's at [npr.org](http://npr.org), click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Yoruba Richen joins us now from our bureau in New York. Nice to have you on TALK OF THE NATION.

Ms. YORUBA RICHEN (Filmmaker, "Promised Land"): Thank you, Neal. It's great to be here.

CONAN: And we know that under apartheid, whites owned 87 percent of the land. Blacks were forced to live in what were called the bantustans. Apartheid is long over though. How much has changed with regard to the land?

Ms. RICHEN: Well, unfortunately, as you said in your introduction, not all that much. When the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela first took power in '95, they promised that 30 percent of that land would be redistributed back to the black indigenous people. And that goal has yet to be met. And in fact, it's really now less than six, seven percent that's been redistributed back to the black indigenous people of South Africa.

CONAN: And the original policy hoped that the market would take care of this. There would be, as I think you'd described, willing sellers, willing buyers.

Ms. RICHEN: Exactly. And a lot of people feel that that was precisely the problem. When the African National Congress again took power after the first democratic elections, they came in on really what was a compromise. And they - their socialist ideals and ideology which is what, you know, which is how they were founded and what they believed in had to be compromised as they took to the global stage.

And one of those ways in which that manifested itself was in how they were going to do land redistribution. And so they chose this willing buyer, willing seller framework, which means that the white farmers, the white land owners have to be willing to sell the land back to the government. The government and the farmers would negotiate a price. And then that land would be given - the government would buy it back and then be given back to the black landless.

And unfortunately, that has been problematic on a number of levels. One, many farmers don't want to sell.

And so there's ways in which they can challenge the claim. And two, there's been major negotiation and white farmers saying that the government is not giving them the market price for their land, so then why should they sell it back when they're going to have to lose out in this deal.

CONAN: One of the farmers that you profile in your film is a man named Hannes Visser. He has a claim against him from a family that claimed that they had been - their ancestors had been forced off that land a couple of generations earlier. And Visser, though, rejected the idea that he had done anything wrong here.

(Soundbite of movie, "Promised Land")

Mr. HANNES VISSER (Landowner): I did nothing in the past that I should feel ashamed about. If I have to feel ashamed about what some other people has done, (unintelligible) I feel ashamed on their behalf. But this process that they say is reconciliation - isn't reconciliation something that's supposed to come from both sides?

CONAN: And you describe his process. Eventually, his land is expropriated.

Ms. RICHEN: That's correct. And I think what South Africa really asks us to do is, as we look as it goes from, you know - that it - as it evolves from a nation under an oppressive apartheid racist system into a democracy and we see it in our lifetime, what is the responsibility of the recipients of that oppressive policy in terms of racial reconciliation and in terms of building the country? And I think the film really asks that question.

And Hannes Visser is - his story is really evidence, and shows what white farmers and what the white community is being asked and - in some cases - demanded of in terms of being a part of the new South Africa.

CONAN: He did not own that land during the apartheid. He bought it afterwards. He has transfers that showed that the African - the black forbearers sold that land willingly. Yet, eventually, he's forced off.

Ms. RICHEN: Yeah, exactly. I mean, he was - his family did inherit that property, did buy that property during apartheid system - the apartheid system. But it is true that the Molamus, they, in a very rare case, have actually title deeds. Abram Molamu, the grandfather, had title deed to that land, and he did receive some compensation. However, what the descendants argue is that the whole framework in which this compensation was given is - was unjust, and that he was forced - still forced off the land, and the government concludes as they - as the investigation goes on, that what - the compensation that had he received in no way compensated him from that land - for the land that he lost.

CONAN: We're talking with Yoruba Richen, whose new film is "Promised Land." It started airing last night on the "POV" documentary series on public television stations around the country. 800-989-8255, if you'd like to join the conversation. Email us: [talk@npr.org](mailto:talk@npr.org). And Mike's on the line, calling from Madison.

MIKE (Caller): Hi, Neal. Thanks for taking my call.

CONAN: Sure.

MIKE: I'd like to ask Yoruba: To what extent is the disastrous land redistribution in Zimbabwe influenced the slow pace of the redistribution process in South Africa? Because I guess in Zimbabwe, a lot of the people whom land was given back to, they don't understand large-scale agriculture. And that has led to, like, starvation being rapid in the country, which wasn't the case prior to the land being given back.



Thank you very much.

CONAN: Okay, bye. Thanks very much.

Ms. RICHEN: That's a really excellent point. A couple of things: First of all, the land policy in Zimbabwe, the - that has really sunk the nation in some ways to - you know, to the levels of desperation it faces now, is something that the South African government set out to avoid and to not repeat. And that is why they have a very clear - at least on paper - legal system and legal process to do that, for the claimants to claim a land, for the landowners to have some rights as well, and for the government to play a role in the whole process.

One thing I do want to say is that I think it's really important to remember in terms of what the farmers - the claimants who get the land back and what they do with the land, that - you know, in some ways, of course they've lost the skills and they may be very urbanized now, and so they may not know what to do with the land. But the white farmers who receive that land initially from the government had massive amounts of training and support from the government to build these big agricultural farms that, you know, in Zimbabwe's case, became the breadbasket of Africa.

So, you have to - if you're going to redistribute the land back to the landless, the government has to be supportive, majorly supportive of the new black land owners in terms of helping them use the land and for it to be productive, so, you know, so it does continue feeding the nation.

CONAN: And it's a relatively short time frame, the - Hannes Visser's farm, after it was taken over. But you show us the new black owners going to that farm and telling you on camera, well, we come out here every month or so just to check, make sure there's no vandalism.

Ms. RICHEN: That's right. And they are, unfortunately, still waiting for the government resources that they were promised. They haven't received it yet. And they - what they're doing now, actually, is leasing out the farm. So they own it, and now they're leasing out to a farmer who has equipment and who has the means to actually keep it in production. So it is being used, but they aren't the ones yet who have taken over and made it a working farm.

CONAN: Now, let's go next to Leslie, Leslie with us from Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

LESLIE (Caller): Yes, I have two questions. I watched the program last night, and was very interested. We have been to South Africa. I was wondering, in the first place, how the moneys were raised to compensate the white farmers. And my second question was whether or not any consideration had been given to taxing the white farmers rather than putting them off the land. And I'll take my answer off the air.

CONAN: Okay, Leslie. Thanks very much.

Ms. RICHEN: Yes. Well, the way that the government raises the money to compensate the farmers is through a tax system. I mean, it's a government - that's the way all governments are - have money, is through taxes. So that is how they have the money to compensate the farmers. But as I mentioned, and as you saw on the film, Leslie - thank you for watching - the - there's often very acrimonious negotiations around the price.

And Visser felt, in his case, that he did not get a fair price for his business, for his, you know, for what he was losing. And, you know, he made that very clear. And he says at the end, he doesn't know what he's going to do. And, of course, we do see what happens with him at the very end of the film.

CONAN: He lands on his feet and starts a new business.

Ms. RICHEN: Exactly. So, you know, I think it asks - it challenges us to ask some questions: What is fair? You know, is market always fair? You know, I think that that - his case makes us really grapple with that, if we're going to look at what fairness is for everybody.

CONAN: And there's another farmer we hear from, a man by the name of Roger Roman. Some regard him as an outside agitator, though. He came to see the issue very differently. He said, well, after he'd read "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," he began to see the issue of land in South Africa very differently. And here he is remarking about the process there at the end of your film.

(Soundbite of movie, "Promised Land")

Mr. ROGER ROMAN (Farmer): As a nation, we're beginning to realize that the system we've got in place isn't enough. It's reform, and it's not transformation. We need transformation. We need a system that delivers real transformation, not just slight incremental change. And white South Africans are beginning to be confronted with the reality that there's a cost to be paid for change, that there is a cost that we have to pay for a peaceful South Africa.

CONAN: And when he said we have to pay for a peaceful South Africa, he meant the white farmers.

Ms. RICHEN: Exactly. Exactly. And Roger is a very unique character, I think, for - in any country, really, that he has come to his own - he came to his own personal moral - morality, grappling with what it meant to be the recipient of these racist apartheid systems and how land was fundamental to maintenance of that system.

And so Roger undertook his own personal land reform, where he gave half his land to a community, and he fought the local white government in order to do that. And this is after apartheid. And then he became a land activist. And he speaks very eloquently about - and passionately about the need for white landowners to be a part of the process and to recognize the position that they are in. And if reconciliation is really going to happen - and also not just reconciliation, but if unrest is to be avoided, that land redistribution has to happen and must happen.

CONAN: We're talking, again, with Yoruba Richen. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And let's get Mike on the line, Mike with us from Douglas, Michigan.

MIKE (Caller): Hi, I - my comment or question has to do with sort of the economics of the land transfer. And I'm wondering, you can transfer title to the land, the soil that grows the food. But also, if the land is transferred, say, to a black family that originally owned it, if they then lease that property back to farmers in the area, as you mentioned, does that not then create an economic transfer, so that perhaps both win, and a relationship - you know, assuming that most of the large scale farmers are white, that have the equipment and current knowledge -if there isn't an economic transfer that maybe benefits both sides?

Ms. RICHEN: Yeah. I think that that's exactly the case, that, you know, I think that the point is that how the government sees it is that the land, the ownership, the title, as you mentioned, needs to be transferred back to the black descendants, in this case, who originally were removed. And the ideal situation is that the land is being used.

And even if they're not the ones who are becoming farmers or operating the farm, they are still contributing to, you know, the agricultural production of society, of the society, even if they've leased it to another farmer, another white farmer, to use it. They still are getting that economic benefit, which they missed out, you know, through so many years.

CONAN: Mike, thanks very much.

MIKE: Thank you.

CONAN: By the end of your film, though, very little moorland has been transferred.

Ms. RICHEN: That's correct. And that is where we are now. I'm premiering the film in South Africa in August. And they've arranged screenings and forums around the issue to look at what has held this up, and why South Africa is in the impasse that it has been around the land issue.

And as I say it under the film, you know, today, 15 years after the end of apartheid, less than 5 or 6 percent of the land has been transferred back.

CONAN: South Africa is very largely a one-party state. Still, there's politics, sure, but the ANC tends to get elected. Is this - could this become a divisive political issue? Could it be demagogued?

Ms. RICHEN: Yeah. You know, I think that - if you look at what happened with Zimbabwe, the - at the point where Mugabe undertook this what they called fast track land issue is when the - when his party, which had been ruling for, you know, 25, 30 years, started to lose, lost in election, lost seats in the electoral house.

And there's no reason to think that the danger is there for a similar situation. I'm not saying the exact same thing could happen in South Africa. Land can be - it's so combustible, you know? It could really be used as a - in a demagoguery approach, if not, you know, if it's not in place, if the system hasn't been put in place to actually, you know, redistribute the land and meet the promises. And also, too, not just from a political party standpoint, but the landless themselves, you know, are frustrated, are angry, are - feel that there have been broken promises. So, you know, it's a very combustible situation.

CONAN: So, the ticking time bomb. Yoruba Richen, thank you very much for your time today. Good luck with the film.

Ms. RICHEN: Thank you. And I - if I can just add that you can watch the film also online on [pov.org](http://pov.org).

CONAN: We were just going to mention that, but thank you for making the announcement for me. Any time you like to come and host the show, you let me know.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Ms. RICHEN: Thank you, Neal.

CONAN: Yoruba Richen joined us from our bureau in New York. To see the film, "Promised Land," go to our website at [npr.org](http://npr.org), click on TALK OF THE NATION. We've posted link to the streaming video there.

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WNYC, New York Public Radio  
The Leonard Lopate Show  
Promised Land in South Africa  
Tuesday, July 06, 2010

Yoruba Richen, director of "Promised Land," talks about her film, an inside look at land reform and racial reconciliation in the new South Africa. It follows the Mekgareng, an impoverished tribe removed from their land 40 years ago that petitioned the government in 1998 to reclaim the land, now owned by white farmers and developers. It also looks at the firestorm ignited in 2006 when the South African government forced a white farmer to give his land back to the descendants of the black owners were removed from it in the 1940s.

"Promised Land" premieres in New York Tuesday, July 6, at 10:30 pm on PBS, as part of the 23rd season of POV.

<http://beta.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/2010/jul/06/promised-land-south-africa/>



## 'Promised Land': Property Rights

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/126153-promised-land>

May 26, 2010

By Cynthia Fuchs, PopMatters Film and TV Editor

When Roger Roman read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, he says, his life was changed. He was moved to act, after seeing what he had assumed to be history from another perspective. Disturbed by "the dispossession by white Americans of the Native Americans," Roman asserts, he was moved to take action. A white South African, he gave his land to black claimants.

As Roman recalls this story in *Promised Land*, he's still visibly moved. He invites the film crew to walk with him on the land, and to meet a black man, now 103 years old. Though he's lived here for all his life, has been called a "squatter" by 30 of Roman's fellow white, land-owning neighbors and so deemed fit for eviction. Roman goes another step, founding Land for Peace, an organization aiming to hurry along the process of reconciliation initiated by the African National Congress (ANC) in 1994. One part of that process calls for the redistribution of land: the government promised to reallocate ownership of a third of it within 10 years.

Sixteen years later, the plan has hardly been fulfilled. In part, Yoruba Richen's smart, subtly complex documentary submits, this inaction results from the impossibility of the government's compromise. Screening on 26 May at *Stranger Than Fiction* and then airing on as part of PBS' *POV* series on 6 July, the film makes deft observations concerning graceless legal mechanisms. At the same time, by looking at two particular land disputes—claims made by the 9,000-member Mekgareng community and 1,000 descendants of Abram Molamu—the film shows essential complications in the process. An opening title card notes, "At the heart of apartheid is the division of the land." But that land (like most land on the planet) is never just land: it is a measure of citizenship, a means to civil rights and self-identity; it is multiply meaningful, across generations and immediately, an emblem of economic and mythic status, political and emotional well-being.

*Promised Land* lays out initial problems in the government's compromise, namely, its assumption (or best hope) that changes might be wrought based on a "willing seller, willing buyer" model. In fact, most white owners have been unwilling and many black buyers have been ill-prepared, their legal claims unrecorded (owing to decades of oppression, abuse, and exploitation) and their claims still stuck in a kind of first gear, grinding. As claimants are righteously aggrieved and seeking redress, they are not explicitly building effective business plans. Perhaps the greatest challenge lies within the government, wavering and unable, leaving too much of the work to be done by individuals and communities in search of answers.

Those answers are inevitably hard. If Roman's response to historical injustice is to feel responsible and energized, taking his own next step to adjust that history, other white landowners—all men in this film—see their part differently. "I did nothing in the past I should feel ashamed about," says Hannes Visser. "If I have to feel ashamed about what some other people have done, I feel ashamed on their behalf. But this process that they say, 'reconciliation': isn't reconciliation something that's supposed to come from both sides?"

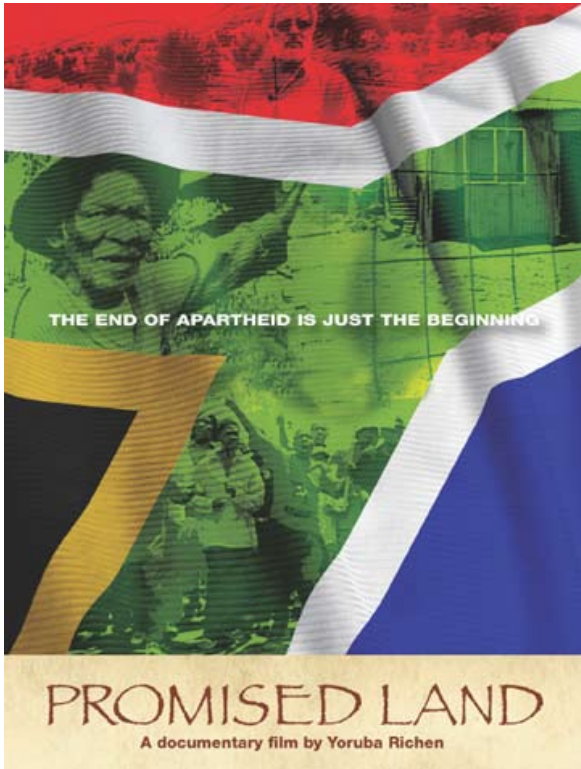
Actually, reconciliation can mean otherwise—including agreeing to absorb and work to address injustice and inequality—but Visser’s view of responsibility is very specific, focused on his own experience, not identified with a structure or system. Where Roman insists on his power to change terms, Visser assumes he need not, because his intention and his lifetime have been his own, alone. (That, and, his family has owned the land for generations, blurring any statute of limitations on who owes what to whom.) And, as Blessing Mphela, a Regional Land Claims Commissioner, puts it, “The land is the basis of power, the basis of power and wealth.”

Visser’s case involves Molamu’s family, a claim led by Kathy Motlhabane, Steve Bogatsu, and Pinky Gumede. Educated and middle-class, they’re working with lawyers to argue that Abram’s initial sale of the land was unjust, premised on systemic exploitation by white buyers. Though Visser counters by citing his longtime friendships with his black employees: “They’ve been here four generations,” he notes as the camera pans to show two men nodding and not speaking. “I was the only white boy, so it was only natural I played with the black boys around me.” Visser goes on to explain his consequent sense of largesse: “I put them in a position where they can take care of their families, then eventually they can take care of me.”

As the documentary offers points and counterpoints, its visual compositions lean inevitably to showcasing the need for sweeping, efficient, and carefully planned change, reform that might be both effective and sustained. Whether white men mean well or ill, or however their effects are understood, they are still making decisions that shape black people’s lives. As of now, none of the parties feels fairly treated. Promised Land reveals they are all moved by an unresolved correlation between pledges and property—abstract and material, timeless and immediate.

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# STILLS



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