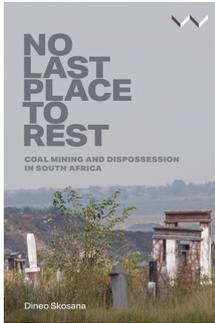




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No Last Place to Rest: Coal Mining and Dispossession in South Africa



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Coal mining, ancestral graves and land dispossession: A review of 'No Place to Rest'

Skosana examines coal mining as a contemporary form of land dispossession in South Africa, showing how its impacts extend beyond economic loss to the removal of ancestral graves and the severing of spiritual ties to the land. Drawing on empirical evidence from Tweekfontein and Somkhele, she demonstrates how mining-affected communities experience not just the material loss of land, but also the erosion of social and cultural life rooted in place. She argues that loss is "intangible and immeasurable and not simply material" (p.5), challenging dominant land reform discourses that treat land primarily as an economic asset.

One of the book's central interventions is that dispossession is not a historical event confined to colonial or apartheid eras, but an ongoing process. This position resonates with Rosa Luxemburg's¹ notion that primitive accumulation is continuous, not an event of the past. For Skosana, dispossession extends beyond the living: the dead are also displaced. Alongside works like Nkosi's², which also links the land question to the dead and the unborn, graves, she argues, are "not about the physical space, but also about the sacred and spiritual connections families establish with their ancestors at birth, over time and during burials" (p.5). When mining companies exhume graves for mining, these connections are ruptured, denying the dead a resting place. As such, the exhumation and desecration of graves for coal mining is an aspect of dispossession. Skosana adds that the dead having no place to rest is not only a spiritual question, but also a matter of belonging and citizenship. At the heart of this continuation of dispossession of African people, what Atuahene³ calls "dignity takings", is the weakness of the law. Skosana argues that the *Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act 28 of 2002*, rather than protecting communities, facilitates conditions for present-day dispossession. She attributes this to the neoliberal orientation of the state, which, in collaboration with mining companies, prioritises capital accumulation over community rights. Coal, she observes, is South Africa's paradox: it is promoted for economic growth, yet the primary beneficiaries are corporations, while working-class communities bear the costs.

Another key thread in the book is the role of traditional leaders, who, in collaboration with the state, are implicated in commodifying 'communal' land. Skosana documents cases where consultation with land rights holders is inadequate or absent. In situations in which residents refuse relocation, mining companies often make their living conditions unbearable. She notes that mining companies study the socio-economic conditions of host communities, often assuming that rural areas are defined by poverty and thus in "need" of development. This framing justifies dispossession as a benevolent intervention.

The book offers a vivid, empathetic portrayal of people's experiences in mining-affected areas. Through interviews and testimonies, Skosana captures the pain of losing not only a home but also a connection to ancestors.

While the book makes valuable contributions to scholarship on graves and dispossession, some conceptual areas remain underdeveloped. Skosana uses the term 'community' without unpacking its complexities. In her narrative, 'community' often appears homogeneous, obscuring internal differences and dynamics, including gendered impacts. The limited conceptual clarity also applies to her use of 'belonging' and 'citizenship'. Similarly, while the racialised nature of dispossession is acknowledged, it is not explored in depth. The experiences she documents are racialised, rooted in a long history of dehumanising African people. Yet this structural and historical dimension is overshadowed by the focus on legal weaknesses, which risks underplaying the broader patterns of violent racial capitalism shaping these events.

Skosana's positioning in the literature is ambitious but overstates some of her claims. In particular, she asserts that earlier scholarship on South African society did not connect dispossession with disruptions to spirituality and humanity, or that it treated dispossession as a thing of the past. She neglects a substantial body of research in South Africa and the Global South that has long made these connections, such as Saccaggi⁴ on protection of ancestral graves and Shipton⁵ on mortgaging ancestors. Works on the "new scramble for Africa"⁶ and post-apartheid farm evictions⁷ explicitly examine ongoing forms of dispossession. Engaging more deeply with these debates and with comparative cases beyond South Africa could have bolstered Skosana's intervention.

One of the book's engaging sections is its use of Sol Plaatje's reflections on Africans' loss of belonging after the 1913 *Natives Land Act*. Skosana draws a direct line between Plaatje's lament that Africans had "no place to rest" and the present-day reality of mining-induced grave relocations. This historical continuity is compelling, underscoring how the denial of a final resting place reflects enduring dispossession. However, Skosana implies a gap in scholarship since Plaatje, thus overlooking the substantial body of literature that has engaged, extended and debated his ideas over the past century. This leap from 1916 to the present flattens a rich intellectual history.

Despite these critiques, the book is a timely and important contribution. In the context of South Africa's dominant land debates, which are overwhelmingly productivist, Skosana expands the terrain of the land question in ways that are as urgent as they are overdue.

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