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Why the roots of grass go way deep

● It's almost impossible to take the side of the lawn. It sucks up water, reduces diversity, needs labour and relies on poisonous fertilisers and pesticides

Jonathan Cane

The May 13 cover of Time magazine was a drone photograph of Germiston. The aerial image shows Pretoria Road cutting through Primrose, the fire station and Primrose public swimming pool on the left; and on the right, the Makause informal settlement.

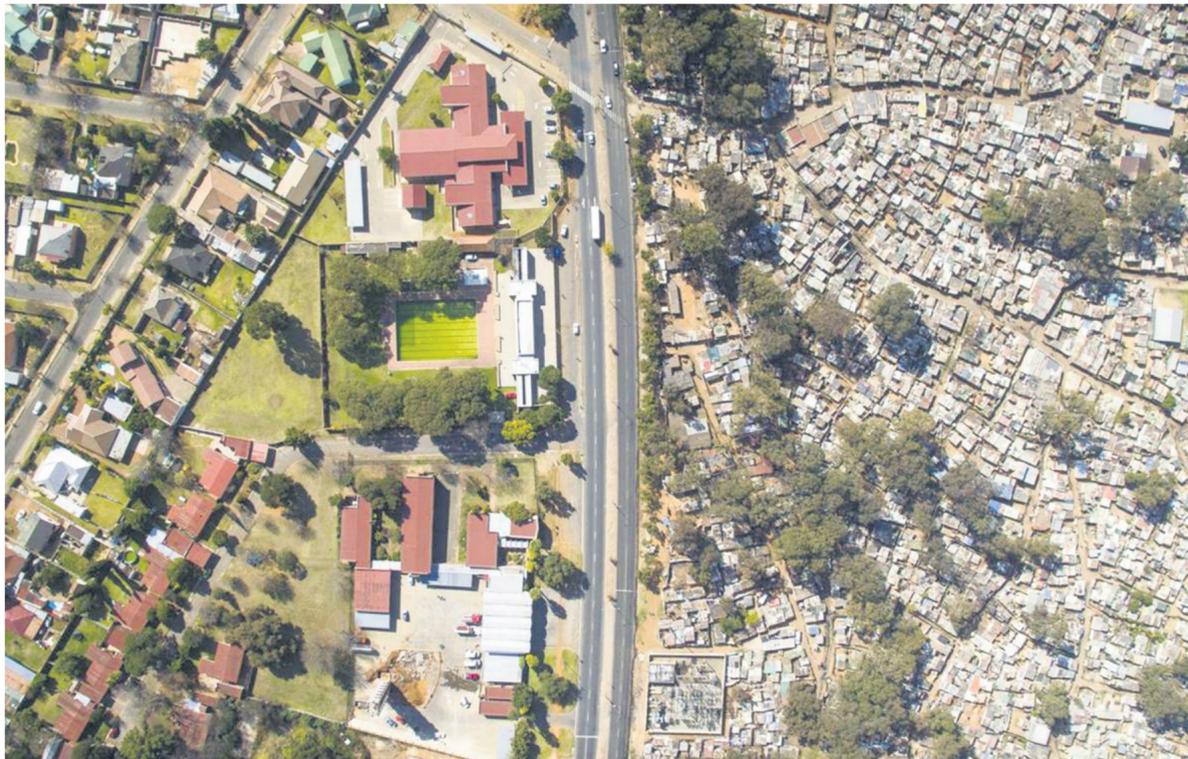
Seen from above, the grim contrast between a green, ordered and spacious suburb and a cramped, brown slum evokes Frantz Fanon's critique of a world "cut in two". The colonists' town, Fanon argues, is "strongly built ... all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about." In contrast, the place of the colonised is "a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other".

Contemporary critics have observed the same polarity in SA: "From the window of an airplane it's all too plain that apartheid has been deeply written into the SA landscape," Lisa Findley writes. "Even the smallest town appears as two distinct towns. One features a spacious grid of tree-lined streets and comfortable houses surrounded by lawns. The other, its shrivelled twin, some distance away but connected by a well-travelled road, consists of a much tighter grid of dirt roads lined with shacks. Trees are a rarity, lawns nonexistent".

Johnny Miller's photograph of Primrose/Makause, from the series Unequal Scenes, attempts to marshal the lawn, green and flat, as a visual argument, a lesson in spatial justice. He is not the first to use the lawn in this rhetorical way. Sol Plaatje, writing in 1916 about the dispossession of black South Africans in *Native Life in SA*, quotes Oliver Goldsmith's poem from 1770 *The Deserted Village*, which describes the theft of the commons during Britain's 18th-century land enclosures: "Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn / Thy sports are fled and all thy charms withdrawn / Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen / And desolation saddens all thy green".

Saddening the Green was one of the working titles for my book, now published as *Civillising Grass*. It is an attempt to understand the SA urban environment by thinking closely about the lawn. Urban ecologies – the histories of fruit tree planting, shot hole borer beetles, fynbos fires, fertiliser consumption, subsistence farming, herb gardens – are revealing ways to think about spatial injustice in the post-apartheid city. The lawn, because it is so ubiquitous and commonplace, is an especially fertile terrain for figuring out some of the more ambiguous and contradictory aspects of urban aspirations.

Recent calls to decolonise the lawn, calls for "rewilding" and "ungardening" for veld and indigenous gardening, all align with long established ecological consensus: the lawn is really very terrible. It's almost impossible to be ethically for the lawn. It sucks up scarce water, it diminishes botanical diversity, requires extensive (often poorly



Flattened city: A drone photograph of Primrose/Makause by Johnny Miller from the series 'Unequal Scenes'. The lack of attention that has been paid to the botanical exuberance of townships and informal settlements means that in images such as this drone photograph, the lawn flattens out completely any nuanced debate. / Johnny Miller



Bottled lawn: Artist Lungiswa Gqunta makes 'gardens' that help to disrupt some of the more stubborn botanical assumptions that structure our urban landscapes. / Jorg Carstensen

paid) labour and relies on (often) very poisonous fertilisers and pesticides. On top of that, it seems to perpetuate and legitimise troubling ideas about the racial demonstration of "appropriate" landownership and also regressive ideas about the relationship between humans and nonhuman nature.

None of this intellectual consensus, however, will lead to the 24 golf courses and driving ranges or the 35 bowling greens in Cape Town being redeveloped into mixed-income housing. The persistence of the lawn in public planning and its emotional defence by many ecologically minded gardeners points to a remarkably stubborn aesthetic convention.

Artist Lungiswa Gqunta has for the past few years been making surprising "gardens", which help to disrupt some of the more stubborn botanical assumptions that structure our urban landscapes. In Sicily last year, at the Manifesta Biennial, she filled a greenhouse of the ancient Palermo Botanical Garden with broken bottles

filled with petrol.

In her earlier installation, *Lawn 1*, the petrol-filled broken bottles form the ground plane of what is supposed to be a soft, gentle, homely suburban yard. The lawn in this artwork is no longer the playground for healthy children, nor the relaxing weekend leisure of happy families, nor even the labour of a hardworking garden labourer. It is a bomb – thrown into the suburb.

ITS PERSISTENCE IN PUBLIC PLANNING AND EMOTIONAL DEFENCE BY MANY GARDENERS SIGNAL A STUBBORN AESTHETIC CONVENTION

This work ought to be interpreted within the urgency of the political moment of impatience towards racial questions of the land. The questioned bottles placed onto a 242 x 122mm wooden board



evolve the shards of glass atop many boundary walls in SA. These symbols of suburban anxiety, emphatic statements of property ownership, are homemade protections which in many cases provide the endpoint of the lawn.

The wall which is so familiar and expressive of SA suburbs is disrupted by Gqunta as she either tips the wall over or flattens and widens it out into the garden floor itself. The wall here has become the lawn; that is, the boundary has become the interior; the structure that provides protection, keeps the outside out, has become instead a dangerous inside. On the other hand, the bottles and petrol must invoke the Molotov cocktail and with it calls for radical land redistribution, an accusation against the violence of white settler occupation and a challenge to the claims of ownership based on the improvement of land. Lawns are seldom the star of the show, they recede into the background and are favoured as backgrounds for the real drama

of life. Foregrounding the lawn is a political act of denaturalisation leading to a reversal of the normative figure-ground relationship.

A key figure of the lawn is the gardener. The careful analysis of his absence from the landscape image is necessary. As is the absence of almost any labour of any kind of landscape art or photography. This is, as many have pointed out before, the key politically troubling aspect of landscapes.

JH Pierneef is the icon of this kind of natural imagery evacuated of productive labour. Until recently it seemed as if the genre of landscape art was all but dead, buried with other colonial anachronisms. And yet we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in pre-1994 landscape art and a recasting of the landscape post-apartheid in politically charged ways.

Climbing auction prices for even B-grade Pierneef woodcuts and the decreased shame of admitting publicly to liking the old white man can be read alongside a recuperation of the oeuvre of painter Moses Tladi. Major shows in Joburg and Cape Town in 2017 brought together the utterly original landscapes of an artist who also worked as a full-time gardener. Tladi's painting of his home, Kensington B, with its genteel lawn from which he was evicted under forced removals, is hard to see contrasted with the paintings of his employer's Parktown garden Lokshoek.

Recent landscapes by contemporary artists such as Dineo Seshee Bopape, Zen Marie, POOL, curators Watson and Mika Conradie, Khaya Witbooi, Uriel Orlow, Themba Khumalo, Kemang Wa Lehulere and MADEYOULOOK suggest new politically and aesthetically energised ways of looking at the garden.

In their multipart exhibition

series, Izwe: plant praxis, MADEYOULOOK team Nare Mokgotho and Molemo Moiloa are putting landownership, restitution and environmental concerns at the forefront of their gardening-focused work. In their installation Ejaradini, Mokgotho and Moiloa focus on "black urban gardening" and the recuperative power of close attention to long-ignored township practices.

They argue that "there remains very little engagement with the recreational, leisure-based practice – despite the ubiquity of ornamental gardens in black urban yards. Rather black gardening is largely framed within ideas of alienated labour in the white suburban garden. Bantu Education's focus on this kind of vocational gardening or, at best, food security and urban farming".

By collecting photographic archives they show how township "gardens have historically become spaces of pleasure and family, of sustenance through growing

Binary generator: The green of Primrose is taken as incontrovertible proof of a profound opposition to the brown of Makause. / Johnny Miller



Different strokes: Painter Moses Tladi, who is also a former gardener, captures the contrast of his home in Kensington B (above) and his employer's Parktown garden, Lokshoek (below). / Wikipedia

food, of care and spiritual fulfilment". Jacob Dlamini makes this point in *Native Nostalgie*, arguing that it "behoves any history worthy of the name" to take seriously the differences and distinctions between black dwellings, which could be "as small as the type of lawn one had in one's yard, the type of furniture in each bedroom, or the kind of fencing one had around the yard – whether it was concrete slabs called 'stop nonsense' or ... wire mesh fence".

Dlamini offers a suggestive anecdote about Mr Chirwa, a resident of Katlehong who was famous for his immaculate garden, which boasted the kind of grass planted at Wimbledon, not just common kikuyu. (Dlamini's forthcoming book on race and conservation promises to be an exciting contribution to the debate about plants and police in SA.)

Writer Niq Mhlongo highlights the "serious competition" in the township to have a house with "a beautiful lawn and a well-polished stoep". In *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree*, Mhlongo draws attention to the narrative

possibilities of fruit trees and underscores, as some historians have done, the iconicity of these trees in township gardening.

How, then, are we to read Time's Primrose/Makause cover? The didactic work of the photograph is to reinforce a binary, which as we've seen has a long intellectual pedigree. The green of Primrose is taken as incontrovertible proof of a profound opposition to the brown of Makause. And yet it is worth asking what this kind of formulation obscures, what complexities, subtleties and ambiguities it hides.

The argument that apartheid was never able to fully totalise lived experience nor to fix the landscape is being more and more forcefully made. The lack of attention that has been paid to the botanical exuberance of townships and informal settlements means that in images such as Miller's drone photograph, the lawn flattens out completely any nuanced debate. It's part of what the lawn generates: binaries – green/brown, inside/outside, mine/yours, clean/dirty.

It is the kind of double-bind that many post-apartheid and postcolonial urban researchers are looking to avoid. Seeking out ambiguous, contradictory and complex spatial knots, researchers and students are examining less spectacular examples of urban injustice through which more sophisticated interventions in the city can be made. In my view, the lawn is itself internally conflicted, not always sweet and soft. Often, in fact, the lawn is a petrol bomb ready to be lit.

● Jonathan Cane is an art historian at the University of the Witwatersrand. *Civillising Grass: The Art of the Lawn on the SA Highveld* is published by Wits University Press. The project was enabled by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation's Programme in Critical Architecture and Urbanism at the Wits City Institute.

