PSYCHOANALYSIS IN PURSUIT OF TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION ON A SOUTH AFRICAN FARM: COMMENTARY ON GOBODO-MADIKIZELA

I will use this opportunity to comment on Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's paper by telling the story of a recent experience of my own, as a white South African—an experience which I think exemplifies and illustrates many of the theoretical points made in her paper. I will not make the theoretical issues explicit; rather, I will let my story speak for itself.

Solms-Delta is the name of a South African wine estate situated in the Franschhoek Valley, originally established in 1690. I became custodian of this estate when I returned to South Africa in 2001, after many years abroad. Having grown up in South Africa as a beneficiary of the apartheid system, I wanted to make a citizen-sized contribution to the reconstruction of the country, by fixing the social fabric of just this one farm. I considered it appropriate to think small, as an individual citizen can easily be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task faced by the country as a whole. However, I was aware of the symbolic significance of my historic farm. It was, after all, with the granting of such farms that the country's troubles began.

Particularly daunting to me was the fact that when one acquires a farm in South Africa, even today, it typically comes with a community of black people who live on it. Not to put too fine a point on it, the farmer inherits the people who live on his land. Solms-Delta came with seven large families, linked in complex ways with each other and with various

Professor of Neuropsychology, University of Cape Town; President, South African Psychoanalytical Association.

DOI: 10.1177/0003065115618201

extended families living on the surrounding farms. Six of the families were housed close to the manor house, in an old wine cellar, where they lived in appalling conditions (e.g., without hot water or proper sewerage), and the seventh family lived in a semi-derelict cottage nearby. All of this was, and remains, typical of contemporary South African farm life. I was keen to meet with my newly acquired tenants, as I was told they were anxious about the future of the farm and their place on it. I wanted to reassure them. I also wanted to explain as quickly as I could that although I looked like my predecessors, the farm would now be run along different lines. I had not worked out the details of how this would be done, but the farm was going to be aligned with the aspirations of the newly democratic South Africa. I set aside one hour for each of my meetings with the families, because I wanted to canvass their views as to how we might go about achieving this aim. As it happened, most of the meetings lasted barely twenty minutes. This was because we could not talk to each other. As I made my introductions and proposals, the farm people became visibly uncomfortable. Looking at each other sheepishly, or at the floor, shuffling in their seats, it was clear they wanted to get out of my house as quickly as possible. Direct questions received no responses. The atmosphere could be cut with a knife. It was evident that we could not talk to each other; we could not even look each other in the eye. It later became apparent why this was the case, but on that day in April 2001 I felt absolutely stumped.

When I relocated my young family to the farm (from London) later that year, things went from bad to worse. It seemed that the tenant workers, having by then realized that I really meant what I said, came to the conclusion that I was a fool. They started arriving late for work, knocking off early, skipping Mondays, helping themselves to things here and there. I even noticed that mature camphor trees in my forest were being chopped down (in the dead of night) for no obvious reason. I started to feel scared. Murder of farmers is not uncommon in post-apartheid South Africa. I also started to feel annoyed. Was this any way to respond to my generous overtures? I had thoughts of which I am not proud. I entertained the possibility that what the neighboring (white) farmer explained to me was true: "Your plan will never work; these people are lazy and untrustworthy; they will take what you give them with one hand and stab you in the back with the other." It seemed the social fabric of the farm was so deeply imprinted with a pattern of abuse that this was the only way things could

work. If I, the farmer, did not assume the customary role of being the abuser, then I would become the one who is abused. I felt I needed to protect myself and my family. In short, within a few months, I had become my own worst nightmare. I was thinking and feeling like a typical white South African farmer, assuming my proper place.

My psychoanalytic training then came to my rescue. In my desperation, I remembered the old quip "Don't just do something; stand there!" So for several months I did nothing, withstanding the urge to act before I understood the predicament I was in. Then I understood how to understand. When a new patient consults me, my first task is to *take a history*. Asking the patient how the symptoms began, when they appeared, in what context they started, and how they developed, is how we begin to understand what we are dealing with. This is how we eventually can make a clinical formulation. The history tells us what we are up against; what needs to be put right. Let me clarify: I did not consider myself to be the doctor and the farmworkers the patient in the figurative image I am using. Far from it. The farmer is very much a part of the pathology; in fact he is the nub of the problem. And the "professional help" I sought was not from a psychiatrist but from academic historians and archaeologists from the University of Cape Town. We, the residents of the farm (owner and workers combined) were the "patient." So we stopped farming and spent the next several months digging the place up, in a manner entirely different from what the workers were used to. Under the guidance of the archaeologists and historians, we literally uncovered the past. We already knew about our country's history in the abstract; but now we discovered it for ourselves, by excavating this one particular piece of land.

In doing so, we uncovered evidence of a very long period of precolonial occupation of the farm. Early and middle stone-age tools littered the fields of Solms-Delta, as they do every farm in this part of the world, the cradle of humankind. But far more impressive to the farmworkers, many of whom show obvious physiognomic features of San (Bushman) descent, was the discovery of a later stone-age settlement site, barely fifty meters from the front door of my house. There, six thousand years ago, the oldest ancestors of the current farmworkers had lived. They had obviously lived there for a very long time. We found, on average, 1,300 stone artifacts per cubic meter of soil! And this was not all. We found mystical rock paintings in the mountains around us, with delicate depictions of the long-gone elephants that gave this valley its original name—Olifantshoek (Elephants

Quarter)—before it became Franschhoek (French Quarter) following the arrival of Huguenots in the 1680s. We also found shards of Khoe pottery, up to two thousand years old, scattered all about. This gave the archaeologists and historians opportunity to teach us about the lifestyle and culture of the hunter-gatherers and nomadic pastoralists who had lived on our tract of land in centuries past; and also to explain what became of them and their economy, when—one day in 1690—the Dutch East India Company took it upon itself to grant this farm to a European settler, to produce the fresh meat, vegetables, grain, and wine it needed to supply its trading fleets shuttling around South Africa between Europe and the East. The indigenous Bushmen and Khoe-khoen did not recognize the concept of land ownership; how could any one person *own* land, which so obviously serves everyone? I can only imagine their incomprehension as the original inhabitants of my farm were jailed for "stock-theft," or, worse, shot on sight as vermin. Their timeless occupation of the dramatic watercourses and valley of my land ended in genocide. Today people seem to imagine that Bushmen (those few who survived) prefer to live in deserts, but those were the only parts of the land that we farmers didn't want. The Bushmen and Khoe who remained in my valley had to abandon all they loved and forget all they knew, and work for my predecessors in menial capacities. They no doubt did so with a lingering sense of shock and confusion as to what had become of them, at the catastrophe that had befallen their world. And, as I have said, their descendants are working still for the sons of the original settlers—people like me—in the same menial capacities. I did not previously know this, but indigenous origins were not considered something to be proud of among the farmworkers. To be called a *Boesman* (San) or *Hotnot* (Khoe) was an insult. These are terms of abuse. They imply that you are less than fully human. Yet, as the archaeologists—who clearly knew what they were talking about—told us about the Bushmen and Khoe-khoen who had lived here as recently as 330 years ago, and explained the tools and the meaning of their paintings and pottery, and gave us a sense of their profound wisdom, so these workers gained a pride in their origins that was previously unknown to them. I will never forget the day when one such farmworker, Benny Daniels, excitedly looked me in the eye, holding a microlithic tool in his hand, which he himself had just excavated from the settlement site, and declared: "You see, Professor, my people were here before yours!" Moments like that changed everything. His relationship to the land was transformed in a

flash; as was his relationship to me. The power dynamics between us could never be the same again. For, implicit in his statement of the obvious fact that his people were here before mine, was a stark question: "So how come you own it now, and why am I working for you?" I no longer felt I was being generous.

The second major thing we uncovered while digging up the history of Solms-Delta was the fact that it was built, literally, on the backs of slaves. I had to look at the grand whitewashed gables of my house differently once I was reminded that their beautiful lines had been molded by someone ripped from the bosom of his family, in a faraway Eastern land, forced to work here against his will for the rest of his days—without pay—and without prospect of ever returning home. The same applied to the laying of every brick in every wall of my house, including the very bedrooms in which my children slept at night. The same applied also to the planting of the majestic trees that surround my homestead, and to the construction of the gracefully proportioned outbuildings of the *werf* (the farmyard) beyond, and so on. My lovely farm was built upon not one, but at least two crimes against humanity. Slave descent, I learned in this process, was also something the farmworkers were ashamed of. Admitting to slave ancestry (despite, again, the obvious physiognomic evidence) was akin to conceding that your grandfather was a pedophile. The psychological process by which the trauma and abuse of the slaves was twisted back again upon its victims, rather than its perpetrators, to produce such deep self-hatred, was almost too painful to contemplate. But as the historians explained these things to us, so our attitudes changed, until at last it was only me—the landowner—who was left feeling ashamed.

When we finally completed our work, we established a museum at Solms-Delta to display what we had found. We took care to install at the heart of the exhibit a wall of granite plaques, with one plaque to remember by name each of the slaves who had given their lives, against their will, to the establishment and development of this farm. The enormous amount of research that went into the identification of these souls (almost two hundred of them) was made possible by the horrific fact that their personal information was recorded in meticulous detail in the same manner as the farmer's other major assets: in his will or tax assessments or mortgage bonds. Farmers borrowed money against their slaves, the value of which was determined by their age, gender, occupation, and ethnicity; that is how we recovered this identifying data.

As I absorbed the lessons of the historians, so I understood many things about my first encounter with the people living on my farm. They were descended not only from the indigenous San and Khoe but also from those slaves; from generations upon generations of living souls who had learned the hard way to give up hope, that it was dangerous to hope and believe that the future might be better than the past. Parents who loved their children would have passed such lessons down, until nobody even knew anymore why they did so. It seems inevitable that over two centuries of slavery, a culture would develop among the survivors—the farmworkers living here today—that is defined by hopelessness, despair, and fatalism. How can you ask people who have internalized generations of such treatment to envisage a better future? They rightfully do not believe they can shape their futures; the future is something that happens to them; they must suffer it and just keep their heads down, hoping not to be noticed. In such a culture it is also not difficult to understand their unenthusiastic attitude to their jobs. They are not living on my farm by choice. They did not freely decide to sell their labor to me at an agreed price. They are more or less compelled to work here, just as their ancestors were; and we, the farmers, since the abolition of apartheid, are compelled to pay them a minimum wage. There is more than a faint echo in this of the resentment felt by the Boers (Dutch for farmers) when first forced by the English colonial government, upon the abolition of slavery in 1834, to pay their laborers at all. Both parties know, still today, somewhere deep down, that neither of them entered into this arrangement by choice. And so I understood, bit by bit, why it was impossible for the farmworkers to be enthused about my plans to transform *my* farm.

Following the abolition of slavery and the introduction of the *dop* system, under which workers were paid in wine (thereby hangs another tale, which made enlightening listening for the alcoholics among the farmworkers)—as if the dispossession of the Khoisan and the dislocation of the slaves were not enough—came apartheid, a third crime against humanity. This one is still etched vividly in the memories of those on my farm who lived through it. We might be forgiven for wanting to believe that the legacy of apartheid could be miracled away by just one man, Nelson Mandela, who gave twenty-seven years of his life for our sins. But of course it couldn't. I might nevertheless (perhaps) be forgiven for wanting to believe that I could arrive on an old South African farm, as the new owner, and wave a wand that would wipe away those memories and

enable everyone to start over again, not least myself, by simply saying, "Although I look like my predecessors, the farm will now be run along different lines." Why would anyone believe that? And why should it be so easy?

The historians did not have to teach us about apartheid. What they did instead was to arrange oral history sessions, in which we told them (and each other) our own life stories, which they recorded for posterity. I will never forget the pain of listening to one farmworker after another tell those stories: stories of grinding poverty, lost childhoods, frozen feet and empty bellies, neglect and abuse of every kind, banal humiliations day after day, and the ever present envious awareness of what we white children had. All of this was remembered and recounted with quiet dignity, instead of rage. How pathetic were the piffling problems of my own privileged life by comparison. But listening to each others' stories, being listened to and being heard, definitely changed us. We came to know each other and to trust each other, and to understand something about how we feel toward each other (and about ourselves). I believe, on the basis of this experience, that white South Africans of my generation, every one of them, knows—somewhere in the recesses of their minds—that they have inherited ill-gotten gains. This makes them ashamed and guilty, and fearful; even if they do not consciously know it. What becomes of such feelings if you do not allow yourself to feel them? I have come to the conclusion that the main way we white South Africans defend ourselves against these feelings is by racism. Racism is a rationalization we have constructed in order to avoid looking at the real reasons why things are as they are between us—why the victims behave toward us as they do.

The fundamental ethic of psychoanalysis is to *face the facts* of what has really happened. We have to face up to what was done in our names, and what is still being done, and then we have to deal with those facts. That is what we did at Solms-Delta. The outcome was not to blame anybody. The outcome was to *get our minds back,* so we could think properly again. Now we could think about a new way forward, rather than be compelled forever to repeat the mistakes of the past. I believe that we South Africans, as a nation (apart from a very few, exceptional leaders), have severely restricted our ability to think clearly about our problems because we are too scared or guilty or ashamed—or too angry or humiliated or hopeless, as the case may be—to confront the facts of our past, which are still so patently shaping our present. If we do not face up to those facts we

cannot possibly find appropriate solutions in the present, because the very things we cannot think about are precisely the things that we have to put right.

Having faced the facts at Solms-Delta, with professional help, we finally had a basis for approaching the task I envisaged at the outset. The single most important thing we learned was this: the farm belongs to me today because of this history, and the farmworkers live here today and have to work for me because of this same history. The landowner is always white and the farmworkers are always black. The white family is always relatively rich and lives in the big house, and the black ones are always poor and live in the outbuildings. And so on. These are the simple facts, but now we had to face them. This obviously led to the million dollar question: what are we going to do about these facts?

Must I give the farm back?

As I contemplated this question, now actually *feeling* the guilt and *knowing* that my situation was wrong and untenable, the first answers that came to me were rationalizations. It wasn't *me* who took the land away from the Bushmen; I paid good money for it (I had to buy out the farm's creditors). The farmworkers who live here today are a mishmash of people, accumulated over hundreds of years. So who am I supposed to give the farm to; a symbolic representative of some long-gone society? Who chooses such a representative? And what good would it achieve anyway? Should we divide the farm up and give an equal little piece of it to each person living here? Then it wouldn't be a farm anymore. And in any event, you aren't allowed to do that with agricultural land, by law. It would destroy the country's food security. (Remember: this is a wine farm!) And so on . . . Working through all these rationalizations I eventually came upon a feeling that I knew was real and true: I didn't *want* to give my farm back. I wanted to keep it, and enjoy it, and pass it down to my children. That is what I came back to South Africa for. I came back for selfish reasons. My transformation plans were a sort of excuse, a way I could come home and live the privileged life that I apparently thought was my due, without having to feel bad about it, and without really having to give anything up. Even though I now knew the farm came to me, and my kind, via a process that was wrong and indefensible, still I didn't want to let go of it. I just didn't. And I wouldn't. That was what I really felt. Now I had to admit that to the farmworkers and discuss it with them. Actually, such feelings were not so difficult for them to understand. We

are few of us saints. Everybody understands self-interest. So long as you are honest about it. And especially, so long as you recognize that others have self-interest too. Problems with self-interest arise only when it is selfish interest. So long as you take cognizance of the self-interest of those around you, there is nothing wrong with looking after yourself and your own. Even the scriptures say "Love your neighbor as yourself"—not "Love your neighbor instead of yourself."

So we came up with a simple solution: I will keep my farm, but I will also use it as security for a bank loan, made out to the farmworkers, so they can buy the farm next to mine (called Deltameer, which came with another eleven farmworking families). That way we can all own land, and nobody loses anything. The ownership of the farm was put into a trust, the beneficiaries of which are the eighteen disadvantaged families on the two farms combined.

When my neighbor got wind of this plan, he thought I was mad: "Do you not realize what a risk you are taking? Think of your children!" What he did not seem to appreciate was that the risk is there already. The situation we are living in, whereby the land stays in the hands of the whites, the perpetrators of all those crimes against humanity, and whereby the blacks simply carry on working for them, is untenable. It is completely unsustainable. How can anybody *not* see that? I wasn't taking a risk, I was acknowledging a risk. And once you acknowledge risk, and debt, you can manage it. It was precisely because I was "thinking of my children" that I did so. I believe most white South Africans know these facts, unconsciously at least, and they know that the way they are living is untenable. They surely know the facts but must be too scared and guilty to face them. So they live with blinkers on, hoping that the chickens will come home to roost only after they have passed on. But what about their children? And at what psychological cost? It is no exaggeration to say that most farmers live with constant fear—in fact, paranoia—which is not a good way to live. Having acknowledged the risk, I managed it by sharing skills. (Self-interest is a good, realistic motivation for transferring skills.) That is, I went into partnership with the farmworkers. We took equal shares in the company Solms-Delta and leased our respective farms to it, and then farmed them as a combined operation. In fact, we were also joined in this by an English friend of mine (Richard Astor) who bought a third neighboring farm, Lübeck-Delta; so we now had a three-way partnership, increasing our resources and economies of scale.

How have things turned out for us? I was impressed to witness the process by which the beneficiaries of the workers' trust decided to use their new income. Not surprisingly, a good portion of the money was spent on improving their immediate quality of life, including better housing, with satellite television in every home (which may seem like a luxury, but is actually an important way to broaden the horizons of such an isolated community). In addition, the trustees employed a full-time social worker to help them decide, on an objective professional basis, how the sometimes widely different needs of the beneficiaries could best be met on an ongoing basis. The social worker also introduced programs dealing with alcohol and drug abuse, child neglect and domestic violence, and so on, addressing the social ills that afflict such farming communities. She also introduced recreational and sporting programs. By far the greatest proportion of the trust's income, however, was from the very start spent on the education of the farmworkers' children. This was an investment in the long-term future that everyone seemed willing to make. First the trust employed teachers to help the children with their homework and to provide after-school lessons and other support such as internet access. One easily forgets that the farmworkers themselves cannot help their children with their schoolwork, not only because they work such long hours but also because they themselves have had minimal formal education. After two years of trying to bridge the divide in this way, the teachers advised the trustees that the schooling provided locally was simply too weak; it could not be buttressed by after-school support. The teachers of farmworker children have no ambition for them. They know that as long as they realize that 1 + 1 = 3 they are ready for farm work. Our children would have to be enrolled in better schools. On the basis of this advice the trust paid the fees of every child whose parents wished to enrol them in a nearby fee-paying school. Almost every family took up the offer. This required the purchase of a bus and the employment of several assistant teachers ("facilitators") to work with the children in the classrooms of the new school, to help them catch up, as they were so far behind the town children. As one can imagine, this was a delicate social exercise, as the "backward" farm kids could easily have become an ostracized minority. This prospect was forestalled in various ways, not least because we had the enthusiastic support of the staff at the school, which we had almost single-handedly rendered financially viable by introducing such a large contingent of new students (more than sixty). Lastly, to improve the

school-readiness of our children even before entering this school, we opened a pre-school at Solms-Delta, with a large, well-trained staff. Today we are seeing the fruits of this multifaceted educational program, not only in the school results, but also beyond school, where our children are engaging in a wide range of tertiary educational programs and taking employment of a kind their parents could never realistically have aspired to. Also, we have a rich and active cultural life on the estate. Nothing exemplifies this better than our music. Interest in the vernacular music of the Cape flourished among the farmworkers during our archaeological digs. The cultural melting pot of the early colony gave rise to a rich tapestry of musical styles, from trance-dance and Riel to Ghoema and gospel, from Vastrap and Langarm to Cape Jazz and Boeremusiek. The explosive revival of interest in this music among the farmworkers was truly "by popular demand." Today the trust provides lessons in strings, brass, percussion, voice, and songwriting to over two hundred people, drawn not only from our own farm but from those of our neighbors and even from the townships beyond. We have four musical ensembles who have released successful CDs and are in heavy demand at local events. The biggest of these by far is our annual *Oesfees,* or harvest festival, which is attended by well over five thousand people every year—farmworkers (who are given free tickets, to thank them for the harvest) and farm owners and managers, all together, dancing and celebrating a shared rural culture. There is nothing on our region's calendar that better promotes a sense of common identity and belonging. Whereas the children and teenagers on many other farms escape their boredom and despair with alcohol, drugs, petty crime, and other antisocial activities, ours are making music together (even with their parents and grandparents) and actually becoming musicians. At the same time they are learning to value their unique culture, and are showcasing it to the world.

What we have achieved at Solms-Delta provides a beacon of hope, which is becoming a springboard for many other things too, such as the Franschhoek Valley Transformation Charter (http://ngkfranschhoek.co.za/Dokumente/Charter.pdf). We are seen as a source of information for other South African farmers who want to learn from our example. For instance, in 2013 we received (by their own initiative) a delegation of more than sixty farmers, from a very conservative farming region, who wanted to spend a day with us learning from our experience. ("We are not saying we agree with you," they said, "but we want to talk.") We have

also been actively engaged with organized agriculture, and with the government in its important task of designing new rural development and land reform policies for South Africa.

I think we can now truly say that my farm is transformed. The centuries-long cycle of poverty and dependency is broken, and there is a better future for all. Psychoanalysis played an important, if unexpected, role in this success. Of course we are not yet living in Paradise, and transformation is always a work in progress, but a transformed *attitude* has taken deep root in this place. That attitude can best be captured in a phrase that the farm children once chanted on a local community radio station: "*Ons help mekaar om ons self te help*" (We help each other to help ourselves).

Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town
Private Bag
Rondebosch, Cape Town 7700
SOUTH AFRICA
E-mail: mark.solms@uct.ac.za