

Review of *No Land! No House! No Vote! Voices from Symphony Way*

by Nathan Daniel Peld



Thirty kilometers from the rich harbor of Cape Town, the shimmering business towers of the city skyline and the Cape Town Stadium now of World Cup lore, stands a row of improvised shacks on a dusty road, the refuge of South Africa's invisible population. Their story, common to Rio de Janeiro's favelas, Paris' sans papiers, displaced Iraqis penned into desert refugee camps and the uprooted fringe dwellers of Shanghai's urban sprawl, is told in a community of voices united in defiance of their conditions as well as government negligence and succinctly captured in the banner of the Symphony Way Anti-Eviction Campaign, the title of this volume, *No Land! No House! No Vote! Voices from Symphony Way*. The tales contained within unmask the various broken promises and hypocrisies of the neoliberal commitment of the ruling political parties, the corruption of government contracts to private construction companies for rapid urban development, the cronyism of deceptive functionaries who escape unpunished, the shameless patronage of crime-ridden prefabricated slums euphemistically designated Temporary Relocation Areas (TRA), and the former victims of apartheid who are forced to persevere in the streets.

In their own words, Cape Town's forgotten describe their beginnings as backyard tenants listed on an obscure government housing waiting list to the joy of settling in a new housing development in the Delft neighborhood. However, with only a retraction of the Ward Councilor's blessing and a speedy court order, their two month tenure is invalidated, as a legion of police officers arrive one morning and forcibly remove the residents and dispose of their belongings. Faced with a choice between the indignity of reverting to homelessness or accepting the city's offer of resettlement in the cheap single room sheds, or *blikkies* (Afrikaans for tin cans), of a TRA, the residents propose their own alternative: occupying the Symphony Way road until adequate housing is restored. Armed with only community solidarity, the new roadway residents organize security patrols, water access and home maintenance. Many tell accounts of dealing with police indifference and brutality, persistent crimes such as rape and threats from drivers unnerved by a human impediment to their daily commute, yet very little about internal dissension or surrender to the combined weight of the country's political, economic and legal forces attempting to restore normalcy to dire poverty without notice.

Instead of the gleaming rise of South Africa as an emerging market among the BRICS states or the spectacle of global attention upon the 2010 World Cup, the reader finds a universal sense of betrayal, of protracted impatience with a system that allows people to linger in rented backyard plots for ten to twenty years while ostensibly marked to receive permanent housing. Even similarities to apartheid are drawn in the ends to which large masses have been removed from political and economic participation. Given

the triumph of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress in 1994, unleashing an era of optimism and promises of universal access and prosperity, the lack of substantial change and the persistence of want begs ominous questions: How can South Africa's globalized jet set continue to amass and enjoy the fruits of commerce and power while so many languish in far flung slums? And how can a supposedly rich nation reformed on the basis of equality afford only a crime infested menagerie of tin cans surrounded by police surveillance and barbed wire as a temporary, much less permanent, solution while the centers of power deliberate over chronic housing shortages?

Phrased in so many ways, the Symphony Way squatters reject both silence and displacement, resulting in their own model South African community inclusive to all ethnicities, colors and religions. The stories are told from a predominantly female perspective, commendable for subverting the typically male voice of protest movements, highlighting the poverty of single mother families and raising the additional burdens of child rearing and collection of resources such as water and food generally borne by the female adult of each household. Themes of faith, strength in family and community unity figure prominently alongside disgust, disappointment and struggle, leading to the conclusion of the absurdity of voting in a system that fails to respond to real human needs and rights, unlike the spontaneous organization of the evicted for all their lack of capital in a neoliberal world. Unequivocally, perpetuating a regime that runs on the deprivation and debasement of many cannot stand common human dignity and the will to resist.

In *No Land! No House! No Vote! Voices from Symphony Way*, the reader can be inspired by collective organization and direct action among the world's without instead of deducing that they can think for themselves, as Raj Patel's foreword derisively suggests, and be seduced by the spirit and determination displayed in the assembled texts and accompanying photos of smiling parents and laughing children rather than the bleak, impoverished surroundings in a distant land. Moreover, the continued trend of oppression, the squat has since been demolished and its inhabitants forcibly removed to the Symphony Way TRA, need not be seen as an inevitable consequence of powerlessness, for the Anti-Eviction Campaign continues to organize from within the squalid compound acts of resistance, or *Aluta Continua* (The struggle continues, adopted from the Mozambican independence movement), as they prefer. The book is distributed by Pambazuka Press, the progressive pan-African publisher, and is available at [pambazukapress.org](http://pambazukapress.org).

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