

Author's statement

*"Our belief is that land is a gift from God and from our ancestors who have not left us. We continue to see ourselves as stewards of God's resources, especially of communally owned land."*¹

Z. Nkosi, Spirituality, Land and Land reform in South Africa

E*arth Songs* explores and celebrates spiritual connections to the land in South Africa. While the ownership of "land" in this country is a highly contested issue, people have long marked and celebrated their spiritual connections to the land in ways that signify and re-imagine what it means for a variety of its inhabitants. Such meaning-making often etches the landscape, turning it into a natural canvass through which layered stories, manifest or buried, are expressed.

In quiet ways beyond the news and headlines, people of all traditions, persuasions, faiths and spiritual engagements partake in formal and informal rituals that mark the land in ways that align with their beliefs. They may go on pilgrimages, or re-ritualise places of archaeological, historical and cultural significance. Such rituals may take place in makeshift places of worship, in caves, next to rivers, or in churches, temples and mosques. In some instances, these spiritual sites are well-known, like Mount Nhlankazi, the endpoint of a 50 km pilgrimage for thousands of followers of the *Ibanda lamaNazaretha* (Shembe Church). In others, as in the case of Twee Rivieren, where a small statue at the confluence of the Swart and Liesbeek rivers in Cape Town pays homage to the brave *Goringhaiqua* Khoi who defeated the first colonisers in 1510, these sites are less known. The lesser-known sites often tell stories of contest and simultaneous spiritual significance that need to be told more volubly and heard more widely.

My project explores many of these lesser-known, lesser-recognised, off-the-beaten-track, unusual sites of spiritual practice and ritual, bringing to the surface histories that are often

muted or erased. Collectively, this work is an amalgam of spiritual connections to our land that celebrates our diversity, engages with our past and, for many, transcends the everyday. This project complements and expands on the extensive book I did on rituals and spiritual practice called *Moving Spirit* (1996–2006). It hopefully offers another way of understanding our country and reflects the essence of spirituality that lies deeply embedded in our land.

Paul Weinberg