



## “PROMISED LAND”

By Yoruba Richen

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### Filmmaker’s Statement

My first experience working in journalism was as a teenager interning for the public television series *South Africa Now*. This was in the 1980s at the height of the anti-apartheid movement, and *South Africa Now* was one of the few outlets bringing news from the country during the State of Emergency — a time when the government had banned foreign news outlets. I remember sitting in a dark, dank room in SoHo for hours transcribing interviews and organizing tapes. I was fascinated by this unfolding freedom struggle and struck by the similarities to the U.S. black civil rights movement, which had peaked before I was born. This began my lifelong interest in South Africa.

I remember the day when Nelson Mandela was released and how practically my entire neighborhood walked to nearby Yankee Stadium to hear him speak when he subsequently came to New York. The sense of possibility and jubilation was more than palpable — we, as part of the African Diaspora, felt like we had won the freedom struggle, too. I remember in 1996 at the U.N. Conference on Women, South Africans describing what it was like to vote in the first multi-racial elections. I became heady thinking about what it must feel like to be part of building a country. It seemed like the dream of South Africa had been attained.

Then I began hearing about the harsh realities — entrenched poverty, HIV and land inequality. It was 2003 when I began reading about the land problems in the country. I was particularly interested because it had been ten years after the fall of apartheid and whites still owned most of the land. Land reform, which had been one of the pillars of the freedom movement, was stalled. I wanted to find out why.

When I began to read the stories of landless black claimants who were spending years trying to prove that they were the original inhabitants and the white farm owners who were contending with the reality of having to give up their land, I thought it would make for a revealing documentary. To me the land struggle in South Africa is emblematic of how all post-colonial societies are dealing with race, reconciliation and reparations.

I left my job at ABC News in 2004 and received a fellowship from the International Reporting Project (IRP) to travel to South Africa and begin the film. The first person I found was Roger Roman, the white farmer who had willingly given up his land as an act of reconciliation. Roger is a fascinating character who had undergone a personal transformation about his responsibility as a white person who had benefited from apartheid his entire life. It was then that I decided that I also wanted to and tell the story of the white farmers who were on the other side of this land struggle; I knew the story would not be complete without their voices.

And though there was tension and mistrust between the two sides, the Mekkareng and the Molamus and the farm owners whom they were battling shared their lives and their history with me. I believe they did this in order to tell the larger story of a country still in transition, reflecting a shared belief in South Africa’s future.

— Yoruba Richen, Director/Producer