



## Whites-Only Town - Utopian Dreams Marry Racist Ideals in South Africa

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*In a white separatist town in rural South Africa, a non-white writer finds a frightening mix of racism, innocence and Utopian-style resistance to our mixing, globalized world.*

ORANIA, South Africa--People speak of it only in whispers, this white separatist town in the middle of the South African bush. Very few South Africans of any color like being reminded of places like this. To mention Orania in polite conversation is akin to bursting into the company Christmas party in Akron, Ohio, with jokes about affirmative action and the Ku Klux Klan.

I suppose that is why I decided to spend a weekend in Orania. I like bringing up topics that slow the conversation at cocktail parties; I like, too, the notion of someone like myself -- educated, professional, distinctly non-white -- showing up and forcing the town to confront my existence.

Confront me they did. Ordinarily, people of color are not allowed to stay in Orania overnight. We are not permitted to enter their churches or attend their schools. We do not order food from their cafes, and, most peculiarly in a country of cheap labor, we are not permitted to toil on their farms or do domestic work in their homes. Oranians take enormous pride in the fact that they have not succumbed to what their provincial parliamentary representative, Carel Boshoff IV, calls "one of the central traits of colonialism" -- dependence on black labor.

Oranians, who number more than 600, take enormous pride in many things that may be met with derision in our mainstream, globalized society. But increasingly, they are coming to represent the dreams and desires of various groups of malcontents all over the world. They speak of themselves as inclusive, not exclusive. "We stand in favor of a particular ethnic, cultural, and political identity," says Boshoff IV, "and we welcome anyone who shares that belief system."

That is a belief system centered around the language and history of the Afrikaner, the so-called "white African tribe" of mixed Dutch and German descent that settled in South Africa during the late 17th century. The Afrikaners lost colonizing rights for South Africa at the close of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902; deeply suspicious of the British victors and the black majority, they've appropriated the language of self-determination and cultural survival ever since. Although it was an Afrikaner government that instituted apartheid in 1948, some Afrikaners insist on likening themselves to the Jews in Israel, the Basques in Spain, the Gypsies in Europe and others of the oppressed.

Afrikaners are under siege, Oranians say. South Africa's respect for Afrikaans is crumbling in an English-language-dominated world order, affirmative action has left them without jobs, and Zimbabwe-style land grabs are surely next. "We developed Orania to show Afrikaners how they can re-win their freedom after years of black rule," says Boshoff's father Carel Boshoff III, one of Orania's founders. And they've modeled it after American utopian socialist settlements like New Harmony and Brook Farm. "We've looked at those examples very carefully because the people who settled there were like us -- people interested in making a new society with new principles," says resident Chris Jooste.

It is this mixture of the rational and the delusional, the enlightenment and the insanity, that lends Orania its particular character. For me, an American writer who moved to South Africa two years ago, it was like a trip to some faraway place and time, maybe rural Alabama in 1932, and this impression was not helped by the fact that I spent my first night in town at an empty hospital. (The guesthouse was full.) There are bats in that hospital and at night, dust and tumbleweeds tap the windows. In the morning I got up on shaky legs and, forbidden to attend the local church service, I tried to sympathize -- really tried to sympathize -- with Mr. Jooste.

Jooste is 80 years old and retired; formerly he led the South African Bureau for Racial Affairs until the demise of apartheid. He told me about his dream for his people, and as he spoke about ideal communities and self-sufficiency and brotherhood, I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up -- not from horror, but from recognition. In the last two years, every conscious young Westerner I know has talked about pulling up stakes to move somewhere remote with a select group of loved ones. The narrative is always the same: grow our own vegetables, keep dogs and horses, help raise each other's children. And so I cannot laugh at Mr. Jooste's dreams of Utopia, especially since I came to South Africa following my own idealism.

And that is why Orania is so frightening. For people who are young and bright and scared, it can be extremely seductive. I spoke to a young man, avowedly non-racist, who had just moved to Orania to work on a melon farm for about \$6 a day. The pay was low, he admitted, and he lived in a rotting wood-frame house with five other farmworkers, but: "I'm happy here," he said. "It's not like living in the big city -- here I know that nothing is going to harm me." I smiled at him. He was earnest and vulnerable, and to imagine him in Johannesburg or Cape Town was to imagine a litany of small, crushing tragedies -- stolen wallets, petty betrayals, victimization by fraudulent capitalists. In Orania, he had found New Harmony.

He smiled back at me, gave me a melon to take home.

And home I went, back to the big city, back to the financial strain and alienation and oblique anxiety of modern life. I am no longer looking for my Utopia, but not because virtually every American settlement that claimed to be a "new society" failed after a few years. I've stopped looking because the South African version shows me what shape these dreams can take. Orania is 12 years old and growing faster than ever.

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