

# SOCIAL RESTITUTION: Addressing South Africa's burning questions

How to make things right for South Africa's past history of injustice? These are some of the questions addressed in a new book by Sharlene Swartz, *Another Country: Everyday social restitution*. Launch participants of the book tell us why.

The screens have been torn down, said former Truth and Reconciliation commissioner and a founding member of the Black Sash, Mary Burton, jumping right in. Events of the past two years have shown the depth and extent of rage felt by those that have not experienced any sense of benefit from what was meant to be a new and transformed society.

'Many of us, mostly those who are white, have been protected, first under apartheid itself and then by the ongoing effects of privilege. Some would like to deny benefit while others recognise it but don't know what to do about it – this book is going to help us with that,' she said.

We are haunted by poverty and inequality and the unfair distribution of benefits and opportunities. Even those that reject the opportunity to be drawn into discussion about restitution do indeed have a longing to be a part of a reconciled South Africa. 'They know in their hearts the relief, even the joy, that this would bring.'

**Even those that reject the opportunity to be drawn into discussion about restitution do indeed have a longing to be a part of a reconciled South Africa.**

And while some have tried various ways of responding, they feel incapable of making a real difference. *Another Country* provides some answers, and provokes thought and discussion about finding more answers.'

## How do we define and address restitution?

What are those answers? Admitting his scepticism about white South Africans writing about restitution, Tshepo Madlingozi, chair of the Khulumani Support Group and a lecturer in law at the University of Pretoria, said Swartz 'is not a moral justice entrepreneur. Instead, this book is a manifesto that grapples with the issues. The author does not claim that she's seen the light and is therefore bringing enlightenment for all of us. The book holds up a mirror to white South Africans about unearned privilege and amnesia about the past, but also says to black people, talk to white people about anger... you are allowed to be angry and you must tell us what we should do'.

The legacy of apartheid is still very much present, Madlingozi said. Decolonisation has failed and this is what students are saying. In the book, Swartz argues that restitution should be bi-focal; both backward looking and forward looking.

'It should be about becoming post-colonial, not merely punishment. It helps us to remember the past and rethink our way past our location as fractured colonial subjects. *Another Country* reminds us of

Mahmood Mamdani's very deep question: How do settlers become native? How do we build a society where we are all human beings?'

'How do white people stop being settlers? A settler is someone who comes to someone's land, dispossesses them of the land, and then refuses to take any moral responsibility. Such a person will always be a settler. I think this book is about how we get through this binary of settler-native and how we come to live in a society where all of us can become human beings.'

**Don't say sorry ... do sorry**

Paballo Chauke, a recent master's graduate from the University of Oxford and former UCT student, spoke of 'the plaster of the rainbow nation that we used to cover up our ills that has finally come off. The volcano has erupted.'

He summarised the ways in which this book contributes towards providing non-superficial solutions.

'I read the multiple stories of white and black people in *Another Country* with a sense of familiarity. I saw myself; I saw my mother, my friends and acquaintances in these accounts. This is our story. We may not all be responsible for the atrocities of this country –

apartheid, colonialism and slavery – but I believe we are all responsible for making sure that we fix it because South Africa needs to work for all of us.'

For social restitution – the key thesis of the book – to work, we need everyone to be involved, Chauke said. Even those who are screaming 'we want blood, we want war, we want to destroy everything'.

He stopped counting the times he had to comfort, unfriend (on social media), teach or shut down white people who cry and say 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry about apartheid. I'm sorry about colonialism'.

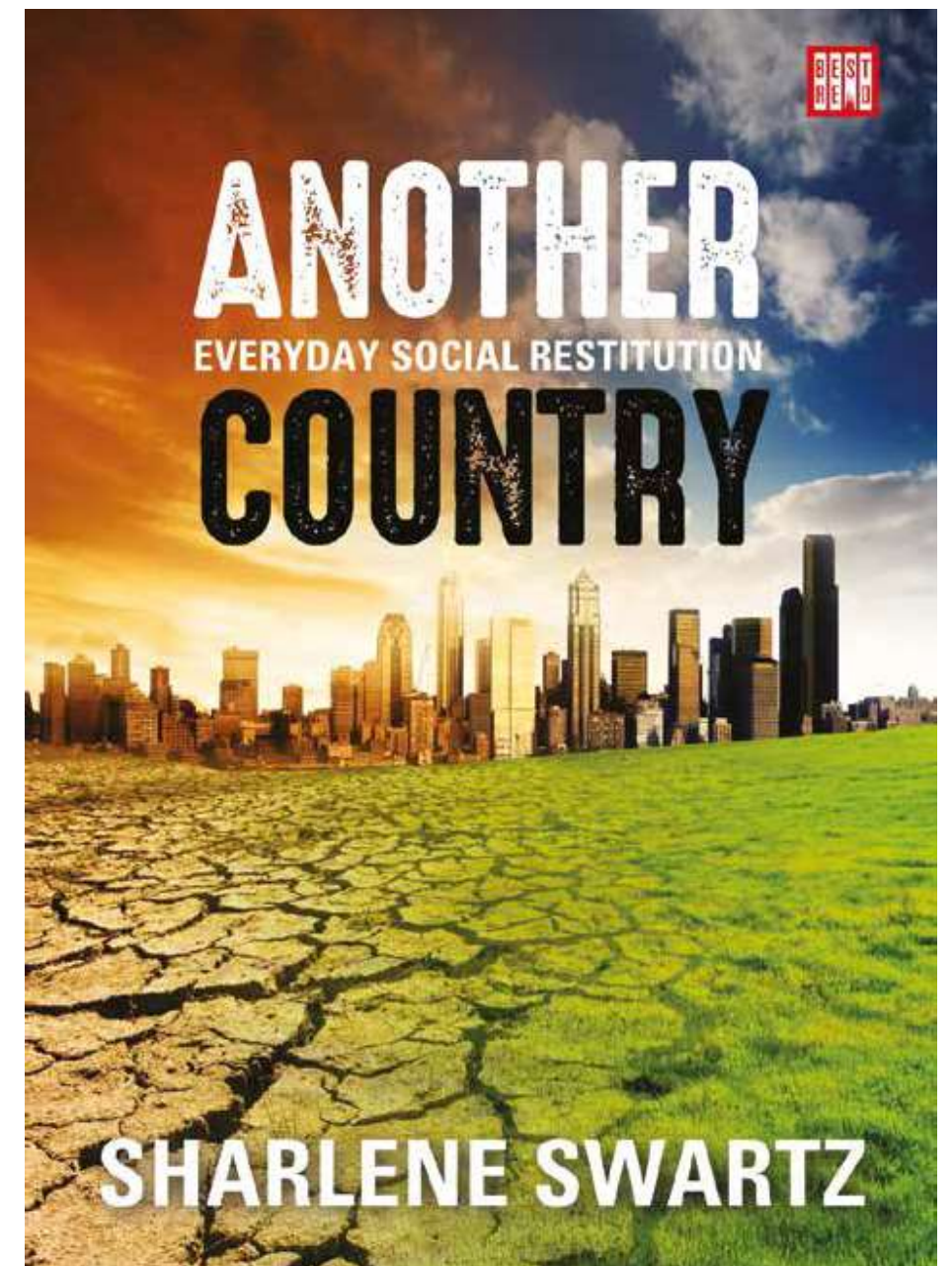
'It's okay to feel bad and be sorry but the point is *you* cry, *you* say sorry and *I* go back to my shack in Khayelitsha and *you* go back to your nice house in Rondebosch. As such, I think it is really important to *do sorry* instead of say sorry. This book is the perfect way to begin this *doing*. Included in this doing is that we all have to constantly work on our socially learned and endorsed superiority and inferiority complexes'.

**It is really important to do sorry instead of say sorry. This book is the perfect way to begin this doing.**

Last speaker Jessica Breakey spoke about how reading about white people's racism in *Another Country* is petrifying but real and that white South Africans need to be more open in admitting both complicity with the past and ongoing racism.

She drew attention to the way in which *Another Country* speaks about time: 'White people are living in a different time to black people. This idea that time is linear and that in 1994 we entered into a new period of time is completely false. This idea that time moves forward and doesn't stay in a moment of pain, oppression and privilege is false and this book deals with this clearly'.

Ending the discussion, Breakey, highlighting restitution as a quest for humanity, especially for white South Africans, said: 'White people... need



to stop feeling guilty and be more reflective about the past. Only then can we see what is happening around us as oppression, which in turn can lead us to restitution. We are in a moment of fire and everything is burning around us. I think that many people are realising their privilege and so the how and the what question is very important as we move forward'.

*Another Country: Everyday Social Restitution* by Sharlene Swartz, Publisher: Best Red, HSRC Press. A free discussion guide for the book under the same name is available for Apple and Android phones.

***Another Country* reminds us of Mahmood Mamdani's very deep question: 'How do settlers become native? How do we build a society where we are all human beings?'**