

LAND AND FORGIVENESS: HOW ONE WOMAN'S DREAM TO FREE THE LAND IS BREAKING NEW GROUND

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural, economic, and ecological challenges of the Die Bevyryde Grond Trust and communities of the larger Valley of Grace in the Breede River Basin of South Africa. It examines how 'Deep Forgiveness' inspires acts of practical love through reconciliation, restoration, and regeneration. This is the story of Aletta Venter, a South African farmer and descendent of European colonials, who created the Die Bevyryde Grond Trust, or Freed Land Trust, to prioritize land stewardship over land ownership. It chronicles Venter's pursuit of emerging technologies (Decentralized Autonomous Organizations, blockchain, tokenization, and community currencies) as the new plows and seeders to actualize her bold dream to free the land. Venter's story touches on all four cornerstones of Riane Eisler's Partnership Framework: Gender, Family/Childhood, Economics, and Language/Narrative. Eisler urges that clarity of vision is required for new ideas to be translated into new realities. Venter embodies this vision by partnering with Indigenous farmers, technologists, and social scientists, to forge a new narrative of our enduring relationship with The Land.

Keywords: Deep Forgiveness, Evolutionary Impulse, Freed Land Collaborative, Incentive Technologies, Land Stewardship, Land Trust, Post-modern Governance

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To center land and life itself, we are obliged to confront all the systems which operate in its violation inside, between, and around us. It is to restore integrity to the structures of our world and recommit to the life-affirming paradigms that can build a more dignified reality. ~ Layla K. Feghali (2024, p. 37)

Whether we believe that God separated land from the firmament or that land is the only thing that cannot fly (Winchester, 2021), we can agree that humans and land are deeply connected. This relationship has evolved over millennia, shaping both individual lives and entire civilizations. Land has profoundly influenced human spiritual, cultural, and economic expression. In turn, these human dimensions have literally altered the face of the earth through our use, or misuse, of co-evolving technologies (Eisler, 1995).

This is the story of Aletta Venter, a South African farmer and descendent of European colonials, who created the Die Bevryde Grond Trust, or Freed Land Trust, to prioritize land stewardship over land ownership. It chronicles Venter's pursuit of emerging technologies (Decentralized Autonomous Organizations, blockchain, tokenization, and community currencies) as the new plows and seeders to actualize her bold dream to free the land. See Figure 1.



Figure 1. Aletta Venter at Hoekiesdam Farm, Wolseley, South Africa. Photo by Aletta Venter.

Aletta Venter’s story touches on all four cornerstones of Riane Eisler’s Partnership Framework: Gender, Family/Childhood, Economics, and Language/Narrative (Eisler & Fry, 2019). In *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, Eisler urges that clarity of vision is required for new ideas to be translated into new realities (Eisler, 1995). Venter embodies this vision, and by partnering with Indigenous farmers, technologists, and social scientists, she is forging a new narrative in terms of our enduring relationship with The Land.

The Transition Collective

I met Aletta Venter, a biodynamic farmer in South Africa, as members of the Transition Collective (“TC”), a group of systems “thinkers-linkers-doers” convened in 2023 by social scientists Michael Haupt and Yolanda Methvin (also of South Africa) to explore post-modern governance models. The flow of complex transdisciplinary ideas deeply grounded in ancestral wisdom and fueled by a collaborative consciousness was enormously compelling. TC guiding principles held that figuring out what comes next is far more valuable than debating what’s wrong in the world, and that *transcending*, not transforming, the current system may be our best evolutionary step forward.

TC members were acutely aware of the existential challenges facing humanity; our goal was to surface and creatively combine life-enhancing technologies into a replicable idea that supported whole systems actualization. Put more simply, we wanted to leverage human ingenuity, past and present, to reclaim a better way of living on Planet Earth. In the words of TC member Zeno Goldsmith, son of Edward Goldsmith, author of *Blueprint for Survival*, “It’s about seeing the way we see, shaking our fundamental beliefs about how the world works, and then seeing beyond what we see” (Goldsmith, 2023). His passionate words call to mind Eisler’s provocative Cultural Transformation Theory on systems change:

It is fascinating that as we stand at the threshold of a massive shift in our cultural evolution, this question of how systems break down in periods of extreme

equilibrium and are replaced by different systems is being studied by scientists (Eisler, 1995, p. 82-83).

Lack of impact and fragmentation are considered key roadblocks to transformative efforts around the world (Dykstra, 2024; Eisler, 1995). Underlying these meta-dynamics, however, is a pervasive ideological misappropriation around *capital* and *governance*. While there is certainly no shortage of either in the world, these societal levers are not well distributed for planetary well-being. The Global Impact Investment Network (GIIN) estimates that only 0.4% of total global assets (\$1.164T out of \$267T USD) are directed toward impact investments – those made with the intention to generate positive social and environmental impact alongside a financial return (GIIN, 2024). Further, due to the unrestrained destructive practices of androcratic actors (particularly industry, finance, and government), the people, places, and products genuinely trying to be in service of life (Smith, 2023) are so nascent, so under-valued, so resource-poor, that they lack the *systemic purchase* required for a financial return (or *profit*) to investors, much less a fair wage in return for their own efforts.

One of my favorite words is *consilience*, the linking of knowledge and principles from different disciplines to form a comprehensive theory (Oxford Reference, 2024a). It suggests a synthesis of evidence from different areas to form a coherent and validated narrative or conclusion. Fittingly, through its collective visioning process, the TC metabolized the insights of systems pioneers over the last half century, together with the abiding regenerative beliefs and practices of Indigenous peoples, particularly in the Valley of Grace, South Africa. Certain critical themes emerged from this process that reflected Edward Goldsmith's similar work with more than 40 analysts and critics of the global economy:

- Relocalization: shifting economics back to local communities
- Decentralization: reducing centralized power of governments/corporations
- Community-based Economics: devising systems of cooperation and sharing
- Place-based Food Production: shifting agriculture toward healthier practices

- Respect for Cultural Diversity: protecting diversity of cultures and nature.
(Goldsmith, 1996)

These themes coalesced into the TC's primary objective, which was deep ecological and cultural repair through incentives that shifted society toward cooperation, altruism, reciprocity, and interbeing (Haupt, 2023a). This proposition would sit on the blockchain and be activated via three emergent social technologies:

- Land Trust Tokens
- Community Inclusion Currencies
- Bioregional Community Governance (Haupt, 2023a)

These incentive mechanisms would attract Indigenous denizens (roughly 20,000 citizens) living within the Valley of Grace area of the Breede River Basin to steward “freed” lands placed into Land Trusts by current landowners (many of colonial descent) as a way of redressing historical racial and land claim tensions, restoring soil and hydrological cycles, and offering meaningful work at a fair wage (Haupt, 2024b). It would also prioritize decentralized, participatory governance, giving authority and responsibility to those closest to the stakeholders, to the land, and to the most relevant information (Haupt, 2024c).

On a macro level, the intention was to create a transformative path toward a post-capitalist “*intrastructure*,” a portmanteau of *inter* and *infrastructure* Haupt crafted to refer to the complex, interconnected nature of the world (Haupt, 2023b). In his words, “It includes the entire *infrastructure* of a society (physical and organizational) as not just a set of static elements that make up complex societies, but as a dynamic process of interaction between these elements, underpinned by our *belief* in how these systems work” (Haupt, 2023b). Again, Haupt’s *intrastructure* model captures the essence of Eisler’s Cultural Evolution Theory (*italics mine*):

Rather than being random, fluctuations in recorded history can be seen to reflect periodic movement in the prevailing androcratic system toward the “attractor”

of a partnership model of social organization. On the *structural* level, this is reflected in periodic alterations in the way human relations are organized. On the level of *values*, it is reflected in everything from literature to social policies. (Eisler & Fry, 2019, p. 137)

Once the underlying tenets and social technologies were identified by the TC, one critical piece remained: to find or build a prototype, a living laboratory, that could model this new post-capitalist infrastructure. This community prototype would have its own place-based economy and system of governance. Once proof of concept was achieved, it would become a “bioregional node” that could be fractally scaled (replicated) in other parts of the world.

In this new ecosystem, land tokens would underwrite a community inclusion currency, which would support regenerative farming activities, all based on a revitalized origin story of planetary purpose. It was a breakthrough idea, an “evolutionary, coherent approach” to creating healthy value flows *out of* life-destroying systems and funneling them *into* life-enhancing systems (Haupt, 2023a). Eisler and Fry describe this as:

The alternative of *breakthrough* rather than breakdown: how through new ways of structuring politics, economics, science, and spirituality we can move into the new era of a partnership world. (Eisler & Fry, 2019, p. xxiii).

All we needed was a literal *place* to start. And Aletta Venter and the Hoekiesdam Farm were the perfect ecosystem.

Aletta Venter’s Family Background

Aletta Venter grew up in 1960s South Africa when Apartheid was the law of the land. Apartheid was an authoritarian system that politically, socially, and economically segregated and discriminated against people on the basis of race. In Afrikaans, the word Apartheid literally means “apartness” or “separateness” (Oxford Reference, 2024b). Although Apartheid was legally institutionalized in 1948, it is rooted in the colonization of South Africa by the Dutch in 1652 (Mandela, 1995, p. 64). Venter’s own European ancestors arrived in South Africa in the late 1600s.

Despite being raised in Apartheid's shadow, Venter felt an "inner resistance" that prevented her from absorbing its tenets. She recalled watching the televised broadcast of Nelson Mandela's release from prison and being struck by his "ability to forgive" and his invitation to "walk together into the future" by putting grievances in the past (A. Venter, personal communication, March 15, 2024). Her father, Barend Venter, was a political journalist who believed that "the original impulse for Apartheid was to allow people to develop according to their own will, but who had witnessed how this well-intentioned impulse gets corrupted by human greed, egoism, and the need to be on top" (A. Venter, personal communication, March 15, 2024). Venter was profoundly influenced by her father's outspoken critique of the Apartheid system, but in a way that repelled her from any socio-political engagement. "I was absolutely *never* going to be involved with any kind of politics, struggle, people stuff. It was too horrendous to grow up with the news shaping every facet of one's life" (A. Venter, personal communication, March 15, 2024). Much like Riane Eisler, who witnessed the horrors of Nazi fascism (Eisler, 1995, p. xiii), Venter began to question why it had to be this way.

As a student at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, Venter did not become an anti-Apartheid activist. Rather, she studied agriculture, which deepened her connection with the Earth and opened the pathway to examining the internalized, intergenerational trauma of South Africa.

It became clear to me how the Afrikaner had succumbed to the inevitable re-enactment of the genocidal trauma suffered at the hands of the British and black African tribes. This became entrenched in the sophisticated cruelty of Apartheid that, ironically, was at odds with their own sense of freedom. The book *Apartheid, Britain's Bastard Child* by Hélène Opperman Lewis (2016) made me acutely aware of intergenerational trauma across the globe. This made me realize that each individual needs a personal transformation to escape the bonds history places on us. (A. Venter, personal communication, March 15, 2024).

This sentiment resonates with Eisler and Fry’s findings on culture and neuroscience in which they observe that “the cultural environments we create affect nothing less than how our brains develop and hence how we think, feel, and act” (Eisler & Fry, 2019, p. 1). Further, Eisler’s biocultural framework differentiating between Partnership and Domination cultures reveals how cultural beliefs and social institutions such as politics, economics, and education affect and are influenced by childhood and gender relations (Eisler & Fry, 2019).

Reflecting on her father, Venter shared, “My dad instilled in me that all humans were worthy of equal attention and care. That despite our differences, we shared a common humanity to be guarded and cherished at all costs” (A. Venter, personal communication, March 15, 2024). Because he had been so outspoken about Apartheid, Barend Venter’s career as an Afrikaner journalist was episodic at best. In 1995, after years of moving the family from city to city in search of work, he retired and made a decision that changed the trajectory of Aletta’s life: he bought the 37.6-hectare (roughly 93 acres) Hoekiesdam Farm in the Breede River Basin just south of Wolseley, South Africa. For him it was a place of escape and relaxation, surrounded by vineyards and fruit farms. For Aletta it was a place to realize her dream of having a farm with livestock. In her own words, “Wolseley isn’t the Kalahari, but you have to work with what you’ve got” (Kriel, 2021).

Indeed, *the work* proved to be far more difficult than she had imagined. Attempts to restore neglected vineyards failed. Efforts at traditional livestock and pasture production faltered. Water was scarce and the land area too small to justify intensive commercial farming. As a result, Venter and her husband went overseas and worked on several dairy farms in Ireland and New Zealand from 2000 to 2002. Venter was particularly inspired by a biodynamic farm in New Zealand that prioritized animal welfare, food safety, and social and environmental responsibility, a decade before these issues became mainstream concerns (Kriel, 2021). She soon discovered that a pioneer of biodynamic farming, Jeanne Malherbe, lived an hour’s drive from Hoekiesdam Farm. For the next seven years, Malherbe became Venter’s spiritual

mother, friend, and mentor, with Venter absorbing everything about biodynamic farming from Malherbe.

From Apartheid to Deep Awakening

It was during this time that Venter encountered the ideas of scientist and philosopher Rudolf Steiner, whose work inspired the evolution of biodynamic farming. In the 1920s, Steiner gave lectures on the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical worlds. He warned of the highly mechanistic view of nature that had taken hold in the 1900s that led to the development of synthetically produced fertilizers and pesticides (Steiner, 2011). Venter recalled, “Steiner was the first to acknowledge a farm as a holistic and self-sustaining organism that thrives through biodiversity, the integration of crops and livestock and the creation of a closed loop system of fertility; the idea being that nothing should go to waste on a farm” (Kriel, 2021). Like Steiner, Eisler pointed to the “mechanistic reductionism” that had infiltrated the study of both natural and social sciences (Eisler, 1995, p. xxii).

In the early 2000s, Venter also participated in a full-body sand burial as part of a ceremony practiced by Indigenous San people of southern Africa. She recalled feeling “extreme pain in her heart chakra” during the ritual, as well as the clarity of its meaning:

I came to understand that it was the pain of Mother Earth and all her children (human and other) that was piercing me. Since then, I have dedicated my life to being a protector, guardian, caregiver, and healer of the Earth Community. (A. Venter, personal communication, March 15, 2024).

As Venter applied Steiner’s biodynamic principles, fueled by this spiritual awakening, Hoekiesdam Farm began to thrive. But even as operations stabilized, she was plagued by a nagging feeling that something was still not right. This was another turning point for her. She realized that biodynamic farming would only succeed in South Africa if it embraced the social and economic shifts described by Steiner (2011). For her, private land ownership, skewed labor relations, and debt-based capitalism not only hindered

farming, they also were systemic stumbling blocks to planetary healing. Like Steiner, and the San and Khoi peoples that had inhabited South Africa for millennia, Venter believed that land was not a commodity, but a common heritage for all generations. Land was not to be owned; it was to be cherished, used but never abused, and never sold. As Aletta often says, “I have had a long relationship with the Hoekiesdam farm, but I have never owned the land. It has rather been the other way around, with the land owning me” (in Kriel, 2021).

In *The Chalice and the Blade*, Eisler details some of Sumerian King Urukagina’s reforms dating back to circa 2300 BCE, which required that “fruit trees and food grown on temple lands were to be used for those in need, rather than solely for the priests.” Researchers now believe these reforms may have been enacted by Shagshag, King Urukagina’s *wife*, and that they reasserted the moral and ethical precepts of earlier partnership societies. According to art historian Merlin Stone, the word for these reforms was *amargi*, which in Sumerian meant both “freedom” and “return to the mother” (Eisler, 1995, p. 65). *Everything* about Venter’s life conjures *amargi*.

Eisler provides further evidence that agriculture was likely first performed by women more than 10,000 years ago in the Neolithic period:

It is more than likely that women first dropped seeds on the ground of their encampments, and began to tame young animals by feeding and caring for them as they did for their own young. Anthropologists also point to the fact that in the primarily horticultural economies of ‘developing’ tribes and nations, the cultivation of the soil is to this day primarily in the hands of women (Eisler, 1995, p. 68-69).

Agriculture is considered the first major transformation in human history because it fundamentally changed human lifestyles, social structures, and interactions with nature (Eisler, 1995, p.68; National Geographic Society, 2024). Early cultures were so entwined with the environment that their entire “belief system focused on the agricultural cycle of birth, death, and regeneration, embodied in the feminine principle, or Mother Creatrix” (Eisler, 1995, p. 48).

Evolution and the Cycles of Civilization

This notion of *cycles* is a pervasive theme or pattern in human evolution. As Haupt encourages, “We want to pay attention to patterns because patterns provide clarity when navigating a complex world” (Haupt, 2022). There have been macro evolutionary cycles, or patterns, of human progress, starting with the Agricultural Revolution. See Figure 2.

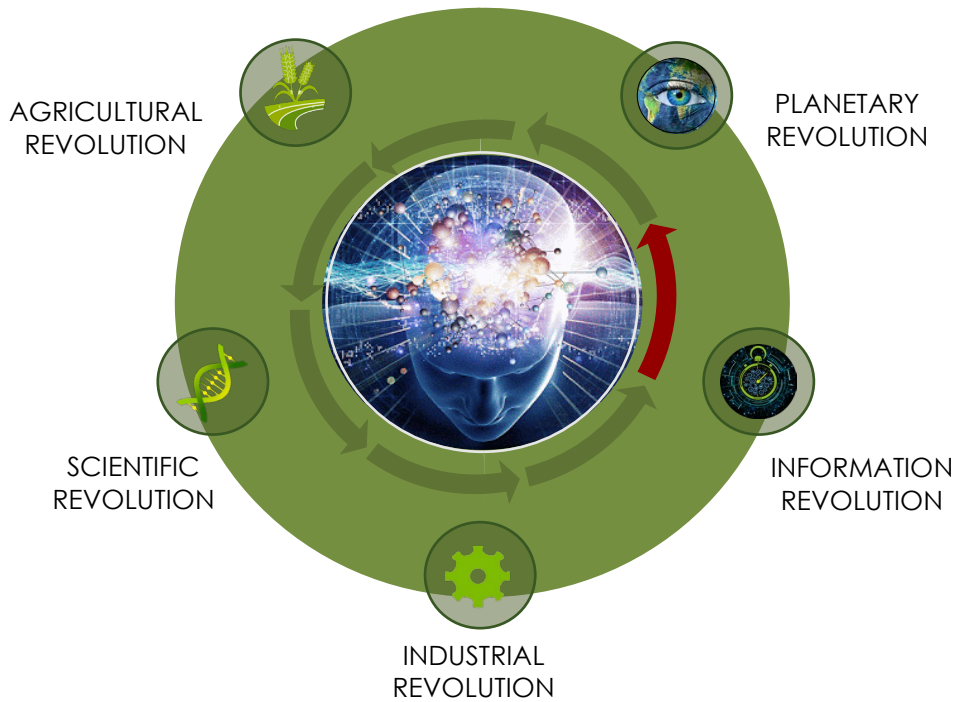


Figure 2: Human Evolutionary Cycles. Source: Eli Ingraham

In his book, *Emerging World: The Evolution of Consciousness and the Future of Humanity* (2021), Roger Briggs (also a member of the TC) takes this idea of cyclical patterns to a new level. Briggs explores both evolutionary science and consciousness, and then combines these ideas into a hybrid concept he calls “Planetary Consciousness” (Briggs, 2021, p. 3). He asserts that roughly 3 million years ago, humans diverged from all other life forms, evidenced by the appearance of manufactured stone tools, made possible by a new “mind-sharing” ability that gave rise to “culture” (Briggs, 2021, p. 121). From this point on, Briggs contends, the human story is about *cultural* evolution, the outward manifestation of the evolution of our *consciousness*.

According to Briggs, archeology points to several major transitions in human evolution, suggesting four psycho-cultural stages of development leading up to today: Mimetic, Magical, Mythical, and Material. See Figure 3.

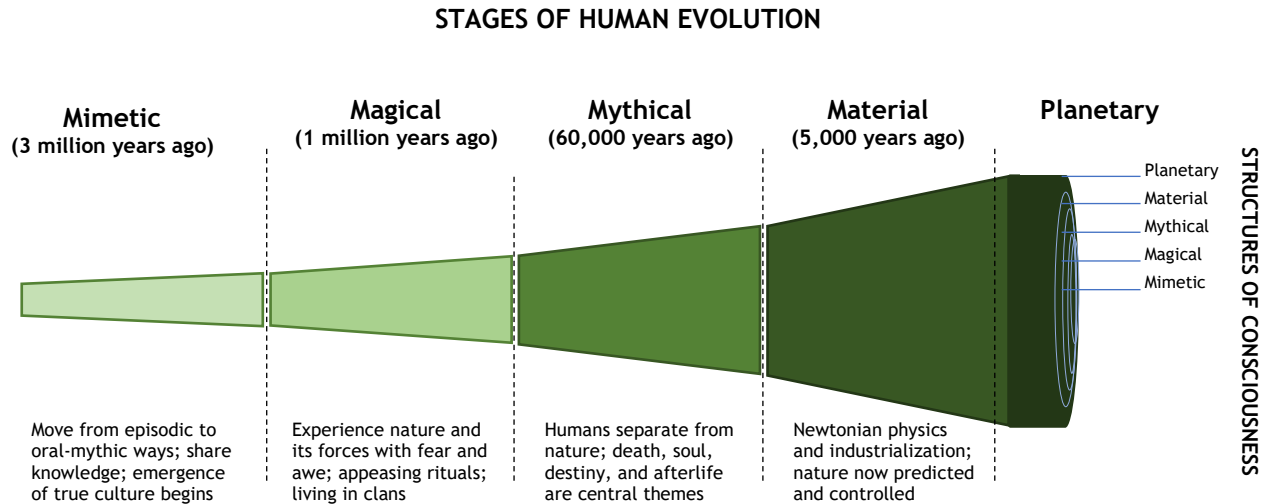


Figure 3: Macro Stages of Human Evolution and Consciousness. Source: Briggs, R. (2021). *Emerging World*. (Used with permission).

Briggs examines the last 5,000 years, when human civilization first emerged. He asserts that the transition from “a dynamic, magical world to a world of permanence and the inert objects we know as objective reality brought centralized, top-down power structures with ruling elites, minimizing the freedom of nearly everyone, especially the slaves who powered civilization” (Briggs, 2021, pp. 149-150). Briggs directly connects this Material macro-stage of human culture and consciousness to the earlier research of Eisler:

To make sense of the meta-crisis we face, [we need to] understand the Material worldview that emerged 5,000 years ago with the first civilizations. Some of the things that appeared for the first time: cities with monumental architecture, written language, social hierarchy, poverty and wealth, top-down power structures, organized warfare, empires, patriarchy, the depletion of Nature,

objectified reality, scarcity, and separation. Riane Eisler calls this the dominator culture. (Briggs, 2021, p. 161)

In *The Chalice and the Blade*, Eisler corroborates Briggs' 5,000-year timeframe as a significant demarcation in human history: "Western culture veered off into a bloody five-thousand-year dominator detour. Our mounting global problems are in large part the logical consequences of a dominator model of social organization at our level of technological development – hence *cannot* be solved within it" (Eisler, 1995, p. xxiii).

Like many collapsologists (Haupt, 2024g) who study the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, and social issues to see how these might lead to systemic collapse (Servigne, 2020), Eisler and Briggs observe that "the prevailing system is rapidly nearing its logical evolutionary end, the end of a five-thousand-year androcratic detour" (Eisler, 1995, p. 171). Eisler adds that "each time, after some period of cultural regression, the interrupted course of civilization resumed" (Eisler, 1995, p. 90).

Despite the regressive setbacks of this Material, domination-based period in human history, both Briggs and Eisler believe that humans are "not stuck in an endlessly repeating cycle of domination, war, and destruction" (Briggs, 2021, p. 169), but that we are at a "bifurcation point when the system can choose between or among more than one possible future" (Eisler, 1995, p. 135). We are at a fork in our evolutionary road where we can pursue change as usual: exploiting nature, extracting profit, and performatively responding to our meta-crisis with the same mindset that caused it; or we can recognize the "faint path" before us based on a planetary consciousness that leads to a life-enhancing "ecological civilization" (Briggs, 2021, p. 226-227).

This human crossroad echoes the research of many historians on the cycles of class-based societies, including Carroll Quigley in *The Evolution of Civilizations: An Introduction to Historical Analysis* (1961) and John Glubb in *The Fate of Empires and Search for Survival* (1977). See Figure 4.

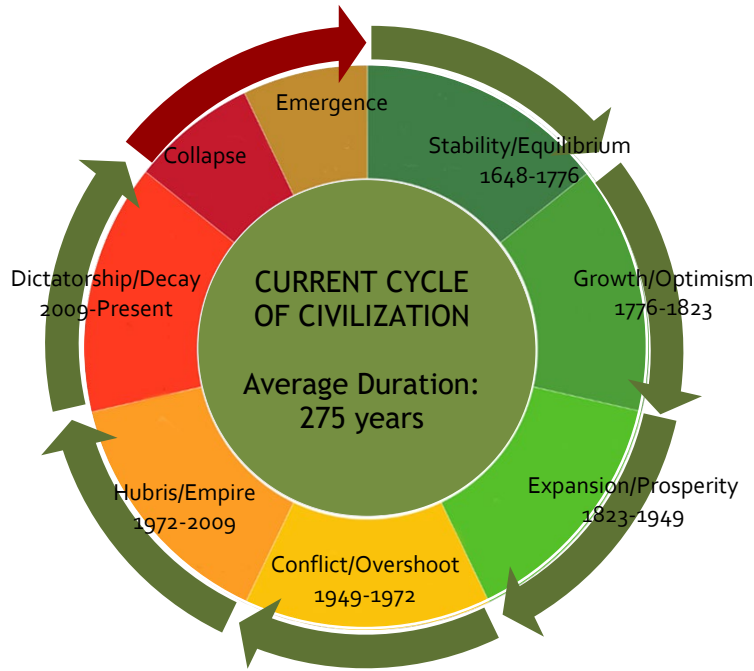


Figure 4: Cycle of Civilization or Globalization. Source: Haupt, M. (2024d). (Used with permission).

According to Quigley, these societal cycles have been repeated methodically over the past 8,000 years, with each cycle lasting between 225 and 325 years, or 275 years on average (Quigley, 1961). There have been 26 deeply researched civilizations, with more than 80 now known to have all followed the same cycle (Haupt, 2024d). Quigley describes seven distinct phases in each cycle:

- Phase 1: Stability | Equilibrium
- Phase 2: Early Growth | Optimism
- Phase 3: Expansion | Prosperity
- Phase 4: Conflict | Overshoot
- Phase 5: Hubris | Universal Empire
- Phase 6: Dictatorship | Decay
- Phase 7: Collapse and Emergence (Quigley, 1961, p. 146)

Understanding these cycles helps us navigate the complexities of collapsing ecological, economic, and social systems by revealing cognitive *patterns*. Researchers place the start of the current cycle at 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia, two treaties that ended the Thirty Years' War and brought stability to the Holy Roman Empire. This new cycle also ushered in the rise of sovereign states, Newtonian science, and two other significant events that changed world history: the publication of Scottish economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, his treatise on nations' wealth-building that informed capitalist economics; and the explosive growth of trade and commerce that launched the transatlantic slave trade (Quigley, 1961, pp. 270-278, 370).

It was during this phase of the current cycle of civilization that Aletta Venter's ancestors arrived in South Africa. It bears noting that in 2024, we are 376 years into this cycle, roughly 100 years beyond the average cycle duration.

The Faint Path of Evolutionary Impulse

The notion of *evolutionary impulse* has been explored by many scholars, biologists, philosophers, and religions including Jean Shinoda Bolen, Zach Bush, Mircea Eliade, Jeremy England, Jean Gebser, Stanislav Grof, Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Terence McKenna, Elisabet Sahtouris, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Eckhart Tolle, and Rudolf Steiner. Evolutionary impulse is the innate drive, or active organizing principle, within all living systems to adapt and evolve into higher expressions of itself (Haupt, 2024e). It is a force that guides life on Planet Earth toward a more conscious and interconnected future (Haupt, 2023c). The hallmarks of evolutionary impulse are characteristics that align with Eisler's partnership principles, including:

- **Collaboration:** Working together towards a transcendent world. It is not about competition or domination. It is about finding common ground (our humanity; our home) and working towards a shared future vision.
- **Creativity:** Finding new ways to solve challenges, even if these new ways are not incentivized by the old ways of being.

- Optimism: Setting (and holding) a clear intention about the future we desire or envision, even in the face of challenges.
- Interconnectedness: Understanding that we are all part of a larger whole and that we have a responsibility to each other, to all living creatures and to the living system, which we call Planet Earth.
- Spirituality: Finding meaning and purpose in life, beyond what existing incentive systems offer us. It is about connecting with something larger than ourselves and finding our place in the universe.

Evolutionary impulse theorists hold that throughout history, the manner in which humans coordinate their activities has been influenced by periodic bursts, often beginning with “weak signals” (Haupt, 2023b), or Briggs’ “faint path” (Briggs, 2021, p. 226) that gain traction and then ultimately propel humanity forward. Beyond biological changes, evolutionary impulse focuses on advances in human consciousness and social technologies. These evolutionary impulses manifest in human experimentation with a wide variety of social, political, and economic arrangements. While there have been many experiments that yielded sub-optimal outcomes, the general direction has tended toward greater clarity and complexity of human consciousness and social technologies after each perceived failure (Haupt, 2023c). From the perspective of Eisler’s Cultural Transformation Theory, this “revolution in consciousness” can be seen as “the transformation of androcratic (domination-based) to gylanic (partnership-based) consciousness” (Eisler 1995, p. 188).

Eisler referred to the emergence of “small fluctuations” and “punctuated equilibria” during periods of great social disruption that can lead to cultural transformation (Eisler, 1995, pp. 47, 129). In *The Chalice and the Blade*, she mentioned a number of ancient cultures (including Catal Huyuk, Hacilar, and Minoan Crete) that manifested the evolutionary impulse toward oneness with Nature, peace, equality, disdain for tyranny, and respect for law (Eisler, 1995, p. 36). She also cited larger social movements in history (French Troubadours, the Elizabethan Age, the Renaissance), the recent past

(Abolition, Suffrage, Workers Rights), and present (Ecological Consciousness, Regenerative Economics, Bioregionalism) that all align with the evolutionary impulse toward partnership principles (Eisler, 1995, pp. 142-144).

According to Briggs, we are living in a “Time Between Worlds,” caught between the Material dominator culture and the emerging new culture and consciousness:

The emergence of the planetary or unitive consciousness in humans is a 5,000-year event that signals the end of civilizational cycles as we’ve known them, and the emergence of a new kind of civilization, which we are trying to birth (Briggs, 2024b).

It is precisely at times like these that certain individuals, profoundly dissatisfied with the status quo, attune to the evolutionary impulses unfolding on the Earth and collude to amplify them into an emergent future (Haupt, 2023c). Today, these evolutionary impulses are the resounding vibrations of ancestral wisdom, suppressed by domination-based cultures, but still resonant, and the awakened insights of those within the Western paradigm that yearn for a partnership-based ecological civilization. According to Haupt, “these individuals must not only envision a world based on cooperation, life-enhancement, and abundance; they must also design pathways of transformation. Not only must they envision this world, they must figure out how to get us there” (Haupt, 2023c).

This is where we return to Aletta Venter, a singular, female farmer in South Africa who, like the *hetaerae* women of ancient Greece, was driven by a strong evolutionary impulse to make amends with Mother Nature (Eisler, 1995, p. 115).

Land and the Economics of Freedom

In 1995, Venter’s father put the Hoekiesdam Farm into a conventional family trust, with his children as trustees and their children as beneficiaries. The trust ensured generational wealth by including provisions to sell the land and distribute any profits in

the future. By 2005, Venter was solely responsible for managing the land as no other relatives were interested in living on or caring for the farm.

Her previous anthroposophical studies had inspired her to re-think ownership and land custody, so in 2006, she drafted a proposal to place the family farmlands into a National Heritage Land Trust. This plan languished until 2012, when her father wanted to sell the land, but she successfully vetoed the motion. Recognizing Venter's passion, her father gifted her the right to convert the family trust to a land trust where the property could never be sold or misused. Venter's story is hauntingly reminiscent of Eisler's observation that "the older socioeconomic system, in which the heads of the matrilineal clans held the land as trustees for the people, was thus a constant threat" (Eisler, 1995, p. 43).

Finally, in March 2013, the Master of the High Court approved Venter and two new appointees as trustees of Die Bevryde Grond Trust (DBGT), translated as the Freed Land Trust. In September 2013, the Afrikara Cooperative was granted use of the land and rights to all its benefits in lieu of paying a nominal levy per annum. Sadly, a four-year drought ultimately led to the dissolution of the Afrikara agreement with DBGT. In 2019, a biodynamic training course settled on Hoekiesdam Farm under the guidance of Venter. This time, conflict erupted among local factions, leading to another breakdown between the land and community life (Venter, 2024a).

Despite these ongoing challenges, there are 37.6 hectares (93 acres) of land in the Breede River Basin of South Africa that are free of all debt and encumbrance, including any future sale. Aletta Venter's passion and persistence successfully returned the land to itself.

In 2024, Venter began working with the TC to explore how the freed lands of Hoekiesdam Farm might become a living laboratory for the larger River Basin Resilience Initiative experimenting with land tokenomics (the use of blockchain technology to manage tangible assets). These lands would become part of a "Freed Land Collaborative" that would adapt tokenomics for *regenerative* rather than speculative

purposes. Medically speaking, regeneration is “the process of replacing or restoring damaged or missing cells, tissues, organs, and even entire body parts to full function” (National Institute of General Medical Sciences, 2024). To Venter, any genuine regenerative impulse considers all life on earth as an integrated whole organism (Venter, 2024b).

Like her mentor Rudolf Steiner, Venter sees the whole earth as a living *economic* organism, where value creation begins with nature and agriculture, primarily through the efforts of those genuinely connected to the land as working farmers, *not owners*. For her, these productive efforts, combined with human intelligence applied to the value created, form the true engine of economic wealth (Pye & Lambert, 2024). To Venter, neither land nor labor are commodities; rather, they are the real fruit-bearers of shared economic prosperity.

In her view, buying land is the equivalent of “taking money and burying it,” literally trapping capital in the ground instead of keeping it dynamically invested in human potential (Pye & Lambert, 2024). It was Steiner’s more nuanced concept of money that inspired Venter to consider cryptocurrency (blockchain tokens) as a way of incentivizing fiat money out of land-lock and into human endeavors that had greater urgency and more intrinsic value. Venter sees these democratized, disruptive technologies as the incentives to actualize her vision to free the land from enclosure, and to remove the barriers that block people from stewarding the land.

The Freed Land Collaborative (FLC) is based on three emergent incentive technologies:

- Decentralized Autonomous Organization (DAOs): Member-owned communities managed largely by decentralized cloud computing users, with voting and finances handled through a blockchain.
- Tokens/Tokenization: Digital or physical units that represent a specific value, such as a share in a project, a conservation practice, or a carbon credit. Typically, tokenization is the process of converting “rights” to an asset into a digital token on a blockchain.

- Community Inclusion Currency (CIC): Open-source blockchain-based credit programs that enable fragile communities through mobile networks to trade their own digital tokens for goods and services.

The FLC, set up as a DAO, is intended to fund a community inclusion currency (CIC) through land token sales to interested donors. Eventually, farm productivity will generate this CIC, which will be used to pay community members for ecoservice, land restoration, and other regenerative work not currently perceived as economically viable. The CIC will ultimately support a local circular economy of goods and services. By setting up a DAO, with blockchain-based currencies and contracts, the ability to differentiate those working on the ground from those making decisions is minimized. In addition, trust and transparency are ensured via immutable recorded transactions on the blockchain. See Figure 5.

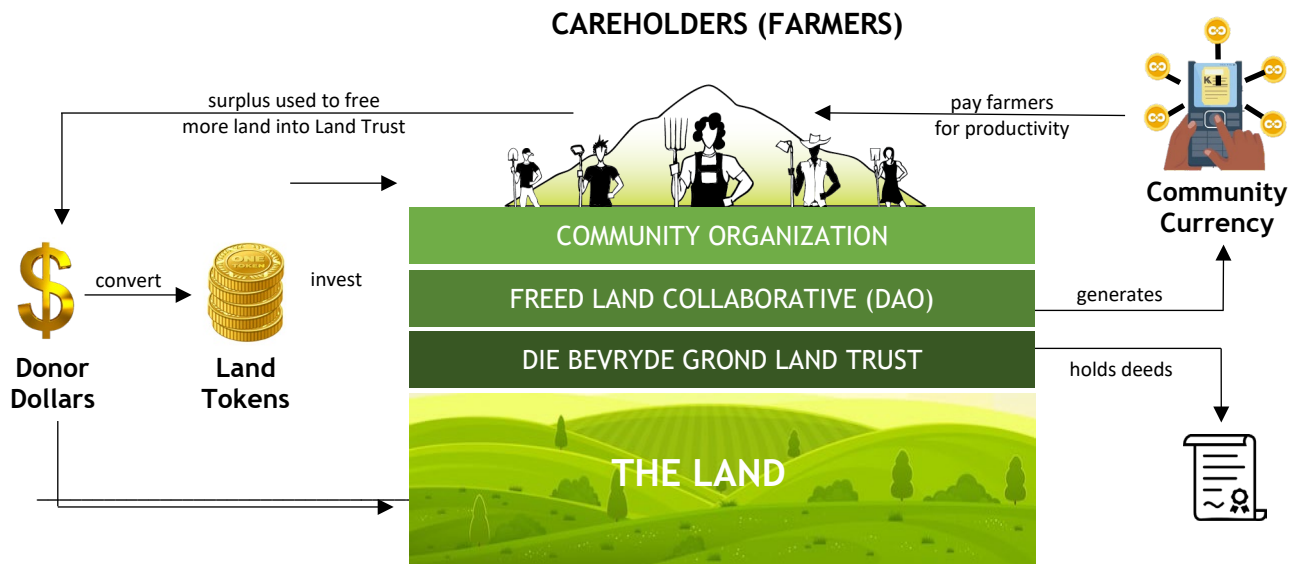


Figure 5: Structure of Liberated Land Initiative. Source: Eli Ingraham

The FLC is also based on two other emergent protocols, one designed to more accurately assess human engagement with the planet (beyond GDP), and the other to promote democratized stewardship in a peer-based governance model:

- Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI): A metric introduced in 1995 to measure the net benefit of human activity on a bioregion, as an alternative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), by aggregating ~25 variables into social, environmental, and net economic values.
- Holacratic Governance: A governance framework that emphasizes self-management and distributed decision-making. Traditional hierarchies are replaced by a network of interconnected circles that operate autonomously. Holacracy promotes transparency, encourages continuous improvement, and fosters a culture of individual empowerment.

Eisler's Social Wealth Indicators (SWI) mirror the GPI and demonstrate the substantial financial return derived from caring for people and nature, as well as the enormous costs of not doing so (this is why Venter refers to farmers or land workers as *careholders*). Unlike GDP, Eisler's SWI model goes beyond measuring impact (outputs) to include the investments (inputs) needed for a healthy and sustainable economy and society (Ghosh, 2014).

Similarly, the idea of holacratic governance is underscored in Eisler's *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* (a counterpoint to Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* that drove modern capitalism) in which she referred to *hierarchies of actualization*:

In hierarchies of actualization, accountability and respect flow both ways, and social and economic structures are set up so there is input from all levels. Leaders and managers facilitate, inspire, and empower rather than control and disempower. Economic policies and practices are designed to support our basic survival needs and our needs for community, creativity, meaning, and caring, in other words, the realization of our highest human potentials, (Eisler, 2008, p. 31).

One of the key distinctions of the FLC model is that land workers are paid using a mutual *credit*-based currency (issuance with no obligation to pay back) rather than a traditional

debt-based currency (loan to be paid back). Anthropologist David Graeber provides rich context for the significance of this decision in his analysis of another compelling 5,000-year cycle of civilization: *money*. See Figure 6.

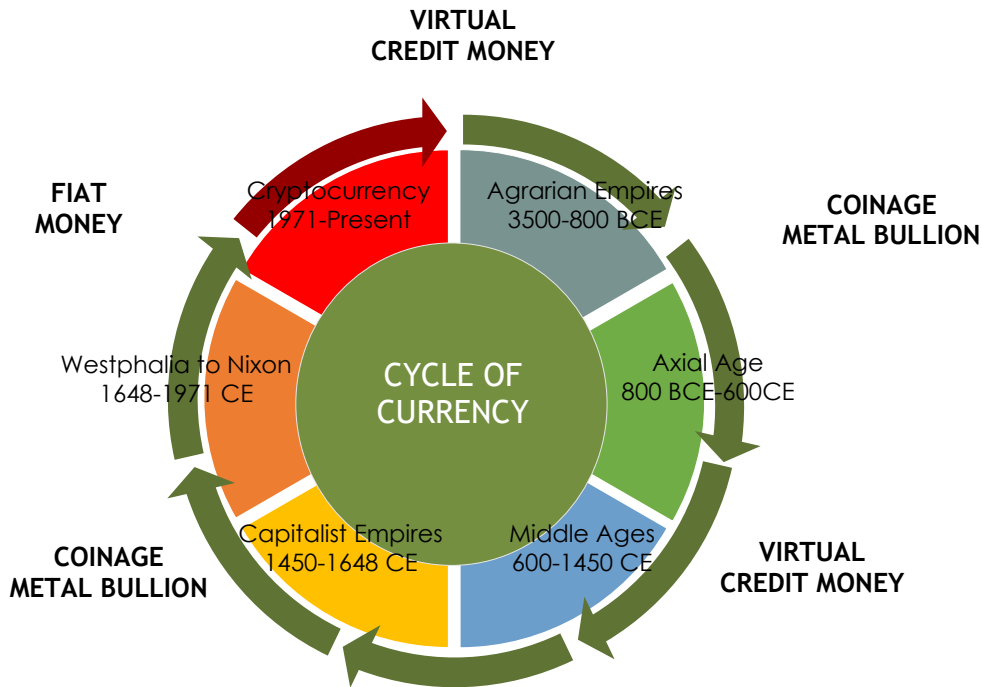


Figure 6: Cycle of Currency. Source: Haupt, M. (2024d) and Eli Ingraham. (Used with permission)

In his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2014), Graeber describes how the pendulum of currency has swung between debt-based and credit-based monetary systems throughout history:

There's nothing new about virtual money. Actually, this was the original form of money. Credit system, tabs, even expense accounts, all existed long before cash. We also find that history tends to move back and forth between periods dominated by bullion—where it's assumed that gold and silver *are* money—and periods where money is assumed to be an abstraction, a virtual unit of account. But historically, credit money comes first. (Graeber, 2014, p. 18).

Graeber reveals how the introduction of debt dehumanized everyday life by turning the simple obligation to *pay something back* into a punitive profiteering business deal.

Similar to the hallmarks of domination-based societies described by Eisler, Graeber further details money's link to violence (crime and recompense, war and slavery) and capacity to justify "outrageous and obscene" actions (Graeber, 2014, p. 5):

There is no better way to justify relations founded on violence, to make relations seem moral, than by reframing them in the language of debt. These two elements—violence and quantification—are intimately linked. In fact, it's almost impossible to find one without the other. (Graeber, 2014, p. 5).

According to Graeber, the struggle between rich and poor over the last 5,000 years has largely taken the form of conflicts between creditors and debtors over peonage, seizing of land and livestock, even selling children into labor. He recounts how popular insurrections have similarly centered on the destruction of debt records, landholding documents, and tax assessments (Graeber, 2014, p. 8). In the words of classicist Moses Finley, "In the ancient world, all revolutionary movements had a single program: cancel the debts and redistribute the land" (in Graeber, 2014, p. 8).

Land has been inextricably linked to the propensity *in human nature* to *exchange* one thing for another (beginning with bartering), but it is the idea of *debt* (as obligation plus extortion), fueled by Smith's "founding myth of economics," that turned humans' relationship *with nature* into a different kind of exchange, one based on a reductive, extractive, and exploitive marketplace (Graeber, 2014, pp. 13-14, 19, 25). Debt has been used throughout history as a tool of political control and social hierarchy. Eisler clearly links the amassing of private property with the "emergence of hierarchies and social stratification that reinforced male domination over nature and women" (Eisler, 1995, p. 45).

The current global debt crisis is not only a *financial* problem; it is also a symptom of *systemic* failure. Our expansionist monetary system, backed by political powers driven by private sector greed, has led to an unprecedented polycrisis. Graeber, like Eisler, Briggs, and many others, believes that a new societal operating system is required, one

based on principles of cooperation and mutual aid, rather than exploitation and domination of people and planet (Haupt, 2023c).

Not surprisingly, Aletta Venter has her own view of debt that could dramatically reshape, perhaps even heal, the ruptured relationship between humans and land:

As a human species, we owe Mother Earth, and we have to pay a debt that we've incurred, all of us, it doesn't matter whether we're pink, black, white, yellow, whether we're living today, or we're standing on the shoulders of generations back, we have a debt that we have to pay. When talking about forgiveness and paying debts, this act of taking land out of its current status into a trust has to be matched with deeds of practical love. Putting the land into trust, taking that oath to take care of the land and to build healthy community on the land, that is the act of practical love. I consider it a demonstration that you've done the inner work to recognize the pain and the hurt and the injury that we, as humans, have caused to the land and the earth communities connected to that land. (A. Venter, personal communication, February 19, 2024)

For Venter, getting lands deeded into secure trusts, getting fiat money out of the ground, and creating regenerative local economies are all *acts of practical love*. But it is the solemn purchase of individual tokens, in a conscious act of liberating both land and capital, that repays the personal debt to Mother Earth in Venter's mind (Pye & Lambert, 2024). It is *this* intimate transaction that captures the essence of Steiner's "spiritual capital," where deep human creativity and caring are applied to economic value creation in a ritual of redemption and forgiveness (Scharmer, 2019).

Deep Forgiveness and Re-Mything Narratives

The Hebrew scriptures describe a Year of Jubilee after every seventh Sabbath year, or every 50 years. The Jubilee was intended as an economic, cultural, environmental, and communal reset, when people were released from their debts, slaves were free to return to their communities, and lands were reclaimed by their owners.

A Jubilee is what that 50th year will become for you. You will not sow seed or reap what grew on its own from leftover grain nor gather the grapes of unpruned vines. For it is a Jubilee. It is to be holy to you. You may eat only what the land produces by itself. (Leviticus 25: 11-12, New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, 2024).

The larger purpose of the Jubilee was to prevent the accumulation of land by a wealthy few. It ensured that generational servitude would not persist, allowing families to regain their social purchase. Importantly, all debts were forgiven, which served as a check against chronic debt accumulation leading to systemic poverty and dispossession. The Jubilee also served as a sabbatical for The Land, allowing it to lie fallow for a year, reflecting a deep respect for environmental sustainability and stewardship. If economic and environmental justice, together with debt forgiveness, was a celebrated part of society in 1300 BCE, one wonders why it is so difficult to structure relief and redistribution programs today.

It turns out that community organizer Peter Block is one of those working with the concept of Jubilee as part of his Economics of Compassion Initiative in Cincinnati (Block, 2015). In his book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (2008), Block emphasizes the importance of building connected and inclusive societies through intentional conversations and the recognition of individual gifts. He encourages a contextual shift from fear and self-interest to possibility and generosity, ultimately aiming to foster vibrant communities and shape a future marked by unity, trust, and resilience (Block, 2008). This echoes Eisler's domination-to-partnership paradigm as well as her observations about the evolutionary trend of neuroscience, love, and behavior in *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future*: "We create ideas, cultures, and technologies that to a significant extent feed back to mold human relations and human development" (Eisler & Fry, 2019, p. 45).

The idea of "Deep Forgiveness" is a complex cornerstone of Aletta Venter's land trust project, particularly because it sits between the rock of love and the hard place of coloniality. Deep Forgiveness is the intentional and voluntary process by which both

perpetrators and victims acknowledge and humbly seek forgiveness for the collective trauma caused by colonialism and neoliberalism, with no expectation or judgment that forgiveness is granted (Haupt, 2024a). This forgiveness is not about forgetting or condoning the past, but about releasing the generational hold past offenses have on a human being. Once freed, the person regains an unencumbered agency to engage in the *acts of practical love* described earlier. These actions hold the promise of reversing the harm done to humans and the natural world by focusing on reconciliation, restoration, and regeneration (Haupt, 2024a).

Venter's own words on forgiveness bring us back to her appreciation of Mandela, and her concern for the future of South Africa, writ large:

Most of the energy in South Africa is not focused on healing the trauma of the past. There are small groups of people doing that work, but there's no national consciousness that, until we can fully face and understand why our history developed the way it did, we cannot free ourselves from the past. Instead, the truth and reconciliation process got fixated on an economic retribution exercise. It was not an exercise that engaged the broad spectrum of people, because people of all colors have recognized the error of their ways, but how are they being offered forgiveness? I remember on the farm thinking, I can just imagine how Mandela had to move from wanting to kill these white people to where he said I'm willing to talk to you. (A. Venter, personal communication, February 19, 2024).

But Venter sees forgiveness as an individual duty rather than a necessary exchange between two or more people. When I probed her about my queasiness around white people *forgiving themselves* for their past and present complicity, she was quick to respond:

Forgiveness is something you are called upon to do because, whether or not the other party forgives you, you still have the responsibility in yourself, because forgiveness is a spiritual act and therefore it is an entirely *personal* act. You cannot enter into a process of forgiveness and say, I'll forgive you if you forgive

me. That's a bargaining economic transaction. (A. Venter, personal communication, February 19, 2024).

It was Yolanda Methvin, one of the TC conveners from South Africa, who connected this idea of Deep Forgiveness to the importance of myths and narratives in a conversation I had with her, Aletta, and Michael Haupt. She reminded us that “the story tells itself as this deep forgiveness, as the land speaking, as the animals speaking on behalf of the land. There's a mythology, a story that we all know” (Y. Methvin, personal communication, February 19, 2024). This got me thinking about the power of cultural narratives and Eisler's claim that “consciousness is largely a function of our cultural contexts, particularly of cultural myths and theories about human nature” (Eisler & Fry, 2019, pp. 4-5). It seemed fitting that at the end of our discussion, Aletta, Yolanda, and Michael had a remarkably raw exchange on the complexities of human nature, land, and storytelling in the context of the Land Trust initiative:

Yolanda: Alongside deep forgiveness, there's got to be a component of deep trust. You can structure the new economic model, but you won't get the beneficiaries, the stewards in the Valley, to participate if they question, “Now these Afrikaners want me to believe that I can take something on my phone and walk into the village and get a block of bread? Never am I going to believe them.

Aletta: That's why it's so difficult to take care of Mother Earth because there just are not that many people who want to do it. When you do find the odd person, they end up not being able to sustain themselves because the whole economic system is geared differently. I really think it's human nature, until we can strengthen and support people that have the willingness to do that work.

Michael: But what we think is human nature is really the way people respond within the system in which we were born into, and in which we grew up in and became familiar with. Human nature in an Indigenous tribe, the original

Khoisan people, I don't know for sure, but I imagine there's very little greed, and very little need to become engaged.

Yolanda: When I think about not finding anybody who wants to do this kind of activity, it's because they've got a choice between going to work on the land and not being able to earn an income to pay the bills or going to work at Facebook and earning whatever is possible there. It's the incentive system, the system within which we plunk what we call human nature.

Aletta: When we started talking about the Land Trust idea, we wanted to see what human nature is like when you put people passionate about the land into a system where they no longer need to be concerned about how they're going to pay the bills and whatever else. But we haven't been able to get there yet. So, I think we must be a bit careful of the term human nature.

Yolanda: The story is about the liberated land, and how and why the land became liberated. We want to make sure this story is felt, not just read, so that others can increase their imaginings, right? We want to shift consciousness to be able to get this done.

Eisler claims that “our stories are the blueprints for our future” (Eisler, 2008, p. 139) and that fundamental change requires new narratives (Eisler, 2019, p. 13). People across the earth are clamoring for a better future, one where humans live in balance with one another and with nature. Aletta Venter's story is about healing the land from possession, and human beings from the burden of inherited guilt. It's also about re-mything our narratives on economics, debt, ownership, and governance by reaching deeper into the unorthodox well of human ingenuity for more equitable, life-enhancing ideas. And it is the story of one woman, who, in looking out at the horizon, saw a faint path in the liberated land, and made her way toward it.

Epilogue: Bioregionalism and River Basin Resiliency

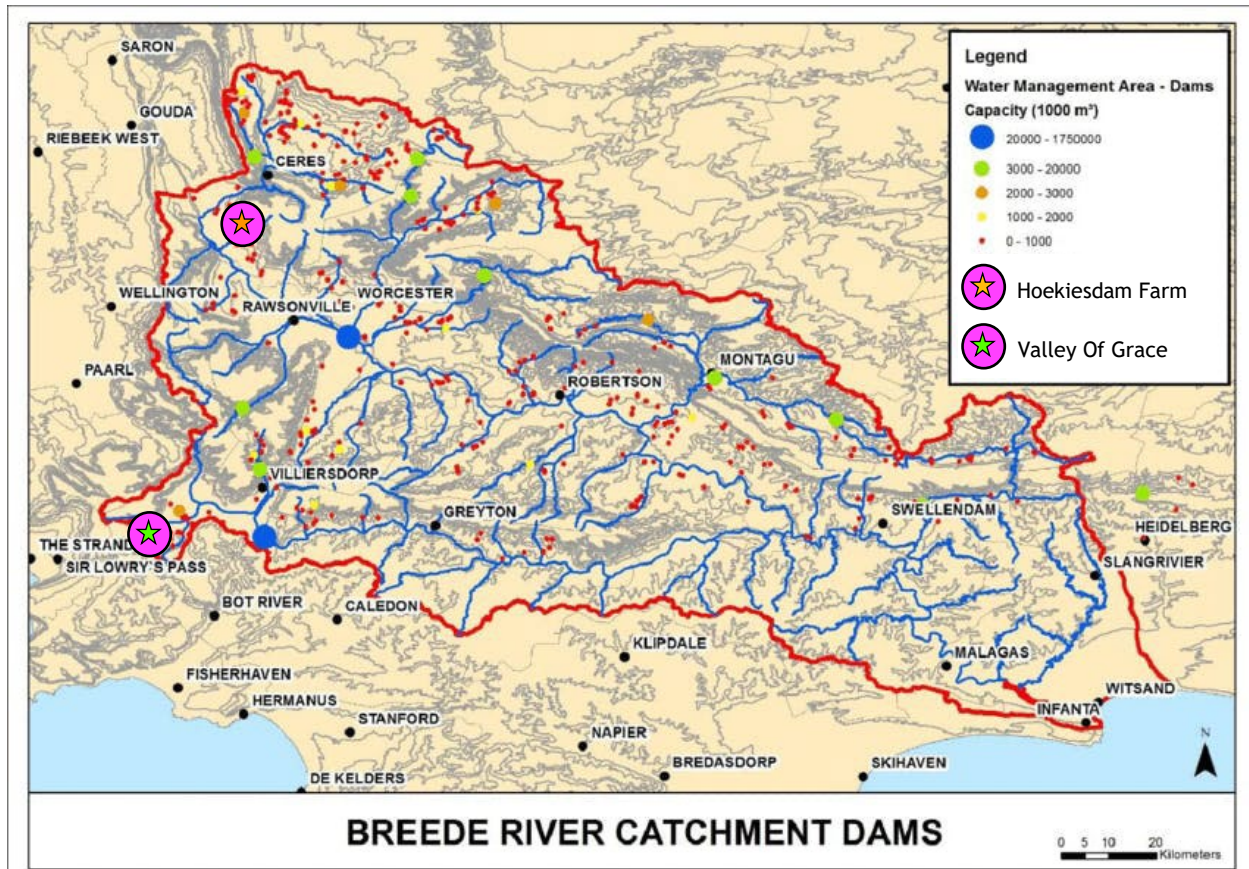


Figure 7. Breede River Catchment Map. Source: Seeliger, L., et al (2018). Creative Commons.

Aletta Venter’s Freed Land project is part of a much larger vision for bioregionalism and river basin resiliency in the Breede River Catchment of South Africa (See Figure 7), and around the globe. As mentioned earlier, the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 marked a significant turning point in world history by establishing national sovereignty as the basis for international relations. However, globalization, characterized by increased flows of goods, capital, information, and people across borders, has superseded this notion of national sovereignty. The rise of multinational corporations, global financial markets, and supranational organizations such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization has shifted power away from individual states and towards an international system, sometimes referred to as *neoliberalism* (Haupt, 2024h).

While globalization has brought economic prosperity and cultural exchange to some parts of the world, it has also led to profound ecological and societal challenges. Expansionist policies have resulted in deforestation, widespread pollution, and biodiversity loss. Globalization has also led to social inequalities through labor exploitation, increasing wealth disparity, and pervasive coloniality. These crises call for a transition toward bioregional sovereignty that prioritizes local decision-making, ecological sustainability, and community empowerment. Bioregional sovereignty acknowledges the interdependence between human societies and the natural environment, recognizing the need for regenerative practices and stewardship (Valley of Grace Wiki, 2023a).

In the words of Thomas Berry, author of the United Nations' *World Charter for Nature*:

A bioregion is a self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing and self-fulfilling community. The future of the human lies in acceptance and fulfilment of the human role in all six of these community functions. The change indicated is the change from an exploitive anthropocentrism to a participative biocentrism (in Wahl, 2017).

A river basin, also known as a drainage basin or catchment area, is the land area drained by a river and its tributaries. It is bound by a watershed, which is the geographical boundary that separates one drainage basin from another. River basins are important ecological units as they play a crucial role in collecting precipitation, supporting diverse ecosystems, and providing water resources for agriculture, industry, and human consumption. The management of river basins is also essential for flood prevention, water quality maintenance, and environmental conservation.

River basin resilience efforts *link bioregions* in a network of communities that recognize the interdependence between healthy ecosystems and human well-being. These communities are vested with stewardship of their surrounding natural resources as governance of these basins must be grounded in local knowledge, participation, and cooperation (Valley of Grace Wiki, 2023b). While bioregionalism is gaining traction around the world, progress is particularly slow in the Breede River Basin, due to lack of

investment capital, ongoing tensions between local factions, and exodus of next-gen workers to urban areas in search of more lucrative employment. See Figure 7.

We encourage readers to learn more about River Basin Resiliency initiatives in their own bioregions. Readers can also follow the ongoing efforts of Aletta Venter and many others, to make the Breede River Basin a resilient bioregion in South Africa via the [Valley of Grace Wiki](#). You will undoubtedly experience how bioregionalism is a profound “coming home to place,” something we all need and can relate to.

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