

Preface

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THIS VOLUME encompasses an extraordinary collection of historical and contemporary photographs that singly and collectively speak to the power of land, not only in the turbulent history of this country but also as a significant material and symbolic resource in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities. The curators and editors have drawn together a compelling set of images of people, land and place that spans more than 100 years in the history of this region, with a focus on the century since the passage of the notorious Natives Land Act in June 1913.

The title of this book – *Umhlaba* (Land) – is direct yet open-ended, allowing for different entry points and multiple forms of engagement with the collection's overall themes. The history reflected here is, inescapably, one of often brutal conflict and exclusion that has left the present generation with many daunting challenges in the political, economic, social and ecological spheres. However, threaded through this familiar overarching narrative in complex, even challenging ways, are other more affirming accounts of how people have related to or been present on the land. Solidarity, productivity, creativity, spirituality, a sense of place: these experiences of land and landscape that inform the larger history also find expression in the pages that follow.

The material presented here comes from many different archives. The wide range of photographers and photographic genres is, in itself, an important achievement of the curators and the team that assisted them. One of the strengths of this collection is the different genres of photography it includes, for example posed studio portraits to commemorate significant milestones in life, alongside photographs taken by activist photographers during the era of forced removals. Not only do the photographs document key events and changes over a century, they do this through different 'eyes', some intimate, others seemingly dispassionate. The collection embodies the ever-present tension

between time passing and the immediacy of images captured in the then-present. Many of the images are deeply moving in their powerful evocation of the personal significance of land in the lives of so many South Africans, past and present.

The photographic exhibition on which this edited collection is based formed part of the programme of an inter-disciplinary conference, 'Land Divided: Land and South African Society in 2013 in Comparative Perspective', held at the University of Cape Town in March 2013 to commemorate the centenary of the passage of the Natives Land Act. This Act, passed by an all-white, all-male Parliament just three years after the Union of South African was established, is widely recognised as foundational for the system of spatial, political and economic marginalisation that was progressively forced on black South Africans after 1910 and which found its apogee under the apartheid regime.

The March 2013 conference was a joint initiative of three centres of teaching and research on land and agrarian studies in the Western Cape: the Centre for Law and Society at the University of Cape Town, the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology and the LESA research programme at Stellenbosch University, and the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape. The aim of the conference was to use the occasion of the centenary of the Natives Land Act to provide a platform for critical reflection on not only the uneven manifestations of its legacy across space and time, but also contemporary and future challenges around land and the environment, not all of which can be attributed to this legacy.

The conference was, accordingly, organised around four themes: the legacy of the 1913 Natives Land Act; land reform and agrarian policy in southern Africa; the multiple meanings of land (identity, rights, belonging), and ecological challenges. It drew together some 300 delegates – academics, community leaders, policy-makers and officials – in four days of intense debate and discussion. Delegations of rural people attended and spoke at the conference, in addition to academics, public intellectuals, parliamentarians and the Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform. They spoke about their direct experiences of landlessness and their struggles for change. Many of the key challenges facing land reform emerged clearly within their testimonies, for example,

the way in which the Traditional Courts Bill of 2012 re-entrenched the ‘Bantustan’ boundaries that are a particularly potent and intractable legacy of the Land Act, the state’s reluctance to transfer restitution land to elected Communal Property Associations, and the absence of effective post-settlement support.

The photographic exhibition on which this book is based, which opened at the Iziko National Gallery in Cape Town on 25 March 2013, was a high point of the proceedings. It gave powerful visual expression to the conference themes while challenging viewers, then and in the months to follow in Cape Town and later in Johannesburg, with previously unseen archival material and the unexpected framing of issues and juxtapositioning of images. The exhibition managed, in a way that is more difficult for academic conferences, to convey its meanings directly and personally to a wide range of differently situated people. Photography can, perhaps, be a more direct and democratic medium than words, especially those deployed at academic conferences, with all their complications of language and separate disciplines and bodies of knowledge. We were proud, as members of the Conference Steering Committee, to have collaborated with the curators of the exhibition in this way.

The centenary year of the Natives Land Act presented us with a major opportunity to reflect on the significance of land, historically and in contemporary society. The legacy of this Act is still etched in South Africa’s deeply divided countryside and racialised inequalities. Yet what is also becoming increasingly apparent at the start of the third decade of political democracy in this country is that the complex intersection of social, economic and environmental issues which shape relationships to land cry out for fresh analysis and revitalised understandings. This book makes a significant contribution to this task of reflection and review.

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PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN: Sol Plaatje, far right, with other members of the South African Natives National Congress (SANNC) delegation which travelled to London in 1914 to convey their objections to the 1913 Natives Land Act to the British government. Others are, from left to right, Thomas Mapike, Reverend Walter Rubusana, Reverend John Dube and Saul Msane. Plaatje remained in England to fight for their cause until 1917. Courtesy of Silas T Molema and Solomon T Plaatje Collection, Historical Papers Research Archive, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand.