

# *Umhlaba unowned* – Can it ‘own’ us all who live in it?

*Njabulo S Ndebele*

*UMHLABA!* THE World! The word’s meaning expands and contracts. Yet it retains its essence, whatever the extent of the shape it takes.

*Umhlaba wami!* Since I cannot own the world, the word’s meaning contracts. My land!

*Umhlaba wethu!* It then expands. If a piece of land can only be ‘mine’, and yet the world belongs ‘to us all’, then a country can only belong to more than me, but fewer than ‘us all’. *Umhlaba* expands from ‘my land’ into ‘our country’, in a geographical space that borders other countries. *Ilizwe* is its more legal, less resonant form.

It is a beautiful word that can give comfort or discomfort to those whose identities are shaped by the size of the *umhlaba* they wish to be identified by and with.

From time to time, there have been people in the world who dreamed of owning *Umhlaba*, The World. They then went about taking others’ countries. Once they had done so, they took away the land from those who had long had custody of it.

Such dreams of world ownership have caused a great deal of human misery. Unwittingly for those whose countries were taken, and who were then dispossessed of their land, such dreams also came with unexpected gifts, only grudgingly recognised as such over time.

The contagion of the desire to own the world is universal. And so it was that, over time, in Africa it also spread, spawning empires. The last big empire in southern Africa had as its epicentre the city of KwaBulawayo, in a land that came to be known as Natal. Viewed as a visionary, sometimes also as a tyrant, King Shaka was the instrument of its spread. The empire ended before it could reach its optimum size. A bigger, more advanced, and more powerful empire swallowed up Shaka’s empire. The epicentre of this new empire, ruled by a queen, was the city of London, in a country known as Great Britain, thousands of miles away.

This book tells a story, through photographs, of the impact of the march of the spirit of empire through a country that came to be known as South Africa. Over time, its total impact covered the entire southern African sub-continent.

THERE ARE photographs in this book that I kept returning to. In time, I figured out why. They were photographs of large gatherings of people.

Take the photograph that has struck me the most: ‘The day’s work done, the workers return’ (p. 56). It captures several hundreds of men, plodding one after another like ants up a steep, sandy, desolate slope at Kimberley’s world-famous open-cast mine. They tilt forward as if a relentless gust of wind threatens to blow them to the ground. But there is no such wind.

They bend forward in a struggle against gravity. They have to reach the summit of the hole. Each day they descend, the hole grows deeper, and the return journey of ascent, longer. In the photograph the base of the gaping hole is out of sight. But in its absence we can almost sense its unfathomable depth. It swallows the men when the day begins; they clamber out exhausted when it ends.

What was it like there, for these men, so far away from home? Looking at the photograph, I could intuit their loneliness and longing more than a century ago. They were trapped. It was for this reason that the irony in the way the photograph is curated struck me. ‘Mineworkers return from their day’s work at Kimberley’s open-cast mine, 1880s.’ I asked myself: exactly where did they return to? Assuming that they were deemed to ‘return’ after they had ‘arrived’ earlier in the day, where had they really left from that could imply a ‘home’ or a place of refuge?

The reality seemed to be that being at the mines, or in their vicinity, the men were actually almost continuously ‘at work’. Being ‘at work’ could never be like being ‘at home’. ‘Work’ for them, in a place far from their homes, was a semi-permanent experience, whether they were physically ‘at work’ or returning from their labours at the end of the day.

At the mines they were bodies governed by the regularities of ‘time in’ and ‘time off’. In the photograph they follow one another in single file like ants down the hill into the hole for ‘time in’, and up the hill to the summit for ‘time off’. ‘Down and up’ was the framework of their captivity as labour in their hundreds of thousands.

Although they may have been formally described as workers, historically they were still very much something else. They were the conquered. In the 1880s they were among peoples recently defeated by Afrikaner and British invaders. As the defeated, they were drafted into service in the mines for a wage they were compelled to earn. Whatever its amount, the value of that wage, and the conditions under which it was earned, would have been below the dignity of the self they were familiar with, a self that

was part of a way of life formed by generations of culture, now suddenly destroyed. These men were now faceless human ants moving in labouring lines up and down mine mountains. They created those mines with their hands for the disproportionate benefit of their conquerors.

But in their defeat they had lost more than battles and wars. They lost *umhlaba* in all its dimensions: the world, the country, and the land on which they had built their homes, grown their food, and raised their children. Dispossessed of it, they were then displaced from it. *Umhlaba* was carved up into spoils of war, with concessions made to the defeated in the form of some land reserved for them. They would be hectorred into land reserves where they would have no choice but to pursue a livelihood restricted to being employed, reproducing the next generation of labour, unquestioningly abiding by the law and obediently following instructions. In those reserves they could do little more than live to reproduce themselves as labour. In this way, hundreds of thousands of men became wanderers. They travelled vast distances away from home.

Several photographs tell the story of their travel. The men, leaving their families behind, travelled in mostly small, sometimes large bands. Close-up photographs of travellers personalise a vast human tragedy. One photograph shows eight men described as ‘Young men en route to the diamond fields’ (p. 55). A close-up photograph of two men confirms the typical dress of travellers going long distances to seek employment (p. 54), ‘South African migrant workers bound for the Goldfields’. As protection against the sun, they wore a variety of hats, they had coats for warmth, and slung folded over their shoulders were blankets and mats for periodic rest and overnight sleep. For sustenance they carried containers for food and drink, and an assortment of travelling sticks.

Arriving at the place of work after days of travel on foot, the men encountered the full, cumulative impact of the journey they had just undertaken. They had traversed great distances across varied terrains, in heat and cold, under sun and cloud, over grassy plains sometimes green, sometimes brown, and hard on their feet, over equally seasonal hills, streams and rivers. Kilometres upon kilometres of *umhlaba*! They felt it under their feet when they walked, and under the full length of their bodies when they slept.

Parts of the *umhlaba* may not have been that new to some of them. As soldiers in an army, they may have been familiar with territory they had crossed before on their way to war. If they had once returned victorious, they now walked under and absorbed the burdens of defeat. If they had lost their wars, they now relived and absorbed the humiliations of those losses. This journey would be a part of their future stories.

They talked, shared stories, joked and sang. They quarrelled and made up. And when they finally arrived at their destination, they were a small, bonded, community tested by journeying. Each drew strength and security from this new-forged community to face the strangeness of their destination and face up to its uncertainties.

And just as well. What they saw was unprecedented. They saw hundreds and thousands of other men from distant parts of the sub-continent. They merged into a massive, enforced aggregation of labour with a singularity of purpose and scale such as they had never imagined before: to dig minerals out of the earth at unprecedented depths. In time, deprived of individuality, they would be known as numbers embossed on metal or plastic bangles on their wrists. Then each ant could be tracked.

From being massed in such numbers, the inevitable, if unexpected, occurred. Their identities as groups and as individuals began to melt at the edges as each of them absorbed new languages, new habits, new psychologies. They transformed into new human beings whose identities were fused with those of others.

In our photograph of ant-men plodding up the mine mountain, the men's experience of defeat must still have been fresh. Walking up and down the mine, creating gaping wounds in *umhlaba*, they were still trying to make sense of the kaleidoscopic pace of events in the 1880s. It was not long after the epic Battle of Sandlwana and others which they had won; and not long after others, such as the Battle of Ulundi, which they had lost. *Umhlaba* would never be the same again.

In January of that fateful year of 1879 the invaded successfully defended their way of life, only to lose it almost forever in April. One hundred and fifteen years later, in April 1994, they would win back the space to create legal and political instruments that would release them from captivity, reverse their dispossession, allow them to regain their dignity. More than one hundred years later, they began to claw back *umhlaba*.

AFTER DEFEAT and dispossession, the rest of life for the defeated becomes subject to the power that administers conquest. The British were easily the most powerful invader in Southern Africa. Their armed forces were the chief instrument of state for projecting British power beyond the borders of the imperial island. That power extended worldwide. And partly because of the vastness of the global *umhlaba*, the British state, and other colonising states, shared colonial rule with commercial companies who paid taxes to them.

Sometimes, in the colonial unfolding, companies went ahead of the state, until they required its protection to consolidate their gains and keep competitors at bay. At other times the state went ahead to acquire strategic territory for companies to enter, where the companies in turn would consolidate the presence of the Empire through commerce. Circumstances determined the nature of the complementarity between state and private enterprise.

There is a photograph that captures some of the resonances of this complementarity. It is that photograph in which a man once deemed to be Cecil John Rhodes, but whose identity cannot now be ascertained, stands prominently in front of a portion of what could be his political or mining empire (*A group of Native Mine Boys*, p. 57). He stands at the head of a hierarchy positioned almost horizontally on a gentle slope. He is distinctive in his attire. He seems to hold, rather than lean on, his walking stick, making it a mere accoutrement of authority.

A step behind this personage are a white man to his right, and a black man to his left. Their shadows on the ground are aligned behind his shadow but parallel to it. Their position, manner of dress and confident disposition may signify equality between them. His arms akimbo, and endowed with a growing paunch, the black man exhibits a self-aware confidence.

Immediately behind the triumvirate of high authority is a line of twelve men. But just as one takes in this line, the eyes are drawn to a stand-alone white man at the extreme bottom right of the picture. He, too, has a growing paunch. Seeming to stand marginally behind the two men of senior authority immediately behind the imposing figure in front, he is a question mark! What role could he have been playing, as signified by his marginally prominent position? But this question is not strong enough to divert attention from the pictorial drama being played out behind the figures at the front of the group.

In the row of twelve men, one man wears a uniform with a helmet; three are distinguished by their plumed headgear and do not wear shoes. The rest wear shoes. The position of these men in the second row behind the front figures suggests that they carry authority. If so, what could be the source of that authority? The men in the plumed headgear may suggest the direction of speculation.

Could they represent segments of authority among defeated peoples, each of whom commands some form of loyalty from sections of the people massed behind them in the photograph? Did they bring with them informal authority over the labour pool of 'Native Mine Boys' standing behind them

that was deemed by mine owners and the authority of empire to be vitally complementary to the production system that had been established – and did they even derive some benefit from it?

If so, it was an arrangement shaped by mine owners to enable them to depend on the new hegemony of conquest, to pressgang traditional authority into supporting their commercial ambitions; one in which they toned down compulsion with recognition and reward. If the twelve men in the line earned a wage, it was because they stood in both a line of authority derived from their conquered societies, and in a production line imposed by new conditions of work in the mines.

But wait! Is that a woman in a pink dress? She stands out in the middle of the photograph. Next to her, in a hat, is a man in what could have been a Madiba shirt of the times! Are they a couple? Why is her man not in the line of twelve just behind the man in front? A closer inspection of the photograph reveals more women. What were their roles among all these ‘Native Mine Boys’? The answer to this question must belong to the story of men and women in South African mines.

While the date on which this photograph was taken is unknown, it might have been in 1887. By then the administration of conquered Africans was solidifying into a colossal, extractive economic system and a government that ordered its legal legitimacy. The person in the forefront of the group in the photograph might very well signify that system’s ownership of both land and human beings. Unseen in the photograph are the vast land beyond and people in their hundreds of thousands: women, children, and relatives associated with this gathering of ‘Native Mine Boys’. The man at the front of the group and other colonists own them all. This part of the world, in the hands of the colonists, would never be the same again.

An undated photograph complements this one of colonists and their human and material possessions. About two hundred men, farm workers, looking reasonably well dressed, have been organised into a meandering line where they wait to be paid for their work at the ‘Rhodes Fruit Farms, Simondium, Western Cape’ (p. 64).

Individuality interacts intriguingly with its submergence in a group. The men stand one after another, ready to be itemised and identified so as to receive the personalised benefit of a wage. While work aggregates them, the wage disaggregates them. This relationship between aggregation and disaggregation may ultimately have evolved into the system of identification by number. We will see this relationship again, as we will see another feature of this photograph that is part of the formative symbolism of government based on authority and the management of the defeated.

Here it is. Somewhat obscured, midway up the right edge of the photograph in line with its central focal point is the actual centre of the activity. This is what has brought the men together. Three men sit at a rectangular table. The man on the left is writing. He records the business of the day. It is the creation of the record and its management that are at the heart of the functional, delegated authority present at the table. All the men in the photograph are clearly posing for the camera, but soon the act of payment will establish the table as the focus of activity for the day, with the meandering line beginning (or ending) there. Through it, Rhodes Fruit Farms is enacting its value as the source of work. *Umhlaba* has been transformed into geometrically structured plantations whose size and organisation may inspire awe. Both its produce and the men whose labour plants and harvests it are transformed into a wage that is part of the financial yield of the farm.

Another photograph, 'A Magistrate collecting the Hut Tax' (p. 63), dated to about 1890, enables us to ponder the relationship between human aggregation and disaggregation as forms of control in a new system of imposed rule. It shows a group of black men seated on the grass while four white men sit around a table. Two are helmeted police officers. Of the other two, one wears a fashionable hat while the other must be the one who gives the picture its title. Here, the seated posture of the men on the ground subjugates them completely to the magistrate in his black suit, hat and bearded awesomeness. The gigantic tree just behind the magistrate and a booted, cross-legged policeman lends further awe to the scene, inviting further deference from the men seated on the grass.

The entire scene is an enactment of power and authority. The dignity of the displayed power and authority contrasts dramatically with the indignity of the powerless displayed by their seated position on the ground. Not only that; they have travelled to this place. In the near distance beyond are European-type houses, indicating that this is an outpost of colonial authority. Some or all of the officials at the table probably live there. So the men on the ground have travelled to the seat of power.

But if the individuality of the men seated on the grass is submerged in their collective powerlessness, they briefly shed anonymity at the point of paying their hut tax. At that point they are identified as individuals. While subjugation aggregates, the payment of tax, like the receiving of a wage, disaggregates by subjecting individuals to personal accountability.

In such circumstances the hut tax is a legal mechanism to secure the labour of conquered people in the service of the Empire and its commercial and political agents. It is a brutal law, which demands that

those without power, at the same time that their daily efforts are diverted from their inherited way of life, must pay for their powerlessness and participate in the administration of their subjugation.

These three photographs and their resonances represent the nascent structuring of the political and commercial dimensions of power, the power that was developed over the course of the twentieth century by the South African state. These and others in the collection capture individualised antecedents and aftermaths across the vast and disparate terrains of *umhlaba*. They represent a culmination of disparate events whose impact coalesces over time in the kinds of aggregate embodiments captured in the group photographs. They epitomise systemic impact.

The essential character of the modern South African state, incarnated in this form of embodiment, is shown here in its early days. It still endures within the interstices of a self-declared progressive state in the early years of the twenty-first century.

SOME SIXTY years after the camera captured our mountaineer miners plodding up the side of the open-cast mine at Kimberley, it captured a most spectacular gathering in 1949. It is a massive gathering of 'about 250 000 white people during the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument by Prime Minister D F Malan, Pretoria, 1949. The broken horizontal lines to the right of the monument are part of a laager of 64 ox wagons carved in granite which surrounds the entire monument' (p. 73). This gathering took place one year after the overwhelmingly Afrikaner National Party had won an electoral mandate to preside over the establishment of formal, institutionalised apartheid. The evolution of post-conquest government in South Africa achieved its highest moment of triumph when Prime Minister Daniel François Malan and his government began their work. While the description of the gathering as 'white' reflects the racialised nature of South African society, it under-emphasises the impact of the event as Afrikaner self-affirmation. Ethnic nationalism carries more significance here than race.

The Voortrekkers' tortuous epic journeys in cattle-drawn wagons across *umhlaba* would almost certainly have been a deeply formative experience for them. These journeys bonded them to the land even though it was not theirs. This bonding was an investment consolidated by superior weapons and the worldwide advance of Europe into other parts of the world, and by the colonising powers' partitioning of Africa.

The path to the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument had been a long one. On that day, 16 December 1949, a dream was realised that had first been conceived on 16 December 1888 when President Kruger of the South African Republic took part in celebrations at Blood River in Natal marking the Day of the Covenant. The climb to the monument on the hill had taken sixty-one years.

The dream was born in the decade of the 1880s when the anonymous mountaineer miners were in full stride up and down the open-cast mine. The journey to the Voortrekker Monument on the hill was only upwards, and it bore the imprint of Cecil John Rhodes: not directly, but through the ever-encompassing hegemony of which he was a formative part and to which organised racial aspiration could attach itself over the coming decades.

INDEED, THE system of extracting human labour and mineral ore, its labour assured through hut and poll taxes, had been further systematised into an even larger, more complex state project that culminated in the establishment of a Union Government in 1910.

There is a photograph that captures the men who were ‘Members of the first government of the Union of South Africa on the stoep of Groote Schuur, Cape Town, 1910.’ (p. 14). In this photograph, the striking, white-bearded figure in the middle, reminiscent of the tax-collecting magistrate, is not the head of government. The head of government, Louis Botha, sits rather inconspicuously to the immediate right of the bearded figure. Louis Botha, perhaps aware of the imposing figure next to him, seems to accentuate authority through an upright pose with hands on thighs and crossed ankles. Ankles must be crossed if you are seated on too high a trunk. Otherwise uncrossed dangling legs convey the sense of a hanging lack of control and some indignity. You don’t want to be like the third man to the left of Louis Botha. The other option is to be as ‘cool’ as the only man in the photograph who wears a hat, while one of two others with hats on their laps has used his hat to tone down the awkwardness of his dangling legs.

These are the men of the first Union government of 1910 who represented Afrikaner political, business, and cultural interests, and had become strong and coherent enough as a group to negotiate with the British the latter’s withdrawal from the operational management of the Empire at the local level, something the British government was willing to do because of its confidence that it could continue to exercise leverage over the affairs of South Africa in three important ways: sovereign

accountability through King George V as Head of State, a more secure environment for local British business interests, and the global reach of British hegemony over the legal, political and commercial management of international trade. Louis Botha and his twenty-two colleagues shown in the photograph presided over South Africa for nine years, from 31 May 1910 to 3 September 1919, their rule ending just over a year after Nelson Mandela was born.

It took thirty-eight years of various Union governments to grow the fundamentally extractive economic system significantly shaped by Cecil John Rhodes, now governed and administered by Afrikaners. On 16 December 1949 D F Malan triumphantly closed the circle as he addressed the crowds.

The solid structure of the Voortrekker Monument stands at the summit of a hill. It is a hill not to be climbed by ‘mine boys’ at the end of ‘the day’s work done’. This is a hill to be climbed by the aspiring souls of the mass of Afrikaners, now the overwhelming shareholders in the project of self-affirmation that has taken root far away in time and place from its European origins.

The Monument in the photograph dominates the human mass around it as the only thing in the picture with individuality. The individuals that make up the mass are anonymous, as they are meant to be. Their identity is embodied in a gigantic object. But more than this is embodied in the monument: it contains a history of deliberation, decisions and actions by institutions that cannot be seen in the photograph but whose cumulative effect is present in the spirit of that moment of inaugural gathering.

Self-affirming moments of triumph at the culminating point of histories of invasion, conquest, capture and settlement can carry within them an irony. They can dominate those for whom those very moments, captured in monumental and other commemorative images, have become a defining part of their domination of others. At that very moment of self-affirmation, the absence of the dominated, who are de-affirmed at the same time as the celebrants are self-affirmed, represents a silence of immense magnitude, one whose extent stretches equally over time. Defeats, just like conquests, have a durable memory. And durable memories can make for both blindness and insight.

Compare the photograph of the delegation of the defeated and dispossessed ‘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’ (p. 12) with that of the first Union government. Both are photographs of men who have achieved a great deal of personal distinction.

What would one group have seen of the other, had they met in a room – at Groote Schuur perhaps? My hunch is that Thomas Mapike, Rev. Walter Rubusana, Rev. John Dube, Saul Msane, and Sol Plaatje, men of considerable stature, would have seen in their interlocutors people with immense power who, precisely because of that power, needed to be persuaded with reason.

In contrast, Louis Botha's cabinet would have seen, across the table, men of personal achievement who had no power behind them regardless of the merits of their arguments. The men who served in Botha's cabinet were deeply implicated in the powerlessness of their interlocutors. With the momentum of history on their side, they were obligated to prolong it. This is a thought they would not have articulated, although it could have been picked up by their astute interlocutors through observation of their body language.

Louis Botha's men and he himself would have heard stories of hundreds of black men toiling in the open-cast mine at Kimberley, and stories of tax collection by magistrates; they would have heard of or seen pictures of the chief Bambatha's severed head on display; they would have known of Cecil John Rhodes's ravenous and expansive ambitions; and they would not have let themselves be persuaded to stop in mid-stream an unfolding historical momentum of which they were agents. It was a momentum that drove them to see, for the most part, only the promise of their own freedom and prosperity for their followers.

The delegation of the dispossessed was doomed never to be heard at home. It could perhaps be heard in Britain, but not necessarily listened to, no matter how much one of its members sought to speak, as he wrote in his historic book *Native Life in South Africa, Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion*, 'on behalf of five million loyal British subjects who shoulder the "black man's burden" every day, doing so without looking forward to any decoration or thanks.'<sup>1</sup> The tide of history was flowing against them. They had lost the economic, political, cultural and institutional power to resist the colonial momentum successfully. Ascendance and descent flow in conflicting directions all the time. The decisive direction at any moment culminates in moments experienced by congregations of people such as those captured in the photographs we are contemplating. They are reflected either in a state of triumph or in one of defeat.

The misery of the dispossessed escalated when the Union government promulgated the Natives Land Act of 1913. Sol Plaatje documented the full impact of dispossession in *Native Life in South*

*Africa, Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion*. His book is echoed in two pictures on pages 62 and 66 of our photographic history. The full title of Plaatje's book reveals in its author a mind that discerns connections between big historic events and their extensive impact on individuals among millions of people.

It is the extent of human pain and suffering that mediates between what may be seen as impersonal forces of history on the one hand and, on the other, the imperatives of morality that always open up a space for judgement. The efficacy of human actions lies not only in material gain, but also in moral growth. By the time of Malan's inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument in 1949; of the mass removals of people across the land, gathering momentum in the 1960s in the unfolding logic of that triumphant moment; of the inauguration of the monument to the Afrikaans language in 1975; and, in 1976, of the shooting and killing of school children in Soweto by the South African Defence Force, in response to their protests against the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction – by that time, Afrikaner self-affirmation had reached the height of its material achievements. It had also reached the nadir of its moral being.

And from one century to the next, *umhlaba* bore the scars of these triumphs and defeats: open-cast mines; mountains of yellow mine dumps; squalid squatter camps across the land of opportunity; migrants seeking more than the ability to pay tax as they travelled in search of ways to make a livelihood whose possibilities still represented newness, many of whose miseries were documented in the book *The Discarded People*,<sup>2</sup> and in photographs such as those in this book (p. 92); golf courses sucking out scarce water from the earth to provide relaxation and entertainment for the beneficiaries of the march of Western civilisation in South Africa; shopping malls where bombs would one day explode; and a landscape of wilfully divided communities.

If General Botha, in his hostile reaction to the publication of Sol Plaatje's book, justified 'honest attempts made by the Government to avoid the infliction of hardship in carrying out a principle which, you must remember, was sanctioned by the legislature',<sup>3</sup> we can borrow his formulation to describe the state of *umhlaba* that we have inherited. It was a landscape of division sanctified by the political and cultural aspiration embodied in two monuments: the Voortrekker and Afrikaans monuments. And still today, widespread moral deprivation in the corridors of government, oligarchic business enterprises, and a culture of exclusion pervade *umhlaba* like a lingering plague.

ALMOST SUDDENLY the tone of the moments captured in the group photographs changes. But in fact the tide of history changes slowly. A photograph shows men on horseback raising whips or hands, as if indicating support for some position that has been expressed at a gathering. At this meeting, rural communities put forward their grievances regarding tribal authorities and bantustan 'self-government'. On the facing page, another photograph: two Bantu Commissioners, one of them also a magistrate, officiating at the same meeting (pp. 80 and 81). There is also a 'security policeman'. The meeting takes place in the open. The government officials are seated at a table. Some people sit on the ground. The stage and theatre of power have not changed much over eighty years! Practice has ossified into repetitive habits of control that urge on the agency of resistance.

The atmosphere of meetings change, white farmers are in a hall, sitting on chairs together with their black labour tenants (p. 100). A meeting is under way, and a 'labour tenant addresses farmers at a meeting about evictions from farms, Estcourt, KwaZulu-Natal, 1995.' The historic democratic elections took place a year ago. The faces of the white farmers in the hall reflect none of the posture of power and authority we have seen historically. There is no table with government officials sitting around it, applying the law. The farmers look at the gestures of assertiveness from the black man in the picture who speaks. They listen, anxious, in a new space of powerlessness.

It is a delicate moment. The photograph capture an instant at which the white farmers in the hall are the newly defeated. The men of power they have followed and who rendered *umhlaba* a political, moral and cultural desert are not there. Not any more. Where will they go? What will they do? How will they, who own fragments of what was taken from those who lost almost everything of *umhlaba*, participate in striking a fair and meaningful balance with their dispossessed fellow citizens of this new democracy?

There is potential common ground here that probably none of the contestants in the hall are aware of. It is the reality that all of those seated together here are destined to be citizens of *umhlaba*; and that in the scale of historical responsibility, the blacks who carry agency for the future ought to be the holders of a solution, as bold in its intent as the colonial project that led everyone to converge in this hall at this very moment. The history that scattered them all across the land has given birth to a higher-order project of achieving an inclusive society – the quest for which will bring different people with different histories in *umhlaba* together, enjoined by the leadership of the scattered to create the new society in which they can all live on equal terms.

The world is changing. The personage in our picture has been replaced by a farmer and his little son (p. 108). The farmer smiles. His son poses boyishly for the camera. Behind him, it seems, are his workers. Everyone looks well-dressed. But the land is parched. Whatever new relationships have been forged between farmer and worker seem to be a compromise between accumulated wealth and privilege and the capacity of the workers in the new dispensation to undermine the future of accumulated advantage. It is an uneasy compromise. But it is those standing behind the farmer, descendants of those who stood behind our unidentified personage, who have little time to take the lead in the journey into the future before they are caught in the grip of the accumulated power that brought them more than misery in the past; before they internalise the illusion that the political, business, and social cultures that kept an entire nation divided for over a century could ever unite it.

On a larger scale, the compromise plays itself out in the photograph of men gathered on a rocky hill at Marikana, where the trajectories of power relations became confused (p. 125). There, the law enforcement authority that represents a new government, ostensibly with the same aspirations as the men on the hill, opened fire on them during a miners' strike that was not meant to end until the workers' demands were met. Instead, they died in a hail of bullets. It was a chilling replay of the killing of children in 1976. Where were those that ordered the Marikana killings in 1976?

What could have happened to the sense of ascendant moral authority that is born out of long and systematic deprivation? Our personage, who at the time that he posed for a photograph in front of a group of migrant workers, stood at the head of all that he may have owned, has been replaced by some of the descendants of those 'Native Mine Boys' whose labour produced his wealth and power. His replacements function as he did, in a structure of control and, no matter how misguidedly, in pursuit of a vision. Yet the vision of those who have replaced him is murky. Even when they proclaim the Constitution, they persistently undermine it with their actions. It seems as if they have situated themselves uncritically or with undeclared intentionality in the same structure of control and violence which once degraded them, and which Sol Plaatje and his colleagues created an instrument to negate. Now it is they who control the guns that kill. But to what end is not clear. It would appear that they are profoundly trapped within the illusion that the forces which kept an entire nation divided for over a century can now be redirected to forge its unity.

UMHLABA!

*Umhlaba wethu!*

*Umhlaba wami!*

The conquest and subjugation which took away *umhlaba* were single-minded, systematic and supremely self-directed. The conquerors sought to exert domination over everything outside of their own realm. And yet at the heart of their mission to subjugate was an inventive genius that could have done better, done more, had a spirit of compassion infused their actions.

When the great dispersal occurred it was because *umhlaba wethu* was overcome and captured; and then *umhlaba wami* was possessed and the defeated were driven out of it. Even King Shaka could not have imagined the dispersal that overshadowed the one he had caused. And neither he nor that central authority figure in our picture could have foreseen the seeds of a new society germinated by that second dispersal. Hundreds of thousands among the descendants of those who were dispersed by King Shaka converged at the gold mines of South Africa in congregations that gave effect to the first multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic world envisioned by the founding fathers of the African National Congress. The winds of history gave momentum to that vision in ways they could never have envisaged.

The foundations of a diverse cosmopolitan society may have been established far back in the great dispersal of the dispossessed. Perhaps the Constitution of the new Republic that came into being in April 1994 is a timely formal articulation of a new home. The home we have known until recently is the dispossession we have shared and the collective pain of it. The Constitution gave us a common country to aspire to, one that demands a new spatial environment for the new human being that has been in the making for over a century. It is this togetherness that is the gift of our long pain.

At *umhlaba wethu's* crowning moment of plenty, with its artificial scarcities, the rich in South Africa get richer while the poor become poorer. That is the fundamental law of the structure of the South African economy. *Umhlaba* enjoins us to retain the capacity for inventiveness that led to South African capital's success, but to abandon its acquisitive rapaciousness that caused so much pain and suffering.

*Umhlaba* calls on us to find new ways to own without disowning others; to understand what to own and what not to own; to learn how to own what you own, while knowing that there is a

dimension of what you own that can never ever belong to you alone; that others were involved in the making of it, and that it is that co-ownership that keeps you linked to them even if you have never known them. The millions and billions of rand you may think you own represent the height of the illusion of personal autonomy. They are a result of an investment in the poverty and misery of others accumulated over centuries of rapaciousness.

*Umhlaba*, in which you have the privilege to raise your family and feed yourself and others, is never entirely yours. The country you have the birthright or the choice to belong to, is never entirely yours. It remains a vital part of the world and its people to whom you have the gift of belonging, bequeathed to you by millennia of comings and goings. Perhaps we can find a way to be owned by *umhlaba* without owning it. What a liberated world it could be – liberated from the compulsion of ownership!

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 S T Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa, Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion* (ed.) B Willan (London, Longman, 1987), pp. 3–4.
- 2 C Desmond, *The Discarded People: An Account of African Resettlement in South Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).
- 3 Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa*, p. xi.