

24. Attached to the soil: Portraits of South Africans

Peter Glendinning

Can we put ourselves in Nelson Mandela's shoes for a moment, the shoes he wore on 9 May 1994, and think about the massive decision he had to make that day? What was he going to say on 10 May 1994... and what would we say in a similar situation were we to have to begin a speech today? In essence, that was the challenge I presented to the young people of South Africa with whom I collaborated during my seven months of teaching, research, and service as a United States Fulbright Scholar in 2019. In the 25th anniversary year of Nelson Mandela's inauguration as the first freely-elected president, I was committed to research collaborations that would result in works of art, with the foundational content being statements formed by "Born Frees," by "Democracy Babies", intent on projecting their perceptions of the past, or present, or future, or all three, regarding South Africa.

I returned to South Africa 20 years after my first visit, to collaborate with young people who were either very young children in 1994, or perhaps not even born. They live their lives today, as all young people do no matter where they live, in a country that has been moulded by the conceptions that were in the minds, and acted upon, by the people from generations past. My interest was in these young persons' conceptions regarding South Africa today, as they will form the future of the nation just as surely as past generations' conceptions have formed the present.

Those young persons' conceptions, cast in the form of a metaphor that was related to "soil," were the foundation for the research project titled *Attached to the Soil*. Consisting of photographic portraits of persons whom the young people felt had a story from their life that related to their chosen metaphor, along with oral history recordings of those stories, the project will return in 2021 as an exhibit of 50 photographic portraits, accompanied by excerpts from the subjects' stories to be exhibited in South African university galleries and museums, and also available online.

Mandela was to be inaugurated on 10 May, after many years of imprisonment, activism, and other activities that ranged, depending on who was interpreting or reporting, from the anarchistic to the communistic to the democratic to the capitalistic to the legal to the illegal and on and on. In no way could he be deemed a non-controversial person. After 27 years in prison, he was, to some, no more than an ex-convict, no less than a messianic figure. Yet, whatever opinions the broad spectrum of people in the "rainbow nation" held, whatever identity others cast on his persona, he was to be inaugurated as the first democratically elected president of the Republic of South Africa in one day's time.

Here was a man who many considered then, and consider still, a person whose "shoes would be hard to fill," and indeed as the presidents of South Africa have come and gone after him, I am sure that each of them would agree. Many of the citizens of South Africa today, and those who call other countries home as well, would also agree. But at the same time, there is certainly a goodly number who would disagree, who would see Mandela as a person who did not leave as large a footprint as he might have, whose tracks did not lead in the direction or at the pace or in the manner they should have. Whatever their opinions about his footprints, there was 100% unanimity among all the thousands of people I met and spoke with that the problem he faced on 9 May 1994, what he would say, was one that he was uniquely prepared to solve.

“President Mandela was no more than an ex-convict, no less than a messianic figure”

What were the very first words he would say on the next day to his compatriots, after the oath had been taken, after he had sworn "So help me, God," after his hand had been lowered, and once he was finally and officially, and forever to be remembered as, the first president of the new Republic of South Africa? How could he create a symbolic gesture in word form, one that would, in the very opening sentences of his address, convey his perceptions about the nation he was to lead to that broad range of people?

What would they hear, this assembled overflow crowd of dignitaries from across the globe, the many past and present political leaders of the "rainbow nation"? What tone would be set, what message would be shared, what effect would the words have on these representatives from the widest range of religious and intellectual and academic and tribal social spectra, the millions listening intently through television and radio and other means across the world?

Most importantly, what message of authoritative direction, what guidance, and what response, would be felt by those average South Africans, the working men and women, and the unemployed

men and women, and all the children, each of whom were so critical to the future of the nation?

Whether those who listened with bated breath for those first words were in the audience at the Union Building in Pretoria, where he stood inaugurated before that large assembly, or listening elsewhere in South Africa or across the world, Madiba knew that whatever he said would mark his presidency, and the path forward for the nation. Talk about pressure!

In response to such an immense challenge, soon-to-be President Mandela formed a metaphor to deliver, as he put it, to his “compatriots,” as follows:

“I have no hesitation in saying each of us is as intimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country as are the famous jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the mimosa trees of the Bushveld. Each time one of us touches the soil of this land, we feel a sense of personal renewal.”

While one may have their own opinion as to what President Mandela meant to convey by that profound metaphor, that word-symbolism (and indeed there are many opinions and they range as wide as a rainbow itself), it should be clear to any South African who engages the intellectual exercise of creating their own soil-related metaphor regarding their country that his was no small feat.

It was for the purpose of giving the opportunity to young people in South Africa to walk in Madiba’s shoes, to create their own soil-related metaphor, that I spent seven months in South Africa in 2019. By putting themselves in his shoes, not in the context of an older man speaking in 1994, but in the context of a young person freely expressing themselves in 2019, they could feel the same pressures that Mandela felt to form their own metaphor, to define some significant aspect of South Africa, something meaningful in terms of their own lives.

By making a firm decision concerning an essential and personal understanding of South Africa’s past, present, or future, arising from their own unique perspectives as young people, and forming their own soil-related metaphor, they could truly walk in his shoes. And they did, walking not alone, but with a portrait subject and with me, all three collaborating to bring each of the 50 projects to fruition.

In my lectures across the republic at 16 universities to approximately 1 000 young people, I shared this opportunity, this challenge to form an opinion, and then to create an appropriate metaphor about their country, and an art project based in that exercise. 48 of them put themselves forward to collaborate and create the 50 projects, each with their intellectual and creative problem-solving resulting in metaphors that, like Madiba’s, were related in some way to the “soil.” They each also had decided on a person who had a story from their life that was related to that metaphor, with whom we could collaborate to make the metaphor literally come to life, through a photographic portrait and recording of the subject’s oral history.

Without those young people’s passion for South Africa, their individual unique perceptions and creative expressions through metaphor, and the willingness of the subjects whose stories related to those metaphors, *Attached to the Soil* would not exist.

While I was formally hosted as a Fulbright Scholar by Tshwane University of Technology and Nelson Mandela University (and the support of the administrators and faculty members of those institutions cannot be understated), without the participation and support of faculty from 10 other institutions, there would have been very few projects indeed. *Attached to the Soil* consists of collaborations in partnership with Durban University of Technology (DUT) Journalism students, under the mentorship of an excellent staff of teachers and researchers whose professionalism and passion have created an impressive academic environment. I am greatly indebted to DUT administration, teaching and research staff, and students for the rigour and enthusiasm with which they extended themselves to collaborate with this representative of Michigan State University, the Fulbright Scholar program, and the United States State Department.

Ultimately, the goal of *Attached to the Soil* is three-fold. First, to convey the specific creative expressions in photographs, metaphors, and stories that resulted from each of the 50 collaborations with subjects and students. Second, for both the individual works and the group as a whole, to serve as a vehicle for the voices of the young people themselves, their hopes and dreams for the future, their sense of the realities of the past and present. Thirdly, I hope that through the works of art, and the expressions of young persons’ sensibilities regarding South Africa, conversations will be sparked between and across the spectrum of South Africans today, as they learn of stories like their own, and stories very different from their own as well. The three works that follow, all of which are the result of collaborations I shared with DUT Journalism students and their subjects, are representative of the entire set of 50 that comprise *Attached to the Soil*. I hope that the young persons’ metaphors, the stories from lives of our subject collaborators, and the photographic portraits created in locations across KwaZulu-Natal in these three examples, motivate the reader to place themselves in President Mandela’s shoes, and those of the young people as well, to contemplate their own impression of meaning in the conception of South Africa, and a soil-related metaphor that would convey that to others.



Blessing Xaba

Young person’s soil-related metaphor by Blessing Xaba: Those who do not like you may bury you, but they do not know that is a great favour, since you are a seed.

Subject: Ela Gandhi

Story: One Sunday in 1975, Ela Gandhi was in her kitchen at the Phoenix Settlement, Inanda, KwaZulu-Natal. “I was at home making cakes and getting everything prepared for a party that we were having later that day for my son’s eighth birthday. His friends and their families would be arriving in a few hours, and I had so much left to do! He was so excited, I was so excited, and then there was a knock at the door, and the excitement changed.” A uniformed officer presented her with an order of “banishment”, which meant that from that moment until almost nine years later she was not permitted to be in the company of more than two other adults, whether they were family members or not. She was also put under house arrest. All of this for following the peaceful protest footsteps of her grandfather, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, with her cause being his as well, a continued objection to the institution of apartheid. She was not alone in receiving that punishment. She was also not alone in feeling, on the day of her release from that sentence, “When that knock came on the door again, this time a good knock, I felt free, as free as a bird.”



Bridget Ngcem

Young person’s soil-related metaphor by Bridget Ngcem: In a harsh landscape, just one strong tree can provide shelter from heat and famine for many.

Subject: Nokwe Bain

Story: Mrs Bain holds a managerial position at a Pick n Pay store in Durban, and is the sole source of income, of shelter, for three families, her own immediate household and two others. “When I was growing up, I was taught that the little you have you should share with others. I make it my duty that whatever I have I share with other families.” Like so many others in the current economic environment, she lives with the pressure of knowing that her one income is the rock, the stable force in a swirling world of hope and also desperation on which the very lives of others depend. She is also seen as a source of strength in mind and spirit, giving shelter from the storms of life to the unemployed and to elderly pensioners alike, who visit the store not so much to purchase anything but simply to have someone to talk to. “We have a lot of old people, and I feel it is my duty to share my time with them when they are lonesome. I work in retail. I see different types of people every day. Elderly people

are alone. In the community where I stay, there are a lot of unemployed people who live on the streets. They come into the store, but I don’t ignore them. Life works this way, whatever I get working here, getting in contact with other people, I can give them hope, just by talking to them.”



Divani Coopoosamy

Young person’s soil-related metaphor by Divani Coopoosamy:

When a strong plant is uprooted unexpectedly, even violently, it does not die. It is strengthened, and extends its branches further.

Subject: Poobathy “Cookie” Gurappa Naik

Story: When her parents died, Cookie Naik was eight-years-old. She and her sister were taken by relatives to live with their family on a farm in KwaZulu-Natal. “Poverty is not the word I would use to describe my life at that time, it was more like slavery. We were abused physically, mentally, and spiritually. We were so poor, that even a bar of soap was difficult to come by. I was barely 16 when I was forced to get married, I had no choice in the matter, uprooted again. However, whatever life throws at me I can handle it, there’s no problem too big or too small because God has taken me from the gutters and grime to a better place.” Today, she is one of South Africa’s most successful AVON representatives, an inspiration and empowering figure to other women. She feels most successful when she is able to empower others, to share with them that it is possible to emerge from a desolate past and blossom into an amazing flower. In a country where one’s faith is so important to so many, she is passionate about sharing the reason she feels she did not wither and die as a result of her many upheavals in life. “My faith has taken me beyond my imagination. We serve an almighty God, praise be to Jesus, who has brought me from the pit of hell to where I am today. If it were not for the strength I gained from surviving my childhood, I could not today give back to the community, or bless somebody and make them happy, or help others to find their own joy in self-employment.”



Peter Glendinning has served on the Michigan State University faculty since 1978, currently at the rank of professor, where he has taught the full gamut of photography coursework. He has taught hundreds of thousands of learners worldwide through the online course series *Photography Basics & Beyond*, (www.coursera.org/specializations/photography-basics). His fine art photographs have been widely exhibited in the USA and Europe, and his Fulbright Scholar project, *Attached to the Soil*, will be hosted by a number of South African galleries and museums in 2021-22. His works are represented in public collections such as the George Eastman Museum, University of Arizona Center for Creative Photography, Temple University, K-Mart Corp., and hundreds of private collections. Among his professional clients are Warner Brothers, General Motors, Fuji Film USA, United Auto Workers, Genovese Drugs, and Panasonic. He has served as president of the Midwest Region, Society for Photographic Education, and president/vice-president/board member of the International Photo-Imaging Education Association. He is regularly called on to serve on art exhibit juries, and has been a guest lecturer on professional practices in art at colleges in the United States and South Africa. He received the Paul Varg Arts & Letters Alumni Association Award for excellence in teaching. Other awards include Individual Artist Grants from the Michigan Council on the Arts and from Unicolor Corporation; the ADDY Award; Citations of Excellence and numerous Gallery of Superb Printing Awards; the American Society of Media Photographers Best of 2015 Award; and, the Fulbright Scholar Award (service in South Africa 2019).