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**RE(DIS)COVERING THE EXTRAORDINARY:
A reflection on the Plaatje Diary, 50 years on**

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ABSTRACT

In the half-century since the now famed *Plaatje Diary* was “discovered” – disinterred, more accurately, thence re(dis)covered – both Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje and South Africa have undergone radical refiguration. Plaatje has emerged from the shadows of history, from being a bit player in a past willfully erased by the apartheid regime to becoming a major name in the pantheon of twentieth-century national heroes, indeed, one of its public intellectual giants. For its part, South Africa has seen the death of its *ancien regime* and the dawn of an altogether new one, if not in the revolutionary form envisaged in the struggle to birth it. Plaatje’s observations at Mafeking/Mahikeng offered some acute insights into colonial southern Africa at *fin de siecle*, and into the Siege of Mafeking, and has long been recognized for its value as a singular historical archive. But, in recent times it has also been revalorized as a literary text of distinction, at once as a vernacularized, culturally-nuanced appropriation of the diary form and as an exceptional work of literary/narrative journalism. This essay, a reflection, fifty years on, explores recent critical commentary on Sol Plaatje’s journal in light of his re-emergence as a historical figure of great heft in postapartheid South Africa.

I. PROLOGUE

August 1996, Mahikeng, evening.

A motley clutch of history students at the infamous, apartheid-era University of Bophutatswana (a.k.a. Unibo), soon to be renamed the University of the North-West, gather in our sitting room. Our, here, refers to my wife and colleague, Jean Comaroff, and myself. It is a bitterly cold winter night. The chatter before we begin the class rumbles out a cacophony of questions: What was the Enlightenment? Does history have a future in South Africa? What is an archive? Many more, but it is questions about the future of history and the archive that detain us. We are scheduled to teach a lesson in Tswana history. An inescapable irony this, two aging white South Africans, living

abroad, coming “home” to teach a nine or ten young Tswana men and women about *their* history. This in a notorious former bantustan.

Where even to begin?

A time check here. Remember, in the mid-1990s, obsessive talk of decoloniality was not yet a part of everyday life in the academies of the Global North or South. In South Africa, decolonization had been lived very recently as a visceral struggle, one with a serious body count, not as a loosely defined abstraction clothed in Afropessimist-speak. The country was living through a moment of national optimism. History, it seemed, was no longer necessary; as Jean Comaroff and I have written elsewhere, it had migrated into popular entertainment, monumentalization and memory, and away from its older scholarly forms.¹ Now that the *ancien regime* had fallen – or, at least, appeared to have fallen – the future seemed assured; with apologies to Nietzsche, history-as-learned had become redundant. But, as time passed, there was a dawning realization, especially in non-metropolitan South Africa, that the end of the struggle did not necessarily usher in the promised “better life for all”. In the countryside, it was soon to bring with it a bitter harvest of immiseration. A few of those Unibo students were history teachers who had not been paid in months. Some could not afford the paper and pens needed to take class notes or write essays. The question of whether history had a future at that moment was, therefore, a nontrivial one for them, a question as much material as it was epistemic. Even more pressing for them was whether the future itself had any sort of future.

It was in this context that we began our class on Tswana history. But, again, where to begin that history, a history from and for a “new” South Africa? The answer to which we came, in a feverish conversation that went on long into the night, was...the archive. If Tswana history was going to be repossessed, to be learned, valorized and claimed for a future yet unmade, it required its own vernacular documentary sources. Which is where Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje entered the room, a shadow, an intellectual ancestor, a ghost who walked, and wrote, this landscape just less than a century

¹ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, 2012. *Theory From the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, p.133ff.

earlier. Nor did he walk alone. He walked it with Silas Modiri Molema, another giant of black South African historiography, author of, among other works, *The Bantu, Past and Present*.² Brian Willan's magisterial biography of Sol Plaatje traces the relationship between the two men. Both had left behind them copious unpublished papers. This, then, is where we began, by imagining how, where and with what to build an archive: with the papers of these literati, and with those of others yet to be disinterred, ordinary voices yet to be rediscovered, to evoke Njabulo Ndebele's apt phrase.³ The most notable, of course, was the *Diary* itself, although it was far from the first historically significant document to be written by Tswana; many, some of them public intellectuals, had penned letters, newspaper articles and the like for many decades. Never intended for publication, Plaatje's journal entries provided an iconic example of what an archive of the future history of South Africa, told from one Tswana perspective – needless to say, there are many – might look like. It is where we began our history classes all those years ago.

At the time, we did not realize that the *Diary* would enter into the new, and newly decolonized, South African canon, celebrated in its own right as a *literary* work. Over the past half-century, it has become recognized for two things in addition to its significance as an historical archive; as an account, that is, of an imperial war told from a hitherto silenced perspective, one attuned to the vantage of the colonized as well as that of the colonizers. The first of those two things is that it is a brilliant example of the diary form recommissioned by African literati from its Euromodernist "home", vernacularized and laced with quite different culturally-nuanced sensibilities – thereby producing an entirely new kind of writing. And reading. The second is that it is a distinguished work in the genre of prose non-fiction – even of auto-ethnography, recently emerged as a popular form of rapportage in anthropology – despite never having been intended for publication. It was with these two things in mind that I offer

² Silas Modiri Molema, 1920. *The Bantu, Past and Present*. Edinburgh: W. Green & Son.

³ Njabulo S. Ndebele, 1991. *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. Johannesburg: Congress of South African Writers.

this reflection on Sol Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary*.

II. FIFTY YEARS ON

The *Diary*, variously titled in its different published editions, has turned fifty years old. It is an especially auspicious anniversary. The document itself, obviously, is much older, having begun its life in October 1899, in a town whose designation has also changed over the past decades. It is now officially rendered as Mahikeng, closer to its Setswana vernacular. The translation, however, remains the same, "Place of Rocks". But its place in the rocky political and economic history of southern Africa has morphed dramatically. So has its place in the narrative cartography of the country; in the telling, that is, of its geographical relevance over time. Once the far-flung chiefly capital of an autonomous African polity – the Barolong boo Ratshidi, a Tswana nation – it is now the administrative centre of the North West Province in post-apartheid South Africa. Since its founding in the mid-nineteenth century, as noted in the Introduction below, it has witnessed many turbulent, troubled turns in a *long duree* of conflict and sovereign struggle over land, people, rights and resources. Even over the telling of its history, past and present

Sol T. Plaatje, as an historical figure, has also undergone radical transformation – actually, transformations, more than one – since his early Mafeking/Mahikeng days, the Days of the Diarist as a Young Man. Indeed, even since the first publication of the *Diary*, in 1973, he has been reinscribed on the literary and political landscape of South Africa, attracting a substantial scholarly literature. Some of those transformations echo, and have occurred in counterpoint with, the history of the country at large. To wit, Plaatje, the largely unknown bit player during the Siege of Mafeking, stands in sharp contrast to his later emergence as a public intellectual, cultural producer, newspaper editor and political activist, which began in 1902 with his editorship of *Koranta ea Becoana* and ended with his death in 1932. Thereafter, he suffered almost total eclipse for several decades, until his recuperation began during the years when revisionist Africanist historiography documented the anti-apartheid struggle. It came to full fruition,

finally, with his establishment as a significant ancestral presence in post-apartheid South Africa, thus bringing to conclusion a trajectory brilliantly told by Brian Willan in *Sol Plaatje: A Biography* (1984) and *Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, 1876-1932* (2018).

No need to recount that story here, except to remind ourselves quite how remarkable was Sol Plaatje's rise, in thirteen years, from a twenty-three year old court translator with limited education – and a willing subaltern in the British colonial regime at Mafeking – to the first General Secretary of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, later the ANC), of which he was a co-founder. As a leading player in black public life, he traveled to the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada representing the struggle for liberation, enfranchisement and land rights – which he did with celebrated eloquence and unflagging energy. His activism abroad put him in touch with the likes of W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey and others, bringing him, and his writings, to the attention of the Pan-African movement. This was a complex moment in black political history, a moment in which African leaders sustained the sanguine hope that they could bring about racial emancipation by persuading the world at large of the merits of their cause, of their right to equality, of the oppressive conditions under which black South Africans lived. And that telling their story on world stages might produce an effect at home.

For his own part, Sol Plaatje came to embody a one-man African Renaissance. Alongside his unrelenting political activism, he pursued what can only be described as a hyperbolic modernism, of which he was a prime living instance: *vide* his copious, often critical, self-consciously cosmopolitan journalism; his translations of Shakespeare into Setswana and his accomplished sociolinguistic scholarship; his prose fiction, epitomized in *Mhudi*, the first full length novel in English by a black South African, and his extraordinary *Native Life in South Africa*, itself part organic anthropology, part political argument, part forensic journalism, part elegy to a changing countryside. Also, his easy fluency in a number of African and European languages, both spoken and written; his stage performances as actor and singer; and his devout Christianity and devotion to the life of his embourgeoised family.

Plaatje, in sum, exemplified the Modern African Person, at least as he and the emerging black elite of the time envisaged that figure – both as an aspiration, a civilizing mission for their people at large, and as a political argument for their claim to equality as citizens of South Africa. It was an emphatically male-centric, middle class vision, one clearly influenced by mission Protestantism and the politesse of British colonial society. But it coexisted, as Plaatje made plain in his preface to the first edition of *Mhudi*, with an explicit effort to retain the values intrinsic to African vernacular cultures, *mentalité*, lifeways. Regarded retrospectively, with the *faux* certainty of 20/23 vision, the diarist appears to have been a man of irreconcilable contradictions. As Peter Limb, among others, has pointed out, he was a “British Empire enthusiast” who admired the ways and means of its Establishment. Yet he was often quick to criticize those ways and means, sometimes with sharply barbed irony. He was “staunchly opposed to radical working class forces” yet he repeatedly espoused black rights, expressing a heartfelt aversion to the “terrible conditions of African workers and the plight of African women, including working women”.⁴ And, while he was a prolific author in the English language, entirely fluent in its stylistic conventions and universalist pretensions, he devoted his a great deal of effort to the sustenance of *Setswana*, Tswana language and culture, its performative genres and its oral literature.

To Plaatje himself, however, these were not contradictions at all. Nor were they irreconcilable, as critical (“decolonial”) twenty-first century scholars and commentators would almost certainly argue, looking backwards into history through a glass darkly.⁵ They were the partible, principled responses of an obviously thoughtful black activist-intellectual seeking his own way, as subject *and* citizen, through the labyrinthine challenges of life under colonialism. And seeking ways to meliorate the “terrible conditions” wrought upon the mass of his contemporaries by what is now broadly referred to as racial capitalism. But most of all, it was this very capacity to speak and

⁴ Peter Limb, 2003. “Sol Plaatje Reconsidered: Rethinking Plaatje’s Attitudes to Class, Nation, Gender, and Empire”. *African Studies* 62(1):33-52.

⁵ Some of those critics are quick to dismiss Plaatje in highly pejorative terms. Andile Mngxitama, for example, has allegedly referred to him as a “good house N—”. See Sean O’Toole, 2016. “In the Lost Land”, *Sunday Times*, 15 May 2016; <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/sunday-times-1107/20160515/282815010466247>.

act in multiple, often countervailing directions that made Sol Plaatje a public figure whose voice breached the so-called “colour bar”, itself not a common accomplishment for black South Africans back then. “Our Great Leader”, the Reverend John Langalibalele Dube, first president of the South African Native National Congress, called him in his obituary in 1932.⁶ As one Edison Malebe Bokako put it, in verse, on the occasion of Plaatje’s passing, “Self-schooled by small degrees he rose, Till fame her own declared him far, A leader of men and high in prose, He’d hitched his wagon to a star”.⁷ Some white notables, among them academics and journalists, spoke in similar terms. *The Times* of London, which did not accord obituaries to that many Africans, published a highly laudatory one for Plaatje, the politician, polymath, public figure and praise poet for Africa. Some distinctly racist colonial tropes bled through too. For example, the Catholic missionary, Father Bernard Huss, described him, patronizingly, as “[a]n example of what Africans can become under the influence of European culture”;⁸ testimony, this, to a willful misunderstanding of everything Plaatje embodied, and stood for, from a cleric who sought to extend “paternalistic influence over rural African communities and resist more radicalizing political influences”.⁹

No wonder then, that, at the time of his death, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje was a figure of considerable public heft in black South Africa – and among the few whites who paid attention to the lives and times of the vast majority of those who peopled the country in which they lived.

Soon, however, as noted earlier, Plaatje slipped into oblivion. It happened rather

⁶ Wits University Research Archives, Historical Papers, File De3 - Obituaries by Prof C M Doke, Rev Bernard Huss and Rev John L. Dube; <http://historicalpapers-atom.wits.ac.za/uploads/r/historical-papers-research-archive-library-university-of-witwatersrand/f/3/a/f3ac46509e60a6865bd7947341567accfe1787057f020a22a4db7da71f2e4f31/A979-De3-01-jpeg.pdf>.

⁷ Wits University Research Archives, Historical Papers, File De2 - Bokako, Edison Malebe. To Sol Plaatje. Eulogy. Healdtown; <http://historicalpapers-atom.wits.ac.za/bokako-edison-malebe-to-sol-plaatje-eulogy-healdtown>.

⁸ Wits University Research Archives, Historical Papers, File De3 - Obituaries by Prof C M Doke, Rev Bernard Huss and Rev John L. Dube; <http://historicalpapers-atom.wits.ac.za/uploads/r/historical-papers-research-archive-library-university-of-witwatersrand/f/3/a/f3ac46509e60a6865bd7947341567accfe1787057f020a22a4db7da71f2e4f31/A979-De3-01-jpeg.pdf>.

⁹ Paul B. Rich, 1993. “Bernard Huss and the Experiment in African Cooperatives in South Africa, 1926-1948”. *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26(2); 297-317.

quickly, given his erstwhile prominence. Brian Willan observes in *Sol Plaatje: A Biography* that, for all the talk of his greatness at his large funeral in Kimberley in June, 1932, an occasion marked by some memorable oratory, “[m]uch of what he strove for came to nought, his political career was largely forgotten, his manuscripts were lost or destroyed, his published books largely unread. His novel *Mhudi* formed part of no literary tradition, and was long regarded as little more than a curiosity” (p.389-90). Apartheid killed off not just “what he strove for” but much of the memory of the man.

To be sure, in 1969-70, at the time I happened upon the *Diary*, the “Great Leader”, as public personage, was all but forgotten beyond the world of his own descendants – and, presumably, the relatively small circle of scholars, intellectuals and activists for whom the struggle history of the SANNC/ANC was a matter of concern. I do not recall having heard him mentioned in the innumerable conversations about South African political history in which I participated as a college student during the middle apartheid years. Nor did I come across any of his writings. None were referred to, not even, as far as I was aware, by historians then at the University of Cape Town. Black South Africans with whom I interacted spoke of many prominent political figures, past as well as present, but not of him. His trace had largely disappeared. In truth, I have no memory of how I first became aware, even dimly, of his name before I started working in Mahikeng. It was only there that I came to realize how important he had once been. Prior to that, he was no more than a sketchy echo in my consciousness, a spectral figure about whom I could not have offered much detail even at a push. The Return of Sol T. Plaatje in the years thereafter, however, was to be as rapid, and as remarkable, as his earlier demise. It began, as I said a moment ago, even before the *ancien regime* gave way formally in 1994 and has accelerated dazzlingly since then – roughly at the rate that old South African history-as-written has been decolonized by more recent South African history-as-lived. And, in tandem, rewritten. Perhaps the publication of the *Diary* even had a little to do with it all.

Sol Plaatje’s recuperation is, by now, the stuff of legend: of biography, of scholarship, theater, art and architecture, of documentary TV, even of music: the earliest recording of the National Anthem, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, sung by him in 1923 in

London, can be heard on YouTube.¹⁰ He has joined the Pantheon of Past Black Luminaries, political and cultural. The signs are almost everywhere. Usually mentioned are the naming of a municipality and a university for him in the Northern Cape Province; the founding of the Sol Plaatje Educational Trust and Museum at his former home, in Kimberley, which is now a national monument and a heritage site, as is his grave; and the creation of several literary, educational and other awards that bear his name. So does the Department of Education building in Pretoria, a dam and power station, a university library and at least two schools. A somewhat awkward statue of him writing at his desk is to be found in the Ernest Oppenheimer Memorial Gardens, Kimberley. Another, by Egon Tania and Guy du Toit, has been on display in a public garden in Bloemfontein and at the National Heritage Museum in Pretoria; more life-like, it pictures him with the bicycle – replete with typewriter strapped to its rear – that he is said to have ridden around the country doing his research for *Native Life in South Africa*.¹¹ Nor is this list exhaustive.¹² It does not include the growing literature about his writings, which fall beyond our purview here. Except, of course, for the *Diary*.

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At the time of its first publication, I had no idea that Plaatje would emerge as a historical figure of such memorial heft. Or that his writings might become the object of literary criticism, part of a newly rejuvenated postcolonial canon in which black authors would at last be given their long-deferred due; in other words, that their erasure itself would finally be erased. Brian Willan has noted that, compared with Plaatje's other publications – especially *Native Life in South Africa* and *Mhudi*, which have received a great deal of attention over the past few decades – the *Diary* has been relatively neglected; beyond its frequent citation, that is, by historians intent on decolonizing the

¹⁰ See https://www.flatinternational.org/template_volume.php?volume_id=267 on the history of the recording; for the YouTube clip, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kxoYeVdDrl>.

¹¹ This odyssey on a bicycle, now the stuff of legend, has been questioned by Sean O'Toole, who refers to it as a "myth". Sean O'Toole, 2016. "In the Lost Land".

¹² See Sol Plaatje Museum, "Commemoration and Recognition of Plaatje in the Public Domain"; <http://solplaatjemuseumandlibrary.co.za/commemoration.htm>.

view that South Africa 1899-1902 was a “white man’s war”, a claim entirely discounted by diarist’s eyewitness account.¹³ This is not to slight its value as an historical source, however. Quite the opposite. As its reviewers have often observed, the *Diary* shed sharp new light on the siege as a military, political and cultural encounter – which is hardly surprising, given the unique perspective of its author, a man placed both at the centre of administration of the town and at the seams that joined black and white, military and civilian, citizen and subject. But Plaatje’s journal is much more than an event history. It is more, even, than a chronicle of the inequalities of suffering born along lines of race in a war among colonizers. Or of the unspoken reliance of white belligerents on indigenous populations. Or of promises made by the British to their black allies and then casually, callously broken. It captures the *zeitgeist* of its time in an altogether singular manner, a point to which I shall return.

Beyond being plumbed as an archival resource, Willan goes on to insist, the *Diary* ought, at this moment in South African literary history, to be read for what it is in its own right: a piece of prose non-fiction. No longer should it be regarded merely as a historical curiosity, the accidental product of a colonized black African writing in a genre hitherto associated with bourgeois Euromodernist culture – a view that, implicitly, has Plaatje as mimic-man, which is a grotesque, not to mention racist, misreading of both the man and his work.

As it happens, the *Diary* has begun of late to show signs of drawing critical attention in its own literary right. A review of the centenary edition of 1991¹⁴ by Jane Starfield anticipated this, observing that “historical change has enabled Plaatje’s writing” – of which the *Diary* “is now probably his best known text” – to “migrate from quasi-pariah status on the periphery of South African literature and history into what may

¹³ Brian Willan, 2022. “Revisiting Sol Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary*”. *Journal of the African Literature Association* 16(1):9-22.

¹⁴ John Comaroff and Brian Willan, with Solomon Molema and Andrew Reid (eds.), 1999. *The Mafeking Diary of Sol T. Plaatje*. Oxford: James Curry, Cape Town: David Philip.

become a new mainstream South African reading culture”.¹⁵ She comments on its “inimitable style”, arguing that it is “one of the most literate texts written under wartime pressures”, although the universe of comparison is not specified. Perhaps this has to do with the fact, as I suggested in the Preface to the Centenary Edition, that the narrative moves between literary forms, playing not just with language but with a plurality of languages and cultural images, often to striking ironic, metaphorical and lyrical effect. It, it is a modernist work that exceeds received modernist aesthetics in favor of a willfully creolized hybridity. The result is a personal literary experiment crafted in prose that is never prosaic. It is prose, Jane Taylor notes, that touches the uncanny. This is especially the case, she says, when Plaatje, “a deft and wry story-teller”, contemplates death from “inside the event”, revealing, as he does so, “the structure of a haunting persistence”, of a “recurring trauma”.¹⁶

Consider, with this in mind, a reflection on the *Diary* by Kevin Davie. Written in 2021, Davie evaluates Plaatje’s account of the siege “against the precepts of literary or narrative journalism”, a mode of presenting “factual stories using techniques more usually associated with fiction writing”.¹⁷ He set the bar exceptionally high – this in light of his view that “Plaatje’s writing casts a long shadow across the South African literary landscape” – by comparing the *Diary* with the work of George Warrington Steevens. Steevens, Oxford-educated and academically pedigreed, was the “pre-eminent British war correspondent of his era,...[typifying] the highly commercial, personal and sensational British ‘new’ journalism of the last quarter of the 19th century”. As it happens, he also found himself under siege in the South African War, but in Ladysmith, where he was to die of typhoid. For Davie, well aware of Steevens’ literary reputation, Plaatje’s writing was “every bit as good”, despite being the work of a youth with no

¹⁵ Jane Starfield, 2001. “Re-thinking Sol Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary*”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27(4):855-863, pp.855, 867.

¹⁶ Jane Taylor, 2021. “Sol Plaatje Under Lockdown”, *Daily Maverick*, 6 July; <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-06-07-sol-plaatje-under-lockdown/>.

¹⁷ Kevin Davie, 2021. “The Mafeking Diary of Sol T. Plaatje, 120 Years Later”, *News24*, 10 September; <https://www.news24.com/channel/arts/the-mafeking-diary-of-sol-t-plaatje-120-years-later-20210910>. Davie is a former convener of the Financial Journalism Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand.

background in prose non-fiction and without much formal education:

The difference...is that over a century later Plaatje, who engaged and recorded the struggles of all who participated at Mafeking, stands the test of writing time. A blinkered Steevens, notwithstanding the poetic prose, appears as a propagandist for a dated imperial project.

Like Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, so-called “Hero of Mafeking”, George Warrington Steevens, says Davie, erased black South Africans from his visually spellbinding accounts of the war – beyond passing racist, demeaning slights. By contrast – and here I add my own voice to Davie’s – Plaatje’s creolizing, experimental, often edgy prose, like his multilingual allusions, gave voice to a critical imagination that saw the colonial theatre for what it was: a complex *mis-en-scene* of entangled predicaments, mutual dependencies, interwoven ironies and interlocking tragedies given shape by polite rules of brute violence.

Of all recent readings of the *Diary*, the most comprehensive, predictably, is owed to Brian Willan, whose grasp of the life, times and writings of Sol Plaatje remains unparalleled.¹⁸ Willan begins by noting the “inherently indeterminate genre of the diary...being a private rather than a public document”. It was, as he reminds us, a narrative form favored during the late Victorian years; this precisely because of its ideological association with bourgeois selfhood, with the aspiration for self-improvement and with the modernist conception of life as an individual progress. Plaatje, endowed with the Protestant Ethic, was deeply attached to this world-view. Perhaps it explains his willingness to experiment: to play with metaphor and irony, alliteration and onomatopoeia, to give vent to his sense of humor and command of languages, to satirize and self-deprecate – all of which point to his turn to the diary form as *both* a means and a measure of his own self-making. But another wrinkle: the journal may well have been intended, also, as a memoir for his wife, who had taken refuge elsewhere in the Colony.¹⁹ Several moments of poignant personal reflection, strikingly

¹⁸ Willan, “Revisiting Sol Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary*”. The quotation in the following sentence is to be found on p.10.

¹⁹ Willan, “Revisiting Sol Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary*”, p.13.

unselfconscious, suggest as much. And give insight into the sensibilities of a man coming to maturity in a colonial theatre of war. Willan adds, perspicaciously, that Plaatje's silences – especially on capital punishment and on British colonial interference in the political sovereignty of the local Barolong chief – are also telling.²⁰ They illuminate not just his own ethical principles and the moral economy in which he was situated astride two very different yet interlocked worlds, but also the limits beyond which he was not willing to go in serving his imperial masters.

As this implies, the *Diary* was, apart from all else, a self-exploration in the complex aggregation of elements that would come together, over time, in the construction of Sol Plaatje's identity. And his political subjectivity. Here Willan cites Karin Barber's landmark volume, *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, in which she makes the argument that established Euro-modernist forms like the diary and the letter were readily adopted by African individuals and communities, but were "refashioned...to express new forms of being".²¹ Which returns us to the point that, while Plaatje-as-diarist documented the siege in a genre favored by a number of Europeans in Mafeking and occupied a subaltern role in a colonial institution, he was, *pace* V.S. Naipaul, no mimic-man.²²

I have already hinted at the complexities implicated in "reading" Plaatje's identity-information, circa 1899-1900, from the *Diary*.²³ I stress: "in formation". According to Tswana vernacular notions of being-in-the-world, personhood is a lifelong process of becoming. It consists of partible elements that, together, compose the unfolding identity of a human subject over time, an identity built up through the work (*tiro*) of self-making in relation to significant others. *Motho ke motho ka batho*, goes the vernacular axiom, "a

²⁰ Willan, "Revisiting Sol Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary*", pp.18-19.

²¹ Karin Barber (ed.), 2006. *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*. Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, p.8. Quoted in Willan, "Revisiting Sol Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary*", p.16.

²² V.S. Naipaul, 1967. *The Mimic Men*. London: Andre Deutsch.

²³ I take the liberty here of expanding beyond Willan's insightful discussion of the question of identity in the *Diary*.

person is a person by virtue of [other] people.”²⁴ Reading Plaatje, consequently, requires understanding that his maturing selfhood, played out in relation to many others of varying significance, involved multiple dimensions. His ethnicity expressed itself in his deep attachment to *Setswana* (“Tswana lifeways”) and in his frequent observation of the differences between Barolong and other African populations in Mahikeng. Race, as invested in his blackness, his proud Africanity, manifested itself by contrast to whites and white lifeways (*Sekgoa*); also in the complicated, often breached yet archly maintained, opposition between colonizer and colonized. Gender was given voice in his repeated concerns with his masculinity and his often demonstrably delicate references to the women in his life. Religiosity and class made themselves felt in his consistent efforts to essay, and behave according to, the norms of an emerging black Christian bourgeoisie and its sense of civility. And generation was interiorized in his marked respect for older people, itself taken for granted in a Barolong world that, in times past, emphasized the significance of age as a critical principle of social differentiation and authority.

The *Diary*, as a work of both self-construction and narrative rapportage, speaks to all of these elements. It does so in a profoundly kaleidoscopic manner, giving fluid shape and color to an extraordinary chapter in the life of an extraordinary man, a self-making man early in the process of becoming a major historical personage. Also in a microscopic manner, offering the sort of grounded, experience-rich detail worthy of the finest of organic ethnographies. As an account of a late imperial war, fought at the edge of a colonial theatre itself undergoing radical change, is at once chilling, thrilling and unusually moving; besides being all the more informative for the standpoint from which it was written. Reading it as an exquisite exercise in the making of a “new” African in a morphing world at the turn of the twentieth century – partly self-conscious, partly unconscious, much of it somewhere in the prose-poetics of the in-between – one gets the sense of reading backwards into the future. If we learn anything from it, it is – to

²⁴ See John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, 2001. “On Personhood: An Anthropological Perspective from Africa”, *Social Identities* 7(2):267-283. Reprinted in Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, 2012. *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

rewrite one of Marx's most cliched, most misquoted lines – *not* that all history is lived twice, first as tragedy then as farce. It is that much colonial history, the Siege of Mafeking being an epic instance, was at once tragic and farcical, deadly serious yet often absurd.

There is nothing more for me to say, fifty years on. Sol Plaatje has said it all for himself, at once volubly and eloquently, in his own inimitable voice. It is a voice that has spoken cogently across centuries and across worlds. And still does.