

Sol Plaatje Reconsidered: Rethinking Plaatje's Attitudes to Class, Nation, Gender, and Empire¹

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Sol Plaatje was the fiercely proud offspring of literate, independent peasant farmers in the Free State. His greatest grief was to see the thriving South African peasantry destroyed, dispossessed of their own land, crops and herds by the evil Land Acts of the new Union Government, condemned to wander the country as sharecroppers, migrant labourers, proletarians or domestic servants in the new mining and industrial towns. Sol Plaatje lived by the written word. He was a teacher ... a messenger ... a court interpreter ... journalist, a founder of newspapers He was the first black South African novelist ... Plaatje lived and died at the crucial intersection of South Africa's history, where a cowardly imperial government created an overtly racist constitution, and handed the reins of power to the forces of reaction and oppression. He experienced dispossession. He fought against it. He foretold the bleak future of repression and resistance through which generations more were condemned to pass until liberation day. (Kader Asmal, Minister of Education, International Literacy Day, 8 Sept. 1999, National Assembly)

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje is widely regarded by scholars as a British Empire enthusiast, a moderate leader of the African National Congress (ANC) who, if valiant in his espousal of black rights then nevertheless was staunchly opposed to radical working class forces. Yet he criticised, often in an ironic style, the very Empire and Establishment he allegedly upheld. It is less well known that he remained, throughout his life, deeply concerned about the terrible conditions of African workers and the plight of African women, including working women. Today Plaatje's position as an icon of the spirit of the new South Africa is well established. However, a better understanding of his complex attitudes to class, nation, gender and Empire helps to appreciate fully this image.

In this paper I primarily examine his attitudes to African workers. To a lesser extent, I survey his use of irony, his attitudes to Empire, nation and women, and his place today in South African studies. I argue that a close analysis of historical records and especially his journalism, together with an appreciation of recent insights by literary scholars and a re-envisioning of his life project, all point to "another" Plaatje. This necessitates significant modifications to the portrait so ably crafted by his biographer Willan some twenty years ago. This new way of looking at Plaatje is important in interpreting the ideological and historical underpinnings of the current political hegemony of the ANC.

A Biographical Snapshot

The broad contours of the story of Sol Plaatje are well known. He was an African political leader and writer of the early twentieth century who challenged the inequality of settler colonialism. Born in 1875 of a Baralong *kholwa* (Christianised) family, he received only three years of formal education.² This lack of formal higher education was to set him apart from most other black political leaders. However, he continued to study privately and secured work first as a courier in Kimberley and then as an interpreter and clerk in the Mafeking magistrate's Court. His diary of the siege of Mafeking in the South African War vividly records black experiences (Plaatje 1999). As editor of the black-owned newspapers *Koranta ea Becoana* (1901–1908) and *Tsala ea Batho* (1910–1915) he highlighted issues of great concern to Africans, such as racism, injustice and exploitation. This raised his national profile and he became a founder and first Secretary-General of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) in 1912. He actively opposed the 1913 Land Act that restricted Africans to the most barren parts of the country, publishing in 1916 *Native Life in South Africa*, a passionate exposure of its harsh effects on Africans. In 1914 and 1919 he joined protest delegations to Britain and in 1920–1922 continued to raise international awareness of black oppression on tours of Canada and the United States.

In the 1920s, while not abandoning Congress, Plaatje largely withdrew from national ANC politics and instead participated in government-sponsored Native Conferences, which he nevertheless sought to use as a forum to criticise state policy. In his later years, he increasingly turned to temperance work and literature, writing the first black South African novel in English, *Mhudi: An Epic of South African Life a Hundred Years Ago* (Plaatje 1930). In his writings Plaatje challenged the cultural domination of colonialism with its blatant stereotypes of Africans and worked to preserve Setswana, publishing a book of proverbs and becoming the first translator of Shakespeare into an African language. He continued to lobby for better conditions of Africans until his death in 1932.

Ambiguities, Identities and Interpretations

Recently, literary critics have vigorously reassessed the great South African writer. Notable in this regard is Chrisman's (2000a) sensitive reappraisal of Plaatje's attitude to gender, the work of Johnson (1996) on Plaatje's elevation to the canonical status of the Shakespeare of South Africa, Green's (1997) reinterpretation of *Mhudi* as a "novel history" aiming to forge, in barren terrain, a new nationalism, and Mpe's (1996; 1998) focus on the politics of the oral in Plaatje's fiction.

These literary scholars help us appreciate Plaatje's potent literary arsenal. He was a gifted writer and effective orator. At the Kimberley City Hall in 1931 none other than the Governor-General complimented him on his mastery of the English language (Willan 1984: 381). But what was Plaatje really saying in his

speeches and writings? Many literary scholars have noted his use of irony. What is the implication? If we follow Riley (2000) on irony and the self, then Plaatje's self-identification with Empire can be seen as quite *distinct* from his "race" solidarity with Africans. Plaatje's irony often is subtle, and intensely political. Schalkwyk (1999) argues that Plaatje's use of sarcasm, allegory and ironic manipulation of genres via the coloniser's language exposed the arbitrariness of white domination and reappropriated African history; his Shakespearean translations were a political act of cultural struggle proving the equality of African and colonising cultures. This *anti-Imperial* aspect has led some writers to rethink Plaatje's *pro-Empire* stance; Samin (1999) sees him as "one of the harbingers of post-colonial fiction" and Mpe (1996:82) is alert to Plaatje's subtle critique of imperialism through subversive proverbs and songs.

The above interpretations all draw on Willan's magisterial biography, which remains the most successful attempt to capture the totality of Plaatje. Willan concludes his study by noting that Plaatje was, by 1984, largely forgotten, his ideals thwarted by apartheid, but that his political role might prompt future interest (1984: 390). Willan's edited selection from the Plaatje (1996) corpus is part of a subsequent rediscovery vindicating this prediction, testifying to the breadth of Plaatje's oeuvre, and helping recover the *historical* Plaatje from an emerging canonical figure (Schalkwyk 1999). Yet, significant lacunae remain in our understanding of Plaatje.

Few writers have considered Plaatje a de facto historian. This reflects an earlier tendency in South African historiography to neglect how blacks perceived their own history (Gebhard 1991: 213–4). The nature of white supremacy ruled out black professional historians, whilst restrictions on the free growth of a black intelligentsia meant black writers often sought publication outlets in the press (Peires 1981: 176). Plaatje and other black *literati* such as Rubusana, Fuze and Molema did write, often in the vernacular, about history. In doing so, they articulated the need for an expression of African identity and an African account of the past. *Native Life in South Africa* was the first attempt to situate rising African nationalism in an historical context and Plaatje also wrote historical sketches of African leaders and an historical novel (1931; 1930). It is true that "[t]oo little has been written of Plaatje the historian rather than the writer of fiction or journalist" and that "[h]is forays into history are usually either aestheticised as the work of the historical novelist, or rendered exotic" (Schalkwyk 1999), but scholars (Willan in Plaatje 1996; Couzens and Willan 1976) have rescued some of these historical works from obscurity.

A greater obstacle to understanding the totality of Plaatje's oeuvre is neglect of his Setswana works. The *Selected Writings*, as the editor concedes (Willan in Plaatje 1996: 4), draws but little from vernacular writings, an omission that Schalkwyk (1999) claims

renders the selection in an important sense unrepresentative, and merely confirms the picture of Plaatje as a mere mimic of white colonists Plaatje scholarship is sorely in need of a new paradigm, one which acknowledges his immense linguistic, cultural and political range.

A forthcoming “collected works” from Kimberley perhaps may rectify this lacuna.³ However, the most persistent and, I argue, the most stereotypical image of Plaatje remains that of the “petit-bourgeois”. Recognition of Plaatje’s close attention to labour issues was one casualty of the conceptualisation of a purely “middle class” ANC. Thus, whilst Willan (1984; Willan in Plaatje 1996) eschews simple class categorisation, he accords relatively little attention to Plaatje’s rather extensive labour journalism. Seminal interpretations of Plaatje by Couzens and Willan (1976) and Willan (1984) appeared at a time of vigorous scholarly engagement with theories of class. Many historians saw the early ANC as an essentially “middle class” élite with no organic ties to workers, drawn from “the new ‘middle class’” (Walshe 1970: 211, 243) with “petty bourgeois” leaders (Cobley 1990: 80, 171). Such views, which were based on compelling evidence, were not restricted to those outside the ANC. Benson (1966: 164), who worked with the ANC, claimed that before the 1952 Defiance Campaign, it was “an élite party of middle-class intellectuals”. ANC historian Meli (1989: 45) refers to its early leaders as “definitely not working class”.

Yet most of these writers acknowledge, with due recognition of black labour’s limited influence, the gradually increasing significance of workers to, and within, Congress (Walshe 1970: 306–14; Meli 1989: *passim*). Moreover, as social history increasingly displaces structuralism in the Academy, class-reductionist characterisations of Congress that leave little room for appreciation of it as a *movement* in all its ramifications — branches, members, supporters, traditions — are making way for the (re)discovery of the ANC’s “organic” nature. ANC policy resonance with the broad needs of all Africans is now more often conceded, even if consensus remains on its moderateness and middle class leadership base. Various regional studies suggest that ANC ties with workers were rather more substantial at the local level and push back the date of such contacts (Delius 1993; Sapire 1989; Bozzoli 1991: 239–241; Limb 2000). This accords with the findings of Africanists writing in other contexts that, despite the presumption that nationalism is the domain of the elite, nationalisms rarely emerge without the involvement of both élites and masses. Lonsdale (1968: 119–46) demonstrates this dialectical relationship in his study of the role of “ordinary Africans” in nationalism in Kenya and Davidson (1992: 163–6) argues that the “labouring poor” gave nationalists “ground to stand on”.

The ANC clearly drew support from a wide range of black social strata. This relates to its emphasis on African national unity. Founder Pixley Seme called for a Congress that “more than fairly represented ... every section” of the people.⁴ While tempered by its liberal demand for incorporation into public life, Congress regularly attacked rigid state controls that created barriers to African unity and

advance. These political barriers combined with the economic levelling of diverse black social strata to induce cross-class alliances. Hence, the ANC variety of nationalism could not afford to be separate from African workers. Whilst the ANC did not really adopt the ideology of “nationalism” as such until the 1940s, some of its leaders used the term in the 1920s and considerations of “nation” often were in the mind of Plaatje.

Plaatje’s broad attitudes to labour partly relate to the political strategies of Congress that evolved over time. Lodge (1983) and Bonner (1982) argue persuasively that sections of the ANC became more sensitive to labour influences in times of crisis or after watershed developments such as World Wars or the 1950s Defiance Campaigns. Chrisman (2000b) observes that Plaatje “belonged to a class that had historically perceived the British Empire as a system of liberal ‘equality’” but that by 1920 this was threatened. Plaatje’s attitudes to many issues, such as Empire, did harden over time. However, I argue that he displayed earlier, more long-term and relatively consistent interest in subaltern classes across his whole career. Whether Plaatje is seen as belonging to an African “petit bourgeoisie” (an inexact term, as many African middle strata lacked effective access to the means of production), an African élite (but one *without* real power), an African intelligentsia (*without* academies or publishing houses), or a dispossessed African peasantry (*without* land), the evidence presented below shows his definite and continuing sympathy for black workers.

Therefore I propose “another” Plaatje. Not the stereotypical, gentlemanly top-hatted pro-Empire moderate, but the obstinate if at times timid fighter for the rights of all Africans, critical of Empire if deferent to Western legality and broadly sympathetic to the predicament of African toilers. I also propose an alternative selection from his works, suggesting somewhat different attitudes than hitherto presented. Like Midgley (2001), whose innovative research employing computer analysis of *Mhudi* suggests that Plaatje has been misread, I stress that Plaatje has been oversimplified as a pro-Empire “petit bourgeois” and should be seen in a fuller light. One aspect of this reconsideration is Plaatje’s attitude to gender.

Chrisman argues that Plaatje used his writings to criticise “the constitutionalist liberalism of the early ANC” and in so doing articulated “a pro-feminism which complicates and extends his conventional vision of South African liberation” (Chrisman 1997: 57). Early ANC ideologues constructed a definition of nationalism relying on ties to African masculinity for legitimation (Erlank 2001), but Plaatje appears more of an exception⁵. *Mhudi* was remarkable for the time, for its “woman-centeredness” (Chrisman 2000a: 177). Plaatje practically and publicly supported African women arrested for protesting pass laws in 1913, visiting them in jail: “[s]ome of the most refined ... women of Bloemfontein are negotiating the pebbles and the cement floor with the bare skins of their feet”. Some writers have interpreted these remarks as evidence of his petit bourgeois

sensibilities and contacts. However, passes also affected working women for they cost valuable money. Plaatje reported that “forty working women” were “kept away from their work”; dozens of domestic workers “failed to take up their positions beside the kitchen stoves ... [as] on their way to town they had been accosted by the police, arrested, and locked up”.⁶ In 1914 he solicited material aid for the Native Women’s Association.⁷ This concern was, one suspects, more race-based solidarity than class- or gender-consciousness. He feared the effects of the wrath of radical workers and their womenfolk, in 1914 warning that “women and some of the chiefs” favoured a general strike and that “when the strike is declared and those women begin to jeer at the pusillanimous labourers who hesitate to join, we will have the whole quarter million out on strike. ... Many ... will be shot.”⁸ A clue to the meaning of this anti-strike rhetoric is Plaatje’s concern to prevent bloodshed, but the contemporary lack of formal organisation of black workers suggests another reason for caution (an approach often later adopted by radical communists and unionists). A further moderating influence was censorship; Plaatje composed his speeches and writings with an eye to readers, who might consist of Africans, state officials and white supporters. This reminds us that we should give Plaatje more than one reading, and this certainly is the case with his pro-Britishness.

Plaatje’s “Britishness” coexisted with his own critique of Empire. His apparent pro-Empire sentiment could be used to invoke loyalty also for the purposes of African solidarity. Elsewhere, as part of a wider study and employing a computerised textual analysis of *Native Life*, I elaborate on this paradox (Limb 2002a). In *Native Life*, written to appeal to the British public and government, he clearly identifies with what he sees as the democratic aspects of the Imperial mission but protests its exploitative and racist aspects. Simultaneously and often sarcastically he asserts loyalty to the Crown whilst denouncing the hypocrisy of Empire and challenging the cultural domination of colonialism with its African stereotypes.

The effects of the historical synthesis of the complex links between literacy, Christianity and colonisation in Southern Africa (De Kock 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991) influenced Plaatje’s makeup but his outward trappings of late Victorian culture amount less to a cultural cringe than a studied compromise. He admires and imbibes many British traditions — Shakespeare, legalism, and liberalism — but is ambivalent; he values Shakespeare’s non-racialism but loathes contemporary British cinematography depicting Africans as savages (Plaatje 1916). His residence in Kimberley, “a supremely British place” in which Imperial hegemony permeated all forms of social life, contributed to his pro-Britishness (Willan 1982: 238, 242) but also eventually contributed to his scepticism about the true motives of British capital. Plaatje respects British “progress” but, like other Congress leaders, often condemns colonial officials. Thus, in his 1909 manuscript *Black Dreyfus*, he castigates the British High Commissioner for jailing Chief Sekgoma (Plaatje 1996: 105–19). How long can

Plaatje criticise the colonial administration without also attacking the Imperial centre? By 1921 he had done this; his address *in absentia* to the Paris Pan-African Congress highlights the “inferior position” of black subjects of *all* Empires at the hands of “exploiters” (Plaatje 1996: 264). In doing so he (re)asserted his African identity.

In his works Plaatje inserts other identities important to him: South African, African, MoTswana, and membership of ANC and Christian communities. He helps forge an African national identity at a time when full South African citizenship was denied Africans. He probably saw no contradiction between his apparent simultaneous identification with Empire and Africa but increasingly the former gave way to the latter, typifying the dilemmas faced by African leaders (Limb 2002a). These complex identities are evident in his journalism, which reveals both loyalty and criticism of British rule, and also ambiguity to the struggles of workers, to which I now turn.

Plaatje, the Press and the Proletariat

African newspapers in early twentieth century South Africa were modest in size and moderate in tone, with low circulation rates among a population with limited literacy. Yet they confronted a social system that discriminated against all Africans (Switzer 1984: 464). Many black editors protested against discrimination, and many of these newspapers had ties with Congress leaders and supported Congress policies. The press was a crucial weapon of African nationalists for several reasons. Firstly and more generally, as modern political formations develop, the role of the press tends to increase in significance. Anderson conceptualises the nation as an “imagined” political community in which intellectuals, using tools such as the press, play a pivotal role in developing nationalism, particularly the case in colonies (such as South Africa) with a stunted indigenous bourgeoisie (1983: 13–15, 137). Secondly, denied involvement in parliament, Congress sought to represent African aspirations wherever it could, such as through the press. Thirdly, because the ANC confronted rival Imperial, state and ethnic authorities, each claiming a measure of legitimacy among Africans, it made use of the press as an avenue to claim legitimacy. With few other publication outlets, many early African writers, such as Plaatje, turned to newspapers and to Congress.

These newspapers certainly reflected African “petit bourgeois” interests. The African proletariat in the early twentieth century was too small and poorly resourced to secure effective self-representation. Given the silence of the white press about black workers and the fragile nature of black labour unions, African workers had few mediators to communicate their grievances. However, newspapers associated with Congress, if owned and controlled by an educated élite, then at least catalysed some public awareness of labour conditions, both in the sense that African workers were part of the African nation and because these

workers often bore the brunt of the harshest forms of racial discrimination and exploitation (Limb 2000). This was the case with newspapers in Mafeking and Kimberley edited by Plaatje.

Plaatje's labour journalism reveals an ambiguity in his support for worker grievances. Rarely was he prepared to go beyond exposure of labour conditions to more direct representation of their interests. Yet he shows a general sympathy for African workers and a level of understanding of their struggles that suggest a more complex set of attitudes towards labour than acknowledged by historians. In comparison with more conservative black newspapers, such as *Ilanga lase Natal* or *Imvo Zabantsundu*, Plaatje's newspapers give relatively more consistent representations of black workers.

In accord with prevailing cultural and strategic paradigms of the African élite, *Koranta ea Becoana* (Bechuana Gazette, 1901–1908, Mafeking) disclaimed “social equality with the white man” in favour of “political recognition as loyal British subjects”. But beside this apparent docility Plaatje developed a strong critique of black exploitation. Historians have neglected *Koranta's* labour coverage. Yet “Native Labour” was a frequent news header. In 1902 prominence was given by Plaatje to those who opposed plans by “insatiable Rand mine ... capitalists” to indenture Chinese labour. He linked such plans directly to moves by magnates to lower African wages in order “to obtain the cheapest labour in the world at our expense”. He denounced claims by a white writer that African labourers were lazy and attacked “the greed” of mine magnates for “wrongfully and illegally withholding the just wages of their labourers”. He congratulated British Secretary of State for Colonies Chamberlain for rejecting a proposal by mine capitalists that Africans work for virtually nothing. Plaatje published reports on the mistreatment of labourers and when the government subsequently relied only on the views of mining magnates he supplied his own damning evidence.⁹

Koranta frequently denounced the harsh and discriminatory treatment of African labourers — exploitation of unpaid apprentices, discrimination on ethnic lines, and high industrial accident rates. The latter was a “butchery” occurring “with terrible frequency”, even at De Beers (Plaatje at times articulated a parochialism exaggerating this firm's concern for its employees). He added that De Beers' “promiscuous distribution of monetary gifts [dividends] ... very often overlooked the interest of the most loyal and harmless (though important) section among its labourers”.¹⁰ The latter characterisation encapsulates Plaatje's attitude to African workers. He recognised them as vital to the economy — mines “did not happen to grow. They were dug by black men” — and his *Koranta* was their defender — “organ of the majority of [De Beers] employees [and] representing the labouring classes”. Plaatje affirmed that “we want our Natives to teach our Europeans the dignity and happiness of educated labour” but revealed his distaste for workers' involvement in class struggle: “[u]nlike any class of

labourers the world over, [Africans] can produce a spotless record of years of loyal and faithful service". Plaatje appeared satisfied with black workers' political impotence when he wrote: "the rowd[y]ism of the white miners last week has demonstrated the peaceable harmlessness of black labour". This attitude of Plaatje's was due in part to the importance he attached to ethnicity and liberalism. He saw Africans as a "race-class" and promoted Booker T. Washington, an advocate of black capitalism, as an "emblem of emulation" by youth.¹¹ In general, Plaatje's first editorship saw him grapple with issues of class and race. It is difficult to estimate the impact of this newspaper. *Koranta's* labour reporting was not limited to the Rand and Kimberley, but a circulation of only 1,000 to 2,000 copies and the low literacy levels of black workers undoubtedly limited its penetration of working-class communities.¹²

In 1910 Plaatje became editor of the self-styled "independent race newspaper," *Tsala ea Becoana* (later *Tsala ea Batho* (Friend of the People) 1910–1915) in Kimberley. After he became ANC secretary, readers increasingly viewed this newspaper as a Congress organ. Circulation increased from 1,700 copies in 1910 to 4,000 copies in 1913.¹³ Based in a mining city, *Tsala* often carried reports on strikes, letters from mine employees, and editorial expressions of concern for the welfare of wage-earners. Plaatje, for instance, criticised the retrenchment of African interpreters and postal workers in favour of less skilled white employees, attacked the meagre pensions of Africans and their "niggardly wage", and published letters from workers voicing grievances. When Dutoitspan labourers formed a "benefit society" they requested Plaatje to print its regulations. Another *Tsala* link with miners was the printing of Native Recruiting Corporation advertisements, suggesting that at least some miners read the paper.¹⁴ *Tsala* also reported meetings of government and ANC leaders on protection for migrant workers, calls by whites for forced labour, and parliamentary debates on industrial colour bars. *Tsala* covered matters of everyday interest to African workers, such as assaults committed by supervisors against labourers,¹⁵ so Plaatje as editor was at least aware of the torments of working class lives.

Tsala editorials tended to oppose strikes, thus expressing moderate views. However, such moderate viewpoints do not necessarily prove Plaatje's aloofness from labour; social democratic (and even communist) leaders occasionally opposed individual strikes. Moreover, the black press was under constant state scrutiny and so tended to modify editorials much in the same way that declarations of Imperial loyalty often accompanied ANC protests.¹⁶ An example of the complexity of Plaatje's attitudes is his coverage of a 1913 Rand strike. He detailed the "dissatisfaction" of labourers following cessation of their pay, drew attention to their statements that white unionists had made them "familiar with the meaning and effect of a strike" and, following the strike's "pillage, sabotage and bloodshed", contrasted the withdrawal of charges against white strikers with harsh sentences given to "native accomplices". He urged clemency but indicative

of a greater interest in race justice than worker solidarity, added that “just grounds” existed to imprison black strikers if “white agitators” were jailed. Another instance of *Tsala’s* attitude to strikes was its call, in the face of intense state intimidation, for blacks not to participate in a 1914 white strike¹⁷ (see below).

However, Plaatje did not base his editorials entirely on ideas of race. Commenting favourably on “an interesting sketch of moderate Trade Union views”, Plaatje affirmed that to “deny to the working man or to his Union the right to bargain ... is to show a lack of the most elementary rudiments of common justice”.¹⁸ Notions of justice are explicit here, but Plaatje’s apparent support for the principles of unionism is in keeping with the tenets of the social democratic movement then gathering steam in Britain and South Africa.

This was a time of intense black suspicion of the increasingly racist white labour movement. *Tsala* urged black voters in 1910 to oppose a Labour Party candidate because Labour wanted “employers to sack their native servants”. Plaatje did reproduce a speech of the radical Labourite Waterson explaining why whites had encouraged Africans to strike. In general, however, he remained hostile to Labour, accusing the Labour Party of conspiring with the state to reserve jobs for whites.¹⁹ Plaatje forged closer relations between Congress and the African Political Organisation, which claimed influence among “coloured” workers, whom he warned against joining strikes by “our arch-enemy, the lily-white Labourite”. Plaatje’s newspaper urged “coloured” workers — despite the contradiction in supporting their other “arch-enemy” — to “stick to the Government might and main!” He condemned “selfish white labour agitation” and state policy for squeezing coloured workers out of work.²⁰

The above press extracts indicate both an ambiguity and an openness on labour issues. Plaatje was a moderate, but very concerned about the harsh conditions of black workers and willing to protest their mistreatment. Whilst he generally opposed strikes he also partly understood their causes and was concerned as much with preventing violence and exhausting constitutional protest as with opposing radicalism per se. He continually reaffirmed the central role of black labour in South African society. This “Friend of the People” may have been firstly a friend of Africans as a race, rather than as workers, but he sought to mitigate the suffering of African workers. He was, as *Bantu World* eulogised on 25 June 1932, “a thorn in the flesh of the oppressors and exploiters”.

Plaatje’s willingness to publicise the grievances of black labour is attributable to various factors. Labour issues were unavoidable in Kimberley, with its preponderance of labourers. His sympathetic labour reporting probably also related to his need for readers. Part of the paradox — that he appears both pro- and anti-worker²¹ — lies in his own experiences of the labour market (see below) and in the position of blacks in society. Blacks were treated by the state and by

whites as a servile mass predestined for purely labouring tasks. It was impossible for Plaatje to escape this notion entirely. Plaatje's reporting helped keep labour issues alive among his readers and, combined with ANC statements in support of the basic rights of black labour, helped establish Congress as a force that was at least sympathetic to the broad aspirations of black workers. Plaatje matched his journalistic interest in black workers with his political lobbying on their behalf.

Plaatje, Politics and African Workers

In its first months leaders of the SANNC held meetings with state ministers on job discrimination and the need to extend workers' compensation to mine labourers. Plaatje spoke out strongly at these meetings, at public gatherings and in the press against discriminatory state policies.²² As part of Congress protests against the Land Act, he travelled widely and saw first-hand evidence of mass poverty.²³ In July 1913 he detailed to government the hardships suffered by Africans caused by the Act and raised the fate of black miners imprisoned for their part in the above-mentioned white-led strike.²⁴ Plaatje was instrumental in disassociating Congress from the strike but his main opposition appears to have been to the role of white (often racist) unionists, whom he regarded as inimical to black interests. In the same year he clashed with Transvaal members of Congress who proposed strike action to seek redress on the Land Act (Willan 1984: 155, 163, 222). On another occasion he was at least prepared to address a strike meeting and express a form of solidarity. In June 1918 he told a public meeting called by Congress that the death of an African killed by a white man for his horse "shows that we will be shot down as dogs, [just] as the ... magistrate said to the natives arrested while demanding an increase to their wages".²⁵ More often, however, Plaatje was cautious about industrial action. In 1919 he convinced Lydenburg workers threatening to strike not to "quarrel with your Masters".²⁶

Despite Plaatje's rejection of strikes and radical socialism, the state continued to monitor his movements closely.²⁷ He maintained a broad sympathy for African workers in the 1920s in the face of hardening state attitudes, writing a graphic press description of the wretched conditions of Lichtenburg miners.²⁸ That such sympathy rarely transcended the limitations of writing or lobbying was evident when the more radical Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union accused him of "plaintive thanksgiving" in failing to confront the government at a Native Conference. The Communist Party of South Africa expressed similar criticism of Plaatje's moderateness. In characterising Congress as "dominated by instruments, conscious or unconscious ... of the ruling class", the Party chose to exemplify Plaatje who, "expected to figure as a leader of the blacks to emancipation", instead repudiated the idea of a reprieve for an African sentenced to death.²⁹

By then Plaatje no longer was prominent in Congress, although he continued to protest poor conditions of black workers in the press.³⁰ In 1930 he joined an ANC deputation protesting against the pass laws. Plaatje's evidence to the Native Economic Commission in 1931 focused on workers and the landless. He told the all-white commissioners that even urban Africans in regular employment had "no money at all" in times of poor harvests. The situation of diamond labourers was precarious, driven by white diggers to become "wanderers ... content to do casual jobs ... for the price of 'a bellyfull of skoff'". The deleterious effects of the Great Depression, which in South Africa hurt blacks much more than whites, were highlighted by Plaatje, who supplied answers to what the white commissioners saw as the riddle of labour "shortages". Plaatje pointed out to the Commissioners that many blacks naturally sought higher wages than those offered on farms. Africans, he added, simply were not considered for better-paid jobs. He urged the commissioners to recommend a minimum wage for Africans. Recounting for them his 1927 visit to the Lichtenburg mines, Plaatje argued that the African labourer, "by the exercise of his muscles ... was banishing White unemployment". Plaatje demonstrated that closed compounds where labourers had nowhere else to buy goods were a lucrative source of company income and made a plea for aged ex-workers and phthisis victims to receive land compensation. He echoed these verbal complaints in a written submission: the African was not only "the Union's cheap labourer" but also, with "his meagre wage, ... chief taxpayer". "No commission," he concluded sarcastically, "ever reminded the Europeans that they owe their country's solvency to the labour of 200,000 Native miners". Any champion of the "black petit bourgeoisie" could be expected to detail the demands of this class; yet Plaatje mentioned the problems of African traders only in passing, choosing instead to give priority to the problems of black workers³¹.

Later in 1931 Plaatje returned to themes of unemployment and job discrimination when addressing the Cape Native Voters' Association in Aliwal North. The African was "gaoled for being poor" whilst the remedy, work, was now a white prerogative. In the last year of his life he travelled to Cape Town to raise with the Minister of Native Affairs the suffering of unemployed workers and the harsh provisions of the Native Service Contract Bill. This legislation, Plaatje charged, made farm labourers "virtually owned by the European landowner". In his last press articles, Plaatje denounced the Bill and attempts to extend the "tot" system of farm worker payment, recounting the case of an African worker who was arrested when trying to protest about employer assault. He also warned that the National Party wanted to rid itself of any obligation to pay African labourers³². For all his "petit bourgeois" accretions, which earned him a reputation among historians as a study in moderation, Plaatje remained the champion of his oppressed people, of whom he often accorded workers a prominent place.

Explaining Ambiguity and Commitment of Plaatje

I distinguish several causes to explain Plaatje's labour views. Firstly, behind his defence of labour rights lay a partial identification with black wage earners, influenced by his own working days. He started work as a letter courier in 1894, earning £72 a year. This identification decreased in later years as his apprehension increased about the gathering trends to foreclose non-manual employment options for blacks (Willan 1984: 28–57³³). Secondly, Plaatje clearly had sympathy for exploited African workers. *Native Life* raises questions about this exploitation and *Mhudi* ends with reference to the notion that whites see Africans purely as labourers. In *The Mote and the Beam*, he illustrates his exposure of the hypocrisy of white miscegenation with the story of a female domestic worker (Plaatje 1921: 86–91). Thirdly, Kimberley was a colonial mining town replete with race, national and class contradictions that cannot fail to have influenced Plaatje. Plaatje lived much of his life in Angel Street, Kimberley, in a house (now a national monument) in the old Malay Camp not far from the quarters of some black workers and a few blocks from the “Big Hole”. This spatial proximity to workers should not be exaggerated but in the context of settler society there was thus always opportunity for Plaatje to be reminded of his less affluent compatriots. Neither was he ever rich. He returned from overseas political missions impoverished and his modest house was in fact a gift of Kimberley citizens (Willan 1984: 28–9, 380). The fear of proletarianisation haunting more affluent ANC leaders thus had less effect in Plaatje's case. In all Plaatje's writings there is evidence of what Ndebele calls Plaatje's implicit awareness of class conflict and commitment “on the side of a large economic group against another economic group” (Ndebele 1993: 60). Fourthly, the duality of power implicit in settler society created a deeply ambiguous context in which African political culture and writers such as Plaatje developed. Finally, he found white Labour racism intolerable. This influenced his acceptance in 1918 of De Beers support for his opposition to Congress socialists (Willan 1978)³⁴. Too much however can be made of this “relationship” and Plaatje's anti-communism as indicating pro-capitalist views, for he remained sceptical that white capitalists cared at all for the black poor. Magnates who generously endowed white schools, he wrote, “never think of the children of their docile mining labourers” (Plaatje 1920: 183).

Even ANC writers sometimes portray Plaatje in a more conservative light. In 1981 an article in the then broadly pro-socialist ANC organ *Sechaba* saw Plaatje as a

representative of the emergent African intelligentsia. ... He did not want to commit Congress to strike action ... The contradictions that existed in Plaatje's speeches and behaviour reflected the real contradictions that existed... He never really understood (or he disliked) the emergence of the working class” (ANC 1981).

Yet Plaatje was aware of the burgeoning power of socialism. Interviewed by the

British *Labour Leader* in 1919, he conceded that “the only people from whom we have any sympathy and support are the International Socialists and, unfortunately, they are an insignificant minority” (Couzens 1976: 59–63).

I am not arguing that Plaatje had a socialist ideology even if, at times, he adopted elements of social democratic thought and came into contact with socialists. He tended to view African workers as Africans, rather than as workers. He never envisaged for them an independent political role. His message frequently was ambiguous; his editorials preached industrial moderation as much as the need to alleviate the problems experienced by labour. His coverage of workers, if sympathetic, never captures the vibrancy of working class culture, suggesting some distance from the lives of labourers. Neither do I want to suggest that there are two Plaatje’s: the “revolutionary” populist of *Native Life*,³⁵ and the post-1917 moderate. Plaatje regularly opposed radical influences in Congress and his sympathy for black workers certainly had inconsistencies, whilst his “representation” of labour had no real mandate from workers themselves. Nevertheless he lobbied throughout his career to improve black labour conditions.

Plaatje tried to articulate the views of “voiceless” Africans. This reflected not just his opinions but also the undercurrent of movements and ideas integral to the ANC and the diverse social classes supporting it. “Middle class” movements influenced Plaatje, but they in turn were responding to other influences, including the growing social presence of black workers. Plaatje mixed heterogeneous elements: commitment to African emancipation, the influence of liberalism and legalism, opposition to radicalism, and sympathy for workers. Taken alone, each could prove class identification but Plaatje’s attention to workers is indisputable. Limited black literacy and low circulation of his newspapers make it unlikely that the majority of workers read his journalism. However, Plaatje’s columns partly filled a vacuum caused by the dearth of social democratic and labour organisations that could claim genuinely to represent African workers in the two decades before 1920. More importantly, Plaatje’s claims to speak on behalf of all Africans, including workers, helped legitimise Congress in African eyes. One component of this process of legitimisation was the representation of workers in the black media, a trend that, like the later alliance of black unions with the ANC, was broadly, if inconsistently, sustained over the decades and contributed to the eventual electoral victory of the ANC in 1994.

Plaatje’s Place in South African Studies

Since the demise of apartheid, Plaatje’s life and writings continue to attract attention. In 1992 his Kimberley home and in 1997 his grave were declared national monuments. In 1998 the University of the North West conferred on him a posthumous honorary doctorate. Schools and the South African Education

Department Head Office now carry his name. The house in which he lived in London bears a plaque from English Heritage.³⁶ When the ANC instituted a new system of awards, the first was the Sol Plaatje Award, conferred on the best performing ANC branch (ANC 2001). Several films on Plaatje have appeared; Tim Couzen's 1979 *Light in a Dark World*, Lance Gewer's *Come See the Bioscope* (on Plaatje's attempts to educate rural people about the Land Act) and Jane Thandi Lipman's 2000 *Sol Plaatje, a Man for Our Time*.³⁷ There even have been postage stamps in honour of his role as a South African Wartime author. Perhaps the only sour note was a threat by a foundry to melt down his statue when the Kimberley Council was slow to pay for the work.³⁸

Plaatje's position as a cultural icon or political symbol of the new South Africa is thus well established. With what then do South Africans today associate his name? Most probably they see an important ANC founder, a tireless fighter for human rights, and a wonderfully creative writer. Government, writers and film directors affirm his significance as an apostle of reconciliation, a pioneer of integrating nationalism, and a champion of the survival and vitality of African culture. To these splendid achievements we should add Plaatje's uncommonly consistent (for the time) adherence to supporting the rights of African workers and African women, and his role as an early articulator of African nationalism and identities even if at times this was cocooned in Imperial garb. Understanding Plaatje's complex attitudes to class, nation, gender and empire help us to appreciate better the ubiquitous contemporary images of the man. Previous Plaatje scholarship provided keen insights into the ambiguity of his class position and the contradictions of multiple identities. Further analysis of the historical context, and a comprehensive reading of Plaatje's oeuvre, show that his attitudes to class, nation, gender and empire were more complex. Plaatje opposed settler colonialism, if in ambiguous ways. He combined commitment to African emancipation with belief in the fairness of Cape justice, sympathy for the plight of African workers with opposition to radical socialism. A devout Empire loyalist on the surface, he nevertheless recreated in the coloniser's language a sense of African dignity and identity denied by the exclusion of Africans from citizenship.

Part of the secret of the ANC's continuing electoral success is its ability, like Plaatje, to appeal to a very wide range of social strata. This is typical of nationalism everywhere but also it is due to the simultaneous sympathy and involvement (though not without contradictions) with the day-to-day struggles of diverse peoples by leaders such as Sol Plaatje.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at conferences and seminars at the University of the North West, Mafikeng, Université de Laval, Quebec, and Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg.

2. Plaatje reminded a *Friend* correspondent who dubbed him a (well-educated) “Lovedale beauty” that not only had he received little education until age fourteen but had walked barefoot to a labour centre with only fifteen pence in his pocket. Now, he retorted, he owned property: *Koranta ea Becoana* 21 Mar. 1903.
3. Personal correspondence with Brian Willan and with the Kimberley editors of a proposed “collected” edition (likely, however, to be another selected edition rather than his comprehensive oeuvre).
4. P. Seme, “The Native National Congress,” *Tsala ea Batho*, 17 July 1915.
5. Some other Congressmen at this time were sensitive to women’s demands (see Limb 2002b)
6. *Tsala ea Batho*, 14, 21 June, 12, 19 July, 16 Aug., 15 Nov. 1913; see also Plaatje 1987: 115.
7. *Tsala*, 22 Aug. 1914.
8. *Tsala*, 10 January 1914.
9. *Koranta ea Beroanq*, 20 June, 25 July, 29 Aug., 11 Apr., 7 Feb., 4 Nov., 17, 24 Jan., 31 Dec., 11 Oct., 15 Nov. 1902. Plaatje did, however print a Sylvester Williams article attacking Chamberlain and “his gold-worshipping confrères”: *Koranta ea Becoana*, 18 July, 1903.
10. *Koranta*, 2 Dec, 28 Oct., 1903.
11. *Koranta*, 25 July, 2 Dec., 4, 18 Apr., 24 Jan., 29 Aug.; 28 Oct., 18, 11 Nov., 27 June 1903.
12. *Koranta*, 14, 7 Mar. 1903; see also Willan 1984: 109, 125.
13. *Tsala*, 17 Feb. 1912, 2 Aug. 1913, 17 Oct. 1914, 17 July 1915, 10 May, 26 July 1913.
14. *Tsala*, 2 Dec. 1911, 17 Feb. 1912, 17 July 1915, 25 Oct., 10 May, 5, 19 July, 30 Aug. 1913.
15. *Tsala*, 14, 28 Nov. 1914, 23 Jan., 15, 22, 29 May 1915, 3, 17 Sept., 24 Dec. 1910; 30 Aug. 1913, 21 Feb., 7 Mar. 1914. White labour racism increasingly preoccupied Plaatje. A 1914 editorial gave “a thousand apologies” to the Chamber of Mines, which it had “always accused ... of deliberately shutting out Natives and Coloured labourers from skilled work”. Now it “seems clear that our limitation is the result of a conspiracy between the Union Government and the Labour Party”: *Tsala ea Batho*, 4 Apr., 1914.
16. The paper was “carefully read by the heads” of several state departments: *Tsala ea Batho*, 21 Mar., 1914.
17. *Tsala*, 26 July, 18 Oct., 29 Nov. 1913, 23 May, 17, 24 Jan. 1914.
18. *Tsala* 23 May 1914. Plaatje’s distaste for strikes also is shown in a 1913 letter to S. Molema in the Molema-Plaatje Papers, file Da23, held in the University of the Witwatersrand Library.
19. *Tsala*, 1 Oct., 10 Sept. 1910, 4, 18 Apr., 9, 23, 30 May, 13 June, 17 Oct., 14 Mar., 1914, 12 June 1915.
20. *Tsala*, 3, 17 Jan. 1914.
21. This ambiguity may have confused state officials who were undecided whether he was an agitator or ally against radicalism. Police closely monitored his movements for years: South African Police to Secretary of Justice re Movements of Plaatje, 1923, in SA. Secretary for Justice (JUS), file J269 3/1064/18 C.2 59/20, 22/12/23.
22. *Tsala*, 6 Apr. 1912; *The International*, 8 June 1917. See also Willan 1984: 244.
23. *Tsala*, 15 Nov. 1913, 14 Mar. 1914.
24. State Archives, Pretoria (SA), Native Affairs (NA) file 15 2972/13/1 814; see also Plaatje 1920: 203.
25. SA. Director of Native Labour. Government Native Labour Bureau 281 446/17/D48; *International*, 5 July 1918.
26. Police report, 23 Apr. 1919, JUS 3/527/17.
27. Police report 1923, JUS J269.
28. *Daily Dispatch* 7 May 1927.
29. *The Workers’ Herald* 15 Dec. 1926; *The International* 11 Jan. 1924.
30. *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 9 Nov. 1929.
31. Evidence to Native Economic Commission (1930–32), in NA 62/276(1): 5283–96, 5305–30; cf. Plaatje 1986: 390–6.
32. *Ikwizi le Afrika* 9 Jan. 1932; *Umteteli wa Bantu* 9 Jan., 13, 27 Feb. 1932; Willan 1984: 384.

33. See also the obituary in *Umteteli wa Bantu* 21 May 1932.
34. De Beers and state officials courted Plaatje as an antidote to rising socialist agitation. De Beers began to perceive the ANC relationship to workers at an early date, booking 100 seats at the public reception of the SANNK 1914 Kimberley conference and offering delegates free train excursions to their mines: *Tsala ea Batho*, 10 Jan., 28 Feb., 14 Mar. 1914.
35. *Native Life* voices “the revolutionary rage” of the dispossessed (Chrisman 1997: 62).
36. *Mail and Guardian*, 9 Oct. 1997; *The Star*, 24 April 1998; Talk by Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, to the learners of Vryburg High School, 14 January 2000.
37. A. Worsdale, “Ahead of His Time” (film review), *Mail and Guardian* 24 July 2000.
38. “Sol Plaatje Statue Heading for the Melting Pot”, *Pretoria Online* 16 Feb. 2000. Found at: <http://www.pta-online.co/za>

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