

the groundwork for future historical research that can investigate the competition that emerged among different networks of Indian business in South Africa, as well as the linkages that grew with East African and Gulf societies further to the north along the Indian Ocean coast.

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REFLECTIONS ON SOL PLAATJE

Sol Plaatje's Native Life in South Africa: Past and Present.

Edited by Janet Remington, Brian Willan, and Bhekizizwe Peterson.

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'Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth' (ix, xvi). Thus begins Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje's book-length jeremiad against the Natives' Land Act, a law that greatly restricted the ability of rural black South Africans to buy and sell land, and that compelled most of them either to crowd onto small 'native reserves' or to work on white-owned farms. Published in 1916 in London, Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* was written primarily for British readers in an effort to generate sympathy for the plight of blacks in the British dominion of South Africa and to pressure the South African government to reduce the severity of the law. However, appearing in the midst of the First World War and overwhelmed by European domination in South Africa, *Native Life* had limited impact on white public opinion and failed to stem the tide of growing discrimination against blacks in South Africa.

In commemoration of *Native Life's* centenary, a group of scholars based mostly in South Africa has produced a collection of essays with the intention 'to explore the book in its original context and to consider its contemporary significance' (xvi). Emulating *Native Life's* eclectic mix of genres, the anthology includes not only scholarly essays from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, but also several poems, photographs, a short story, and other supplementary materials. The book's examination of Plaatje's *Native Life* can be described as addressing four general themes: its production, format, and style; the social context in which it was written; its significance within the history of South Africa; and its relevance for South Africans today.

As described by Plaatje biographer Brian Willan in the first chapter, Sol Plaatje wrote *Native Life* while visiting Britain with a delegation of the South African Native National Congress (the African National Congress after 1925). As Willan relates, Plaatje employed a variety of strategies to persuade his British audience and secure the support needed to publish the book. In Chapter Two, the literary scholar Bhekizizwe Peterson examines more closely the style of *Native Life* and Plaatje's use of various tropes, idioms, and

cultural references that reveal his position as a cosmopolitan, mission-educated African intellectual during the early twentieth century. That text is followed by Peter Limb's chapter focusing on Plaatje's career as a journalist and the world of black-run newspapers in South Africa at that time. Analysis of *Native Life*'s rhetoric and its social context continues with Janet Remington's consideration of movement, stasis, and location in both Plaatje's writing and more generally in colonial South Africa. Albert Grundlingh's chapter considers the impact of the First World War on *Native Life*. Later in the anthology, Heather Hughes describes the roles played by women in Plaatje's life and work, including his marriage with Elizabeth M'belle, the patronage he cultivated with prominent progressive women in Britain, and the inspiring efforts of black South African women who protested against pass laws in 1913.

Much of the book is devoted to exploring the broader historical significance of Sol Plaatje's career, and two chapters that this historian found to be particularly thought-provoking were by Khwezi Mkhize and André Odendaal. Given that *Native Life* and its Cape liberalism failed to prevent apartheid, many scholars and activists after 1960 tended to dismiss the work of Plaatje and his generation as ill-conceived and futile, but Mkhize and Odendaal both observe that *Native Life* appeared during an era when the idea of South Africa, much less of a democratically-governed independent state, was still very much in its infancy. Christopher Saunders echoes some of those same thoughts in his chapter, and Keith Breckenridge similarly suggests that Plaatje and his cohort may have been prescient rather than 'stooges of international capitalism' in advocating black private land ownership (175).

Despite such historicity, much of the book nevertheless retains a persistent, though understandable, tendency to view the South African past through the thick lens of the apartheid era, emphasizing Sol Plaatje's foundational role in the 'freedom struggle' of the twentieth century rather than as a product of the long nineteenth century. Several of the book's contributors acknowledge that Plaatje was writing as a subject of the British Empire and was part of a larger world of black intellectuals, but that analysis could have been greatly strengthened by including a chapter comparing his work with that of Anglophone writers in West Africa. There are a few passing references to the American Pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois, but there is virtually no mention of prominent contemporary intellectuals in Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, and Nigeria who shared many of the same views, goals, and methods as Sol Plaatje.

That said, the volume is a welcome collection of well-written, well-researched, and insightful commentaries on Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje's importance as an astute observer and influential critic of South Africa during its transition from an assortment of African chiefdoms under European colonial domination to a single, white-ruled state.

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