

# Cinema and the Idea of Fieldwork in Sol Plaatje's Journeys

Fernanda Pinto de Almeida<sup>1</sup> \* , and Aidan Erasmus<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape

<sup>2</sup>Department of History, University of the Western Cape

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [pintoafernanda@gmail.com](mailto:pintoafernanda@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** In the mid-1920s, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje toured the South African countryside showing films he brought from the Tuskegee Institute in the United States. Plaatje's cinema tours complemented his educational talks on the status of Africans in the Union of South Africa alongside the material he collected for books, speeches and political tours. Focusing on the itinerant cinema as an element of fieldwork, our article asks what can be learned from approaching Plaatje's research practices. We consider Plaatje's methods of research in relation to conventional notions of social scientific fieldwork, which also relied on modern media but were often entangled in colonial projects that projected an image of African rural life. Drawing on letters, novels, and accounts of his film screenings, our essay argues for an interdisciplinary engagement with cinema practices in African history that is attentive to the uses of mass media in research and the pedagogical valences of itinerant film screenings. Considering Plaatje's cinema alongside the value he attached to travelling and mobility, we argue that his cinema puts the field to work and inspires new practices of research in African Studies.

**Résumé:** Au milieu des années 1920, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje fait une tournée dans la campagne sud-africaine pour diffuser des films qu'il a apportés de l'Institut Tuskegee aux États-Unis. Les tournées de cinéma de Plaatje complétaient ses conférences sur le statut de Africains de l'Union sud-africaine ainsi que le matériel qu'il a collecté pour ses livres, discours et tournées politiques. En mettant l'accent sur le cinéma itinérant comme élément de travail de terrain, notre article demande ce que l'on peut apprendre des pratiques de recherche de Plaatje. Nous évaluons ses méthodes de recherche par rapport à la notion de terrain en sciences sociales, qui s'appuyaient également sur les médias modernes mais étaient souvent empêtrées

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dans des projets coloniaux qui projetaient une certaine image de la vie rurale africaine. S'appuyant sur des lettres, des romans et des récits de ses projections de films, notre essai plaide pour un engagement interdisciplinaire avec les pratiques cinématographiques en histoire africaine qui soit attentive aux usages des médias de masse dans la recherche et aux dimensions pédagogiques des projections itinérantes de films. En évaluant le cinéma de Plaatje avec la valeur qu'il attachait au voyage et à la mobilité, nous avançons que son cinéma met le terrain à contribution et inspire de nouvelles pratiques de recherche en études africaines.

## Introduction

A kind of paradigm shift is occurring; we are perhaps now acceding to a new, invigorated sense of looking at the struggle over geography in interesting and imaginative ways. Edward Said<sup>1</sup>

This article concerns the research endeavors and tours of South African writer and intellectual Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje and explores how his research journeys included, from the mid-1920s, film screenings with a bioscope projector. While he was not unique in staging film showings in the South African countryside, what distinguished Plaatje's bioscope was that his screenings complemented his political and educational talks on the status of Africans in the context of the Union of South Africa and the changes in land ownership laws after the 1913 Native Land Act. Although the bioscope's reception did not translate into the financial success that Plaatje expected, the screenings were arguably popular among African children and youth.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we approach Plaatje's bioscope as more than mere entertainment or a mode of political agitation. We consider it, instead, as a method for rethinking what African life in a shifting colonial landscape was and could be. Plaatje, we contend, offered a different vision of fieldwork to that held by early twentieth-century ethnographers, and we suggest that cinema became an important medium to realize this vision.

While the transatlantic aspects of Plaatje's life and work—including his cinema—have received considerable scholarly attention, attending to cinema as an element of his fieldwork remains underexplored.<sup>3</sup> Scholarship on

<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, "Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism: A Symposium," *Social Text* 40 (2004), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje 1876–1932* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Phehello Mofokeng, "Cosmopolitanism in *Mhudi*: 100 Years Is a Long Time, but *Mhudi* Is Still Relevant," *BKO Magazine*, July 2020, <https://bkomagazine.co.za/cosmopolitanism-in-mhudi-100-years-is-a-long-time-but-mhudi-is-still-relevant/> (accessed 5 March 2022); Laura Chrisman, "Black Atlantic Nationalism: Sol Plaatje and W. E. B Du Bois," in *Postcolonial Contraventions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 89–103; Anthony E. Voss, "Sol Plaatje, the Eighteenth Century, and South African Cultural Memory," *English in Africa* 21–1–2 (1994):

Plaatje's bioscope presents Plaatje as one of the "early pioneers" of South African film culture.<sup>4</sup> Our reading of Plaatje's cinema differs from approaches that read his cinema—and his work as a journalist and novelist—as a vantage point from which to write about national cinema histories or to express an incipient Black modernity in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> While inspired by some of these approaches, we consider Plaatje's cinema tour to be itself a practice of public history that simultaneously seeks to represent history and to contest its grounds.<sup>6</sup> Foregrounding a characterization of Plaatje as a traveling intellectual, we show how cinema reconstitutes modes of reimagining the placement of Africans within a particular time and sociopolitical order, while upholding the desire for African cosmopolitan mobility within imperial and national bounds.<sup>7</sup>

We thus approach the mobile cinema as a medium for, and of, traveling, as well as a pedagogical tool in what Plaatje called his "research journeys."<sup>8</sup> We position the bioscope as a specific but not isolated locus for a confluence of two fields in which Plaatje and his contemporaries found themselves: the rise of new reproductive, transcriptive, and compositional media and practices—such as phonography, cinema, music, and film screening—and the rise of

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59–75; and Ntongela Masilela, "The 'Black Atlantic' and African Modernity in South Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 27–4 (1996), 88–96.

<sup>4</sup> Saks, "A Tale of Two Nations: South Africa, De Voortrekkers and Come See the Bioscope," 140. See also Ntongela Masilela, "The New African Movement and the Beginnings of Film Culture in South Africa," in Balseiro, Isabel and Masilela, Ntongela (eds.), *To Change Reels: Film and Culture in South Africa* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 15–30.

<sup>5</sup> See Masilela, "The New African Movement"; Jacqueline Maingard, "Projecting Modernity: Sol Plaatje's Touring Cinema Exhibition in 1920s South Africa," in Treveri Gennari, Daniela, Hipkins, Danielle E., and O'Rawe, Catherine, *Rural Cinema Exhibition and Audiences in a Global Context* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 187–202; and Lucia Saks, "A Tale of Two Nations: South Africa, De Voortrekkers and Come See the Bioscope," *Ilha Do Desterro A Journal of English Language, Literatures in English and Cultural Studies* 61 (2011), 137–188.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie Witz, Ciraj Rassool, and Gary Minkley write of Cohen and Odhiambo's notion of 'the production of history': "Two aspects were particularly important to us: the first was the emphasis on practice, and the second was that it is knowledge about pasts. The plural is important: the production of history was multiple and 'equal' in significance and possibility. Thus, the sense of history as representation, where there are 'multiple locations of historical knowledge,' together with the sense that in approaching the 'production of history' one is also approaching 'history as production,' meant that doing history involved the investigation of different forms, practices, genres, and methodologies and social contexts that went into the production of histories as well as their forms of representation." Witz, Minkley, and Rassool, *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis (eds), *Worlding the South: Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture and the Southern British Colonies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> This term was used by Plaatje in *Mhudi*. Solomon T. Plaatje, "Foreword," *Mhudi* (London: Penguin, 2005 [1930]). xii.

forms of white nationalism and imperial displacements to which Plaatje was witness as journalist, activist, and traveler. In this manner, Plaatje's bioscope, as an element of his fieldwork, rejects a view of the urban as the only locus of the cinematic "modernity" while offering a vision of the countryside beyond boundedness and stasis. Indeed, we propose a reappraisal of Plaatje's notion of fieldwork beyond the idea of the field that was at the heart of a logic of retribalization in early twentieth-century South Africa and that shaped disciplinary methods of collection of evidence, especially in anthropology, archaeology, ethnomusicology, history, and Bantu Studies.<sup>9</sup> We conclude by discussing how Plaatje's cinema changes conventional notions of fieldwork and how emerging media technologies offered alternative engagements in and with the field to conceptions offered by universities at that time.<sup>10</sup>

### Pedagogies of Mobility

What if some day, and sooner than we think, that great mass [of disenfranchised human beings] becomes mobile, learns to cooperate, and moves irresistibly together?

Vere Stent, commenting on  
Dr Abdullah Abdurahman's presidential address,  
September 1913

In 1902, Plaatje became a prominent editor for an English and Setswana newspaper through the establishment of *Koranta ea Bechuana* (the *Bechuana Gazette*) in Kimberley, which focused on the political and social conditions of Africans in the area and beyond. These conditions, Plaatje felt, were degenerating rapidly as the so-called "native question" sought an answer after the

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Suren Pillay. "Where Do You Belong? Natives, Foreigners and Apartheid South Africa," *African Identities* 2–2 (2004): 215–232; Michael Nixon. "Depths of Field: Photographs and Early Southern African Music Studies," in Carolyn Hamilton and Pippa Skotnes (eds.), *Uncertain Curature: In and Out of the Archive* (Cape Town: Jacana Media, 2014) 189–229; and Archie Mafeje, "The Ideology of 'Tribalism,'" *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 9–2 (1971), 253–261.

<sup>10</sup> A figure who set these new media to work toward cultural and political ends much like Plaatje, but with different outcomes, was Hugh Tracey. Using sound recording technology in the 1930s, he inadvertently provided the basis for ethnomusicology's concept of African music. It is worth noting that Tracey also embarked upon a pedagogical project, where the recordings produced were cast as artifacts from which Africans might encounter their "culture" before it was lost to "modernity," as it were. The point here is that it seems that Plaatje's use of the cinema was intent on producing something other than cultural relativism as was the use of these various media at the time. See Hugh Tracey, "The Text Book Project for African Music," *African Music: Journal of the African Music Society* 4–1 (1967): 64–65; and Noel Jams Loble. "The Social Biography of Ethnomusicological Field Recordings: Eliciting Responses to Hugh Tracey's 'The Sound of Africa' Series" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Oxford, 2010).

South African War, eventually being resolved by the devastating Native Land Act of 1913 and increasing limitations on the Cape franchise for Black African voters, which culminated in the Representation of Natives Act of 1936. Plaatje called for attention to “the policy [by the government] of deliberately boycotting and ostracizing the Native African and the British Indians, as persisted in by the selfish newcomers of the Rand [which] leaves a dark future for the generation to take the place of the citizens, both white and black, who inhabit this subcontinent.”<sup>11</sup> It was the purpose of the newspaper in 1903 to “enlighten the natives on what is going on amongst them” and “to [its] European readers it advocates fair treatment to their Native servants, equal political rights to their Native neighbors and the absolute social segregation of the white and black races of South Africa, which later alone...will keep and maintain the purity of our race and color, both of which we are as proud of as our European educators are of theirs.”<sup>12</sup>

With *Koranta*, Plaatje sought to form a readership through the press that could both reach and transform readers in remote rural areas and establish a dialogue with them.<sup>13</sup> In 1912, Plaatje, together with other African writers and educators, such as the editor of *Ilanga lase Natal* John Dube (with whom he established a reputation as public speaker and political leader), formed the South African Native National Congress (SANNC).<sup>14</sup> Plaatje's role as editor and the place of the newspaper as “mouthpiece for the Natives” are important because it is a site where the relationship between education, mobility, and politics in Plaatje's conceptual universe is clear. For Plaatje, the press aided in his political speech tours and had an “educative role” toward fomenting the conditions for the “progress and enlightenment” of Africans.<sup>15</sup> For example, the newspaper's letters to the editor were a space for communal and public interaction.

<sup>11</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, “Bechuana Gazette, 4 April 1903,” in Brian Willan (ed.), *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016), 71.

<sup>12</sup> Silas Molema, “letter to Sir H.J. Gool-Adams, Lieutenant-Governor of the Orange River Colony, 11 April 1903,” in Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 74.

<sup>13</sup> This use of print journalism as a means for advocacy was not peculiar to South Africa and exemplified a particular view of the world that educated classes of Africans in British colonial settings expounded in the early twentieth century. It was also a world in which Plaatje interacted, and one that overlapped, with the growth of movements such as the Brotherhood Movement, Marcus Garvey's Negro Improvement Society, as well as the growing Pan-African movement. See Derek R. Petersen, Emma Hunter, and Stephanie Newell (eds.), *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that John Dube and his wife, Nokutela Dube, were well-known for their work as composers too. This is indicative of a broader convergence of the discourse network of the senses and the political worlds that Plaatje and his contemporaries existed in, and indeed, actively negotiated. See Tsitsi Jaji, “Re-Collecting the Musical Politics of John and Nokutela Dube,” *Safundi* 13–3–4 (July 2012), 213–229.

<sup>15</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 171.

Plaatje was committed to supporting chiefly authority and its commitment to a communal life in which duty, morality, and good behavior formed a pathway to African education through his journalism. In an address in 1903 titled “The Education of Children,” Plaatje delineated what he saw as the core features of an ideal education: it was to be “based on the practice and celebration of a people’s material culture, arts, and heritage.” Such an education “embodie[d] *botho* (respect, harmony, interconnectedness), humaneness, knowledge, and cultural identity.”<sup>16</sup> This sense of education was understood by readers of the newspapers and its editors to be core to claims for political citizenship in a changing South Africa; and it did not equate to, as Plaatje noted, “send[ing] our children to school so that they will shun their cultures and traditions and become westernized.”<sup>17</sup> Some readers would use the newspaper platform to discuss the so-called degeneration of African societies and complain, for instance, about the perceived “rowdy behavior” of Africans in public spaces, for instance.<sup>18</sup> Although the readers expressed a condescending and conservative approach to the changes in the jurisdiction of African land and law under the auspices of the Union’s Native Affairs, these grievances also represent a change in communal forms of self-representation that the newspaper afforded. The press also had an approach to dialogue and connecting people through reading, realizing Plaatje’s vision of “bringing knowledge of the wider world to the Batswana,” as Willan suggests, but also critically bringing African readership to the wider world.<sup>19</sup> Plaatje was very clear that language was not culture, noting that “children who go to school think education only means eloquence in a foreign language [and] they look down upon their own culture and feel ashamed of their own language.”<sup>20</sup> It was thus the pedagogical promise of the press (and perhaps more broadly of literature) that Plaatje would combine with the traversal of ideas and space that mobility allowed.

The press was thus a critical platform for Plaatje in a moment when responsibility for the formal education of Africans had shifted from missionaries to equally disputed and considerably more institutionalized government bureaus. Another fundamental aspects of children’s school life involved language and “culture,” however defined, which were now at the mercy of government officials. As an already a disputed aspect of missionary education, the formal teaching of Sestwana and other African languages was being instrumentalized as a tool for modes of association and identification

<sup>16</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, “The Education of Children” (1903), in Molema, Seetsele Modiri, *Lover of His People: A Biography of Sol Plaatje* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012), 105.

<sup>17</sup> Plaatje, “The Education of Children,” in Molema, *Lover of His People*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> “Tsa Bakoaleli,” *Koranta*, 20 June 1903, 3, cited in Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 170.

<sup>19</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 171.

<sup>20</sup> Plaatje, “The Education of Children” (1903), in Molema, *Lover of His People*, 105.

within the contours of a developing national image. Much later, in 1930, Plaatje would present verbal evidence to the Native Economic Commission, which was set up to examine the condition of Africans living in urban areas. In this presentation, he made a distinct connection between the efforts to disenfranchise the African and the role of education as a means to resist such disenfranchisement, echoing the position he and others held as journalists:

Next to the land trouble, the most burning grievance about which Natives and their ministers are constantly appealing to high heaven for retributive justice is the educational grants to Native schools and institutions in contradistinction with coloured, Indian, and European school grants and Native condemnation of the inequalities has been fully justified by the helpless mess in which the administration of Native education finds itself today; but the Native Affairs Commission has never been able to view the position as seen [through] Native eyes; how then, could they interpret Native feelings in this or any other matter?<sup>21</sup>

In the midst of these political struggles Plaatje began his travels to England and the United States, where he sought to engage in important legal debates and expand the reach of his political tours against a diminishing of African communal spaces in the countryside. In England and the US, he spent his time giving talks about the conditions of Black South Africans and trying to raise funds for his various projects. Though his fundraising mission had by and large failed, Plaatje continued to research, learn, and expose his political and artistic projects to international audiences. Meeting artists, writers, and important political figures in his travels, in addition to seeing the social conditions of Black individuals in different countries, impressed on Plaatje the political and educational value of mobility. The impact of Plaatje's travels and its direct influence on his notion of the possibilities afforded by education to understand and then escape the predicaments of "native life" is captured in a letter to poet and literary editor of *The Crisis* Jessie Fauset, dated 16 May 1922, when he notes "how [he] wishes the grownups could take as keen an interest in Ethnology and the sociological questions; especially where they happen to be so inseparably wound up in their own lives" as he reflects on his visit to the Hampton College in Virginia, Booker T. Washington's alma mater—the latter whom Plaatje described as "the greatest black man of our time."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, "Further Evidence to the Native Economic Commission, 1931," in Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 393.

<sup>22</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje "Letter to Jessie Fauset, 16 May 1922," in Willan and Mokaë, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 213. Demonstrating the link between his journalistic publics and the new ones he would now address, Plaatje signed a letter to Emmett J. Scott in which he described Washington in this way, noting his role as "Editor of 'Tsalala ea



Following *Native Life in South Africa*, written in 1916, Plaatje began writing a new book, one which would intervene in the genre of the epic and that was inspired by his renewed interest in anticolonial writing in England and the US. After many failed attempts to secure a publisher for his new novel *Mhudi* in the US and the UK, Plaatje might have seen himself as somebody who was unable to mobilize the financial support of his seasoned political circles and interests (which included the likes of W. E. B Du Bois) but who could still be a powerful speaker and attract young audiences. He did realize, however, that his political tours could justify applying for philanthropic educational grants, like the Phelps Stokes Fund, which funded his visit to Tuskegee and Hampton College. The time spent in the United States gave Plaatje a renewed hope that he could apply what he learned in his travels to produce teaching material and to continue to perform his role as a political speaker and an educator.

Moreover, he thought his networks in the US, more so than in Britain, could help him forge connections to finance his tours, which were largely well-attended and a success. In Hampton, Plaatje noted that “young people went wild over my message,” and, in Tuskegee, pupils were excited about Plaatje’s speech, saying he “certainly made a fine impression” there.<sup>23</sup> However well-received Plaatje was, the tours did not turn into a sustained financial source nor did they help Plaatje strike a deal with the printing and sale of his pamphlets, hymn books, and tonic solfa “tunes.”<sup>24</sup> Plaatje was still very impressed with what he had seen in Tuskegee and continued to correspond with Robert Russa Moton, who in April 1922 offered him a film of the unveiling of the statue of Booker T. Washington, filmed only a month

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Batho.” See Solomon T. Plaatje “Letter to Emmett J. Scott, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, USA, 19 November 1915,” in Willan and Mokae, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje “Letter to R. R. Moton, Tuskegee, Alabama, 22 September 1924,” in Willan and Mokae, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 243. See also Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 409–410.

<sup>24</sup> This speaks to the confluence of transcriptive and compositional media that marked Plaatje’s milieu, and the different forms of practice that emerged from it. Plaatje writes to Albon Holsey at Tuskegee in 1923 that “of all the things [he has] undertaken nothing has worried [him] more so much as the task of finding the money to print the Native Hymn Book and tonic solfa tunes for our Community Services in S. Africa.” He adds that “the task of translating the metres into African was child’s play compared with the job of finding the money.” Tonic solfa is a form of sight-singing that was commonly used by African composers at the turn of the century for its ease of use by various choirs who may not have been familiar with formal musical notation. In the statement above, while it is uncertain where Plaatje is referring to the lyrics of the hymns or the notation itself of the hymn book into tonic solfa, the overlap here demonstrates these forms of transcriptive practices in Plaatje’s context. Solomon T. Plaatje, “Letter to Mr Holsey, Tuskegee, 13 March 1923,” in Willan and Mokae, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 223.



earlier.<sup>25</sup> Tuskegee was itself presented as an educational model and aspiration; as Plaatje notes, “to see the grasping manner in which Negroes [sic] reach out to take advantage of the several educational facilities” amazed him. Plaatje was convinced the film itself and the (presumably) shorter reels that composed the bioscope program were the only way in which he could attract and convey political messages to young African audiences. He saw institutions for Black education in the United States as a place that Black South Africans could aspire not only to go to but to emulate.<sup>26</sup>

In March 1922, however, Plaatje suffered with physical illness, overwork, and lack of financial success. His heart condition was poor, and his son had dropped out of medical school to support the family in Plaatje's absence. Besides this, Plaatje's daughter passed away, and his wife was in serious grief and financial trouble. “Circumstances are always beyond our control,” he confessed in a letter to Mrs. Colenso.<sup>27</sup> In May 1923, he reported that he was suffering from “neuritis,” overworked and in complete financial disarray.<sup>28</sup> He promised his family he would return to the country and that he hoped he would be in much better shape to take his family around. Before his departure, he encountered George Lattimore, an entertainment impresario who was gauging British interests for “negro exotica” and wildlife films. Plaatje must have seen in Lattimore somebody who used his own persona as an African American impresario to show more authentically Black entertainment to audiences. Lattimore's 1923 Swedish travel film *The Cradle of the World* screened together with a short theatrical production, with Plaatje playing the role of a Zulu warrior in the latter. Critics expressed mixed feelings about the film, praising it but questioning the depictions of African life performed by Plaatje and others. The play and film were a disappointment: the target of the show seemed to be more exotifying than educational and did little to counter some of the misconceptions of audiences as Plaatje had hoped. But despite this experience, Plaatje's contact with “film folks” helped him to secure films about Canada, the West Indies, and the US along with footage of the English royal family and their travels.<sup>29</sup>

The return home left Plaatje “penniless and in debt.”<sup>30</sup> Plaatje was now persuaded by political coalitions and welcomed a renewed attention by Cape liberals to race relations. Though he considered these interventions politically beneficial to Black South Africans, he also found it problematic that now well-meaning whites were self-appointed defenders of the welfare of

<sup>25</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 411.

<sup>26</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, “Account of North American tour (typescript), late 1922,” 298–299.

<sup>27</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, “Letter to Sophie Colenso, 31 March 1922,” in Willan and Mokae, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 211. See also Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 405.

<sup>28</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 423.

<sup>29</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 428.

<sup>30</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 436.

“Natives,” particularly in the countryside. Plaatje believed there must be an intervention on the level of education, a theme which he approached with some level of optimism, particularly in Kimberley, but he was less optimistic about education that involved the plight of Africans on the eyes of their fellows.<sup>31</sup> Plaatje continued to hold dear what was kept largely outside the reach of much of liberal politics: rural areas and displaced rural Africans. There were, however, deeper concerns, and Brian Willan speaks of Plaatje in this period as “a leader without a people”: a public speaker, political leader, and intellectual in search of his constituency at home.<sup>32</sup>

The challenge of the return home for Plaatje was to find room for the kinds of industrial aspirations he saw in Britain and particularly in Black American society, aspects of which he made clear in his “Account of North American tour” in 1922.<sup>33</sup> There were a few public spaces where Plaatje had envisioned improvement of the social and educational conditions of Black South Africans, particularly in rural areas. One of them was the improving of the “native press”; the other was the creation of cinema audiences in the countryside, which he traveled throughout extensively again, this time to reexamine the conditions of rural Black South Africans and to talk about the educational value of his experience overseas.<sup>34</sup> Still, he was moved by the influence of the New Negro movement in the US, the proponents of which he met in New York’s Harlem. He was inspired by the several concerts he saw and fascinated by art made by Black artists for Black artists. He was struck by Florence Mills, a performer who, for him, was able to overcome the racial divide in audiences. He was surprised that what was called ‘Negro music’ was not only popular with audiences across racial lines but that there was a growing educational interest in colleges, teaching, and research on this subject, while the same was not seen in South Africa. Even though he had little financial returns on his writings, his acquaintances were positively impressed by Plaatje’s rhetoric and commitment to the political cause of Black South Africans.

Plaatje’s travels were part of what had largely turned into a profitless mission—barely paying its own costs, let alone fulfilling Plaatje’s desire to finance his tours within South Africa. But while his travels to the US did not translate into financial returns, it certainly left an impression on Plaatje’s view of Black education, particularly after his visit to Tuskegee. Not only were Black American pupils changing education by establishing pedagogical resources for both rural and urban Black youth, but Tuskegee and Hampton were successfully inserting African American education into traditions of liberal arts,

<sup>31</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 453.

<sup>32</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 435.

<sup>33</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, “Account of North American tour (typescript), late 1922,” 289–299. Plaatje was interested in importing films of “Sunshine Sammy,” who was at the time one of the most famous African American actors in Hollywood.

<sup>34</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 441.

particularly artisanal knowledge and the visual pedagogies of lantern slides, film, and photography. Plaatje may have seen in Tuskegee's early visual culture the possibility of presenting these images as aspirational, and this view came to fruition when audiences, mostly formed of Black children, became excited with the bioscope. He noted in a letter to Dr. R. R. Moton requesting films for his film tour in 1924 that "it would be a good thing to have [some films of] Hampton before the novelty of my present programme wears off and if you can add something showing advanced Negroes [sic], like your recent Business League at Chicago, so much the better." Plaatje adds that he "does not think that anything could be more inspiring."<sup>35</sup> It is thus no surprise that, his letter to W. E. B Du Bois in 1925—which begins with "the native outlook, never too good, is not very rosy just now"—has at its core a request for a film with depictions of the American rural landscape:

But there are a few coloured pictures I saw in America that could be very enlightening to the Natives without provoking the ban of the Censors. Let me mention at least one and I hope you will try and secure a copy of it for me at a reasonable figure. It was by Afro-American Film Exhibitors Company of 1520 E. 12th Street, Kansas City Mo., and showed the cowboys on the "Bar L" farm, one of the finest farms in the South and a beautiful home which I was informed was not on the farm at all but the magnificent residence of Madam Walker in the Hudson Valley. I do like to get it and show our people not merely scenarios and unknown people but magnificent places, a farm and home, owned by black people.<sup>36</sup>

By 1927, Plaatje witnessed the consolidation of the interests of "Natives," along with historical knowledge and relevance of customary laws being conflated with the effects of "native laws." He thought that such knowledge of customs should not become the exclusive preserve of Bantu Studies scholars at universities such as the University of the Witwatersrand, where it would be systematized, published, and taught by white professors. Critically, he was concerned these historical renditions would ultimately leverage those "policies of 'retribalisation'" and these would return in speeches of delegates of the SANNC and their modes of resistance. For him, cinema was a form of field formation in that it created alternative spaces of research and conviviality as well as spaces for transnational and diasporic exchanges. In it, Plaatje had a vision of rural South Africa as leveraging the formation of culturally and "morally" savvy publics to experience cinema. Cinema could reconstitute a sense of collective viewership and of public space to largely unsettled and dispossessed audiences. It offered a promise for audiences to be transported elsewhere, to find in mobility a mode of aspiration and in the countryside a utopian horizon rather than a political and educational dead end.

<sup>35</sup> Plaatje, "Letter to R. R. Moton, 22 September 1924," 244.

<sup>36</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, "Letter to Dr. W. E. B Du Bois, 15 March 1925," in Willan and Mokaie, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 249.

## Cinema as a “Moving School”

Plaatje’s research trips in the South African interior covered a broad area across the Orange Free State, the Transvaal, Northern and Eastern Cape, including the Transkei, and he visited towns, cities, and rural areas. Plaatje’s initial contacts in the rural districts of Bloemhof, Boshof, and Hoopstad were described in *Native Life in South Africa* as a “tour of observation regarding the operation of the Natives’ Land Act.”<sup>37</sup> In October 1924, Plaatje wrote to then Prime Minister and Minister of Native Affairs General Hertzog about his work, including the cinema tour that in Plaatje’s view related directly to an act that permitted the acquisition of land for the Barolong of Thaba ‘Nchu. At that time, Plaatje also wrote to the town clerk in East London requesting permission for the screening of films and accompanying lectures at St. Philips Mission.<sup>38</sup> The idea of a bioscope tour began after Plaatje received a gift from the head of the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Reverend J. A. Johnson, who offered Plaatje a mobile projector for 35mm educational films.<sup>39</sup> Later, Mr. I. R. Grimmer of De Beers mining company provided him with a generator as well as other films. Like his earlier research journeys, Plaatje’s bioscope relied on a wide and varied network, including venues regularly used for political community meetings as well as mission and church halls.

At that time, the countryside was a place of political instability and social unsettlement, particularly for those who Plaatje named “native wanderers”—farmers stripped of their rights to land and left without home and hope.<sup>40</sup> The Native Land Act made official the displacement of Black tenanted land and livestock and evicted entire families and communities of Black farmers. In search of land, they were condemned to wander the countryside with no place to settle and were forced, in the words of Mr. P. Alden in the British

<sup>37</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (Northlands, South Africa: Picador Africa, 2007 [1916]), 63.

<sup>38</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, “Letter to General J. B. M Hertzog, 7 October 1924,” in Willan and Mokae, *Sol T. Plaatje*, Solomon T. Plaatje, “Letter to the Town Clerk, East London, 9 October 1924,” in Willan and Mokae, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 245.

<sup>39</sup> In correspondence with Sophie Colenso dated 31 March 1922, Plaatje notes this exchange, informing Colenso that “one church at Philadelphia gave [him] a moving picture projecting machine costing \$420” but that he did not receive any films with it, as “films of coloured people are *too dear* and no church body of persons could donate any” (emphasis in original). Later, in a letter to Mr. Albon L. Holsey, the personal secretary of Dr. R. R. Moton, about the procurement of future films dated 26 May 1922, Plaatje “begs to remind [Mr. Holsey] that [his] machine is the De Vry: Standard size – 35 mil. as used in the theatres,” a space Plaatje was soon to be familiar with in his encounter with *The Cradle of the World* in June of 1923. Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 405; Willan and Mokae, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 212, 215.

<sup>40</sup> Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa*, 221.

House of Commons, “to leave their crops un-reaped.”<sup>41</sup> The effects of the Act were a hard and complex subject to tackle in public fora, given the conditions of a segregated public opinion and the constraints of a strictly severed polity. In this context, “wandering” media, such as the bioscope, turned an unsettled but mobilized countryside in its capacity to stage and accommodate wider and searched-for audiences. While it is likely that Plaatje demystified the cinema by challenging the urban as the privileged locus of a transnational Black modernity, the rural publics of itinerant bioscopes that Plaatje encountered were likely already accustomed with film showings for at least a decade.<sup>42</sup>

Itinerant bioscope shows and impresarios thrived from the mid-1910s with bioscopes becoming a staple of many political gatherings, including the 1914 Meeting of SANNC, which discussed the issues of the previous year Native Land Act (see [figure 1](#)). This is not to say that the bioscope had been used on such occasions with a political mission, but it shows how the bioscope was already a popular medium and a familiar popular entertainment to promote and amuse audiences in political gatherings. Plaatje's innovation was to widen the political scope of this entertainment form—as a mode of leisure but also a device to attract audiences to political talks and to allow audiences to see other people, places, and political realities through the bioscope. In urban settings or the countryside, the traveling bioscope was part of a hopeful moment in which the public organizing of African intellectuals, including Plaatje, sought to connect Africans with a broader community of British imperial citizens and persons of African descent beyond the borders of the Union. Indeed, part of gauging the support of the press for his tours was to ensure the audience reception of his films and to attract broader audiences. He later noted how, even if he failed to raise money out of ticket sales, the touring bioscope allowed him to see how audiences responded to films and to his accompanying “explanatory remarks.”<sup>43</sup>

Hence, his bioscope restaged his research journeys and allowed him to perform as a medium of education and political travelogue. Indeed, with his “Coloured American Bioscope” Plaatje promised images of “Coloured people” from Brazil, America, and the West Indies, along with the main feature film of the Tuskegee Institute in the US South and “her thousands of

<sup>41</sup> Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa*, 227.

<sup>42</sup> Thelma Gutsche suggests a continuum between theater audiences in small rural *dorps* that migrate to the early bioscope, by many accounts not strictly divided by race. Cf. Thelma Gutsche, *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa, 1895–1940* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1972).

<sup>43</sup> Plaatje also reports to Moton the remarks in a letter written by a principal at “the higher mission school” in Grahamstown that shares “the abiding impression made on his scholars by the Tuskegee drills.” Solomon T. Plaatje, “Letter to R. R. Moton, Principal of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, 29 June 1927,” in Willan and Mokae, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 260.

Figure 1. A "Grand Bioscope" organized in Kimberley by Joshua's Bioscope company, and promoted in honor of the delegates of the Native National Congress. *Tsala ea Batho*, 21 February 1914, 3. Historical Papers Research Archives, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa (Silas Thelensho Molema and Solomon Tshkisho Plaatje Papers [A979])

**S. A. NATIVE NATIONAL CONGRESS.**

**NATIVE LANDS ACT (No. 27, 1913.)**

A SPECIAL MEETING of the above Congress will be held at **KIMBERLEY** on **FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27th, 1914.**

(a) To send a final deputation to the Government on the Native Lands Act.

(b) To receive the Financial Report of the Organising Committee, and appoint the members of a deputation to carry our protest to England, if necessary.

All delegates are requested to notify the Secretary beforehand (Address: Bar 143, Kimberley), to enable him to arrange accommodation.

Delegates must come prepared to defray their own boarding expenses.

**JOHN L. DUBE, President.**  
**SOL. T. PLAATJE, Secretary.**

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**IN HONOUR OF THE CONGRESS' DELEGATES**

**A GRAND**

**BIOSCOPE**

—AND—

**Variety Entertainment,**

—IN THE—

**CITY HALL, KIMBERLEY.**

**On Friday, 27th February, 1914.**

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Animated Pictures by Joshua's Bioscope Co.

**GLEES!**

**CHORUSES!!**

**PART SONGS!!!**

By the *Greenpoint Wesleyan Choir* (under Mr. P. Walton Mami), and the *Kimberley Troubadours.*

Dr. TALMAGE once said the following to those who were singing—

"I have a great love for a Bioscope filled with good music artistically by four boys who are in the gallery; but there came not a note to my eye, nor any major emotion. One evening I attended a meeting at Anderson's Place, and a black woman stood against a wall that knew the rest of the congregation joining in the chorus. I was so close some three or four miles nearer Heaven than I had ever been before."

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**Admission: . . . 1 Shilling.**

**Doors Open 7.30 p.m.—Commence 8 p.m.**

>

young men and women students at Drill and Manoeuvres.”<sup>44</sup> The show was later announced in King William’s Town as Plaatje’s “travelogues” and was advertised in various churches, town halls, schools, and hospitals. In Plaatje’s own words, he imagined he had brought films to places he perceived as “away from the beaten track and far from the reach of enlightened sentiment.”<sup>45</sup> Traveling turned the cinematic into both a medium of entertainment and a method of continuous travelling and education, besides constituting a public space that provided a sense of common sociality and collective engagement with the “field.” Plaatje was, on the one hand, inspired by the educational value of the Tuskegee model of public screenings followed by talks, which was also a format known to figures such as Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois, both of whom Plaatje met and engaged. On the other hand, Plaatje’s own research methods for *Native Life*, *Mhudi*, and much of his other writings already established traveling as a particular mode of intellectual inquiry and production of knowledge, inviting the reader into his research journey.

Plaatje used an array of modes and improvisational styles of communication in a direct challenge to the otherwise documentary character of colonial official reportage, as Remington suggests. His own style of presentation was in line with the writing of *Native Life* as a form of contesting bureaucratic classifications and forensic and anthropological notions of evidence.<sup>46</sup> Plaatje’s field notes—although not the same as those otherwise found in the journals of anthropologists and perhaps more sparsely littered across his correspondence with his broader network and in his public writing—were significant parts of his literary and research production. He deeply considers the authenticity of the close encounter with those he interviews and the making of an ethnographic and journalistic voice.<sup>47</sup> As a political travelogue that engaged a wider literary universe, the book *Native Life* becomes what Karin Barber has called a “fertile textual borderlands.”<sup>48</sup> Plaatje mobilizes a “view from the ground” to express less as a parochial attachment to the land than a place from which to forge what Njabulo Ndebele has termed a “tactical cosmopolitanism”—with the travelogue affording connections between locales and individuals in disparate but related contexts—and what Bhekizizwe Peterson described as a “method or genre of creative meditation.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, Plaatje creatively mobilizes

<sup>44</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 435.

<sup>45</sup> Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, xx.

<sup>46</sup> Janet Remington, “Solomon Plaatje’s Decade of Creative Mobility, 1912–1922: The Politics of Travel and Writing In and Beyond South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39–2 (2013), 435.

<sup>47</sup> Remington, “Solomon Plaatje’s Decade of Creative Mobility,” 433.

<sup>48</sup> Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons, and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 433.

<sup>49</sup> Bernth Lindfors, “Interview with Njabulo Ndebele,” *Journal of Humanities* 4 (1990), 35–53; Bhekizizwe Petersen, “Reasoning Creatively in *Mhudi*,” in Mokae,



images through “theorizing” a range of difficult historical, political, and social questions.

Plaatje’s descriptions of the field and eyewitness accounts reemerge in the 1920s amidst the rising dominion of another form of travel and knowledge production: participant observation as a mode of field engagement in ethnography, particularly in the discipline of anthropology. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson differentiate between anthropology and other disciplines precisely on method: anthropology forges “specialists in difference” whereby an appropriate method for identifying and mobilizing difference is created. Such conception of fieldwork anchors the discipline of anthropology and the “field” for the disciplinary in both senses of the term: “constructing a space of possibilities while at the same time drawing the lines that confine that space.”<sup>50</sup> While conscripted to the disciplinary boundaries of the institutions that sponsored his research and that shaped, in many ways, his relationship with “field” and “informants,” Plaatje, we suggest, seems to challenge such a conception of fieldwork. In his book *Native Life*, for example, readers are cast as active participants insofar as they are not only taken through the narrative but also given instruction on the appropriate way in which to take part in the text, in a sense becoming custodians of the text and its effects. This, for Remington, helps grasp how Plaatje exceeds a normative or reductive reading, extending influence well into traditions beyond itself through reference to the intersection between British and Irish travel writings and rural land surveying.<sup>51</sup> These texts address multiple audiences, and this resonates with what Plaatje believed the book should do in the connected world that the British Empire had produced: speak to the particular and the universal.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, the land through which Plaatje traveled and which became a background of most of his political and cultural endeavors was turned, we suggest, into a cinematic space, a space woven in fantasy and utopia and with which Plaatje circumvents any facile conflation of Africans pastoral life, and

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Sabata-mpho and Willan, Brian (eds.), *Sol Plaatje’s Mhudi: History, Criticism, Celebration* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2020), 125–146, 125–126.

<sup>50</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Discipline and Practice: ‘The Field’ as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology,” in Gupta, Akhil and Ferguson, James (eds.), *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (University of California Press, 1977), 2. The growth and uptake of participant observation in disciplines concerned with the colonial subject also took a distinct interest in the technologies of perception available and becoming popular around the turn of and early twentieth century. These included the camera, phonograph, and cinema and deployed the perceived objectivity of their reproducibility. Cf. Eric Ames, “The Sound of Evolution,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10–2 (2003), 297–325; and Michael Nixon, “Depths of Field,” 189–229.

<sup>51</sup> Remington, “Solomon Plaatje’s Decade of Creative Mobility,” 433, 434.

<sup>52</sup> Remington, “Solomon Plaatje’s Decade of Creative Mobility,” 432.

“the dispossessed black man into the idyll.”<sup>53</sup> Unsurprisingly, several scholars place Plaatje's literary rendition of African peasantry as precisely subverting a recurring pastoral nostalgia.<sup>54</sup> Plaatje's pursuit of land as a form of grounding is a place of connection and stability amidst an ever-changing and unstable imperial world. This also seems to be the case of how the texts engage the cultural materiality of African life and, in particular, the collection of Setswana proverbs as fieldwork collections.<sup>55</sup> It is his intervention in the very notion of the field that turns Plaatje's work into that which is “*literally* and *quintessentially* interdiscursive.”<sup>56</sup> We contend his tours represent more than merely a portrayal of what he learned abroad; they are also moving images that could be passed on as inspiration and motivation. They constitute a method of learning and thus a pedagogical intervention, one in which certain technological objects and spectacle have a particular place in Plaatje's imagination of the countryside on the world stage. Not only did this approach to the “rural” align with his view of vocational education and industrial farming typical of US-based vocational schools, but it also informed Plaatje's conception of cinema as a pedagogical method and a medium of aspiration and mobility. Plaatje envisioned the cinema tour beyond fieldwork, constituting what he aptly called a “veritable moving school.”

By theorizing cinema as part of Plaatje's fieldwork, we argue that Plaatje's activism lay claim on fieldwork methods and field recording in ways that differ from ethnographic and anthropological forms of knowledge production of the time. On the one hand, Plaatje is able to protest spatially on behalf of his “informants” by moving both through the text as its key protagonist as well as outside of it as its author and as a key political personality. On the other hand, Plaatje's travels contrast with that of millions of people in South Africa who were turned from land tenants into “land serfs.” In Plaatje's deployment of the traveling cinema as an emergent method of mobility and research and a pedagogical, ideological, and political intervention in knowledge production about Africa and Africans, we suggest there is an anticipation of a method that did not lend itself to the research milieu of Bantu Studies, and perhaps a latent critique of the binary of tradition and modernity that often dominates colonial research framework. The significance of cinema as part of his research endeavors expands a notion of fieldwork that Plaatje invoked in his writing to conceive of the rural and the southern African countryside as a

<sup>53</sup> J. M. Coetzee, “Farm Novel and ‘Plaasroman’ in South Africa,” *English in Africa* 13–2 (1986), 1–19, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Chennells, “Plotting South African History: Narrative in Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*,” *English in Africa* 24–1 (1997), 37–58, 41.

<sup>55</sup> See Daniel Jones and Solomon T. Plaatje, *A Sechuana Reader in International Phonetic Orthography (with English Translations)* (Sandton: Arts & Culture Trust, 2000 [1916]).

<sup>56</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 126.

site of invention, as opposed to what Jacques Depelchin might characterize as the syndrome of discovery that marked other forms of fieldwork at the time.<sup>57</sup> It is in the combination of fieldwork and cinema that turns the bioscope into a pedagogical method for projecting African life beyond dispossession.

### Cinema as Traveling

For the writing of his novel *Mhudi* (1930), Plaatje collected, in his words, “stray scraps” of history and interviewed several elderly people in the places he traveled.<sup>58</sup> Traveling was an important research method, which helps us to understand his own approach to the cinematic as a form of mobility, both physical and cultural. It is only when he begins to travel that he begins, effectively, his fieldwork: when he intervenes in the field of the relations between “races” or when he sees himself closer to rural Africans (“his people,” by his own account), where they live, what they see, how they share experiences. Cinema aided Plaatje in his traveling and effectively extended Plaatje’s traveling experience though the experiences afforded by the films. The mobile projector also allowed Plaatje to afford traveling to others and offer aspirational images. The cinema also allows us to consider the ways fieldwork, for Plaatje, participated in the production of historical knowledge and its interpretations. Countering a review by Hubert Harrison, who called his political pamphlet merely a mode of making business, Plaatje responded that he

[had] travelled 9000 miles purely in aid of the most oppressed Negroes [sic] of the world. I would have gladly stayed at home and earned \$15 per week ... but ... if anywhere, at one time, somebody had not left home and hearthstones and travelled to the Southern slave plantations in the face of the bitterest hostility ... or if, a hundred years ago, someone had not travelled to South African wilds and made incredible sacrifices on our behalf, neither [Harrison] or I would be able to write. Somebody did it for us, so why not I?<sup>59</sup>

Whereas some, like Remington, place *Native Life* as a “travel account and travel product” with “its political content and import, as well as the politics around its creation, publication, and dissemination,” we would like to consider the implications of reading it as fieldnotes, a result of, and a glimpse into, methods of collection and note-taking.<sup>60</sup> Plaatje’s “travel-writing nexus,” as Remington reminds us, is “answerable to cultural imperialism” as it is “responsible for colonialism’s imaginative and

<sup>57</sup> Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition* (Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2005), 7.

<sup>58</sup> Plaatje, “Foreword,” xi.

<sup>59</sup> Solomon T. Plaatje, “Letter to the Editor, *Negro World*, 18 June 1921,” in Willan and Mokaie, *Sol T. Plaatje*, 204.

<sup>60</sup> Remington, “Solomon Plaatje’s Decade of Creative Mobility,” 432.

geographical impositions and conquests." And paradoxically, she argues, "travel has productively ... also been linked to colonialism's destabilization ... and to an alternative black modernity." Particularly for those who have been considered subjects of historical research rather than productively participating in knowledge production, alternative modes of fieldwork research may be similarly linked to the destabilization of colonial forms of "field" exploration. Thus, fieldwork, in the sense of the research journey, marked by participant observation was part of Plaatje's mission to learn.

Fieldwork in history, as Carolyn Adenaike and Jan Vansina argued in the mid-1990s, forced historians to consider "their own subjective involvement as an effective pathway to achieve an enriched and more nuanced understanding of the past."<sup>61</sup> Adenaike and Vansina suggest how, much like archival research, historical fieldwork requires careful collection. This prompts them to question what the method of historians of Africa owes to models that privilege a perceived "neutrality" of researchers and an attitude of detachment and objectivity—the latter, in addition to the selection of informants and translators, largely draw on anthropological theory. Adenaike and Vansina suggest moving further away from anthropology's inheritance to propose that field researchers in history adopt field studies that consider immersion and attachment to particular "communities." This way, researchers would not try to constantly maintain distance and disassociate their identities in the name of objectivity. Their position as historians and producers of a field equally depend, in this view, not only on processes of negotiation of time but "negotiation over time."<sup>62</sup> African history from the mid-1990s, they contend, emerged as a different path to knowledge than those produced within a tradition of European cultural hegemony and with Africanist historians questioning methods of field research to include in their findings "a search for meanings, mentalities, and perceptions of mind."<sup>63</sup>

Though this suggests a shift for field research to move away from what has been considered a largely Eurocentric paradigm of "participant observation" toward a more personal involvement, along with subjectivity and adaptation to situations and environments they encounter in the field, this involvement seems to be more negotiated and more complex, as we see in Plaatje's cinema in the early twentieth century. This is because these encounters in the field tend to rely on equally reified notions of belonging and experience that can be experienced in an almost unmediated way, historically speaking. Baz Lecoq shows that the expectation of a certain measure of "involvement" comes at a considerable cost to researchers in being their own instrument

<sup>61</sup> Carolyn Adenaike and Jan Vansina, *In Pursuit of History: Fieldwork in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), xiii.

<sup>62</sup> Adenaike and Vansina, *In Pursuit of History*, xiii.

<sup>63</sup> Adenaike and Vansina, *In Pursuit of History*, xiii.

of work.<sup>64</sup> What this turn to various notions of “involvement” does—and this is fundamental to our approach here—is to oversee how historical experiences can be mediated by particular research methods and aesthetic objects. A historical approach to fieldwork must contend with the various forms of mediation in the field, not only by researchers and by their own subjects of study but also through their medium, as in the case of Plaatje’s cinema. Whereas Adenaike suggests that, differently from people, “archives cannot talk back,” Plaatje’s various forms of historically specific engagements with the various technical media at his disposal proved otherwise.<sup>65</sup> The assumption that people are essentially “historical” archives and things are not relies on the same essentializing notion of “authenticity,” unaltered by time and space, so often associated with Western interventions. In very significant ways, materiality and media are actors and enactors of historical knowledge in the present, and a historiographic method that foregrounds this is one that unsettles the field as a site of the production of history; this is, in our view, visible in Plaatje’s use of the cinema as a pedagogical tool for the present.

In South Africa, where both methods of research and their knowledge production have been systematically put into question in the context of calls for decolonizing public universities, there has been a call for a turn to notions of “emplacement” as an account for research practices.<sup>66</sup> But in contrast with such a view we offer that Plaatje’s cinema method suggests a dis-emplacment, a radical mobility that takes the question of mediation as its central tenet. In this sense, Plaatje’s engagements take the form of travel as itinerary, in the sense in which James Clifford presents it as “denot[ing] a range of material, spatial practices that produce knowledge, stories, traditions, compartments, musics, books, diaries, and other cultural expressions” and as that which is “a notion of comparative knowledge produced through an itinerary, always marked by a ‘way in,’ a history of locations and a location of histories.”<sup>67</sup> Cinema in the context of Plaatje research is also fieldwork in that it collects evidence, produces a field of knowledge, and makes claims on subjects of study, practice, and media as representing truths of a particular historical moment. Cinema, we argue, is much an engagement with an

<sup>64</sup> Baz Lecocq “Fieldwork ‘Ain’t Always Fun: Public and Hidden Discourses on Fieldwork,” *History in Africa* 29 (2002), 273–282.

<sup>65</sup> Adenaike and Vansina, xiii.

<sup>66</sup> Shannon Morreira, Josiah Taru, and Carina Truys, “Place and pedagogy: using space and materiality in teaching social science in Southern Africa,” *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 5–1–2 (2020) 137–153. Engaging such notions of space and emplacement, Dubbeld has recently argued for the importance of time as a “context” or a form of mediation in South African Studies. We try here to think about how these media forms disturb time and place. See Bernard Dubbeld, “Translating E. P. Thompson’s Marxian Critique: Contesting ‘Context’ in South African Studies,” *Social Dynamics* 46–1 (2020), 67–85.

<sup>67</sup> James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 35, 31.

environment, irrespective of the consensus according to which this environment can successfully claim to be authentic of a people or can be characterized as “natural.” Plaatje’s turn to media of reproduction—such as the press, the cinema, and through his recording of the hymn *Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika* in 1923—shows how his political intervention relied on what was given as real or historically present, as much as on what was not there. These horizons of possibility and impossibility appear truthful in the medium of cinema and screenings *in the field*. Besides the archival desire of keeping films, as Plaatje suggested repeatedly, and the recording and preservation strategies that the reels afford, film screenings themselves are incursions in a field even if they are radically *un-placed*: they point as much to what is viewed as to what is implied and therefore allow for different conceptions of historical time.

## Coda

In this article, we examined the modes through which a notion of fieldwork takes shape in Plaatje’s research. We considered Plaatje’s views and practices about pedagogy, media, and traveling. Historical approaches to fieldwork suggest that it is precisely the different geographic strategies adopted in research that allows for a “constant process of appropriation, re-appropriation and transformation as cultural forms and styles moved back and forth, blending cosmopolitan and local elements along the way.”<sup>68</sup> We contend that even approaches that ostensibly attempt to escape conceptions of cinema as bound to urban and metropolitan locations tend to overlook other forms of methodological engagements of cinema that privilege aesthetic and speculative approaches and facilitate its reading as a practice of public history.<sup>69</sup>

Plaatje’s engagement of cinema in his tours allows for a rethinking of geographies of African studies and history: placing a form of media as central to a practice of politics and history-making in countryside areas considered “traditional.” This is not to say that film and other media has not been used for essentializing purposes but rather that Plaatje’s cinema constituted a demystification of these essentialisms. As Bill Bravman suggested in relation to the use of photography in interviews in the field, what historians often take for granted is the bounded nature of these mediatic objects.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, we have explored Plaatje’s cinema as an intervention in fieldwork practice: it is precisely the use of a traveling media that also allows traveling in time and in space, opens a space for aesthetic engagements with audiences and places of

<sup>68</sup> Leslie Bank, “Home-made Ethnography: Revisiting the ‘Xhosa in Town’ Trilogy,” *Kronos* 28 (2002): 146–171, 169.

<sup>69</sup> See an analysis of the contribution of Kapwani Kiwanga’s speculative approach to the field of African History in Gavin Steingo, “Kapwani Kiwanga’s Alien Speculations,” *Images Re-vues* 14 (2017).

<sup>70</sup> Bill Bravman, “Using Old Photographs in Interviews: Some Cautionary Notes About Silences in Fieldwork,” *History in Africa* 17 (1990): 327–334, 317.

screening, and inaugurates creative spaces for collective experience. In addition, we considered cinema as a live engagement with archival objects, such as films, that inspires methods of archival collection and preservation practices that might be either transformative and static. Finally, we read cinema as an art medium that foments modes of aesthetic engagement and aesthetic pedagogies: it lays claim on the senses—claims that are at once mediated by a particular reference to the past and that transcend the very modes by which we identify these claims with a particular historical frame. Plaatje's cinema unsettles.<sup>71</sup>

In the various biographies of Plaatje, cinema is associated with the creation and gradual loss of a space of the commons—common language, customary laws, and religious affiliation—and it has in many ways aided in the making of his self-image and his own autobiographic endeavors. Together with the modern press, cinema aided Plaatje in his imaginative conception of a public sphere. Cinema expressed and inspired modes of engagement centered on discussion and argument and the production of evidence with which Brian Willan and many scholars associate Plaatje's methods. But more than accounting for the conditions of his historical time and pointing to how these conditions could be changed, Plaatje's cinema and its radical mobility allowed for a vision of African life that, though crafted out of a struggle for a rightful place in the making of its own history, is also oriented towards the future. In this way, his fieldwork also puts the field to work, or collapses the field into its own imaginative work as a methodology. That is why, like the cinema, this historical method is able to extricate what we see from what can be imagined, allowing not only a new consideration of African pasts but the unrealized futures they helped to forge.

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<sup>71</sup> Witz, Minkley, and Rassool, *Unsettled History*.



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