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*‘It Is As Bad To Be a Black Man’s Animal As It Is To Be a Black Man’ – The Politics of Species in Sol Plaatje’s Native Life in South Africa**

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‘This law makes us dogs, stray dogs for all time’¹

Ilanga Lase Natal, 22 August 1913

Sol Plaatje and his contemporaries described the traumatic effects of the Natives Land Act 27 of 1913: forced expulsions of Africans and their animals, followed by desperate livestock sales at slaughterhouse prices. In many places, previously secure sharecroppers on white-owned farms became roaming exiles accompanied by their skeletal sheep and cattle, many of which starved along the road. Yet no single overarching narrative can capture the new law’s immediate effects, as the dynamics of changes were geographically idiographic. This Act is perhaps the most thoroughly studied piece of legislation in South Africa’s past, but the historical meta-narrative should be contested. The ‘land’ part of this Act has monopolised historiographical attention, while other aspects have been neglected. In this essay, I hope, therefore, to contribute another category to the analytical lens of class, race and gender through which the Act has been considered: species. Thus I focus on Sol Plaatje’s Native Life in South Africa as a key source, arguing that his repeated refrain that the Act was ‘cruel to animals’ was both a sincere response to its impact on African livestock and a deftly deployed act of political theatre scripted by Plaatje himself.

In the cold winter of 1913, herds of gaunt beasts roamed the South African veld. In his book, *Native Life in South Africa*, Sol Plaatje ascribed this to the newly imposed Natives Land Act, which imposed a fine of £100 on landowners quartering Africans on their farms, and a further fine of £5 per day if Africans left livestock on that farm while seeking refuge elsewhere.² Thus, Plaatje continued, Africans

must take the road immediately and be kept moving day and night until they die of starvation, or until the owner (who is debarred, by Section 1, from purchasing a pasturage for his cattle) disposes of them to a white man. Such cruelty to dumb animals is as unwarranted as it is

*Profound thanks to my anonymous referees, and to Sarah Duff, Danielle Dunbar, Wesley Mwatwara, Brian Willan, Cheryl Walker and especially to Shula Marks for their insights.

1 ‘*Lomteto usenzo izinja, imigodoyi yokugcina, ngakoke iSANNK kayiposisi uma iti mayobikwa kuKing lendaba.*’ (‘This law makes us dogs, stray dogs for all time. Therefore the [South African National Native Congress] is not making a mistake if it says this matter should be reported to the King’.) Extract from report about the Chiefs at Dukuza’s response to the Land Act, *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 22 August 1913.

2 The Act proscribed sharecropping contracts between white land-owners and black farmers – many farmers construed it as requiring (or allowing) them to evict African sharecroppers with their stock or force them to sell their stock and remain as labourers. Colin Murray, ‘Land, power and class in the Thaba Nchu District, Orange Free State, 1884–1983’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 29 (1984), p. 39.

unprecedented. It reads cruel enough on paper, but we wish that the reader had accompanied us on one journey, say, during the cold snap in the first week in August, when we travelled from Potchefstroom to Vereeniging, and seen the flocks of those evicted Natives that we met. We frequently met those roving pariahs, with their hungry cattle, and wondered if the animals were not more deserving of pity than their owners.

Plaatzje thus sketches a bleak picture of the expulsions, summary evictions, and forced stock sales precipitated by the Natives Land Act 27 of 1913. Frequently expelled from white farms they had long occupied only after the ploughing and sowing was completed, Africans began to reap a new and bitter harvest.³ This essay focuses on Plaatzje's *Native Life in South Africa* as a key source, arguing that his polemical outcry over animals was both a result of the 1913 Act's immediate impact on African livestock in the Orange Free State, and a skilfully mobilised piece of political theatre scripted by Plaatzje himself.⁴

The Natives Land Act is arguably one of the more closely studied laws in South Africa's history.⁵ The context of the Act requires greater investigation, however. Indeed, Rich went so far as to impugn Plaatzje's polemic and its massive influence, which led historians to focus on legislation as causation.⁶ In fact, as scholars of South Africa's agrarian past have shown (and as Beinart and Delius discuss in this issue), the Land Act was not a new course of action, nor did it immediately or entirely transform the rural landscape.⁷ It collated and confirmed long-enduring racist property relations.⁸ The Act has been variously interpreted, and no single storyline can do justice to the complexity of the motivations behind the Act, nor its immediate effects.

These varied not least because the dynamics of change were idiographic – local context played a large role, as Beinart and Delius show.⁹ It was, however, in the Orange Free State, the area that Plaatzje knew best, that its provisions against African land purchase, rent tenancy and sharecropping, were at their most draconian. It was there that white farmers clamoured for the criminalisation of sharecropping. Nor was this surprising, as, after the South African War, poor whites observed the comparative affluence of sharecropping African families who returned from Basutoland with their livestock.

Although the 'land' aspects of the legislation are generally seen in the Union as the paramount issue, in the Free State the issue of livestock warrants special attention.¹⁰ Accordingly, this essay adds another analytical category – species – to the trinity of class, race and gender, through which the Act has generally been viewed.

3 See U.G. 22–1916, *Natives' Land Commission*, p. 11. (U.G. = Union of South Africa: Government Printers.)

4 This essay attempts to broaden our understanding of the 1913 Natives Land Act by critiquing this key source, but also hopes to contribute in a small way to the fine scholarship on Plaatzje – as B. Peterson has contended recently, in 'terms of analysis', *Native Life* is a 'much neglected book' ('Sol Plaatzje's *Native Life in South Africa*: Melancholy Narratives, Petitioning Selves and the Ethics of Suffering', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43, 79 [2008], p. 80). Sol Plaatzje, *Native Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1982). For quotes in this essay, the most widely available version of *Native Life* has been used: Project Gutenberg's E-text: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1452/g1452.html>

5 T. Keegan, 'Crisis and Catharsis in the Development of Capitalism in South African Agriculture', *African Affairs*, 84, 336 (1985), p. 373.

6 P. Rich, 'African Farming and the 1913 Natives Land Act: Towards a Reassessment', SALDRU Farm Labour Conference, paper no. 21, September (1976).

7 For an early and excellent example, see Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979). See W. Beinart and P. Delius, 'The Historical Context and Legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913', in this issue.

8 In fact, for the next generation, the number of Africans on white-owned farms actually increased. The 1936 census showed 37 per cent of Africans on white farms (with 45 per cent in reserves and 17 per cent in towns).

9 Beinart and Delius, 'The Historical Context'.

10 H. Feinberg, 'Protest in South Africa: Prominent Black Leaders' Commentary on the Natives Land Act, 1913–1936', *Historia*, 52, 2 (2006), pp. 119–44.

Native Life in South Africa?

Although, five decades after his death, critics were asking why Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (1876–1932) had been forgotten in his own country,¹¹ a generation later his writings had migrated from periphery to mainstream.¹² His house in Kimberley and his grave were declared national monuments, in 1992 and 1997, respectively; his writings are now part of the standard canon taught at South African universities, and he himself is a recurrent subject for academic research.¹³ He has even earned the sobriquet ‘Shakespeare of South African literature’,¹⁴ and South Africa’s newest university (to be constructed in Kimberley) will be named in his honour.

Plaatje was one of an influential cohort of black writers, and political and religious leaders – like John Tengo (‘J.T.’) Jabavu and John Knox Bokwe – who were fluent in English and used it as the language of aspiration and empowerment. He is now well known for his polemic, *Native Life in South Africa*, his *Mafeking Diary* and *Mhudi* (the first novel by a black South African).¹⁵ His identities overlapped and shifted over time – journalist, interpreter, linguist, Christian moralist, historian, orthographer, diarist, politician and consummate wordsmith.¹⁶ Born to Christian parents, who claimed a royal lineage as descendants of the Rolong king Kgosi Modiboa, Plaatje was proud of the Rolong tradition of the Mabina Tshipi-Noto clan.¹⁷ After a few years at the Lutheran school in Pniel, he worked as an interpreter in the magistrate’s court in Mafeking, and for the British authorities in Mafeking during the South African War.¹⁸ As a journalist, he founded the *Koranta ea Bechoana* (*Bechuana Gazette*) in Mafeking in 1901, editing it from 1902 to 1908, when he assumed the editorship of the *Tsala ea Bechoana* (*The Bechuana’s Friend*)¹⁹ in Kimberley for seven years. During these years, his reputation grew, and in 1912 he became co-founder of the South African Native National Congress (precursor to the African National Congress). In his journalism (often for the white press), he drew attention to African grievances in a tone that was a blend of ‘ironical humour and moral indignation’.²⁰

Moral indignation developed as a profoundly middle-class emotion. Certainly, Plaatje identified as part of the *petit bourgeoisie*, with his mission background and white-collar job. But he also identified as an African nationalist and Rolong patriot, a representative of the

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- 11 T. Couzens and B. Willan, ‘Solomon T. Plaatje, 1876–1932: An Introduction’, *English in Africa*, 3, 2 (1976), pp. 1–6. As Beinart and Delius point out in this issue, Francis Wilson used Plaatje’s work in ‘Farming, 1866–1966’, in L. Thompson and M. Wilson (eds), *The Oxford History of South Africa Vol. 2* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 104–71, but until Willan’s account there was no full-scale biography: see B. Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography – Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, 1876–1932* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1984).
 - 12 At least in part because of such useful laments by Couzens and Willan. See also J. Starfield, ‘Re-Thinking Sol Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary*’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27, 4 (2001), pp. 855–63.
 - 13 B. Willan (ed.), *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1996) – this contains excerpts from books, newspapers and, mostly, from previously unpublished manuscripts, such as his letters; Sol T. Plaatje, *Mhudi*, edited by T. Couzens (Cape Town, Francolin Press, Sefika series, 1996); Peter Midgley, *Sol Plaatje: An Introduction* (Grahamstown, NELM Publications, 1997).
 - 14 D. Johnson, ‘Literature for the Rainbow Nation: The Case of Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi*’, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 10, 3–4 (1994), pp. 345–58.
 - 15 Sol T. Plaatje, *Mafeking Diary: A Black Man’s View of a White Man’s War*, edited by John Comaroff, with Brian Willan and Andrew Reed (Cambridge, Meridor Books, and Athens, Ohio University Press, 1990; first published as *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje* [London, Macmillan, 1973]); Plaatje, *Mhudi*.
 - 16 P. Mpe, ‘“Naturally These Stories Lost Nothing by Repetition”: Plaatje’s Mediation of Oral History in *Mhudi*’, *Current Writing*, 8, 1 (1996), pp. 75–89.
 - 17 Sabata-mpho Mokae, *The Story of Sol T. Plaatje* (Kimberley, Sol Plaatje Educational Trust, 2010). Among Batswana at this time it was assumed that the elite were Christian, and only the *batho hela* (ordinary people) were *baheitan* (heathens). Thanks to an anonymous referee for clarifying this.
 - 18 The name has been transliterated in a number of ways over the last century, and is now called ‘Mahikeng’, but this essay adopts the spelling that Plaatje used in *Native Life*.
 - 19 Its name changed in 1912 to *Tsala ea Batho* (The People’s Friend).
 - 20 Couzens and Willan, ‘Solomon T. Plaatje ... An Introduction’, p. 4.

Barolong nation.²¹ He was strongly influenced by his experiences in the siege of Mafeking during the South African War, where Africans assisting the British received the worst rations and their lives were deemed less important than those of cattle.²² Yet, as Bickford-Smith has shown, British 'hegemony' (or even Anglicisation) was more than propaganda or proselytising: it was a set of practices, expectations, perceptions, hopes and everyday 'lived system of meanings and values'.²³ These beliefs were complex, shifting and syncretic, but Plaatje's residual faith in the set of 'meanings and values' associated with *Pax Britannica* was shaken by the Natives Land Act, passed by parliament in June 1913.

Natives Land Act?

Except in the Cape Province, the Act prohibited Africans from buying land outside reserves and locations, and banned whites from buying land in those areas. The creation of 'scheduled areas', in which Africans could own land, was designed to bar Africans from owning land outside them or selling land within them to non-Africans.²⁴ The Act's outcome (in some places) was to harness the skills of the African tenant farmers and tie their resources (especially oxen) to their landlords. The Act restricted African capital accumulation and social mobility through personal enrichment. It targeted wealthier Africans who had more livestock than the white farmer was prepared to accommodate.²⁵

As Plaatje argued to *The Labour Leader*, 'To appreciate the effect of the Bill, you must understand that the coloured people in South Africa have almost entirely gained their livelihood by working on the land, principally in the rearing of cattle'.²⁶ Animals, and particularly cattle, were central in Tswana culture; they were not only key to socio-political and economic sustenance, but also nourished the cultural imagination.²⁷ Indeed, Haire and Matjila argue that the trope of dying cattle in Plaatje's narrative signified not only the economic ruin of the Tswana: the Tswana, dispossessed of cattle, faced cultural extinction, as cattle provided the means of communication between the living and the dead.

Certainly, dating back to the pre-colonial era, cattle – and to a lesser degree goats and sheep – were a connection not only between ancestor and descendant but also between ruler and ruled. Cattle underpinned the authority of the patriarch of the homestead.²⁸ Used for *lobola* (bridewealth) and ritual slaughter, they buttressed and shaped social relationships as

21 Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*; see also Maureen Rall, *Peaceable Warrior – The Life and Times of Sol. T. Plaatje* (Kimberley, Sol Plaatje Educational Trust, 2003) p. 133. The Barolong are a Tswana-speaking people, with long roots in Thaba Nchu in the then Orange Free State. G.E. de Villiers, *Servant of Africa – The Life and Times of Sol T. Plaatje* (Pretoria, Stimela, 2000).

22 Plaatje, *Mafeking Diary*.

23 See V. Bickford-Smith, 'Revisiting Anglicisation in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31, 2 (2003), pp. 82–95, quoting Raymond Williams on p. 82.

24 The designated areas were of wholly inadequate size and were, in any case, held by lineage groups which prevented individual acquisition of land. They also served to create 'tribal' cleavages, just as key figures in the leadership were starting to adopt a national black identity.

25 Keegan, 'Crisis and Catharsis', p. 387.

26 Solomon T. Plaatje, 'Homeless! Landless! Outlawed! The Plight of South African Natives – Interview with Solomon Plaatje', in *The Labour Leader*, 11 December 1919, republished in *English in Africa*, 3, 2 (1976), pp. 59–63, see especially p. 61.

27 Karen Haire and D.S. Matjila, 'The Cattle Motif in Sol. T. Plaatje's Publications in English – Re-Storying the African and Batswana Sensibilities', *Journal of Black Studies*, 41, 1 (2010), pp. 207–17.

28 A. Kuper, *Wives for Cattle: Bridewealth and Marriage in Southern Africa* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). See also J. Guy, 'Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies in Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 1 (1987), pp. 18–37.

‘invisible capital’.²⁹ By controlling access to cattle, the patriarch retained a measure of authority over labour-power. Thus livestock were at the ‘critical intersection of economics, authority and cosmology’. They provided meat, milk, manure and muscle. Indeed, the last – draught power – was pivotal in sharecropping relations between white and African farmers.³⁰

Plaatje certainly believed that investment in cattle was the core economic strategy: ‘An African home without its flock and herd is like an English home without its bread-winner.’³¹ Cattle had long been the source of convertible and transportable wealth. Alfred Xuma, who corresponded with Plaatje and who revived the ANC in the 1940s, recalled that livestock tending was a normal part of African boyhood; youngsters progressed from watching over sheep and goats to looking after cattle and horses, and finally – as a rite of passage – to learning to plough and drive oxen. He referred to these animals as his ‘father’s banking account’, which paid for school fees and ‘other family needs’.³² It was this ‘bank’ that some white landowners undermined in order to curtail independent access to capital by Africans. They wanted to restrict African independence; but they also resented African use of land they coveted, and claimed that African ‘scrub’ cattle were a reservoir of disease. Thus one of the most devastating immediate manifestations of the Act was the forced sale of their animals. As a petition to the Heidelberg and district branch of the South African National Native Congress (SANNK), noted in 1914:

The Native Land Act breaks our people and puts them back in rearing of their Stock, and ruins what we term our bank. Another reason that this Act oppresses us, is that the farmer refuses to engage the average native who is in possession of stock, and says that he is a Boss himself, therefore the poor man is compelled to sell his stock for whatever he can get so that he may obtain employment, not having a place of refuge.³³

An expanding black rural economy, profiting from several successive good seasons and the opening up of the maize export market, reached an apex of accumulation just as white agriculture was capitalising. Moreover, the economic boom led to an increase in wages for rural Africans, which they invested in livestock; livestock in turn opened up access to a complementary income in hides, transport and meat. This gave them more independence and had an impact on grazing resources – two developments the 1913 Act affected, albeit with regional variation. White landlords had no problem with tenants’ oxen in the ploughing season, but resented animals of less direct and practical advantage to themselves.³⁴ Access to grazing land for their livestock was of paramount importance to black tenant farmers, but white landlords resented the loss of grazing.³⁵ This was becoming an issue because of the explosion of stock in the Free State during the seven years leading up to 1913, which saw good rainfall and the gradual triumph over epizootics.³⁶ The sub-division of farms in some areas and

29 B. Cousins, ‘Invisible Capital: The Contribution of Communal Rangelands to Rural Livelihoods in South Africa’, in T.D. de Bruyn and P.F. Scogings (eds), *Communal Rangelands in Southern Africa: A Synthesis of Knowledge* (Alice, University of Fort Hare, 1998), pp. 16–29.

30 C. Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-Industrial South Africa: The Making of the Colonial Order in the Eastern Cape 1770–1865* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 21.

31 Plaatje, *Native Life*, p. 180.

32 P. Limb (ed.), *A.B. Xuma – Autobiography and Selected Works* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 2012), p. 9.

33 *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 3 July 1914.

34 In fact, Keegan argues that sharecropping persisted in many places openly until the 1940s – when tractors replaced the sharecroppers’ plough-oxen. Keegan, ‘Crisis and Catharsis’, p. 393.

35 U.G. 22–1916, *Natives’ Lands Commission*, pp. 10, 28, 70, see Appendix I, pp. 1 and 4. See also U.G. 17–1911, *Blue Book on Native Affairs*, 1910, p. 178.

36 Keegan has demonstrated an enormous increase in cattle holdings in the OFS between 1904 and 1911: the number of ‘trek-oxen’ in the OFS went up from 76,251 in 1904 to 116,663 in 1911, and ‘other cattle’ from 246,541 to 917,304 (in 1890, there had been 276,037 trek-oxen and 619,026 ‘other cattle’, respectively). Their numbers probably account for why the OFS was so intent on applying the Land Act in the most draconian way possible – and why so many cattle were turned off the land so ruthlessly; T.J. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa. The Southern Highveld to 1914* (Braamfontein, Ravan Press, 1986), p. 208.

overstocking, as, for example, in Ladybrand, added to white farmers' complaints.³⁷ Facing the loss of their livestock, some Africans applied for butchers' licences so that they could at least slaughter and sell their animals, rather than let them starve or put them on a market saturated with stock.³⁸ Their efforts proved unsuccessful and white stock speculators profited.

Mongrel Beasts?

An aspect largely neglected by historians of this period was that white farmers in the OFS were becoming increasingly conscious of stock breeds – at least in part because of importations by the Department of Agriculture to improve the national herd. They were increasingly unwilling to allow the mingling of their own stock with the stallions, rams or bulls of their African tenantry. There was a porous boundary between the domain of animal and human breeding (and Sol Plaatje was very aware of the debates over miscegenation, as his 1921 treatise *The Mote and the Beam: An Epic on Sex-Relationship 'Twixt White and Black in British South Africa* made clear). The cordons sanitaires around the elite breeds and (white) families suggest that both were seen as threatened by socio-sexual intercourse.³⁹ Such ideas about sexuality served as a 'graphic substantiation of who was, so to speak, on the bottom and who was on the top'.⁴⁰ Indeed, the first premier of the Union, Louis Botha, believed: 'If you cross an Afrikaner cow with a Friesland bull, you will never get pure red calves from her.'⁴¹ A white farmer from the Free State declared two years before the 1913 Act that 'progressive farming' was hampered because 'natives are allowed to graze and breed any kind of mongrel stock. . . . Our Government is spending large sums on the importation of pedigree stock, but what real progress can be made until we have a law enforcing the castration of downright mongrels.'⁴² Some white farmers resorted to providing African tenants free access to pedigree studs, as historically herds grazed together, on condition they castrated their own male animals. But as grazing became more valuable, paddocking became more commonplace,⁴³ allowing landlords to rotate their herds and to relegate African stock to over-grazed camps: a harbinger in microcosm of the Act itself.⁴⁴

Protest and Petition

There was, however, freedom to protest. The black press was unfettered, and rights of speech, assembly and petition existed: no African newspaper was confiscated or banned at this time.⁴⁵ Attwell has established that a 'constricting Victorian ethos' was common in the writing of the

37 The stock boom varied regionally: for example, the OFS escaped east coast fever altogether, whereas Natal, as Ballard has argued, was hit with a locust plague, rinderpest and east coast fever, at this time: C. Ballard, 'The Repercussions of Rinderpest: Cattle Plague and Peasant Decline in Colonial Natal', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 19, 3 (1986), pp. 421–50.

38 Keegan, 'Crisis and Catharsis', p. 388.

39 For discussion of telegony, see S. Swart, *Riding High – Horses, Humans and History in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2010), pp. 66–7.

40 A. Stoler, 'Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures', *American Ethnologist*, 16, 4 (1989), pp. 634–60; see p. 636.

41 C. Louis Leipoldt, *Bushveld Doctor* ([1937] Johannesburg, Lowry, 1980), p. 234.

42 Letter to editor (using pseudonym 'Puzzled'), *Farmer's Weekly*, 4 October 1911.

43 For the history of enclosure, see L. van Sittert, 'Holding the Line: The Rural Enclosure Movement in the Cape Colony, c. 1865–1910', *Journal of African History*, 43, 1 (2002), pp. 95–118.

44 As Plaatje pointed out, the density of cattle to the square mile in Cape Colony was 6.39 in white areas, and 61.15 in native areas; once the law was enacted there would be 0.24 cattle per square mile in white zones and 163.26 in 'Native' regions.

45 H. Feinberg, 'Protest in South Africa', p. 141.

African educated elite (right up until the 1940s).⁴⁶ Certainly, the African petit bourgeois adopted and adapted several ideologies and means of expression, but seldom submissively or without question.⁴⁷ As Ogude has shown, the African intelligentsia often borrowed western forms (like petitions) to critique the west.⁴⁸ This mimicry was not subservient but rather subversive. It returned a measure of political agency to the local petitioner and laid siege to the very foundation upon which imperial authority rested, by insisting on the application of the empire's own principles.

Thus, as Bickford-Smith has contended, there was no Manichean divide between embracing and abhorring imperial ideals: 'people brought traditions, acquired ... social identities, practices and skills, and whatever they could marshal from their native cultures and the colonial cultures to which they were now continuously exposed.'⁴⁹ This strain of British ideology within Cape liberal discourse endured into the first decades of the twentieth century, promoting the idea that all 'imperial citizens' could become 'civilised' irrespective of race, that good English was a hallmark of being civilised, and that 'respectability' could lead to their acceptance as 'civilised'.⁵⁰

Plaatje's book was, in large measure, a challenge posed by a 'civilised man' to his civilisation. This challenge assumed the rhetorical shape of a plea to the British people, begging the 'Imperial government' to intervene in South Africa. As Remington has observed, Plaatje's use of 'we' (rather than 'I') throughout his book was not unusual in Victorian prose; it was also part of his effort to represent the commonality of the people, and this was further buttressed by his arduous journeying to gather 'personal observations' – strategies which contributed to the legitimacy of his plea.⁵¹ As a narrative, it recorded the SANNC's attempts to oppose the Act, but also legitimised the group's claim to lead South Africa's black masses, by demonstrating its superior 'civilisation'.⁵² It was both a polemic and an educational tract, assuming the moralism and didacticism of both. Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa, Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion* was published in May 1916 in London, 350 pages long, selling at 3s 6d a copy. It was dedicated to 'Miss Harriette E. Colenso, *Nkosazana Matotoba ka So-Bantu*', who had inherited from her father, Bishop Colenso, the role of emissary from the Zulu to the imperial authorities. Plaatje called for the reversal of the Act and the restoration of pre-Union, 'pre-Boer', English justice, and the implementation of Rhodes's notion of 'equal rights for all civilised men, irrespective of colour'. Indeed, 'civilised men' and civilisation were central to Plaatje's argument. He was at pains to remind his readers that, while South Africa's 'coloured races' offered to help in Britain's war, Afrikaners had rebelled against the Union government's decision to fight on its side. He evinced a 'civilised man's' outrage at being led by the 'the partly literate parliament of the Union of South Africa'. Thus, on one level, he was a lawyer in the legal case: the South African African as plaintiff vs the Boer defendant.⁵³

46 D. Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity – Studies in Black South African Literary History* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 32.

47 B. Willan, 'Sol Plaatje, De Beers and an Old Tram Shed: Class Relations and Social Control in a South African Town, 1918–1919', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4, 2 (1978), pp. 195–215.

48 J. Ogude, 'Engaging Modernities: Cultural and Intellectual Trajectories from East and Southern Africa', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43, 1 (2008), pp. 1–5.

49 B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 8–9.

50 Vivian Bickford-Smith, 'Revisiting Anglicisation in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31, 2 (2003), p. 85; Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War*, p. 6.

51 J. 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), pp. 425–46, see p. 432.

52 L. Chrisman, 'Fathering the Black Nation of South Africa: Gender and Generation in Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* and *Mhudi*', *Social Dynamics*, 23, 2 (1997), pp. 57–73.

53 A.E. Voss, 'Sol Plaatje, the Eighteenth Century, and South African Cultural Memory', *English in Africa*, 21, 1, 2 (1994), pp. 59–75, p. 63; Willan, 'An African in Kimberley', p. 64.

Plaatje underlined his own loyalty to both the empire and the middle classes (and by extension the SANNC and, indeed, all 'respectable' Africans) by reminding his readers that when, for example, the Congress was invited to 'British Kimberley', their meetings closed with 'singing the British National Anthem, and not with singing the "Volkslied" or the "Red Flag", as is the case in meetings at some other South African centres'.⁵⁴

Plaatje's allegiance to class is clear. His attack on the pass laws, for example, was based on the horrifying notion that respectable African women were having their feminine gentility besmirched; a 'minister's wife' and 'families of respectable [Africans]' had been dishonoured by such laws.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Limb has cautioned us against class-reductionist analyses, and cites Davidson as demonstrating that the 'labouring poor' gave nationalists 'ground to stand on'. Plaatje does not speak *for* the workers, but he does speak *about* them, exposing exploitation and evincing sympathy. Limb argues for deeper sympathies to the workers and to women hidden underneath the 'gentlemanly top-hatted pro-Empire moderate'.⁵⁶

Efforts to find the 'real' Plaatje are probably unconstructive.⁵⁷ As observed of Oscar Wilde, another enigmatic author at the imperial edge in a very different way, 'All a biographer can ask for are a few insights behind the layers of masks'.⁵⁸ Indeed, as Wilde himself noted, 'Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth'.⁵⁹ Plaatje's many masks expose the dissonances of empire.⁶⁰ Plaatje wore the mask of the gentleman. He 'performed' Britishness – in fact, his pro-empire stance *permitted* his critique – in his rhetoric and writing style. Indeed, as Bundy has observed, Plaatje's description of the Land Act is 'reminiscent of contemporary descriptions of the enclosure movement in late eighteenth century England'.⁶¹ It was written with a deep identification with Britain – or rather, 'English civilization'.⁶²

Despite Plaatje's caustic critique of the editor of *Imvo Zabantsundu*, Jabavu, who supported the Land Act,⁶³ de Kock has shown how Jabavu prefigured and influenced Plaatje's own tactics. Plaatje learned from the older man how to use 'the master narrative of "civilisation" with its teleology of ultimate fairness and equal justice in a British constitutional system' as part of his political struggle.⁶⁴ *Native Life* is divided into two parts: the first eighteen chapters provide a first-hand account of the immediate impact of the Land Act, culminating in the SANNC deputation to Britain. The remaining seven chapters focus on the war and the Boer Rebellion, based on newspaper clippings Plaatje received while in

54 Plaatje, *Native Life*, p. 90.

55 Chrisman, 'Fathering the Black Nation', p. 63.

56 P. Limb, 'Sol Plaatje Reconsidered: Rethinking Plaatje's Attitudes to Class, Nation, Gender, and Empire', *African Studies*, 62, 1 (2003), pp. 33–51; see pp.36 and 37 for stereotypical notions of Plaatje.

57 Haire and Matjila argue that he was 'first and foremost an African and a Motswana', but most other interpreters allow the shifting shades of self to incorporate Plaatje's many identities, without arguing that one part of him was more dominant or authentic than another. Haire and Matjila, 'The Cattle Motif', p. 208.

58 B. Belford, 'On Becoming Oscar Wilde: Transformations Seen in a Biographer's Journal', *American Imago*, 54, 4 (1997), p. 333.

59 Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic As Artist', in the *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London, HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 1142. Masks have been a significant trope in writing from the imperial margins and postcolonial writing. For two examples, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, forewords by Ziauddin Sardar and Homi K. Bhabha (London, Pluto Press, 2008); Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989).

60 D. Schalkwyk, 'Portrait and Proxy: Representing Plaatje and Plaatje Represented', *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, 4, 2 (1999), pp. 14–29.

61 Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, p. 231.

62 Voss, 'Sol Plaatje, the Eighteenth Century', p. 63; Willan, 'An African in Kimberley', p. 239.

63 Plaatje, *Collected Writings*, pp. 159–63.

64 L. de Kock, *Civilising Barbarians: Missionary Narrative and African Textual Response in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press and Lovedale Press, 1996), p. 123.

Britain. It is a book written in outrage and anguish, with his deep feeling of having been betrayed running through it. As Plaatje noted, with aggrieved dignity:

This appeal is not on behalf of the naked hordes of cannibals who are represented in fantastic pictures displayed in the shop-windows in Europe, most of them imaginary; but it is on behalf of five million loyal British subjects who shoulder 'the black man's burden' every day, doing so without looking forward to any decoration or thanks.⁶⁵

A sense of betrayal drips from every page of *Native Life* – particularly so as M.P.J.W. Sauer was thought to have been appointed Minister of Native Affairs at Whitehall's suggestion. He had been seen as a liberal, who had even championed extending the black vote. Plaatje occupied a continuum of consciousness between a quest for a liberal South Africa as part of a benign empire at one end, and, at the other end, a new spirit of insurgency.⁶⁶

In doing so, Plaatje's narrative adopted elements of the quixotic, tilting at the windmills of the modern state, with perhaps a consciously La Mancha undertone. Whether he assumed this persona, or whether parts of him really believed it, is unknowable. He uses a lacerating sarcasm at times, at other times a melancholic irony, as in his frequent deeply sardonic references to the Orange 'Free' State. Humour arguably allowed Plaatje to say things that would otherwise have been socially threatening. This form of *lag met 'n traan* humour exhibited what James Scott called (in a very different context) the 'weapons of the weak'.⁶⁷ Statements made 'humorously' had deniability, offering protection through the defence that 'I was only joking'. As Langston Hughes has shown, African-American slaves used such camouflaged and coded humour: their publicly stoic laughter veiled private pain, allowing the maintenance of dignity.⁶⁸

Plaatje's frequent questions, reiterations, and insistent supplications underscore his petition – which culminate in a coda addressed to 'you', the British public. In fact, *Native Life* was favourably reviewed and widely read by the British public, for whom it was intended.⁶⁹ Plaatje knew his public, he knew his empire and he used its own words, its own laws and its own emotions. A central emotion that culture-brokers used to help define what it meant to be 'British' and to be 'middle-class' was the sensibility against animal cruelty.

Brutishness and Britishness

By the early twentieth century there had been a fundamental shift in the human understanding of cruelty. Indeed, from the long eighteenth century, there had been a revolution in sensibility fostered by preachers, poets, and philosophers.⁷⁰ Early social commentators actually saw

65 Plaatje, *Native Life*, p. 13.

66 Johnson, 'Literature for the Rainbow Nation'.

67 For more, see James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990), p. xiii. The description 'lag met 'n traan' may be translated as 'laughing with a tear'.

68 S. Swart, "'The Terrible Laughter of the Afrikaner' – Towards a Social History of Humor", *Journal of Social History*, 42, 4 (2009), pp. 889–917.

69 Chrisman, 'Fathering the Black Nation', p. 58. Indeed, several reviewers remarked on how incredible it was that a book of such calibre could have been penned by an African; Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*, p. 197).

70 As Keith Thomas has pointed out, however, there was a solid and coherent attitude towards anti-animal cruelty between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries: humans were not to cause unnecessary pain; see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World – Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (London, Penguin, 1984), p. 153; see also H. Kean, *Animal Rights: Social and Political Change since 1800* (London, Reaktion Books, 1998); C. Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes: Animals in Romantic-Period Writing* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2001); C. Lansbury, *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers and Vivisection in Edwardian England* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); C. Li, 'A Union of Christianity, Humanity and Philanthropy: The Christian Tradition and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Society and Animals*, 8 (2000), pp. 265–85; H. Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1987).

English brutality as a problem, entrenched in the nature of the nation.⁷¹ From the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, one can trace a perceptible, wide-ranging but largely tacit assumption of the Judaeo-Christian god's granting of dominion over all animals to 'man' (Genesis 1: 26–28; 9: 2–3). Aside from this notion of divine stewardship, there is scattered evidence of the moral condemnation of cruelty to animals based on God's 'mercy' to 'all his creatures'.⁷² A core motive behind calls for compassion was the fear of brutalisation: ruthlessness towards animals could lead to heartlessness to fellow humans. Before the nineteenth century there was no law regulating animal protection in any European country. Initial laws banned cruelty to animals only in public: they were intended to protect the humans compelled to witness the spectacle, not the animal itself. Thus the laws were intended to shield human sensibility not animal vulnerability. The nineteenth century, however, saw the malicious abuse of animals made punishable, even if it occurred out of the public eye, moving closer to the idea of ur-animal rights.⁷³

Although some believers promoted the idea of the mechanistic Cartesian beast-machine, *sans* feelings or rationality, there was a movement towards compassion based on the animal as a feeling subject. Just as in movements for the abolition of slavery and penal reform, the English movement for the prevention of cruelty to animals was initiated by the free churches. Although the notion of the 'prevention of cruelty to animals' was disseminated across Europe, it was especially triumphant as an ideology in Britain.⁷⁴ A new genre of literature, including popular pamphleteering and novels, campaigned against cruelty to animals.⁷⁵

The growing literature of sentimentality featured animals. Such sentimentalism infused the morality codes of social institutions from the evangelical movement to the aesthetics of the novel as the century wore on.⁷⁶ Of course, some animals were more sentimentalised than others. Poultry and pigs receive scant attention in Plaatje's animal diaspora; goats and sheep receive some mention, but his focus is on horses and especially cattle. Both the horse and the ox were good subjects – their perceived morality contingent upon docile *service* to humans not offered by other livestock.

In 1822 the British parliament passed an Animal Protection Act, which afforded protection to sheep, cattle and horses.⁷⁷ Two years later, the first anti-animal-cruelty organisation was founded in England, and laws against cruelty to dogs (1839 and 1854) and against animal-baiting and cock-fighting (1835 and 1849) followed.⁷⁸ The Society was composed mainly of the professional middle classes, and their energies were first directed towards the wanton leisure pursuits of the working classes: cock- and dog-fighting, bull-

71 H. Ritvo, 'Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain – Complicated Attitudes and Competing Categories', in A. Manning and J. Serpell (eds), *Animals and Human Society – Changing Perspectives* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994), p. 107.

72 Indeed, in his *A Dissertation on the Duty of Mercy and Sin of Cruelty to Brute Animals* (London, 1776), the Anglican priest the Reverend Humphrey Primatt (1736–79) likened cruelty to animals to heresy: A. Maehle, 'Cruelty and Kindness to the "Brute Creation" – Stability and Change in the Ethics of the Man–Animal Relationship, 1600–1850', in Manning and Serpell (eds), *Animals and Human Society*, p. 83.

73 Maehle, 'Cruelty and Kindness', p. 98.

74 As expressed in two British parliamentary Acts: the Act to Consolidate and Amend the Several Laws Relating to the Cruel and Improper Treatment of Animals and the Mischiefs Arising from the Driving of Cattle, and to Make Other Provisions in Regard Thereto (1835); and the Act for the More Effectual Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (1849).

75 Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1887) was perhaps the apogee of this genre.

76 F. Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 3. There was a shift in the modern period from this romantic sentimentality to irony, which satirised bourgeois mawkish sanctimony.

77 See B. Blossom, 'Black Beauty as Antebellum Slave Narrative' (MA dissertation, University of South Florida, 2008).

78 Followed by societies in France (1845), Austria (1846), and Germany (1841).

running, ratting and the baiting of animals.⁷⁹ This was part of the desire of the ‘respectable’ middle class to discipline the new working class into higher standards of public behaviour.⁸⁰ By disciplining – in essence by ‘civilising’ – the publicly disruptive element, they hoped to domesticate the wildness they feared would disrupt the social order.

Influenced by the eighteenth-century reformation of morals, the anti-cruelty crusade developed much of its moralistic nature and focused on legislative change. It was concerned not only with the suffering of animals but with its debasing effect on the character of humans and with the drunken debauch that animal-baiting events became.⁸¹ Similarly (albeit slightly later), anti-vivisectionists argued against baiting, not only because it inflicted agony on creatures of God, but also because it brutalised its practitioners.⁸²

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the movement further extended its philanthropic scope to embrace the institutionalisation of homes for stray and sick animals and the building of public drinking-troughs. Animals were increasingly portrayed and understood as beloved family members.⁸³ Victorian funerals for pets were not uncommon among the middle classes. In the 1860s and 1870s, many societies began to embark on educational projects for the cultivation in the young of ‘kindness to animals’. Between 1820 and 1870, middle-class ideas about the appropriate character of animal–human relationships coalesced into the distinctive ethic that is, in many ways, still characteristic of middle-class culture: kindness to animals became one characteristic of *being* middle-class. Reformers categorised ‘kindness to animals’ as characteristically ‘civilised’ and, increasingly, ‘British’ (and more particularly ‘English’) emotions.⁸⁴

English humane society claimed kindness to animals as an English trait, and associated cruelty to animals with foreigners.⁸⁵ This spread to the colonies – particularly as cruelty to animals was identified as an African attribute. Theal, for example, the prolific and once influential historian of South Africa, wrote in 1888 that a characteristic ‘common to the different sections of the Bantu in Southern Africa’ was the divination of the ‘issue of warlike operations by revolting cruelties practised on animals’.⁸⁶ Cruelty to animals was banned in the Cape (1856), Natal (1874), the Orange Free State (1876), and the South African Republic (1888). The first local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in Cape Town in 1872, and legislation against cruelty to animals was passed in 1897.⁸⁷ The Cape SPCA generated other branches and affiliated associations.⁸⁸ Supported by increasing state-

79 This while the arguably almost equally gory pursuits (indeed ‘blood sports’) of the aristocracy, such as steeplechase, fox hunting and stag hunting, were largely ignored.

80 J. Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain, and Humanity in the Victorian Mind* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

81 P. Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830–1885* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 31.

82 C. Li, ‘Mobilizing Literature in the Animal Defense Movement in Britain, 1870–1918’, *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 32 (2006), p. 32.

83 H. Kean, *Animal Rights – Political and Social Change in Britain since 1800* (London, Reaktion Books, 1998), p. 13.

84 N. Sznajder, ‘Pain and Cruelty in Socio-Historical Perspective’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 10, 2 (1996), pp. 342–3.

85 Ritvo, ‘Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, p. 107.

86 G. McCall Theal, *History of the Emigrant Boers in South Africa, Or the Wanderings and Wars of the Emigrant Farmers from their Leaving the Cape Colony to the Acknowledgement of their Independence by Great Britain* (London, S. Sonnenschein, Lowrey, 1888), p. 10.

87 KAB (Cape Archives), 3/ELN, 988, 1810, Society for the Prevention Of Cruelty To Animals, 1839–1949; KAB, CVS, 1/37, 116, Cruelty Cases, 1904–1906; KAB, CVS, 1/76, 629, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 1908–1909.

88 See L. van Sittert and S. Swart, ‘Canis Familiaris: A Dog History of South Africa’, *South African Historical Journal*, 48, 1 (2003), pp.138–73.

imposed penalties, they focused on prosecuting public cruelty, particularly by the perceived under-classes.⁸⁹

In the metropole, cruelty to animals preceded cruelty to humans as a public issue. Plaatje would not have been unaware (given his obsession with slavery and his repeated rhetorical deployment of the concept – over 60 times in the text of *Native Life*) that Parliament passed the Emancipation Act, which established a plan to free all of the slaves in its West Indian colonies, only in 1833, a decade after the Animal Protection Act.⁹⁰ The irony cannot have been lost on him, especially as he was also reeling from the betrayal of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society (APS), which actively opposed the SANNC deputation.⁹¹ The APS argued that the Land Act guaranteed 'contented populations [i.e. "natives"] enjoying the free play of every legitimate tribal institution, flocks and herds ...'.⁹²

Plaatje determinedly quoted metropolitan writers, and cited Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*, to reflect on the consequences of the Land Act. Goldsmith had also written against cruelty to animals. Thomas has traced how Victorian popularisers of kindness to animals frequently used the mechanism of contrasting their pets favourably with 'savages' – 'cannibals' or 'Hottentots and Bushmen'.⁹³ It might even be that as the orthodox doctrine of human uniqueness waned, the European sense of superiority was rescued by late-eighteenth-century racist doctrines of polygenism, so the lowest rank of man was the neighbour to the highest rank of animal.⁹⁴ Plaatje cites British romantic poets, including William Cowper and Robert Burns, both of whom were cherished by the anti-cruelty movement.⁹⁵ Indeed, the evangelical Cowper declared 'I would not enter on my list of friends / (Though graced with polish'd manners and fine sense, / Yet wanting sensibility) the man / Who needlessly sets foot upon a worm'.⁹⁶ Burns famously considered even a mere mouse a 'fellow-mortal', and was 'truly sorry man's dominion / Has broken nature's social union.'⁹⁷

In quoting these authors, Plaatje underlined the fact of Britishness: he simultaneously both underscores his own consciousness of what it means and appeals to his reader's conscience. The anti-cruelty movement was determinedly middle-class, although patronised by the aristocracy (the Duchess of Kent and Princess Victoria lent their royal benefaction in 1835).⁹⁸ Admittedly, by the beginning of the twentieth century, with socialists and feminists becoming part of the movement, the crusade radicalised at one extreme. The discourse of 'rights' and 'justice' appeared slowly, before almost replacing the moral reform idiom of 'mercy' and 'kindness' (much) later.⁹⁹ The change was a move away from the moral reform tradition and towards political radicalism.¹⁰⁰ But the Royal Society for the Prevention of

89 See, for example, KAB, CSC, 1/1/1/63, 28, Record of Proceedings of Criminal Case. Criminal Session, September 1906. Rex Versus John Daniels, John Fortuin and Jane Johannes, Charged with Malicious Injury to Property and Contravening Section 2 Of Act No. 18 Of 1888, Entitled 'The Cruelty To Animals Act, 1888', 1906.

90 J.L. Wyett, 'The Lap of Luxury: Lapdogs, Literature, and Social Meaning in the 'Long Eighteenth Century'', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 10, 4 (1999), pp. 275–301.

91 The two organisations had merged in 1910.

92 B. Willan, 'The Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society and the South African Natives Land Act of 1913', *Journal of African History*, 20, 1 (1979), p. 94.

93 Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, pp. 187–8.

94 *Ibid.*, pp. 135–6.

95 While most Romantic poets did not explicitly champion animal rights, their artistic influence on the subject of animals 'gradually had practical results'. See D. Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. xii.

96 William Cowper, 'Winter Walk at Noon', 1785.

97 Robert Burns, 'To A Mouse, On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plough', 1785.

98 M. Tichelar, '"A Blow to the Men in Pink": The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Opposition to Hunting in the Twentieth Century', *Rural History*, 22, 1 (2011), pp. 89–113.

99 Li, 'Mobilizing Literature', p. 31.

100 C. Li, 'An Unnatural Alliance? Political Radicalism and the Animal Defence Movement in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *EURAMERICA*, 42, 1 (2012), pp. 1–43.

Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and related organisations stayed determinedly middle-class and middle-of-the-road. Indeed, by the beginning of the twentieth century, it epitomised liberal, ‘respectable philanthropy’.¹⁰¹

Plaatje adopted another form of respectability – the interdenominational Brotherhood Movement, which gave him both a platform and financial help during his three-year campaign in England. The movement had been founded in 1875 among the Nonconformist churches to promote the practical application of Christianity, and Plaatje drew on their emphasis on hands-on religion and respectable, aspiring working-class and lower-middle-class values. His own Christianity found expression in the language of universal humanity, suffering and mercy – making him the ‘champion of the oppressed’.¹⁰² This is evident in his attack on the hypocrisy of purportedly Christian law-makers:

The policy of goading the Natives into rebellion is not wholly foreign to Colonial policy; but the horrible cruelty to which live stock is exposed under the new Act is altogether a new departure. King Solomon says, ‘The righteous man regardeth the life of his beast, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel’; but there is a Government of professed Bible readers who, in defiance of all Scriptural precepts, pass a law which penalises a section of the community along with their oxen, sheep, goats, horses and donkeys on account of the colour of their owners.

It may be the cattle’s misfortune that they have a black owner, but it is certainly not their fault, for sheep have no choice in the selection of a colour for their owners, and no cows or goats are ever asked to decide if the black boy who milks them shall be their owner, or but a herd in the employ of a white man; so why should they be starved on account of the colour of their owners? We knew of a law to prevent cruelty to animals, but had never thought that we should live to meet in one day so many dumb creatures making silent appeals to Heaven for protection against the law. ‘What man has nerve to do, man has not nerve to see’, and oh! if those gifted Parliamentarians could have been mustered here to witness the wretched results of one of their fine days’ work for a fine day’s pay! But [they . . .] draw their Parliamentary emoluments . . . to enjoy more rest than is due to toilers who have served both God and humanity.¹⁰³

‘Cruel’, ‘being cruel’, ‘cruelty’ stand out in Plaatje’s text. The idea is used as adjective, verb and noun, and occurs 39 times in the text, possibly because the irony that the British Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (No. 8 of 1914) was passed a year after the entrenchment of the 1913 Act had not escaped him. Indeed, Plaatje had observed hypocrisy, British sensibility and the power of emotions about animals a decade earlier. During the Siege of Mafeking, he had already seen how a growing public humaneness could be mobilised as effective propaganda, because the kind treatment of animals – especially horses – was increasingly mobilised as a hallmark of civility. General Viljoen, for example, trumpeted the fact that while Boers had been compelled to fashion boots out of the hides of horses that had died, ‘no horse was specially slaughtered for this purpose or for the purpose of food’. The British, by contrast, committed hippophagy, ‘to make sausages’.¹⁰⁴ For Plaatje, eating horsemeat was unthinkable, and by February 1900 he ‘saw horseflesh for the first time being treated as a human foodstuff’ during the Mafeking siege. The black refugees in Mafeking were compelled to eat it first, the whites later. Plaatje noted: ‘I was moved to see [the horses’] long ears and bold heads, and those were the things the people are to feed on. The recipients, however, were all very pleased to get these heads and they ate them nearly raw’.¹⁰⁵

101 Ritvo, ‘Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, p. 108.

102 Rall, *Peaceable Warrior*, p. xi.

103 Plaatje, *Native Life*, p. 44.

104 B. Viljoen, *My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War* (London, Hood, Douglas and Howard, 1902), p. 503. Drawn from S. Swart, *Riding High – Horses, Humans and History in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2010) and Sandra Swart, ‘Horses in the South African War, c.1899–1902’, *Society & Animals*, 18, 4 (2010), pp. 348–66.

105 Plaatje, *Mafeking Diary*, diary entries for 27 and 26 February 1900, p. 108.



Figure 1. Horses being shot to provide food for the garrison, siege of Mafeking. *Source:* KAB, Leica, L912

Certainly, his private writings such as his war diary reflect his ‘real’ private, non-rhetorical, and apolitical outrage at the needless suffering of non-human creatures. As an early biographer who knew him observed, Plaatje had ‘a compassionate heart’.¹⁰⁶ Unsurprisingly, Plaatje was not against animal killing per se: part of his background and aspiration (both as Tswana and as British) was the hunting of small game; he was reported to be a crack shot.¹⁰⁷

For perhaps more political reasons, Plaatje makes a gentle but telling reference to the animal suffering he witnessed in Britain:

Early in August, we left London to visit the Scottish capital. . . . A painful sight at some of the stations was the number of restive horses forced into the railway trucks by troopers – beautiful, well-fed animals whose sleek appearance showed that they were unaccustomed to the rough life to which the Tommies were leading them. Further, it was sad to think that these noble creatures by their size were to be rendered easy targets for the marksmen of the enemy’s forces, and that they would in addition be subjected to the severity of inclement weather conditions, to which they likewise were unaccustomed.¹⁰⁸

Plaatje is at pains not only to mobilise the rhetorical strategies outlined above, but also to highlight animal suffering alongside the suffering of Africans in the following poignant passages:

Is it natural that their cattle should be subjected to this starvation process, while the grassy tracts of their God-given territories are mainly untenanted and preserved as breeding grounds for venomous snakes and scorpions? . . .

It is clear that under the proposed arrangement native cattle must starve and their owners with them. For it has come out in evidence that even now (while many Europeans hold large tracts of idle land) some of the blacks have not enough grazing for their stock. But that little difficulty the

106 Seetsele Modiri Molema, *Lover of His People – A Biography of Sol Plaatje*, translated and edited by D.S. Matjila and K. Haire (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2012), p. 74.

107 Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*, p. 148: see the page facing p. 148, Figure 42.

108 Plaatje, *Native Life*, p. 128.

Commission solves by proposing that Natives should be taught to give up cattle breeding, which alone stands between them and the required serfdom!¹⁰⁹

Africans as Animals?

While many nineteenth-century liberals had faith in the transformative power of education and Christianity, a growing opposition deployed the new race science to buttress anti-African policy. Many white settlers embraced this metropolitan-inspired race theory, drawing on populist (mis)understandings of Social Darwinism. Indeed, the human relationship with animals is connected to both how humans see themselves and, further, how they see *other* humans. As Jan Smuts (soon to become Prime Minister) said, ‘natives have the simplest minds, understand only simple ideas or ideals, and are almost animal-like in the simplicity of their minds and ways’.¹¹⁰ Milner’s ‘expert’ on ‘black tribes’, Sir Godfrey Lagden, Milner’s head of the South African Native Affairs Commission, drew parallels between Africans and baboons: ‘A study of the physiognomy of the masses shows a lack of intellect . . . and gives the impression of being not unlike baboons.’¹¹¹

Plaatje makes particular mention, to the white readership of the *Cape Argus*, of Hertzog’s racist remark that ‘Natives are like baboons’. With icy irony, he illustrates the idiocy of removing from the land the one group who were farming it fruitfully:

But rational people would be inclined to say that if this be the character of baboons it were better to let baboons go to work and flood the Free State with food than have a lot of able-bodied poor whites knocking at the treasury gates as they are now doing, begging the government to feed their hungry children for them.¹¹²

Interestingly, it was not Plaatje’s first objection to the derogatory animal-labelling of Africans. When called a ‘damned, bloody, dirty black swine’ by a white policeman, he wrote to the Attorney-General of the Transvaal himself that, while he, Plaatje, was not altogether sure of his ultimate damnation, he sported no visible stains, and, ‘I need hardly add that . . . I was not a pig’.¹¹³

Indeed, Plaatje himself likens Africans to animals – but very carefully and strategically. Compassion for animals was a significant move toward an objective compassion for the sufferings of other humans. If animals were important to human concern then it also necessitated the prevention of ill-treatment of those who were in an animal-like condition. Of course, a key facet of the politics of prevention of cruelty to animals is that animals need protection by the human species. So the animal protection analogy could arguably be used only up to a point without Plaatje’s conceding, albeit tacitly, that Africans were fundamentally different – the very racism he resisted. He thus had to navigate a very careful line of analogy. In a reversal of the romantic poets’ tactic, Plaatje deployed the comparison between Africans and animals ironically – to awaken sympathy for the *human* in his readership:

109 *Ibid.*, p.180.

110 J.C. Smuts, ‘The White Man’s Task’, speech given 22 May 1917, in *Plans For A Better World: Speeches of Field-Marshal the Right Honourable J.C. Smuts, P.C., C.H., K.C., D.T.D.*, (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1942).

111 Donald Denoon, *A Grand Illusion: The Failure of Imperial Policy in the Transvaal Colony during the Period of Reconstruction, 1900–1905* (London, Longman, 1973), p. 100; D.R. Burton, ‘Sir Godfrey Lagden: Colonial Administrator’ (PhD thesis, Rhodes University, 1989).

112 Willan (ed.), *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings*, p. 326.

113 See Willan (ed.), *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings*, pp. 87–89, as reviewed in Uma Mesthrie, ‘Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 32, 1 (1999), p. 184.

With the increasing difficulty of finding openings to earn the money for paying these multifarious taxes, the dumb pack-ox, being inarticulate in the Councils of State, has no means of making known to its 'keeper' that the burden is straining its back to breaking point.¹¹⁴

In a sense, this is part of his adoption of what Njabulo Ndebele has called a rhetoric of tactical humility.¹¹⁵ Peterson has shown how his humble pose, including his self-deprecating description of *Native Life in South Africa* as 'but a sincere narrative of a melancholy situation', was a ploy designed to appeal to his audience. It was also part of a biblical tradition of laments, with which Plaatje was conversant, and which he used together with calling on the 'inherent right of every British subject' to appeal to the sovereign.¹¹⁶

At the same time, Plaatje noted of the muleteers serving the imperial war effort abroad in the First World War, driving provisions and ammunition wagons, and acting as orderlies:

These native drivers are classed with the transport mules, with this difference, that while the owner of a mule receives monetary compensation for each animal that falls on the battlefield, or is captured by the enemy, the Government's interest in the black driver ceases when he is killed.¹¹⁷

Plaatje was not the only one to say that the Act stripped African people of their humanity, by treating them as animals, indeed worse than animals: '... by law natives have now less rights than the snakes and scorpions abounding in that country'.¹¹⁸

Moreover, animals were useful in critiquing not only British imperial failure, but betrayals closer to home. By strategically linking the suffering of children and animals in rhetorical spaces, Plaatje was able to deliver a damning critique of Jabavu's accommodationist reaction to the Land Act.¹¹⁹ He deploys the true innocents and truly powerless (animals and children) as those betrayed by Jabavu's newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu*:

... I witnessed [in Hoopstad district] ... families on the roads, the numbers of their attenuated flocks emaciated by lack of fodder on the trek, many of them dying while the wandering owner ran the risk of prosecution for traveling with unhealthy stock. I saw the little children shivering... I could scarcely suppress a tear. But because these were not its editor's children, *Imvo* can refer to their suffering in a manner that will bruise a wound in one's heart ...¹²⁰

Conclusion

The imperial promise was more than just propaganda: it contained a 'lived system of meanings and values'. Lingering faith in *Pax Britannica* was shattered by the Natives Land Act. As this essay has argued, a distinction existed between these meanings and values, to which many (including Plaatje) remained attached, and the actions of the imperial government (in endorsing the South African state), which were seen to betray them. Indeed, the more oppressive their actions, the greater deployment, in rhetorical terms, of the 'meanings and values' as a means of opposing them.¹²¹

Consciousness cannot be taken possession of like land and livestock. Certainly, Plaatje used a tactical approach in including (among his many rhetorical tactics) a powerful appeal against animal suffering. Yet our analysis of his sophisticated strategy and political posturing

114 Plaatje, *Native Life*, p. 13.

115 See N.S. Ndebele, *Actors and Interpreters: Popular Culture and Progressive Formalism* (Institute of African Studies, University of Bophuthatswana, 1984), p. 6.

116 Peterson, 'Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*', pp. 81, 86.

117 Plaatje, *Native Life*, p. 132.

118 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

119 For the painful breakdown of this long friendship, see Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*, pp. 165–7.

120 Plaatje, *Selected Writings*, p. 161.

121 Thanks to Brian Willan for helping me to articulate this idea more lucidly.

should not disguise Plaatje's sincere sympathy for the pariah herds in that winter of 1913. We have seen his evident compassion for animal suffering in his war diary, which was not meant for publication. Let us not forget the visceral horror experienced by both halves of Plaatje – a Tswana man and a middle-class British subject – at the sight of skeletal herds and flocks needlessly starving to death. Caring about the non-human demonstrated both aspects of his humanity.

Finally, Plaatje observed a number of refugees driving their dwindling stocks towards the Basutoland protectorate, where British law prevailed. He found it comforting to know that, once they crossed the river, 'these exiles could rest ... and water their animals without breaking any law. Really until we saw those emaciated animals, it had never so forcibly occurred to us that it is as bad to be a black man's animal as it is to be a black man in South Africa'.¹²²

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122 Plaatje, *Native Life*, p. 55.