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Essay

**Imaginary intersection: Thomas Mofolo, Gertrude Stein and W. E. B. Du Bois**

This brief exploration of the potential connections and interconnections between Thomas Mofolo, Gertrude Stein and W. E. B. Du Bois began as a result of happenstance but quickly transformed into an investigation fuelled by a sense of wonder and mystery. The wonder was due to an evocative literary echo. The mystery came through the discovery of a few overlapping facts that may or may not add up to an argument, but certainly add up to a compelling story that might as well be true.

In a larger frame, this essay attempts to look at the way works of literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century could have played a role of aesthetic influence on each other despite being separated (via their locus of creation) by geographic distance, cultural milieu and potential access. It also hopes to undermine the assumption in the Global North/Western mind-set that the currents of aesthetic influence flow only in one direction. The specific goal is to imagine Thomas Mofolo's first experiment, his allegorical narrative *Traveller to the East*, rippling out from the small mountain nation of Basutoland (now Lesotho) in Southern Africa, up the continent and either across the Mediterranean Sea to Paris—the home of expatriate Jewish American experimental writer Gertrude Stein—or across the Atlantic to New York and into the hands of African American sociologist, intellectual and Pan-Africanist W. E. B. Du Bois.

**Stumbling onto Thomas Mofolo**

I found myself taking part in the “Translating Mofolo” conference at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) by accident of scheduling. As a long-time colleague of the university's Department of English, and more specifically the Theatre Unit, I'd been teaching and making theatre in Lesotho on and off since 2005. The conference happened to coincide with my intended arrival in Lesotho for performance residencies related to my work with The Winter/Summer Institute (WSI), an HIV/AIDS collaborative theatre project. Since the Department of English was hosting the conference, I offered to help out with logistics and other tasks when I arrived. I

was also persuaded by my NUL colleague Prof Chris Dunton, (co-convener of the conference and a participant in WSI's work from the start), to present at one of the sessions even though I knew little about Thomas Mofolo or his writing.

With no time to prepare and no background in the topic at hand, my first impulse was to put together a comic interlude, a pause in the academic rigor. My idea was to give a typically American perspective on *Chaka*, the text at the heart of the conference. The central premise of that American perspective meant I'd not actually read the book (I hadn't), but I had seen the movie (I had). Or at least I had seen a movie. In the case of *Chaka*, what I'd seen, in the mid-1980s, were the "pivotal parts" of the 10 part mini-series, *Shaka Zulu*, produced in 1986 by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and based on Joshua Sinclair's 1985 novel. An American writer, medical doctor and high profile anti-apartheid activist, Sinclair also wrote the script for the 1984 film, *The Biko Inquest*.

I watched the mini-series with a group of young Marxist-Leninist-Maoist activists in New York City who considered Sinclair a fellow traveller and the story of *Chaka's* rise an instructive lesson in our training for 'the coming showdown'—meaning revolution in the USA, something we were convinced (at least in the 1980s) was right around the corner. I thought my presentation could be built around what I remembered of how the mini-series served (or didn't) a fledgling revolutionary training programme. Since the SABC series wasn't even based on Mofolo's text, I thought I could also compare Sinclair's novel with Mofolo's earlier work and possibly even uncover some creative 'borrowing'. To do that, it made sense to revisit the SABC mini-series and read Sinclair's book, but it made even more sense to start at the beginning, with Thomas Mofolo's seminal version of the *Chaka* legacy.

I went looking for *Chaka* through a cursory online search and was surprised to see another Mofolo book appear, *Traveller to the East*. I bought them both, but I read *Traveller* first. Naturally, although I was ignorant about it at the time, I read what I now think of (based on consensus of conference participants) as The Leaves-Much-to-be-Desired English Translation by Hugh/Harry Ashton. What initially struck me about the book wasn't a social or cultural critique (there have been many) or even a question (I would eventually have dozens), but a kind of sensory recognition, distant yet powerful, halfway through the text, that I can only explain by talking about a recent theatre production in New York City.

### **Gertrude Stein enters, stage left**

A colleague of mine has a theatre company, Ripe Time, committed to translating literary works to the stage, from Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Treatment of Bibi Halder* to Virginia Wolff's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The company's most recent endeavour is interpreting Haruki Murakami's short story, "Sleep", into live performance. In 2014 they created a production of Gertrude Stein's *The World is Round*.

The book was ostensibly a children's story, but as told through Stein's modernist lens with its focus on the necessary struggle for individuation and identity, it was more a book for adults although its appeal was multi-generational. It tells the tale of a journey of self-discovery by a young girl, an almost-woman named Rose, who left what she knew behind to travel toward the mountains, taking with her a small blue chair.

It is hard to go when you are nearly there but not near enough to hurry up to get there. That is where Rose was and she well she hardly could go on to get there. And where was there. She almost said it she almost whispered it to herself and to the chair. Where oh where is there.

But she went on and the grass was shorter and the slant was steeper and the chair was bluer and heavier and the clouds were nearer and the top was further because she was so near she could not see which way it was and if she went one way and the top was the other way could it be that she would never see what she could see. (Stein 59)

The show was a success. It won awards for the music and its strong visual design. But I forgot about it completely until I started reading *Traveller to the East* and came to an abrupt, unconscious halt at the end of Chapter 5 with the protagonist, a young boy, almost-man named Fekisi, setting off on his journey of self-discovery:

He went on, he went on, he went on, the night waned on him far away, and even then he was not going slowly. The night waned on his feet wet with dew, with his clothes packed up, that big boy. The night waned on him as he was on his way, going where he did not know, he did not know where he was going. The night waned on him walking, looking, looking for righteousness, looking for God. The night waned on him running away, fleeing from that increasing wickedness, fleeing from that land in which there was no right. His heart was searching, was meditating, wishing earnestly for some great thing. (Mofolo 46)

I read that last paragraph of Chapter 5, which transported me to the theatre and the production of *The World is Round*, and I thought, "This guy reminds me of Gertrude Stein!" And then a moment later I thought, "Or maybe it's more that Gertrude Stein reminds me of him. She must have read him. Could she have read him?" Those two opposite entry points to the same thought about inspiration, influence and contact made me wonder if it was possible their paths might have crossed literarily speaking or literally speaking? And, if so, how?

My half-baked comic interlude idea evaporated in the face of this far more enticing detective story which included the possibility of upending the dominant Western narrative of who inspires whom. I started looking, beginning with the most basic level of research—and there was the first clue:

Thomas Mofolo, 22 December, 1876–8 September, 1948; Gertrude Stein, 3 February, 1874–27 July, 1946.

### Configuring new identities in Basutoland and Paris

Given confidence by the fact that Mofolo and Stein were alive at the same time, regardless of the 9,000 kilometres between them, I began to look for their nexus point and a likely intermediary, while also trying to understand my perception of the parallel rhythms and shared spirits of their roving protagonists.

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Stein was working on *Three Lives* (1907), a slim novel subtitled *Stories of the Good Anna, Melanctha and the Gentle Lena*, along with her 926 page *The Making of Americans* (1911). All of Mofolo's work was created during that same period of time, *Traveller to the East* (1907), *Pitseng* (1910), and *Chaka* (1912), although interestingly, neither *The Making of Americans* nor *Chaka* was published until 1925.

Considered an early Modernist, Stein described one of her objectives in writing *The Making of Americans* as wanting "to show the old world in the new or more exactly the new world all made out of the old". In "On the Powers and Limits of Literature", Alain Ricard sees Mofolo as doing just that with *Traveller to the East*:

If the figure of the writer is partly the figure of a prophet, then Mofolo could be considered one of the Bantu prophets. As Paul Ricoeur (1983) would express it, the novelist reconfigures the world, gives a new figure to feelings and representations. He also creates a new language, still waiting to be used again. This is what the oral poet does with tradition. *Moeti oa Bochabela (Traveller to the East)* reconfigures, in Paul Ricoeur's sense, the world of experience of a Sotho shepherd in a totally new way. It is the story of a conversion, of a solitary adventure, in a society viewed by an individual who presents in a new way what has always been there. (24)

In 1926 Stein completed an essay, "Composition as Explanation", in which she attempted to give expression to what she considered a writer's way of seeing:

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends on how everybody is doing everything [...] Each period of living differs from any other period of living not in the way life is but in the way life is conducted and that authentically speaking is composition. After life has been conducted in a certain way everybody knows it but nobody knows it, little by little, nobody knows it as long as nobody knows it. Any one creating the composition in the arts does not know it either, they are conducting life and that makes their composition what it is, it makes their work compose as it does. (Van Vechten 456)

For Stein, "what is seen" and "how everybody is doing everything" was inextricably bound up with her own experience as an expatriate, a Jew and a lesbian. Composition was a process of negotiating identity, and her idea of Modernism the organic result of an outsider's ongoing manoeuvres in search of self and place. Isabel Hofmeyr recognizes a similar compositional impulse in *Traveller to the East* where she contends

Mofolo was juggling his own increasingly complicated cultural and social contradictions and negotiating identity through landscape:

What his novel, in effect, does is to 'lamine' together evangelical panoramas and the landscapes of cattle-keeping. In this landscape, Mofolo scatters a number of different texts in order to explore new ideas about religious being [...] Here, a repertoire of texts is likewise shifted around a landscape to find their most optimal placement. Through the sequence, selection and arrangement of these textual units against a layered landscape, we are able to see a series of identities unfolding and coalescing. The text becomes a zone of experimentation and we, the readers, are able to see the process of identity in formation. (Hofmeyr 150)

The English translation of *Traveller to East* was published in 1934. Stein wrote her implicit tale of a journey through shifting landscapes in search of the self in 1939. All I really needed to do now was find out who gave Stein Mofolo's book. Modernism and Africa seemed a good place to start looking.

#### **W. E. B. Du Bois arrives just in time**

The dilemma in a short reverie like this is the tension between wanting to gather enough hard evidence to plead the case while recognizing it's impossible to do more than point in a number of contradictory directions at the same time, knowing the ability to follow any of those arrows to a satisfactory destination will remain elusive.

What led me to W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was the fact that in the December 1910 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois had (as editor) included Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* in his 'What to Read' column, a short list of the most noteworthy current books (Sol-lors 30). *The Crisis* was the first significant African American magazine, an organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) of which Du Bois was also a founder in 1909. Of course by 1909 Du Bois was already a well-known intellectual, sociologist, civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist and a prolific writer. Starting with his ground-breaking work, *The Suppression of the Slave Trade*, published in 1896, Du Bois wrote books, articles, essays, papers and reviews.

The sympathetic resonance between Stein and Mofolo's work could have found a conduit in Du Bois, who began a serious involvement with the Pan-African movement in 1900, making frequent trips to the Caribbean, Europe and Africa. His involvement with *The Crisis* and with the artists and activists who were key players in the Harlem Renaissance, continued up through the mid-1930s, at which point *Traveller to the East* was available in English and Du Bois was increasingly an actor on the world stage (he died a citizen of Ghana in 1963).

W. E. B. Du Bois's fleeting appearance marks the end point of this exploration while simultaneously opening a vast area of potential new territory. In his 1903 book of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, considered a seminal work in the history of sociology,

Du Bois theorized that racial oppression created a “double consciousness”, a recognition of otherness that reverberates in Stein’s rendering of the compositional nature of what is authentically seen and Mofolo’s allegory of divine dislocation.

The sun rose gently, it rose in a clear sky, a sky clear as crystal. It rose with no wind blowing, everything was pleasantly still, not a branch or leaf was stirring. When the sun rose it struck Fekisi on the forehead, and he was very glad to see that it did strike him on the forehead, and not on one side, he saw he was indeed on the path. He continued to go on running until midday. (Mofolo 47)

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