

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST AND RECENT:¹
MODIRI MOLEMA'S LETTERS HOME TO MAFEKING

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'Tin-Trunk Texts': Daily memories, archives of the Self²

“Oh what a literary war”, wrote Paul Fussell, describing how the Great War inspired literary production and galvanized the making of memory on battlefield and home front (1975 and 2009: 194).³ Even a young black South African at a cold Scottish University, Modiri Molema, began his historical ethnography of African people by asserting: “The Great War will be quoted to explain everything” (1920: vii).⁴ This war kept him in Scotland far longer than his five-year medical curriculum required and inspired the many letters that he wrote to bridge the gulf between the two spaces in which he lived, Glasgow and Mafeking. Though written during wartime, his letters did not share the phlegmatic self-censorship that made the epistolary style of soldiers “a literature of their own”, in Stuart Cloete’s view (Fussell 1975 and 2009: 181-182, 228-229).

When he reached Glasgow Molema was already an adept letter-writer, after years away from the family’s Mafeking home while studying at Healdtown and Lovedale schools in the Eastern Cape (1905-12) and teaching in Kimberley (1913).⁵ Long, often painful separation from family while pursuing the ambition to study medicine in Glasgow (1914-21) led him to master the art of writing home across the immense continent that his first book would analyse.⁶ Though not ‘literary’, in the narrower sense, like the writings of some participants in this war (Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden), his letters invite us to consider how letter-writing – this minority member of the life-writing genres – encodes memory and self-fashioning. This article challenges Irma Taddia’s (2000: 109) contention that “the use of correspondence among African people is very poorly documented”, by investigating the correspondence of the Molema family in order to understand the literary and cultural conventions through which their relationships were expressed.

Life-writing is often said to deal with the remote past, as does Molema’s autoethnographical text, *The Bantu Past and Present* (1920, henceforth *The Bantu*).⁷ He wrote *The Bantu* to explain intellectual debates about the African past and present to British

people, his black friends from other colonies who knew little of Africa, and his fellow countrymen at home. Letters may also juxtapose the past of ten minutes ago with one far older.⁸ However, the generic conventions of letter-writing are little studied, “compared ... with poetry or the novel, and there has been little attention paid to letters as objects, compared ... to the contemporary interest in the book as object” (Barton and Hall 2000: 2).

The epistolary use of narrative time is also significant. While the narration of ‘true’ stories occurs later than the events narrated, letter-writers frequently employ first-person narration in the present tense, which, Dorrit Cohn argues, reduces “the temporal hiatus between the narrating and experiencing self – which diary and epistolary novels may shrink to days, hours, even minutes” to nothing (1999: 107). Because wartime restrictions intervened and the homely style of letter-writing seemed too intimate, some soldiers expressed their experiences on the Front in poetry, while others cited it. Using Pope’s present subjunctive to meditate on memory, while waiting in the Aegean for action against the enemy, Rupert Brooke cited “Eloisa to Abelard” (l. 207) “‘At any moment we may be fetched along to kill the Paynim. *Or* we may stay here, the world forgetting, by the world forgot’”.⁹ In letters, fictional or not, the writer’s world often keeps pace with the world described, despite excursions into the remoter past.¹⁰ Modiri’s letters narrate his present experiences and wartime changes, while, less often, recalling his childhood or family history and showing that, as Cohn states:

[...] the moment of narration *is* the moment of experience, the narrating self is the experiencing self. One effect of this fusion is the seamless continuity between outer and inner reality, report and reflection. (1999: 107)

Yet, for Gerard Genette, the first-person narrative of autobiography “explicitly locates its story in a completed past that fully marks its narrating as subsequent”, whereas, for Cohn, the first-person present-tense elides the temporal distance between experience and narration to create “seamless continuity ... between outer and inner reality, report and reflection” (Genette 1988: 79–80; Cohn 1999: 107). Modiri varied his use of tenses as his narrative letters represented the shift in time notional present to longer-term memory.

Such distances and implied proximities of time fed his longing for home, and he consciously felt the need to narrate the spatio-cultural distance between the worlds he inhabited. Through memory and imagination, his letters attempted to link Mafeking (temporarily past, steeped in personal, family, and community history) to school and university (the strange worlds of his immediate present). Thus, in the grammar of letters, past

and present converged on each other in the remembered formulae of traditional address and idiomatic expression. While away, letter-writing allowed him to reimagine ethnic and racial identity, perhaps to reassure Mafeking readers that these strong attachments remained intact.

“[E]thnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and ... is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which [s/he] lacks control”, Michael Fischer’s study of life writing asserts (1986: 195).¹¹ Some of Modiri’s letters evoke ethnic identity and memory, but in many, memory is implicit. Importantly, the Glasgow letters were written while, unbeknown to family, he compiled his argumentative study, *The Bantu*. Perhaps African cultural identity seemed so marginal in Glasgow, that assertively Scottish industrial sprawl, that he desperately needed to illuminate his continent’s history and ethnography. The letters do not elucidate his strong desire to write this study, but do reveal his need to maintain strong ties with intimate family members.

Letters helped him reflect on how the passage of time affected these ties, as the verbs “think” and “remember” (“*gopola*” in Setswana) suggest. The context in which he used “think”, “remember”, and “*gopola*” determined whether they referred to present or past relationships and places or Modiri’s beliefs, fears, actions and plans:

(1). “Moreover Rra, **I think** this is my last year in Lovedale, and I have been wondering what I shall be doing next year and all the time till you send me across [i.e. to Britain].” (SMM., Lovedale, to STM., 27 October 1912)

(2) “*Ketle kebe ke tshabe go gopola fa kentse ke bona chelete e feta fa gare ga menoana eame jana, mme epe e sa lathege fela. Loka thusioa ke Morena, Rra le Mme. Le nna ka thusho ea gagoe ke tla dira choanelo eame koano janong, koo gae morago, go lo utluisa monate ruri ka tiro e kgolo ea lona.*” (SMM., Glasgow, to Mrs Molalanyane Molema [MM.], 9 July 1915)

(3). “Today **I am thinking** how you very often sent us every holiday time to Motlhokaditse and to Kraaipan to see our maternal grandparents. It is now, when I cannot see them that I begin to realise the lesson. It is now, when I am trembling with fear that I may not see my dear grandfather, that I wonder I did not appreciate your practice of sending us to see him years ago. (SMM., Dublin, to STM., 30 November 1919)

(4). “There are very few girls **to think** of in connection with marriage, who have either education or ambition enough. There are certainly none among our immediate people, and certainly none amongst our relations. This difficulty **I think** you recognise my dear father.” (SMM., Glasgow, to STM., 10 October 1920) [My emphasis]¹²

Frequently, Modiri used “think” (*gopola*) to discuss present or future concerns circumstances (examples 1, 2,) or memories of important relationships, such as those with his grandparents (3). In (4), he challenged paternal disapproval of the woman he wished to marry, Anna Moshoele, by declaring his views on a suitable marriage partner. The assertive “I think” and the earlier infinitive indicated his maturity as his return home in January 1921 loomed.¹³

In Modiri's first year in Scotland, "remember" and "gopola" implied that he saw his letters as one linked chain of communication; both verbs are also used to remind his father, Silas, to send money more regularly:

"Ke a gopola janong fa uku romela £80 fela ka ngoaga [...]" [I have remembered now that you sent £80 only this year]. (SMM., Glasgow, to STM., Ad1, 23 July 1915, pp. I-II)

Ke gopola mo lokoalong loa bofelo lo kena ka go lokoalela, kena kago bolelela fa ene ele maikaelelo ame gonnela ntlha ngoe ea examination eame ea ntlha (half of my first Professional examination) I also sent you a booklet of our programme of courses in medicine and fees. (SMM., Glasgow, to STM., Ad1, 9 Oct. 1914)¹⁴

"Gopola" also enveloped Modiri and brother Sefetogi (b. 1902) in a relationship of memories shared in letters, despite their age difference and years apart. Shortly before returning home, Modiri wrote late one summer night, using Sefetogi's praise name, "*Tau ea gaecho*" ("Lion of our home" to convey deep affection:

Le gompieno jana fa ke koala go bosiego. Ke dira fela gore u seka oa gopola gore ke go lebetse kgotsa gore usegopole fa ke sekaka amogele lokoalo loa gago. (SMM., Glasgow, to Sefetogi Molema, 18 June 1920)¹⁵

The phrase "*u seka oa gopola gore ke go lebetse*" ("you should not think that I have forgotten you") conveys Modiri's attempt to reach out to the eighteen-year-old Lovedale scholar. Building the family was vital to Modiri: in the 1930s, he would allow Sefetogi the experience and career opportunities that their father had given him (Modiri), by paying for Sefetogi's medical studies in Edinburgh.¹⁶

The referential space that these personal letters create alludes in language and convention, to present and past, to the personal and the cultural, to the ethnic and the modern. Of Modiri's twenty-eight letters from school and Cape Town (1908-14), twenty-four are in English while just four contain elements of Setswana. Conversely, his first letter home from Britain is in Setswana. From then onwards he often chose the more familiar language when reaching out to his distant home, ever-present in his imagination. Apart from contacts with fellow medical student, James Moroka and family friend, Solomon Plaatje, letters formed his connection between Glasgow and Mafikeng, Scottish and Setswana, imperial and local cultures (SMM., Glasgow, to STM., about Moroka Ad1, 27 August 1915; SMM., Glasgow, to HMM., Ad3, 8 October 1918, and SMM., Glasgow, to Harriet Molema [HMM.], after Moroka's return home, Ad3 15 April 1919).

'Conquering space through ink' (Khumalo 2006: 122)

Modiri and the extended Molema family were prolific correspondents. Introducing *Africa's Hidden Histories*, Karin Barber notes that “[p]rofessional letter-writing – with pen or typewriter – became one of the new occupations of the colonial era” (2006: ix).¹⁷ Vukile Khumalo found a large community of black nineteenth-century letter-writers in colonial Natal. Having “mastered the technology of letter-writing ... [they] sought to conquer space through ink and were able to establish connections that did not rely on physical, face-to-face proximity” (2006: 115, 122).¹⁸ In Mafeking, business and political letter-writing occupied much of Silas’s professional career. Chief Montshiwa and the Rolong boo RaTshidi (1848-96) spoke volumes to government through his secretary, Silas’s letters and diplomacy as they negotiated the annexation of British Bechuanaland to Britain (1885) and later to the Cape (1895).¹⁹ In this respect, Silas was writing in what Mary-Louise Pratt terms:

the contact zones ... social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. (1991: 34)

In this intermediary zone, Silas’s fluent grasp of the discourses of colonial diplomacy, owing in part to his Healdtown education, enabled him to step outside familiar Setswana cultural idiom, temporarily, to negotiate both with colonial authorities and Africans of other ethnicities.²⁰

Many of Silas’s papers are business letters and correspondence from the family’s children while at school. The whole collection illustrates how pivotal he was in planning and funding their education. By offering all his children secondary and tertiary education, he implicitly challenged the belief of colonial Superintendent-General of Education, Langham Dale, that black people should be educated to occupy “the lower grades of employment in handicrafts and menial office” (Dale, qtd. in Johnson 1993: 167; Willan 2011: 28-29).²¹ Accordingly, Silas steered the course of their lives, fashioning their identities. Much of his labour was silently present in what Khumalo terms the abstract space surrounding letters and their writers:

For us to understand the epistolary relations these writers created, we have to appreciate the importance that they attached to writing and reading. These two practices constituted a significant part of their lives. To these letter-writers, writing was like constituting a sphere, an imagined sphere free of the harsh realities of colonial life. The letter constituted a space for discussion and dreaming. (Khumalo 2006: 121)

In this ‘imagined sphere’, families not only dreamed of new personal destinies, but envisioned new national connections in a chain of letters linking the experiences of people different in ethnic identity, religion, and political affiliation (See Khumalo 2006, 113-16).

The styles and conventions of address, the subject matter, and the recognition of the boundaries and intimacies between the correspondents writing these letters, illustrate the workings of this sphere and the network of relationships of respect, understanding and intimacy underpinning it.

For the literary biographer, letters are an invaluable resource. Reading letters chronologically imposes order and meaning upon them, giving them a sequential narrative that becomes part of the ‘raw material’ of the biographical subject’s life. Taddia (2000: 110) explains:

[...] colonial literature in the form of correspondence also appears to be literature related to a biographical discourse. In fact letters show many aspects of the daily life and offer biographical material that would be very difficult, and indeed impossible, to find in other available sources.

The manuscripts of letters may be hoarded for many years and become what Barber terms “tin-trunk texts”, before they are formally archived:

Such printed and hand-written texts were often preserved for many years, to be brought out from time to time and read over, alone or to company. People all over Africa kept precious documents in tin trunks under their beds This hoarding of texts, often taking place over a lifetime, provides inquiries not just into the nature of the texts themselves but into the habits and dispositions surrounding them. What we appear to be witnessing is a kind of local, do-it-yourself archiving (2006: 2)

Silas’s meticulous archiving preserved the many letters in the Molema-Plaatje Papers for posterity, not in a ‘tin trunk’, but in a wooden box (Jacobson 1978: vii).²²

My work uses letters from the first half of Modiri Molema’s life as evidence towards the reconstruction of his biography and – in this article – examines them as literary form and a space of cultural interaction.

The ‘Interiorised Subject’

This ‘wooden box’ archive housed twenty years of Modiri’s letters to his father, mother, and siblings from school and university (1908-27). These letters (Ad1, Ad2 and Ad3) constituted a nexus of unusual intimacy amid the vast network of official correspondence criss-crossing the country at this time.²³ While in nineteenth-century Europe letters expressed aspects of the *private* self, in the colonies letters were usually, Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, “devoted to public affairs or to the affairs of the extended family”, and “seldom yield pictures of an endlessly interiorised subject” (2000 and 2009: 35). Modiri’s letters offer rare insights into the inner life of a young man in wartime Britain. As a young man from colonial South Africa,

he was immersed in both Setswana culture and the versions of European culture taught in two leading schools for African pupils. School imparted the correct structure and grammar of formal writing, as *The Bantu* demonstrates, but his emotional and practical needs made him reveal more of his inner self in letters home.

This article reimagines Modiri's interior world as he wrote these letters. As Shula Marks (1987: 1-2) states apropos of the correspondence of three South African women, letters "[...] reveal the separate worlds which we all inhabit, [...] made more frightening and more separate by the divisions of age, ethnicity and race".

If what is precious in the letters is the personal and the idiosyncratic, it is nonetheless possible through them to show that "the private lives, even [the] obsessions of ... individuals, far from being psychological quirks or even aberrations, flowed directly from the social situations of these ... individuals."

Reading the Molema letters a century after their writing, one detects an emerging narrative of the private self. Yet, the difficulty of seeking the interiorised subject lies in the nature of letters. In their study of Olive Schreiner's correspondence, Liz Stanley and Andrea Salter argued that letters are 'heterotopic texts' in which "textual space is an exterior emplacement that meddles with our sense of interiority" (2009: 8). Indeed, as my study shows, letters both reveal and conceal the interiorised subject. In the imagined, heterotopic spaces that letter-writing creates, Modiri edited, elided and partly evidenced the alienation, conflict and trauma of his life in Glasgow. "[H]eterotopias are disturbing", asserts Foucault, and secretly disrupt language, descriptive ability and the syntax that "'holds together' words and things" (1966: 9, my translation). The letters that traversed 11,000 kilometres were disquieting, contradictory texts: in which he struggled to express needs, distress and longing, all perhaps misunderstood at home, and to assert the need for independence from parental rule and/or tradition.²⁴

Salutations, conclusions, and narratives

The writing of a diary or a letter is thus a form of narration, although the one that writes it may not intend to or be conscious of narrating. (Rimmon-Kenan 1983 and 2002: 90)

Modiri was part of a community of writers who, over time, learned to filter personal intentions and differing levels of emotion through the formal structures of letter-writing. Like others, he adopted the formal division of letters into five distinct phases, "Salutation, Securing of good-will, Narrative, Petition, and Conclusion", a categorisation far older than the colonial world. He consciously assumed the role of narrator, recounting fragments of his

life to his “‘narratees’” at home. (Barton and Hall 2000: 6) Aware that the salutation defined the “social roles and statuses of the sender and receiver, placing both within institutionalized social relations”, he accommodated English conventions of greeting to Setswana idiom, and evolved his own mature style of writing (Bazerman 2000: 19-20).

Among many letters addressed to Silas, some salutations and conclusions are formulaic, but Modiri’s conveyed great feeling; these reinscribed him into their father–son relationship, while the securing of goodwill exchanged his hopes that Silas was well with affirmations of his own well-being. The narrative might discuss the war or his studies, while the petition usually dealt with finances. Conclusions, with Modiri’s loving messages to others, sought to bridge the distance between them with assurances of affection.

“*Kena ka amogela lokoalo loa gago ka boitumelo lo bogolo*” [“I have received your letter with great joy”]: versions of this ‘securing of goodwill’ frequently opened Modiri’s letters home (SMM., Glasgow, to STM., Ad1, 14 Jan. 1915). Many letters from family members used variants of this salutation. In 1927, Modiri’s younger sister Harriet supplied her own version, greeting Silas earnestly just before his death: despite a diffident opening (“*Re teng Rra ga go molato*” [“We are well Father and have no complaints”]), she expressed sincere concern for her aging parent (“*ke sholofela le lona lo coga sentle*” [“I hope you are also well”]), (Harriet Mmasemela Setlogelo, Tweespruit, to STM., Aa1, 5 July 1927).²⁵

Modiri’s long goodbyes show him embracing the imagined sphere through which he reached out to the world at home.

Rra – send my love to Mother and my brothers also to Mrs Taoana if she is still there.
I hope you don’t miss me very much, Papa Dear.
A sweet Goodbye and happy love to you Rra from
Your loving son
MS Molema (SMM., Lovedale, to STM., Ad1, 25 Feb. 1910)²⁶

From Glasgow, his Setswana letter to Harriet, entered the imagined world of home more deeply and mused on his writing style, saying he had sent “an ‘open letter’” to their sister Seleje, “but of course it ends in sweets lest it should make the dear [Seleje] heartsore” (Ad3, 17 Sep. 1914, SMM., Glasgow, to HMM.). “Sweets”, affectionate farewells, also ended a longer letter to his mother:

U dumedise bora Taoana – Ke itumele go utloa, fa maoto a ga Ra-Onyane ale botoka thata. Ke sholofela atla fole.

*Dumela thata janong Mma. A bana ba **dumele** thata botlhe. Ka lorato lo lo golo
Kenna ngoana oa gago*

Modiri [my highlighting]

(Ad1 9 July 1915: SMM., Glasgow to MM.)²⁷

His conclusions strove to maintain family bonds while bidding farewell. The illocutionary force of these repeated goodbyes, with repeated variants of the verb “*dumela*” (greeting) allow him to name, imagine and send love to a sibling whose everyday experiences he once shared.²⁸ He asks his mother to relay greetings across miles and seasons, to a world beyond the ken of most Glaswegians. As Barton and Hall note, “[s]ome genres rise out of more ordinary, daily speech acts” and, between opening and closing, this lengthy letter also described how war was reconfiguring daily life in Glasgow (2000: 17).

In the heterotopic space of the letter, writers also edit daily experience and conceal aspects of the writer’s identity from the recipient. Modiri guardedly told his family about feeling ‘other’; not only was his racial difference from most British people obvious, but he had come to a fast-moving industrial hub of the entire Empire, from a rural home after attending two rural mission schools in which black people formed the majority. In crowded Glasgow, strangers were made to live their strangeness. This feeling overtook him on arrival. A month after the Armadale Castle docked at Southampton, his first letter home announced that he was one of just seven “coloured” students at Glasgow University (SMM., Glasgow, to STM., Ad1, 24 April 1914).²⁹

After another ‘lean’ period of struggling to afford fees and lodging, the midwinter 1915 letter to Silas expressed disquiet. It contained a rare echo of Silas’s voice: “As you asked me to explain some points to you, I shall now proceed to do so”. The letter’s narrative section tabulated the cost of each first-year course before explaining that this year was the most expensive: £35-14-0. Pleas for money to be telegraphed became the motif of his life in subsequent years (See also SMM., Glasgow, to STM., Ad1 30 April 1915, about his desperately low finances).³⁰

Some letters adumbrate the gender relationships in the family: while he told Silas, often clinically, the cost of his education, he confided his fears and emotions to his mother and sisters (SMM., Glasgow, to HMM., Ad3, 5 March 1915). In the War’s first months, the pull of Mafeking, that ‘other space’ and ‘other time’, lured him into the heterotopic space that letters afford both writer and reader. Distance and his sense of difference from fellow students drew him to that imaginative space where, reminding Seleje of their childhood selves in the 1890s, he asked her to tell young daughter, Onyana (just beginning her schooling) of the “‘hard times’ we had in the years gone by ... *Abo rekile ra choara bothata ruri*” [“we really suffered in those days”] as they walked barefoot to Mafeking’s Methodist School from Silas’s

estate at Motsoseng outside town on cold mornings (SMM., Glasgow, to ST, Ad3, 15 September 1914, p. IV).³¹

Hungry for home news, he asked Harriet – half-jokingly – two days later “Well what is going on in Old Mafeking?” (Ad3, 17 Sep. 1914, p. II).³² In June 1915, he wondered “*Kana ka Mafika ele motse oa ditiragalo tse dikgolo, goka tlhokafala mafoko jang ...*” [“how in Mafikeng[,] a town with such a long history[,] news can be so scarce”] and repeated this complaint, teasingly, a week later, before reflecting on why he showered her with questions about the family (SMM., Glasgow, to HMM., Ad3, 24 June 1915). To him, “Mafeking” contained home, family, and the social world he left behind. Harriet’s letter was the lifeline, a link (*legoka*) between that world and Glasgow: “*A dipoco! Disaka tsa go lepisa tlhe, Sisi – Ke kgakala bobee; ebile ke gone etla reng u koala unne legoka tlatsa dipampiri tse pedi kgotsa tse tharo ka go araba dipoco tseo*” (SMM., Glasgow, to HMM., Ad3, 1 July 1915, pp. I-II).³³

The brother–sister correspondence reveals the close relationships between Silas’s children. Teasing “Mrs. Taoana” for excessive devotion to her children, Modiri concealed his hurt in a masterful simile, part playful, part serious, and very politically aware: “[d]ont [sic] treat me as the Union Government is treating the Natives please – cruelly and mercilessly. Oh dont my sweet sister Seleje – dont” (SMM., Glasgow, to ST, Ad3, 15 Sep. 1914, p. II). Government actions were much on his mind at the time, and he condemned them severely in *The Bantu*: “The Natives’ Land Act [...] aims at reducing the Bantu people to serfdom” (Molema 1920: 249). Modiri’s conscious reflection here shows that letters are spaces in which memory may be explored, and in which the interiorised subject may meet the quotidian world of family, community and politics. Letters, the frail vestiges of which survive a century later, bridged long family separations in the years before electronic communication.

Not wanting Silas to think him unappreciative of the great expense of his education, he unveiled his acute loneliness to Harriet during the long summer of 1917. To Harriet, he wrote as a mature man, acknowledging, yet not succumbing to his emotions:

I am feeling a bit lonely tonight; to begin writing, I note it is 5 minutes to 12. I have been to town (Sauchiehall Street) and perhaps it is the happy crowds of people one meets there that form a contrast and make one realise how much alone he is. It is really a funny life one leads when he is away from kith and kin, and stays in apartments or lodgings. See what it means – you practically live alone, eat alone, sit alone and so forth alone, so there is ample scope of being homesick isn[']t there. [...] Everybody at Mafeking owes me a letter – father mother, Seleje, not to mention Mr & Mrs Moshoele. I wonder if these dear people have forgotten me. [P]oor me! *Nna ke itsetse*. Sis Harriet. (SMM., Glasgow, to HMM., Ad3, 4 August 1917)³⁴

Had an African Races Association meeting taken him to Sauchiehall Street? Perhaps not: the organisation (he was its president) met every second and fourth Sunday of the month; he

wrote on 4 August, the *first* Sunday (See ARA pamphlet Ad3 attached to 8 October 1918).³⁵ The “happy crowds” that first enticed him could not replace “kith and kin”. This phrase hinted that his work on *The Bantu* preoccupied him, as he used it twice there in discussions of ethnicity (Molema 1920: viii and 49).³⁶ “*Nna ke itsetse*” indicated that he felt so solitary that he might literally have given birth to himself.³⁷

That long letter describing how he missed his mother, Molalanyane, (1915), admitted the reader into an interior space not broached in other letters: his religious faith (SMM., Glasgow, to MM., Ad1, 9 July 1915, p. 1).³⁸ He enriched inquiries after her health in devout discourse: “*Ke santse ke cogile sentle tlhe Mme ka tlanelo ea Morena. Nka rapela fela le lona koo lapeng loa gago lobo lo santle lo tshedile ka itekanelo*” (SMM., Glasgow, to MM., Ad1, 9 July 1915, p. 1).³⁹ He assured her that he attended services led by English priest, Rev. Holdsworth, an associate of erstwhile Methodist minister in Mafeking, Rev. Appelbe (Findlay and Holdsworth 1922: 344-45).⁴⁰

Ke mo itsisicoe ke Moruti Appelbe ke sena go tsena mono. Ka Shoantaga ngoe-le-ngoie fa reKgathane koa tshiping fela aba a mpotsa are “A u koaletsa Mmago?” Ere kere erile, kele fa gatloa gareng aba are – tsamaea ue go koala janong, ga esete jalo gotle koala mme, legale ere abua jalo aba a tshameka, mme a tloge a bue ele tota are, Ke ka go bontsha le gobolela ba re baratang lorato loa rona mo botshelong [...]. (SMM., Glasgow, to MM., Ad1, 9 July 1915, pp. I-II)⁴¹

Modiri scripted this letter carefully, using the authoritative religious discourse in which his mother was steeped to enable her to imagine his unknown world in Glasgow. Overwhelming fear that they might never meet made him defer telling her he loved her, citing these words from the minister’s plea that parents should tell their children they loved them – and vice versa. Thus, he infused the minister’s words with allegorical force, making Holdsworth’s authoritative advice rise above daily discourse to the eternal plain, where God’s love of His children is parental love writ large.⁴² The rest of the letter reverted to his familiar impersonal discourse, history, which bypassed his feelings in a narration of wartime social transformations. The conventional ending sent her his love with restrained warmth. When soldiers’ letters told their families the truth about the fighting, “it was excised by company officers, who censored all outgoing mail” (Fussell 1975 and 2009: 87). Modiri partly censored his own letters, shielding his mother from his fear of never seeing her again.

Molema might not be “vigorously literary” (Fussell 1975 and 2009: 157) like Brooke or Herbert Read and recite Shakespeare or Keats in letters home, yet he read voraciously during the war and made it and incorporated his reading into *The Bantu*. Like them and many soldiers serving at the Front, he felt trapped in the machinations of the great powers, though

even the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, felt overwhelmed by the war: “The thing is horrible, and beyond human nature to bear, I feel I can’t go on any longer with the bloody business” (Fussell 1975 and 2009: 174).

Unlike novelist Archibald Cronin, a classmate who joined the navy, Modiri did not enlist. However, his political activities included founding an organisation of students of African descent, the African Races Association of Glasgow.⁴³ Yet, he did not mention the ARA until 1920, another instance of the careful editing of his daily experience. Nor did he yet reveal that, while studying Anatomy and Physiology, he was writing his history of black South Africans (SMM., Glasgow, to STM., Ad1, 20 Oct. 1920). In 1916, his parents would have known that Plaatje visited Modiri in Glasgow, but whether they knew that he addressed Modiri’s organisation is doubtful (Willan 1984: 186). Fifty years later, Modiri recalled the visit in his biography of Plaatje, *Morata wabo*:

[m]o marigeng a 1916 Plaatje o etetse Skotlelane go ya go buisa diphuthego dingwe tsa Ma-Sekotshe tse di ne di mo laleditse, mme erile kwa Glasgow a bo a buisa Kopano ya Merafe ya Afrika (African Races Society) e ke ne ke le Presidente ya yona [...]. (SM. Molema, [1965], Ad 6.4)⁴⁴

Modiri only unveiled his history and political involvement to the family when planning to return home: “I have no doubt you will be very much pleased to hear that I am writing a History of the Native People of South Africa” (SMM., Glasgow to STM., Ad1, 20 June 1919):

[n]ow here in Scotland I long ago called together black people from many different countries. I [became] their leader at these gatherings of black people. Some people came from South Africa, some from West Africa, some from Central Africa, etcetera. Some are from North America, some from South America, some from the West Indies. My work is to help one tribe of black people to love the other and I taught them to examine the customs of the past like those of the children of father Molema ... like your own. I taught all of them that the true way of life is not to live for oneself, but that the real life is to live for the whole nation, for all the children of Africa. I taught them that if they love Africa they must not corrupt their blood with white blood.” (SMM., Glasgow, to STM., Ad1, 20 Oct 1920)

The Africanist in Modiri had clearly surfaced during his seven-year exile.

***“The Great Course before Me”:* 27.07.1913, Modiri, Kimberley to Silas, Mafeking**

While each carefully dated letter in which he made the family his audience marked the time it took for Modiri to acquire an education, it also evidences the development of his identity. In letters, the interiorised subject (one aspect of the modern individual) also becomes the “‘public’ self”, discerns Chakrabarty (2000 and 2009: 35). To this audience, Modiri would, over time, announce his vision of an emerging identity. But one does not ‘give birth to

oneself' or shape one's identity alone. His letters and other writings show that the person Modiri became was also shaped by family, community expectations and public institutions (schooling, university), not to mention his reactions (accepting and contesting) to the chimerical impact of the colonial era.

Language is also at issue in these letters, which are disquieting because they convey implicit fears that he might not find the right words to say to his mother and that the once shared language of home might lose its power to reach the man who wished him to achieve their mutual ambition. Journeys from home in pursuit of education opened a distance between the Molema children and the father who was their sponsor.⁴⁵ As distance attenuated Modiri's relationship with Silas, words became his chief source of power, but these had often to surrender to Silas's long silences and delays in sending money.

Although Silas funded Modiri, he shared authorship of the plan that Modiri study medicine with his brother, Joshua's son, Sebopioa (b. 1882) the *first* Molema to travel abroad. Modiri's agnatic brother, Sebopioa, who studied law in America (1904-11), convinced Silas that overseas education, though ruinously expensive, would enable the young Molemas to escape the stultifying academic restraints black students faced at home.⁴⁶

Sebopioa's journey is significant; his letters suggest that, contrary to Anne Digby's view that Modiri's Lovedale letters "showed single-minded commitment to his chosen career" (2005: 431), family influence initially nurtured Modiri's medical ambitions. While waiting to board the Gascon Castle for Southampton and, later, Wilberforce University, Ohio, Sebopioa advised "My dear Father" (Silas) on choosing a high school for Modiri, by advocating Lovedale, a school he thought far better than Zonnebloem in Cape Town.⁴⁷

In the second letter, a year later, Sebopioa – still only in his early twenties – congratulated Silas on planning for Modiri (only fifteen!) to study medicine and then added, more magisterially:

The sons of Molema should be leaders among the Bechuana just as our grand-father was the instigator of civilization to the Barolong, so his grand-children should perfect those fundamental principles that he laid. (SJM., Jacksonville, Florida to STM., Ac1, 18 October 1905)⁴⁸

Sebopioa's pride in the triumphs of their grandfather, Chief Molema, became an argument suturing history, destiny and achievement together. Molema's evangelism, founding of Mafikeng and encouraging of trade should spur his heirs to maintain his heritage among the Batswana (Starfield 2007: 43-100, on Chief Molema). This reasoning also became a rough paraphrase of Modiri's letter of 20 October 1920 and his argument in *The Bantu*. Both

grandsons revealed the twofold rationale of ethnic nationalism: while its proponents assemble historical narratives about history, land and identity, they use their historical capital to make claims about future rights and power. In Fischer's view, "the search or struggle for a sense of ethnic identity is a [re]-invention and discovery of a vision, both ethical and future-oriented" (1986: 196).

The more reflective Modiri's letters to family are also texts of memory and longing, consciously and unconsciously recalling daily life and conveying an immediate and longer-term sense of the past. As Le Goff (1996: 98) states, "[m]emory is an essential element of what will henceforth be called individual or collective *identity*, the feverish and anxious quest for which is today one of the fundamental activities of individuals and societies".

He gradually came to share the vision that Sebopioa and Silas were shaping for him. After Healdtown (1905-09), he entered Lovedale in 1910 to take his matriculation.⁴⁹ His earliest letters revealed a desire to learn, even on the veritable rail epic from Mafeking in 1910.⁵⁰

My Dearest Father [...]

I just arrived here yesterday [at Lovedale] — Thursday afternoon at about four. My journey from Mafeking was very safe too. I arrived at Vryburg at 3 PM, and instantly got another train for Kimberley; I did not reach Kimberley until 2 o'clock in the night.

On Tuesday, I was joined by some Lovedale students, and we left Kimberley at 11.40 AM. I came up together with them as far as Cook House where I broke off my journey on Wednesday for a day and then on Thursday morning I took a train in the morning and was here in the afternoon.

I am glad to state that I did not have the unnecessary waitings which we anticipated. I have had to wait only in Kimberley, but even then I did not feel uneasy as I had a chance of knowing more about the place. (SMM., Lovedale to STM., Ad1, 25 February 1910, p. 1.)

After addressing his father affectionately, he relates his immediate memories of that 629 mile journey in polite English, his *forté*.⁵¹ The letters of the first six months capture his excitement at making his first mark the country's premier school for black scholars by coming first in Lovedale's stiff bursary examination.

As I told you – there were in all forty (40) candidates who sat for the Examination, and the subjects in which we were examined were Arithmetic, English (comprising Composition, Analysis, Paraphrasing, Dictation and Translation []). The Examination occupied the hours from 9A.M to 5 P.M on the 25th Inst.

...

The results have been published, and Papa you will, I am sure be glad to know that I obtained the top. The order of the names given below is the order of merit of those who got the bursary

1. Molema
2. Mlwandle
3. Jabavu
4. Niekerk

Yes, Papa I did get the top, and I am, accordingly granted the bursary. My knowledge of English, I am told, is what helped me mostly. In Arithmetic I got 98 marks out of 100, and I missed the total only by 2 marks. I had the [highest? first?] mark in English. (SMM., Lovedale to STM., Ad1, 28 February 1910, pp. 1-2)⁵²

Eighteen-year-old Modiri's detailed account, which preserved for posterity the content of the 1910 English syllabus and the rigorous Lovedale system, showed his fine eye for narrative. This would serve him well four years later when he began writing *The Bantu*.

One bad Healdtown memory sharpened the tone of Modiri's relationship with Silas. Mortified that Silas still owed school-fees to Healdtown principal, Richard Hornabrook, Modiri thought complete clarity might resolve the matter: "Father my dear, I would like that everything, in the way of money, owed to Rev. Hornabrook should be settled soon. I shall also send you the account for my books" (Ad1, 28 February 1910, SMM., Lovedale to STM., p. 3).⁵³

While Silas delayed payment, son urged father to pay the offending £9 and Hornabrook, with Lovedale principal Henderson's backing, held Modiri moral hostage to the debt.⁵⁴ He strove to remain respectful while begging Silas, "I hope you will try and settle that amount as soon as ... possible" (SMM., Lovedale to STM., Ad1, 09 July 1911).⁵⁵

Receipts and promissory notes suggest that business commitments overextended Silas's reserves from 1899 to 1912,⁵⁶ as did the pressure of educating seven children: his daughters, Seleje and Harriet, brother Israel's son, Officer, brother Joshua's children – Sebopioa, Ketlareng and Bafiti – and Modiri.⁵⁷ Books, clothing and train fare for each child cost between £10 and £20 per term (AW. Roberts, Acting Principal, Lovedale, to STM., Aa3, 4 Oct. 1900).⁵⁸ With younger children still to educate Silas' money and Molema children would travel to the Cape for this purpose until at least 1926.⁵⁹

To break the eighteen-month stand-off, Dr Neil Macvicar, head of Lovedale's Victoria Hospital, made a pragmatic agreement to settle the debt in 1911 (SMM., Lovedale, to STM., Ad1, 08 March 1911). Macvicar defused the now icily polite father-son fray by proposing a special arrangement to repay the debt of the scholar whom he regarded as a gifted doctor in the making:

You know Rra there was a bill of £9 owing to Mr Hornabrook in Healdtown that is part of my school fees which was not payed [*sic*] when I was there. This bill [*illegible*] is now to be paid and settled by Dr Macvicar on conditions that this coming year I help as a hospital orderley [*sic*] in the Victoria Hospital at Lovedale, and then at the end of the year, I shall receive a certificate as a fully qualified hospital assistant and dispenser. This is of course if I am successful in my examination. (SMM., Lovedale, to STM., Ad1, [19 Dec.] 1911, pp. III-IV)⁶⁰

Edinburgh University graduate Macvicar had joined Lovedale in 1902 as the South African War ended and the hospital re-opened. Finding that white nurses refused to care for black patients, he began training black nurses (Wells 1919: 228).⁶¹ He fought the authorities for

permission to train black doctors, but the highest rank to which black candidates could aspire remained ‘medical orderly’ – a training that laid the foundation of Modiri’s medical career (Xuma Papers, ABX290731, 31 July 1929, p. 1; Digby 2005: 427-54, Digby 2007: 424-29)⁶²

Modiri’s formal letter to Silas avoided further verbal fencing by using the passive voice strategically: “this bill ... is now to be paid” finessed the account from sixty-year-old Silas’s responsibility to his own. Modiri added that, should he not matriculate, hospital work would be impossible, and Silas would have to repay Macvicar. In the phrase “[y]ou know Rra”, the twenty-year-old stepped into adult persona, by linking payment to Silas’s plans for his medical career, and, thus, taking on the family’s ambitions. While his ancestors were socialized into manhood through *bogwêra* (initiation), battle and migration, his entry into adult manhood, announced in this letter, came largely through the vicissitudes of education; later, a migration of his own extended the course of his socialisation (Molema 1920: 122-23; Jean Comaroff 1985: 92 ff).⁶³

In March 1914, embarking on the longest journey of his life, Modiri cabled Silas twice: from Kimberley (2 March) to thank him for the £40 to cover expenses, and at 3:10 (7 March) from Cape Town, “*Sekepe se tsamaea gompieno ka 5pm*” (SMM., Kimberley, to STM., Ad1, 2 March 1914; SMM., Cape Town, to STM., 7 March 1914). The intimate goodbye, “*Dumelang thata, Rra*” (“My deepest love, Father”) conveyed his longing for the bonds of home. He would not return until 1921 after seven years that shaped his mature identity and changed the world he lived in utterly.

The Molema letters reveal that, as in colonial Natal, networks of letter-writers “share[d] similar thoughts and dreams” in letters to one another (Khumalo 2006: 115). The Molemas were part of a chain of correspondence radiating from Mafeking to Kimberley, Johannesburg and the Cape. Modiri’s studies stretched this chain to Glasgow. These writers used their “masterly control of the conventions of letter-writing, [and] commented, reflected upon, and articulated their views on social, political, intellectual, and economic situations in the colony” (Khumalo 2006: 115). This network was wired into the rapidly unfolding African nationalist politics that saw Plaatje and SANNC deputations travel to London, mighty heart of colonial politics (see Willan 1984: 174-232). On revisiting Glasgow in May 1920, Plaatje became *The Bantu*’s first South African reader and reported news of the book to Mafeking (SMM., Dublin, to STM., Ad1, 30 Nov. 1919).⁶⁴

***“Kenna ngoana wa gago”*: Conclusions⁶⁵**

Unlike the letters of Es’kia Mphahlele and Virginia Woolf, Modiri Molema’s letters are, with a few exceptions, unaccompanied by their recipients’ replies.⁶⁶ In reconstructing the ‘conversation’ that these letters contained and imagining the personae of writer *and* recipients, it is only partly possible to discern in his letters a mirror of his family’s replies. Any images of Modiri that *their* correspondence might have featured are partial. Thus, it is mostly the self-representation of ‘Modiri Molema’ in these letters that this article has explored.

The correspondence reveals that a letter is a space in which writer and reader(s) may share memory and imagination, past and present. Because “one writes to become someone other than who one is”, the writing space is ‘other’, being a physical site *and* replete with ephemeral thoughts, desires and fantasies (Ruas 1963 and 2004: 184). Writers like Molema, for whom writing a letter meant engaging imaginatively with its recipient, strove to span the two ‘spaces’ of experience that Foucault identifies: that of dreams and desires – the interior self –and “the space in which we live”, where the self is caught in innumerable relations and cultural complexities (1986, 23).⁶⁷ The letter is a heterotopic space between these worlds; it exists outside the self, yet expresses or even re-writes aspects of the self, representing the self as other. In Scotland, Modiri found himself inexorably part of the modern world, living out an altered relationship to time and space: “in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (Foucault 1986: 22-23). For him, remembrance of things present and past and distance from loved ones was perhaps “silent”, but far from “sweet”.⁶⁸ Writing across the distance between near and far, past and present was, this article has shown, an exercise that both comforted and frustrated.

While letters are a quotidian genre, they also provide autobiographical insight into the life and personality of their writer (Lejeune 1975:14), like Modiri’s letter to Harriet on 18 April 1919. It reveals his complicated emotions at graduating two weeks before the anniversary of their mother’s passing. That commemoration makes him relive this traumatic event; simultaneously, he imagines returning to a home haunted by her absence. His achievement – graduating in five years – would have overjoyed her (SMM., Glasgow, to HMM., Ad3 18 April 1919).

Being a poor man’s son, I made up my mind to waste no more time than was called for and therefore to waste no money. ... There is generally great excitement when students pass their final exam and some celebrate the occasion by becoming drunk and others by giving parties. ... I too was of course glad to finish my undergraduate days, but I could not be excited as others. I don’t remember ever being excited

in my life, but the completion of undergraduate days is such a great event in one's life that I quite believe that if mother had been living I would be excited for once in my life. As it is, so far from being excited, my joy was mingled with sorrow and bitter grief. Today it is the 18th April. I cannot but recall that this is the date on which our dear mother died last year. What a blow that was dear Harriet. How very different it would have been if our dear mother was alive to hear of my success. How very much I would have rejoiced over it myself. But alas! Alas this pleasure has been cruelly, sadly denied us. (SMM., Glasgow, to HMM., Ad3, 18 April 1919)⁶⁹

Although Silas had survived the South African War as one of Mafeking's more affluent citizens, farming and property provided an inconstant livelihood in the ensuing decades (Standard Bank *Inspection Reports*, Mafeking, 24 November 1903). Consciousness of being "a poor man's son" was burned into Modiri's identity; during his long education, he learned that fee payments depended on Silas's selling livestock and renting out land. The state contributed little to black people's education, father and son knew, so it was through their own physical and intellectual labour that several generations of Molemas, Taoanas and Moshoeles would obtain learning ("School Inspection Form for Healdtown", CA SGE 2/156, 1905, p. 1).⁷⁰

After the first ellipsis in the above passage, Modiri's tone changes: his sense of difference from most of his classmates throughout his studies escalated into desolation on witnessing his graduating classmates' celebrations with their families. Had she not passed away in 1918, Modiri would gladly have waited until his return to rejoice with his mother, the quietly beautiful Molalanyane.

Perhaps visual memories looked back at him as he wrote, of how close together they had stood to face the photographer's lens in 1901 or 1902.⁷¹ His mother, at the centre of her family in a dark Victorian dress then fashionable for middle-class ladies, sits with that enduring threesome of older children behind her: tall Seleje, in the long skirt of a young girl in her early teens; Modiri, in plus fours and knee-high boots, and Harriet, in sailor suit and dark stockings, look small. Is their audience perhaps the photographer and Silas, the authoritative, foresighted man who did not narrate, but determinedly fashioned the lives of his family and community as best he could?

Their clothes, adorned with buttons, look hot and restrictive; they convey the story of the way the children were, firstly, fashioned, then fashioned themselves into membership of the colonial intelligentsia, a relatively small class by 1920. Its members, like Modiri, Silas and Sebopioa, would extend the borders of the new nation by joining a world in which some black people had, despite legal restrictions, an increasingly vocal presence, through their "a parliament without walls – an epistolary network" (Khumalo 2006: 114). Modiri's letters testify to his experiences and offer fragmentary daily memories of his education, growth and

transformation into the man who could remember his boyhood, and know, to his sorrow: that time was gone forever.

When that small boy in the picture returns to South Africa, he will convert much of those seven Scottish years into memory. He will address himself to building his medical career, taking care of his family and, in stolen moments, retiring into his study and write. Histories and essays will flow from his pen; only three books will be published. Decades later, researchers will use the richness stored in the Molema-Plaatje papers to reconstruct the lives and times of Sol Plaatje, and Silas and Modiri Molema, their past and present.

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¹ The title paraphrases William Shakespeare's Sonnet XXX, ll.1-2: "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought/ summon up remembrance of things past..."

² All translations from Setswana are by Professor Stephen Maphike and Jane Starfield unless otherwise stated. All archival references are to sections of the Silas T. Molema and Solomon T. Plaatje Papers unless otherwise stated. In-text references do not include the archival abbreviation 'MPP' or the archival number 'A979'. The location of Modiri Molema [SMM.] is given after each quotation, but it is assumed that his correspondents are in Mafeking, unless otherwise stated.

³ Fussell refers to the "unparalleled literariness of all ranks who fought in the Great War". Chapter five, "Oh What a Literary War" deals with the letters that crisscrossed the globe, linking those at the front with family at home.

⁴ This article uses the first name 'Modiri' to identify the author of the letters and capture this genre's personal nature; 'Molema' is used to identify him as author of *The Bantu*.

⁵ The town now called Mafikeng or Mahikeng was called Mafeking in 1910, the English version of *Mafika-kgoa-choana*, place among the rocks, the name its founder, Modiri's grandfather, gave it in the 1850s and 1860s. See Unisa AD2186 Fb19, ANC Collection, SM. Molema, "Mafeking – A Retrospect" [1949] and Molema (1966: 52). In letters, Molema usually uses Mafeking in English, but Mafeking, Mafikeng or "*Ka Mafika*" in Setswana.

⁶ MPP Aa3.3, 9 June 1905, Rev. RF. Hornabrook (Principal, Healdtown Training Institute, Ft. Beaufort) to Silas Molema [STM.]: receipt for £6 for Modiri's fees to June 1905. Final payments for Modiri's education at Lovedale were made in late 1912 via Silas's attorney (Aa3.3, 22 Aug. 1912, JW. de Kock, Mafeking, to STM. Receipt £4-0-6 for settlement of promissory note with Lovedale).

⁷ On the autoethnographical aspects of *The Bantu*, see Starfield 2001: 487.

⁸ Sol Plaatje's letter to Silas Molema (Da33, 3 Dec. 1913) juxtaposes the recent and the remoter past. In 1913, the Mafeking Magistrate warned Silas that his ancestors' aggression in the *difaqane* might diminish the amount of land the Rolong received under the Land Act. Plaatje's lengthy reply to Silas's request for a 'Rolong' opinion emphasized the Rolong's peaceable behaviour in the face of Ndebele and Boer attacks "We never killed anyone until the Matabele poked us; we fought with them to help the Boers to expel them and come home, today they [Boers] are giving us trouble" (Starfield 1990:15).

⁹ Cited in Fussell (1975 and 2009: 150) notes the deliberate allusion to literary classics in letters home in order to avoid specific reference to events at the front.

¹⁰ Compare Austen [1811] 2002: 129–133: Letters between Marianne Dashwood and John Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* are written, mostly, in the present tense, which gives immediacy to the passionate feelings of the former and the dispassionate denials of the latter.

¹¹ Fischer accepts that ethnic memories may be written ones, thus differing from Jacques Le Goff (1996: 55), who uses the term 'ethnic memory' to mean "the collective meaning of people without writing"

¹² (2) SMM, Glasgow, to MM., 9 July 1915: "I often fear to think when I see the money that is passing through my fingers and simply getting lost. You will be helped by the Lord, Father and Mother. I shall also with his help do my duty now, at home there afterwards, in order to make you truly proud because of the great work you have done."

¹³ See Ad3 19 May 1919: Modiri had already heard from Harriet that Anna, granddaughter of Silas's eldest sister, had been 'seduced' by their mutual relative, Mmadichukudu Marumolola, grandson of Silas's second youngest sister, but was apparently prepared to marry her nevertheless.

¹⁴ "I remember that in the last letter that I wrote to you, I informed you that it was my intention to sit for the first of my new [illegible] examinations [...]."

¹⁵ “Even now when I write, it is late at night. I am doing those so that you should not think that I have forgotten you or that I did not receive your letter.”

¹⁶ J. V. Starfield, Interview with Dr Silas Sefetogi Molema, November 1992, at Mrs Seodi Khama’s home, Gaborone, assisted by his daughters, Prof. Leloba Molema and Mrs Khama.

¹⁷ Catherine Burns (in Barber 2006: 78–112) and Keith Breckenridge (in Barber 2006: 143–54) create a sense of the diversity of committed letter-writers, practising their arts across classes in early twentieth-century South Africa.

¹⁸ Khumalo found that “preachers, wagon-makers, migrant workers, scholars and prison inmates” were included in the practice of letter-writing, though many ‘wrote’ by using skilled letter-writers.

¹⁹ Silas was the fifth son of Montshiwa’s elder brother, Chief Molema, Mafikeng’s founder. Silas (for Montshiwa) to Nicolaas Gey van Pittius (Ba8(a), 9 May 1883), asserted that the boundary drawn between the Tshidi and the British protected Tshidi land (see Starfield 2007: 118–119). His literary and mathematical skills, honed at Healdtown (1874–77), enabled him to play many parts in his 78 years: teacher, councillor, headman, cattle rancher, businessman, newspaper publisher, SANNC Vice President, stern, but wise, parent. After his return from Healdtown (1877), Montshiwa appointed him a Tshidi councillor. The Crown Colony of British Bechuanaland (1885–95) included Mafeking, Vryburg, but not Kimberley.

²⁰ Cape Archives [CA], Superintendent General of Education [SGE], 1/35 Wesleyan Training Institution Heald Town. “List of Students ... year ending 1873” and SGE 1/47, 27 Apr 1878, Barton to Cameron, “Students Residing in Healdtown ... Institution, July 1877 to June 1878.”

²¹

²² The wooden box was located in a store room at the Molema homestead, Maratiwa, in the Montshiwa Stad, Mafikeng. The Molema-Plaatje Papers were eventually presented to the University of the Witwatersrand by his widow and nephews decades after the first one was penned.

²³ The MPP Ad1 collection contains Modiri’s letters to Silas Molema, while Ad2 and Ad3 contain the letters of Sefetogi Molema and Harriet Molema Montsioa (later Setlogelo) to their father.

²⁴ An unverified source, <http://distance.co.za> (consulted 20 July 2013) gives the distance from Mafikeng to Cape Town as 1,135 km (703.76 miles), and that from Cape Town to Glasgow is given as 10,214 km (6,332.68 miles). These calculations suggest that Modiri’s letters would have traversed roughly 11,349 km (7,052 miles) to reach their recipients.

²⁵ In Silas received similarly phrased letters from his sisters’ children: his sister Mafikeng’s son, Mmadichukudu Lekoko, wrote from Tsolo Agricultural College, Transkei (Aa2.129, 1 June 1927), “*Ke koala go goitsise fha ke amogetse loa gago ...*” (“I am writing to let you know that I have receive your letter”) and assured Silas that he too was well. Silas’s elder sister’s son, Silas Motshegare, Maretsane, merely stated that he had received Silas’s letter (or notice), but did not inquire after his uncle’s health (Aa2.110, 16 June 1923).

²⁶ Modiri teased his eldest sister, Seleje [ST.], who had recently married, by calling her ‘Mrs Taoana’ (sometimes spelled Tawana).

²⁷ “Please greet the Taoana family – I am so glad to hear that Onyana’s father’s legs are much better. I hope he will soon be well. My loving greetings, now, Mother. And greet all the children warmly. With my fondest love. I remain your child, Modiri.” Seleje was married to Taolelo Joseph Taoana, a fellow descendant of Chief Tawana. Onyana was their daughter.

²⁸ The causative verb “*dumedisa*” may be used to ask someone else to send greeting on one’s behalf.

²⁹ Armadale Castle, Passenger List, p. 6: “Mr. S. Molema ... Arrival Date, 24 Mar 1914.” *UK Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960*. Accessed 12 March 2012.

³⁰ For an account of his medical studies in Glasgow and Dublin, see Starfield 2001: 479-503.

³¹ By September, Modiri had been in Glasgow for six months. These events must have occurred before 1899, the year in which, Silas's accounts show, Seleje went to Lovedale, paying £6 for board and fees. (Seleje [sic] Molema to James Stewart, Lovedale, Aa3.3, 13 Feb. 1899).j

³² He added "Surely there must be something new ...". The following year (25 June 1915) he begged her not to write a short letter "*lokoalonyana lo lokhuchoanyane*" without much news.

³³ "What questions! Let them not tire you, Sister – I am very far away; and it will only be when you when you write that you become a link by filling up those pages two, or three in answering these questions."

³⁴ Sauchiehall Street stretches from east to west, and is one of Glasgow's main high streets.

³⁵ For a copy of the African Races Association of Glasgow pamphlet, see Starfield 2007, Appendix E.

³⁶ The first example introduces the importance of race and identity in general; the second discusses the Barolong, his community of origin. Chapter XXVII of *The Bantu*, "Intellectual Possibilities or Impossibilities" was his Presidential Address to the ARA, Dec. 1917. (See Starfield 2012, 442-43.)

³⁷ My thanks to Sabata-Mpho Mokae and Thabo Tsehloane for helping me understand it's the more metaphorical application of this phrase: "I am alone".

³⁸ "*Ke ngoana eo mashoe ruri Ka ke seka ke dira jalo ka bonako*" ("I am really a bad child for not having done this [written] sooner").

"I am still well, dear mother, by the Lord's grace. I can only pray that you too at home are in good health, safe and sound."

⁴⁰ On reaching Mafeking (1885), Rev. RF. Appelbe found the Molemas to be leaders of the 250-strong Mafeking Stadt Methodist community, which had withstood long-term hostilities against the Western Transvaal Freebooters. He helped to expand Methodist numbers to ±1,000 by 1890, when he was moved to Johannesburg.

⁴¹ "I was introduced to him [Holdsworth] by Rev. Appelbe when I arrived here. Each and every Sunday in Church, he always asks me 'Have you written to your Mother?' When I dilly-dally he says 'Go and write right now, otherwise I shall do the writing', saying this jokingly. He would then speak earnestly, that I have to show those whom we love our beloveds in our lifetime... ."

⁴² A month earlier, he had told Harriet (to whom he revealed his feelings) how run-down he was feeling and that he wished he "could fly to Mafeking". See Ad3, 24 June 1915, SMM., Glasgow, to HMM., p. II.

⁴³ Cronin and Modiri began studying medicine in 1914 and graduated together, but Cronin spent time in the navy. His wartime experiences feature in his autobiography, *Adventures in Two Worlds*. (See University of Glasgow Matriculation Albums, 1914–1915: no. 246; also Glasgow University Archives (GUA), DC225/6, Final Year Medical Dinner Programme 1914-1919.)

⁴⁴ "In winter 1916, Plaatje journeyed to Scotland in order to speak to several Scottish organisations who had invited him, and in Glasgow where he addressed the African Races Society [literally Meeting of the Peoples of Africa] and it was I who was its President ..." (my translation). The biography was written in the 1960s, as Rev. Derek Jones's letter from Gaborone (24 July 1965) to Dr Molema about changing Chapter IX confirms.

⁴⁵ How Silas came to study at Healdtown is still unknown. His father, Chief Molema, became a Wesleyan Methodist evangelist at Thaba 'Nchu in the 1830s and established his own Wesleyan community, the Barolong boo RaTshidi ba Wesele, at Mafikeng (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 261, and Starfield 2007, Chapters 1 and 2).

⁴⁶ After attending Healdtown, Lovedale and Zonnebloem, Sebopioa [SJM.] studied law at Wilberforce Institute, Ohio. (See Campbell 1998: 268, 272.) From Ohio, he debated (in Plaatje and Silas Molema's newspaper, *Koranta ea Becoana*, 19 Oct. 1904) which profession to choose: “*Dr (ngaka), kgotsa Lawyer (agente), kgotsa go nna Moruti (minister)*”. (“Either becoming a Dr, a Lawyer, or a Minister”) (my translation). On Joshua's advice, he ‘suspend[ed]’ his studies in 1905 and gained experience in law firms in Jacksonville, Florida (see Ac1, 18 Oct. 1905, SJM, Jacksonville, Fl. to STM.).

⁴⁷ For SJM's letters, see MPP A979 Ac1. The records of his travels are available through Ancestry.com. In the UK Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960, his age is given as 22 (making him nine years Modiri's senior). He embarked at Cape Town on the Gascon Castle (sailing from Melbourne), landing at Southampton on 15 August 1904. He then embarked on the Philadelphia to New York in order to commence his studies in Ohio. <[http://www.unioncastlestaffregister.co.uk/SHIP_GASCON_\(2\)_01.html](http://www.unioncastlestaffregister.co.uk/SHIP_GASCON_(2)_01.html)>.

⁴⁸ This letter was typed on the letterhead of I. L. Purcell, Attorney and Counsellor at Law, 120 West Bay Street, Jacksonville

⁴⁹ Modiri was first entered for the University Senior School Leaving Certificate Examination (equivalent of the Cape Matriculation, without Latin) in 1911 (see KA. Hobart Houghton, head of Lovedale's College Department, to STM., Mafeking Aa2.31, 12 September 1911) but, being underprepared for these exams, re-sat them in 1912, and passed.

⁵⁰ He omitted saying that train travel in 1910 was a racial undertaking. To Plaatje (3 March 1911, Willan 1996, 144–45), it was South Africa's “Jim Crow” service: unpunctual, crowded, and terribly slow. “[i]t took over 30 hours to reach Bloemfontein from Johannesburg — a distance covered by the express [for whites] in 11 hours”.

⁵¹ Mafikeng to Vryburg by rail is 157 km (±98 miles); thence to Kimberley 170 km (±106 miles); to Cookhouse, 588 km (368 miles) and, finally to Fort Beaufort, 91 km (57 miles): ±1006 km (±629 miles).

⁵² Modiri's teacher, C[ornelius] Rakhosi Moikangoa, Lovedale, confirmed to STM. (Aa2.29, 28 Feb. 1910) that Modiri has received 98/100 for Arithmetic, 28/50 for English, 35/50 for Essay Writing, 13/25 for Reading, 42/50 for Sesuto [sic], and a mere 2/25 for General Knowledge, giving him a total of 218/300 (72.3%), and had come first (of 28 candidates) in the bursary examinations.

⁵³.

⁵⁴ Ad3.2–3.4 contain Silas Molema's invoices, receipts and promissory notes show his indebtedness to Mafeking's traders, some clan members and especially his lawyers.

⁵⁵ Plaatje, Lovedale, told STM., Mafeking (Ad1, Da15, [Nd] April 1911) that Modiri was also stressed by the stand-off and suffering eyestrain.

⁵⁶ Aa3.2 and Aa3.3, STM.'s Invoices and Receipts. From 1896, Silas either paid school fees directly or instructed his solicitor to pay. Silas continued trading in cattle in 1916, while struggling to pay Modiri's university fees in 1916 (Ac1, 29 June 1916. SJM, Mauñ [Bechuanaland] to STM.). Sebopioa offered to buy him 70 or 80 heifers at 25/- each in Hut Tax season (when local residents paid their tax in cattle). The more cattle he had, the easier Silas found it to settle his education bills.

⁵⁷ Aa3.3, 9 June 1905, STM., paid Healdtown £6 for Modiri's fees. Seleje's Lovedale fees that year were £10, with £22-7-6 still owing for outstanding fees (Aa3.3, 20 June 1905).

⁵⁸ In November 1900, AW. Roberts Lovedale's Acting Principal included a printed notice indicating the Lovedale fees from 1900, when Silas was paying for Modiri's sister, Seleje, and nephews, Sebopioa and Officer (Oposiri). Fees and board cost £10 to sit at the First Table, £14 for Second Table, and £20 to sit at Third Table. A further £2 was charged for

matriculation classes, for which Modiri later enrolled. Silas also paid for Harriet to attend Emgwali until 1910.

⁵⁹ In 1925, he paid his second-youngest daughter, Motshidi's final fees of, at Emgwali (STM., paid Emgwali, Aa3.3, 5 Feb. 1925; STM. Received Sefetogi's report from Lovedale for June 1926, Ae3.4).

⁶⁰ Modiri added "besides Dr Macvicar has also promised to give me additional lessons in medicine".

⁶¹ See also Rhodes University, Lovedale Missionary Institute Archive, Dr N. Macvicar 1910: 100. MacKenzie 2007: 115; Marks 1994: 83; Shepherd 1952: 8; Shepherd 1942: 356, and Molema 1920: 233–237.

⁶² An orderly performs heavy duties in the hospital, like moving patients and supplies, and cleaning Xuma argued that "the African" contributed directly and indirectly to the country's revenue, so that "... ample provision [should] be made for the training of his youth as far as his European neighbour[s]". 'White' universities with medical training facilities excluded black students. On the training of black doctors.

⁶³ Isaac Schapera noted (1963: 171) that conflict often characterized father and son relationships in chiefly families among the Tswana, but despite tensions in Silas's family, his children asserted their love for him in their letters. The great migration of the several Barolong communities to Thaba 'Nchu occurred after the Battle of Khunwana (1832), described in Molema (1966: 23-32) and in Plaatje's epic novel *Mhudi* (1930).

⁶⁴ In Britain with the second SANNC Delegation, Plaatje, had already sent Modiri a parcel of clothes from home. SMM., Glasgow, to STM., Ad1, 18 June 1920, "*Ke kopane le Morena Solomon Plaatje mono malobanyana [...]*" ("I met Mr Solomon Plaatje yesterday evening").

⁶⁵ "I am or I remain your child," was Modiri's habitual conclusion in letters to his father.

⁶⁶ Mphahlele, 2010; Woolf, 1975–1980. The one letter from Silas T. Molema in the collection of Modiri Molema's letters (Ad1) is a formal typed letter, in English, addressed to Modiri on 16 March 1914, "Mr. Silas Modiri Molema on board the Armadale Castle, C/o The Union Castle Co., Ludgate Circus, London".

⁶⁷ Foucault adds that phenomenology shows us that: "we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well".

⁶⁸ See Note 1. Shakespeare, Sonnet XXX, ll. 1-2.

⁶⁹ On the same day, he wrote to Silas one of few letters in which he unveiled his emotions to his father (see SMM., Glasgow to STM., Ad, 18 April 1919).

⁷⁰ This report for the year that Modiri enrolled at Healdtown gives the government grant to this school that year as £842, most of which subvented teachers' salaries (£498); the rest funded the boarding school. The SGE calculated that £10-0-6d was spent per scholar. After union, Modiri argued (1920: 232), the state contribution to African education declined markedly. Both Modiri's daughter, Warada Molema (Mafeking, 1992) and Sefetogi's daughter, Prof. Leloba Molema (Gaborone, 1992) confirmed that on Silas's death (1927) Modiri assumed the role of educating his family; he sold cattle to pay for his brother Sefetogi's medical studies in Edinburgh, and for Leloba, her sisters and Warada's education, in Aliwal North.

⁷¹ My thanks to Rasenti (Solomon) and Elisabeth Molema for showing me this undated photograph in their home, Maratiwa, Mafikeng, on 21 November 2012. This is the home that Silas built in 1893 and in which both Rasenti's grandfathers, Silas Molema and Solomon Plaatje, lived during the Siege. (See Aa3, 20 Nov. 1893, F. Robertson, Mafeking, to Mr C. Mallema [S. Molema]. Account for building the house.)