Between Complicity and Resistance:  
A Social History of the University Presses in Apartheid South Africa

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Submitted in fulfilment of the degree
Philosophiae Doctor (Publishing)

in the Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology
at the University of Pretoria
Pretoria

February 2013

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Abstract

University press publishing, while often associated with the promotion of academic freedom, may be situated between the poles of resistance and complicity when considering intellectual responses to apartheid. Yet the history of this form of scholarly publishing has largely been ignored thus far, due to a perception that it had little to tell us about either apartheid or the struggle against it. However, the social history of South Africa's university presses – at Wits, Natal and Unisa, in particular – provides a new angle for examining academic freedom and knowledge production during the apartheid era. Using a hybrid methodology including archival research, historical bibliography, and political sociology, this study aims to examine the origins, publishing lists and philosophies of the university presses through the lens of a continuum of intellectual responses: ranging from collaboration and complicity, to opposition and dissidence. Results show that, over time, the positions and publishing strategies adopted by the South African university presses shifted, becoming more liberal. It is argued, however, that the university presses should not be considered oppositional or anti-apartheid publishers, in part because they did not resist the censorship regime of the government, and in part because they operated within the constraints of publicly funded, bureaucratic institutions of higher education. They nonetheless produced an important, if under-valued, body of work and provided a platform for a variety of academic opinions. Moreover, the university presses faced a variety of challenges in their struggle to survive over the years, including financial pressures, international competition, and wavering institutional support. But perhaps the greatest challenge was a delicate balancing act: an attempt to promote academic freedom within a climate of political repression, censorship and ideology. The study demonstrates the significance of publishing history for an examination of broader issues of social history, as well as the applicability of a wide range of methodological tools for the field of Book History.

**Keywords:** academic freedom, apartheid, censorship, knowledge production, oppositional publishing, scholarly publishing, self-censorship, social history, South Africa, university presses
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### Abbreviations

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>African National Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>AWA</td>
<td>African Writers’ Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>CUP</td>
<td>Cambridge University Press</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRP</td>
<td>field of restricted production</td>
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<tr>
<td>GIS</td>
<td>geographical information systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPASA</td>
<td>Independent Publishers’ Association of South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISBN</td>
<td>international standard book number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLSA</td>
<td>National Library of South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NP</td>
<td>National Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUP</td>
<td>Oxford University Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASA</td>
<td>Publishers’ Association of South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCB</td>
<td>Publications Control Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SABC</td>
<td>South African Broadcasting Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANB</td>
<td>South African National Bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPRO-CAS</td>
<td>Study Project on South African Christianity in Apartheid Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCT</td>
<td>University of Cape Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKZN</td>
<td>University of KwaZulu-Natal (formerly the University of Natal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UFH</td>
<td>University of Fort Hare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unisa</td>
<td>University of South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNP</td>
<td>University of Natal Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOC</td>
<td>Dutch East India Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wits</td>
<td>University of the Witwatersrand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WUP</td>
<td>Witwatersrand University Press</td>
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Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking my supervisor, Archie Dick, for his unstinting support throughout this study. His knowledge, wide reading and ability to pull together disparate strands of research proved invaluable, and I am deeply grateful for his expertise, kindness and passion. Thanks, Archie.

Thanks must also go to Peter McDonald of Oxford University, as without his openness and willingness to discuss ideas, this research might never have got off the ground. He provided a spark during a SHARP conference in 2008. The other main intellectual sparks came from Pierre Hugo and the work of Nicholas Basbanes.

Without the support of university archives, this research would not have been possible. I would thus like to thank the archivists at each of the institutions and key people at the university presses themselves: Manoko Mohale at the Wits Corporate Archives and Veronica Klipp of Wits University Press; Marie Coetzee at the Unisa Archives and Sharon Boshoff at Unisa Press; and Carol Davis at the UKZN archives in Pietermaritzburg as well as Debra Primo at UKZN Press. Philip Clarke, the Africana and Rare Books Librarian at Fort Hare University, and Thomas Jeffery at the National English Literary Museum, were helpful although they could not provide many additional archival sources. Thanks to the many other members of staff at the university presses and the former Publications Committee members who shared their memories and expertise with me. I would also like to thank DISA for access to the full electronic archive of the journal *Theoria* and Taylor & Francis for access to *Bantu Studies, African Studies and English Studies in Africa*.

Thanks to David van der Merwe for his design expertise, in translating my (very wordy) ideas into clear, concise diagrams. Thanks, little brother.

Thanks to Margaret and my mother for tea and a sympathetic ear, and to Steven and Juliette for being a welcome distraction.