

# The Appearance of the Book: Towards a History of the Reading Lives and Worlds of Black South African Readers

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## ABSTRACT

This paper elucidates the material, spatial, social and infrastructural contexts of reading in early twentieth century South Africa. It adds to a growing body of work on reading practices and patterns of book consumption by drawing attention to the neglected question of the “where of reading” – the physical contexts and settings of reading and the ways in which the organisation of space and the allocation of resources impacted on particular reading experiences and habits. The article also takes up a related set of questions pertaining to the access of books, the nature of specific reading encounters, the social relations that developed in these contexts and the reading practices that ensued. It focuses in detail on the contexts of reading which developed around the various “Non-European” reading initiatives and advances the concepts of the “poor library” and “fugitive reading” in order to describe both the rudimentary and improvisational nature of black reading spaces at this time and the various practices of tactical, opportunistic and itinerant reading which arose in response. Finally, it draws attention to the sociable, convivial and inherently public nature of black reading encounters and highlights a pervasive practice of mediated reading in which book interests were shared and encouraged.

## KEYWORDS

History of reading and reading practices, geographies of reading, “Non-European Library” initiatives in South Africa, early twentieth-century South Africa

In his unpublished autobiography, *The Colour of Your Skin*, Maurice Webb, one of the founders of the Carnegie Non-European Library in Durban, records a visit to Adams College in March 1933. The purpose of the visit was to establish how the library books were being used by African students. His visit prompted reflection on his own experience of books:

My own reading had been greatly helped by one or two of my teachers who asked me to their homes, showed me their books, taking this one and that from the shelves, reading a passage, sharing an enthusiasm, lending the book. Adams seemed particularly suited to this kind of thing. We looked for evidence of one mind having set another on fire, but did not find it [...]. Certainly there did not appear to be that hunger for reading on the part of the Native students which made the sharing of enthusiasms so real a pleasure. We did not see a Native student on his bed or under a tree on the campus deep in a book, completely unmindful of the world about. Perhaps the books in our book boxes were not the right ones to stir in a Native a love of reading.

(n.d., 4–5)

Webb’s account offers two idealized, archetypal scenes of reading. First is an account of reading as intimate and shared experience in which the avuncular mentor and passionate student stand before a cherished book collection as books are lovingly taken from shelves, opened and enjoyed. The second highlights a practice of solitary and silent reading – in the stillness of a bedroom or under a tree – in which the book has so absorbed the reader that the ordinary world disappears. Webb’s expectations of reading, derived from his own experience as a young working-class man eager to participate in elite culture, are confounded by the South African context. Where he expected to find the desire to inspire, he encounters only the dreary insistence on duty and the limits

of mission egalitarianism. Where he anticipated scenes of contented or passionate reading, he finds only dull scholastic routine and hardly any reading at all. If the mission context was an important site of book encounters and reading for a privileged black elite, it was also characterised by inequality and racism, an inequality which took spatial and material form in the “rigid separation in some mission stations of the Natives, herded in barracks and the European staff, housed in cultured homes which the Natives do not share” (Hewitt and Webb 1933, 15).

The difference between imagined ideal and disappointing reality invites closer investigation into the nature of particular conditions and contexts of black reading in early twentieth-century South Africa. As many scholars have noted, the reconstruction of these kinds of histories, particularly the reading habits of ordinary readers, is notoriously difficult. Traces of reading in history are to be found in memoirs, library records, letters, the histories of educational institutions, correspondence, diaries, newspapers, publishers’ records, book-sellers’ ledgers, censorship and imprisonment records. One of the difficulties lies in organising the multiple, scattered fragments into a compelling social history. Another, as several scholars have noted, is that histories of reading “are limited by what has survived (often accidentally) through the centuries”, thus “evidence-based studies are invariably histories of reading based on extant evidence” (Towheed and Owens 2011, 2). And finally, since “there is no such thing as a wholly trustworthy source”, the historian of reading must “use the broadest possible repertoire of source material to reconstruct the experience of the reader” (Rose 2011, 21).

Scholarship on the history of reading and reading practices in South Africa is characterised by two distinct but related concerns: first, the attempt to document the history of liberal library initiatives for black readers in South Africa (Couzens 1986; Peters 1975; Copley 1997; Rochester 1999; Clarke 2004; Dick 2007b) and, second, the effort to unearth a hidden history of reading practices, assumptions and habits on the part of the ‘common reader’, one which places a particular emphasis on the ways in which ordinary readers negotiated or undermined the prevailing logics of power, authority and privilege (Dick 2007a, 2008, 2011, 2012; Nuttall 1994; Peterson 2001; Sandwith 2014, 2016). What is missing from many of these histories is a sense of specific book encounters and the material and social contexts in which they took place. What Robert Darnton calls “the where of reading” (2011, 28) directs

attention to the spatial settings and material conditions of reading and to the material circulation and physical apprehension of books. Several studies of British readers focusing on the geography of reading and the phenomenology of book encounters have highlighted the physical details of the reading space (Hobbs 2011), the ways in which these spaces were arranged and organised to “accommodate the reading body” and the extent to which these contexts impacted on particular reading experiences and habits (Colclough 2011, 100). Additional questions concern the kinds of personal and social relations and networks which accrued around the reading of books and the kinds of reading practices that predominated. Were books consumed alone or in the company of others, in contexts of leisure, public debate, political organisation or pedagogy? Were reading spaces gendered? Were books read out loud or in silence, read casually or with concentration? Did reading take place in particular environments as part of a daily routine or consumed more opportunistically in a multitude of settings? In the South African context, particularly, a further consideration arises from the rarity of the book (and even newspaper) in early twentieth-century working-class black communities: if books were neither a fixed nor commonplace feature of the material environment, and if book possession was beyond the means of most working-class people, how did readers access books and other kinds of reading material? Were they borrowed, found, stolen, swapped, passed on or provided? How did books enter into particular reading arenas and in what form and what are the details of these encounters?

Research into the travels of books and the specifics of reading in early apartheid South Africa has identified a number of sites in which books were discussed, circulated and performed. These included centres of leftist activity and debate such as the Left Book Club, the New Era Fellowship in District Six, the Lenin Club and the Spartacus Club in Cape Town, the Progressive Forum and the Donaldson Orlando Community Centre in Johannesburg (Dick 2012; Sandwith 2014). In these informal and ephemeral settings, constituted in the moment of gathering, books were drawn from a corpus of works which included not only left-wing and other classics but also works by African-American and South African writers. In this paper, I seek an answer to Darnton’s question about where reading takes place by focusing in particular on the more mainstream reading cultures that arose in close proximity to the

various “Non-European library” initiatives which emerged during this period. In the various archival collections that still exist, the dominant archival perspective tends to be that of the liberal-philanthropist founder, thus necessitating a methodology of reading through the white archive in order to arrive at some sense of the reading worlds beyond. Aside from the remnants of the liberal library archive – and in the absence of the comprehensive documents of reading such as reader surveys and circulation records – I also draw on autobiographical accounts in an attempt to reconstruct something of the material textures of black reading encounters and experiences in segregationist South Africa and by these means to gain a greater sense of the particular social worlds and relations of reading during this period.

A history of black reading in early twentieth-century South Africa must take into account the peculiarities of reading in an historical context in which “non-European” reading (and education more generally) was both actively prohibited by some and energetically encouraged by others. This was shadowed or determined in further ways by a racially-segregated and economically exploitative society in which minimally existing voting rights for educated Africans were gradually being eroded. The bifurcated white response encompassed both a narrow view of black reading as moral or political instruction as well as the widespread and ingenious efforts on the part of liberal library philanthropists to take books to the people, even those in remote, rural areas. Perhaps this deeply contradictory and fractured ideological context also explains the built-in ambivalence of missionary reading efforts hinted at in Webb’s account in which reading is made part of a desirable subject identity but not approached as part of an expanding and liberating enlightenment project. In this sense, the enlightenment ideal of developing a critical citizenry via literacy vies with the more instrumentalist project of creating a compliant black work force. Liberal efforts to produce the sober reader as model citizen bear a close resemblance to early working class reading initiatives in nineteenth-century Britain (Roberts 1998; Hobbs 2011). As Jonathan Rose (2001) and others have demonstrated, and as the South African case also confirms, these opportunities were frequently seized for an emancipatory purpose.

### Autobiographical Scenes of Reading

Some answers to the questions raised above are provided in the occasional snapshots of early black reading encounters to be found in several autobiographies centred on this period, many of which also draw attention to “the neglected category of place” (Halsey and Owens 2011, 2). As several scholars have argued, the autobiography as evidence of reading must be approached with caution not only because these readers tend to be out of the ordinary (Rose 2001, 2; Gerrard 2011, 380) but also because accounts of reading are incorporated as part of a rhetorical “construction of an autobiographical self” and therefore might be questionable as “quasi-objective accounts of reading practice” (Flint 1993, 15). While this study takes these cautions into consideration, it does not discount the possibility that the extraordinary reader can also be exemplary and that scenes of autobiographical reading can shed a certain kind of light on the reading practices and encounters of a particular historical period. Memoirs such as Peter Abrahams’s *Tell Freedom* (1954), Es’kia Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue* (1959), Bloke Modisane’s *Blame me on History* (1963) and Richard Rive’s *Writing Black* (1981) detail the stark poverty of pre- and early apartheid slums, locations and tenements, the wearying routines of long working hours and the daily labour required to keep homes orderly and clean. If two or three-roomed dwellings were frequently rented out to other families creating conditions of over-crowding and constant noise, they could also be transformed into places of illegal beer-brewing, drinking and entertainment as a means to supplement low wages. In these contexts, private reading is accomplished with difficulty, done by candle light (Modisane 1963, 40), in small locked rooms (Rive 1981, 9) or only begun once an onerous list of domestic chores had been completed or others had gone to bed (Mphahlele 1959, 37–38).

In a context of book scarcity, many of these autobiographies reiterate a persistent hunger for books. Mphahlele describes a practice of wholly indiscriminate almost feverish reading, driven both by pleasure and by a desire to disprove his status as a backward country boy newly thrust into alien township life. “The truth of it was that I used to pick up any piece of printed paper to read, whatever it was. It became a mania with me. I couldn’t let any printed matter pass [...]. I was pretty poor in English, which was the medium of instruction. I read and read till it

hurt" (1959, 51). As with other township families, the possession of books was rare: only the two books required by the local Methodist school were purchased each year. For the rest, Mphahlele relied on the serendipitous arrival of books from the white employers of his domestic worker mother and those he happened to find: "I continued to rummage for discarded, coverless, rat-eaten, moth-eaten, sun-creased books", a "blind quest" that led to a "tattered copy of *Don Quixote*" which he read so many times that it fell apart (1959, 85). Later at St. Peter's mission school, "it was glorious to find a large quantity of books to burrow into in the school library" and for the first time in his life since his encounter with Cervantes, "to shake hands with notable men" – Robert Lynd, Alpha of the Plough, Addison, Steele, Goldsmith, Shakespeare, Dickens, R. L. Stephenson and Robert Herrick (127).

Similar practices of avid and indiscriminate reading are described in other memoirs. Richard Rive, for example, would read "anything he could lay [his] eyes on" (comics, detective stories, schoolboy yarns), partly as a means of escaping "the realities of deprivation" (1981, 9). For Rive, it was the second-hand book stalls on Cape Town's Grand Parade rather than the rundown Hyman Lieberman library in Muir Street which answered his desire, providing him with *Measure for Measure*, the poetry of Wordsworth, the complete works of Walter Scott, *War and Peace*, Volume II and Rider Haggard's *She*. In a later period, Chris van Wyk's account in *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* (2004) of a trip to a second-hand book shop in Diagonal Street in Johannesburg also underscores the hunger for books. For Van Wyk, the "old, slightly worn" second-hand book was "not a hand-me-down but a new creation in its own right" (67). The handwritten dedication on the title page (wishing bon voyage to "Joshua") speaks to a remote world of white privilege, a mini-narrative to be read and pondered over, but the principal memory is the fact of abundance: "I turn to the shelf and I can't believe my eyes. *The Clue in the Embers*, *The Sign of the Crooked Arrow*, *The Mystery of the Chinese Junk*, *The Sinister Signpost* ... There are so many of them it's The Mystery of the Lots of Nice Books!" (2004, 69).

For Mphahlele it was the entry into city life in Pretoria that propelled him into reading, an ability which he acquired quickly and which soon made him indispensable to his friends who relied on him to read the screen subtitles in silent movies. A similar account of shared reading, public reading and informal "reading clubs" is given by Chris van Wyk

who, every Friday, was appointed the designated reader of the latest *True Africa* photo-comic (2004, 38). In contrast to these accounts of early reading accomplishment is Peter Abrahams's experience of learning to read at age eleven. Having never been to school, his first shocking encounter with reading and the world of the book occurred at his place of work, when a young woman offered to read him the story of Othello from Lamb's *Tales of Shakespeare*.<sup>1</sup>

While working-class readers may have seized on the classics as an important source of cultural capital it was books by African and African-American writers which offered various kinds of intellectual and psychological emancipation. Many accounts of reading emphasise the painful consciousness of being aligned with the 'other' in the text, situated as part of that which is dismissed or despised in a book which is otherwise regarded as an intimate friend. Thus, Abrahams' realisation that he was "the savage Black Tribesman" and "the Indian rebel" (1954, 10) confounded and subdued by white heroes, Phyllis Ntantala's early recollection (in *A Life's Mosaic*) of the overwhelming emphasis on "England, English culture and Europe" (1992, 30) and Van Wyk's troubling epiphany that a disparaging poetic reference to children who throw stones was a reference to "the likes of me and my cousins" (218). In this distorted reading context, encounters with works by Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, W. E. B. du Bois and Langston Hughes (memorably described in Abrahams' memoir when he visited the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg) are imbued with the quality of a revelation. As Abrahams recalls, they were a means "to assess my own situation through theirs" (1954, 10).

Several autobiographies include scenes of shared and reciprocal reading practices, frequently in relatively more affluent, rural settings. The first, coming close to the paternalistic ideal articulated in Webb's account, is described in Abrahams' biography where an invitation to inspect the books of his English teacher leads to many nights of animated discussion. Others such as Phyllis Ntantala describe experiences of being read to by teachers and parents. A vivid rendition of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* made the events leading up to the French Revolution so real to her that when she did not find Dickens' characters in her history lessons on the subject, she "wondered if the historian had all his facts right" (1992, 71). Ntantala also recalls a practice of shared reading and interpretation with her father who would



carefully explain the metaphorical allusions of the praise poems in her Xhosa school reader, thus offering the powerful political resources of a revisionist history of the wars of resistance in the Eastern Cape (1992, 44). Scenes of father-daughter reading are also to be found in Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call me Woman* (1985) where she describes how her stepfather "patiently coaxed [her] into reading" by marking out passages in his favourite newspapers and magazines, encouraging her to read and to understand the meaning of abstract subjects and topics (1985, 67). Finally, Van Wyk's experience of reading, swapping and discussing books with his mother at the kitchen table points to the possibilities of other more egalitarian and reciprocal reading encounters between adults and children, one which placed less emphasis on guidance than on shared enjoyment (2004, 52).

### **The Poor Library**

Given the conditions of scarcity described above, most of the earliest encounters between black readers and books in the segregationist period would have occurred in the context of the (largely underfunded) mission school; this, mainly in the form of "class readers" which were often "of poor quality and lacking in real interest" (Hewitt and Webb 1933, 13; Christie and Collins, 1982). Mission libraries provided another important reading context. Chief of these was the Howard Pim Library at Fort Hare which housed a collection of about 15 000 books including "many valuable pieces of Africana" (Johnson 1941, 6), the Cuthbert library at Lovedale College which held an "unrivalled" library collection based on personal endowments and gifts (Cobley 1997, 62), the library at Adams College which in 1935 had a collection of 2500 volumes (Johnson 1941, 12), the Inanda Seminary in Natal, the John Dube Memorial Library at Ohlange Institute, the aforementioned library at St. Peter's school, the M. K. Gandhi Library in Durban and The Tiger Kloof Native Institution in the Orange Free State (Cobley 62; Johnson 1942). Also important in a context in which municipalities took little or no responsibility for the needs of black readers (Cobley 1997, 69), were the various liberal initiatives to establish library services for "Non-Europeans" as well as a wide range of small, informal libraries established by religious and political organisations (Dick 2007b). The most significant of the former initiative was the Carnegie Non-European Library Service established in

the early 1930s, a highly successful circulating library scheme whose areas of operation included the Transvaal, Natal, Free State and Cape provinces. Other important sites of black reading – beyond the Carnegie purview – include the “Non-European Reading Room” at the University of the Witwatersrand under the charge of W. B. Vilakazi (Cobley 1997, 66), the Pietermaritzburg Native Teachers’ Library organised under the auspices of the Natal Education Department, the Hyman Lieberman Library in Cape Town founded in 1933 (which was later incorporated into the Carnegie project), the Winnifred Holtby Library in Soweto established in 1940 and the Wolhuter Native Men’s Hostel in Johannesburg (Johnson 1941; Cobley 1997; Rochester 1999).

The history of black library formation in South Africa makes clear the extent to which early black reading was positioned within a broader liberal-philanthropic ethos, framed as part of a social welfare project to direct African leisure and politics into profitable channels, to inspire racial co-operation and to influence reading choices (Couzens 1986; Cobley 1997; Sandwith 2016). This means that in many instances specific acts of reading take on the character of civilised performance, to some extent taking place under the approving liberal gaze. This emphasis on reading as performance is made explicit in Webb’s account of the Bantu Social Centre (BSC) library in Durban where books were housed in such a way as to be visible to passers-by. The spectacle of books and visible reading was designed not only to introduce potential readers and casual onlookers to the pleasures of the book; it also offered a public demonstration to white observers (who also frequented these centres) of the possibility of black reading itself (Webb n.d., 16). A further peculiarity of black reading contexts during this period is that books were consumed in segregated reading spaces and that book collections themselves were frequently divided along racial lines. Segregated reading was driven by questions regarding “suitability”, special needs and the desire to direct reading away from politically dangerous books.

The operations of the Carnegie Library scheme in South Africa have been well-documented (Shepherd 1945; Peters 1975; Cobley 1997; Rochester 1999; Clarke 2004). Modelled on the County Library System in Great Britain and the US, the books were distributed in bulk from “a central headquarters library [...] to local centres such as rural schools, village clubs and other institutions”. Books were lent for a period of

about six months after which time they were returned to the central depot and a new set was dispatched. In this way, “any reader had many thousands of volumes at his call instead of a comparatively small and stagnant collection”.<sup>2</sup> By 1948, there were over 95 depots in the Transvaal alone and the total Transvaal library collection numbered some 12000 books.<sup>3</sup> Branches were situated in municipal locations, township and mission schools, training colleges, hospitals, men’s and women’s hostels and mining compounds.

Many of these early library locations offered a reasonably close approximation of the conventional model – shelves lined with books, good lighting, newspaper stands and wooden tables and chairs. Benoni Library, for example, is described as offering “a well-lit and spacious reading room in the Location”.<sup>4</sup> Douglas Hall in “Marabastad Location” near Pretoria was noted for its well-stocked library, its comfortable furnishings and the beautiful pictures adorn[ing] the walls” (*The Reader’s Companion*, May 1938, 1–2) and the Bloemfontein library is described as “a specially decorated room with cream washed walls, green bookcases, orange curtains and gay posters” (Johnson 1941, 15). The Winnifred Holtby library, one of the few purpose-built libraries for black readers, consisted of four separate rooms used as library, reading room, lecture room and storage room, respectively (Johnson 1941, 25). Even in the more well-appointed libraries, however, space was at a premium. The Johannesburg Bantu Men’s Social Centre (BMSC), for example, had “tables and chairs crowding the central floor space” and the “room was too small for the services it [was] called upon to render” (Johnson 1941, 25). And at the Howard Pim library, there was barely enough space for “book room” or “standing room”, let alone “elbow room” (McCall 1937, 80).

As indicated above, many of the libraries were situated in social and recreational centres such as the BMSC in Eloff Street Johannesburg, the Ndongeni Library at the Durban BSC and the Gamma Sigma Club in Germiston. The Ndongeni library was typical of these, boasting a spacious room, a fair selection of books (fiction and non-fiction) and newspapers and magazines (*Ilanga Lase Natal* 19 June 1943, 9). In these locations, reading was situated as part of a social centre with the library forming just one part of the many activities available including sports, amateur dramatics, debating, film screenings, bible study and night classes.<sup>5</sup> As in the Free Black Libraries in antebellum North America

(McHenry 2002; 2011) and in the various church or club-sponsored reading rooms in nineteenth-century Britain (Hobbs 2011, 126) what emerged was a variety of social and convivial reading arrangements in which reading took place in the company of others. That this could be both a stimulant and an impediment to reading is suggested by the example of the BMSC which was housed in a noisy billiard room.<sup>6</sup> Also acting as a constraint for women readers was the predominantly male character of these centres.<sup>7</sup> At the BMSC, for example, the library was located on the first floor which meant that women had to pass through the men's club in order to access the library (Johnson 1941, 29). That this would have impacted on women's ability to access these spaces is borne out by reading statistics compiled by Johannesburg librarian, Karlton C. Johnson in 1942 which showed that there were more than twice as many women readers at the Winifred Holtby library in comparison to the BMSC (Johnson 1942, 28).



*Reading Room at the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg*  
(Courtesy of the A. W. G. Champion Collection, UNISA Archives)

Most of the reading environments for black South Africans were far more rudimentary and improvisational, providing not so much a space for leisurely contemplation and quiet reading as simply a physical location for the housing of books. In the 1930s and 40s, municipal services (or at least the pretence thereof) in Government-sponsored “locations” were frequently centred on the “Location Hall”. Not unexpectedly, this was also the space which was most often regarded as suitable for the “library”. The “location library” in Grahamstown, for example, was situated in the Bantu Social Club at the rear of the location hall. Some of the books were kept in a locked, glass-fronted cupboard while the remaining 200 (mostly in dilapidated condition) sat on open shelves. The library was particularly unsuited for quiet reading as it was used by the Club for games (Johnson 1942, 8). Others offered an even less convincing approximation of the middle-class library model – at times comprising only “a box of books placed in the corner of a hall, under the charge of a voluntary Librarian”.<sup>8</sup> In the various Carnegie Library reports over the period 1935–1945, it is only on the rare occasion that a reading space is described as “Special Library Room”. Much more common were venues such as “Room in a school”, “Club room”, “Public Hall”, “Librarian’s House”, “Boys” Hostel, “Location Superintendent’s Office”, “Hospital Verandah”, “Shop Premises”, “Mine Compound Office”, “Location Clinic”. “Office of School Principle”, “Church Premises”, “Municipal House in Locations”, “NAD [Native Administration] Offices” and “Private Houses”.<sup>9</sup> As some of the library reports also indicate, book boxes were also opened and distributed under trees or in the open veld. Given that so many of the library spaces existed within the auspices of municipal governance, what is also clear is that a desire to read would invariably bring the reader into contact with an often hostile and bureaucratic officialdom involving location superintendents, mine bosses and other officials. In this context, reading is negotiated rather than claimed, an activity which occurs in the context of asymmetrical and racialized encounters.



*A Carnegie Book Box. Reprinted from M. Peters, 1975.*

**The Contribution of the Carnegie Non-European Library Service  
Transvaal to the Development of Library Services  
for Africans in South Africa: An Historical and Evaluative Study  
(Courtesy of the National Library of South Africa, Pretoria)**

Those readers who lived in remoter areas were almost wholly reliant on book boxes sent from the Germiston depot. These boxes arrived from elsewhere usually by train in rough wooden trunks which opened out to form the shelves of a make-shift bookcase. The portable trunk-library provides another indication of the rudimentary and often impoverished circumstances in which reading took place and of the relations of patronage within which reading was positioned. In these settings, books make a dramatic appearance, filling a space which was previously empty. Delivered by an invisible hand, they are bounty, provision or charitable hand-out, suggesting a benevolent supplier and an unknown beyond. As denizens from elsewhere, they also necessarily formed a mediating point with a further-off, less familiar space and thus became the sign of a different set of cultural-economic norms. In these reading contexts, books were experienced as mobile rather than static and library spaces were informal, transient and ad-hoc rather than clearly demarcated. The sense of provisionality and impermanence is also

evident in the collections themselves which, at regular intervals, were repacked into their boxes and sent back to the depot.

Accounts of the Carnegie initiative are replete with stories of difficulty, failure and transience. The books housed at the “Helping Hand Club”, for example, were sent back to the depot because “girls do not read and those who do lose the books”<sup>10</sup> and in Pietersburg, the library was withdrawn because both “the person responsible for our books” as well as the box itself had disappeared.<sup>11</sup> That said, its success is also measured in the significant traffic in books across various rural and urban centres across the country, something of which is suggested in various archival lists of reading centres and numbers of readers. Good Hope Mission Station: Number of readers 22; Lady Selborne Methodist School: 125; Zeerust Indian School: 45; Bushbuckridge: 45; Durban Deep: 92; Phokeng Preparatory School: 76; Heidelberg Indian and Coloured School: 60; Potchefstroom Location: 114 and Payneville Township, Springs: 674.<sup>12</sup> The statistics for rural centres confirm a commitment on the part of the liberal welfare project to take the pleasures of reading beyond the usual circles of the elite – to reach not only the privileged male patrons of the popular urban social centres but also mineworkers, rural school children and trainee nurses. In the city of Johannesburg, detailed individual reading records for various libraries in the area provide evidence not only of the success of the library project in this region but also of the rich reading lives of its patrons: “Miss L”, described as “a Mosotho schoolgirl” borrowed 23 books in three months; “Mr T”, formerly a High School teacher “who reads five languages” borrowed 36 books in five months including Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, Marie Corelli and Sapper; “Mrs M”, a Xhosa washerwoman borrowed 19 books in three months including Bunyan, Edgar Wallace, Heaton Nicholls and Agatha Christie; “Mr P”, a police constable, read 43 books in a year, including Edgar Brookes, Samuel Butler, Georgette Heyer, Dickens, Buchan and Jules Verne and “Mr B”, described as a caretaker, borrowed 20 books in 6 months including Booker T. Washington, John Buchan, Arthur Conan Doyle, James Weldon Johnson and William McMillan (Johnson 1942, 35–38).

Something of the reading lives of black South Africans is also indicated in the vigorous exchange of letters from users and would-be-library users to the Carnegie librarian, some requesting to be part of the scheme, others indicating that a book box had been returned and

requesting another, and others requesting particular books or genres.<sup>13</sup> These letters provide an indication of the extent of the library's geographical reach, the widespread and intense interest the library generated in a context of book scarcity as well as evidence of readers' efforts to influence the kinds of books they received. A school teacher from Serowe, Botswana writes, "Our school has an enrolment of 230 boys and girls [...] and two boxes containing simple story books, biographical books, historical and fiction books would help us very much".<sup>14</sup> Another, G. Mtimkulu, writes "with deep feeling" of his desire to "improve the social standard of Barberton" through the provision of books.<sup>15</sup> And an avid reader from Louis Trichardt writes: "Please send me the list of your books, I want to choose one to read, or send me any books with a story of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* other than *Sir Percy leads the Band* or *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. In fact, any of the books of Baroness Orczy, other than the above-mentioned".<sup>16</sup>

If liberal library efforts provided access to books (and occasionally reading spaces) which were otherwise unavailable to the poor and working classes during this period, they also tended to confirm black reading experiences as less important than those of whites. The point is made in the 1936 Annual Report of the Johannesburg BMSC which refers to the "small lots of books" available to black readers in these "make-shift" libraries, arguing that, "[t]he reader's interest wanes when the authors on the subjects of his choice are exhausted" (10).<sup>17</sup> If conditions were invariably inadequate and the demand for books frequently outstripped supply, it was also only on the rare occasion that readers could be assisted by a trained or full-time librarian. Much more common was the voluntary librarian or the teacher or, in the ubiquitous library in the location, the less-than-enthusiastic location superintendent or the caretaker of the building. Conditions of inadequacy are also underscored by the fact that many of the collections were founded on ad-hoc donations from private individuals and those books that had been discarded from "European libraries" (Johnson 1941). What the evidence suggests is that it was the "poor library", the "cast-off" library or the not-quite library that served as the dominant context for black reading encounters during this period, a context which would also have reinforced the notion of the working-class reader as the recipient of charity and as second-class citizen, both of which would have had an impact on the reading experience itself.



## Mediated Reading

Key to the liberal ideal of black reading initiatives during this period is the kind of personal contact, encouragement and (moral) guidance which could be provided by the figure of the librarian. What arises in these contexts is a kind of “schooled” or mediated reading practice in which the librarian takes on the identity of a proselytiser-evangelist for the cause of reading and the schooling of a race. For those involved in the Carnegie scheme, this sociable aspect of the library was crucial to its success. As Senior Carnegie Librarian E. A. Borland explains, the librarian’s task is to “close the gap that formerly existed between the Native readers, who are suspicious of things offered to them free of charge by Europeans, and of the Europeans who run the library”. This role is prompted not only by the questionable assumption that reading is foreign to Africans but, more interestingly, by the recognition of an historical breach of faith: that African readers might not trust the giver of gifts. For Borland and other Carnegie supporters, it is the black librarian in particular who, in more ways than one, was able to speak to library users “in their own language” (Borland 1942, 4). For these reasons, early black reading initiatives place emphasis on the library as an intimate and social space in which “books can be taken from the shelves and talked about” as opposed to “an efficient service coldly and impersonally organised” (Hewitt and Webb 1933, 15).

The idea of the librarian as sympathetic mediator between and translator of ‘white’ and ‘black culture’ within a context in which memories of violent colonial conquest are still vivid is nicely captured in a vignette about a particularly successful and enthusiastic Carnegie librarian located in the North West:

When the box of books arrives he examines them all carefully; then he invites the borrowers to come and inspect them; he picks books out of the case, one by one describing the contents to his readers, reading out choice bits here and there, and in this way stimulates the interests of readers very successfully. One of his habits is to attend sessions of the local tribal court; and while witnesses and audiences are waiting for cases to be called, he presents them with magazines and books to read.

(Borland 1942, 4)

In this instance, the librarian and his/her portable book stocks become an invitation for the curious to inspect what is perceived as a foreign, otherworldly, object. The reading of extracts as a powerful stimulus to reading is a ubiquitous trope in the black reading archive, suggesting the centrality of this reading practice during the period. Another was the creation of a variety of informal reading groups in which listeners would clarify, question, recount and discuss what they had read.<sup>18</sup> This practice of mediated reading was also undertaken by readers themselves through the recommendations of books. According to a report of the Johannesburg Non-European Library, for example, the books in the library “are passed so much from hand to hand that it is impossible to keep track of them from headquarters”.<sup>19</sup> The various archival accounts of communal reading practices indicate a move away from the liberal ideal of authoritative guide and reading novice towards more symmetrical reading relations of conviviality, sharing and camaraderie. Furthermore, in contrast to the normative Romantic ideal of the static and solitary reader what is also advanced is an itinerant, opportunistic and mobile reading practice in which reading occurs in snatches. As Carnegie librarian-organiser, H. I. E. Dhlomo advises, “If you want to become a good reader ... it is necessary for you to read wherever you can. Carry a book around with you, in your pocket or under your arm; and if you have to wait for a friend, or if you have one or two minutes to spare, read a few paragraphs from your book” (“The Reader’s Companion” 4 December 1938, 1).<sup>20</sup>

Similar ideals of reading mentorship, inspiration and guidance informed the decision to employ a full-time organizer-librarian for the Carnegie collection whose role it was to interest people in books, to assist in book selection and to encourage reading. As indicated above, it was H. I. E. Dhlomo who, in 1938, was appointed to this task. During his tenure (until he resigned after an altercation with Borland), Dhlomo made regular visits to rural and urban centres around the Transvaal and gave numerous lectures on topics such as “Let us all Read”, “The Library as a Social Asset”, “How to Keep our Readers Interested” and “Books and their Use”.<sup>21</sup> He also organised lectures by B. W. Vilakazi, R. V. Selope Thema (both on “Bantu Literature”) as well as a lecture by Prof A. J. White on “Negro Literature”.<sup>22</sup> A similar practice was followed at the Ndongeni library in Durban in the early 1940s where lectures were given on G. B. Shaw (by D. G. S. Mtimkulu) and on

“African Youth and Intellectual Awakening” (by Jordan Ngubane) and at the Winifred Holtby library on topics such as “How we are Governed” (by Julius Lewin) and “The life of the American Negro” (by J. D. Coan). Social centre libraries also supported a range of additional activities such as literary societies, debates, readings, “literary socials”, “boys’ clubs”, reading circles, children’s “story hour” and essay competitions. In this way, black reading encounters were located within a broader social and educational infrastructure involving a range of networks and activities. And, as a result, library reading rooms became important meeting places for “progressive Africans”, a means of “improving the intellectual life of the community”.<sup>23</sup> They offered a lively social space in which books became the prompts for a wider set of intellectual, social and political activities and exchanges.

*The Reader’s Companion*, a monthly newsletter edited by Dhlomo and circulated free to members of the library, was an additional resource in the mediated reading scheme. The ongoing liberal stewardship of black reading was signalled in encouraging prefatory comments from well-wishers such as State Librarian, M. M. Stirling and the Rev. Ray Phillips, founder of the Gamma Sigma debating club and author of *The Bantu are Coming* (1936) as well as quotable quotes from Carlyle, Bacon, Emerson, Milton, Spencer, Shakespeare and Alcott, themselves offering both a demonstration of a particular reading life and a set of ideal reading coordinates. Also included were various hints and tips for librarians and book custodians which offered a kind of ‘schooling’ in the discipline of library work. Working to some extent against the Eurocentric paradigm, Dhlomo also provided a regular list of recommended books and contributed an informative series on black South African writers including S. E. R. Mqhayi, Sol T. Plaatje, Thomas Mofolo, B. W. Vilakazi, Ismail Sulyman, James Jolobe and Rolphes Dhlomo.

## **The Unread Book**

What many of the Carnegie librarians soon discovered, however, was that despite the evidence of meticulous record keeping, many of the books were being returned to the library in the same immaculate condition in which they had been borrowed.<sup>24</sup> Some commentators were not overly perturbed by the problem of the unread book, arguing for the salutary effect of its mere presence (Borland 1942, 3). In this case, the idea of the

book as magically transformative is extended to include even the book which remains unopened and unread. Various reasons, including the absence of leisure and the lack of familiarity with books, were given for the failure of libraries in some areas. Closer inspection suggests that the finger of blame might just as well be pointed at the book stocks themselves. The earliest list of “Books Recommended for Purchase” based largely on titles published by the British Library Association (Borland 1942, 3), was comprised of a parochial selection of late-1920s British children’s literature – such as *The Wharton Medal* (1929), *Lone Scouts of Crusoe Island* (1928) and *Evelyn finds Herself* (1929) – and a non-fiction section dominated by moralising tracts focusing on sex, hygiene and delinquency.<sup>25</sup> This was soon superseded by a more wide-ranging collection which also included the works of African and African-American writers.

The question of “Non-European” reading preferences is a pervasive topic in the liberal library archive. An early assumption shared by many librarians involved in the Carnegie project was the preference for non-fiction over fiction: “the Bantu, for economic reasons chiefly, prefer to read “useful” books, which term includes for them books about racial problems and examination textbooks” (Borland 1942, 6).<sup>26</sup> The assumption appears to be borne out by a few extant documents indicating circulation figures but the evidence is often difficult to interpret.<sup>27</sup> Assumptions about useful reading of course also fit into the prevailing liberal emphasis on non-utilitarian reading as representing a higher stage of civilizational achievement.<sup>28</sup> It was also an assumption which was used to justify the non-supply of black libraries by the state.<sup>29</sup> The assumption contradicts the evidence of other sources<sup>30</sup> and also seems to ignore the library’s own findings about the popularity of detective fiction, adventure stories, fairy tales and translations of Greek and Latin classics (Riley n.d.).<sup>31</sup> It also required that certain reading claims be downplayed or dismissed. Thus, for example, requests for English classics – Shakespeare, Thackeray, Keats and Dickens – are put down to what is termed “little learning”, choices based not on actual preferences but rather on what readers were exposed to at school.<sup>32</sup>

Lists of books purchased by the Carnegie library for the period 1936 to 1940 offer a more reliable record of reading preferences.<sup>33</sup> Given the understandable anxiety about unread books, Carnegie librarians went out of their way to encourage reader responses (through informal

discussions with readers as well as the distribution of questionnaires) and paid close attention to circulation patterns.<sup>34</sup> In this way the popularity of particular authors and genres in the previous years was reflected in the list of new purchases. These lists (as well as other scattered statistics of book circulation and reader preference) bear testimony to eclectic and diverse reading tastes encompassing the popular adventure novel, the imperial romance, detective fiction, a wide range of European and English classics, Southern African literature, African-American fiction and poetry<sup>35</sup> and various genres of non-fiction including biography, history, politics, education, health, religion and travel.<sup>36</sup> Across the scattered fragments of evidence, a few authors and titles stand out – the works of Rider Haggard, Zane Grey, Charles Dickens, Edgar Wallace, Baroness Orczy, H. G. Wells, Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*, Georgina Gollock's *Lives of Eminent Africans*, D. D. T. Jabavu's *The Black Problem*, T. B. Soga, *Life of Tiyo Soga*, E.W. Smith's *Aggrey of Africa*, J. H. Soga, *Ama-Xosa Life and Customs*, John Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln* and Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*.<sup>37</sup> Notwithstanding a special interest in black authors and South African history and politics, the evidence appears to undo the assumption of a special category of black reading, confirming instead that readers of a similar educational level enjoyed a similarly diverse selection of books.

In 1933, two Durban librarians (Mary Hewitt and the aforementioned Webb) carried out a mini-survey of "Non-European" reading focusing on night-schools and training centres in and around Durban. The survey which involved interviews with approximately 600 students and 30 teachers is illuminating not so much for what it suggests about reading tastes as what it confirms about the lives of the poor – the rarity of book possession (apart from Bible, hymnbook and prayer book), the importance of newspaper reading, the desire for books, the difficulties of accessing them and the infrequency of reading. Those who were attending night schools included "kitchen boys", apprentices, "store and errand boys" and factory hands (Hewitt and Webb 1933, 8–12). Those in domestic employment typically worked from 6am to 8pm. Their night school classes, which they hoped would emancipate them from domestic work, took place between 7.30 and 9.30pm. During the rare hours when they were not working, they liked to look at the shops. This bare information about long working hours and poorly paying jobs takes the scholar of reading beyond the specifics of reading environments and

book choices to a broader social and political context of systemic racial discrimination and economic inequality.

## **Conclusion**

The traces of reading and the spaces of book encounters in segregationist South Africa – suggested by a range of autobiographical and archival sources – point to the scarcity of books, the persistent hunger for books and the various strategies readers employed to access them. Key to this reading world are practices of indiscriminate, serendipitous, ad hoc, opportunistic and itinerant reading in the manner of many other autodidact traditions (Rose 2001; Fleming, Finklestein and McCleery 2011). In contexts of racial discrimination and material constraint, what emerges is a fugitive reading practice in which personal reading histories are derived not from careful selection but rather from what could be found, borrowed, taken, stolen or swapped. Evidence also points to the rarity of book possession and private or domestic reading and the consequent importance of the segregated library and school. If the “library” in early twentieth-century South Africa takes a variety of unanticipated forms including the most rudimentary, provisional and impoverished it was also frequently a space of conviviality, discussion and exchange in which reading took place neither alone nor in silence but rather out loud and in public as part of various kinds of social networks, infrastructures and activities. In this sense, reading “correlates with social involvement” (Price 2004, 3). The importance of mediated reading is suggested in the many relationships that developed around the consumption of books, including those reading and mentoring relationships that arose between parents and children, teachers and pupils and between librarians and readers, only some of which were modelled on a moralised, liberal-paternal ideal. The evidence also confirms the importance of the reading of extracts in school, library and domestic settings, suggesting not only an established pattern of shared and public reading but also the potential of reading as dramatic performance in a context in which reading competence is rare. In this sense the reading habits of black South Africans mark an important continuity with practices of orality. The strong social bonds and the shared reading experiences which mark these spaces produced a particularly cohesive, if predominantly male, “interpretive community”,

one which stretches the limits of the term as it is conventionally understood. Finally, what the evidence of case-studies suggests is the importance of linking the habits of reading to specific material contexts such as decent pay, proper education and adequate leisure and that, in the absence of these enabling conditions, reading may happen very infrequently and even not at all.

#### NOTES

1. Catherine Woeber's argument (2001, 339) that this story may be apocryphal bears out the earlier point about autobiographical self-fashioning. However, even as an invented story, articulating the intensity of a first encounter with books, its value as evidence still stands.

2. "Carnegie Non-European Library (CNEL), Transvaal, Report for 1935–1938", 2. National Library of South Africa, Pretoria.

3. "CNEL, Transvaal. Memorandum on Library Services for the Bantu People of the Union of South Africa. April 1949." South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) Collection. AD1715. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of Witwatersrand.

4. "CNEL, Transvaal, Report for 1935–1938", 3. National Library of South Africa, Pretoria.

5. "Pamphlet for the Bantu Men's Social Centre" and "Bantu Men's Social Centre: Annual Report, 1933." A. W. G. Champion Collection. UNISA Archive.

6. "CNEL Transvaal Branch Minutes of Meeting, 29 April 1937" In 1942, the billiard table was moved to another location leaving the room free for the sole use of readers. "Bantu Men's Social Centre Annual Report, 1943." Bantu Men's Social Centre Records. AO158. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand.

7. The point is borne out by photographic evidence. Aside from the photograph reprinted here, the photographs of the reading and library rooms at the Winifred Holtby Library show a clear majority of adult male users (reprinted in Copley, 71, 72; originals to be found in the W. G. Ballinger Collection. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of Witwatersrand.

8. "CNEL, Transvaal, Report for 1941", 4.

9. "CNEL, Transvaal, Report for 1943", 5 and "CNEL Transvaal, Report for 1944", 3.

10. "CNEL Organiser-Librarian Report, March-April 1937." Library Association Collection. UNISA Archives.

11. "CNEL, Transaal, Report by Librarian 3 June 1949", 1. South African Institute of Race Relations Collection. AD1715. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of Witwatersrand.

12. "CNEL, Transvaal, Report for 1945", 3–5.

13. Library Association Collection, UNISA Archives.

14. Letter from Reginald J. Mogoba to the Librarian, Non-European Carnegie Library, 6 March 1946. Library Association Collection. UNISA archives.

15. G. Mtinkulu to the Hon. Secretary, Carnegie Library, 3 May 1947. Library Association Collection. UNISA Archives.

16. Letter from H. J. Mathambi to the Librarian, Non-European Library, 27 May 1946. Library Association Collection. UNISA Archives.

17. Bantu Men's Social Centre Records. A1058. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of Witwatersrand.

18. See for instance, "Carnegie Non-European Library: Report on the Second Conference of Non-European Libraries", *South African Outlook*, 1 December 1936, 282–83 and the various reports from branches at Phokeng, Kliptown and Vereeniging amongst other places and which are collated in "Carnegie Non-European Library: Report on the Second Conference of Non-European Libraries", *South African Outlook*, 1 December 1936, 282–83.

19. *South African Libraries*, October 1937 (22), 63.

20. See also Mphahlele's account of reading while at work in *Down Second Avenue* (1959, 143).

21. "CNEL, Transvaal, Report for 1943", 4.

22. "CNEL, Secretary's Report for the Period July-December, 1938." Library Association Collection. UNISA Archives.

23. "Ndongeni Branch Library Annual Report" (*Ilanga Lase Natal*, 19 June 1943, 9).

24. Mary C. Hewitt and Maurice Webb. 1933. "Non-European Library Service: Report on an enquiry into the present working of the library service and its future possibilities." Library Association Collection. UNISA Archives.

25. "Carnegie Non-European Library: Books Recommended for Purchase." Undated but most likely 1933. Library Association Collection. UNISA Archives.

26. See also "CNEL, Transvaal, Report for 1938", 6. National Library of South Africa, Pretoria.

27. See, for example, *South African Libraries* April 1941, 134–80 and "Carnegie Non-European Library, Transvaal. Lending Section. Details of Circulation, 1948". Library Association Collection. UNISA Archives.

28. "CNEL, TVL, Third Report 1938", 13.

29. A letter from the Secretary of Native Affairs in Pretoria to an unnamed correspondent from the CNEL justifies the lack of expenditure on library services for black South Africans on the grounds that "very few Natives read books for pleasure". The letter also supplies evidence of the narrow, instrumentalised ways in which black reading was understood by the state at the time: "[I]t is felt that a far wider approach to the Native book reading public can



be made through their newspapers than through libraries ... Under this scheme illustrated articles, explaining government policy and legislation and giving information on such matters as Agriculture and Health are published", 19 August 1949. Library Association Collection. UNISA archives.

30. See for example "Ndongeni Branch Library Annual Report" (*Ilanga Lase Natal*, 19 June 1943, 9).

31. "CNEL Report". Library Association Collection. UNISA Archives.

32. "CNEL, TVL, Third Report 1938", 13.

33. Various lists of books purchased are to be found in the Library Association Collection. UNISA Archives and the SAIRR Collection. AD 843, B 68.1. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand.

34. See for example, the "Annual Report of the BMSC, 1933", 8. A. W. G. Champion Collection. UNISA Archives. A questionnaire (uncompleted) directed at branch librarians of the CNEL asks for details concerning the condition of the library, the various activities offered, the kinds of newspapers available and the books that are most in demand. SAIRR Collection. AD 843, B 68.1. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand.

35. As a result of an additional Carnegie grant in 1937, Maurice Webb was able to establish the "African and Negro Library" initially housed at the BSC and which included the work of all the major South African and African-American writers including W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, George Padmore, Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. "List of Books and Journals Presented to the University of Natal Library" by Maurice Webb Esq. October 1954 and "The African and Negro Library", 2 October 1954. Maurice Webb Collection. Killie Campbell Library, Durban.

36. See Johnson (1942, 31–47) for a detailed record of circulation statistics at the Johannesburg Non-European Library as well as several case studies of individual readers.

37. This is a small selection from a much fuller list. For details, see the Library Association Collection, UNISA archives. A similar range of titles and authors were to be found in the Winifred Holtby Library in Johannesburg. See "Book-List August 1940." SAIRR Collection. AD 843/B, 68.2, 1.8.2.8. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand.

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