

## **Print culture and imagining the Union of South Africa**

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Testing Benedict Anderson's thesis that nations are communities imagined principally in the medium of the printed word, this chapter surveys a variety of writings on South Africa from the decade between the South African War (1899-1902) and the moment of Union (1910) – novels, histories, newspapers, as well as more ephemeral texts. The question posed is: how did published writings contribute to the constitution of the postcolonial South African nation?<sup>1</sup> On the basis of this one case study, I reflect briefly upon the relationship between print culture and postcolonial African nationalisms.

### Novels

The South African War had an unanticipated impact upon British book sales, as the *The Bookman's* monthly survey for January 1900 explains:

At first glance it might seem that there was little connection between [the War and the book trade], but unfortunately this is not the case. There is a serious falling off in business, a very noticeable curtailment of orders. This is partly owing to the interest evinced in the war news contained in the daily and evening papers, leaving little time for more profitable reading, and partly to the fact that so many high families and others have been plunged into mourning by the sad losses, more especially among the officers, in South Africa. Even where this is not the case the anxiety felt for the safety of those serving in the front has completely set aside the question of book-buying, for the present, at any rate . . . There is a small redeeming feature amid all this depression of business. It is that the war has created a literature of its own, which is much sought after.<sup>2</sup>

Writers and publishers were swift to react to this new growth area in book sales: by the end of 1900, 33 books on the War had been published, 23 works of fiction and reportage, and ten aimed at juvenile readers. By 1910, 84 books on the War had been published, 60 for adults and 24 for juvenile readers.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the novels on the South African War looked forward to reconciliation between Briton and Boer. Bertram Mitford's *Aletta. A Tale of the Boer Invasion* (1900) was the first novel to resolve the political conflicts of the South African War through the marriage of characters representing the two contending factions. Such a narrative structure repeats that of the late eighteenth-/ early nineteenth-century sub-genre of the novel Katie Trumpener designates as the 'national tale'. Trumpener explains how '[d]uring the first decades of the nineteenth century, novelists in Ireland, then in Scotland and England, continue to re-write this national marriage plot [as these novels] engaged, from the outset, in a complicated political reconciliation process'.<sup>4</sup> The marriage-as-allegory-for-national-reconciliation novel was not the only version of the national tale,<sup>5</sup> but it was the one which travelled especially successfully to colonial and neo-colonial societies.<sup>6</sup> Latin American historical romances, for example, demonstrate 'the inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building [as they provide] stories of star-crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties, or economic interests, which should naturally come together'.<sup>7</sup> The South African version has an Englishman and an Afrikaner woman struggling through the hostilities of the war and marrying each other in the closing chapter.<sup>8</sup> Aside from *Aletta*, other examples include Charlotte Moor's *Marina De la Rey* (1903), Ernest Glanville's *A Beautiful Rebel* (1903), and Florence Ethel Young's

*A Dangerous Quest* (1904).

Mitford's *Aletta* opens by disavowing its own political significance:

Let it be distinctly understood, however, that the subjoined story is romance pure and simple, and devoid of any political purpose or leaning whatsoever. Boer life and character in every phase will be found throughout its pages, but Stephanus De la Rey and his family, and others who help to make up our story, are not mere glorified idealisations, but types that do exist, popular impressions to the contrary notwithstanding.<sup>9</sup>

The thoughts of the sympathetic Boer patriarch Stephanus de la Rey establish the component elements of the nascent nation: 'War was a terrible thing, and war between two white nations – two Christian nations, in a land swarming with heathen barbarians – seemed to him hardly justifiable under any circumstances whatever' (p. 24). The two lovers – the Englishman Colvin Kershaw and the Afrikaner Aletta de la Rey – recognise each other's superior breeding and feel an instant mutual attraction: '[Colvin] noticed, too, that the hand which he took in his was long and tapering – in short, she looked thoroughbred from head to heel' (p. 80), and Aletta defends Colvin against criticisms by an Afrikaner rival: 'I have seen English people, too, who I like and admire. Those of good blood are second to no race in the world – for good blood is good blood the world over' (p. 102). The narrator reinforces Stephanus' political analysis, lamenting how 'once more two Christian and civilised races were shedding each other's blood like water, while countless swarms of dark-skinned and savage heathen stood by and looked on' (p. 174), and Colvin in a similar vein explains his horror at the bloodshed, distinguishing the deaths of white soldiers in the Anglo-Boer War from those of Africans in the first Chimurenga of 1896-7: "Yes, I served in Matabeleland," answered Colvin. "But with niggers it's different. Then, you see, we hated the brutes so because they'd butchered a lot of women and children at the outbreak of the rebellion'" (p. 203). Mitford's protestations notwithstanding, the novel's politics are unequivocal: the superior stock of the two white races must unite. And so too is its warning: failure to unite will leave the Anglo-Boer white race at the mercy of the 'countless swarms of dark-skinned and savage heathen'.

The symmetry between the fictional narrative of Bertram's novel and the national narrative of the new Union would appear to support Anderson's contention that 'that the nation would continue to serve as the natural if unspoken frame of the novel, and that the novel would always be capable of representing, at different levels, the reality and truth of the nation'.<sup>10</sup> In this case, the white settler nation is the natural frame for the novel *Aletta*, and *Aletta* represents the reality and truth of the white Union. But there are several reasons to pause and complicate such a neat correlation. In the first place, the South African sales of novels like *Aletta* were modest. The boom in the sales of books on the South African War in Britain noted in *The Bookman* had no corresponding impact on book sales in South Africa itself. Indeed, whereas British readers were consuming great numbers of books on South Africa, South African booksellers were tardy in supporting local writing:

The very words 'South African Literature' seem to terrify our booksellers, so seldom does one see the title displayed . . . .  
An intelligent traveller, landing at Cape Town or Durban, and anxious to acquaint himself with our colonial literature, would find admirable bookshops worthy of any large English provincial town, a most creditable selection of the newest

books, but little or nothing to enlighten him on the subject of his enquiry: no segregation of South African books, no visible pride in South African achievement, and probably not even a respectable selection of our own latest verse and prose. Until all this is changed . . . our national booksellers can only be regarded as an obstacle in the path of a national literature.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, novels like *Aletta* that promoted a proto-national ideology were in fact relatively few in number. Not only did two-thirds of South African novels up to 1910 ignore the South African War and themes of Union,<sup>12</sup> but of those that were about the War and Union, a significant percentage side-stepped the ideology of South African nation-building. A good example is the best-selling novel of 1910, *The Dop Doctor* by Richard Dehan (Clotilde Graves). The plot centres upon two English characters who find true love during the South African War. Owen Saxham is the disgraced ‘dop doctor’ whose heroic deeds during the Siege of Mafeking ultimately win the heart of the beautiful orphan-heiress Lynette. The possibility of an English-Boer love-alliance does arise in a sub-plot in which the English working-class Jane falls for the Boer Walt Slabbert. But Walt turns out to be a spy, Jane ultimately marries the cockney Billy Keyse, and the couple settle down after the War in London as the cheerful servants of Dr and Mrs Saxham. The marriage plots in *Aletta* and *The Dop Doctor* might be configured differently, but the novels share the same uncompromising racial politics. Owen Saxham, like Colvin Kershaw in *Aletta*, has no qualms about enforcing white authority. When the African ‘Jim Gubo’ and the Hindu ‘Rasu’ shirk their duties during the Siege, ‘Saxham scored repentance upon the hide of his blacker brother, holding him writhing, shouting, and bellowing at the full stretch of one muscular arm, as he plied the other he kept a foot on Rasu the Sweeper, so as to have him handy when his turn came’.<sup>13</sup> Saxham’s thrashing of the African and Indian wins the approval of the Irish Mother Superior at the Mafeking convent: ‘[t]here was a glint in her deep eyes as she regarded Saxham’s thorough handiwork that told her approval of castigation well deserved’ (p. 300).

Reviewers at South African magazines and journals like *African Monthly*, *The Bulletin* and *The State* promoted a literary aesthetic requiring a combination of nation-building sentiment and realistic representations of the new nation. Applying these criteria, *Aletta* can be approved as a national-settler allegory of Anglo-Boer unity, whereas *The Dop Doctor* criticised as a post-imperial retreat to Anglo-metropolitan self-sufficiency. Compounding its absence of nation-building sentiment, *The Dop Doctor* also fails to capture the realities of South Africa, as S. G. Liebson complains in *The State*:

But as far as it concerns our land, ‘The Dop Doctor’ is nothing but a malediction . . . . Speaking from an African point of view, the book is boldly, unashamedly, and totally one-sided. With all its realism, it never approaches reality. It is a Jingo-chant – a concentrated hiss at all that is and means South Africa. It was the book of the year [in England]. Yet it is but the book of a year. Soon it will join the ranks of the Lost Legion – of the once-read.<sup>14</sup>

For South African critics, the vast majority of novels were like *The Dop Doctor*, and never came close to meeting their criteria. Assessing a selection of over sixteen South African novels published between 1902 and 1909, the reviewer for the journal of the South African Home Reading Union, *The Bulletin*, concludes that ‘[w]ith the exception of Mr [Perceval] Gibbon there appears to be no writer of recent years

whose literary skill has developed in a really South African direction'.<sup>15</sup> The main reason for such failure lies in their obeisance to models external to South Africa:

. . . we are still awaiting a true South African novelist. The fault lies, it appears to me, very largely with the story tellers themselves . . . . They are too fond of depending on the classics of bygone days and other civilizations; they are still in leading-strings, not sufficiently self-reliant, and they write of the things they think they are expected to write of, not of the common things that lie around them. To put it vulgarly, they prefer 'the imported article.' But, until they get to see otherwise, the results must inevitably be small. (p. 190)

Only by overcoming their colonial cringe and replacing their British-imperial with an African-settler sensibility would South African novelists produce fiction true to their new nation.

A final reason for moderating claims about the affinities between novel and nation is a conceptual one. In a sympathetic reading of Anderson's arguments, Jonathan Culler provides a nice example to clarify the distinction between nation-building and novels: 'If, for instance, we ask what made Britons "Britons", it is more plausible to answer "war with France" than "Jane Austen"'.<sup>16</sup> But this does not mean novels are irrelevant, as he clarifies:

If we try to argue that the novel, through its representations of nationhood, made the nation, we will find ourselves on shaky ground, but if we argue that the novel was a condition of possibility for imagining something like a nation, for imagining a community that could be opposed to another, as friend to foe, and thus a condition of possibility of a community organised around a political distinction between friend and enemy, then we are on less dubious ground . . . . [T]he novel can be a condition of possibility of imagining communities that may become nations because it addresses readers in a distinctly open way, offering the possibility of adhering to a community, as an insider, without laying down particular criteria that have to be met. (p. 49)

Applying Culler's distinction to the South African case demonstrates both its usefulness, but also its limits, limits that derive from Anderson's own theory of the novel and the nation. Given the modest scale of *Aletta*'s circulation, it can be readily conceded that although the novel narrated emergent white South African nationhood, it can in no way be said to have 'made the nation'. Extending Culler's example of how 'war with France' and not 'Jane Austen' made 'Britons', it is certainly also more plausible to argue that the South African War made the citizenry of the Union of South Africa, not Bertram Mitford. Following Culler, we could still argue more cautiously that *Aletta* was a condition of possibility for imagining the new nation of the Union of South Africa. But even this second and more circumspect formulation needs to be qualified. While Jane Austen's novels might have served such a function during the Napoleonic Wars, in the case of racially bifurcated nations – like the Union of South Africa – the novel's mode of address is not 'distinctly open'. Only white readers can adhere to the community as insiders, and exclusionary racial criteria dictate admission to the novel's imagined community.

## Histories

For South African publishers after the War, the steady increase in the numbers of school pupils and the prospect of new syllabi meant that school textbooks were a potentially lucrative market. The racially differentiated statistics of 1909 provide the following breakdown: 154,159 white pupils and 281,817 pupils in total.<sup>17</sup> Of the white pupils, only about 2.5% completed high school, and a very much smaller percentage of the other races.<sup>18</sup> As there was no centralised education system for black education before Union, the numbers of black pupils in school are difficult to establish, but educational historians have estimated 110,000 – 0.3% of the 4 million black South Africans.<sup>19</sup> This means that in a total population of about 6 million,<sup>20</sup> an absolute maximum of about 3000 white pupils and a handful of pupils of other races completed high school every year. In the eight university colleges there were just over 1000 students in 1911.

Between 1902 and 1912, at least seven new or revised editions of high-school history textbooks were published, with a flurry appearing around 1910.<sup>21</sup> In all but one of the textbooks, Union was zealously promoted, with the same themes recurring: the natural affinity of the two white races; the economic advantages of Union to white South Africa; and Union embraced as the best device for containing the aspirations of the black majority, routinely characterised as ‘the native problem’. In the language of social Darwinism, the Rev. Joseph Whiteside’s *South African Union Reader* (1912) dwells upon the common racial ancestry of South Africa’s white races in early Europe: ‘The Dutch and the English really belong to the **same race** [bold in original]. Fifteen hundred years ago, their ancestors were Teutons, living side by side on the southern shore of the North Sea’.<sup>22</sup> Their shared past underpins the survival of certain fundamental commitments: ‘their descendants, both Dutch and English, retain this love of freedom and sport to the present day’ (p. 8). In political terms, it means that Union is both a political solution and a racial destiny:

Dutch and English, sprung from one Teutonic stock, now form one glorious Anglo-Dutch nation. As Ex-President Steyn said, ‘If the war had done no more than make this possible, the suffering and loss of life had not been in vain.’ The misunderstanding and conflicts of the past, it is hoped, are ended, and their return made almost impossible. Henceforth, there is to be **One People, One Parliament, One South Africa**. (p. 21)

Victorian racial discourse thus precedes and enables the nation-building historical narrative of the white South African settler state. Black Southern Africans are mentioned briefly on but four occasions: ‘Hottentots’ trading with Van Riebeeck (p. 15); Dingaan’s ‘treachery’ and the killing of Piet Retief (p. 16); the Battle of Blood River (p. 17); and the killing of the Landdrost Stockenstrom (p. 25).

Lancelot M. Foggin’s *Stories from South African History* (1910) echoes Whiteside’s hopes that the divisions between the white races will disappear under Union, and enumerates the advantages of Union in terms of economic profitability, potential international influence, and effective racial governance:

There are many advantages which we expect to gain from the union of South Africa. One of them is that the country will be able to sell its products, to buy the necessary commodities, and to borrow capital for its enterprises, on better terms than ever before. Another is that it will hold a more influential place among the countries of the British Empire and of the

world, than the separate colonies could. A third is that it will be far better equipped than in the past for ruling its great native population successfully. But the chief benefit will be that, under union, all the old jealousies between the two great white races in South Africa will gradually but surely disappear.<sup>23</sup>

Foggin's third advantage of Union, that it will help in 'ruling its great native population successfully', was given greater priority in several of the other textbooks. Henry B. Sidwell's *The Story of South Africa: An Outline of South African History* (1910) sets out the 'native problem' in its final chapter, ending with cautious optimism:

The native populations of South Africa are increasing in numbers; the desire for education among them is keen; native labourers already provide nearly all the unskilled labour in the country, and are steadily, if not very quickly, advancing to a place among the less skilled workmen of the white races. The question of how to deal with the vast numbers of these people, how to direct their way to higher civilization, and provide for them in the coming nation, is one of the most difficult ever placed before any state, and would alone justify every effort to bring about a United South Africa. There is no doubt that the problem can be solved, but only by one united policy, guided by the combined wisdom and experience of the European colonizers, and going hand in hand with the aims and efforts of the native peoples themselves.<sup>24</sup>

Alicia Sophia Bleby's *South Africa and the British Empire. A Course of Lessons for the Cape Matriculation History Syllabus* (1911) shares Sidwell's sense of the centrality of 'the native problem', but ends on a more anxious note:

Of the many difficulties remaining to be settled, the most difficult were those relating to the native races and coloured people of South Africa. One of these was the question of the franchise, in which any attempt at uniformity was certain to wreck the scheme of union. To extend the franchise to the whole native population of South Africa, civilised or uncivilised, would be sheer madness; and short of this no voting qualification could be devised which did not take away the vote from some class of men already possessing it. The Convention therefore determined to leave the franchise laws in each colony unaltered, and to content itself with carefully guarding the rights of the coloured voters in Cape Colony. Time and advancement of civilisation would, they hoped, indicate the best method of dealing with this vital question, on which the future of South Africa largely depends, and which more than any other calls for firm and enlightened policy. On the whole native question South African opinion is at present divided, and any agreement can only be attained by the influence of mind over mind exercised in common deliberations. In this process, union will aid, while strengthening the forces of order in a country where natives outnumber white men by five to one and increase at a much

more rapid rate.<sup>25</sup>

Without invoking Whiteside's language of the 'Teutonic races', both Sidwell and Bleby reproduce a racial teleology which sets (white) civilisation as a distant but by no means certain destination for black South Africans. For Sidwell, the new Union government might in time discover 'how to direct [black South Africans'] way to higher civilization', and for Bleby, '[t]ime and the advancement of civilisation' might do no more than provide answers to 'the native question'. Whiteside countenances the possibility that 'the aims and efforts of the native peoples themselves' will contribute to a stable political settlement, but Bleby's emphasis is squarely upon questions of racial governmentality: resisting the extension of the black franchise calls for 'firm and enlightened policy', and union is to be embraced because it aids in 'strengthening the forces of order'.

The one textbook to book hostile to Union was E. C. Godée-Molsbergen's *A History of South Africa* (1910), which was translated into English by Miss M. Le Roux, and published by Longmans in London. The Dutch historian Godée-Molsbergen had been invited by the Zuid-Afrikaanse Tallbond, the Zuid-Afrikaanse Onderwysers Unie, and the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouwen Vereneiging to write a school history of South Africa. Although there are gestures to the reconciliation of the white races under Union, there are at least as many appeals to a specifically Afrikaner readership. The Preface, for example, offers young South Africans an encounter with their history 'from the coming of the white man to the present day. The story is one to cause the heart of every Afrikaner to throb with gratitude towards Providence for the favour he has shown his people, and to thrill with love for his country, and his nation'.<sup>26</sup> And the chapter on 'The Great Trek and the republic of Natal' does little to downplay the nineteenth-century tensions between Briton and Boer:

**England** regarded herself as the champion of all native-races, and these she expected, thanks to the low and cruel character given the Boers by **Sir John Barrow and Dr Philip**, would be ill-treated and misused by the Emigrant Farmers. More important than this was the fear that large numbers of Kaffirs would remove southwards to the Cape Colony. Far-sighted statesmen in England saw the seriousness of the situation, but the consequences of the Great Trek were even more momentous than anyone had predicted. **A new nation** was born – the **Boers** [bold in original]. (p. 112)

In fundamental respects, Godée-Molsbergen's history is indistinguishable from all the other pro-Union histories, most notably in its assumption that South African history is the history of white South Africans. But it was nonetheless received at the time as a threat to Union. In a review in *The State*, for example, J. Edgar bemoans its anti-British sentiment, and declares:

In a book of this kind, intended for the instruction of the young, it is an almost sacred duty to avoid biasing their minds on the subject of their own history. The most scrupulous care should be taken to state facts truly and honestly and to avoid misinterpretation and misstatement. Controversial topics should be avoided, and anything which tends to stir the embers of racial hatred. In all these points the book before us errs most gravely, and we are afraid deliberately. The whole tone of the book is violently anti-English. . . . What a deplorable start for the new nation to have its young minds



impressed thus with a feeling of resentment and antipathy  
towards the whole British Empire, of which they form a part.<sup>27</sup>

Edgar's review recognises that the imagined community of the new white nation remained fragile at the moment of Union, and that continuous ideological labour was still required to refute the idea of a separate and independent Afrikaner nation.

Godée-Molsbergen's history aside, the historical narratives of the high school history books were therefore in close accord with the fictional narratives of the settler novels, as both reinforced the official national narrative of the new Union. As in the novels, so too in the school histories, the textually constituted addressee was the white reader, and they both shared the same narrative template: Briton and Boer must put their past differences aside and unite in order to contain 'the native problem'.

### Newspapers

There were limits to the nation-building mantra of the novels and school histories. In the first place, it was performed in a narrow range of publications. A survey of all South African publications reveals that even in the febrile political atmosphere of 1909, the overwhelming majority ignored both the Union specifically and politics in general: only 40 of the 339 publications in South Africa in 1909 dealt directly with issues relating to nation-building.<sup>28</sup> While it was certainly the case that published books reached far fewer readers than newspapers, the dissemination of nation-building ideas via the press was restricted by a second factor, namely low literacy rates and modest newspaper circulation: in 1911, only 273,802 (6.8%) of the adult black population was literate,<sup>29</sup> and the total numbers of newspapers for black readers were below 5,000 per day.<sup>30</sup> Carry-on readerships (literate reading to non-literates or passing on publications to other readers) increased access to ideas about nationhood substantially, as did forms of public reading, the 'public scanning of signs, placards, posters, and newsprint [by] a heterogeneous collection of stray passers-by as members of a shared, known, terrain constituted in part by the written text'.<sup>31</sup> However, even including these public and informal modes of reading, participation in the discursive ferment of Union nation-building remained a minority activity.

Thirdly, there were dissenting voices speaking out against Union. In the white press, anti-Union critics were in a minority. There were those writing against Union in the same pro-Boer separatist spirit as Godée-Molsbergen, but there were also those like Olive Schreiner, who questioned certain assumptions of the official Union narrative. First published as a series of open letters in *The Transvaal Leader* and soon after as the booklet *Closer Union* (1909), Schreiner's intervention acknowledges the black majority as an indispensable economic resource: 'We [the whites] desire [the Bantu] as thirsty oxen in an arid plain desire water, or miners hunger for the sheen of gold. We want more and more of him – to labour in our mines, to build our railways, to work in our fields, to perform our domestic labours, and to buy our goods'.<sup>32</sup> But Schreiner was exceptional in warning that if 'the Bantu' is seen in this restricted way, 'if, unbound to us by gratitude and sympathy, and alien to us in blood and colour, we reduce this vast mass to the condition of a vast seething, ignorant proletariat – then I would rather draw a veil over the future of this land' (p. 29).

Black newspapers by contrast were unanimous in denouncing the exclusions built into the Union constitution. Editorials, articles and letters expressed outrage at the proposed Union settlement, especially after 9 February 1909, when the National Convention released the draft South Africa Act, with its clauses restricting qualified African franchise to the Cape, and excluding Africans from parliament. A letter in *Ilanga Lase Natal* from a reader signed Godoza objected, 'The white men have

spoken. The Closer Union is before the people who have votes to give their yes or no, and the many who have no choice are ridden over . . . . Nothing but a blank future is left for the African because of his nation's colour'.<sup>33</sup> The editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal*, John Dube, agreed, 'We can see many good results coming from Unity. But when we see that the native who is a civilized man is to be treated as a nobody, then we think there is very good reason . . . to say that there can be no Union without dishonour'.<sup>34</sup> John Tengo Jabavu in *Imvo Zabantsundu* argued that to exclude Africans at the outset from Union 'was very, very bad policy indeed. May our beloved country be spared from it'.<sup>35</sup> And in even more forceful language, A. K. Soga in *Izwi Labantu* protested:

This is treachery! It is worse. It is successful betrayal, for the Act has virtually disenfranchised the black man already even before the meeting of the Union Parliament, which will repeat the crime by solemn vote of the two assemblies. This is a replica of the Treaty of Vereeniging.<sup>36</sup>

Written out of the official discourse of Union, moderates (like Jabavu) and radicals (like Soga) alike were committed to addressing the divisions within black politics, a commitment expressed in the formation of the South African National Congress two years later.

### Readers

A final check on the ideological power of nation-building publications – novels, histories or newspaper articles – was the capacity of readers to reject their authority. Rejection of the white-nationalist discourse of Union underlies the polemical interventions of Schreiner, Dube, Jabavu and Soga, but the experiences of one particular reader demonstrates how racist publications could be re-interpreted. The unpublished autobiography of Victor Richard Selope Thema (1886-1955) provides a detailed account an African intellectual's encounter with books as a student at Lovedale between 1906 and 1910 – precisely in the years of Union.<sup>37</sup> Thema's recollections of his Lovedale days demonstrate his deep love of books, and also his faith in the capacity of books to contain political (including racial) disagreements and conflicts:

Truly speaking books became my companions and this naturally made me lose the friendship of other boys who were not as studious as myself . . . . I enjoy being alone; I like to walk alone, to talk to myself and think of things that matter in this life. This habit of mine, a habit which makes some people think that I am conceited, came to me through love of books. Although I realise its iniquity, its destruction of friendships, yet I cannot regret having developed it. The fellowship I find in books is more valuable, more inspiring than that which I find in my association with persons. I do not think that I would have enjoyed the friendship of Shakespeare as I enjoy that of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and *A Comedy of Errors*, nor that of Lord Macaulay as I enjoy that of his *Lays of Ancient Rome* or his historical and critical essays. Books are not quarrelsome; they do not argue the point; they direct and guide. If you are in trouble they do not tell tales about you, but they advise you and give you hope and courage. They extend a helping hand when you are in difficulties. They do not laugh at you and treat you with

contempt. Books have no colour or race prejudices. I can take *The Rising Tide of Color* with me to the hills and there let it tell how its author feels about the question of colour, but I cannot easily persuade Professor Stoddard to accompany me to the woods and there tell me his fears about the rising tide of the advancement of the coloured races.<sup>38</sup>

Convinced that books can ‘direct and guide’, ‘advise you and give you hope and courage’, Thema even argues that they ‘have no colour or race prejudices’. Such confidence in the benevolence of books – independent of their authors – enables him to encounter with equanimity Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy* (1920). Stoddard’s book provides a global version of white South Africa’s racist fear of the ‘native problem’, but Thema, like his contemporary W. E. B. Du Bois, believed that even such uncompromisingly racist views could ultimately be defeated by rational argument in the public sphere.<sup>39</sup>

Thema’s courteous reading of Stoddard’s book, however, in no way diminished his robust rejection of racist ideology. His critical refusal of Eurocentric accounts of South Africa’s past (of the kind he would have encountered at Lovedale in history textbooks) attest to the dangers of over-stating the power of the printed word to interpolate obedient colonized subjects:

It is no injustice to those who wrote the history of South Africa in the early days to say that they wrote it with an object in view. Their primary object seems to have been to impress the world with the wickedness and cruelty of the African race, and to enhance the prestige of the White race. The so-called ‘Kafir Wars’, as already pointed out, were said to have been waged solely for the purpose of plundering lonely farmers; but an impartial enquirer would have discovered that although there was a great deal of plundering and pillaging the wars were prompted by an ardent desire to rid the country of European invaders. They were similar wars to those waged by the Britons against the conquering Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Danes; or by the Anglo-Saxon tribes against the invading Romans. The motive that prompted these wars was not that of stock-theft but that of self-preservation. It was not for the sake of the farmers’ cattle and sheep that black men made that futile but noble attempt to ‘drive the white man into the sea’. It was not for the sake of mere plunder that the Amaxhosa people, in obedience to the false prophecy of a misguided girl burned their corn and killed their cattle in the hope that the white man would be driven into the sea . . . . It was for something far greater, something nobler than all this. It was for the independence of the African race, for its right to develop along its natural lines so as to determine its destiny without let or hindrance. As I read the South African history comparing it with that of Europe, I discovered that Nongqause was but a prototype of Joan of Arc. The only difference being that Joan’s scheme succeeded while that of Nongqause proved a disastrous failure. But no one can deny that Nongqause, like Joan of Arc, was prompted by the spirit of patriotism.<sup>40</sup>

Thema demonstrates a clear understanding of the colonial-settler ideology underlying the history textbooks, and refutes its racist logic in at least two ways. First, he subverts the colonial hierarchy by reading English history as an early version of South Africa's colonial history, with the European invaders in South Africa the direct equivalents of the Romans, Normans and Danes who invaded Britain, and the native Britons the equivalent of Africans. Secondly, he reverses the negative ascriptions assigned to figures in African resistance like Chaka, Moeshoeshe, Nongqause, and insists *contra* that they be accorded heroic status. It is also arguable that Thema's autobiography, with its faith in a non-racist public sphere and anti-colonial historiographical revisionism, contains the seeds of an alternative South African nationalism.

### Conclusion

Caution is needed when leaping from one (neo-) colonial history to another. During the South African War, the Filipino nationalist Isabelo de los Reyes wrote an essay hailing the Boers fighting against the British Empire as inspirational anti-colonial heroes. According to Reyes, 'the Boers learned from the Filipino guerrilla fighters, and . . . the Filipinos could learn from the sober discipline of the Boers'.<sup>41</sup> Whether the Boer ideologues of 1900 viewed the Filipino anti-colonial struggle with reciprocal generosity is not on record.

A century later, Benedict Anderson has used the histories of South-Asia as the basis for developing theoretical arguments about print cultures and postcolonial nationalisms. Can his arguments be extended to Africa, or are such endeavours destined to be no more than sophisticated updates of the misrecognition of Isabelo and the Boers in 1900? Do the vastly different historical specificities of South-East Asian and African nations render any general claims about postcolonial book histories and print cultures banal? Certainly the case of the Union of South Africa would appear to question the centrality of print cultures to African postcolonial nation-building. Even at the time, serious doubts were raised as to whether the new imagined community of the Union had any substance, with an article in *The Times* of London in June 1909 suggesting that 'South African nationalism did not exist', and arguing that 'a handful of leaders may fashion a state but they cannot create a nation'.<sup>42</sup> On this line, Union nationalism was a negligible political factor, and by extension, books and print culture had made very little impression. But viewed in a longer time frame, noting that the white South African state endured until 1994, it is arguable that the printed word facilitated the transition from (intra-white) civil war to (white) Union, and ultimately played an important role in forging the consciousness of the citizenry of the twentieth century's exemplary settler-racist nation.

Accepting on the basis of this case study that print cultures in colonial and postcolonial Africa might have played *some* role – however modest or qualified – in constituting new nations, one major question still remains unanswered, namely: how are the histories of the millions of Africans without access to published texts to be registered? In South Africa in 1910, this excluded constituency amounted to about 80% of the population. Debates in African book histories and print culture conducted exclusively in their own terms run the risk of forgetting such constituencies, their histories and cultures, and their political agency. The difficult challenge is to pursue a research agenda in African book history that constantly juxtaposes the histories of those with access to print cultures with the histories of those who do not.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quite when South Africa became 'postcolonial' is debated. Possibilities for the moment of transition from 'colonial' to 'postcolonial' include 1910 (when South Africa left the British Empire and formed the Union of South Africa); 1961 (when South Africa left the British Commonwealth and became a republic); and 1994 (when white rule ended and a black majority-elected government assumed power). See Nic Visser, 'Postcoloniality of a Special Type: Theory and its appropriations in South Africa', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 27 (1997), pp. 79-94.

<sup>2</sup> 'The War and the Book Trade', *The Bookman*, 17: 100 (January 1900), pp. 106-7, at p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> See Donald J. Weinstock, 'The Two Boer Wars and the Jameson Raid: A Checklist of Novels in English', *Research in African Literatures*, 3: 1 (1972), pp. 60-7.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the quality of these publications was uneven. An anonymous review of a collection of tales from North Africa in the August 1900 edition of *The Bookman*, for example, noted that 'South African fiction has been just a little too abundant and not quite good enough these last months, and for our recreation we turn north of the Equator with some relief' ('Review of A. J. Dawson's *African Night's Entertainment*', *The Bookman*, 18: 107 (August 1900), p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism. The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> An alternative to the marriage of adversaries, masculine bonding has been another common model, as exemplified in nineteenth-century U. S. novels imagining male adversaries forming fraternal communities that emerge "naturally" in a society fractured by the most violent racial, class and regional antagonisms' (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 203): Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pathfinder* (1840); Ishmael and Queequeg in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851); and Huck and Jim in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1881). Before Union in 1910, popular South African novels imagining such fraternal communities transcending intra-national conflict were rare, although proximate examples are John Buchan's novels *Mr Standfast* (1915) and *Greenmantle* (1916), which recount how the British hero Richard Hannay and his Afrikaner friend Peter Pienaar put the antipathies of the South African War behind them to fight together in the service of Britain and its Empire.

<sup>6</sup> It has flourished in post-apartheid South Africa. Nape 'a Motana's comic novel *Fanie Fourie's Lobola* (1997) ends in the marriage of the white Afrikaner Fanie Fourie and the Pedi Dimakatjo Machabaphala. In the film version directed by Henk Pretorius (2013), Fanie remains Fanie, but the character of Dimakatjo is changed into the Zulu Dinky Magubane.

<sup>7</sup> Doris Sommer, 'Irresistible Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America', in Homi Bhabha (ed), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 71-98, at p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> This formula had appeared in novels before the War like R. M. Ballantyne's *The Settler and the Savage* (1877) and H. C. Adams's *Perils in the Transvaal and Zululand* (1887). See Laura Chrisman, 'The imperial romance', in David Attwell and Derek Attridge (eds), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 226-45, at p. 236. There were a number of other novels that follow slight variations, like Mrs G. Bowden's *Nella of Pretoria* (1907), in which the eponymous protagonist has a Transvaal Afrikaner father and an English mother.

<sup>9</sup> Bertram Mitford, *Aletta. A Tale of the Boer Invasion* (London: F. V. White, 1900), Introductory. For critical discussions of the prolific Mitford, see Jack Kearny, *Representing Dissension. Riot, Rebellion and Resistance in the South African Novel* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2003), pp. 14-19, and Gerald Monsman, *Colonial Voices. The Anglo-African High Romance of Empire* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2010), pp. 39-72.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons. Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 334.

<sup>11</sup> 'Notes and Comments', *The South African Bookman*, 1 (August 1910), pp. 1-3, at p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Chapter 3 of J. P. L. Snyman's *The South African Novel in English (1880-1930)* (Potchefstroom: The University of Potchefstroom Press, 1952), pp. 46-65, provides brief summaries of 'South African Novels: 1900-1910. Of the 69 novels Snyman summarises in this chapter, 14 deal directly with the South African War or the politics of Union. For Snyman, *The Dop Doctor* is the best of them, but like the critics of 1910, he finds that overall they are 'disappointing. Their emotion rarely rises to anything beyond sentimentalism or jingo-feeling; and the real tragedy of the war – the setback to co-operation between the white races and the suffering of the women who bore the brunt of the war – does not seem to have stimulated South African writers to produce work of lasting value' (p. 48).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dehan, *The Dop Doctor* (London: William Heinemann, 1910), p. 299. *The Dop Doctor* ran to twenty editions in the next five years, and was made into successful film in 1915, attracting controversy for its negative depiction of the Boers.

<sup>14</sup> S. G. Leibson, 'The South Africa of Fiction', *The State*, 7: 2 (February 1912), pp. 135-9, at p. 139.

<sup>15</sup> D. L. 'South Africa in English Fiction, 1902-1909', *The Bulletin*, 3 (October 1909), pp. 187-91, at pp. 190.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Culler, 'Anderson and the novel', in Jonathan Culler and Pheng Cheah (eds), *Grounds of Comparison. Around the Work of Benedict Anderson* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 29-52, at p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> See Ernst. G. Malherbe, *Education in South Africa. Vol I: 1652-1922* (Cape Town: Juta, 1925), p. 401. Malherbe provides the province-by-province breakdown in 1909: for the Cape Colony, 174,649 (total pupils) and 76,969 (white pupils) (p. 174); for Natal, 29,114 and 12,444 (p. 218); for the Transvaal, 59,191 and 47,488 (p. 401); and for the Orange Free State, 18,863 (white pupils; no statistics for other races).

<sup>18</sup> E. G. Pells, *European, Coloured and Native Education in South Africa, 1652-1938* (Cape Town: Juta and Company, 1938), p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> Ken Hartshorne, *Crisis and Challenge: Black Education, 1910-1990* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> In the racist nomenclature of the 1911 census, the population totalled 6 million, with 1.3 million 'Whites'; 4 million 'Natives'; 0.5 million 'Coloureds'; and 0.15 million 'Asiatics'.

<sup>21</sup> George McCall Theal, *Maskew Miller's Short History of South Africa and its Peoples* (Cape Town & Pretoria: Maskew Miller, 1909), Charles Douglas Hope, *Our Place in History. A Comparative History of South Africa in Relation to Other Countries* (Cape Town: J. C. Juta, 1909), E. C. Godée-Molsbergen, *A History of South Africa; Compiled at the request of the Suid-Afrikaanse Onderwysers Uni, and*

*the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouwen Vereeniging* (London: Longmans, 1910), Henry Bindley Sidwell, *The Story of South Africa: An Outline of South African History* (Cape Town: J. C. Juta, 1910), Lancelot M. Foggin, *Stories from South African History* (Wynberg: The Rustica Press, 1910), Rev. J. Whiteside, *A New School History of South Africa with Brief Biographies and Examination Questions* (Cape Town: J. C. Juta, 1910). A year after Union, Alicia Sophia Bleby's *South Africa and the British Empire. A Course of Lessons for the Cape Matriculation History Syllabus* (Cape Town: Juta, 1911) was published, and went through new editions each year until 1917. In 1912, Whiteside supplemented his multi-edition *A New School History* with *The South African Union Reader for Use in Schools* (Cape Town: J. C. Juta and Co. 1912).

<sup>22</sup> Whiteside, *The South African Union*, pp. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Foggin, *Stories*, pp. 147-8.

<sup>24</sup> Sidwell, *The Story*, p. 154.

<sup>25</sup> Bleby, *South Africa*, pp. 370-1.

<sup>26</sup> E. C. Godée-Molsbergen, *A History of South Africa; Compiled at the request of the Suid-Afrikaanse Onderwysers Uni, and the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouwen Vereeniging* (London: Longmans, 1910), p. vii.

<sup>27</sup> J. Edgar, 'Review of E. C. Godée-Molsbergen, *A History of South Africa*', *The State* 3: 6 (June 1910), pp. 1018-23 at pp. 1020-1.

<sup>28</sup> These figures have been assembled using Fransie Rossouw's *South African Printers and Publishers, 1795-1925* (Cape Town: South African Library, 1987) in conjunction with the revised edition of Sidney Mendelssohn's *A South African Bibliography to the Year 1925: being a revision and continuation of Sidney Mendelssohn's South African bibliography (1910)* (London: Mansell, 1979). Most of the 40 publications related to South African nationhood were political pamphlets, with many of them re-publications of articles that had first appeared in newspapers or magazines.

<sup>29</sup> *Union Statistics for Fifty Years: Jubilee issue 1910-1960* (Pretoria: Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1960), A-22.

<sup>30</sup> Les Switzer, 'Introduction. South Africa's alternative press in perspective', in Les Switzer (ed.), *South Africa's Alternative Press. Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880s-1960s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1-53 at pp. 1-2. For a further breakdown of circulation figures, see Tim Couzens, 'The black press and black literature in South Africa, 1900-1950', *English Studies in Africa*, 19: 2 (1976), pp. 93-9 at pp. 94-5.

<sup>31</sup> Karin Barber, 'Audiences and the book in Africa', *Current Writing*, 13: 2 (2001), pp. 9-19 at p. 12. One might extend this kind of public literacy to the ability to read performances like national parades or pageants. On the nation-building Union pageants, see Peter Merrington, 'Masques, monuments and masons: The 1910 pageant and the Union of South Africa', in Winnifred M. Bogaards (ed.), *Literature of Region and Nation* (Saint John: University of New Brunswick Press, 1998), pp. 278-99.

<sup>32</sup> Olive Schreiner, *Closer Union. A Letter on the South African Union and the Principles of Government* (Cape Town: Constitutional Reform Association, 1909), p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Godoza, 'Letter to the Editor', *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 19 February 1909.

<sup>34</sup> John Dube, 'Editorial' *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 9 April 1909.

<sup>35</sup> John Tengo Jabavu, 'Editorial', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 9 February 1909.

<sup>36</sup> A. K. Soga, 'Editorial', *Izwi Labantu*, 16 March 1909.

<sup>37</sup> On Thema, see Jane Starfield, "'Not quite history": The autobiographies of H. Selby Msimang and R. V. Selope Thema and the writing of South African history', *Social Dynamics*, 14: 2 (1988), pp. 16-35; Les Switzer, 'Bantu World and the origins of a captive African commercial press', in Les Switzer (ed.), *South Africa's Alternative Press. Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880s-1960s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 189-212 at pp. 189-96; Ntongela Masilela, 'African intellectual and literary responses to modernity in South Africa', in Peter Limb, Norman Etherington and Peter Midgley (eds.), *Grappling with the Beast: Indigenous Southern African responses to Colonialism, 1840-1930* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 245-76 at pp. 262-5. On black resistance to Union more generally, see André Odendaal, *The Founders. The Origins of the ANC and the Struggle for Democracy in South Africa* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2012), pp. 335-446.

<sup>38</sup> R. V. Selope Thema, 'Out of darkness: from cattle-herding to the editor's chair', File AD 1787, South African Institute of Race Relations Papers, University of Witwatersrand.

<sup>39</sup> In 1929, Du Bois engaged in a public debate with Stoddard. See *Shall the Negro be Encouraged to Seek Cultural Equality?: Report of the Debate Conducted by the Chicago Forum*, (Chicago: Chicago Forum, (1929)).

<sup>40</sup> Thema, 'Out of darkness'.

<sup>41</sup> Benedict Anderson's summary of Isabelo's argument in *Under Three Flags. Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 224. Isabelo's essay 'Organización del ejército Boer' [The organisation of the Boer army] is in *Filipinas ante Europa*, 10 Sept 1900.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Shula Marks, 'War and Union, 1899-1910', Robert Ross, Anne Mager and Bill Nasson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa Vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 157-210 at p. 194.