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Imported Black Books, Radical Undesirability, and Comparative Reading Under Apartheid

Overlooking District Six, on the City Bowl's gradual eastern slope toward Devil's Peak, sits the former Roeland Street Prison. The prison was erected in 1859 under the orders of Governor George Grey, the same year the infamous Breakwater Prison was built along Cape Town's Waterfront—both part of Britain's contribution to the carceral architecture of empire dotting the port city that includes the Castle of Good Hope, the Slave Lodge, and Robben Island. Once dubbed "Cape Town's own Black Hole," the Roeland Street Prison shares none of the physical battlements of the Breakwater, but with imposing, seemingly impenetrable walls designed to keep a portion of the population out and others in, it features all of the local penal structures' defensive embattlement—a monumental marker of Europe's simultaneous power and weakness in the colonies.¹

Today, after its 1970 closure and 1990 renovations to the cellblocks inside its fortress-like exterior walls, the Old Roeland Street Prison houses the Western Cape Archives and Records Service.² What the forbidding stone walls now contain are the papers of the old order. In addition to official records of the Western Cape province, the complex holds the majority of the archives of the apartheid era's censorship apparatus: the deliberations of censors who formed part of the

¹ <https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/looking-back-roeland-street-prison>; Mira Rai Waits, "Imperial Vision, Colonial Prisons: British Jails in Bengal, 1823-73," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 77.2 (2018): 146-67; Fran Buntman, "Prison and Law, Repression and Resistance: Colonialism and Beyond," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 47.2 (2019): 213-46.

² <https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/looking-back-roeland-street-prison>

Nationalist government's enterprise of massive social control. In a curious twist of chronology, the former colonial prison is now the repository for the ruminations of a repressive order ushered into being by the same political formation that erected the building. The documents of apartheid censorship, once strictly concealed from public view, are now open to the public, but awkwardly so: they remain inescapably bound to the authority of the prison-house architecture, and the past it continues to conjure.



Old Roeland Street Prison, Cape Town
(<https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/looking-back-roeland-street-prison>)

The Nationalist government ordered the systematic review of potentially damaging materials to defend—like the walls of the Old Roeland Street Prison—a way of life, an idealized minority population, and ultimately the state itself from forces, inside and outside, that it continually sought to keep in check. The apartheid-era censorship apparatus was positioned as a “bulwark” against those forces imagined to degrade the South African state and the white civil society it claimed to serve.³ For all the boastful proclamations of white supremacy, *herrenvolk* democracy on Africa’s southern tip was quite fragile, in constant need of shoring up and vigilant, violent protections. The paternalistic state and its apparatuses, as strong arms protecting a vulnerable culture, sought to impose impermeable partitions between good and bad cultural publications—or in the parlance of censors, between “undesirable” and “not undesirable” work, between contraband and legally permissible expression. The state of the mid- to late-twentieth century regulated these partitions by policing the movements across its national boundaries, to scrutinize what could pass into and out of Fortress South Africa.

³ J.M. Coetzee, *Taking Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6.

This policing notoriously involved the transnational traffic in books. To be sure, many of the works censored by the apartheid government were authored by South Africans and published within the country, but a considerable portion came from outside the country. For the large portion that came by sea from other countries of origin, the government turned to the hydrocolonial institutions of customs and excise that their nineteenth-century British predecessors deployed to maintain authority over southern African territory. Conscripting the Custom House into the moralistic enterprise of censorship and building off of extant colonial-era and Union-era censorship laws, the state saw to it that the vast majority of imported books censors processed were seized by customs, then rerouted for review.⁴ For books produced in-country, imported by land, mailed, or brought in undeclared, they could be submitted directly to censorship regime for review by anyone: a private citizen, publisher, librarian, bookshop owner, but more often than not, the security police. The latter and customs were responsible for submitting the vast majority of the cases. This review process generated a mass of bureaucratic paperwork: the vast accumulation of form-filled files for each case of a submitted or resubmitted book that documents the censors' deliberations.

Among the stacks of dossiers archived at the Western Cape Archives and Records Service are cases involving black-authored texts produced outside of South Africa that form the subject of this essay. These files—dating from the 1960s, ballooning across the 1970s and 80s, and ending in the early-1990s dawning of democratic rule⁵—evaluate texts by continental writers including Chinua

⁴ For a detailed discussion of hydrocolonialism, see Isabel Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022). For a discussion of the censorship laws that predated and paved the way for the apartheid regime's own regulations of publications, see Rachel Matteau Matsha, *Real and Imagined Readers: Censorship, Publishing and Reading under Apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg: U of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2018), 9-12.

⁵ In a clear response to a near-century of draconian policing of publications, the new democratic Constitution of South Africa, codified in 1996, enshrines the right of free expression (as Item 16) in its Bill of Rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes-

- a. freedom of the press and other media;
- b. freedom to receive or impart information or ideas;
- c. freedom of artistic creativity; and
- d. academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.” (10)

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/South_Africa_2012.pdf?lang=en

Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Amílcar Cabral, Buchi Emecheta, Cyprian Ekwensi, Dambudzo Marechera, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Kwame Nkrumah, Nkem Nwankwo, Yambo Ouologuem, Fernand Oyono, and Wole Soyinka; and texts by diasporic writers including James Baldwin, H. Rap Brown, Aimé Césaire, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, W.E.B. Du Bois, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, Frantz Fanon, Marcus Garvey, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Martin Luther King, Jr., Toni Morrison, Samuel Selvon, Alice Walker, Richard Wright, and Malcolm X. Not all the black-authored texts submitted for review were outlawed, but all were subject to the censors’ scrutiny, and—whether they led to an admission, a ban, or the lifting of a ban—these books’ state-sanctioned (re)interpretation and (re)evaluation merit their own scrutiny, and not only because, remarkably, they have remained largely unstudied. These files disclose the judgments, assumptions, preoccupations, and logics of the censors, the censorship apparatus, and the state itself as they interpreted the works and drew conclusions about their meaning and value. But taken as a corpus, the files documenting the adjudication of these books tell a tale of black transnationalism partially interrupted. “Partially interrupted” because these circulating black books were impounded (at least for the duration of their formal evaluation, after which they were cleared or banned), and those banned by the state faced severe impediments on the open market (even if they would be clandestinely channeled through informal circuits and distribution points frequently designated as the literary underground).

What I have been calling the apartheid-era censorship apparatus actually involves a sequence of slightly different of administrative dispensations, dictated by shifts in legislation and directors’ distinguishable reigns.⁶ While building off of previous administrative norms, each produced its own

⁶ Peter McDonald outlines different apartheid-era periods of censorship accordingly: the Dekker Years (1963-68) and Kruger Years (1968-1974) dictated by the 1963 Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963, followed by the Pretorius-Snyman Years (1974-1980, “most repressive era in the history of the system” [61]) and the Van Rooyen Years (1980-90, which included the putatively more reform-minded period of “repressive tolerance”). See Chapter 1, “Censors,” on Peter McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 21-82.

forms, practices, and general judgmental tendencies. But what unites them is the fact of a centralized bureaucracy, part of a single enterprise in the name of protecting the republic and its people. Individual titles could be presented for submission (the initial adjudication) or for review (new rulings subsequent to the initial submission) by numerous government agencies (principally, customs and security police), so that the vast majority of considered publications were processed by a single board or body of censors. Any books submitted to the censorship apparatus—the earlier Publications Control Board (PCB) and, later, the Directorate of Publications (DP) and Publications Appeal Board (PAB)⁷—would prompt reports by appointed censors, who deemed the texts before them “undesirable” or “not undesirable.” (Outside the official domain of censors, some agencies could independently impose bans in accordance with other legislation; e.g., security police had the discretion to ban individuals and any of their writings under the Suppression of Communism Act.⁸) Unlike in other national contexts in which the banning of publications were (and continue to be) the province of local officials (from individual librarians to city councils), apartheid-era censorship was fully integrated into the machinery of national governmentality.

White and black writers⁹ were equally subject to these prohibitions under the law, but some being more equal than others, black authors faced more scrutiny and their works were more frequently banned than those of their white counterparts, whose cases often garnered greater attention by virtue of being rarer and were more vigorously defended in public.¹⁰ Quite a number of

⁷ The Publications Control Board, established by the 1963 Publications Act, was structurally replaced (to more efficient and pernicious effect) eleven years later, in accordance with the 1974 Publications Act, with the coordinated Directorate of Publications, a secondary slate of censors, and a Publications Appeal Board. See Peter McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 21-82.

⁸ Under the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act (No. 44), its 1965 Amendment, and the General Law Amendment Act of 1962 (No. 76), the state extended from banning individuals to any of their publications. Matsha, *Real and Imagined Readers*, 30-32.

⁹ My reference to black authors in the South African context aligns with a definition of blackness after Black Consciousness, such that “black” not only encompasses Bantu-speaking populations but also segments of the population the government classified as coloured and Indian.

¹⁰ Matsha, *Real and Imagined Readers*, 27, 31. In addition to greater resources available to white writers to fight banning decisions by censors, there was also a greater tendency in their cases to allow for “literary value.”

black-authored books from abroad, including some clearly committed to racial equality, escaped the ultimate sentence by censors, even as their censorship reports tellingly registered concern and disagreement, given *prima facie* allowances for “literary value.”¹¹ When not always forbidden for explicitly political views that ran contrary to the South African status quo, some dissident literature was banned on the basis of obscene language and sexual content (especially when featuring outlawed interracial sexual relationships). But, in all cases, it was the representation of violent resistance to the state that drew the most vociferous objections and swiftest condemnation by censors.

My initial foray into this wider corpus of files,¹² this essay features two case studies of books that drew explicit attention to political violence: the first involving the English translation of Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* (published in 1963 as *The Wretched of the Earth*), the second focused on Alice Walker’s 1976 novel, *Meridian*. Although distinctive in ideology and genre, each probed the meaning of revolutionary struggle in their respective political contexts, a rapidly decolonizing Africa and the U.S. Civil Rights/Black Power Movement (and their aftermath).¹³ When both titles were initially submitted to censors (1965 and 1977, respectively), the appointed censorship committees banned them on the basis of their radical undesirability for what officials construed as their advocacy of violent political upheaval. When their cases were later reassessed in the 1980s and 1990s, the new reports and committees recalibrated the threat they posed and eventually lifted their bans. But, just as significantly, both early and later evaluations of the works bring the importance of other shores

¹¹ For an anti-scholastic take on the scholasticism embedded in the censorship’s conception of literature (as opposed to propaganda), read McDonald’s excellent introduction to *The Literature Police*, 1-18 (especially 14-15).

¹² A longer version of this essay will examine other case files, especially those by continental African authors, including Yambo Ouologuem and Dambuzo Marechera.

¹³ Genre was tied to matters of literariness *and* state security. It was also racialized. According to Ted Laros, in a case that resulted in the ban of Oswald Mtshali’s volume of poetry *Fireflames*, one censor argued that “it also had to be kept in mind that the black languages are particularly rich in imagery, that poetry as a consequence hereof has special resonance with the black man and that he will be incited more easily thereby than by prose”; Laros, *Literature and the Law in South Africa, 1910-2010: The Long Walk to Artistic Freedom* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 174.

into sharp relief. Indeed, perhaps nowhere were the extra-national¹⁴ dynamics of censorship more in evidence than in reports on imported black books that meditated upon political violence, for crucially, censors' objections to representations of political violence (unlike other objections to profanity, blasphemy, and depictions of sex) often involved a comparative casting out beyond the national boundaries as a means of assessing or imagining what could obtain if the objectionable material were allowed to flow into the country. In what follows, I examine the reports to read the censors' comparative readings—not of the two texts per se but of their (and their censors') geopolitical points of reference. Before this, however, I consider the implications of the censorship files on black-authored books from abroad, for the latter prompt scholars to rethink the most common feature of the narrative of South African censorship—its national frame—and the terms of black transnationalism.

I.

Censorship of materials from across national boundaries, continents, and oceans challenges scholars to reconsider how we typically think about the scope or magnitude of censorship. Whereas censorship is commonly approached as a local, state/provincial, or national phenomenon, the bureaucratic evaluation of black books from abroad casts it at a broader scale. Their archived records require that we broaden not only perspectives on the post-publication afterlives and circulation histories of individual books, but also on at least two literary histories: that of the books' origins and that of South Africa, their destination. Opening out to an extra-national scope disrupts

¹⁴ A note on terminology: in this essay, I employ “transnational” to designate phenomenon that either transgress or disregard national boundaries, while “international” signals an ideological allowance for or an investment in those same boundaries. “Extra-national” more inclusively and generically names phenomena that exceed the nation, be it transnational or international in nature.

the national boundedness the texts are traditionally made intelligible within. To reposition these texts in a transnational frame is thus to crack open hardened country-centric accounts of censorship, specifically, and book histories, more broadly. It prompts questions like: How might our understandings of a given writer's or book's significance change if we recalibrate to allow for (partially) interrupted histories of international reception? And how might the histories of African American, Martinican, or South African literature look if they accounted for the ways that texts did, didn't, and *couldn't* circulate transnationally?

For South African book history, the consequences of this recalibration are considerable. Southern African book history has long been transnational in scope—by necessity, given the colonial foundations of book culture across the region. Archie Dick reminds us, for example, that libraries in colonial South Africa were inevitably shaped by transnational sources from their inception in the 1600s. Early Dutch and British traffic to southern Africa meant that most collections (private and semi-public) were furnished by European suppliers, and even as presses began establishing themselves in the South African colonies, their funding and aesthetic influences were directly or indirectly tied to Europe.¹⁵ Isabel Hofmeyr places a British classic in the transformative orbit of sub-Saharan African publishers and readers and, in another study, examines a Durban-based press and experimental publication that wove local, national, and Indian diasporic politics while borrowing text from all parts of the globe.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Stefan Helgesson has succinctly framed transnationalism as “a condition, a predicament of literature in southern Africa, not a programme or an ideology. It is a predicament brought about by the cultural, economic, and political impact of late colonialism and by the migratory potential of the print medium.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Archie Dick, *The Hidden History of South Africa's Book and Reading Cultures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Stefan Helgesson, *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature: Modernists, Realists, and the Inequality of Print Culture* (New York: Routledge), 1.

Andrew van der Vlies, Meg Samuelson, John Gouws, Lucy Valerie Graham, and Rita Barnard have likewise importantly traced the transnational trajectories of publications or the roles of other places in South Africa's book history and book culture.¹⁸

But the same transnational dimension has not attended most narratives of South African censorship. Until recently, most studies of censorship in apartheid South Africa have revolved around the apparatus of control—the operation of “the literature police,” as Peter McDonald dubs it¹⁹—that suppressed (and produced, in a Foucauldian sense) South African literary culture. With occasional reference to cases involving often sexually-explicit imported western classics, primarily as defining legal battles in the country, most scholarship has effectively maintained a national focus: tracing the muzzling of South African writers at home or in exile, the pressures applied to local publishers, and an attenuated national literature. This, with good reason: the province of national governmentality, censorship applied to all (readers and writers) residing within South African territory. Banned South African authors were barred from their own national public, and those writers (especially emerging ones) caught in the censors' sights would have to struggle that much harder to appear on the international stage, which published along narrow, easily recognizable lines that required little to no translation to readers abroad. Writing in a state of terror meant that the act of creation was always subject to potential erasure and punishment; wary writers anticipating the state's heavy hand would also be more likely to self-censor and moderate their output. Moreover, the suppression of South African dissident writing led to the creation of what David Philip called “the unbridgeable gap,” which Rachel Matteau Matsha characterizes as “[t]he interrupted flow of

¹⁸ Andrew van der Vlies, *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). See also the many contributions in Andrew van der Vlies (ed.), *Print Text, and Book Cultures in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012) and Karin Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacies and Making the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Peter McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

literature by black writers, wiping out cultural and literary references for future generations.”²⁰ And from the reception end of the equation, bans denied South African readers the very voices who could speak with intimate familiarity about their own context. The centralized decisions of the censorship boards meant nationally applicable effects (even if, on occasion, these were informally mitigated at local levels), and so recovering and documenting this history of attempts at systematized erasure is inestimable work.

But for all the obvious value of attending to the national scale of South Africa’s censorship, there are also compelling reasons to consider its transnational dimensions. Scholarship on censorship is primarily based upon a model of national jurisdiction, the application of nationally empowered officials whose decisions cover a corresponding terrain. But interdiction and policing are themselves the insistence of sovereignty in the face of more flexible cultural and economic circuits, more fluid traffic of objects or goods; they are the very acts of staking of a national claim and performance of authority. Outside of studies of such nationalist claims or performances, then, there is little requiring scholarship to abide by the same categorical footprint.²¹ Indeed, if we reframe the focus from one based on jurisdiction to one based on the items themselves (here, print publications), their provenance, and their trajectory, key considerations come more clearly into view. For one thing, this approach sets the pathways, formal and informal, that the print publications journeyed into fuller relief. Rather than discrete domains of authority being or determining our primary objects of study, we may inquire into the ecosystem of routes, conjunctions, points of dissemination, tunnels, and desire lines carved across policed landscapes (and waterscapes). Furthermore, it allows us to consider how what we conceive of as national literary traditions are, in

²⁰ Matsha, *Real and Imagined Readers*, 31.

²¹ However helpful this category is for managing what are often unbounded scholarly inquiries, it need not dictate the limits of/on scholarship. The tendency to defer to this “easy” demarcation points to a need to investigate more discrete cultural and material flows.

fact, constituted by layers of sometimes layered, interwoven, or competing circulations that well exceed the edges of those boundaries—circulations which are most evident in contexts whose boundaries have been externally imposed and whose centuries of colonial relation tie colonized territory and subject peoples to an imperial metropole.

The contours of black transnationalism, as a condition and set of ideologies, also comes more clearly into view. As both products and vectors of social or intellectual movements, black books-in-motion help us trace significant histories of Pan-Africanism and black (trans)nationalism that shaped conceptions of identity and political community unshackled from the nation-state; their interception leads us importantly to chart potential impediments to developing epistemological or political formations. Indeed, with print matter being essential resources for black communities accessing knowledge about their own contexts, contexts abroad, and how to imagine the relationships between them—the stuff with which much of black transnationalism was fashioned—the terms of its transmission and circulation matters considerably. To be sure, internationally oriented publications within South Africa—including but not limited to *Indian Opinion* and *Drum* and *Zonke!* magazines—played key roles in this endeavor (when not banned), but the screening of black texts from abroad placed pressure on the means by which transnational consciousness could thrive, especially as it concerned black readership in the country. This aspect of literary history reminds us that the movement of black art, knowledge, and political expression have been neither free-flowing nor certain; black cross-cultural relation has been forged in the context and in spite of, not in the absence of, these pressures. Banned black books, like other publications, circulated clandestinely in spite of any imposed restrictions, but as a result, students of this literary history must rely upon confirmation (rather than assumption) of readers' access to these books from abroad.

As we will see in the sections that follow, the state's interception of imported black-authored books, in fact, highlights precisely some of those extra-national dimensions and the reasons for

studying them. Alongside the state's seizure of imported books, the censors' international-mindedness and their palpable fear of an evolving black transnational reading public, both of which I explore in this article, point to the need for a more unbounded narrative of censorship in South Africa.

II.

The first time Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* went before the censors was in October 1965, after a copy of the MacGibbon & Kee (British) edition was embargoed by the Department of Customs and Excise and forwarded to the Publications Control Board. Its censorship committee (constituted under the terms of the 1963 Publications and Entertainments Act)²² was comprised of the Board chairman Gerrit Dekker, A.H. Murray, T.M.H. Endemann, A.P. Grové, and H. van der Merwe Scholtz ruled against the book, their written reasons brief (compared to later, longer reports) but sharp: While the primary reader, Murray, observed that Fanon's anticolonial/decolonial treatise was "perceptive," "informative," and "precise[]," he identified its "wild extremism" and warned that the "propaganda in the book contains expressions that can lead to incitement."²³ Endemann curtly denounced it as "anti-white propaganda," and Grové concurred, calling the text both "anti-colonial" and "anti-white." It was Dekker, the Board's chair, who aired reservations signaled by marking the "Approved" box accompanied by a question mark. His written comments noted explicitly that "I have serious doubts. [. . .] To my mind, the book does not disturb our cause," but he acceded to the

²² Typically, original reviews (and any subsequent resubmission) of a publication were based on an initial report written by a primary reader or expert that included a summary/analysis of the text, a specified accounting of possible Publications Act violations within the publication, and finally, a preliminary recommendation of whether or not that was "undesirable." That initial report would be considered, commented upon, and voted on, by a committee of censors and followed by a final brief report (often based on the primary reader's language) and a final ruling by the committee's chairman.

²³ 1460/65.

Republic, (d) harmful to relations between South Africans, or (e) jeopardizing the state or “peace and good order.”²⁶ A Penguin (UK) edition of *Wretched* was submitted by Colonel C.J.W. du Plooy of the South African Police in Pretoria, and this more extensive review resulted in a decision not only to maintain its ban for category “e” (being deemed “prejudicial to the safety of the State, the general welfare, or the peace and good order”), but also to outlaw the very possession of the book (over and above prohibiting its distribution), placing it in a rarer class of banned writing.²⁷ The view that Fanon’s work embraced political violence in such a way that it proved threatening to the South African state and the decision to outlaw it would be reaffirmed across successive resubmissions. Despite being reevaluated under the 1980s climate of “repressive tolerance”—a period of putatively greater lenience towards dissent in literature as a political safety valve²⁸—both the 1981 and 1985 decisions fervently cosigned on the standing order to suppress *Wretched*’s distribution and possession. Even the 1990 resubmission yielded a rather qualified lifting of the ban: in the aftermath of Mandela’s release signaling the advent of democratic rule, at a time when most book bans were being swiftly reversed, *Wretched* was found to be formally “not undesirable,” but its distribution was nevertheless restricted to university and duty delivery libraries.²⁹ It was only in its final resubmission two years later that Fanon’s classic would be subject to an unqualified unbanning—and could circulate unimpeded for the first time in almost thirty years.³⁰

Besides the consistent anxiety around Fanon’s analysis of violence, often mistaken for a wholesale embrace, nearly all of the censors’ reports were routed through the invocation of

²⁶ McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 34.

²⁷ P77/2/16; McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 34.

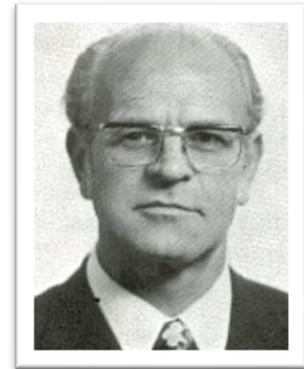
²⁸ The term is Jaki Seroke’s; see Matsha, *Real and Imagined Readers*, 41. As Rachel Mattheau Matsha notes, “[a] space for moderate political discourses was created in the public sphere[,] and protest was differentiated from sedition, although still under the paternalistic and ever-watchful eye of the censors. However, as McDonald points out, these seemingly progressive reforms of the publications control apparatus were paralleled by a series of repressive laws that acted as direct forms of censorship” (43).

²⁹ P90/04/12.

³⁰ Peter McDonald notes that, between 1991 and 1992, the Directorate conducted over 4,000 resubmissions for previously banned titles, “almost all of which were passed”; McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 82.

international contexts. Most immediately, reports invoked North Africa to contextualize *Wretched*: references to Algerians' violent upheaval against French occupiers and to Tunis, where Fanon relocated after Algeria. This is as we would expect, given that the study itself was grounded in the mid-twentieth century Maghrebi geopolitical order and that bloody liberation struggles defined Algeria and South Africa at the time. But, curiously, references to North Africa remained limited to quick context. Across the original review and multiple resubmissions, *Wretched*'s censors dwelled more on other horizons to establish their most detailed assessments of the text's claims and positions that lead to their outlawing the book's distribution and possession.

In the case of the book's 1977 resubmission to the censorship apparatus, the other horizons were largely American. J.P. Jansen, the author of the primary reader's report, outlined in studied detail assessments of Fanon's text and the central role it played in the U.S. revolutionary politics of 1960s and 70s. A cursory translation I've conducted from the original Afrikaans (the period's default language of state censorship) bears quoting at length:



J.P. Jansen
(<http://www.stellenboschwriters.com/jansenj.html>)

- (2) In the U.S.A., well-known academics acknowledge that the works of Frantz Fanon played a significant role in the black uprisings.
- (a) Robert Zangrando (of Yale University) says in an article "Black Protest: From the politics of Entree to the politics of Liberation" (*Afro-American Studies*, 1970, Vol. I. pp.29-40). "The Period of Liberation (in the USA from 1965 to 1971) finds its strength especially in two concepts, namely the Negritude (which was popularized in the USA by the 'American Society of African Culture') and the political-activist theories of Frantz Fanon"³¹
- (b) Prof. Robert Brisbane says in his book "Black Activism," the following: The two books used in the US during the Black Uprising were: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon.

³¹ The attributed quote is inexact and more of a tight paraphrase. Another closely related but jointly-authored article similarly credits Négritude and Fanon. See Joanna Schneider Zangrando and Robert L. Zangrando, "Black Protest: A Rejection of the American Dream," *Journal of Black Studies* 1.2 (December 1970): 141-159. The Zangrandos' reference to Négritude and Fanon can be found on page 148

- (3) The main objection to the book is that it openly preaches similar violence. In this regard, *Time Magazine* of April 2, 1973, p. 64, the following: "---- his later preaching that the oppressed can heal their souls through the cathartic effect of revolutionary violence, posthumously turned Fanon into a hero for some white radical theorists and some American blacks.³²

Jansen's own reading and citational practice merits some discussion, for he proffered evaluations of *Wretched* found in American publications: the mainstream *Time Magazine*³³ as well as academic sources attesting to Fanon's primacy in the legacy of social upheaval. Jansen drew some insights from organs of Black Studies—the journal *Afro-American Studies* and the monograph *Black Activism: Racial*

Revolution in the United States, 1954-1970—

and respected intellectual historians—

Robert Zangrando of Yale University (the upper echelon of U.S. higher education), and Robert Brisbane of Morehouse College

(a hub of black knowledge production),

respectively. Jansen's scholarly approach

establishes that Fanon's writing is

(alongside Négritude and Malcolm X's

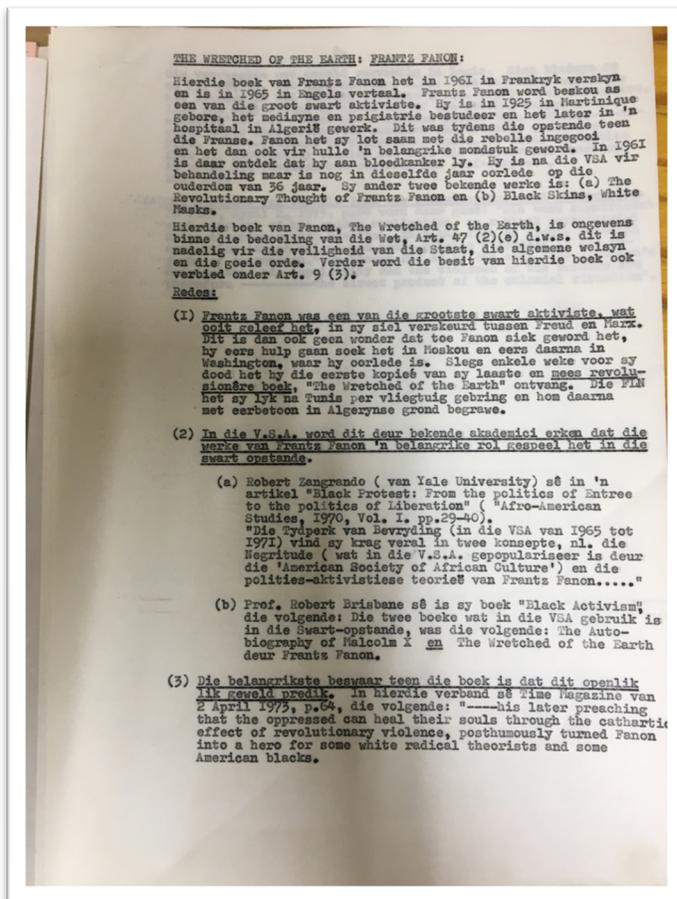
autobiography) a keystone of the U.S.

struggle for racial justice and the heroic

advocate of violence espoused by black and

white American radicals. Voicing a now-

commonly embraced view of Fanon, this



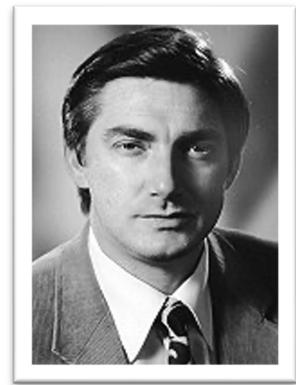
Reader's report from the 1977 resubmission file for Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. (P77/2/16)

³² P77/2/16.

³³ The article cited is Horace Judson's book review of Irene L. Gendzier's study *Frantz Fanon*. See Horace Judson, "Master and Slave," *Time Magazine*, April 2, 1973.

presentation marshaled Jansen’s authority by routing it through American sources: not only citing seemingly unmitigated assessments “straight from the source” (as opposed to South African assessments), but also resting upon the hegemonic heft of U.S. publications and institutions. He fashioned a façade of objectivity by displacing the foundational judgment onto credible American conclusions. Fending against any sense that South African authorities might have a skewed, interested view on Fanon, the report ended in the happy reassurance of South African impartiality and the unavoidable conclusion that *Wretched’s* ban be reaffirmed.

The 1981 resubmission file for Fanon’s text similarly drew on international political scenes to ground its reevaluation and endorse continuing the ban. In this file, a letter from the Director of Publications, Abraham Coetzee, informed the author of the primary report, Professor D.J. van Zyl, of the censorship committee’s final determination as well as the “committee’s motivation for its decision,” which he explained was based on Van Zyl’s following observation in his report:



D.J. van Zyl
(<http://www.stellenboschwriters.com/vanzyl dj.html>)

It is a well-known fact that the publication is being extensively used and consulted by the *IRA, Black activists in the USA and other revolutionary movements*. (See last sentence on back page). Recently it was announced that a book will be published shortly dealing with Fanon’s influence on the Soweto riots. It is therefore clear that Fanon is the mentor of revolutionaries *not only in Africa but elsewhere in the world*.

The above factors make it clear that the original decision to ban the publication in accordance with 47 (2) (e) and 9 (3) remains valid.³⁴

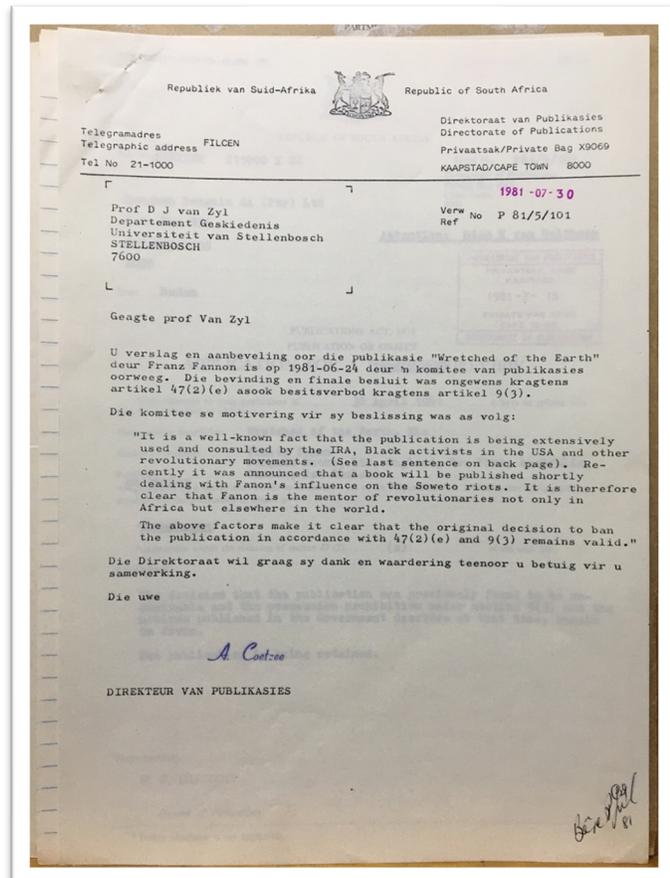
The proverbial nail in the coffin in the committee’s decision to maintain the book’s ban was Fanon’s ability to suture together the revolutionary agents in the U.S., Northern Ireland, South Africa, the rest of Africa, and more vaguely, “elsewhere in the world.” Fanon, then, became a threat to South Africa not by his purported connection to the 1976 Soweto Uprising alone, but also by virtue of his

³⁴ P81/5/101; emphasis mine.

inspiration in other global sites of struggle. In this case, as elsewhere, a text's (in)admissibility depended not merely on its literary value or even its direct relationship to the criteria, but also on its (presumed) effects elsewhere: an assessment by geopolitical proxy.

It is worth making two observations about the striking current of international awareness running through these and other reports. The first is the deliberate, often scholarly practice at the heart of this enterprise: the evidence of censors' extensive, informed international reading that pervaded the bureaucratic discourse. Such evidence complicates the hackneyed image of apartheid censors as state stooges, unworldly bureaucrats, or in the words of Isabel Hofmeyr, "ham-handed buffoons"—a long-held stereotype that scholarship has been correcting to

account for censors' relatively greater sophistication, however deleterious their effects or nefarious their politics.³⁵ Indeed, many censors were traditional academics with their own research agendas affiliated with prominent universities, reputable bastions of twentieth-century Afrikaner nationalism: Jansen (professor of African Studies at the Stellenbosch University), Van Zyl (professor of history at the same institution), and C.W.H. Boshoff (professor of theology at the University of Pretoria), who we encounter below. Not all censors were professors of literature, but the most literary among



Letter of thanks to official reader from the 1981 resubmission file for Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. (P81/5/101)

³⁵ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 65. See also Peter McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 1-82.

them would deploy formalists interpretive skills central to the practices of American New Criticism.³⁶ As educators steeped in Afrikanerdom, their participation in the state's machinations lent apartheid legitimacy among certain segments of the white population inside and outside the country.

Part of their scholastic approach, I am arguing, includes an attunement to international dimensions, past and present. The arbiters of acceptability may have been staunch nationalists and political ostriches, but contrary to popular conception, they did not bury their heads in the sands about the world beyond South Africa. That international knowledge may well have been, at least in part, learned on the job: born of (or at least extended by) the very books they screened and the supplemental secondary sources they used to arrive at their rulings. If they aggressively privileged and defended the exceptional "white" nation-state on the southern tip of Africa, their postures nevertheless rested on a foundation of international knowledge and systems of support, well-developed circuits of racist political ideology, governance, and capital between southern Africa and the west constituting what Gerald Horne has dubbed "the White Atlantic."³⁷ Another way of saying this is that apartheid's adjudicators paradoxically leveraged international expertise in order to impose a blindered unworldliness upon the majority of its citizens so as to render them locked into and dependent upon the institutions of the white minority state.

The second observation worth making is the constancy of the U.S. as a point of reference in the censorship reports, regardless of the author's origins or the book's content. Although South Africa and Algeria had much more in common geopolitically as settler colonies in the throes of protracted armed liberation struggles on either end of the same continent, censors paid only perfunctory attention to Algeria while privileging American professional assessment and U.S.

³⁶ McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 27.

³⁷ See Chapter Two in Gerald Horne, *From the Barrel of a Gun: The United States and the War Against Zimbabwe, 1965-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 51-92.

political developments. Whether censors were blind to anticolonialism in francophone Africa; whether their racist logic overrode their geopolitical analysis (by presuming greater kinship between black freedom fighters than between Africa-based struggles); whether they were caught within the gravitational pull of the American culture industry, politics, and the mass-mediatised black American protests; or whether they recognized the force of emerging black transnational solidarities, they regarded developments in the U.S. with particular caution. Concern over ideological and political contagion appear just below the surface of all censors' deliberations. As Hofmeyr observes, the "epidemiological hermeneutic" of the colonial custom house saturated the operations of the censors, so that "seditious or obscene goods exuded microbial menace" and the "logic of contamination and infection prevailed."³⁸ Such logic was applied to all things "foreign," especially those related to political violence (including Algeria, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere). Even so, preventing contagion seemed particularly salient when approaching things American—politics, publications, analysis—again, even when the books themselves were not primarily concerned with the U.S. In the case of Fanon's *Wretched*, American effects sufficed to warrant its banning.

III.

Evidence of the censors' international consciousness was not limited to judgments about political tracts that fell under their scrutiny. It manifested in their evaluations of creative writing, including the fiction of Alice Walker. Walker is certainly no stranger to censorship. Her work—from her short stories "Roselily" and "Am I Blue?" to her classic 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*—has long been subject to banning campaigns in parts of the U.S. for its depictions of sexuality,

³⁸ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 72.

vegetarianism, marriage, religion, alongside use of profanity and supposed bias against black men.³⁹ Far less known is the history of her writing's suppression in South Africa.

While Walker's 1981 short story collection, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, and her novel *The Color Purple* were admitted by censors shortly after their reviews in the early 1980s, it was *Meridian* that would be formally banned a few years earlier.⁴⁰ Published in 1976, Walker's second novel offers a somber but searching *postmortem* of the 1960s and 70s Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Set in the American South and New York after the surge of political activism, it assesses "the Movement" and its aftermath as experienced by African American protagonist Meridian Hill, her lover Truman, and his white ex-wife Lynne, all of whom meet during the height of the 1960s protests and voter registration drives across the American South.⁴¹ As each emerges (or doesn't) from the emotional rubble resulting from a mixture of political and personal violence, we glimpse flashbacks into Meridian's past that frame her as the wounded but healing hero of the story. Walking to the beat of her own drum, Meridian cuts against the trends that predominated during the headiest days of struggle, and well after most protesters drift away, she persists—at great physical costs—in confronting injustice and in continuing the work of liberation.

On April 4, 1977, a copy of the UK edition by publisher Andre Deutsch was impounded by the Department of Customs and Excise and directly submitted to the Publications Board for adjudication. Six weeks later, the novel was declared "undesirable" under what McDonald calls "the most repressive era in the history of the [censorship] system."⁴² Of the five established categories

³⁹ Alice Walker, *Banned*, Introduction by Patricia Holt (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1996).

⁴⁰ For the 1982 review of *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, see P82/11/52; for the 1983 review of Walker's *The Color Purple*, see P83/11/3.

⁴¹ There is one passing reference to South Africa in *Meridian*, a reference noted in Ramsay's report: the appearance of a white South African divinity student that Meridian briefly speaks with, in part, to test his reaction to her; Walker, *Meridian*, 115.

⁴² McDonald marks the most repressive period between 1975 and 1980, during which the suppression rate of submitted materials—the vast majority presented by the state itself—was 60 percent. "The most notable trend," he explains, "was the steady increase in politically motivated bannings," rising from 25 to 44 percent. See McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 61.

for censorship laid out in the 1974 Publications Act, *Meridian* was banned for violating three: standards of morality (category “a”), interracial harmony (category “d” mandating “inter-section” peace), and the safety of the state (category “e”). The ban would be reversed eight years later by reinterpreting the novel in light of the categories it had been charged with violating.

The two censorship dossiers weighing *Meridian*’s merits and demerits and give us access to the rationales behind its 1977 banning and 1985 reversal, and however different their verdicts on *Meridian* may be, the competing reports overlap along interesting lines. One critical point of convergence is the fact that both toggle between American and South Africa political contexts, each report maintaining one eye on the Civil Rights context the novel figures and (more implicitly) another on an instable, late-apartheid South Africa. As with Fanon’s *Wretched*, we find in both files that censors interpret the novel by comparing U.S. and South Africa black liberation struggles and, in the process, reveal key anxieties about black readership.

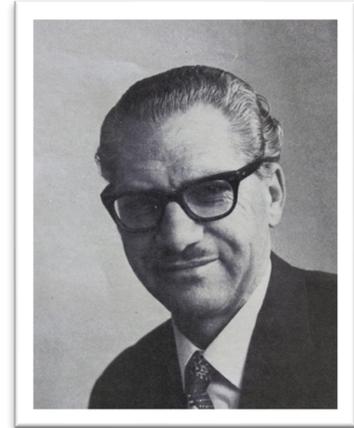
In *Meridian*’s initial review, C.W.H. Boshoff produced a terse primary reader report across two pages of the standard form, so as to signal that this was an open-and-shut case, in keeping with the Directorate of Publications’ adoption of more heavy-handed “political, moral and religious approach.”⁴³ Boshoff’s report isolates *Meridian*’s most sensational elements via decontextualized quotes to denounce its depictions of graphic sex and vulgar language; advancing anti-white sentiments; and potential incitement of political violence detrimental to the “security of the State, general welfare, and good order.” In the process, Boshoff was as content to conflate interracial sex with rape—each, in his words, “sexually repulsive”—as he was to confuse dissent with communism

⁴³ As Matsha notes, “With this new approach in mind, the likely reader no longer featured in the censors’ discourse. The notions of ‘average man’ or ‘man of balance’ with a ‘Christian view of life’ took precedence over literary implications”; Matsha, *Real and Imagined Readers*, 161.

(a staple of apartheid apologists), charging that “Marxism is seen as the only solution, while the people involved in the struggle must be willing to commit murder.”⁴⁴

This was the least sophisticated interpretation in the files, but to say that Boshoff’s brusque report advances a vulgar or bad reading of *Meridian* would be to miss the point. His report was the work of no mindless bureaucrat, but rather the result of conveying creative expression through a

white nationalist interpretative grid. The report didn’t come close to the subtleties of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that yield “paranoid reading,” as Eve Sedgwick has named it,⁴⁵ although suspicion and paranoia were defining ingredients of Boshoff’s interpretation. His reading represented a blunt, defensive block in the service of a state by one of its hardline ideologues; a superficial pass at the novel sufficed. Professor of theology at the University of Pretoria, he was also the son-in-law of apartheid architect and



C.W.H. Boshoff
(<https://www.gemeentegeskieidenis.co.za/boshoffcarel-willem-hendrik/>)

prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd. His commitment to Afrikaner nationalism survived long past apartheid’s formal fall: after being barred from the Afrikaner Broederbond for being too conservative, he went on to found Orania, the semi-autonomous Northern Cape Karoo municipality and white ethnonationalist preserve. At no point during or “after” apartheid was subtlety his aim.

⁴⁴ P77/4/5; author’s emphasis.

⁴⁵ Sedgwick attributes the “hermeneutics of suspicion” to Paul Ricoeur. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You,” *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1-37.

Meridian's fate was unsealed in the mid-1980s,⁴⁹ when the Directorate of Publications (and its corollary, the Publications Appeal Board) began adopting a relatively more liberal posture. A modified dispensation of “repressive tolerance” allowed for greater consideration of a text’s literary merit and of the “likely” reader (as distinguished from the “ideal” or “average” one) in deliberations, which ushered in a period of gradual unbanning.⁵⁰ Besides the ideological differences between the two evaluations, context helps explain the gap between the censors’ divergent reactions to Walker’s novel. The interpretation prevailing in the first report took place in the acrid aftermath of the 1976 Soweto Uprising, while the reevaluation emerged during the moderating moment of the 1980s when the white state attempted strategies of political cooptation and neutralization (even as the increasingly defensive government declared two states of emergency and a coordinated plan of Total Strategy to violently suppress rising popular resistance).

The 1985 resubmission, or re-adjudication, leading to *Meridian's* unbanning was based on the primary reader’s report by Mrs. U.L. Ramsay, who offered a much more involved reading of the novel and praised the novel’s literary value. Ramsay’s report, composed in English, was structured to refute point-by-point the judgements of her predecessors; as a longer document with two additional single-spaced typed pages to extend and defend its findings, it diligently assessed the “conflicts and contradictions” of the Civil Rights era.⁵¹ Openly admiring the novel for its advocacy of racial equality and feminism, Ramsay interpreted the most graphic sexual depictions as powerful moments critiquing women’s sexual exploitation. (Ramsay’s own positionality in a male-dominated bureaucracy may well have led her to prize the novel’s feminist overtones.) And regarding interracial

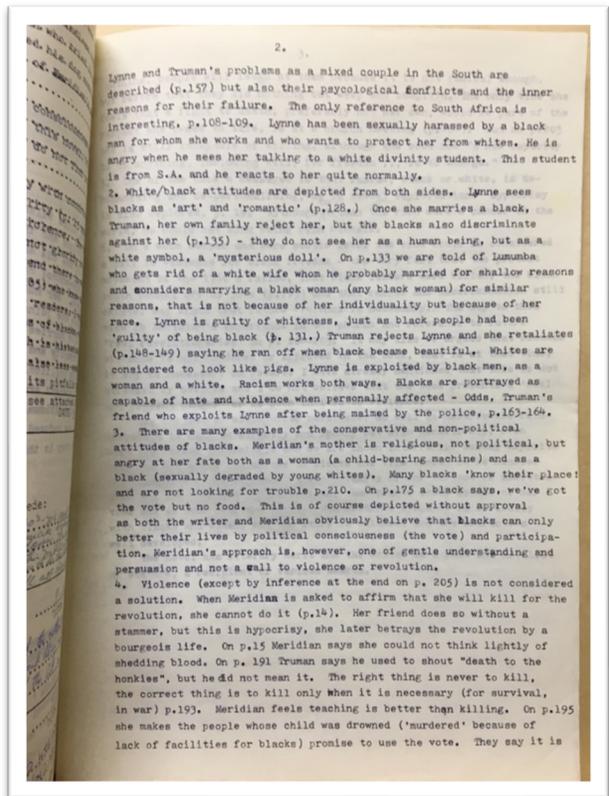
⁴⁹ It was re-submitted for review by Lesley Miles, a poet at the University of Cape Town who had previously communicated with the Director of Publications in Cape Town, S.F. du Toit (P85/11/46).

⁵⁰ While this slightly more permissive dispensation gave the (less-than-persuasive) appearance of a moderating, more humane apartheid regime, it also doubled as self-justifying rationale for the bureaucratic state’s reasonability and, thus, *raison d’être*. In this way, screening of literature essentially constituted the regime’s own perverse moral authority.

⁵¹ P85/11/46.

sex, she noted that it was a “less sensitive” matter than it had once been but that “this book certainly stresses its pitfalls and difficulties.”⁵² She also directly contradicted the previous censors on the question of violence: “When Meridian is asked to affirm that she will kill for the revolution, she cannot do it . . . Meridian feels teaching is better than killing.”⁵³

Ramsay’s reevaluation stressed the ambiguities, sensitivity, and “sadness” that drive the novel. Her correction of the previous interpretations hinged on muddying the waters of Boshoff’s and Jansen’s Manichean readings. For instance, Ramsay noted the white female character Lynne romanticizes black people, who in turn both appreciate and reject her, just as her white racist family rejects her. “Racism works both ways,” she declares, while observing that “Lynne is exploited by black men” and underscoring some black characters’ “conservative and non-political attitudes.”⁵⁴ Above all, she stressed that “violence is not considered a solution,” nor does the novel “glorify violence.” Ramsay emphasized, instead, that *Meridian* powerfully illustrates how the Civil Rights Movement “petered out and was betrayed.”⁵⁵



Report excerpt from the 1985 resubmission file of Walker’s *Meridian*. (P85/11/46)

⁵² P85/11/46.

⁵³ P85/11/46.

⁵⁴ P85/11/46.

⁵⁵ P85/11/46.

The variance in how the 1977 and 1985 files imagine the U.S. and South Africa (and their relation to each other) is instructive. Boshoff's and Jansen's 1977 reports emphasized their similarity, assuming a deep correspondence between the two national contexts. On that basis, there was a high risk of revolutionary choices, actions, and ideas in *Meridian* naturally taking root in South Africa, so for them, the experiential proximity of the contexts signals the novel's relative danger. The comparison in Ramsay's later, more liberal reading is present but more muted. By underscoring a historical and experiential distance between the two contexts, Ramsay bolstered the novel's relative safety: With the choices, actions, and ideas in *Meridian* as matters of an inert past, it could pose little danger in the South African present.

But Ramsay's approach warrants some scrutiny, as it shared some ground with that of her predecessors. Ramsay's report exhibited a stronger, more nuanced grasp of the novel than Boshoff did, but her interpretation engaged in its share of distortion. In her attempt to temper the hysteria and anxieties that drove the initial evaluations, she ended up bending the character of *Meridian*, figured as a valiant unconventional radical in the novel, into a passionate but dulcet moderate. Even more jarring are Ramsay's claims about the novel's ultimate conclusions: Walker undoubtedly highlights the unfinished work of the Civil Rights Movement, but was this fact framed approvingly by Ramsay as failure and betrayal? Did the report invite the committee to find comfort in the novel's depiction of social justice activism's demise? Was this why the committee should unban the benign novel? And was highlighting the equivalence of racisms among all characters, or the black men's exploitation of the prominent white character, meant to entice the censors into accepting the novel? The committee chairwoman, E.H. (Rita) Scholtz, amplified precisely the more conservative notes in Ramsay's interpretation in her summary report to justify lifting the ban: "The Civil Rights movement is a historical fact, this book does not glorify it and shows how it petered out and was

betrayed. [. . . A]nd we are shown interracial sexual exploitation and brutality (by blacks to blacks & vice versa) [. . .]”⁵⁶

In contesting *Meridian*’s original reports by underwriting the novel’s relative tameness, Ramsay paradoxically affirmed some of apartheid’s classic arguments: that interracial relations were inherently exploitative and eventually fail, to devastating effect; that revolutionary force was similarly destined for failure. Even as she praised the novel’s approaches to racial justice and gender, Ramsay parroted, wittingly or not, some shibboleths of Afrikaner nationalism. It remains unclear whether Ramsay’s interpretation was a discursive strategy of mirroring back to the censorship committee some apartheid logic in order to achieve the unbanning or whether Ramsay’s own ideological commitments, and experience as censor, colored her earnest reinterpretation. Deliberately ambiguous or not, this shared ground of apartheid logic in Ramsay’s report recalls the inescapability of the prison-house architecture of the Western Cape Archives and Records Service: however much Ramsay might have wanted to moderate the structure of apartheid, that structure ineluctably conditioned (feeble or fervent) attempts to resist it.

IV.

In *Africa in Stereo*, Tsitsi Jaji conceptualizes the stereophonic sound system as metaphor and medium of black transnational relation. In framing her sonic-based inquiry, she pauses to define the *stereoscope* as “an optical device that reproduces the phenomenon of seeing a three-dimensional object by juxtaposing two slightly different images which the eye and mind interpret as detailing the relief of the extrapolated third ‘true’ image.”⁵⁷ But, Jaji stresses, the nature of “stereo” in the stereoscope

⁵⁶ P85/11/46.

⁵⁷ Tsitsi Ella Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.

is illusory: “depth is not actual so much as a produced effect of solidity.”⁵⁸ To be sure, because stereoscopes crucially depend upon some minimal variance between two near-identical images, the figure of the stereoscope can only serve, here, as a partial, inexact metaphor for the censor’s comparative readings of black-authored texts from abroad. But its explanatory value helps highlight the censors’ insistence on keeping South Africa and another international setting within the same frame of interpretation to produce an “effect of solidity” in their evaluation, whatever conclusions they drew. In other words, the effect of solidity in their readings derived not necessarily from the tight similitude of international contexts (though some readings relied on this idea) but, rather, from the comparative enterprise itself; the censors’ approach was marked by a fundamental faith that comparison held accurate predictive power. The latent “if-then” assumption inherent in this practice paradoxically contradicted the spirit to South African exceptionalism that apartheid supporters often vaunted.

Reading the reports on *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Meridian* allows us to get beneath the effect of seeming solidity to register a set of subtle but fundamental assessments that lie embedded in the censors’ comparative readings, regardless of their varying judgements. The first of these, noted just above, is an implied theory of the relationship between the two political contexts. The censor explicitly posited how one should understand the connections or disconnections, historical and current, between two contexts. The second assessment is a forecast of what would happen if the literary content from abroad were carried over from its original context to the target context of South Africa. How would the texts’ contents resonate and be received if they circulated locally? Finally, lurking behind these questions and so much of the censors’ evaluations of literature of dissent is an implied fear of an imagined dangerous South Africa reader. What would happen if the works reach the awaiting hands of impressionable, undisciplined, or anti-establishment readers?

⁵⁸ Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 12.

Censors, then, gamed out the imaginative projection of a non-South African text in a South African context, but this process relies on a sequence of linked interpretive moves: (1) interpreting the book, (2) interpreting anticipated readers of the book, and (3) interpreting anticipated readers' anticipated interpretation of the book—almost necessarily in strikingly reductive terms. More precisely, they anticipated the anticipated readers' comparative reading of black books from abroad. Absurdly, the state's and censors' language around anticipated readership was frequently cast in racially unmarked terms, but race was very much at work in their logic. The standard for the imagined reader shifted over the era of apartheid censorship—moving from conceptions of the “ideal” to “average” to “likely” reader—but for the majority of its operation, the ideal reader—the upstanding subject position in whose stead the censors read—was, as Matsha reminds us, a white, Christian, law-abiding citizen supportive of the segregated status quo.⁵⁹ This may be who they read *for*, but just below the surface was a defensive reading *against*, undergirded by the fear of an imagined dangerous reader who, like Meridian Hill, was willing to sacrifice personal relationships, risk her own health, and grapple mightily with the question of whether or not kill for the revolution. If some of the dangerous readers were imagined to be white,⁶⁰ authorities were surely more anxious about black readers who had the most to gain from overthrowing the apartheid state. In this regard, the censorship regime operated in part on an institutionalized white imaginary *about* a black imaginary, and the interception of potentially objectionable black books coming into South Africa aimed to straightjacket that perceived black imaginary. Indeed, following Hofmeyr's claim that “questions of

⁵⁹ Matsha, *Real and Imagined Readers*, 161. See Matsha's full study for superbly observed shifts in how censor's conceived of “the reader.”

⁶⁰ Some white readers might be considered dangerous as individuals who might be moved to take up arms against the state or who might battle the state within the realm of politics and further whittle down white support for apartheid. Black readers might be dangerous insofar as they were imagined to be an inciting leader or part of a nebulous, ever-threatening black collective—Nationalists' *bête noire*, the *swart gevaar* (black danger).

circulation, both real and imagined, lie at the heart of how publics come into being,”⁶¹ we see, here, how apartheid’s censorship apparatus sought to surveille the transnational flow of knowledge and arrest the development of black transnational reading publics that could come to conceive of themselves as such and, further, develop into possible political communities. In short, *Meridian*’s censors read comparatively to preempt black transnational imaginaries that could bring the white minority state to ruin.

* * *

However well or poorly they facilitated apartheid censors’ understandings of imported black-authored texts, their comparative readings afford us a reading of our own: a reading of extra-national dynamics fundamentally at play. Alongside the *ways* that censors read, the attempted interdiction of incendiary black books from abroad invites us to revisit and open out conventional literary historical accounts of South African censorship. Too rigid a national boundedness in this narrative, not unlike the formidable structure on Cape Town’s Roeland Street, risks not admitting adequate movement between inside and out. Like the former prison, modification of these walls (and their policing) is clearly possible. But a greater allowance of fluidity between the national inside and the extra-national outside, I’ve been suggesting, will make this history all the worthier of future study.

⁶¹ Isabel Hofmeyr, “‘Spread Far and Wide over the Surface of the Earth’: Evangelical Reading Formations and the Rise of a Transnational Public Sphere: The Case of the Cape Town Ladies’ Bible Association,” *Print, Text and Book Culture in South Africa*, ed. Andrew van der Vlies (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012), 83.