

# Reading in Practice: Citation as a Route to Black Reading Cultures in Early Twentieth Century South Africa

Corinne Sandwith

University of Pretoria, South Africa

<https://doi.org/10.17234/9789533792910.03>

**Abstract:** This paper centres the history of colonial reading and the figure of the colonial reader. It explores the history of reading and reading practice in segregationist South Africa in the inter-war years, arguing for the importance of citational practices in colonial periodicals as a route to difficult-to-access reading cultures, treasured books, intellectual lineages and reading dispositions. The study takes its starting point from the history of performative citation in several popular Black publications of the period – *Umteteli wa Bantu* (1920-1956), *The Workers' Herald* (1923-1929), *Bantu World* (1932-1955) and *Ilanga lase Natal* (1903-1965). Focusing on the citation practices of prominent activist-intellectuals as well as ordinary readers, it demonstrates how readers used the periodical press to tell the story of their reading lives and habits, thus providing unique insight into readers' intimate encounters with, and investments in, literary texts. It argues that colonial readers used books for a wide range of purposes: emotional solace, inspiration, political critique, scholarly argument and creative rewriting, showing how both politically moderate and more radical writers/readers – and men and women – drew from a similar stock of shared books and ideas. It ends with a discussion of how citational form presents itself as a key site of colonial transaction, anti-colonial resistance and Black agency; of

citation as a verbal artefact which encodes a moment of interaction, negotiation and reinterpretation in the colonial contact zone.

**Keywords:** periodical press, H.I.E Dhlomo, R.V. Selope Thema, Clements Kadalie, women readers, anti-colonialism, Black reading cultures

## 1. Introduction

This paper makes the case for the reconstruction of everyday reading via the practice of citation. Described by Ruth Finnegan as ‘this strange human propensity to repeat chunks of text from elsewhere and to echo others’ voices’ (2011, xii), citation has yet to find a place alongside more conventional forms of reading evidence used by scholars to reconstruct reading lives in history. As the vast scholarship on the subject bears testimony, it is to memoirs, library archives, marginalia, private collections, oral interviews, book clubs and literary and debating societies that historians of reading have tended to turn. In contexts in which archives are absent or incomplete, citational form provides an important source for the recovery of hidden reading histories, treasured books, intellectual lineages and reading dispositions. Echoing the focus of studies by Priya Joshi (2002), Stephanie Newell (2002) and Priyasha Mukhopadhyay (2024), this paper turns the spotlight on the history of colonial reading and the figure of the colonial reader. In particular, it draws out the history of reading in South Africa in the inter-war years, a period characterised by increasing capitalist industrialisation and urbanisation, the entrenchment of the racially segregationist state and on-going Black resistance. Focusing on several popular publications of the period – *Umteteli wa Bantu* (1920-1956), *The Workers’ Herald* (1923-1929), *Bantu World* (1932-1955) and *Ilanga lase Natal* (1903-1965), this study parses the history of performative citation in the Black counter public sphere

in order to shed light on the bibliosphere of Black reading in this period. As in Elizabeth McHenry's landmark study of reading cultures in the United States (2002), this paper centres the popular periodical press as an overlooked archive of reading, a site in which the traces of reading lives, circulating texts, textual attachments and prevailing modes of reading can be reassembled.

As several studies have shown, citation was a commonplace feature of Black rhetorical practice in the colonial period (Newell 2002, 2023; Hofmeyr 2006; Peterson 2008; Sandwith 2014; Johnson 2020). This was particularly true of the periodical press, a verbal-visual amalgam based on repetitive interpolation and intertextuality. In the South African context, as elsewhere in Africa, newspapers and public speeches provided the occasions for a conspicuous, even extravagant, citational practice and the wielding of quotes for a wide range of purposes. These multi-faceted discursive practices played out in a rich and diverse colonial printsphere in which weekly and monthly, multi-lingual papers targeted at Black readers competed for space in a context dominated by the white pro-capitalist and pro-segregationist press. While the scholarship on African print cultures and the periodical press in African contexts is extensive, scholarly interest in the history of reading in African contexts is still at an early stage.<sup>1</sup> This paper extends this body of work via a detailed history of citational form in the periodical press. It demonstrates how prominent activist-intellectuals and ordinary readers used the periodical press to tell the story of their reading lives and habits; it shows how periodicals shaped and supported everyday practices of reading and it sheds light on the various uses to which literature was

---

<sup>1</sup> Key studies in the history of reading in the African context include Nuttall (1994), Newell (2002), Hofmeyr (2006), Peterson (2006), Sandwith (2014, 2018); Dick (2007, 2011, 2012) and Johnson (2020).

put. As a history of contextualised reading in practice, the study of citational form provides unique insight into readers' intimate personal encounters and dialogues with literary texts; what Rita Felski has described as 'the mysterious event of reading' (2008, 11).

The question of readers' encounters with literature takes on a particular significance in colonial contexts where questions of western epistemological dominance are drawn into sharp relief – the automatic privilege given to Western literary-cultural forms (correspondent with the habitual erasure of the significance of oral cultures) and the ways in which the zone of culture became politicised as sites of 'civilised' performance, colonial dominance and varieties of cultural resistance (Newell 2002, Sandwith 2014, Orsini et al 2022). In contexts like these, the citation of canonical texts is opened to a wide array of meanings, including the demonstration of colonial cultural 'mastery'; of wide-reading, erudition; the conspicuous demonstration of accumulated Western cultural capital as part of the quest for political and economic rights; citational performance as a training ground for political leadership (Hofmeyr 2006); or just a practical way for non-status holding colonial actors to get ahead in life (Newell 2002). Postcolonial frameworks tend, understandably, to privilege modes of reading/re-reading that are irreverent, unorthodox, non-deferential or resistant. While the evidence of this study suggests that resistant or sceptical reading is by far the dominant mode of response, it is equally clear that reading practices also exceed this framework; that the practice of reading includes both suspicion and endorsement; critique and affective attachment.

## **2. Discussion**

I begin with a resonant example from *Umteteli* newspaper by the journalist and African National Congress member, Richard Victor

Selope Thema whose article, entitled the 'New African', which appeared in 1928, included an interpolation from W.E.B. du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

Although the colour line is at present fenced with racial barbed wires yet there is no racial bar which prevents the mind of the new African from appropriating the intellectual and spiritual heritage of civilised mankind. 'Across the colour line', says Dr W.E.B. Du Bois, 'I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. [...] I summon Aristotle and what soul I will and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension'. Who can prevent the new African from moving among men and women of science, letters and art? To day the mind of the African is digging up the past histories of nations that have played and are playing their part upon the stage of the world. And as they examine critically the records of these nations, they come across the philosophy of Plato and Darwin, the writings of Homer and Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare and Milton. No colour bar can prevent the mind of the African from enjoying equality with the great minds of Europe, Asia and America. Why, the other day, in my humble residence in Doornfontein I enjoyed the company of Tagore, the Indian poet, Koo the Chinese social reformer and Kawaga, the Japanese Author. It is wonderful this mental fellowship with men of other races and other lands – And who can prevent it?' (*Umteteli* 21 July 1928, 3).

The presence of Du Bois' famous study in Selope Thema's arguments provides evidence of the pervasive resonance of African-American thinkers for South African activist-intellectuals and his importance as a touchstone for anti-colonial thinking. In this example, Selope Thema invites Du Bois into the pages of a South African newspaper in order to underscore the freedom of the Black reader to read what he or she will, an argument that does not mark a distinction between literary and 'non-literary' texts. His argument against race-based exclusion reveals some of the more common reasons for the quoting

of texts: citation as accreditation, exemplification, adornment and support. The quoted text – in this case, explicitly set off with quotation marks – seals the authority of the speaker, lends gravitas and force to the argument and imparts a certain affective resonance and lyrical flair. What is also apparent is the subtle process through which the initial sounding is replicated and recast, de-historicised, recontextualised and subtly re-oriented for new purposes. To quote a text, as Walter Benjamin notes, involves the ‘interruption of its context’ (2007, 151). Signs are unmoored and re-attached to new priorities and viewpoints; the text is ‘grafted’ onto a new semiotic chain, and thus made ‘liable to new context-specific meanings’ (Derrida 1988, 9) and ‘unexpected swerves’ (Butler 2017, 177). As Constantine Nakassis argues, acts of citation involve the ‘re-presentation’ of a discursive event, a replication which marks both its sameness and its subtle alteration. In this way, repetition ‘begets difference’ and ‘newness comes into the world’ (2013, 54). Texts which are spoken in the mouths of others become de-authorised, both in the sense that they are disconnected from their authors and in the sense that they become subject to a new authority.

Selope Thema’s interpolation of *The Souls of Black Folk* bears all the consequences of the iterability of signs and the transplanting of texts: the frisson that arises when discrete discursive acts are linked within the ‘same semiotic frame’ (Nakassis 2013, 56). Transported to 1920s South Africa and nested within a different rhetorical structure, Du Bois’ arguments are replicated and remade. As in du Bois’ scheme, the relationship that Selope Thema imagines between reader and author is companionable and uncondescending, a ‘moving arm in arm’. As in other examples from the period, reading is figured as convivial

fellowship.<sup>2</sup> In Selope Thema's re-reading, however, the scene of encounter is transferred from the domain of the ideal to segregationist South Africa – not a magnificent 'gilded hall' but a space of racial interdiction in which a would-be participant might be threatened or expelled. Instead of 'moving alongside', the protagonist attempts to 'move among', a slight adjustment which hints at an untoward intrusion. With the three-fold repetition of the question, 'Who can prevent it?', the mood shifts from liberal pathos to resistant assertion. The scene of Black reading – the impoverished Johannesburg suburb of Doornfontein – is re-imagined as a space of transgressive pleasure; of intimate encounters with proscribed texts in defiance of political norms; the Black interloper is recast not only as equal interlocutor but as an assertive claimant of his human rights. In this more radical take on Du Bois' famous lines, the 'mind of the African' is placed at the centre of the frame, rendered as an active and unopposable presence, engaged in a 'critical examination' centred on 'digging up the past histories of nations'. Selope Thema's citation thus invokes the image of a powerful critical agency at work and of ordinary reading practices as the scanning and assessing of Western intellectual-cultural achievement and, by implication, as resistance to its hegemonic hold. A reading of the citational trace in this instance offers insight not only into the disjunctures and unexpected swerves of citational form, not only into characteristic reading habits and dispositions but also to the 'force' of textual attachments (Felski 2008, 22). As Selope Thema's example reveals, reading entails pleasure, recognition and critique; appreciation, affiliation and pragmatic appropriation.

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Rahab S. Petje, 'Books as Companions', Letter to the Editor, *The Bantu World*, 3 October 1942, 8.

Selope Thema's argument is underscored with a further citation, this time from the poem 'The Battlefield' (1878) by nineteenth-century American poet, William Cullen Bryant. Thema concludes, 'The new African is a creature that is emerging from oppression with vigour and vitality. He looks the white man in the face, and laughs at his puny efforts to fight against God's scheme of Creation, and with the Poet, he says: "Truth crushed to earth shall rise again/The eternal laws of God are here/But Error Wounded writhes with pains/And dies among His worshippers"'. In this instance, the Black reader and the white American poet are imagined as speaking in one voice and the fighting words of this well-known poem – which also became popular as a hymn – are drawn in as an indictment of South African cultural exclusion. The canonical writer is not only enlisted to the cause of Black rights but presented as an active sympathiser.<sup>3</sup> In this process, Bryant's poem is remade as anti-colonial critique.

Looking more widely, what shadows and echoes of texts, proverbs, excerpts, songs, poems, scripture and scholarly works were to be found in the Black periodical press? What glimpses of ordinary reading cultures, reading dispositions, interpretive schemes, valued forms and affective attachments are revealed through the tracking of citation? And how are these used in the development of specific intellectual and political arguments? The Christian Bible, unsurprisingly, was a central site of readerly investment, inspiration and appropriation in the Black counter public sphere as biblical stories were seized as powerful analogies of the history of conquest, dispossession, discrimination, resistance and betrayal. Other significant literary touchstones were overwhelmingly Western and

<sup>3</sup> 'The Battlefield', also known as 'The Truth Shall Rise Again', was sung as a hymn. It was quoted by Martin Luther King, 14 March 1968. <http://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/mlkaudio.htm>. Accessed 5 July 2025.

male, mapping closely onto the kinds of texts that would have formed the everyday staples of mission school reading in South Africa at the time and based on a pedagogy of reading as memorisation and recital. As I will demonstrate, however, the contents of the Black colonial library along with prevailing reading habits and attachments, extend far beyond the mission school template in which many Black writers and readers would have been schooled.

An imaginative reconstruction of the Black library in the segregationist period could begin with Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320), Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare's sonnets and plays (in particular, *Julius Caesar*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*); seventeenth-century British writers, John Dryden, James Shirley and James Graham; eighteenth-century English poets and novelists, William Cowper, John Gay and Henry Fielding; Romantic poets Wordsworth, Shelley and James Lowell and Victorian novelists, Thackeray, Dickens and Sir Walter Scott. Victorian poets play a particularly prominent role in the history of colonial reading and citation, in particular the likes of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Robert Herrick, Alfred Noyes, Arthur Hugh Clough and Robert Browning. Speeches and hymns were also favourite sources: those of seventeenth-century British preacher, William Secker, nineteenth-century Unitarian cleric William Ellery Channing along with the oft-cited lines from the hymn by Vaughn Williams: 'England Arise, the Long Long Night is over'. Also important were nineteenth-century essayists, Oliver Wendell Homes, Sir Walter Besant and nineteenth century Scottish author Samuel Smiles whose books, 'Character' and 'Self-Help' extolled the Victorian ideals of thrift, hard work and duty. The views of William Hazlitt ('Every word should be a blow') and Ben Johnson (on 'brief style') were frequently cited in arguments about good literary style and credible

journalism. Also widely cited were Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841) and *The French Revolution* (1837), J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Ruskin, H.G. Wells, and the speeches and writings of George Bernard Shaw and Benjamin Disraeli. From the Black diaspora, the voices of du Bois, Marcus Garvey (particularly his 'Declaration of Negro Rights and Constitution of Negro Liberty'), Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), the speeches of James Aggrey as well as the echoes of negro spirituals and the Harlem poets were important. The citation of indigenous sources was relatively rare but newspaper correspondents did, on occasion, invoke the work of South African authors (Robert Grendon, Sarah Gertrude Millan, John Buchan) as well as the wisdom of isiXhosa and Sesotho proverbs and sayings, some of which were rendered in translation.

The everyday practice of quote-wielding and the various investments and disarticulations it records should be seen in the context of a commonplace form of citational practice across various regions and historical contexts which involved the custom of collecting and organising quotations in written compendia (Finnegan 2010, 114). Quotation anthologies – such as the *Oxford Book of Quotations*, involve the practice of 'explicitly framing chunks of words and putting them on-stage as quotations'. In this way, well-known voices are not only 'brought out to re-sound in new settings' (Finnegan 2010, 197) but are also abstracted, fixed and rarefied as timeless and incontrovertible truths. This mode of instructive-inspirational citation – as motivation, homily and instruction – excerpted and authorised in dedicated collections and thus made accessible for everyday use was a conventional practice of the early twentieth-century period. Newspapers and periodicals were important sites for the staging of such quotable quotes, in this case in portable, small-scale, quotidian

and serialised form. In the Black periodical press (particularly, *Umteteli*, *Ilanga lase* and *Bantu World*), these mini-compendia of ennobling ideas took the form of short lists placed randomly on the newspaper page (possibly to fill an empty space) and framed in a variety of ways as 'Literary Gems', 'Selected Saws' and 'Quotations Worth Remembering'. The sources of wisdom were eclectic and largely conventional, including 'highbrow' examples such as Cicero, Goethe, Hume, Francis Bacon, Dr Johnson, William Godwin and Sir Philip Sydney as well as more popular writers like Browning, Dickens, Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson and the afore-mentioned Smiles. In keeping with the dominance of moralising gender policing in this period, such mini-compendia were considered especially appropriate for women readers, appearing frequently on the pages devoted to women's concerns in both *Umteteli* and *Bantu World*. As with other forms of citation, Western sources and male voices predominate. The rare exceptions include Christina Rossetti, Hannah More, Madame de Stael, George Eliot and, from further afield, Swami Vivekenanda, Saadi Shirazi and the Bhagavad Gita. In *Umteteli*, a once-off gesture to the African context, offering momentary relief from the stuffy indoctrination of the Western examples, saw the publication of a list of 'African Proverbs', taken from the Kenyan newspaper, *Habari* (*Umteteli* 17 September 1927, 3).

Similar forms of instructive or inspirational quotation – appearing as justificatory preambles or argument-clinching epilogues – are to be found in editorials, opinion pieces and readers' letters. Such interpolations often drew on particularly 'affective' or 'elevated' verse (Atkins and Finlayson 2016, 172) in order to strengthen, dramatize and embellish. An article in *Bantu World* by the Rev. H. Phillips cements its lesson on the value of stoical endurance with the ringing lines from

Tennyson's 'Ulysses' (1842): 'To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield' (16 December 1933, 9). In another example, the virtues of individual effort and self-belief are underscored with lines from Robert Browning's Epilogue: 'One who never turned his back but marched breast forward, /Never doubted clouds would break, /Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph' (*Umteteli* 28 July 1923, 7). In similar fashion a single line from William Shakespeare's 'Spring' (from *Love's Labour's Lost*) – 'Merry Larks are Ploughman's Clocks' – is used to accentuate an argument about the values of industry and cheerfulness as an antidote to criminality (*Umteteli* 22 September 1934, 3). In keeping with prevailing mission discourse and its understanding of literature as 'a moralising force' (Hofmeyr 2006, 267), these pithy compendiums set the scene for the repetitive inscription of a Christian-capitalist moral code, emphasising honesty, industry, endurance, abstinence, thrift and the profitable use of time. Re-enacted in the popular press, these positive, often triumphalist, verbal segments extolling individual effort, hard work and stoicism are closely aligned with colonial narratives of racial 'advancement'. These are rhetorical structures with strong aspirations towards moral certainty and closure. Their duplication in the South African context has the troubling effect of re-presenting the long history of colonial violence as a progressive teleology of Black fortitude and eventual reward.

At the same time, Black readers and writers were also repeatedly drawn to the affective resources of Shakespeare and the Romantic and Victorian poets for the articulation of suffering and despair, moral condemnation, political critique and alternative worldmaking. The history of Black citation, and the genre of the obituary in particular, reveals strong affective links to poems such as Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' (1850) and 'The Lotus Eaters' (1832), Shelley's 'Adonais'

(1821), Swinburne's 'A Year's Burden' (1870), John Shirley's 'Death the Leveller' (1696-1666), Walter Scott's 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel' (1805), Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*, William Ernest Henley's 'Invictus' (1888) – particularly, its resonant final lines, 'I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul' – and the Biblical book of Lamentations.<sup>4</sup> Thus, F.Y. St. Leger Plaatje adapts Brutus's speech in *Julius Caesar* in order to cement his critique of white party politics in South Africa: 'O Judgement! Thou art fled to brutish beasts, /And men have lost their reason'. In another example, 'Resurgam', resolves his arguments about the problems besetting African political organisations with the hopeful concluding lines of Arthur Hugh Clough's poem 'Say not the Struggle Nought Availeth' (1855): 'Far back through creeks and inlets making/Comes silent, flooding in, the main' (*Umteteli* 25 August 1923, 4). Shylock's famous 'hath not a Jew' speech in *The Merchant of Venice* supplied the ballast for many public sphere debates about racial equality, sometimes repeated verbatim but more frequently adapted. As Clements Kadalie argued in 'A Call to the African Race': 'We are men just as our European friends are, we have limbs just like them. We can suffer as they do, and we too are possessed of a heart that can be tender and true' (*Umteteli* 14 April 1923, 4).<sup>5</sup> Alexander Pope's oft-cited line, 'A little learning is a dangerous thing' from *An Essay on Criticism* (1709) was frequently invoked against the white capitalist press; particularly the ways in which Africans were condemned to alterity in racist public discourse (*Umteteli* 23 July 1921, 2). James Thaele, Kadalie's one-time associate and founder editor of the radical union paper, *The Workers' Herald*, drew on an eclectic citational store to re-read South African

<sup>4</sup> See Johnson (2020, 53-54) for more details on Clements Kadalie's appropriation of this verse.

<sup>5</sup> See also Sol T. Plaatje's reworking of this speech as 'hath not a K\*\*\*r eyes? Hath not a K\*\*\*r hands ...' (cited in Peterson 2008, 89).

political events via the dramatic scenes and speeches of classical antiquity (Virgil and Cicero), the Pauline sermons and the Biblical stories of Ahab and Elijah, Moses and the Egyptians and Judas Iscariot.

The popular periodical genre of the critical essay saw many examples of colonial quote-wielding in the segregationist era as quotations from multiple sources were pulled in as amplification and support. Particularly striking was a pervasive practice of accumulative or accretive citation – often in the form of citational preambles or epilogues – in which arguments were leavened, concluded and framed by a variety of quotes. In these examples of scholarly citation, South African political and social issues were placed in dialogue, and made consonant, with other contexts and commentators; opened out to a virtual assembly of critical interlocutors. Alan Kirkland Soga, a founding member of the ANC and former editor of the newspaper, *Izwi Labantu*, writing under the pseudonym, 'Resurgam', provides a striking example. His lengthy contributions to *Umteteli wa Bantu* throughout the early 1920s wove dense textual webs and digressive arguments through intermittent quotation from Biblical texts, nineteenth-century biographers such as John Morley, the Romantic poets, Swinburne, Shelley and Ruskin, the work of the South African poet Robert Grendon and untranslated isiXhosa sayings, all of which testify to his eclectic reading practices and habits of memorisation. A similar reading/citing practice is to be found in the journalism of Selope Thema and H.I.E. Dhlomo, well-known Johannesburg-based journalist for *Bantu World* and *Ilanga lase Nata* as well as a playwright, poet and librarian.

Selope Thema's essay on 'The Friendship of Books' draws on works by the Scottish missionary Joseph Oldman (1874), Anatole France's *On Life & Letters* (1922), Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship* (1840)

and *The Souls of Black Folk* in order to advance an early exploration of the value of books for Black readers (*Umteteli* 27 July 1929, 2). Selope Thema's disquisition on reading repeats many of the standard arguments of the period – books are repositories of truth, points of contact and friendship, records of human travail and triumph, a means of escape, a means to access the 'higher things of life' and a source of inspiration and courage. He also draws on France's resonant idea of books as a form of 'witchcraft', with the power to disturb and remake. A later article quotes from liberal American race theorist, Edgar Gardner Murphy's *The Basis of Ascendancy* (1909) in order to theorise the psychological consequences of racial oppression and the problem of internalised racism, concluding that those who are 'ostracised and looked upon as a beast of burden in the land of his fathers' is likely to feel like 'changing the colour of his skin and running away from his race' (*Umteteli* 11 February 1928, 2). Selope Thema's reading/citational practice exemplifies the widespread practice of purposeful and directed reading in which history is approached as a lesson for the present; in which stories of suffering and overcoming are read as parallels to the contemporary colonial scene.

H.I.E. Dhlomo's library was equally diverse. In his article, 'History and Human Behaviour' (*Umteteli* 24 September 1932, 4), Dhlomo builds a critique of Western historiography by invoking the work of British-born psychologist William McDougall. As is the convention, the argument proceeds via a range of sources, George Santayana's *Sense of Beauty* (1896), Herbert Spencer's *An Autobiography* (1910) and Voltaire's ringing line 'I have no sceptre, but I have a pen'. Dhlomo is critical of the failure of Western historians 'to look behind the scenes of the history of Bantu-European contacts'. Captivated by the 'thrilling, colourful pictures', they have not 'taken the trouble to study

how the picture-producing mechanism operates'. Yet they 'weave theories as to how they think it works'. Against a historiography centred on surface spectacle and the collection of facts, Dhlomo advocates a practice of reading Western historical texts against the grain, of reading 'between the lines to get to the facts', and of 'making our own history from the history we read'. In this argument, Western scholarly resources are not only mined for an alternative history but become the prompts for re-thinking Western scholarship itself. Unlike the dominative homilies explored above, Dhlomo's use of citational form is evidence of an inherently critical disposition in which authority is not ceded to canonical texts. As a further elaboration of his argument suggests, Black reading practice is also understood as a kind of tactical and surreptitious action, involving the theft of emancipatory ideas left carelessly lying around by whites: 'The white man has given away his best weapons, ideas. It is too late to stem the rising tide of colour. Nothing can stand against the forces of ideas and thought' (*Umteteli* 24 September 1932, 4).

Such examples of free-wheeling, accretive citation were also to be found in letters written by ordinary readers. Jos C.K. Dlula, for example, builds an argument for Black political representation using J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*, the Biblical book of Samuel, the speeches of Disraeli, the Rev G.L. Richardson and Samuel Smiles in order to make the point that the forms of so-called representation available for African people are a means of 'exterminat[ing] them indirectly' (*Umteteli* 16 December 1922, 5). While scholarly citation is often used as a form of credentialization, the examples from Dlula and Dhlomo point to a far less deferential practice. Cited speech is more often reproduced not as authoritative last word but approached as a sympathetic or usable resource, called in, marshalled, controlled and merged to form a new script of the writer's own making. Acts of

writing in the colonial context take shape as dense, textual assemblages or creative composites of ready-to-hand materials. In this process, canonical texts are surveyed, appropriated and plundered and choice verbal fragments are re-arranged and composed according to new and unanticipated logics.

The Black periodical press also yields frequent examples of citational swerve when quoted material is put to use in the analysis of local political issues, situations and conditions as fragments and snapshots from remote contexts were re-directed, transposed and re-oriented.<sup>6</sup> Selope Thema, for instance, installs the myth of Laocoon as a powerful visual figure for the history of slavery and the economic exploitation of Africans on white-owned farms: 'What the serpent was to Laocoon slavery with its entwining folds and its slow torture has been to humanity' (*Umteteli* 23 December 1922, 3). A reader who used the pseudonym, 'Muntu' adopted a similar practice: Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality' about the passing of a rural idyll is transposed and adapted to a critique of the devastating effects of the Urban Areas Act which saw Black people expelled from their homes and pushed into segregated locations:

And their bitterness of soul in parting with old friends and sites cannot  
be described, for to them  
'It is not now as it hath been of yore, -  
Turn whereso'er (they) may,  
By night or day,  
The things which (they) have seen

---

<sup>6</sup> See also Hofmeyr on the way in which Shakespearian texts in particular 'offered an allegorical resource through which [Black intellectuals could] comment on the oppression of apartheid Africa' (2006: 259). In the forums of the Black intelligentsia such as the famed Lovedale Literary and Debating Society which ran from the nineteenth century to at least the 1950s, Shakespeare 'became a way of talking about politics' (2006, 259).

they now can see no more. Anyway, 'should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never be thought to min'?'  
(*'Muntu'* *Bantu World* 9 June 1934, 9).

In this example of creative transposition, we note the shift from the personal to the communal voice and the way in which Wordsworth's lines are conjoined with those of the Scottish folksong 'Auld Lang Syne', also slightly adjusted in order to speak to the loss of former communities. In similar fashion, in an article by prolific Johannesburg letter writer and journalist, Walter Nhlapo, Longfellow's epic poem, 'Hiawatha' about a Native American hero and Christian convert makes an unexpected appearance as part of an argument against the immiseration of Black South Africans as a result of taxation: 'Oh the famine and the fever!/Oh the wasting of the fame/Oh the blasting of the fever/Oh the wailing of the children/... All the earth is sick and famished' (*Bantu World* 7 May 1932, 2). And Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall', a melodramatic poem about unrequited love, is made to speak to the plight of a young African woman who was blinded by a white farmer's son in a shooting incident (*Bantu World* 1 July 1933, 8).

Some of the most interesting examples of citational swerve come from Clements Kadalie, the Nyasaland-born, mission-educated leader of the largest workers' union at the time, the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU). As David Johnson has argued, Kadalie's writing and speeches had a strongly appropriative and syncretic character, drawing on Marcus Garvey's 'Back to Africa' rhetoric, Biblical stories and Marxist vocabulary. An article written to commemorate the shooting of 23 workers in Port Elizabeth on 23 October 1920 (*Workers Herald* 22 October, 3), includes the rewriting of the poem 'In Flanders' Field' by Canadian World War I poet, John McCrae. As Johnson demonstrates, the quiet substitution of 'In

Flanders Field' with 'in trenched graveyard' significantly alters the force and direction of the poem: 'Instead of addressing the reader in the voice of the First World War's dead soldiers [...], Kadalie's adaptation assumes the voice of Port Elizabeth's murdered black workers' (2020, 53). Flanders fields become a 'trenched graveyard'; protesting workers are granted the status of war heroes; and workers' struggles against economic exploitation are ascribed the scope and gravitas of a world conflict. In defiance of racist erasure, the poem in its altered version 'insists upon the equivalence of white and black deaths, and proclaims the humanity of black victims of police violence' (2020, 53).

As suggested, Western literary resources were used to amplify and explore conditions of inequality and states of discrimination in South Africa; they also provided the terms in which just social futures for Black South Africans could be imagined and form the departure points for alternative theorising: thus 'Resurgam' draws on eighteenth-century Irish lawyer and orator John Philpot Curran's words as a way of measuring the gap between current conditions and an anticipated justice: 'And we wait for the time when it can be said of the Black man, "His soul walks abroad in her own majesty; and he stands redeemed, regenerated and disenthralled by the irresistible genius of universal emancipation"' (*Umteteli* 10 January 1925, 3). In other cases, the full force of citational indictment emerges in the form of deliberate omission. Thus, in another critique of racism in white letters to the press, H.I.E. Dhlomo's brother – who wrote a decade's worth of satirical columns for *Bantu World* under the guise of R. Roamer Esq. – asks whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer...' and leaves it at that. The omission of the well-known conclusion – 'or take arms against a sea of troubles' – grants these words a particular taboo value, thus heightening their presence (and possibility) through

omission (*Bantu World* 17 November 1934, 8). If Black readers worked with and against canonical texts in order to turn them towards the cause of Black emancipation, others also installed them for more conservative projects. Political activist Selby Msimang provides a key example. In several articles to *Umteteli* in the 1920s, Msimang drew on quotations from John Ruskin, J.S. Mill, Robert Herrick and Fielding's *Tom Jones* to advance his critique of colonial politics. At the same time, he also interpolated Edmund Burke's 'Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol' (1777) and Milton's political treatise *Tenure of the Kings and Magistrates* (1649) in order to build a conservative critique of populist revolts and irrational 'mob force' (*Umteteli* 9 May 1925, 4).

Newspaper citation includes several examples which exposed the disjuncture between canonical perspectives and the realities of colonial oppression. The ringing declaration from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 'What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties!' appears out of sorts when set within the context of British Imperialism and the history of 'brute force'. As Selope Thema concludes, 'It is no wonder that those of 'us who are not yet "civilised" are puzzled as to the superiority of civilised man' (*Umteteli* 13 July 1921, 2). In a similar rhetorical move, a letter from L.H.P. from Benoni near Johannesburg interpolates the rousing forms of Victorian poetry to register the limits of the discourse of assertive endeavour in the context of racial discrimination. Taking up the struggle for decent wages on the part of Black teachers, L.H.P. invokes several lines from Longfellow's 'A Psalm of Life' in order to characterise the feelings of excited anticipation felt by newly-graduated teachers; in particular, their desire to 'leave behind them':

Footprints, that perhaps another,  
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,

A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,  
Seeing, shall take heart again.

However, as the writer interjects, 'let us draw a kindly veil over the glaring irony that dogged their aspirations'. Far more appropriate for the inevitable discrimination they would face in segregationist South Africa are the words from that 'splendorous poem', 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' by Tennyson: 'Their's is not to reason Why/Theirs but to do and die' (*Bantu World* 18 August 1934, 8).

If the Black periodical press provides ample evidence of the reading of western texts against the grain, it also alerts us to the many occasions when canonical texts were actively refuted or radically re-read: H.I.E. Dhlomo's materialist critique of Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1903) supplies a pertinent example (*Umteteli* 14 March 1931, 2-3); as does Hazael M Maimane's refusal of Thomas Henry Huxley's racist views about the eternal subordination of 'our dusky cousins' (*Umteteli* 22 July 1922, 4). Some of the most striking examples of creative adaptation of Western sources by Black writers are the examples of the rewriting of Biblical sources. Josiah Maphumulo, prolific journalist for *Ilanga lase Natal*, offers advice to his 'oppressed patriots' who face daily police harassment by means of a radical elaboration of a verse from the Biblical book of James: In Maphumulo's re-reading, the original verse, 'Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord...' is merged with a verse from Psalms 96: "Be patient, then, brethren, till the presence of the Lord" who will adjust matters righteously...lifting up him that is poor and him that hath no helper, and taking vengeance on all evil-doers' (*Bantu World* 29 December 1934, 8). In this example, the original call to patience is reshaped as retributive prophecy; its biblical cadences and prophetic gravitas appropriated for a more radical argument about the uplifting of the

poor and the promise of vengeance on all evil-doers. Finally, the most flagrant rewriting of a literary text has to be Kadalie's re-interpretation of the conservative novel, *Bayete!* by William Heaton Nicholls as an heroic story of African resistance and the necessity of organised, collective action. As Johnson demonstrates, this was in direct opposition to 'author's declared intention to warn complacent white readers about the imminent dangers of a revolutionary black uprising' (2020, 55).

Several examples attest to the ways in which male writers harnessed the resources of a misogynist Western canon to remind women of their subordinate social status. Some women readers offered resistance by turning this powerful cultural capital against men. Albertina M. Sikiti, for example, condemns Walter Nhlapo's consistently misogynist arguments in *Bantu World* 'as absolutely repugnant' by invoking Dr Johnson's famous critique of the intellectual pretensions of the 'pedant' (8 August 1936, 12). Mrs A.S. Makubalo, in turn, drew on Aesop's fable 'The Fox and the Crow' for her critique of male sexual predation and the force of 'sweet words' designed to 'take the "Cheese" out of [a woman's] mouth' (*Bantu World* 16 November 1936, 14). Other writers were inspired to look further afield: popular *Bantu World* journalist and theatre impresario, Johanna Phahlane, writing under the pseudonym, 'Lady Porcupine', crystallises her defence of women's character against several misogynist attacks in *Bantu World* with a quote from revolutionary Italian activist, Guiseppe Mazzini's *The Duties of Man* (1860) whose words, she says, are 'more winged and weighty than any of my own could be'. With Mazzini, Phahlane urges her (gentlemanly) audience to consider women 'to be your equal in your civil and political life' while also reworking Mazzini's words to cement its application for the discourse of African emancipation: 'be ye the two human wings that

lift the soul towards the ideal we are destined to attain – Marching – Forward – to Africa’ (*Bantu World* 11 January 1936, 8). Another well-known Johannesburg figure and newspaper contributor, Ellen Pumla Ngozwana closed a series of articles on ‘Female Emancipation’ with the stirring final lines of Henley’s poem ‘Invictus’. Ngozwana’s article is striking for the connection she makes between women’s oppression and the ideology of racial supremacy. Against the ‘feeling of inferiority’ arising from a racist society, Ngozwana offers Henley’s heroic image of a soul that is ‘unconquerable’; a head that is ‘bloody but unbowed’ (*Bantu World* 1 June 1935, 12).

That Black readers looked for inspiration beyond the Western canon is also evident. The lines from a Negro spiritual ‘I dunno what my mother want to stay here for/’Cause this ole world’s no friend to her’ re-appears in the pages of *Umteteli* as a starting point for ANC veteran and writer Sol T. Plaatje’s arguments against contemporary African hostility to the presence of ‘Blantynes’ or migrant workers in South Africa (*Umteteli* 3 March 1928, 5). Plaatje’s arguments in favour of African hospitality trace various examples in history, and invoke the Sesotho proverb: ‘Mo-laea Kgosi o aba a e itaela’ (If you make the rules, know that they are applicable to you too).<sup>7</sup> In this example of citational form, Black diasporic and local proverbial wisdom provide the frame for an early South African argument against xenophobia. A further example comes from an account by Kadalie on the origins and development of the ICU, entitled ‘The Romance of African Labour’ (*The Workers’ Herald*, 14 September 1926, 1): he writes, ‘[A]ll over South Africa one heard a joyful prayer from people who had lived in darkness for the last three hundred years since ‘Dark Africa’ was exploited by foreign adventurers’. He then interjects with a verse from a hymn, written by Barbados-born Arnold J Ford, a Garvey supporter

---

<sup>7</sup> Grateful thanks for Connie Makgabo for this translation.

who compiled *The Universal Ethiopian Hymnal*, the hymnbook of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

O Africa, awaken!  
The morning is at hand  
No more art thou forsaken  
O bounteous Motherland.  
From far thy sons and daughters  
Are hastning back to thee.  
Their cry rings o'er the waters  
That Afric' shall be free!

Like many Garveyites, Arnold Ford held the view that Africans would be awakened from their slumber by the 'sons and daughters' of former slaves who would bring the message of emancipation to Africa. Kadalie's interpolation of this hymn reinforced this message, cast Kadalie in the role of liberator and affirmed powerful solidarities across the Black diaspora.

### **3. Conclusion**

Citational form provides insight into what books have become internalised, memorised and inhabited as the result of a particular kind of cultural education or milieu; it is an indication of what has come to be cherished and respected, what has been sought out and actively drawn in or, more prosaically, what happens to be at hand. As several examples indicate, the words of others come to be regarded as both communal and personal possessions; at times not even formally cited but unobtrusively merged with the new speaker's voice. As is also evident, this practice was the habit of both ordinary and more socially prominent readers, both male and female. The reproduction of verbal form in the pages of the Black newspaper indicates the expectation, if not the existence of, a shared cultural and

moral community; the ways in which citation also worked to confirm and perpetuate these ties. Apart from a greater emphasis amongst political radicals on the ideas of Lenin, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and Marcus Garvey, the wider evidence of Black reading cultures in inter-war South Africa points to a common stock of books and writers, a shared bibliosphere that was drawn on, appreciated, responded to and appropriated by radical and more conservative writers alike.<sup>8</sup> The Black colonial library made no evaluative distinctions between literary and non-literary texts and, while it was strongly oriented towards Western literature (both canonical and popular), it is also evident that critical, creative and appropriative reading practices were not restricted to these sources. As the increasing interest in African-American literature attests, the Black colonial bibliosphere played an important part in strengthening and performing existing connections and solidarities with the contemporary Black diaspora. Although women readers/writers were far less disposed to the wielding of quotes in their articles and letters to the editor – and occasionally resisted the authority this practice represented – there is nevertheless evidence that they drew from the same reading store as their male counterparts.

Beyond imaginary assemblages of lost libraries, the history of citational form offers insight into the particular dynamics of readers' encounters with books in the colonial period. It sheds light on the strong bonds that were forged between ordinary readers and their books and the multiple ways in which books were read, used and

---

<sup>8</sup> Citational form in the Soviet-inspired journals *The International* and *The South African Worker/Umsebenzi* reflect a slightly different corpus, including citations from the works of William Morris, Upton Sinclair and Jack London. These are suggestive of the wider Left-wing culture from which these journals drew and to which they had access through the Soviet International (For more details, see Johnson (2020: 71-103)

remade: as political critique, moral judgement; as sources of solace, inspiration and resistance and as sounding boards and departure points for the development of theoretical perspectives and scholarly arguments by authoritative, often sceptical, Black readers. The books that made up the colonial Black library in this period provided the ground on which anti-colonial theory would take shape. Colonial citation practices point to a long history of non-sanctioned and unanticipated engagements with western-colonial authorities as marginalised colonial actors both exploited the authority of high-status interlocutors to support and embellish their arguments and refashioned these sources in the service of alternative intellectual-political projects. Du Bois' (and Selope Thema's) description of Black reading as the summons of an equal serves as a fitting model for this practice; a model which also asserts the rights of the subaltern reader to access any available intellectual and literary resources; in short, to read what he or she likes.

It is no accident that the citation practices explored in this paper occur mainly in the English sections of these multi-lingual newspapers, nor that they are principally directed at the Western library. In the examples discussed above, citational form presents itself as a key site of colonial transaction, decolonial praxis and Black agency; citation as a verbal artefact which encodes a moment of interaction, negotiation and reinterpretation in the colonial contact zone. As Partha Chatterjee argues, citation is an important part of the 'fascinating story of the encounter between a world-conquering Western thought and the intellectual modes of non-Western cultures' (1986, 41). Colonial citation can be understood as the 'consumption of things English' (Gikandi 2001, 357); the movement of African subjects through the 'anatomy of colonialism and their meticulous translation of colonial culture into the idiom of self-making' (2001, 357). Without

subsuming all instances of subaltern citation within an anti-colonial or de-colonial frame, it is nevertheless possible to read newspaper citation as a site in which Western epistemologies are opened up to the possibility of alternative renditions and untoward readings; a practice in which a Western optic is both centred and de-centred. The history of citation reveals the extent to which Black reading and writing cultures were in many respects defined by a reading practice which redirected Western texts to the service of both anti-racist and anti-colonial argument. As such, it underscores the prominence of commanding, critical and sceptical reading practices in which texts were apprehended for new purposes and read in errant ways.

### **References:**

- Atkins, J. and Finlayson, A., 2016. "As Shakespeare so memorably said...': Quotation, rhetoric, and the performance of politics.' *Political Studies* 64 (1): 164–181.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zorn. The Bodley Head.
- Butler, Judith. 2017. "When Gesture Becomes Event." In: *Inter Views in Performance Philosophy: Crossings and Conversations* edited by Anna Street, Julien Alliot, and Magnolia Pauker. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95192-5>.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1986. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1988. *Limited Inc*. Northwestern University Press.
- Dick, Archie L., 2007. "The Books Were Just the Props': Public Libraries and Contested Space in the Cape Flats Townships in the 1980s." *Library Trends* 55 (3): 698–715.
- Dick, Archie L., 2011. "Remembering Reading: Memory, Books and Reading in South Africa's Apartheid Prisons, 1956–1990". In *The*

*History of Reading, Volume 1: International Perspectives c1500–1900*, edited by Shafquat Towheed and W. R. Owens. Palgrave MacMillan.

Dick, Archie L., 2012. *The Hidden History of South Africa's Book and Reading Cultures*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Felski, Rita (2008). *Uses of Literature*. Blackwell.

Finnegan, Ruth H., 2011. *Why Do We Quote?: The Culture and History of Quotation*. Open Book Publishers.

Gikandi, Simon. 2001. "Cultural Translation and the African Self: A (Post)colonial Case Study." *Interventions* 3(3): 355-375.

Hofmeyr, Isabel. 2006. "Reading Debating/Debating Reading: The Case of the Lovedale Literary Society, or Why Mandela Quotes Shakespeare". In *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* edited by Karin Barber. Indiana University Press.

Johnson, David. 2020. *Dreaming of Freedom in South Africa: Literature Between Critique and Utopia*. UCT Press.

Joshi, Priya. 2002. *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture and the English Novel in India*. Columbia University Press.

Mukhopadhyay, Priyasha. 2024. *Required Reading: The Life of Everyday Texts in the British Empire*. Princeton University Press.

McHenry, Elizabeth. 2002. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*. Duke University Press.

Nakassis, Constantine V. 2013. "Citation and Citationality". *Signs and Society* 1 (1): 51–77.

Newell, Stephanie. 2000. *Ghanaian Popular Fiction. 'Thrilling Discoveries in Conjugal Life' & Other Tales*. James Currey.

Newell, Stephanie. 2023. *Newspaper Literature and Local Literary Creativity in West Africa, 1900s-1960s*. Boydell & Brewer.

Nuttall, Sarah. 1994. "Reading in the Lives of Black South African Women." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20 (1): 85–98.

Orsini, Francesca, Neelam Srivastava and Laetitia Zecchini, eds. 2022. *The Form of Ideology and the Ideology of Form Cold War, Decolonization and Third World Print Cultures*. Cambridge.

Peterson, Bhekizizwe. 2006. "The Bantu World and the World of the Book: Reading, Writing and Enlightenment". In *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and the Making of the Self*, edited by Karin Barber. Indiana University Press.

Peterson, Bhekizizwe. 2008. "Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*: Melancholy Narratives, Petitioning Selves and the Ethics of Suffering." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43 (1): 79-95.

Sandwith, Corinne. 2014. *World of Letters: Reading Communities and Cultural Debates in Early Apartheid South Africa*. University of Kwa-ZuluNatal Press.

Sandwith, Corinne. 2018. "The Appearance of the Book: Towards a History of the Reading Lives and Worlds of Black South African Readers." *English in Africa* 45 (1): 11-38.