"The books were just the props": Public Libraries and Contested Space in the Cape Flats Townships in the 1980s

Archie L. Dick

Abstract
This article examines the relationship between public libraries and social change in South Africa during the 1980s. It focuses on libraries in selected townships on the Cape Flats. It concludes that debates about the public library's success or failure as an instrument of social change cannot overlook the idea of contested space in which the live discussion, debate, and circulation of ideas precludes and includes the use of books and libraries.

Introduction

The relationship between public libraries and social change is still unclear. There is Jesse Shera's (1949, p. 248) early view that public libraries tend to follow rather than create social change, and then there are more ambitious views found in journals like *Information for Social Change.* In this article, this relationship is examined in an analysis of public libraries in South Africa during a period of dramatic social change. Much like the 1940s that ended in a surprising election victory for the National Party and apartheid in spite of alternative political futures, the 1980s also ended with unforeseen events that led to the first democratic elections in 1994.[1]

There were several imagined possibilities for a future South Africa in that decade. Nothing was inevitable at the time, but the hardening of attitudes and lines of division in the 1980s make the anti-apartheid narrative compelling. The United Democratic Front coordinated hundreds of autonomous organizations and thousands of activists who opposed state reforms and resisted the institutions and policies of the apartheid regime. It also promoted the profile and underground structures of the African National Congress.[2] As the liberation struggle intensified, the primary antagonists consolidated

their ideological positions and escalated actions against each other. The result was states of emergency, detentions without trial, sustained township violence, and deaths throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Importantly, 14,000 lives were lost in the four years immediately preceding the elections of April 26–27, 1994 (Coleman, 1998, p. 243).

These developments attracted national and international attention, while less striking events involving the daily responses of ordinary South Africans went unnoticed. Moreover, the prominence of the African National Congress–led liberation movement during the period overshadowed the roles played by other liberation forces that advocated different methods and goals in the struggle to overthrow the apartheid regime. Organizations such as youth groups, civic associations, and trade unions that responded to community grievances and workplace oppression, in fact, conceded this principal role to the African National Congress. "The masses, in other words, chose the African National Congress rather than the other way around" (Legassick, 1998, p. 452). Struggles around local social grievances as well as national political demands yielded a complex situation.

Public Libraries and Social Space

Events and experiences in the 1980s involving a number of public libraries in the strife-torn coloured townships on the Cape Flats[3] are examined against this background. The Group Areas Act of 1950 legislated that areas were set aside for exclusive occupation by a particular "race" group as officially divided by the Population Registration Act of 1950 into "whites, coloureds, Asians and Natives" (Saunders, 1989, p. 488). This led to the forced removal of thousands of Coloureds in Cape Town (Western, 1996; Bohlin, 2001; Field, 2001). *Coloured* refers to South Africans of mixed descent, and their identity remains a topic of ongoing controversy (Erasmus, 2001).

In 1985, a significant year for this article, the demographics for Cape Town in terms of the apartheid classification were 57 percent Coloured, 27 percent White, 15 percent African, and 1 percent Indian. The population statistics in South Africa for that year were 73.8 percent African, 14.8 percent White, 8.7 percent Coloured, and 2.7 percent Indian (*Survey of Race Relations,* 1985, p. 185). So while they are a South African minority, Coloureds are in the majority in Cape Town. Analyses of township struggles focus either on *structural* or material conditions within which action or organization occurs, or on *conspiratorial* or agitating roles played by national political organizations like the African National Congress and the United Democratic Front (Seekings, 1992). These approaches neglect the reactions of township residents themselves and the ways in which township agencies such as libraries and librarians responded to social change out of a sense of facing together political and material struggles.

What is common to the debate on public libraries and social change are commitment to the institutions of literacy, conviction about the posi-

tive influences of reading and the recorded word, and consensus on their transforming effects. From that perspective, public libraries in apartheid South Africa, especially in the 1980s, were perceived as mainstream, passive, inadequate, out of touch with the information needs of their communities, and indifferent to social change. Alternative information centers, such as peoples' libraries and community resource centers (CRCs), that emerged at that time enjoyed "struggle" legitimacy. Closer cooperation between public libraries and these alternative information agencies was recommended, but the prevailing view of public libraries was unflattering (van Zijl, 1989, p. 4; Siegrühn, 1990, p. 5; Nassimbeni, 1991, pp. 45–49; Karlese, 1991, p. 14). Official library and information services were associated with the propagation of apartheid as the ideology of the dominant social grouping (Karlese & Nassimbeni, 1997, p. 36).

This verdict, however, obscures ways in which some public librarians responded to actual situations in their townships. In the case of the Cape Flats, which had low levels of literacy, such a verdict ahistorically overlooks a tradition of library service in which the live discussion, debate, and circulation of ideas precluded and included the use of books and libraries. Illiteracy among Coloureds, for example, rose by almost 19 percent between 1960 and 1980 (Ellis, 1987, pp. 9–11). Such a negative judgment about public libraries also misunderstands some of the ways in which libraries, books, and information were used by participants in the liberation struggle. I draw on personal experience, interviews with librarians, and primary and secondary sources to grasp the contradictions that characterized some of the Coloured township libraries on the Cape Flats during the 1980s. The public libraries selected for analysis are located in Lentegeur, Hanover Park, and Bonteheuwel townships.

One of the criticisms leveled against public libraries was that they were sites of conflict and struggle and that they should therefore not be neutral. In a militarized South Africa, libraries were certainly sites of conflict, as in the case in 1988 of a fourteen-year-old boy that shot indiscriminately at users in the children's section of a library and explained that he always wanted to be a policeman so that he could shoot people.[4] And public libraries were regular targets for destruction or damage during periods of unrest throughout the apartheid era.[5] But more fundamentally, their involvement in urban racial zoning and the forced removals of thousands of people meant that township libraries could never be neutral. The township library was always contested social space—geographically, racially, ideologically, and professionally.

Ideas about social space are prominent in the literature of social theory and in disciplines such as geography and urban sociology (Castells, 1983; Soja, 1985; Lefebvre, 1991; Bachelard, 1994). Their local application in South Africa, however, is guided by perspectives about the control of social space exerted by the South African state and "the reactions it provoked

among recipients and opponents of government policy" (Hart, 1990, p. 285). Space in this view is not just a passive geographical milieu that is simply assigned and manipulated by the South African state; rather it is a "lived space" of continual meaning making and conflict among various social groups. It is constantly made and unmade, claimed and disclaimed by people. The "spatial patterning" of Cape Town stretches back to the seventeenth century, and social identities and the reclamation of its urban space are still closely intertwined today (Bank & Minkley, 1998/99; Jackson, 2003).

But the library as space involves, importantly, librarians as agents both inside and outside of the library building itself and relates to wider views of library service and their social purposes. In her convocation address on why the library as physical space matters, Abigail Van Slyck (2001) underestimates her own recognition of these social dynamics. She tells the impressive story of the early-twentieth-century work of Lillian Gunter in Gainesville, Texas, and how her library career was an outgrowth of her memberships in social and literary clubs. By her efforts to become a library professional, to get involved in the activities of library associations, and to convince officials to apply for a Carnegie grant, Gainesville's first purpose-built public library was erected in 1914. Gunter's progressive philosophy of library service for that historical period translated into how she used the library space creatively and highlighted interactions between the library and its wider social context.

In Cape Town's townships, similar early examples of book collecting and distribution by self-made intellectuals illustrate a native library tradition that did not always culminate in formal library services. The social space for these activities sometimes, but not necessarily always, involved actual public libraries. In the 1930s and 1940s, when libraries in Cape Town were already racially segregated,[6] politicians like Cissy Gool and writers like James La Guma and Christian Ziervogel introduced young men and women from the townships to books and music at social events (Soudien, 2000, p. 36).

Ziervogel, who collected about 15,000 volumes, became the first librarian at the Hyman Liberman Institute in District Six in 1933. By the time he was told to stop supplementing the library collection, he had already added 3,000 of his own books (Clark, 2002, p. 25). The personal libraries and family collections of prominent local Islamic scholars attest also to this library tradition. The Islamic Library in Cape Town, for example, which grew to several thousand items and a membership of 8,700 by 1997, started out as a lending library of 300 items in the home of Ahmed Khan in the residential area of Primrose Park (Haron, 2001).

A central idea in this Cape library tradition was that "the books were just the props," implying that debate and discussion of South Africa's political and cultural conditions was of primary concern, especially for young people. Several debating societies and discussion groups established in Cape

Town during the 1930s and 1940s provided fertile ground for developing an emphasis on oral discourse and the verbal distribution of information. People became aware of political and economic ideas not so much from reading them in books but because they heard them in discussions and arguments inside and outside of the library.

The Lenin Club, the Spartacus Club, the New Era Fellowship, and several other Trotskyist groups were connected in different ways with the influential Non-European Unity Movement, which was formed in December 1943, and with the Teachers' League of South Africa, which was established in June 1913.[7] The Lenin Club, for example, ran a socialist Sunday school for children and held a study group in District Six, as well as open-air meetings. The rival Spartacus Club had its own study class, as did the non-Trotskyist October Club. And many of these political factions taught reading and writing and distributed the books of the Left Book Club (Drew, 2002, pp. 142–43, 186).

This library tradition operated both inside and outside of the library itself and included the production and consumption of reading materials, as well as a wider community involvement. Ziervogel exemplified this tradition best. He belonged to a radical discussion group called the Fifteen Group (Bickford-Smith, Van Heyningen, & Worden, 1999, p. 84), acted as secretary for the Social Welfare Group in Cape Town, and authored several books and newspaper articles.[8] The Non-European Unity Movement, which provided the early political milieu for this library tradition, advocated a policy of non-collaboration with the apartheid state and employed the boycott as "a kind of formula for all seasons" (Alexander, 1989, p. 189). This distinguished it from other influential adversarial political groups in the Western Cape such as the African National Congress, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), and the Pan-Africanist Congress (Pan African Congress).[9]

Alongside this informal library tradition there was a movement for the systematic provision of library services to the African and Coloured sections of Cape Town under the guidance of the South African Library Association (SALA). Several institutions cooperated throughout the 1930s and 1940s to offer library services to the "poorer members of the community." They included the Cape Coloured Carnegie Committee, the Society for Book Distribution, and the Cape Libraries Extension Association. According to Patricia Clark, these institutions were characterized by an "ambivalent liberalism" that developed "separate library services for Whites and Blacks even before the advent of apartheid legislation in 1948" (Clark, 2002, p. 27).

The otherwise excellent work of these institutions and the SALA was sullied by their concessions to apartheid in library services. When, therefore, the Cape Provincial Council passed the Provincial Library Ordinance in 1949 that proclaimed Cape Town as an urban library area and introduced a municipal rate-supported public library service, this provided separate services for blacks and whites. This ordinance for free libraries would not

have been passed without this condition. The highly regarded Douglas Varley, who was praised as the prime mover and "leading light in getting the City Municipal Library System off the ground" (Quinton, 1988, p. 31), lamented his own role in compromising with library apartheid. On the eve of his departure from South Africa in 1961, he said, "In doing so I trod the moral morass in which so many of us in South Africa are struggling."[10]

It is in this context that the Cape library tradition was handed down to a new generation of librarians employed in the Cape Town City Library Service when it was launched in April 1952. Teachers affiliated with the Teachers' League of South Africa who resigned in protest from the Coloured Affairs Department were included in this group, and they educated young library workers in Non-European Unity Movement politics. Some of them ended up managing township libraries in the 1980s. And by that time the primary opposition political forces in Cape Town's townships were still the African National Congress–led Congress movement, which had a mass appeal through the United Democratic Front, and the smaller Non-European Unity Movement and the Pan African Congress (Davies, 1987).

Cape Town's Townships in the 1980s

Political parties that participated in the apartheid tricameral election in August 1984 and that had a meager following in the Coloured townships included the People's Congress Party and the Labour Party.[11] The library as space was contested against this background. Township librarians cooperated and sometimes came into conflict with young political activists, but they also had to contend with the library authorities, state security police, and sometimes with librarians who held different ideological and professional views. In other words, while some librarians cooperated with library authorities and security police, those sympathetic to the Cape library tradition refused to do so. But this tradition was itself contested and adapted in the 1980s.

At most of Cape Town's township schools, teachers and learners who organized themselves under the banner of the African National Congress/ United Democratic Front advocated a "liberation before education" policy, while some schools in middle-class Coloured areas adhered to the Non-European Unity Movement/Teachers' League of South Africa "education for liberation" perspective. As a result, schools and libraries were impacted differently depending on their political allegiance and their physical location. At schools where "liberation before education" held sway, teachers combined classroom academic work with becoming informed about changes that were happening in the country (Wildschut, 2003, p. 112).

This kind of alternative education used classrooms as "zones of liberation" (Bundy, 1989, p. 213). In cooperation with school learners, teachers developed "Awareness Programs," organized plays and poetry readings, and attended film festivals. These activists participated in demonstrations

and marches and were often the victims of police brutality, detention, and torture.[12] They regarded teachers affiliated with the Teachers' League of South Africa as the "Old Guard" (Carelse, 2003, pp. 120–21). For many of them, the local public library became a place to meet and use to plan programs and political strategy.

At schools where Non-European Unity Movement/Teachers' League of South Africa members were dominant, school learners were encouraged to stay in classes and were taught that marches and demonstrations were quick fixes that would not work. Middle-class or elite high schools such as Livingstone, Harold Cressy, and South Peninsula kept their pupils at school and conducted their own workshops. They were seen as conservative and were watched to see if they were carrying out the instructions of the committees that organized marches (Kies, 2003, p. 23). The Non-European Unity Movement/Teachers' League of South Africa teachers were regarded as "armchair politicians." They encouraged school learners to view what was happening as part of "a total political struggle" and not "to lose the momentum of their studies" (Dudley, 2003, p. 40). Learners were provided with study guides that they used at school, but some Unity Movement teachers also gathered at libraries with school learners to discuss political topics, leadership, and how to conduct themselves "in a revolutionary situation" (Bam, 2003, p. 167).

A contest for space commonly faced by township librarians, one that became more complex during the turbulent 1980s, was with gangsters. The several gangs fought each other for "turf" and often confronted librarians about their loyalties and intimidated library users. The Group Areas Act that displaced thousands of people to the Cape Flats townships accelerated gang formation (Schärf, 1990). The gangs staked out geographical areas, which often included or surrounded the library, to establish roots in these communities. Municipal library planners simply ignored this problem by not consulting community leaders about the location of the library. Successive states of emergency in the 1980s contributed to the marginalization of youth and increased gang membership, and by 1990 gangs remained the most powerful organized social force in the country's Coloured townships.

Between 1984 and 1987, townships were beset further by the deployment of South African Defence Force troops in an attempt to quell political resistance. In 1985 there were 35,372 troops in 96 townships around the country (Nathan, 1989, p. 70). The South African Defence Force claimed that the troops were used to protect township residents from "radicals" and "criminals." Soldiers raiding the homes of residents often stuck stickers on furniture that said "Trust me, I am your friend."[13] But their presence was viewed as a threat and as an occupying enemy force. Township space was defended against troops, often in physical battle.

Militant youths dug trenches across roads to trap military vehicles and "lured army patrols into backstreet ambushes, and fired rivets and spark-

plugs from home-made catapults" (Nathan, 1989, p. 72). Military vehicles were often stationed opposite schools and shopping centers and near the libraries, where they knew activists could be found. Their presence provoked intense opposition, and libraries in the Cape Flats "unrest" areas had to be closed on September 11, 1985, May 1, 1986, and June 16, 1986, and on other occasions to protect the "lives of Council employees and Council property."[14] Several librarians joined the call for the removal of troops from the townships.[15]

Another contest confronting township librarians related to unequal services and facilities and the unfair allocation of physical space. The application of standards for physical space was race-sensitive, in spite of the claim of a standard floor area of 700–900 square meters for branch libraries that served 30,000 to 50,000 people (Vermeulen, 1986, p. 5). In this way, a report in 1977 revealed that the size of Sea Point branch library in a white area with a projected population of 33,430 was 1,022 square meters, or 30.6 square meters per 1,000 people. Camps Bay branch library, also in a white area with a projected population of 6,500, was 372 square meters, or 57.3 square meters per 1,000 people. But Hanover Park branch library, which had a projected population of 60,000 was 840 square meters, or 14.0 square meters per 1,000 people; and Bonteheuwel branch library with a projected population of 45,000 was 361 square meters, or 8.0 square meters per 1,000 people (Weichel, 1978, p. 43).

Some of the township librarians and their libraries both accommodated and resisted these political, social, and professional forces in ways that reveal the complexity of conflicts and struggles of the library as contested yet shared space.

Lentegeur Public Library

Lentegeur Public Library was opened in 1979 and was one of three libraries serving Mitchell's Plain in the 1980s. Mitchell's Plain was developed in 1974 on a large tract of land that was a wilderness of shrub-covered dunes; it was intended to become a self-contained area with a full range of community facilities. It was better off than most townships in respect to its cultural and recreational amenities. But these were still inadequate for a population that had already reached 173,659 and that had 42 primary schools and 13 high schools by 1985 (*South African Township Annual,* 1988, pp. 14–16). The suburb of Lentegeur was affected by the violence that plagued Mitchell's Plain during the 1980s.[16]

The Lentegeur Public Library staff, according to former librarian the Reverend Clarence Cheemee,[17] used the resources to reach out to the community despite difficult circumstances. The library's membership grew from 4,408 to 11,752 during the 1980s, and it had a book stock of 33,842 items by June 1990.[18] Its space was both offered to and claimed by community groups to serve a range of purposes—political and nonpolitical.

The United Democratic Front–aligned Mitchell's Plain Youth Movement, for example, used the library hall.[19]

A rapport that developed initially as a result of visits to the library by teachers with groups of school learners provided a platform on which to build a relationship of trust when the security situation worsened during the 1980s. One example is the Maryland Retreat Centre Adult Literacy Program. It started when a child informed the librarian during a story-telling session that her father could not read or write. The Catholic Church of the Cape Town Diocese, the library staff, and other community members cooperated in this literacy initiative. Many adults from Lentegeur and later from other areas of Mitchell's Plain learned to read and write through this program and registered as library members.[20] Persistent efforts by the librarians convinced senior library management of the value of this program and led to the establishment of a special fund to purchase suitable literacy materials.

Another successful library project in the 1980s was an attempt to recover memories and memorabilia from former District Six residents who had been displaced to Lentegeur by the Group Areas Act. Library staff members appealed to the community for photographs and other District Six remnants and constructed an impressive exhibition. Videos and artwork added variety to the exhibition, which was displayed at the Lentegeur library before it was transferred to other libraries in Mitchell's Plain and a number of Cape Town's township libraries.

Happy reunions of former District Six residents at these exhibitions fostered a new sense of space and community. Local Lentegeur businessmen, like the Parkers, regularly sponsored refreshments for these events, and some extended their community involvement by using the library facilities. Pharmacist Dr. Iqbal Salwary, for example, often used the library hall for talks on public health issues like sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, rape, drug abuse, and HIV/AIDS.[21]

The library space was also used by organizations such as Mosaic for assertiveness training for women, by support groups like Headway for victims of head injuries, and for special Poetry Days where local poets read their work. It was therefore in a climate of community ownership and credibility that young African National Congress/United Democratic Front activists trusted the Lentegeur library staff to provide safe refuge for them from apartheid security police during times of extreme township violence. The situation was highly volatile in Mitchell's Plain, where residents supported either the tricameral parliament political parties or the African National Congress/United Democratic Front liberation movement. United Democratic Front political activists often hid themselves in libraries in Mitchell's Plain, which were usually surrounded by security police in armored vehicles for several weeks at a time during the states of emergency. But there was seldom any direct threat of violence to the Lentegeur Public Library and its staff by the political activists, local gangs, or the community.

Several prominent United Democratic Front members were also Lentegeur Public Library members and were voracious readers. Theresa Solomons, who became mayor of Cape Town after South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, and her husband Marcus often used the library resources for their political education and for meetings. And senior United Democratic Front leader and former Minister of Transport, Dullah Omar (who passed away in March 2004), used the Lentegeur library hall to address the community in the mid-1980s.

There was constructive cooperation with the nearby Woodlands Community Resource Centre, which was set up with independently sponsored funds. The Lentegeur library staff, for example, helped to organize the center's library materials. At that time, the Woodlands Community Resource Centre had a more prominent news profile than the library as a result of its political alignment. But while the Lentegeur Public Library's response to extraordinary township circumstances went unheralded, it won the trust of a politically divided community and established the credibility of the library as contested but shared public space.

Hanover Park Public Library

A permanent public library was opened in Hanover Park in 1976, after an old farmhouse had been used since 1972.[22] Hanover Park was established in 1969 to accommodate Coloured families resettled in terms of the provisions of the Group Areas Act. In the 1980s it was still a flat, undeveloped sandy area with many open spaces that were untidy, unhygienic, and unsafe. By 1978 the population was about 50,000 with few social, cultural, and shopping facilities. These were centrally located, and this meant limited access to residents living in peripheral areas (Weichel, 1978, p. 1). The library's membership dropped dramatically from 15,946 in 1980 to 5,418 in 1990, and the book stock shrank from 31,105 to 24,259 items.[23]

John Jacobs, who was the librarian at Hanover Park in the 1980s, was sensitive to the library tradition associated with Ziervogel and the political views of the Non-European Unity Movement and the Cape Action League (CAL).[24] The CAL was part of the National Forum, a national-level Black Consciousness organization that emerged as an idea in Cape Town in November 1982.[25] The National Forum was inaugurated in Pretoria in June 1983, two months before the United Democratic Front was launched, and it opposed the United Democratic Front and the Charterist view of national liberation. It advocated a socialist solution to South Africa's problems and the restructuring of society "by overthrowing the established 'racist/capitalist' order" (Saunders, 1989, p. 472). For this reason, Hanover Park and other libraries where Jacobs worked, such as the Bishop Lavis Public Library and the library of the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHED), were sympathetic environments to groups linked with worker's organizations and left wing groups. The Bishop Lavis Action Committee

(BLAC), which was aligned with the Cape Action League, was one such organization, and its members regularly met in the Bishop Lavis Public Library to exchange materials and produce newsletters.

But Hanover Park's library hall was also made available for other political groups. Under the guise of a chess club, for example, a youth cell of the Pan African Congress–aligned Muslim political strand called Qibla met under the leadership of the activist Ahmed Cassim. Qibla, which drew on "an uncompromisingly revolutionary interpretation of the Quran," also opposed the United Democratic Front's strategy and maintained sympathetic relationships with the Non-European Unity Movement and the Black Consciousness movement (Meer, 1989, p. 83).

Jacobs also participated in the wider political education of young activists through the provision of film shows at the library. The British Council expedited this process by putting pressure on the management of Cape Town City Libraries to allow the screening of films at Hanover Park Public Library. Jacobs successfully purchased banned books and smuggled them into the country via the neighboring "homelands" such as Ciskei and Transkei and then distributed them to local activists.[26]

The library was often targeted by gangsters and sometimes by young political activists during the 1980s. There was a fire following a burglary in September 1981 that caused R40,000 damage, and an alarm system was only installed in 1988.[27] On May 23, 1989, the library was closed because of gang warfare in the area, and there was another attempt to burgle and set fire to the library.[28] The security situation at Hanover Park Public Library worsened when it had to close five times in the second half of 1989, and emergency arrangements had to be made to use security guards and to install an electronic book detection system. The Cape Town City Library management introduced regular foot patrols by the South African police to deter criminal activities, but the surveillance of political activists in the library and the protection of council property were probably the real reasons for the patrols. Librarians were encouraged to liaise with the local police and to develop emergency security plans to deal with, among other things, bomb threats (Fletcher, 1988, pp. 6–8). The space that Hanover Park Public library occupied in the 1980s exposed it to several kinds of conflict, and the librarian's response exemplified aspects of the early Cape library tradition.

Bonteheuwel Public Library

The Bonteheuwel Public Library was opened in 1967 after being housed in a private home since 1964.[29] Most of the Bonteheuwel residents were forcibly moved there from District Six and Diep River areas on June 25, 1965 under the Group Areas Act. Bonteheuwel was a farm originally and "is historically characterized by environmental degradation."[30] By 1991 Bonteheuwel had a population of 47,364 (Central Statistical Service, 1991). The

library's membership dropped dramatically from 21,531 in 1980 to 6,206 in 1990, and the book stock declined from 20,750 to 15,769 items.[31]

Vincent Kolbe, who worked at several libraries on the Cape Flats during the 1980s, represents most fully the Cape library tradition. He had worked at the Hyman Liberman Library during the early part of his career, and recalls the influence of Ziervogel on its collection and ethos. He views the Ziervogel era as the roots of a kind of working-class librarianship in which trade union leaders such as James La Guma and John Gomas, Non-European Unity Movement members, and other organic intellectuals used the library as a marketplace for ideas.[32] The oral tradition had been a significant source of education in this space, and semiliterate people learned all kinds of ideas not from the books but from the debates and discussions in the library. The books were often incidental to the use of the library as space for meetings by any groups in the community.

When Kolbe started working at the Bonteheuwel Public Library, he was familiar with many of the District Six residents who had been resettled there, and it was not difficult for him to continue this tradition. A library community spirit allowed teachers, for example, to instruct learners on their prescribed English literature in the library on Sundays. The quality of library service was affected adversely, however, by a book supply manipulated in favor of white areas. This was achieved by fiddling library standards. The allocation rate per head of the population, for example, was qualified by the phrase "except in areas of known illiteracy" and resulted in smaller supplies of books to township libraries.

By the 1980s the Non-European Unity Movement had lost its appeal and was regarded by Bonteheuwel activists as too much of a "talk shop." Instead, the Black Consciousness movement and the United Democratic Front were popular, especially among the younger library members. The Bonteheuwel Youth Movement (BYO), the Bonteheuwel Interim Students Congress (BISCO), and the Bonteheuewel Military Wing (BMW), which had close links with the African National Congress's military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe–MK (Spear of the Nation), were active in the township. BISCO used the library regularly for its liaison committee meetings.[33]

Kolbe became a source for banned literature such as trade union material; books by Antonio Gramsci and others that dealt with the Nicaraguan, Chilean, and Cuban revolutions; works by authors such as African American political activist Angela Davis; and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) audio recordings and videocassettes. At Kensington Public Library, where Kolbe worked for a while, activists were also assisted with the printing of political leaflets. A sports equipment bag that contained the banned materials was kept under the lending desk and used secretly by activists. Several librarians were involved in this larger network of sympathetic professionals, intellectuals, and activists.

Kolbe and the activists who met in the library were aware of surveillance

by security police. On several occasions, activist library members were arrested and dragged out of the Bonteheuwel library. Kolbe learned from a staff member that security personnel stationed at his library by senior library management to "protect the staff and council property" actually intended to use the library as a vantage point for snipers. He fiercely objected to this subterfuge by security police to harm young activists and forbade the presence of police in the library. Constant exposure to tear gassing and violence that resulted in the deaths of some library users eventually led to a breakdown in Kolbe's health. He left Bonteheuwel library in the mid-1980s; he retired from the Cape Town City Library Service in 1991 and became involved in the development of local museums, most notably the District Six museum.

With the help of his staff, Kolbe had tried to keep the Bonteheuwel Public Library open during the "unrest" in order to challenge the strategies of political activists and to engage them intellectually. But Bonteheuwel Public Library and Kewtown Public Library, where Kolbe had worked earlier, were also cultural centers. This variation of the Cape library tradition derived from Kolbe's contacts in the 1950s with working-class poets such as James Matthews, Peter Clarke, and George Hallett, who often recited their poetry at the library. Kolbe remembers them as a "Bohemian set, unlike those at the Liberman [Institute, in District Six] where the discourse was very political" (Soudien, 2000, p. 36). He carried this variation of the Cape library tradition into the Kewtown, Bonteheuwel, and other township libraries where he worked during the 1980s. In other words, the library space was not just about political debate. Library users also learned about Kolbe's love and wide appreciation of music that accommodated both local minstrel music and "boeremusiek" (Afrikaans music). His subsequent work with local museums continued the early Cape library tradition of using artifacts and audiovisual material to transcend barriers of language, literacy, and books.

CONCLUSION

Commentary that public libraries were inadequate, passive, and politically indifferent to social change in South Africa in the 1980s is not entirely correct. Complexity and differentiation, for example, better describe the responses of township libraries on the Cape Flats. They were not simple agencies of government propaganda. Some were marketplaces for ideas and debate, spaces in working-class areas with low levels of literacy where the books, as props, supported oral discourse. In these cases, librarians continued and sometimes adapted a library tradition deeply rooted in Cape Town's townships.

Township residents occupied the space of public libraries and invested them with meaning and identity to cope with memories of forced removals, to confront state-imposed violence, and to foster a sense of community.

In this process, public libraries became contested but shared space. Some librarians also resisted libraries being seen as apartheid space and used the library as a site of struggle. In addition, therefore, to fulfilling traditional library functions, public libraries became venues for political education and for political meetings, places of safety for activists, and instruments of personal and community empowerment. The Cape library tradition blended well with the ways in which political activists communicated and kept each informed. Mass meetings, clandestine operations, personally transporting banned literature and making secret arrangements for their exchange, and sourcing materials both inside and outside of the library all resonated with this tradition and with an emphasis on orality.

The public library's success or failure as an instrument of social change cannot be judged only by narrow information-based criteria, especially information in print. The Cape library tradition, which was also an oral tradition, emphasized live discussion, performance, and the circulation of ideas. When asked, some people said that they learned about certain political concepts from debates held in the library. Therefore, according to a perspective where public libraries occupy a space that extends into the life of the community and beyond books and the institutions of literacy, they certainly imbricate social change. The events documented here show that township librarians and libraries on the Cape Flats, albeit briefly and perhaps in spite of themselves, actually participated in social change in South Africa. And they deserve a place in the history of the liberation struggle.

Notes

1. The National Party was formed in 1914 and came to power in 1948. It introduced "apartheid" as an official government policy of racial separation at all levels (Saunders, 1989, pp. 486, 490). In February 1990 National Party president F. W. de Klerk unbanned the African National Congress (ANC) and other political organizations and freed political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, who was released on February 11, 1990. This paved the way for negotiations and the first democratic elections on April 26–27, 1994.
2. The United Democratic Front was established on August 20, 1983 and was an extra-parliamentary, nonracial political alliance of various organizations striving for a democratic South Africa. The African National Congress, the ruling political party today, was founded in 1912 as the South African Native National Congress. It started as a moderate, even conservative, organization, but opted for an armed struggle against the National Party regime after being banned in 1960 (Saunders, 1989, pp. 492, 486).
3. The Cape Flats are the low plain, which was once under the sea but now connects the Cape Peninsula to the mainland of Africa. It was originally covered by a light growth of low bushes, which was stripped by generations of slaves in search of firewood, until the flats became a desert of shifting sand dunes (Potgieter, du Plessis, & Hiemstra, 1971, vol. 3, p. 31). The Cape Flats was the area to which people were forced to move and "became understood as a space associated with displacement, hardship and suffering" (Bohlin, 2001, p. 276).
4. "Shooting in Eastern Cape Library: Boy Sent for Observation," *Argus,* October, 19, 1985, p. 5.
5. The Langa Public Library was burned down during the riots in Cape Town in 1960; see D. Varley, "Little Done for Bantu Library Service, He Says," *Argus,* September 28, 1961. The Winifred Holtby Memorial Library in Soweto was destroyed in the unrest of 1976 (Berry & Bishop, 1985, p. 23), and libraries were included in fifteen incidents of dam-

age to civic halls and community centers in Cape Town from August to September 1976 (Western, 1996, p. 267). Libraries could also have been included in the 1,153 buildings belonging to the state damaged or destroyed in 1985 ("Police Losses in Riots, *South African Digest,* March 7, 1986, p. 189). Mini-limpet mines damaged the Rocklands Public Library in Mitchell's Plain on October 20, 1988, and Randfontein Public Library on December 15, 1988 (Morris, 1989/1990, unnumbered).

6. "Colour Bar in City Library," *Cape Standard,* January 17, 1939, p. 4.
7. The Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) opposed the proposal of a Coloured Affairs Department and advocated a program of noncollaboration and boycotts. It remained ideologically aloof from other liberation movements and adhered to strict Trotskyite principles (Saunders, 1989, pp. 396–97, 490); the NEUM became the New Unity Movement (NUM) in April 1985. The Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA) was affiliated with the NEUM and despised colleagues who cooperated with the government as "traitors" and "quislings" (Adhikari, 1993).
8. See Ziervogel (1936, 1938, 1944). For newspaper articles see "The Tar-Brush Peril: A Study of the 'Coloured-European' Problem," *Cape Standard,* February 7, 1939, p. 11; "Progress of Social Welfare Group: Mr. Ziervogel gives Annual Report," *Cape Standard,* May 9, 1939, p. 15; "The Old Order Passeth—C. Ziervogel Writes on Leadership," *Cape Standard,* August 8, 1939, p. 11; "Know This . . . Brown South Africa," *Cape Standard,* October 14, 1939, p. 3, continued in *Cape Standard,* October 31, 1939, p. 12, and November 7, 1939, p. 10.
9. The Communist Party of South Africa was formed in 1921 in Cape Town to promote Marxist socialism. It was outlawed in 1950 under the Suppression of Communism Act and reformed as the South African Communist Party in 1953. The Pan-Africanist Congress was established in 1959 by breakaway Africanist members of the ANC under the presidency of Robert Sobukwe (Saunders, 1989, pp. 487, 490).
10. D. Varley, "Little Done for Bantu Library Service, He Says," *Argus,* September 28, 1961.
11. The tricameral system introduced Coloured and Indian voters into government at the expense of blacks without loosening white control (Saunders, 1989, p. 466).
12. Several personal accounts by victims tell of police brutality and torture in Cape Town in 1985 (Pienaar & Willemse, 1986; Meer, 1989; Chubb & Van Dijk, 2001).
13. "The Townships Are Occupied," *SASPU National,* December 12, 1984, p. 3.
14. *Annual Report of the City Librarian, 1985–1986* (Cape Town, 1986), p. 22.
15. "Troops Must Get Out Now!" *SASPU National,* December 12, 1985, p. 10; "Troops Out!" *Grassroots,* October 6, 1985, p. 1.
16. See the following newspaper articles: "May Day Stayaway by 'Plain Pupils,'" *Cape Herald: The Plainsman,* May 3, 1985; "Bomb Scare at 2 Plain High Schools," *Cape Herald: The Plainsman,* August 17, 1985; "Moms Mad at Police Action," *Cape Herald: The Plainsman,* August 24, 1985; "Bomb Blasts at Mitchell's Plain," *Argus,* October 1, 1988.
17. Interview with the Reverend Clarence Cheemee, former librarian-in-charge at Lentegeur Public Library, Mitchell's Plain, December 29, 2004.
18. *Cape Town City Libraries in Review: Annual Report, 1981* (Cape Town, 1982); *Annual Report of Cape Town City Libraries, 1989/90* (City of Cape Town, 1990).
19. "Let Us Use Halls," *Grassroots,* May 1982, p. 15.
20. "Literacy Classes," *Cape Herald: The Plainsman,* March 16, 1985, p. 3.
21. "Health Lectures at Plain Libraries" *Cape Herald: The Plainsman,* July 13, 1985, p. 5.
22. "Puik Nuwe Biblioteek by Hanover Park," *Alpha,* September 1976, p. 4.
23. *Annual Report of Cape Town City Libraries, 1989/90* (City of Cape Town, 1990); *Cape Town City Libraries in Review: Annual Report, 1980* (City of Cape Town, 1981).
24. Interview with John Jacobs, former librarian-in-charge at Hanover Park Public Library, Centurion, January 10, 2005.
25. N. Alexander, in Pienaar and Willemse (1986, p. 13). The Black Consciousness movement was developed by black (African, Indian, and Coloured) students after 1968 and promoted a positive black worldview (Saunders, 1989, p. 487).
26. "Homelands" were regions where members of particular African language groups like Zulu, Xhosa, and Tswana were offered self-government by the National Party. The "Homelands" system was the backbone of "grand apartheid" (Saunders, 1989, p. 489).
27. *Cape Town City Libraries in Review: Annual Report, 1981* (Cape Town, 1982); and *Cape Town City Libraries in Review: Annual Report, 1987–1988* (Cape Town, 1988), p. 1.
28. *Annual Report [Cape Town City Libraries] July 1988-June 1989* (Cape Town, 1989), p. 5.

29. *Annual Report of the City Librarian, 1985–1986* (Cape Town, 1986), p. 8.
30. *Bonteheuwel Community Profile—Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.* Retrieved August 26, 2005, from http://www.ijr.org.za/reconciliationreconstruction/memoryhealing/communityprofiles.
31. *Cape Town City Libraries in Review: Annual Report, 1980* (City of Cape Town, 1981); and *Annual Report of Cape Town City Libraries, 1989/90* (City of Cape Town, 1990).
32. Interview with Vincent Kolbe, former librarian-in-charge at Bonteheuwel library, Southfield, July 2, 2003.
33. Colleen Williams, a library member associated with the Bonteheuwel Military Wing, was killed by a mini-limpet mine on July 23, 1989; Anton Fransch, who also used the Bonteheuwel library as a BISCO member, was killed by security police in a shootout on November 17, 1989 (Morris, 1989/1990).

REFERENCES

Adhikari, M. (1993). *Let us live for our children: The teachers league of South Africa.* Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
Alexander, N. (1989). Non-collaboration in the Western Cape, 1943–1963. In W. G. James and M. Simons (Eds.). *The angry divide: Social and economic history of the Western Cape* (pp. 180–191). Cape Town: David Philip.
Bachelard, G. (1994). *The poetics of space.* Boston: Beacon.
Bam, J. (2003). Becoming teachers in the struggle. In A. Wieder (Ed.), *Voices from Cape Town classrooms: Oral histories of teachers who fought apartheid* (pp. 166–172). New York: Peter Lang.
Bank, A., & Minkley, G. (1998/99). Editorial: Genealogies of space and identity in Cape Town. *Kronos: Journal of Cape History, 25,* 4–16.
Berry, P., & Bishop, A. (Eds.). (1985). *Testament of a generation: The journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby.* London: Virago Press.
Bickford-Smith, V., Van Heyningen, E., & Worden, N. (Eds.). (1999). *Cape Town in the 20th century: An illustrated social history.* Claremont: David Philip.
Bohlin, A. (2001). Places of longing and belonging: Memories of the group area proclamation of a South African fishing village. In B. Bender and M. Winer (Eds.), *Contested landscapes: Movement, exile and place* (pp. 273–287). Oxford: Berg.
Bundy, C. (1989). "Action, Comrades, Action!": The politics of youth-student resistance in the Western Cape, 1985. In W. G. James and M. Simons (Eds.), *The angry divide: Social and economic history of the Western Cape* (pp. 206–217). Cape Town: David Philip.
Carelse, V. (2003). Becoming teachers in the struggle. In A. Wieder (Ed.), *Voices from Cape Town classrooms: Oral histories of teachers who fought apartheid* (pp. 119–126). New York: Peter Lang.
Castells, M. (1983). *The city and the grassroots: A cross-cultural theory of urban social movements.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Central Statistical Service, Population Census. (1991). *Selected statistical region—Cape Peninsula: Part 1. Social characteristics.* (CSS Report 03-01-11).
Chubb, K., & Van Dijk, L. (2001). *Between anger and hope: South Africa's youth and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.* Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
Clark, P. (2002). "Better Libraries for Everyone!": The development of library services in the Western Cape in the 1940s. *Innovation: Appropriate Librarianship and Information Work in Southern Africa, 28,* 22–30.
Coleman, M. (Ed.). (1998). *A crime against humanity: Analyzing the repression of the apartheid state.* Cape Town: David Philip.
Davies, J. (1987, September 2). Lost chances: The politics of Cape Town. *New Era,* 10–13.
Drew, A. (2002). *Discordant comrades: Identities and loyalties on the South African left.* Pretoria: Unisa Press.
Dudley, R. (2003). Non-racialism: Teachers' League Stories. In A. Wieder (Ed.), *Voices from Cape Town classrooms: Oral histories of teachers who fought apartheid* (pp. 34–41). New York: Peter Lang.
Ellis, C. S. (1987). *Literacy statistics in the RSA, 1980.* Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Erasmus, Z. (Ed.). (2001). *Coloured by history, shaped by place: New perspectives on Coloured identities in Cape Town.* Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Field, S. (Ed.). (2001). *Lost communities, living memories: Remembering forced removals in Cape Town.* Cape Town: David Philip.

Fletcher, J. S. T. (1988). Security in buildings, *Cape Librarian, 32,* 6–8.

Haron, M. (2001). A window into the world of personal and community libraries: Case studies from the Cape Muslim community. *Current Writing, 13,* 56–65.

Hart, D. M. (1990). *Master plans: The South African government's razing of Sophiatown, Cato Manor and District Six.* Ann Arbor, MI: UMI.

Jackson, S. M. (2003). Being and belonging: Space and identity in Cape Town. *Anthropology and Humanism, 28*(1), 61–84.

Karlese, C-M. (1991). Resource centres: Popular information services. *Cape Librarian, 35*(7), 14.

Karlese, C-M., & Nassimbeni, M. C. (1997). Some aspects of the sociology of information: A framework for analysis of information provision in the resource centre sector of South Africa. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science, 65*(1), 31–40.

Kies, H. (2003). Non-racialism: Teachers' League Stories. In A. Wieder (Ed.), *Voices from Cape Town classrooms: Oral histories of teachers who fought apartheid* (pp. 17–25). New York: Peter Lang.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Legassick, M. (1998). Review article: Myth and reality in the struggle against apartheid. *Journal of Southern African Studies, 24*(2), 443–459.

Meer, F. (Ed.). (1989). *Resistance in the townships.* Durban: Madiba Publications.

Morris, M. (1989/1990). *State of the nation: 1988 & 89 South Africa-related trouble numbers & notes.* London: Terrorism Research & Research Associates.

Nassimbeni, M. C. (1991). Factors affecting the role of the public library as an agency of development in South Africa. *Language Projects Review, 6,* 45–49.

Nathan, L. (1989). Troops in the townships, 1984–1987. In J. Cock and L. Nathan (Eds.), *War and society: The militarisation of South Africa* (pp. 67–78). Cape Town: David Philip.

Pienaar, H., & Willemse, H. (1986). *Die Trojaanse Perd: Onderhoude oor die Noodtoestand in die Kaap, 1985* [The Trojan Horse: Interviews about the state of emergency in the Cape, 1985]. Emmarentia: Taurus.

Potgieter, D. J., du Plessis, P. C., & Hiemstra, L. W. (Eds.) (1971). *Standard encyclopaedia of Southern Africa.* Cape Town: NASOU.

Quinton, J. C. (1988). *The library profession in the Western Cape: The first half century, 1938–1988.* Cape Town: SAILIS Western Cape Branch.

Saunders, C. (Ed.). (1989). *Reader's Digest illustrated history of South Africa: The real story.* Cape Town: Reader's Digest Association.

Schärf, W. (1990). The resurgence of urban street gangs and community responses in Cape Town during the late eighties. In D. Hansson and D. van Zyl Smit (Eds.), *Towards justice? Crime and state control in South Africa* (pp. 232–263). Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Seekings, J. (1992). *South Africa's townships, 1980–1991: An annotated bibliography.* Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch Research Unit for Sociology of Development, Occasional Paper no. 18.

Shera, J. (1949). *Foundations of the public library: The origins of the public library movement in New England, 1629–1855.* Hamden, Connecticut: Shoestring Press.

Siegrühn, A. (1990). Library symposium. *Language Projects Review, 5,* 5.

Soja, E. W. (1985). The spatiality of social life: Towards a transformative retheorization. In D. Gregory and J. Urry (Eds.), *Social relations and spatial structures* (pp. 90–127). London: Macmillan.

Soudien, C. (2000). Social conditions, cultural and political life in working-class Cape Town, 1950 to 1990. In H. Willemse (Ed.), *More than brothers: Peter Clark and James Matthews at 70* (pp. 23–37). Cape Town: Kwela Books.

The South African Township Annual. (1988). Johannesburg: IR Research Surveys, (WP).

Survey of Race Relations. (1985). Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.

Van Slyck, A. A. (2001). The librarian and the library: Why place matters. *Libraries & Culture, 36*(4), 518–523.

Van Zijl, P. (1989). *People's libraries in support of people's education.* U.S. Department of Education; Office of Educational Research and Improvement: ERIC.

Vermeulen, C. H. (1986). Cape Town city libraries. *Cape Librarian, 30*(1), 3–7.

Weichel, K. (1978). *An evaluation of community facilities in Hanover Park.* Cape Town: University of Cape Town Urban Problems Research Unit.

Western, J. 1996. *Outcast Cape Town.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wildschut, K. (2003). Becoming teachers in the struggle. In A. Wieder (Ed.), *Voices from Cape Town classrooms: Oral histories of teachers who fought apartheid* (pp. 110–118). New York: Peter Lang.

Ziervogel, C. (1936). *The Coloured people and the race problem.* Ceres: Weber.

Ziervogel, C. (1938). *Brown South Africa.* Cape Town: Maskew Miller.

Ziervogel, C. (1944). *Who are the Coloured people?* Cape Town: African Bookman.

Archie L. Dick is a professor in the Department of Information Science at the University of Pretoria in the Republic of South Africa. He was director of school and deputy dean in the Faculty of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of South Africa from 2000 to 2003. He holds undergraduate degrees in library and information science from the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, a masters degree from the University of Washington in Seattle, and a doctorate from the University of Cape Town, South Africa. He is the author of *The Philosophy, Politics and Economics of Information,* published by the University of South Africa Press in 2002. He is currently working on a project dealing with the politics of the regulation of reading in South Africa.