

Struggle libraries

under cover



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During the 1980s the Cape Flats townships and their libraries were caught up in the turbulence of the anti-apartheid struggle. Many of us still remember that decade vividly. But few know of the struggle library tradition that explains how some librarians became agents of social change on the Cape Flats. They should be remembered and deserve honourable mention in the history of the struggle.

When librarians talk about social change, they still tend to emphasise:

- ◆ the institutions and agents of literacy such as books, libraries, publishing and reading
- ◆ the importance of the written or printed word; and
- ◆ their transforming effects on individuals and societies.

Public libraries in apartheid South Africa, especially in the 1980s, were seen as 'mainstream', conservative, passive, inadequate, out of touch with the information needs of their communities, and indifferent to social change. Alternative information centres, people's libraries and community resource centres (CRCs) that emerged at that time enjoyed 'liberation struggle' legitimacy while official library and information services such as Cape Town City Libraries were often associated with the propagation of apartheid.

This observation, however, obscures the manner in which some public librarians responded to actual situations in their town-

ships. In the case of the Cape Flats with its low levels of literacy, it overlooks an old tradition of library service in which live discussion and debate, and the oral circulation of ideas both precluded and included the use of books, reading and libraries. And it misunderstands some of the ways in which libraries, books and information were used

in the liberation struggle. I want to show how, what I call a Cape Library Tradition, which had strong oral features, operated in public libraries in Lentegeur, Hanover Park and Bonteheuwel townships.

One of the criticisms levelled against public libraries in the 1980s was that they were sites of conflict and struggle, and that they should therefore not be neutral. In a militarised South Africa, libraries were certainly sites of conflict as in the case of a fourteen-year old boy in 1988 that shot indiscriminately at users in the children's section of an Eastern Cape Library, and explained that he always wanted to be a policeman so that he could shoot people. Public libraries were regular targets for destruction or damage during the periods of unrest throughout the apartheid era.

The United Democratic Front (UDF), which was launched in Mitchell's Plain in 1983, coordinated hundreds of autonomous organisations and thousands of activists that 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 (ANC). The prominence of the ANC-led liberation movement during that period overshadowed the roles played by other liberation forces that advocated different methods and goals in the struggle to overthrow the apartheid regime. Youth groups, civic associations and trade unions that responded to township grievances and workplace oppression, in fact, conceded this leadership role to the ANC. 'The masses, in other words, chose the ANC rather than the other way around.' These local struggles around social grievances as well as national demands yielded a complex political space in most townships.

Township libraries

Township libraries and librarians were not isolated from these struggles. Some were guided by the views of a library tradition that had its roots in the 1930s and 1940s when self-made intellectuals collected and distributed books and magazines. Politicians like Cissy Gool and writers like James La Guma and Christian Ziervogel

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introduced young men and women from the townships to books and music at their parties. 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 for political reasons he had already added 3 000 of his own books.

The central idea of the Cape Library Tradition was that 'the books were just the props'. It implied that live debate and public discussion of South Africa's political and cultural conditions was of primary concern especially for young people.

The role of various societies and discussion groups

Several debating societies and discussion groups such as the Lenin Club, the Spartacus Club, the New Era Fellowship and several other Trotskyist groups were established in Cape Town during the 1930s and 1940s, and articulated in different ways with the influential Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) that was formed in December 1943, and with the even older Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA). They provided fertile ground for developing an emphasis on oral discourse, public performance and the word-of-mouth distribution of information. People became aware of political and economic ideas not so much from reading them in books but because they had heard them in discussions and arguments inside and outside of the library.

The NEUM, which provided the early political milieu for this library tradition, advocated a policy of non-collaboration with the apartheid state and employed the boycott strategy as 'a kind of formula for all seasons'. This distinguished it from other influential adversarial political groups in the Western Cape such as the ANC, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). 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 TLSA who had resigned in protest from the Coloured Affairs Department also worked in the library service, and they educated young library assistants in South African politics. Vincent Kolbe (retired librarian), for example, said that he learned about Marx, Engels and dialectical materialism on the belt of the processing department of the library.

Some of these young librarians carried this tradition into the Cape Flats townships in the 1980s, by which time illiteracy levels had risen by about 19% since the 1960s. And by that time the primary opposition political forces in Cape Town's townships were still the ANC-led Congress movement that then had a mass appeal through the UDF, and the smaller PAC and NEUM that became the NUM in April 1985. Some of the political parties that participated

in the apartheid tricameral election in August 1984 that had a smaller following in the townships, included the People's Congress Party and the Labour Party. 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, 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 the tradition was itself contested and adapted in the 1980s.

Schools and libraries

Schools and libraries in the townships were impacted upon differently depending on their political allegiance, and their physical location. At schools where an UDF view of 'liberation before education' held sway, teachers combined classroom academic work with becoming informed

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about changes that were happening in the country. These activists participated in demonstrations and marches, and were often the victims of police brutality, detention and torture. For them, the local public library became a place to meet and use for planning awareness programs and political strategy.

At some middle-class schools where the NUM view of 'education for liberation' prevailed, learners were encouraged to stay in classes and were taught that protest marches and demonstrations were quick fixes that would not work. These schools were seen as conservative and were watched to see if they were carrying out the instructions of the committees that organised marches. Teachers encouraged learners to view what was happening as part of 'a total political struggle' and not 'to lose the momentum of their studies'. Learners were provided with study guides that they used at school, but some NUM teachers



also gathered at libraries with school learners to discuss political topics, leadership and how to conduct themselves 'in a revolutionary situation'.

The influence of gangs

A contest for space with gangsters commonly faced by township librarians, became more complex during the turbulent 1980s. Several gangs fought each other for 'turf', and often confronted librarians about their loyalties and intimidated library users. In Hanover Park, the old library building used in 1974 was known to be a gang's hideout. The gang showed its resentment by damaging the fence and walls, and took 'enough plaster to enable them to detach individual bricks.' By 1982, sixteen gangs had parcelled up Hanover Park among themselves in a way that surrounded the new library (where I worked in 1977/8). An arsenal of weapons removed from young gangsters was kept in a back room of the library. In Manenberg township there were over 80 active gangs during the 1980s and the library was under threat of permanent closure on many occasions. Successive states of emergency in this period contributed to the marginalisation of youth and increased gang membership, and by 1990 gangs remained the most powerful organised social force in the Cape Flats

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townships.

Between 1984 and 1987, townships were beset further by the deployment of South African Defence Force (SADF) troops in an attempt to quell political resistance. In 1985, there were 35 372 troops in 96 townships around the country. The SADF claimed that the troops were used to protect township residents from 'radicals' and 'criminals', and soldiers raiding the homes of residents often stuck stickers on furniture that said 'Trust me, I am your friend'.

But many residents viewed their presence 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 sparkplugs from home-made catapults'. Military vehicles were often stationed opposite schools and shopping centres 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 11 September 1985, 1 May 1986 and 16 June 1986 and on other occasions to protect the 'lives of Council employees and Council property'. Several librarians joined the call for the removal of troops from the townships.

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Lentegeur Public Library

The Lentegeur Public Library staff, according to former librarian Reverend Clarence Cheemee, used the resources to reach out to the community despite difficult circumstances. Its space was both offered to and claimed by community groups to serve a range of purposes - both political and non-political. The UDF-aligned Mitchell's Plain Youth Movement, for example, used the library hall.

A successful Lentegeur 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 that 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.

It was therefore in a climate of community ownership and credibility that young ANC/UDF 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 either supported the tricameral parliament political parties or the ANC/UDF liberation movement. UDF political activists often hid themselves in libraries in Mitchell's Plain, which were usually surrounded by security police in armoured vehicles for several weeks at a time during the states of emergency.

Several prominent UDF 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 UDF leader and former ANC Minister of Transport, Dullah Omar (who passed away in March 2004) in the mid-1980s addressed the community in the Lentegeur Library hall.

Hanover Park Public Library

John Jacobs who was the librarian at Hanover Park in the 1980s was sensitive to the Library Tradition associated with Christian Ziervogel, and the political views of the NEUM and the Cape Action League (CAL). The CAL was part of the National Forum, a national level Black Consciousness organisation that emerged as an idea in Cape Town in November 1982. The National Forum was inaugurated in Pretoria in June 1983, two months before the UDF was launched, and it opposed the UDF and the ANC Charterist view of national liberation. It advocated instead a socialist solution to South Africa's problems and the restructuring of society by overthrowing what it called the established 'racist/capitalist' order.

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 to groups linked with trade unions and left wing organisations. The Bishop Lavis Action Committee (BLAC), which was aligned with CAL used the Bishop Lavis Public Library for meetings, for exchanging materials and for producing newsletters.

But Hanover Park's Library hall was also made available to other political groups. Under the guise of a chess club, for example, a youth cell of the PAC-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 UDF's strategy and maintained sympathetic relationships with the NEUM and the Black Consciousness movement.

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 was also successful in purchasing banned books and smuggling them into the country via the neighbouring 'homelands' such as Ciskei and Transkei, and then distributing them to local activists.

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. The Cape Town City Library management introduced regular foot patrols by the South African Police to deter criminal activities, but the surveil-

lance of political activists in the library and the protection of Council property were probably the real reasons.

Bonteheuwel Public Library

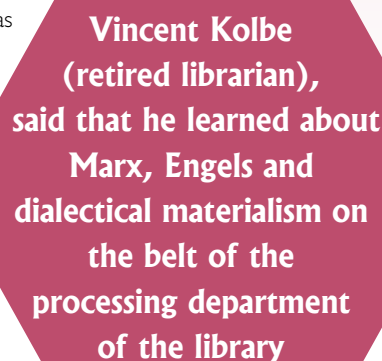
Vincent Kolbe, who worked at several libraries on the Cape Flats during the 1980s, represents most fully the Cape Library Tradition. He worked at the Hyman Liberman Library during the early part of his career, and recalls the influence of Ziervogel on its collection and ethos. When Kolbe started working at the Bonteheuwel Public Library, he was familiar with many of the District Six residents who had been re-settled there and it was not difficult for him to continue this tradition.

By the 1980s, the NEUM had, however, lost its appeal and was regarded by Bonteheuwel activists as a too much of a 'talk shop'. Instead, the Black Consciousness movement and the UDF were popular, especially among the younger library members. The Bonteheuwel Youth Movement (BYO), the Bonteheuwel Interim Students Congress (BISCO) and the Bonteheuwel Military Wing (BMW), which had close links

with the ANC'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. Tragically, Colleen Williams, a library member associated with the BMW and Anton Fransch, a library member associated with BISCO, died during the unrest.

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. When there were police raids no one knew about the sports bag and how it got there.

Kolbe and the activists who met in the library were aware of surveillance by security police. On several occasions activists were arrested and dragged out of the Bonteheuwel Library. Ethel Aranes told me how she broke up large groups of activists in the library into smaller ones so that police would not have an excuse to arrest them. When Kolbe learned from a staff member (Ms Matsiella) that security personnel stationed at his library by senior library management to 'protect the staff and council prop-



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erty' actually intended to use the library as a place for snipers, he fiercely objected to this subterfuge by security police to harm young activists, and forbade the presence of police in the library.

With the help of his staff, Kolbe tried to keep the Bonteheuwel Public Library open during the 'unrest' in order to challenge the strategies of young political activists and to engage them intellectually. But Bonteheuwel Public Library and Kewtown Public Library where Kolbe had worked earlier were also a cultural centres. This variation

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of the Cape Library Tradition derived from Kolbe's contacts in the 1950s with working class poets and artists such as James Matthews, Peter Clarke and George Hallett who often recited their poetry and exhibited their art 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'.

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 'klopsemusiek' and 'boeremusiek'. His subsequent work with local museums after retirement continued the early Cape Library Tradition of using artefacts and audiovisual material to transcend the barriers of language, literacy and books.

Conclusion

Complexity and differentiation better describe the responses of township libraries on the Cape Flats in the

1980s. They were not simple agencies of government propaganda. Some were marketplaces for ideas and debate, and affirmed the library as a space in working class areas with low levels of literacy where the books as props supported a lively tradition of oral discourse and public debate. In these cases, librarians kept alive and sometimes adapted a library tradition with deep roots in Cape Town's townships.

Township libraries became contested but shared space. Librarians also contested township space as apartheid space and used it 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 other and themselves informed. Mass meetings, clandestine operations, and smuggling banned literature resonated with this tradition and its emphasis on oral expression and word-of-mouth circulation of information.

When people were asked how they knew some or other political view they often said that they had heard it from someone. Young political activists were, however, also encouraged to read, and some found role models in books. Bonteheuwel UDF activist Ashley Kriel, for example, adopted the style of Ché Guevarra and borrowed **The children of Ché** from communist leader Jeremy Cronin. In the Cape Flats townships, where many government spies and informers were active, word-of-mouth communication was necessary - often in whispers. As Kolbe explains, like all oppressed people 'we come from a history of whispering'. These events show us then that township librarians 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.

*Note: This paper (shortened version) was delivered at a Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) meeting held in March in Mitchell's Plain. The article on which this talk is based will be published in **Library Trends** in January 2007.*

A detailed list of sources is available on request from the author <archie.dick@up.ac.za>.

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