

*Censorship and Affection: South African Women's Letters during World War Two*¹

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I know that America had a hard struggle to emancipate themselves from the British Dictatorship of the eighteenth century. I believe that - liberal as the attitude of Great Britain is now, this attitude is a result of a repentance on the part of her Government. We are also trying by "all means" to make the South African Government a convert from acts of civilised barbarism to good will and sympathy towards those it find reason to persecute and deny those privileges which are essential in the building up of a not-so-civilised people, who originally were civilised in their own way and who formally considered their culture bliss.²

Introduction

In October 1943 a woman—who referred to herself as Mrs C. Mampura—wrote this paragraph in a lengthy letter from her postal box address in Johannesburg, to a woman in the United States of America. She addressed this letter to Miss Mimie K. Schultz in Palm, Pennsylvania. The letter, written entirely in English, was confident in its rich and detailed analysis of South African history and the causes and results of minority rule in the country. The letter offered comparisons between the oppressive political context of the United States in the past and that of South Africa in the 1940s by stressing the common bond of British colonial rule. It is clear from the first section of the letter that Mrs Mampura knew something about her intended reader, including that she was a young American; that she was interested in the lives of black people in South Africa; and that she would be interested in historical details and debates. Mrs Mampura referred to herself as part of a collectivity, and made it plain that by "we" and "our" she meant black South Africans. In other parts of her long letter she used

¹ As you will see this paper is a very early draft of a work in progress and I have been unable to develop any of the substantial themes in the way I had intended to do. There is no conclusion and very little argument in the last portion. I submit it to this seminar for spirited discussion knowing I will glean a lot from the experience. Please bear with the incomplete citations and so on. I intend to develop it much further for a conference in Cambridge, July 2000. I am working on this theme as Part II of a collective project on "The Social History of Reading and Writing in Africa", spearheaded by Karin Barber of the Centre for West African Studies, Birmingham. Thanks to Keith Breckenridge for working with me on this material in Pretoria earlier this year, and to Julian Brown for transcribing many of the letters we found.

² Note: I have not altered this or other letters cited in this paper in any way. They appear with all their grammatical and spelling quirks. I believe readers of this paper will be able to make sense of all of them. Central Archives Depot Pretoria [hereafter CAD] NTS 9658, 541/500, Censorship of Letters: Union of South Africa Censorship, "Correspondence suspected to require special attention" 12 October 1943.

the terms Non-Europeans; “Natives” (in quotation marks); the Bantu people; blacks; as well as Africans. Nowhere in the letter did Mrs Mampura give any indication that this form of communication was unusual for her, or that she was an insecure or novice letter writer. She evidently anticipated a response and made sure that her postal box address was included. She concluded her letter with a call to widen her circle of correspondents through Mimie Schultz:

Have you any political connections to which you are willing to introduce me as a South Africa Correspondent? If so please introduce me to your connections ...³

Clearly unremarkable as far as Mrs Mampura was concerned in 1943, this communication is very unusual for historians of South Africa 57 years later: an extant letter written by a black woman during World War II in which she draws on and develops a relationship through writing; gives powerful vent to her ideas and emotions; justifies her political views; and ends with an indication of the intended future actions of herself and her intimates. Very little exists in public or private archives of the letters of black South Africans, and even fewer of black South African women. Historians, anthropologists⁴, political scientists, and literary scholars have taken this absence as evidence of the paucity of letter writers or readers among black women and men in this region; their illiteracy; their alienation from the world of writing and reading; and indeed the absence of a literate public of people of colour.⁵ Instead historical analysis and imagination has been put to excellent use in studies of oral communication across a range of settings and contexts. Orality as a developed, performed, stylised, and also spontaneous aspect of human experience has justifiably received wide academic attention over the past 20 years in Southern African studies.⁶

³ CAD NTS 9658, 541/500.

⁴ A most notable exception to this is the work of the now aged anthropologist Isaac Schapera, whose many edited volumes and several monographs from before World War make extensive and imaginative use of letters and weave this form of communication into an analysis of *Bakgatla* social life. I. Schapera, ‘The Native as Letter Writer.’ *The Critic: A South African Quarterly Journal*, 2, 1 (September 1933) and I. Schapera, *Married Life in an African Tribe*, (New York, Sheridan House, 1941).

⁵ In my experience this academic opinion is pervasive but usually appears in this form: As historians we have to search for oral sources as there are/were no written ones for the majority of South Africans. Dozens of conversations over the years with colleagues underscore this view, but two key published pieces articulate this. Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius’s overview of South African Historiography in the *Radical History Review* and Paul La Hausse’s summation of the turn to oral history methodology in the 1980s and 1990s in South Africa as part of a search for voices of illiterate people and so on. Full citations required here.

⁶ J. Guy, ‘Making Words Visible: Aspects of Orality, Literacy, Illiteracy and History in Southern Africa.’ *South African Historical Journal*. (November 1994, 31) A. Jordan, *Towards an African*

In this short and exploratory paper I will argue that the evidence I make use of here—part of a small but crucial cache—reveals an extensive and growing writing and reading sphere among female South Africans and among black female South Africans in particular. Paying attention to this sphere of human communication—letter writing and reading—with its dramatic possibilities as well as constraints and exclusions (and is this not so of all forms of communication and all technologies of the self?) is key to a fuller understanding of the very complex ways in which South African women and men imagined themselves, extended themselves, and survived as persons. Evidence—of the complex, and by no means teleological transformations wrought in human consciousness and intersubjective communication through the technologies and arts of writing and reading—has been emerging of late from such contexts as Ghana, Nigeria, India and China.⁷ These studies have been written in the context of wide philosophical and historical interest on the question of the role of literate forms of communication during the maelstrom of the past 300 years (Atlantic slavery; European colonisation; agricultural and industrial revolutions) when the emergence of enlightenment ideals of democratic individualism and the contradictions of this project drew subject peoples into struggles for their emancipation. Ex-slaves, colonised people, blacks, workers, women in patriarchal societies and so on—seem to have utilised reading and writing as centrally as literate European men. But whether the shape and consequences of these processes are akin to the “structural transformations of the self” described by Habermas and others for European society, still remains unclear and worthy of urgent attention.

Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973) pp. 37-102. J. Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition.* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983) pp. 1-19. L. Switzer, *Power and Resistance in an African Society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the Making of South Africa.* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993) pp. 113-33. As well as Isabel Hofmeyr *We Spend our Years as a Tale that it Told: Oral historical narrative in a South African Chieftdom* Portsmouth: New Haven 1993; Liz Gunner CITE Duncan Brown CITE Carol Muller CITE and so on.

⁷ Cite: Stephan Miescher; Ato Quayson; Karin Barber, ‘Reasons for Writing: Autonomy, self-realisation and the public in the Yoruba intermediate classes’, (unpublished paper, Birmingham, 1995); Cathy Cole; Chakrabatee; Chinese material in the edited collection by J W Scott; Michael Warner; Roger Chartier; J. Habermas as well as M. Perrot (ed) *A History of Private Life: Volume IV, From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War.* Translated by A. Goldhammer. (Cambridge MA, 1990); Brain Street (ed) *Cross Cultural Approaches to Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1993). C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity.* (Cambridge MA, 1989). D. Chakrabarty, ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?’, *Representations*, 37, (1992); P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993).

The second overall point made in this paper is that the Second World War—and the kinds of migrations and tensions of subsistence and intimacy occasioned by these stressful years—spurred on the development of South African letter writing. In this paper I shall be concerned with sketching-out an argument that in these years women from many social classes, educational, and political backgrounds—and from every region of the country—were involved in letter writing as never before. Their correspondents were often men (their lovers and their husbands and their sons), and the subjects of these letters, at least the ones selected and copied for posterity⁸, take on distinctive patterns. Some were concerned with kindling new relationships and others with maintaining reciprocity through reminders of obligations; narratives of home life; beseeches for food or money; warnings about impending disaster; and, more mundanely, highlighting key local news. In food crises of the 1940-1944 period the vulnerability of rural black women responsible for elderly kin and children was given powerful witness in letters so numerous they caught the attention of white male bureaucrats. During this war era women also wrote to other women and political observations, analyses and debates were vigorously communicated through this form.⁹

For women in Europe and the United States, as well as many parts of Asia, the Pacific and some parts of Africa, the era of the Second World War encompassed massive shifts in their daily lives. As they had done 25 years earlier, women took on additional and new work, replacing the drafted and voluntary men soldiers. Across western and eastern Europe, and later north America, women entered new spheres of paid employment and new areas of public life and decision making. This period saw women taking a far more active part in commentary and analysis concerning national politics as well as debating the position and role of women at every level of their societies. In contrast to the World War One era, many European women faced not only the dislocation of war through reemployment in masculine work roles, they also

⁸ I return to this crucial point in detail below.

⁹ It is possible that Afrikaans speaking women began writing to one another and reading each other's letters (as well as corresponding with men outside of their intimate circle) in new and vigorous ways as they participated in "building a nation from words" during the 1920s and especially 1930s. The creation of layers of Afrikaner Nationalist Women's organisations and initiatives in the era of "the poor white problem" and the centrality of letter writing to the imagining and production of this community is given flesh in the work of historians such as Marijke du Toit (CITE). Lesley Wits' history of white Afrikaans speaking women in the Garment Workers Union and Andrea van Niekerk's work on white women workers on citrus plantations at Zebedela bears this out. (CITE).

faced death from attacks on homes where they lived and factories where they worked, and millions of women were herded into labour and concentration camps or forced to migrate—often to their deaths, along with their men-folk—across vast landscapes of war. This is also true of women in certain cities and regions of Asia and the Pacific. Over the past 20 years a lively and extensive literature across the western historical academy has developed concerning the substantial and multifaceted impact of World War Two on women’s lives. The impact of this war on women in Asian and Pacific societies as well as women in Africa is beginning to receive attention, but this research is far newer. There is to my knowledge, for example, no study of the letters home or letters abroad written by any women in Asia or Africa available in English, and yet we know that in countries across these two vast continents, women and men wrote and read millions of pages of letters—many of them communicating in this form for the first time in a substantial way in their lives.¹⁰

South African Love Letters

A tentative conclusion concerning South Africa men and women letter writers and letter readers before the 1920s suggests that at this point two main groups had emerged: white women and men (with the latter in the majority) writing for business, religious, educational, and intimate purposes across the Southern African landscape and back and forth from northern hemispheres¹¹; and black men and women (with the former in the majority) writing letters concerning money and urgent news as labour migration started becoming a way of life for the majority of men and a substantial minority of women in Southern Africa.¹² Post Office records back and forth to the Native Affairs Department from the 1900s to 1930s indicate that the need to extend postal services and provide stationary for sale, as well as postal box addresses for rural regions, was a central concern of the state in the late teens and steadily in to the

¹⁰ Cite here B Melosh and all of the authors of *Unequal Sisters* as well as WWII main books; cite also books based on letters; and indicate texts about censors offices across the world, and post offices and mailing ships recording massive amounts of mail.

¹¹ There is a fairly extensive published corpus on letter writing between leading white settlers or colonial figures and some published material on letters between “ordinary” white women and men. For example see Wyn Rees (ed) *Colenso Letters from Natal* Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1958; *Dear Louisa* and soon. Very little of this material takes the actual reading and writing of the letters themselves seriously. See J. Parle paper “CITE” and “Literature review essay” in Anne Shadbolt “CITE” Masters in History, University of Natal, Durban, 1999.

¹² Add in CB and KB titles from last year; and Louisa Mvemve paper from KRONOS; also Keith Breckenridge “Of Love Letters and Amanuenses: Beginning the History of the Working Class Private Sphere in South Africa” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2000: 26.2, 437-448.

1920s and 1930s.¹³ Across South Africa black men and women were becoming regular letter writers, As Keith Breckenridge and Thandabanthu Nhlapo have indicated in commentaries on the issue, besides the new movements of men into paid labour and the concomitant development of letter writing as a means of communication, love relationships were increasingly initiated and sustained by letter writing after World War One even in rural South Africa. This oft-commented upon facet of youthful self-development occasioned anxiety and action from parents, magistrates and educational authorities.¹⁴

Women and men who had received more than 8 years of schooling were unusual in any part of South Africa and across all class and racial groupings before the 1930s, but a wide search of autobiographical and biographical material reveals that from the 1930s “schooled people” developed the art of intimate letter writing in new ways. These autobiographies of South Africans (the first examples published in the 1950s and the bulk since the mid 1980s) include many examples of an emerging corpus of autobiographical accounts by black South African women.¹⁵ Some of these women writers were educated through to the tertiary level, but several were not.

As a 17-year old teacher-trainer in the late 1930s, Phyllis Ntantala, corresponded with her lover, Halley Oyama Mgudlwa, against the backdrop of complex family expectations of marriage and kinship. Ntantala’s autobiography *A Life’s Mosaic* provides a sense of the well established pattern of courtship-through-letters for members of the African aspirant classes at this time. But, as we shall see later on in this paper, this was not confined to the educated or salaried. Ntantala and Mgudlwa began writing letters daily when they were at school together, and when Mgudlwa left school to work Ntantala writes “Halley and I still continued our hot correspondence and his letters proved a tonic.”¹⁶ As the years went by their life paths diverged but

¹³ See TAB PWD 14 01 2429/01 at the turn of the century “Post Master General wants more letter boxes for Natives” and a decade later (TAB AGT 182 976/091) an audit is conducted into Native Postal Services; (Tab GNLB 374 01 140/28 1) a decade after this a flurry of correspondence takes off on “Native Grievances Employees Post Offices” each of these indicating the pressure on postal services and the huge amount of letters being sent across South Africa by black correspondents.

¹⁴ Thandabanthu. Nhlapo ‘Women’s Rights and the Family in Traditional and Customary Law.’ *Putting Women on the Agenda*. Edited by S. Bazilli. (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Cite here Z. Mphahlele *Down Second Avenue*. Roy Campbell *Light on a Dark Horse* also such authors as Butler; but also include Ellen Kuzwayo; Phyllis Ntantala and edited collections of memoirs by Rebecca Rehyer of Christina Sibiyi. (CITE FULLY)

¹⁶ Phyllis Ntantala *A Life’s Mosaic* Cape Town: David Philip 1992, 94.

their letter-writing relationship remained as alive as ever. According to Ntantala this proved very difficult to reconcile in the face of marriage proposals from a man active in her daily life. A few months before her impending marriage date Ntantala recounts the power of his letters:

Then lo and behold, early in the spring, a new correspondence between me and Halley flared up. It was thick; it was hot; it was romantic. I wrote to him every week and received his letters every Friday, letters in which were enclosed rose petals, and lines from romantic love poems. It was as if there was no A.C., had never been. We made plans to meet in December. Where? Right in my home town, Idutwa.¹⁷

Of course Ntantala had to make a choice:

I still had all the letters that Halley had written to me while I was in Kroonstad, as well as all his pictures. The Wednesday before A.C. arrived I gathered all those letters, closed the door of my room and went through them one by one. The following day I took an open tin, a box of matches and the letters to the far end of the garden behind the trees and one by one, I threw them into the fire, pictures and all. I cried while doing this, for I felt destroyed in that fire was part of me.¹⁸

At around the same period, in 1936 and 1937, Monyadio Moreleba Naboth Mokgatle, known as “Naboth”—born in 1911 in the Phokeng district—built-up and then undid a relationship with his lover through letters.¹⁹ Unlike Ntantala, Naboth Mokgatle was not “well schooled” at this point in his life, having learned basic literacy from Lutheran missionaries but no more until he was in his early 30s, when Communist Party night schools in Pretoria and Johannesburg, as well as his political and trade union work, opened wider aspects of literacy to him. It is clear from the early chapters of his account that as a teenager and man in his early 20s he and his family members relied on brief, often grammatically terse and telegraphic letters to communicate important news and plan family events and responses, and yet managed to convey powerful emotions and draw forth strong responses. He also started and sustained a relationship with a woman while away in Pretoria. His lover, Ntobana Kgamphe, blamed him for not answering the call of a letter in time to help her sick child (it is not clear if the baby, Peggy, was his child too), and it was through letters, and at a distance, that their relationship ended:

¹⁷ Ntantala, 98.

¹⁸ Ntantala, 99.

¹⁹ Naboth Mokgatle *The Autobiography of an Unknown South African* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.

I wrote back expressing my sorrow ... Thereafter our friendship soured, our letters conveyed quarrels and accusations which led to its breakdown.²⁰

The point I wish to make here is that it was not at all unusual for a young man, who had spent many more years cattle herding than learning writing and reading, to organise his daily affairs around reading and writing of letters in the late 1930s, and even when his writing skills developed far beyond these early communications he did not comment that his earlier view of letters or use of them had been less significant because of this. Ntantala's experience of love through letters is also typical rather than unusual in the corpus of life stories collected and published in the past 20 years.

Letters of State Significance

It would be very exciting be able to chart the ways in which dire material motivations for letter writing (terse commentaries about monies enclosed and instructions for planting or purchases and so on) opened up to diverse themes and forms of letter writing over the first decades of this century. As I have indicated it is clear that by the eve of World War Two writing about love relationships and cementing and untying these through words scratched on paper was common. But besides money matters, one other theme took centre stage in letters across the country: sickness and the cures for this. In an earlier study I have shown how the letters and archives of a woman herbalist, Louisa Mvemve, evince the extent of correspondence across Southern Africa achieved by a single sought-after healer, chemist, herbalist and midwife. The manner in which she advertised herself, maintained connection with her patients, and defended her interests in the face of hostile medical and racial legislation depended on letters, newspapers, and a labyrinthine world of literacy: from the person who could make out a patent stamp on a bottle of boil preparations, to a person who could write a beautifully scripted letter to the Justice Department from a mine compound claiming that Mvemve's cures were remarkable.²¹ Mvemve's practice flourished from the eve of World War One to the late 1930s and from what remains of her letters it is clear that people (from rural villages in the Northern Transvaal and Ciskei, to suburban mothers in places like Durban, to immigrant workers in Mediterranean-network communes in Johannesburg, to miners in reef hostels) were reading her letters and adverts and writing back to her. I have argued elsewhere that was unusual about

²⁰ Mokgatle, 215.

Mvemve's extant collection is that she created this archive purposefully. Mbvemve wrote letters and reminders and notes and asked for copies of these, to many state departments such as Justice, Native Affairs, Lands, Health, Finance, Agriculture and so on, as well as local authorities including Magistrates, Chiefs and local Police Commissioners, exhibiting a canny sense of the way in which her life and work would be seen as a yardstick for state decisions long after her death. The letters which form the subject of the remainder of this paper came to be preserved for very different reasons.

In the late 1930s, as South Africa entered the War on the side of the Allies—a decision taken in the context of dissent and tension among white voters and parliamentarians as well as debate among the country's disenfranchised—state intelligence gathering mechanisms were instituted in line with military requirements developed in World War One and then elaborated. Censorship of official and private correspondence and state directives (on the radio, at meetings, in flyers and advertisement campaigns) exhorting people to refrain from slipping important information inadvertently into correspondence which could get into enemy hands, became a matter of course.²² Soon British protocols regarding the importance of tracking strategic information through “marked” sources such as particular individuals, as well as all people fitting into some class or group, became South African policy.²³ This project required trained personnel: readers, interpreters, typists, summarisers, and intelligence gatherers—therefore a heavy commitment of resources—and was deemed important enough to occasion its own bureaucracy throughout South Africa.²⁴ In South Africa's case, for example, all the letters of Africans to and from Portuguese East Africa in the war period were opened and read

²¹ Cite Mvemve papers again.

²² So much so that it is very difficult to find any reference to war era “routine”, let alone “secret” censorship of letter—even of private citizens—in books written on the subject of “Censorship in South Africa”. In many of these fine studies of state censorship during the Apartheid era, it is as if previous forms of censorship in the colonial and segregation periods are naturalised. I am still researching this secondary literature so any suggestions would be welcome, but thus far have had to rely on asides in material on intelligence-gathering in the War mentioned in narrations of military events and actions. CITATIONS.

²³ See for example letters to and from the editors of *Inkululeko*: such as CAD NTS 9658, 541/500, Censorship of Letters: from A P H Manthala, Box 66 Messina; Union of South Africa, by the Office of the Intelligence Records Bureau, 09 November 1942.

²⁴ I am not, by the way suggesting that South Africa was in any way unusual here. I have no evidence to suggest that South Africa tracked, for example, black communist letter writers any more than the

and translated, and most of them were then resealed and sent on. This was a massive and time consuming task, which officials of the Censor's office commented upon and complained about in many of their monthly summation reports. Unfortunately for historians only letters deemed "of interest" to the State (information useful to Labour officials—for example on reports of movements of miners or views about conditions at certain mines; or details of food and planting conditions at home and so on) were recorded verbatim. In addition to this particular tracking the Censors routinely opened and read 10% of all private letters.²⁵ In some cases letters were held back, but these appear to have been in the tiny minority. Most were resealed and sent on. In these cases too only letters deemed important were recorded, and if not written in English, translated.²⁶ Thus only a very small percentage of the read letters were recorded at the time and yet if it were not for the records of censored material in the Pretoria and other state archives we would not know about any of the letters I cite below. The sample of letters I have read were all extracted during the period from 1941 to the start of 1945 and sent on to the Native Affairs Department, where they have been preserved until today. Of all the partial and circumscribed bodies of evidence I have used, the constraints on this collection are indeed glaring. However, as I hope to show, the contents of these letters are worth the effort.²⁷

In most of the letters extracted and preserved by state censors it is clear that the letter writers were unaware of state surveillance of their particular writing, although of course they may have been very aware of the general instruction not to write about "sensitive war matters". It is interesting to note an exception to this however: several letters (translated from "Shangaan") to homes in present-day Mozambique warned family members that letters were being opened to remove money (especially British

British authorities in Kenya did, or Australian officials and so on. The point is, there is very little that I can find written on this subject.

²⁵ These files are housed in: CAD NTS 9658. For examples of the kinds of surveillance of interest to Native Affairs see CAD NTS 9658 541/500, "Censorship of Letters", 26 August 1942 to Colonel D. Reitz, Minister of Native Affairs, Union Buildings, Pretoria from the Controller of Censorship; and for an example of the monthly summary of letters which came in from districts across South Africa see CAD NTS 9658, 541/500, "September Summary" 13 October 1942, from the Office of the Deputy Chief Censor, Durban.

²⁶ From the small sample I have seen of Afrikaans letters, there were translated into English too. I have not found cases of any letters translated into Afrikaans.

²⁷ I see no reason to doubt the veracity of the extracts or wholesale pieces of censored material cited in this paper. In later work I will have to grapple with how to use censored material on "listed" persons, where particular agents of the state may have had an interest in fabricating material for their own ends. This is not the case in the letters I have used here.

currency) and admonished their intimates against writing any details about “war issues” which could lead to the punishment of the recipient. A clear example of this was in a letter extracted and recorded from November 1942:

Grandfather you wrote me a letter and said that I should send you money to buy a bag. European does not allow us to send money to Portuguese East Africa. They say if we want to send money we should change Union Currency into Portuguese Currency. They confiscate the money for their own use. We dont know what the position is, and from what place this comes from. English Ntaka lost money belonging to other people. He posted his money and the money was confiscated. Later they wrote to him to say that we did this so that you must not again post money from this country to P.E.A. Letters are also opened on the way from that end. The other day I received a letter which appeared to have been opened and closed again. You must never at any time dare write anything about the war, because you will cause us to be arrested, that is not being discussed its prohibited. You may die and we also die, it does not matter, I have heard all you have said about starvation ...²⁸

The last point made by this letter writer, indicating that he has understood his family’s anxiety about a food crises is merged into his own anxiety about the war ear in general. This welding together of personal straits with the exigencies of war was an unusual connection for most letters writers to make at the time. The corpus of letters concerning starvation collected by the censors at this time refrain from abstraction as to the causes and structural forces at work in the denuding of the countryside, the seizure of good land by white commercial farmers and the complex causes for the increases in maize prices and shortages of staples. Before returning to why this should be so in the case of these kinds of letters, let me pause to indicate the kinds of overall issues of interest to the Censors to provide a sense of context for the two particular sets of letters (letters concerning starvation and political letters written by women) which conclude this paper.

The Durban office of the Censor employed a staff who, according to the Deputy Chief Censor Lieutenant-Colonel C. W. Lewis, battled with the many local dialects and non standard orthographies and forms of expression in the letters they read and translated from Natal, Zululand, Maputoland and Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique). Every month Lewis summarised the work of his Durban office for the previous month. At

the start of 1943 he provided a summation for the previous end of year comments and, for the first time, a brief breakdown of the quantity and types of letters being read, translated and in some cases recorded:

During the month there has been no matter of military or political importance discovered in Native letters.

There has been a spate of local Zulu letters about Christmas time, mostly dealing with personal matters, love affairs, etc.

A native letter from one in Cape Town to a Native member of the Police in Mayville, expressed fear of being shot by a certain person in the Durban area, whom he stated was in possession of a revolver. This was duly reported.

The native Portuguese letters to and from this District continue to be heavy. Of these 95% are to and from labourers on the Sugar Estates; a few write in Portuguese, 15% to 20% in Zulu or cognate forms; the remainder in P.E.A. Native dialects. There is considerable difficulty in dealing with the latter, as there are seven or eight different Bantu dialects in the country from which the Natives are drawing, and it is only those who are intimate with them who can efficiently deal with these various types. This class of native, however, neither has the inclination or opportunity to acquire information of political or military matters, and is concerned only with his own affairs. Most of them are illiterate. They write badly and split up words into syllables, which makes it very difficult to connect the to their context.²⁹

An interesting summation from September 1943 again repeated the point he made every month, that no "military or political" matters were disclosed in any of the letters they were instructed to read. An extract from this report will serve to illustrate the kinds of banal and serious issues he reported to Native Affairs officials, and also underlines his monthly reminder of the quantity of mail dealing with cures, medications and herbalists:

Letters examined during the month have disclosed nothing of military or political interest. Even letters from Natives on Service are confined to purely personal and family matters.

The Portuguese Native letters examined have not dealt with anything but personal, family and money affairs, and no interest in the war appears to be taken. The examination of 100% of these letters does not appear to be justified when a selected quota would suffice.

²⁸ CAD NTS 9658 541/500: 12 November 1942 Union of South Africa, Office of the Intelligence Records Bureau To: Maluleke, Mapaia, c/o Ngala Ltd., Mapai, via Zoekmekeer From: [not stated], c/o The Power Station, Jeppe St., Johannesburg. Room 2.

²⁹ Deputy Chief Censor's Office, G.P.O., Durban 06 January 1943 Report on Native Letters examined during December, 1942

WELFARE.

A letter from Coleford, Polela District, reported the death of 7 head of cattle from dip poisoning.

Influenza epidemic was mentioned in letters from Estcourt, Bergville and Vryheid areas.

A Native writing from Rockdale, Bergville District, to a friend in Durban for two bags of fertiliser says, "The Europeans trouble us, and wish to close the gates against our requirements."

NATIVE HERBALISTS.

Native Herbalists are increasing in numbers and issue circular lists of the medicines for disposal, claiming extravagant virtues at outrageous prices. Many of the medicines can be regarded as charms. These so-called Herbalists are evidently taking the place of the old-fashioned and less expensive witch doctor.

A qualifying correspondence course for Native Herbalists is being conducted in the Verulam District to provide for this lucrative profession.

C.W. Lewis
Lt.-Col.
Translator.³⁰

The same themes crop up throughout 1943: comments on correspondence regarding herbalists and medicines, the vast range of love letters and seemingly misplaced commentaries about "morality". Occasionally this would be broken by "serious issues" which had been passed on to authorities, as in this case of a rent disagreement being followed up by the Native Commissioner:

There was little of Censorship importance to report during the month. The amount of Portuguese Native correspondence appears, if anything, to increase, and owing to this being subject to 100% attention, that of local Natives has to be neglected.

Native Herbalists make considerable use of the Post to distribute their advertising circulars, not only in the Union, but throughout East Africa, including Native troops in the Middle East and Ceylon. This is evidently a very lucrative business and attracting increasing numbers, who are superseding the old Nyanga.

'Flu is the subject of comment from Newcastle District and Zululand.

³⁰ CAD NTS 9658 541/500: 07 September 1943 Monthly Report on Zulu Correspondence Examined During August, 1943 Office of the Deputy Chief Censor, Durban.

Native boys at a Mission School in the Impendhla District are demanding better food and it is evident that this school caters more for the spiritual than the material welfare.

In a letter to Native Soldier Nene, his sister, who is his allottee, complains that his allotment of (L)4.4.3. has been taken by his uncle. This is being dealt with by the local Native Commissioner.

A number of Zulus who are working in Kenya, regularly use and received Air Mail Letters from their relatives here. Air Letter Cards are frequently used by Natives corresponding with their friends serving Up North, but many regard these as envelopes and so lose the air advantage.

A number of Natives are arranging for their children to change over to Catholic Boarding Schools after the New Year. Correspondence discloses a certain amount of slackness of morals in some of the Native Schools.

C. W. Lewis
Lt.-Col.
Translator³¹

A final example from the start of 1944 reiterates the paucity of matters of military concern, although labour issues, comments on food scarcity, and interest in cures and adverts with medical information in circulation continue to dominate:

Letters from natives generally hardly mention the war even those from natives who are serving who confine themselves to personal and domestic matters. There is considerable correspondence of the love letter type between the younger natives including those at school.

Native workers trade associations are active in whipping up membership and have established offices in Durban. The Portuguese native labourers on the sugar estates keep up and receive considerable correspondence mostly home news and money matters. There has been nothing observed of a subversive nature.

A letter from Vila Joao Gaza to a friend in Pondoland said there had been no rain and the crops had been killed by the sun. Letters from districts in Zululand and Northern Natal report lack of rain and crops seriously affected as well as a shortage of food. Foodstuffs are being sent to their homes by natives working in Durban and in some cases sugar up to 100 lb lost.

An educated native in a letter to a friend wrote that he was consulting a fortune teller for news of his wife of whom he had not heard for some time.

A native woman in Durban writes to a Basuto doctor for medicine to recover or revive her husbands love for her.

³¹ CAD NTS 9658 541/500: 04 November 1943 Monthly Report On Native Letters Dealt With During October, 1943 Office of the Deputy Chief Censor, Durban.

Instructions regarding circulars from the native herbalist Nathaniel Hlatshwayo operating under other names have been carried out and condemned as well as those from other herbalists addressed to natives serving with the forces overseas.³²

An interesting and contradictory aspect of this 1944 report was Lewis' comments about cattle killing in the Vryheid and Ngotshe Districts where fever had broken out:

A watch has been kept on correspondence from the Vryheid and Ngotshe Districts where cattle have been destroyed on account of the outbreak of East Coast fever. There has been little comment on this subject in the letters dealt with, probably because the natives mostly concerned are not of the writing class.

First Lewis comments that letters from the area do not speak of this issue and that this could be because the "class" of people involved are not letter writers. He then goes on to contradict himself by evidently summarising information from letters he and his staff *have* read about the incidents:

At one time it seemed that trouble was developing but this has apparently died down and the natives have become reconciled to the situation. In some cases those who have lose their cattle are milking goats and using donkeys for transport.³³

The bulk of the letters Censored from the Durban office cover these themes: in times when food supplies were adequate, love and health matters, and at times when food was scarce, starvation. It is to these letters that I will now turn.

Letters from the Lowveld: Starvation in the Bushbuckridge area during World War II
Food crises and shortages were not new features of rural South African life in the war era, but in certain parts of the country and for certain communities of people the war exacerbated already difficult conditions. Across South Africa the Census reported from 1941 onwards one area in particular generated a flood of letters whose persistent, and sometimes exclusive, theme was imminent starvation. The Lowveld region of the north eastern interior of South Africa was settled late and sparsely by white farmers. As late as the 1930s the prodigious, and later chief state ethnographer, Van Warmelo, commented upon the ethnic heterogeneity of black settlements in the

³² CAD NTS 9658 541/500: 07 February 1944 Report on Native Letters Dealt With During January, 1944 Office of the Deputy Chief Censor, Durban.

region, noting a wide variety of migrations and movements and resulting diverse clusterings of language and social form.³⁴ Most of these black settlements depended on small stock farming and subsistence maize production but high malaria rates and the extreme summer heat kept commercial farmers at bay. This pattern began to shift in the 1930s when new irrigation schemes and cheap land concessions drew in a new class of commercial farmers able to grow trees, fruits and staples with their new technology and the cheap labour forced into availability by the release of “tribal” land by the state—which required in return the establishment of tenant relationships with African farmers. Harries has documented the way in which the easterly regions of the Lowveld and the area bordering on the Kruger National Park became labour reserves for the rand mines in the later part of the 19th and early 20th century.³⁵ But for the bulk of Lowveld dwellers this process received a sharp jolt in the 1930s. In his thesis on the history and anthropology of witchcraft in the Bushbuckridge area Isak Nehaus delved into records of the Native Commissioners for the area, the Transvaal Landowners Association, the Native Affairs Department records, and the letters and reports of the Lands Department capturing this painful transition so starkly and succinctly that I will quote him in some detail:

During the 1930s most *metse* [scattered homesteads] adequately met their subsistence requirements from what they themselves produced. By selling stock and produce to traders they could also afford to pay rent. Wage labour played a secondary role. Men intermittently became migrant labourers solely to purchase clothes. ... In the late 1930s, rural producers began to operate under increased pressure. With the afforestation of large tracts of land on the slopes of mount Moholoholo, thousands of African were scattered throughout the lowveld. Tenants were also turned off white-owned farms to make way for cattle and crops. The passage of the 1936 Natives Trust Act accelerated this process. The Act required African tenants to perform six months labour service, and stated that “surplus” Africans had to be resettled on land purchased by the South African Native Trust. But since hardly any Trust Land was available in the lowveld at that time, a major crises developed. Dislocated households moved illegally into the released areas and also into the Kruger National Park. ... By 1937 bast amounts of land in Green Valley had been cleared and much soil erosion occurred. Moreover, in 1937, 1939, and 1941 plagues of locust, commando worm (*sefenefene*), and drought, made agriculture a hazardous enterprise. In 1939, which saw the worst of the droughts, maize surpluses were soon exhausted and people were forced to queue at the general dealer store in Acornhoek to buy rations. The supplies were

³³ CAD NTS 9658 541/500: 07 February 1944 Report on Native Letters Dealt With During January, 1944 Office of the Deputy Chief Censor, Durban.

³⁴ N. L. Van Warmelo, *A preliminary survey of the Bantu tribes of South Africa* Pretoria: Government Printer, 1935.

³⁵ Patrick Harries, *Work, culture and identity: migrant laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860-1910* (Portsmouth, N.H: Heinemann 1994).

so limited that there was a stampede by anxious buyers at the store, and a child was trampled to death. Faced with this crisis, large numbers of men signed contracts to work on the Witwatersrand and in Pretoria. For many men migrancy henceforth became a career.³⁶

What Nehaus did not know when he wrote this thesis is that the office of the Censor was collecting and reading, and occasionally recording, vast numbers of letters from women in the region to their newly migrating menfolk. In November 1942 Mr E. H. Wittingstall (probably a farm manager) of “Acorn Hoek” wrote to Mr M. M. Petyt (probably his employer) of Johannesburg about the food crisis and his letter was picked up and recorded, then sealed and sent on. The Censor in Johannesburg then included it with a set of letters by African women from the region to corroborate the stark conditions re-iterated through each written plea. Wittingstall wrote:

Dear Mr Petyt

... We are having excellent rains during the past few days and it looks as though there is plenty more to come. Good planting weather for the Natives if we had any mealies to sell them, but this Mealie Industry Control Board holds up the issue of permits until after the end of the month, and as one has to produce a permit before buying. All the Storekeepers are experiencing difficulty in keeping stocks. We have now been out of stock for more than 2 weeks both of Meal, and mealies, and the Natives will soon be starving.

This is one evil of too much control. It is certainly causing hardship among the native population of the country.

The Native Affairs Department does what it can to help, but the Mealie Industry Control Board does not seem to be influenced by anyone, and go their own sweet way. ...

The kinds of letters that the Censor selected for translation and recording included this series all passing through the Johannesburg office on November 27 1942:

To Wilson Madekere Matebule, North Campo, P.O. Box 2, Daggafontein Mine.; From: Wambazi Makukule, Newington:

... As you are in Johannesburg have you forgotten of the great famine prevailing in this territory this year. The people are falling on top of each other in the stores owing to the shortage of maize - please hurry up sending seeds ...³⁷

³⁶ Isak Nehaus “Society Cosmology and the Making of witchcraft: continuity and Change in the History of Green Valley, 1864-1995”, pp 44 to 46. This extract from Chapter Two “Witchcraft, Power and Politics: An Ethnographic study in the South African Lowveld”. PhD, Social Anthropology, University of the Witwatersrand.1997. Thanks also to Sakkie for a copy of the chapter of his thesis cited above and for reference to his map of the “Wider Bushbuckridge Area” which places the following small stations and rural crossroads in relation to Acornhoek: Islington; Cottondale; New Lines; Casteel; Hoedspruit; Hazyview and Newington.

³⁷ CAD NTS 9658 541/500 November 27 1942: To Wilson Madekere Matebule, North Campo, P.O. Box 2, Daggafontein Mine.; From: Wambazi Makukule, Newington.

The Maize Control Board came under another attack when “Phil” wrote to his father, Mr F W Simpson in Pretoria on 21 October 1943 from Cottondale:

My dear Father,

... Business is quite good in spite of the difficulty in getting the right type of prints. We get a lot of South American stuff which the natives have to buy at 3 to 4 times the old price. Fortunately most of the boys who have joined up and those on the mines get good pay so can send home more money than usual. The unhappy part is that the natives down Islington way have reaped no crops for two seasons and are starving and the Mealie Control Board absolutely refuse to release more mealies.

I get 100 bags mealies and 50 mages mealie-meal about twice a month but it is all sold almost before it is unloaded. I could sell 1000 bags a month. As soon as the natives hear that food has arrived they swarm in from all sides. Those who live a long way off usually are too late to get any. Although I have written several letters to the Board they refuse to take any notice of my representations. I hope retribution follows those members who cause all this suffering to starving natives.

Yours affectionately,
Phil.³⁸

On the 22 October 1943 Mrs Lubisi wrote from the nazarene Mission Station in Acornhoek to her son Mr D Lubisi at a Brakpan mine:

... I have received your letter but what I would like to tell you my son is that we are dying of hunger here at home. And we have no seed to plant with this year. Please send us some money...³⁹

and two weeks later Miss Azaria Mukosi wrote from Cottondale to her brother in Brakpan that their mother was about to die:

...your mother Nkayisis has fainted owing to starvation. I don't know whether she will be restored, as also we have nothing. Even the pig which was given to you will have to be slaughtered because now the pigs will be taxed and I have no money and if you want it, send the money for paying the tax...⁴⁰

Two days later the Censor and his staff recorded a deluge of letters, some examples of which make the point even more clearly:

³⁸ CAD NTS 9658 541/500 21 October 1943 “Phil” in Cottondale to Mr F. W. Simpson, Snr, 18a van Boeschoten Avenue, Sunnyside, Pretoria.

³⁹ CAD NTS 9658 541/500 Mrs Lubisi Nazarene Mission, Acornhoek to Mr D. Lubisi, P.O. Box 13, Room 277, State Mines No. 4, Brakpan.

⁴⁰ CAD NTS 9658 541/500 01 November 1943 Miss Azaria Mukosi, Cottondale to Mr Filemon Mukosi, State Mine No. 4, Brakpan.

... No rain, there is a great drought, please inform Mangonas that his family are starving. Other families are also being scattered about owing to the famine. The drought is very dreadful...⁴¹

Letters from Mrs Mushaba from Mavulgan Store in Bushbuckridge to her husband at Geduld Mine; from a recently married woman in Cottondale Siding to a husband working for L.H. Hall & Son, Mattafin Valley, Komatipoort and from a desperate wife Mrs M. Koza, writing from Rolle, Eastern Transvaal to her husband at van Beck Street, Johannesburg underscore these themes. But what is so striking to the reader accustomed to regarding the world of letter writing as outside of the world of poor women and men, especially black women and men, in South Africa at this time, is the eloquence and the emotion as well as the obvious desperate interest in these recorded letters. Conventions of greeting respect are reinvented and made afresh in the world of letters and as new forms of individuated address emerge there are also many traces of deference and plural subjectivities. [Will need to spend much more time on this in next draft].

We are all well with the exception of famine... And Ana and Nbhongi had fainted with starvation and I hurriedly went home and found them a little better. Please try and help us with a little bag, as we have to buy all kinds of seeds...⁴²

This array of letters speaks to the poverty and disarray in a region of South Africa occasioned by War time Maize controls as well as long patterns of land expropriation and labour oppression. But it also attests to a newly established vulnerability in women's lives. Formerly agricultural subsistence producers these women with surnames such as Mazini, Mawbi, and Zila were unable to provide food for their kin and had to find a way to get assistance with their dignity intact. In developed versions of this paper I would like to argue that they found a way to do this with their new use of letter writing:

I want you to know that people are suffering a great deal from starvation here at home. I cannot afford to live without your assistance...⁴³

⁴¹ CAD NTS 9658 541/500 03 November 1943. From: J. Klamu, Kekoro Store, Cummingham, P.O. Newington To: H. Koza, Van Ryn Estates, Room 8, P.O. v.Ryn.

⁴² CAD NTS 9658 541/500 13 November 1943 From: M. Zila, Newington, E.Tvl.0 To: M. Zila, c/o H.Graham, Red House, Plaston, E. Tvl.; From: Maria Mawbi, Cottondale, E.Tvl. To: Filemon Mudhlovu, Box 13, Nelspruit, E. Tvl; From: L. Silenda, P.O.Cottondale, via Komatipoort. To: W. Silenda, 8 St. Andrews Rd., Parktown, Johannesburg. From: M. Mazini, Cummingmoor, P.O. Bushbuckridge, via Glaskop To: J. Mazini, State Mines No. 4, Box 13, Springs.

Women's Political Letters

The letters written by women which were of the greatest interest to the state, and the ones that they routinely stopped, read and held back permanently were ones in which women gave expression to their political views, especially if these were critical of the South African state, but even if this was not explicit. So for example a nun writing a letter to relative in Switzerland in which she was critical about the hypocrisy of Northern Cape farmers in their attitudes to black farm tenants was stopped.⁴⁴ Letters by Winifred Hoernle (a liberal anthropologist and academic, and the widow of the philosophy Professor from the University of the Witswatersrand, A. Hoernle) had her mail read and stopped when she commented about broad changes in colonial power in settler communities in places such as Algeria and India society to relatives abroad.⁴⁵ Pauline Podbrey (a committed communist and trade union organiser from Durban in the 1930s and 1940s who later married an Indian South African and went into exile) had all her letters read and recorded and many of them stopped as well.⁴⁶ But the letters of black men, and especially black women, to a readership abroad, really exercised the attentions of the Censor Offices.

The paper began with a lengthy quotation from a letter written by Mrs Mampura in 1943. After her opening sections providing a lively overview of South African and world history she chose to break away from this position as narrator of the history of black South Africans and personalised both her content and style. She wrote:

I forgot to tell you something very interesting: I know it will interest you; but before I tell you this, I must say I don't know the extent to which you are interested in politics. I am a politician both by pursuit and inclination. When one is a member of an oppressed nation, one becomes interested in different governments and political issues affecting one's nation. I know that you come from a good well to do family that has never, perhaps, been part of political struggle – more so because your father has always lived I take it – under fair environment and circumstances with nothing urging him to look for social security and economic stability.⁴⁷

⁴³ Manzini above.

⁴⁴ CAD NTS 9658 541/500 30 March 1943 From: Cecile Therese Gasser to Frau Gasser-Taggi

⁴⁵ CAD NTS 9658 541/500 14 April 1944 Mrs W. to A. T. Hoernle, 53721 V, Capt. RA, ME School of Artillery, MEF.

⁴⁶ CAD NTS 9658 541/500 20 February 1943 TO: Hertslet, Dr. Lewis E.; P.O. Mapumulo FROM: Podbrey, Pauline; African Commercial & Distributive Workers Union, 452 West Street, Durban.

Without Mrs Mampura's knowledge the Johannesburg Censor's opened and read the letter, and circulated it to the Chief Censor in Johannesburg and thence to the "I.R.B" (*check what section of Intelligence*) in Pretoria. Finally it was forwarded it to the Chief Censor in Cape Town. The chief reason for this seems to have been Mrs Mampura's attempt to communicate information about a newly formed political party. She concluded her letter with this theme:

My husband and others have organised a party now known as the African Democratic Party whose manifesto I am enclosing in this letter. I need not make any comments on their platform, programme and policy which you find in black and white.

The letter was held it back from its intended destination.

Conclusion

I will try to develop this more fully in my oral presentation. Thanks for bearing with me thus far!