

Well-seasoned talks: the newspaper column and the satirical mode in South African letters

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the popular satirical column “R. Roamer Esq.” written by R.R.R. Dhlomo which appeared in *The Bantu World* newspaper. The study seeks to reassemble the archive of African intellectual and political life by foregrounding a hidden history of print culture practices and traditions. I assert the historical importance of the newspaper column and the satirical gesture in South African letters and emphasise the significance of the modes of humour and irony as forms of political resistance. In directing attention to the rhetorical and performative aspects of South Africa’s protest history, the article expands on the political role of the African press in the aftermaths of colonialism in articulating new modes of agency, resistance and critique. In particular, Dhlomo’s satirical column is approached as a space of literary expression in which opposition to various aspects of 1930s South African society is articulated in elusive, indirect and coded ways. As such, I advocate a reading of South African literary history that goes beyond the published literary text, one which can accommodate the idiosyncratic form of the newspaper column. In this sense, the newspaper itself is re-imagined as an important site of linguistic and genre-based experimentation, invention and play.

KEYWORDS:

R.R.R. Dhlomo, satire, 1930s South Africa, African print cultures, *The Bantu World*, arts of resistance

On March 4 1933, a column entitled “What Roamer sees about Town” appeared for the first time in the weekly newspaper *The Bantu World*. The column was written by journalist and writer, Rolfes Robert Reginald (R.R.R.) Dhlomo and covered a wide range of topics in a distinctive style, combining an informal first-person address, a playful regard for language and idiom and a teasing irreverence for authority:

The Editor – on whom be peace and plenty – has commanded me to fill this column. When these august bugs, – I am sorry, I mean, big ones, – command, lesser men like you and I must needs obey and look pleasant at the same time. Now I am going to start with leaders – curse them! you may say, “bless them,” if you like. It all depends on how this question of leadership touches your tender spots. As for me it does not touch me in any spot – tender or hard. I am going to disappoint you; for I am not going to embark on a tornadic attack on Bantu leadership. All I am going to say about them is that there are too many leaders about. (*Bantu World*, March 4 1933, 6)

Dhlomo's mock-apologetic opening registers his awareness of both his audience and the politics of style. Adopting a rhetorical pose of good-humoured indifference, he deflects criticism of his refusal of the more conventional political mode of "tornadic attack" through a combination of disarming honesty and disingenuous sleight of hand. Roamer's comments in this inaugural appearance highlight a metatextual concern with the manners and modes of resistance, with the form (as well as the content) of dissent. They also anticipate several characteristic features of his journalistic style, a stance of amused, ironic detachment, an uneasy blend of the jocular and the acerbic and a layered, ambiguous and complex rendition of 1930s' South African society which approaches the artifice of fiction.

Concerns with the content and form of political resistance are particularly significant in this instance given the column's location in a newspaper which many regarded as politically conservative. Founded in April 1932 by a white businessman and edited by journalist and veteran African National Congress (ANC) member R.V. Selope Thema, *The Bantu World* was one of the most successful newspapers of its time. Supported and sanctioned by a mix of white liberal commercial and later mining interests, it enjoyed wide-spread legitimacy and impressive circulation figures amongst a largely urban, African elite (Couzens 1976; Switzer 1988). It was also routinely derided in dissenting intellectual circles, labelled a "pseudo Native weekly" (cited in Couzens 1976, 11) by liberal sympathiser William Ballinger and denounced as the "voice of Caliban" by the Orlando township newspaper, *The Voice of Africa* (June 1950, 6). For many on the left, it was a newspaper of political compromise and complicity in which the interests of black South Africans had been made subservient to the needs of liberal capital; as such, it fashioned a discourse of appropriate moral outrage within strict boundaries. This perception was strengthened when, just over a year after it was launched, the paper was bought out by Argus Printing and Publishing Company, a powerful press conglomerate which enjoyed the support of the South African mining industry.

The derisory label of Caliban by *Bantu World* detractors is suggestive of both political subservience and African crudity. The literary insult also suppresses a more radical reading of the Shakespearean play, namely Caliban's refusal to co-operate with the colonial powers and his determination to co-opt the language of his oppressors in order to "curse." In this respect, it may also have registered an unintended truth: appearing every week over a period of 10 years, from 1933 to 1943, Dhlomo's column cast a satirical eye on 1930s' segregationist South Africa, the consolidation of the racial city, the removal of "black spots," the institution of white liberal patronage and the failure of African leadership. Against the official rhetoric of incremental economic and political justice for black people, it exposed the violence of structural impoverishment, overcrowding and lack; it detailed an urban topography of routine police harassment, surveillance and intimidation and documented the daily affronts to personal dignity in a racialised order based on black inferiority. As such, it could only be described as "moderate" in the restricted sense that it did not align itself with the South African left and was generally suspicious of organised politics. As I go on to argue, Dhlomo used the forum provided by the paper and adapted its conventions in order to articulate an artful, inventive resistance "from within," one which exceeded the boundaries of the context in which it appeared.

Oriented towards the urban and peri-urban environments of 1930s' Johannesburg, Roamer's satire is directed towards various examples of everyday oppression and the political absurd, moving also to other subjects such as the foibles of women, the rise of the "modern girl," the English language, the "Bantu" in the backyard, the sex lives of servants and the rights of animals. The significance of the column lies not only in the social and political issues it addresses, not only in its amusing and tender documentation of the life of the segregated city¹ but also in what it reveals about the strains and tensions of the particular historical moment. In this respect, the column plays out cultural anxieties about "good manners" and civilised decorum, thus both resisting and complying with the prevailing segregationist discourse of black racial advancement. Similarly, in its focus on traditional African practices and their place in the modern world, the column speaks to the tensions arising from fraught processes of colonial transculturation and the need to assess the relative merits of European and African civilisation. Anxieties about contemporary cultural and social shifts such as the breakdown of traditional gender roles, the emergence of the financially independent "modern girl"² and the diminishing authority of men are also in evidence. Many of these tensions are deflected through satire and censure. As such, Dhlomo's column continues a venerable tradition of women-hating in Western satirical literature in its frequent caricatures of women as gossips, poor housekeepers, flirts, excessive consumers and layabouts.³ In addition, the dominance of a masculinist perspective marks the paper as a profoundly gendered space, one which reflected the differential forms of gender access of the wider society.

As an important early example of political opposition, the column sheds light on the historical constitution of the "arts of resistance" in South Africa and the various disputes that have marked this history, particularly the protocols of struggle and the etiquette of dissent. In this sense, the article directs attention to the rhetorical and performative aspects of South Africa's protest history, including questions of language, style, symbol, register and vocabulary. In the mode of James Scott and others, it examines those forms of dissent which depart from the conventions of fiery denunciation or "tornadic attack;" those which take coded, oblique or refracted form (Scott 1985, 1990; Obadare and Willems 2014). As part of an ongoing effort to read the archive of African intellectual and cultural life, this paper makes a further claim for the historical and literary importance of the African newspaper itself. In line with this Special Issue, I approach the newspaper – and the newspaper column – as texts in their own right, as sites of discursive performance and invention rather than merely repositories of historical or literary gems. As such, the paper builds on the idea of the newspaper as an important incubator of literary expression in African contexts and adds emphasis to emergent readings of African newspapers as sites of stylistic and genre-based experimentation and innovation in which the boundaries between the literary and the non-literary are frequently breached (Jordan 1973; Couzens 1974; Newell 2002, 2013; Barber 2012; Peterson 2012; Peterson, Hunter, and Newell 2016). In this regard, the column writing genre – inherently unstable, malleable and idiosyncratic – emerges as a very important and distinctive discursive, even literary, form in a tradition of African newspaper formats which are often not very "newsy;" in which information takes second place to social gossip, moral exhortation, philosophical reflection, literary criticism, aesthetic experimentation and political commentary.

As in other parts of Africa, South Africa has a rich and varied tradition of column writing. This is a slice of South African cultural history that has been largely overlooked, comprising a range of memorable literary personae using evocative pseudonyms such as “Busy Bee,” “Rollie Reggie,” “The Pessimist,” “Rolling Stone,” “The Wayfarer Along the Colour Line,” “Scrutator,” “Jo the Cow,” “Gathers no Moss,” “Rabelais,” “Lady Porcupine” and “Peregrine at the Crossroads.” The use of pseudonyms – while offering a measure of protection – also concealed the fact that much of the writing in a particular newspaper was done by only a handful of journalists. What the pseudonym also offered was the opportunity for playful self-invention and the adoption of disguise, a device that both decentred the author and contributed to a kind of celebrity caché (Couzens 1975b; Newell 2013).⁴ With regard to the black press in particular, what is striking is the recurrence of the tropes of movement, migration and transition – a traveller paused at the crossroads, a wayfarer along the Colour line, a roamer, a rolling stone. Inscribed in these metaphors is not only a society in transition in the aftermath of colonial conquest and settlement, not only the Christian teleology of spiritual journeying and redemption but also the material and psychological conditions of indeterminacy, rootlessness and displacement. What is also pertinent in relation to Dhlomo’s column is a certain mobility and waywardness of style.

The history of early-twentieth-century print culture in South Africa reveals a variety of rhetorical practices in the articulation of dissent, including moral outrage, reasoned explication, political exposé, humanist appeal, millenarian prolepsis and radical polemic. Of equal importance in the history of political contention are the modes of satire, irony, iconoclasm and irreverence. Not unexpectedly, the newspaper column has been a particularly fruitful platform for articulations of this kind. Some of the most noteworthy South African examples from the early- to mid-twentieth century include “Straatpraatjes” in *APO* newspaper; Stephen Black’s *The Sjambok*; “Kanttekenings” in *Trek*; “Rabelais and his World” in *The Voice of Africa*; Alex la Guma’s “Up my Alley” in *New Age* and, in the 1960s, Casey Motsisi’s popular “On the Beat” in *Drum*.⁵ Appearing in the early 1930s, the Roamer column can be understood as a compelling, although little-known, forerunner in the history of political satire in South Africa. Its significance as antecedent also extends to African literature more generally which, as Lindfors (1997, 138, 141) has suggested, only saw the flourishing of the satirical mode towards the end of the colonial period and that mainly in the literature of French West Africa.⁶

Satire has been defined as the holding up to ridicule of the vices and follies of the rich or politically prominent. It is at once the gesture of the defeated underdog and the stance of amused detachment and wry omniscience. It thrives on the ridiculous, the pretentious, the absurd and the seemingly unassailable. If its gestures are disruptive, deflating, shocking and revealing, its effects seldom last beyond the moment of utterance.⁷ In South Africa, the iconoclastic send-up tended to find expression within the ambit of the oppositional newspaper and was usually informed by the left-inspired teleology of social revolution precipitating structural change. Roamer, by contrast, takes up his meandering position with a moderate paper in which social change was imagined in terms of personal relationship and within a Christian world view. For many reasons, this is a perspective in relation to which the satirical gesture might find itself at odds.

Tensions around genre choice, oppositional strategy and rhetorical style speak to a broader context in which a number of ideological and political traditions vied for

influence. The 1930s' period saw the systematic whitening of urban space through the removal of "black spots," the tightening of pass laws and intensifying police harassment; this in a context of escalating urbanisation, the emergence of slums and falling wage rates. In 1936, the passing of the Hertzog Bills spelled the end of the Cape-based African franchise and its substitution with the Native Representative Council.⁸ As historians have noted, the 1930s was a particularly difficult time for organised politics in South Africa. By 1929, the once powerful Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) under Clements Kadalie had fallen into disarray while the Communist Party, having made significant gains in the late 1920s, had lost scores of members due to its decision to privilege ideological purity over pragmatism. It was a period when both organisations had "reached the nadir of their influence" (Lodge 1983, 9). So too with the ANC. After a period of political agitation and radicalisation in the immediate post-war period, the organisation had drifted into a moribund state with political leaders focused almost completely on "the welfare of an aspirant African commercial class" (Lodge 1983, 11). Despite the failure of political leadership, sporadic industrial and community-based action continued throughout this period and included pass-burning protests, demonstrations of unemployed workers, campaigns against township police raids and workers' strikes. In many instances, the ferocity of state reaction, involving violence and imprisonment, appeared to confirm the sheer impossibility of political change via conventional methods of protest (Roux 1948; Lodge 1983; Simons and Simons 1983; Walshe [1970] 1987).

What is also apposite to the historical scene of Dhlomo's writing is the public sphere of print and newspapers. As several scholars have argued, the 1930s saw the denouement of a vigorous period of independent journalism in South Africa and the emergence of what Les Switzer has termed the "captive black press" (1988, 353). A representative indicator is the launch in 1920 of the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu*,⁹ introduced in the wake of the African mineworkers' strike – with financial support from South African Chamber of Mines – as a means of countering black radicalism. It was also a period when a number of long-standing independent African-owned newspapers faced absorption by more powerful commercial interests. In this era of commercial co-option and the gradual suppression of a more radical public sphere, black editors of mainstream newspapers commanded a measure of freedom within an unspoken but widely understood consensus about the limits of appropriate dissent. In addition, with the promulgation in 1927 of the Native Administration Act, those found guilty of fostering antagonism between the races could face criminal charges. Dhlomo's satirical column thus gained momentum in a context when conventional means of political engagement (the press, organised politics and heroic struggle) seemed to hold out very little promise of change.

Taking a longer historical view, the Roamer column can also be understood as part of the slow but steady shift away from earlier liberal traditions of protest to mass-based popular activism. This shift in political tactic was frequently staged on the grounds of language and style (Sandwith 2014). Much of the attraction of Kadalie's ICU, for example, was to be found in his rejection of the courtly, bombastic speech modes of ANC elites in favour of a more direct, apocalyptic and emotive styles of address (Lodge 1983, 6). In similar fashion, many of the struggles over political strategy within organisations such as the ANC, the African People's Organisation and the Teachers' League of South Africa were articulated as a debate about the etiquette of struggle. Where the moderates

took issue with the belligerent and exaggerated speech styles of young radicals, these in turn sought to bolster their political credentials by denouncing the pompous, circumlocutory, hedge-betting and overly polite discourse of their detractors. Adopting the modes of irreverence, ribaldry, sardonic humour and sarcasm, they contested the styles of an older generation of leaders through repeated performances of the radical uncouth (Sandwith 2014). What these and other examples suggest is that conservatism and radicalism are matters of substance as well as of form; and that the shift from law-abiding constitutionalism to more radical, mass-based tactics was accompanied by important changes in speech modes and manners. In adopting the coded modes of irony and satire, I suggest, Dhlomo adds his voice to a larger experiment with the languages of resistance, thus making an important rhetorical intervention in the political debates of his time.

I

Rolfes Dhlomo was born in Siyamu near Pietermaritzburg in 1906 and educated at Ohlange Institute at Inanda and Adams College near Amanzimtoti (Couzens 1975a, 1985, 42–62. See also Adey et al. 1986, 67). He was employed as a mine clerk on the City and Suburban Mine in Johannesburg, at the same time working as a freelance writer for the Durban-based newspaper, *Ilanga lase Natal*. He subsequently worked as a staff writer for *The Sjobok*, a scurrilous English weekly edited by former playwright Stephen Black but later returned to Durban for a brief stint as Assistant Editor of *Ilanga*. In 1932, he was appointed Zulu-Xhosa Editor and Assistant Editor of *The Bantu World* where he also established himself as regular columnist, “R. Roamer” and was “Editress” of the women’s page. In 1943, he left *The Bantu World* to become Editor of *Ilanga*, a position which he retained until 1962. During this period, he also returned to the satirical column, this time under the pseudonym, “Rolling Stone.” In a tribute to this brother, Herbert (H.I.E.) Dhlomo places emphasis on Rolfes’s years at *The Sjobok* where he “learned the great lesson that satire and humour can often be greater and more effective weapons than serious ‘learned’ writing” (Dhlomo 1946, 5). Herbert’s tribute also includes reflection on the greater political efficacy of the satirical mode in contrast to other forms of protest writing. According to him, Rolfes’s satirical sketches “are more feared and produce better results in official quarters than the best-written editorials” (5).

In 1928, Rolfes Dhlomo’s first work of extended prose fiction, *An African Tragedy*, was published by the mission-linked Lovedale Press. Subsequent publications included several historical novels and works of fiction in *isiZulu* (Dhlomo 1934, 1935; 1946). An important precursor to Dhlomo’s emerging identity as an irreverent satirist of contemporary South Africa is a series of short stories set in Johannesburg mines which appeared in both *The Sjobok* and *The Bantu World* in the late ‘20s and early ‘30s.¹⁰ Departing from the moralising mode of *An African Tragedy*, these stories offer a more subtle indictment of a corrupt and brutalising system through the use of irony, dialogue and a sustained attention to idiom and register (Gaylard 2005). The implied shift in this description from earnest Christian moralising to the less didactic mode of realist short fiction is complicated by a number of stories about women where he returns to an explicitly moralising stance as he seeks to reinstall the norms of a patriarchal order under threat in African urban spaces. If Dhlomo’s writing does not submit to a neat progression, it is nevertheless worth noting the move from overt protest to satire. In the

mode of the parodic – and in the pseudonymous space of the newspaper – Dhlomo is freed from the obligations of moral reprimand, beginning an experiment with a more open-ended, elliptical and ambiguous literary style.

Roamer's early fears about disappointing his readers proved unfounded. The column was an immediate success and became a regular and much-anticipated feature of the paper for the next 10 years, widely noted for its off-beat humour, its prickly satire of South African race relations and its penchant for the farcical and the absurd.¹¹ A tribute written in 1940 by a fellow journalist at *The Bantu World*, Walter Nhlapo, gives an indication of the column's success and the writer's growing reputation:

Mr Dhlomo is a great shot in Bantu journalism. His hall in the Bantu World known as "R. Roamer Talks" is too well-known to be commented on. He knows his job. His column is very entertaining, unfailingly replete with sarcasm, scorn and unrestrained invective about this, that or the other. His column is a balm to the tired labourer or hen-pecked hubby. The weary and wan enjoy its flavour. To miss R. Roamer is little short of a calamity. This amazing gentleman can write of trams, flies, buses, locations and convince you that his opinion is infallible. He is the same Roamer on all questions – a genius at destructive criticism and constructive indeed. But withal diverting and entertaining. (Nhlapo 1940, 11)

Nhlapo's appraisal points to its format as a miscellany, hodgepodge or "hold-all" as well as to its outspoken, entertaining and piquant style. It also draws attention to the consoling effects of the column on readers – explicitly imagined as men – whose many burdens include not only an exploitative economic system but also nagging, difficult wives. The Roamer column appeared in a regular slot on page four of the paper adjacent to the Editorial; this after a year or so on (the less prestigious) page eight. The column took two main formats: the first, a variant of the opinion piece in which the columnist reflects on a range of social and political issues or describes a recent experience and the second, a comic two-hander involving the dramatic characters Jeremiah and Joshua, township dwellers, shebeen-frequenters and street philosophers.¹² As is the convention, the brief dramatic sketch plays with the dualisms of youth and age, innocence and experience, incredulity and knowing. Joshua – frequently addressed as "boy" and "my child" – confronts the more sceptical, informed and worldly wise Jeremiah ("*mfundisi*," "*baba*,"¹³ "sir" and "father of knowledge"). The dramatic dialogue derives its energy and humour from a rapid question and answer format, irreverent boundary-crossing between "high" and "low" concerns, disconcerting digressions and rapid shifts in tone and subject matter. It exploits the humorous potential of misunderstanding, linguistic muddles, malapropism and crossed wires and, in humorous dialogic style, gives voice to contending positions and tensions within the broader society. In the more standard version of the talking column – the columnist as streetwalker, observer and philosopher – the tone is relaxed and intimate and the style is informal. As in the dialogue format, the talking columns are often radically tangential and digressive. The writer refers to himself in the first-person plural and addresses the reader directly, often as "members," as though the occasion of his words was a formal meeting with Roamer as presiding officer.

The column underwent several changes in title over the 10 years of its existence: these include, "What Roamer Sees About Town," "What Roamer Hears About Town," "R.

Roamer Talks to the People,” “R. Roamer Talks About....” as well as the final rendition of Roamer as educated man of status, “R. Roamer Esq. K.A.” The changes from the visual to the aural to the verbal (and then again from the “talking-to” to the “talking-about”) do not signal a shift in emphasis as much as point to the column’s multiple modes of engagement. As sympathetic observer, Roamer records the minutia of oppression in segregationist South Africa, “pointing out the little inconveniences some of us suffer now and then” (*Bantu World*, May 13 1933, 8). These commonplace humiliations or “pinpricks” (*Bantu World*, August 5 1933, 8) at the hands of police officials, bureaucrats, employers and “madams” prove “what a harrowing thing it is to have a black skin” (*Bantu World*, April 8 1933, 8).

In a characteristically intimate style, the reader is enjoined to accompany the columnist in his “peregrinations” around the city, an imaginative activity which centres on the witnessing of countless examples of injustice (*Bantu World*, September 2 1933, 8). As one reader put it, “Roamer has a microscopic eye to see hidden things” (“The Eagle,” Letter to the Editor, *Bantu World*, May 6 1933, 8). If his city ramblings enunciated a truth often obscured by official discourse, they also tended to contradict much of the commentary in *The Bantu World* itself which, in some ways, acted as publicity campaigner for segregationist South Africa.¹⁴ As listener, Roamer performs the same function, collecting stories of incidents and atrocities, the column also serving as a conduit for news reports, anecdotes, gossip, hearsay and public opinion. In his modality as talker, furthermore, Roamer not only forges a community of sufferers by addressing himself to the average black man on the street but also uses his column to open a space for irreverent public debate on a wide range of topics.

As suggested above, the question of truth became an important point of contention amongst readers who frequently voiced their opinions about the column in the newspaper’s letters page. One reader who lauded it for its delightful revelations registered his approval in the sincerest form of flattery by adopting Roamer’s style in his own letters (“The Eagle,” Letter to the Editor, *Bantu World*, May 6 1933, 8. See also, F.J.M. Thab, Letter to the Editor, *Bantu World*, September 2 1933, 8). Some readers objected to the column on the grounds that Roamer did not take his criticism far enough, others missed the irony altogether and still, others rejected his observations as patently untrue (“The Scribe,” Letter to the Editor, *Bantu World*, May 20 1933, 8. See also W.S. Pela, Letter to the Editor, *Bantu World*, May 6 1933, 8).¹⁵ Roamer’s numerous fans were quick to defend the column against charges of exaggeration or falsity, many of them appealing to the truth of the eye-witness account in which the facts simply “speak for themselves” (Z.J. Raleigh Motaung, Letter to the Editor, *Bantu World*, June 3 1933, 6). As one admirer observed, it was not a question of truth at all but rather of a number of competing truths and their associated interests: Roamer’s truth is the “best truth available in the ‘market of truths’ if ever there is any” (“The Eagle,” Letter to the Editor, *Bantu World*, May 6 1933, 8). On this point Roamer, too, concurred: “through reading these weekly well-seasoned talks [readers] have learned to discriminate. To sift chaff from the corn” (*Bantu World*, September 9 1939, 4).

Although always humorous in tone, many of the earlier columns sound a raw and emotive note. But such open expressions of moral outrage were soon cast aside in favour of a more hard-boiled and ironic style in which Dhlomo’s own affective responses become increasingly difficult to discern. In characteristically self-reflexive

style, the question of whether levity (or insouciance) was an appropriate response to black suffering was raised in the column itself: in response to Joshua's admonition that he should not be "jocular when the occasion demands weighty consideration," Jeremiah responds with a lesson: "You will find, Jerry, that when you are torn between heart-rending emotions, the best way is to ascend into the realm of philosophy in order to mitigate the pangs of your outrageous existence" (*Bantu World*, October 21 1933, 15). Thus, the consolations of philosophy are achieved through ironic detachment and humorous undercutting, through laughter as a mode of defiance arising from the recognition that "there is any amount of truth in funny writing, whatever it is" (*Bantu World*, January 17 1942, 4). In the manner of the Romantic poets, the columnist seeks solace in aesthetic form, in the displacement of sorrow through artifice. The story-telling mode is explicitly set in opposition to conventional political rhetoric and speech-making, discourses which are frequently parodied and derided as "words, words, words. Signifying nothing" (*Bantu World*, January 13 1940, 8). The result is a disarming, disingenuous style which, as one reader put it, "seems to have nothing to do with politics, but [which] attacks those things which are mostly neglected by our supposed leaders" (F.J.M. Thab, Letter to the Editor, *Bantu World*, September 2 1933, 8).

The technique of rendering painful incidents in comedic form is continued in the stance of innocent or bemused credulity adopted by many of the characters including Roamer himself in the face of institutionalised and informal racism. As many examples attest, much of the satirical bite of Roamer's column emerges in the gap between guileless, deadpan or impersonal description and the routine brutalities of the segregationist state. A column on township raids, for example, opens with the assurance that his "dear friends and well-wishers in Africa" need not be alarmed: he is only talking about the "simple location affairs in which European police armed with revolvers, accompanied by African police armed with kerries, raid houses at dead of night in order to discover the 'criminals' who have no permits authorising them to be there" (*Bantu World*, January 18 1941, 4). In another equally detached rendition, he describes the minutia of township policing in the fictionalised world of "Timbuctoo":

In Timbuctoo, our people are set aside from other races who are superior to them – Europeans, Coloureds and Indians. They are placed in fenced locations with gates at strategic points so that control of entrances and exits of residents could be efficiently done. At these gates policeman sit day and night guarding Africans who come in and go out. If you come to the Location with a bundle of clothes, these zealous policemen will stop you for questioning [...] It will take you a long time to make them believe you that you are visiting a friend who is not a criminal, who pays his rent regularly and who is respectable and law-abiding. (*Bantu World*, July 26 1941, 4)

Particularly prominent targets of Dhlomo's satire are the discourses of separate development and racial upliftment premised upon a barbarous past. Frequent invocations of the dualisms of light and dark, morality and depravity, civilisation and savagery provide opportunities for radical undercutting and irony as does the notion of Africans as "menace" to European civilisation. In a characteristic rant at Christmas drunkenness, Roamer concludes, "This is the time of the year when people who are uncooked and half-baked in the fire of civilisation think they can do what they like to others ... when savagery in its jungle form goes abroad unashamed" (*Bantu World*,

December 26 1942, 4). Roamer's irreverence is at odds with the dominant editorial perspective which takes a much more serious view of the trajectory of African development and repeatedly stakes the success of the colonial project on the gradual incorporation of "Africans within the pale of Western civilisation" (*Bantu World*, July 19 1941, 4). In Dhlomo's column – echoing the arguments of many on the South African left – the ideals of Western enlightenment and democracy are held up against the demoralising example of racism and the segregationist state. Thus, African locations are zoos and prisons in which "about 13,000 ani-sorry, people" live in "cages, sorry houses" (*Bantu World*, August 31 1941, 4) and the sjambok and the Bible are close allies in a history of colonial pacification (*Bantu World*, April 11 1942, 4).

Further targets of satire include the figure of the white "Native expert" or "Mr Know-Native-Well" (*Bantu World*, March 18 1939, 4) whose sole aim in life is "to help Africans develop along their own lines." So zealous are these experts that they keep "the Africans themselves out of the centre of things altogether" (*Bantu World*, May 20 1939, 4). Especially irksome are those who receive handsome payment for "discovering our customs, discovering our religious zeal and discovering our moral weaknesses" (*Bantu World*, October 5 1940, 4). The parody of expertism – and the racial essentialism which runs alongside it – forms part of an ongoing critique of the liberal-philanthropist figure, one which is distinctly out of step with the broader Editorial perspective.¹⁶ Satire is also directed at African elites and other "Prominent People," a discussion which opens out into a critique of political expediency, snobbery and class division. An especially satisfying target in the halls of satire is the figure of the assimilated African, caricatured as those who think they are important because "they have written classic prose in 'The Star Readers' Views Column'" (*Bantu World*, April 5 1941, 4); those people who "iron their hair, speak English even when it is not necessary, read European papers, and patronise only those places where a conglomeration of races congregate so as to pose as pundits of the deepest dye" (*Bantu World*, June 20 1942, 4). These and other examples echo the irreverent rhetoric of many left-aligned intellectuals during this period (see Sandwith 2014, 146–147, 222–223). However, these similarities should not obscure the very real differences in Dhlomo's political position, evident not only in his preference for a race rather than class-based political analysis but also in his insistence on the unacknowledged racism of left-inclined groups and his consequent refusal to contemplate solidarity across racial lines.

Language is a persistent preoccupation in the Roamer column not only because it forms the subject-matter of some of the columns themselves but also due to the different discursive registers that Roamer employs, including pompous "High English," broken English, *fanakalo* (South African pidgin) and code-switching between English, Afrikaans, *isiZulu* and township slang. For his talking columns Roamer employs a style of educated English in keeping with his social status and university education but one which avoids the "exuberance of the learned verbosity" of pompous social elites (*Bantu World*, September 16 1939, 4). Roamer's heightened sensitivity to the English language is made evident in wordplay, capitalisation, unidiomatic phrasing, malapropism, grammatical and syntactical error, inversions of meaning and the literalisation and reworking of English idioms and metaphors. Naturalised or dead metaphors such as "from the bottom of my heart," "my eyes fell on the floor" and "pangs of jealousy" are given comedic literal rendition and the formulae of legal, professional and official discourse (motions, mandates, points of order) are parodied, personified and literalised. By

defamiliarising the conventions of legal and political office, Dhlomo reveals these traditions as invented and registers their alienating effects on the cultural outsider. In similar fashion, cherished political formulae such as “The Native Question” and the discourse of “developing along their own lines” are relentlessly satirised through personification, literalisation, wordplay and exaggerated repetition:

If you are thick-headed, you will think your place is where you live with your family. [...] But on second thoughts you will find that these places are not your proper “places” where “lines” obtain along which you develop. For in all these places, you will look in vain for the places where Africans can develop along his own lines. [...] And perhaps the only lines you will see are those your wife hangs her washing on [...] This leaves you absolutely lineless. (*Bantu World*, August 19 1933, 8)

Along with the incorporation of neologisms, the linguistic devices of interpolation and citation have been identified as a frequent strategy in the writing of black South Africans (Hofmeyr 2006; Sandwith 2014). Dhlomo is no exception, frequently including invented words and suggestive echoes of the works of William Shakespeare, the Romantic poets, Alfred Tennyson and Edgar Allen Poe. As in the following apology, he registers an arch awareness of the conventions of the early English novel: “I am sorry dear reader, as writers used to say in the eighteenth century, the above sentence is atrociously long. Read it twice and forgive me” (*Bantu World*, May 6 1933, 8). In addition, he frequently borrows from the Bible, bringing a subversive dimension to these biblical interpolations which are frequently taken out of context, imbued with new meanings and refashioned for comedic effect – “the love that baffles description” (*Bantu World*, August 26 1939, 4) and “I lifted up my voice and cried for my mother” (*Bantu World* September 30, 1939, 4). In an example of intentional misquoting in a gesture against the valorised meekness of the poor, Roamer asserts that “it is more blessed to receive than to give [...] Perhaps we have quoted it wrongly, but we don’t think its meaning is impaired by that” (*Bantu World*, December 23 1939, 4).

The concept of intentional hybridity is usefully deployed in relation to the kinds of linguistic deformations and uncanny traces that occur in Dhlomo’s column (Bakhtin 1981; Bhabha 1985). But, I would argue, more is at stake. Roamer’s word games represent a conscious attempt to negotiate the authority of the institution, whether the judiciary, the state, the Christian religion, the English language or English literature. They are spurred by the recognition that institutional authority and its various powers of interpellation and control reside in part in language, convention and rhetorical style. Through the tactics of linguistic deformation, Dhlomo foregrounds the political valency of language and representation. The tactic of resistant style marks an unexpected alignment between Dhlomo and other more openly resistant activist traditions in South Africa. In either case, political opposition is articulated through adjustments to conventional rhetoric; through the undoing of dominant logics through language and style.

II

What is striking about the Roamer column is the extent to which it incorporates the devices of fiction such as scene-setting, characterisation, dramatisation and dialogue.

Adopting what would later become known as the techniques of New Journalism (and prefiguring similar stylistic experimentation in *Drum* magazine in the 1950s), Dhlomo addresses a range of social and political questions by rendering them in fictional form – by dramatising rather than documenting scenes of encounter between Africans and white officialdom, shop assistants and “madams” – thus rendering the kind of dialogic interaction and polyphony which is usually associated with the fictional mode.¹⁷

Key to this fictionalisation is the depiction of space. In Dhlomo’s column, the social world of 1930s’ Johannesburg is rendered in meticulous, realist detail, delineating the freehold townships of Sophiatown and Alexandra, the municipal locations of Eastern Native Township, Pimville and Orlando, the Johannesburg station, Marshall Square, several well-known Johannesburg streets and even the routes of trams, trains and buses. Occupying the same social place is “Timbuctoo,” a shadowy, fictionalised world apart comprising a range of invented spaces including “Timbuctoo University,” “Dakwastad” [Drunkcity], “Staggerville” and “Spukpukfontein” (a spoof on colonial naming). As the story unfolds, Timbuctoo is revealed as a complex and multivalent spatial and ideological sign suggesting not only the social world inhabited by African people (a “Bantu world”) and the extent to which African urban dwellers remain influenced by traditional codes and practices but also inscribing a segregated city divided between privileged white urbanity and black township life. In this sense, the column invokes the experience of urban segregation and exclusion and satirises the discourses of “trusteeship” and segregation and the essentialised racial identity upon which this social order depends. The lines between the real world and the parodic invention, the familiar and the fictionalised, are not always clearly drawn and exist in perpetual, disarming tension. If the realist Johannesburg maps out an intimate geography of petty racism, daily discrimination and dehumanising state control, the fictionalised world of Timbuctoo opens up a parallel parodic space in which South Africa’s racial order is given relentless satiric treatment. As such, the parodic city allows for an engagement with the political absurd while also making a more serious point about a much more shadowy “Bantu world” which, in the dominant orders of knowing, is repeatedly silenced, othered and disavowed.

The value of this device for Dhlomo’s political critique is made evident in frequent scenes of black/white encounter. I highlight one example of the Joshua-Jeremiah dialogue in which Joshua telephones a white suburban home looking for “Professor Jeremiah.” What becomes evident in the exchange which ensues is that Jeremiah the “house boy” has invited his friends to call him at the home of his white employer who makes this discovery when he answers the telephone. This rendition is noteworthy for Dhlomo’s reading of the doubled nature of black identity in contexts of racial violence; the man of eloquence and status in the township becomes an interloper in white suburbia, “a plain kitchen boy” caught using “his baas’s telephone” who reverts to broken English and the expected postures of subservience: “*Ikona* boss. They make mistakes [...] it is wrong numbers they have got, these *mamparas*. I never speak in telephone before” (*Bantu World*, October 26 1940, 4).

In its use of fictionalised satirical space, the Roamer column is a clear precursor to Es’kia Mphahlele’s fictional world of “Rooikop” and his late 1940s’ satirising of Afrikaner Nationalism in *The Voice of Africa* (Sandwith 2014, 225–228). Where Dhlomo’s column stakes out new satirical territory is in his extension of the persona of

the writer-observer into a fictional character in its own right, who both comments on society “out there” and who inhabits the fictional world he has created. The emerging cast of characters initiated by the comic two-hander – and which includes the various love interests of Betty Bettina and Nurse Jane Maplank – also comes to include R. Roamer himself, the educated, respected man about town. Dhlomo’s column thus also includes a romantic sub-plot the tensions of which, in the celebratory style of Shakespearean comedy, are displaced in the resolution of marriage.

The device of the columnist as fictional character enhances the political critique in several ways. As in the example of Jeremiah as “kitchen boy,” the reader’s sense of a familiar, well-liked figure-about-town collides with Roamer as the object of racist abuse. It also allows for a humorous reworking of painful encounters for cathartic effect, some of which include fantasies of black resistance (*Bantu World*, September 7 1940, 4). In these instances, the urbane walker-observer of Johannesburg streets is also one of a vast number of despised. In other examples, in which Roamer observes the humiliation of others (such as someone being forced off a tram), the insouciant observer also becomes a witness to suffering. In this sense, the figure of the flâneur is recast as both the victim of petty humiliation and the observer of everyday violence. As suggested above, the depiction of scenes of dramatic encounter in which Roamer and the other characters encounter various functionaries of the segregationist state allow for an oblique but nevertheless vigorous critique of South African society, one which stages the repetitive “hailing” or interpellation of the African as debased subject of law and government authority.

Favourite sites for dramatisation in Roamer’s world – and one which is in keeping with the privilege he gives to political subjects – are committee meetings, political protests, law courts and other sites of speech-making and public address. In these examples, the column takes on a markedly dialogic character, placing emphasis on the call and response of political leaders and audiences, lawyers and those accused, speakers and hecklers. The polyphonic dynamics of these spaces are given further emphasis through the parenthetical inclusion of phrases such as “Hear hear!,” “Applause,” “Cries of shame” and “Laughter.” Many of these stories take the form of a farcical restaging of contemporary political events in the parallel world of Timbuctoo. In such examples, Roamer satirises the hyperbole of bureaucratic pomp and process in order to reveal the insignificance and triviality of African political systems designed to deflect attention away from black disenfranchisement. The ubiquity of court-room scenes, lawyers and legal process has importance in delineating the presence of law and order in the lives of Africans and in drawing attention to a near-criminalised status. Exploiting the mobility of narrative perspective that characterises the novel form, Dhlomo satirises a wide range of social and political figures by adopting fictional masks and imitating modes of speech, bearing and character.

By employing various devices of narrative framing, ventriloquism and impersonation, Dhlomo engages in a complex process of narrative displacement and deferral. What emerges is a mediated and radically de-centred text in which the authorial source is placed at several removes. This gives rise to a multi-faceted, often contradictory reading of 1930s’ South Africa, thus inhibiting the drive towards singularity. As suggested above, Dhlomo’s fictionalised rendition gives privileged place to the subjective, intimate and experiential. This, along with the doubled, unstable modes of irony produces a form

of political satire which is oblique, off-centre and indirect. This coded or veiled kind of political engagement has affinities both to W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" ([1905] 1989) and the black American verbal practices of "signifyin'" (Gates 1988). In the fictional mode too, abstractions are played down in favour of concrete depictions of particular incidents, encounters and experiences. In the absence of a controlling or adjudicating consciousness, many dramatic scenes simply "unfold" without narratorial intervention or judgement.

Roamer's interest in writing contexts is accompanied by a running metafictional commentary on the challenges of writing the column itself: every Christmas, he feels "so depressed in spirits that try no matter how hard," he finds it "almost impossible to write a line, let alone a column ... We find ourselves subjectless in a world simply screaming with subjects" (*Bantu World*, February 25, 1939, 4). As suggested here, the problem derives not only from his political position as a non-subject/citizen but also from the difficulties of writing a humorous column in a context of daily suffering:

This column, so we are always told, when we try to make it political so as to talk about oppression and suppression, is supposed to make those who read it smile a bit. It is easier to write a political article when you are suffering from toothache or from the visit of your mother-in-law than to write an article that brings a smile. For instance, a political article is not meant to be soft stuff; it must breathe fire and brimstone. It must have such matter of fact words as these: "menace to liberty", "oppressive legislature", "hewers of wood and drawers of water", "aborigines of this country". We feel that such words come quite readily to one's pen when one is suffering from pain somewhere. (*Bantu World*, February 10 1940, 4)

If the above example (deploying the sexist equation of toothache and mothers-in-law) hints at a certain resistance to the imperative to be amusing, it also reveals Roamer's awareness of different discursive registers, the figures they employ and the political import they carry. Against the modes of fiery denunciation, "tornadic attack" and political abstraction, Roamer chooses a quieter, more oblique perspective in which the daily "pin-pricks" of society are recorded, in which the experiential dimension of everyday racism is narrated rather than approached in the abstract (*Bantu World*, October 17 1942, 4). As such, Dhlomo advances a politics of the everyday and the minor, preferring the concrete specificity, nuance and comparative honesty of fiction over bombastic speech-making. By adopting the medium of fictionalised satire, he is able to exploit the arts of ambiguity and indirection, thereby sustaining an elusive authorial presence. This is a method well suited to the articulation of coded political dissent in contexts of political uncertainty and constraint but one which is simultaneously compatible with Dhlomo's ambivalent position outside established political frameworks, with contradictory ties of allegiance to the mission, colonial Christianity, Zulu nationalism, African tradition, anti-racism and social justice.

III

In a celebratory article on the first performance by the Bantu Dramatic Society in Johannesburg in 1933, H.I.E. Dhlomo writes of the value of drama in terms of the licence it grants to "abuse, expose, defy, insult and ridicule." He also notes its potential for vivid,

realistic portrayal as well as its appeal across a wide social spectrum (H.I.E. Dhlomo 1933, 1). Rolfe's satirical column can be understood in similar terms: it defied and ridiculed a wide range of social figures and accepted truths, it offered a compelling depiction of 1930s' black urban life, and it reached a wide audience. The continuities between genres which are usually set apart invite the literary critic to reconsider established categories and distinctions. This includes not only thinking beyond those forms which appear in the shape of a published "book," not only those which, like the newspaper short story, present themselves as literature albeit in unusual contexts but also those genres of writing which do not appear to be "literature" at all. Dhlomo's satirical column confirms that the literary can emerge in unexpected places and that it can take surprising forms. In Dhlomo's case, a literary history traced through publications and collections suggests a number of competing identities – mission didact, protest fiction writer and Africanist revisionist historian. The inclusion of his newspaper column allows for a fuller sense of Dhlomo's writing life (and South African literature), one which also registers his identity as a writer of edgy and evasive satire.

Further significance of the Roamer column is evident in the insights it grants into the history of political contention and the languages of resistance in South Africa in the 1930s period. Stopping short of political demand, the column effected an important satirical undoing through linguistic play, the deformation of mastery and the questioning of political and social certainties, thus underlining the centrality of language and style in the performance of dissent. In addition, working outside of identifiable political co-ordinates and addressing a complex social terrain, Roamer perfected an idiosyncratic mode of political critique by conjoining a restless, fragmented, tangential and undisciplined style with humour, wordplay, polyphony, dialogism, ventriloquism and verbal excess. Textual experimentation is facilitated by the use of the pseudonym, a device that "sever[s] the text from the persona of the author, allowing the author to experiment with novel forms of address" (Hofmeyr and Peterson 2019; see also Newell 2013). In its elaboration of the satirical mode and in its self-reflexive refusal of the conventional languages of resistance, Dhlomo's column can also be understood as an important intervention in an ongoing South African debate about the politics of style and the protocols of struggle.

The preference in Dhlomo's column with indirection and indeterminacy over resolution and closure establishes links with print culture practices elsewhere in Africa such as in Yoruba newspapers of the 1920s where, as Karin Barber explains, "contradictory moral perspectives are orchestrated but not synthesised, with haunting and unsettling effects" (2016, 168). As in the manner of Yoruba newspapers, Roamer's column is also profoundly addressive: through the elaboration of an extended in-joke, the column established a disaffected, derisive community based on a shared experience of discrimination. Connections across disparate print culture sites suggest that a case might be made about the styles of African newspapers more generally which, as recent scholarship suggests, can be understood as an intertextual space of borrowings, echoes and insertions. Polyphonal engagements engendered by cutting and pasting and the porosity of the text in which, as Barber argues, serials become books, sermons become articles and articles become pamphlets give licence to a particularly vivacious and experimental rhetorical style in which the borders of genres and the etiquettes of speech are repeatedly breached and disrupted. As such, Roamer's column provides

further evidence of the errant, idiosyncratic nature of newspapers produced on the edges of power.

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Notes

1. For details on Roamer's rendition of the city of Johannesburg, see Sandwith (2018).
2. For a discussion of "the modern girl" and the way in which this idea was negotiated in *The Bantu World*, see Thomas (2006). See also Weinbaum et al. (2008).
3. For the definitive treatment of this topic, see Nussbaum (1984). Despite the persistence of derisive caricature in Dhlomo's column, there is some evidence of sympathetic treatment; a closer study is necessary to gauge the full complexity of Roamer's depiction of women in these texts.
4. Given that the community that constellated around *Bantu World* was rather small, it is likely that many readers would have known the real identity of "Roamer Esq." thus adding further piquancy to the play of persona and the experimentation with identity.
5. Studies of various examples of the satirical column in South Africa include Oliphant and Field (1993), Adhikari (2002) and Field (2010). For more on *Trek* and *The Voice of Africa* see Sandwith (2014).
6. Stephanie Newell (2002) identifies an important exception to this narrative in the work of Gold Coast writer, Kobina Sekyi, the author of two satirical works published in the 1910s.
7. For a selection of studies of the subject, see Wood (1994), Ogborn and Buckroyd (2001) and Knight (2004).
8. The Native Representative Council, established in 1937, consisted of partly nominated and partly elected African members whose function would be to advise the Government on legislation and other matters affecting African welfare.

- ⁹. On *Umteteli wa Bantu* see Natasha Erlank's article in this issue.
- ¹⁰. Some of *The Sjambok* stories were collected in a 1975 special edition of *English in Africa* with an introduction by Tim Couzens (Couzens 1975a).
- ¹¹. The final column appeared on March 13 1943.
- ¹². Stephen Black's popular satirical column in *The Sjambok* also took the form of a humorous dialogue between "Joshua" and "Jeremiah."
- ¹³. *Mfundisi* and *baba* are the isiZulu words for priest/teacher and father, respectively.
- ¹⁴. See for example a full-page spread commending the facilities of the new Orlando township, *Bantu World*, September 16 1933, 2–3.
- ¹⁵. For some of Roamer's responses, see *Bantu World* May 13 1933, 8 and March 16 1941, 4.
- ¹⁶. See for example an editorial which extols the work of the mission station and educational institute, Lovedale College, *The Bantu World*, July 19 1940, 4. For another example, see October 5 1940, 4.
- ¹⁷. Horst Zander (1999) also makes much of the hybrid nature of Dhlomo's journalism, a writing style which he designates as "faction." Zander is one of the few scholars of South African writing to give close attention to Dhlomo's journalism.

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