

## **Reflections on the mission/s to capture the 'reader' and 'book' in Southern African art**

Lize Kriel

“Fetishisms generate social hierarchies and differences while at the same time opening up novel spaces for the construction of agency.” Fetishes upset the “normal” interactions of people and objects. Through this shift, distinctions of “gender, class, race, ethnicity and nationality might be negotiated, transgressed, and perhaps most of all, exposed.”

Hofmeyr (2011: 198), with reference to Patricia Spyer’s *Border fetishisms: Material objects in unstable spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 3.

### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents some early reflections from a cultural historical project on the visualisation of reading practices. The focus is limited to images of people reading. The pervasiveness of such images in popular visual culture is illustrated, and how this relates to the established tradition amongst Western artists to paint the image of the reader. A number of scholars have contributed to the image of the reader in art as a field of study, all confirming the particular significance of depicting woman readers in Western art. The current investigation asks how, from our vantage point in the South, the representation, or non-representation, of readers in Africa, specifically southern Africa, stands within, or in opposition to, or in conversation with, the canonised tradition in Western art. The appropriation and negation of Western artistic conventions in the popular proliferation of visual images are also being considered. For the South African discussion, the artist Gerhard Sekoto is highlighted, and some of the contexts which helped shape his visualisations of people reading are being traced.

### **Introduction: the gendered reader in Western art and popular visual culture**

The image of the reader is a well-established feature in Western art, and is equally prevalent in popular visual culture. An almost amusing interplay of the commodification of the fetish and the fetishising of the commodity (Ciarlo 2011: 26) is observed in the commercial success of postcards, calendars and art books featuring images of people reading books. The wide offering on the [www.akgondemand.com](http://www.akgondemand.com) website of *Archiv Kunst und Geschichte* serves as but a single example. The photograph, sketch, painting or sculpture (or its paper or digital reproduction), in itself a commodity,

bears witness to the fetishising not only of the commodity being read, most often a book, but very often also the fetishising of the reader, very often a woman.

German literary scholar Stefan Bollmann's books *Reading women* and *Women who read are dangerous* comprise discussions of approximately fifty images of reading women each. The painting on the cover of *Reading women* is the same one also adorning the cover of the 1997 Flamingo edition of Alberto Manguel's book *History of Reading: Gustav Adolf Hennig's Lesendes Mädchen / Reading Girl* (1828, Museum of Fine Arts, Leipzig). The cover of *Women who read are dangerous* features the painting of a female student at the end-of-summer – *Sogni / Dreams* by Vittorio Matteo Corcos (1896, National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome). Bollmann's sensuously pleasurable books, translated into several languages, have been celebrated as a tribute to the power literacy has brought to women, and the struggle it has been to obtain that power. As explained in the review by Seaman (2006: 36): "[a] woman reading, after all, is a woman not cooking or cleaning". James Conlon (2005) however, approached images of woman readers quite differently. (Notably, Conlon's article, which does not refer to Bollmann's work, was published shortly before Bollmann's *Frauen die lesen sind gefährlich* appeared in English). Conlon (2005: 56) warned that not all images of women endorse "the radical freedom inherent in the art of reading". Susan Casteras (2007), reflecting specifically on paintings from the Victorian era, reiterated Conlon's argument by stating that woman readers were "being watched in a kind of cultural surveillance symbolized by the painting itself and by the (mostly) male artists who created these canvases." Steven Levin's recent classical realist painting *Sunday Paper* (2011), in which a reclining half-dressed man is reading the newspaper, offers poignant commentary on the male gaze so predominant in many of the typical Victorian-style portraits of woman readers.

"In an effort to control" the radical freedom women can potentially unleash through reading, Conlon (2005: 56) explains, "the male artist finds strategies to deny or mitigate the reader's desire, to visually transform it into a mirror of his own." Then, referring to Mary Cassatt's late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century paintings of woman readers, Conlon (2005: 56) argues: "Because women artists have not shared the same fears of feminine subjectivity that men have, they seem more easily able to put the woman reader to more constructive and less dominating purposes." Then he goes on to discuss Cassatt's paintings of women reading with children in gardens, or parks, as an enabling, educational environments. To the rescue of his own gender, Conlon moves on to identify some "rare examples of male artists who manage to transcend their deep-rooted fears and create convincing images of female subjectivity, of women in the midst of their own desires, their own choices, their own journeys." The 'rare' examples Conlon (2005: 47-50) discusses, are Georges de La Tour's *Repentant Madgalene* (c. 1640) and Edward Hopper's *Model reading* (1925).<sup>1</sup>

Also in contemporary visual culture images of female readers still appear to be more prominent than ones of males— a simple search on Google Images may serve as an indicator. This, and the well-known historical prominence of reading women in Western art, stand in sharp contrast, but is nevertheless directly related, to the fact that female literacy had been exceptional from the European Middle Ages and well into the modern period. It continued to lag behind male literacy even as mass education generally worked about greater equalising between the genders towards the present (Fischer 2003: 177, 235, 273; Rietbergen 1998: 355). Belinda Jack (2011: 293-294) passionately invokes Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Random House, 2003) to remind us of contexts in which, even for women who have the skill to do so, it has until very recently been, or still is, unsafe, or impossible, to read what they like.

### **The problem of race when visualising readers**

While the small section of the female population who could read and who did read is disproportionately represented in commercialised Western art, the same cannot be said when the analytical category of gender is replaced with race. In his *Introduction to Visual Culture* Nicholas Mirzoeff (2009: 82-83) gave great prominence to the fascinating case of the formerly enslaved African American woman Sojourner Truth, who sold *cartes-de-visite* of herself posing with knitting, reading glasses and a book (as accoutrements of respectability) in order to support the anti-slavery cause (and sustain herself) in the second half of the nineteenth century. But this example is perhaps so prominent because it is so exceptional. Artistic renderings of reading Africans (from a colonial or postcolonial gaze) are scarcer, and much less prominently commercialised than images of pale-skinned readers, despite the well-documented reification and fetishizing of the book in Africa through the entanglement of literacy, spirituality, respectability and power in the Christian missionary project (see Harries 2001: 408 & 416; Hofmeyr 2004: 232; Hofmeyr 2011: 197; De Kock 2012: 56). Compare the results of a Google Images search for 'reading women' / 'woman readers', 'reading men' / 'male readers', and 'reading Africans' / 'African readers'. Note the difference when replacing 'African' with 'European'. Typing in 'black readers' as search words, Fanon's (1952: 116) reminder about being "over-determined from without" comes to mind. At last, "black women reading" yields a host of photographs, only to emphasise the whiteness of the "women reading".

The majority of images of readers with dark skin colour, those who, by visual denotation, can be associated with Africa and who, by connotation, are associated with the formerly/formally colonised, appear to be amongst visual material consciously generated as part of public projects to promote literacy and encourage people to take up reading. The discourse in these images is



**Image 1** : A photograph used by the Berlin Mission Society in the 1930s as proof of the success of their educational programme. From Missionary Carl Hoffmann's book *Palhaborwa* (1930: 24-25).

fascinating and they are deserving of a study in their own right, but the historic links between such post-colonial literacy campaigns and those of Christian missionary societies in the colonial era (Image 1) should not be overlooked. In this article, the connection between the two 'missions' will be considered by tracking back to the late-nineteenth/early twentieth century protestant missionary projects in the trans-Vaal region of present-day South Africa.

### **Mission: finding the 'reader' and 'book' in South African art**

In this section the present-day promotional, motivational, and advertising imagery of readers in Africa are set aside for the moment, in order first to 'take stock' of the spectrum of meanings art historians have tended to capture in images of readers considered 'works of art' in a Western tradition. Then these will be juxtaposed to a reading of five paintings of readers by the South African artist Gerard Sekoto, dating from the 1940s and '50s.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, Sekoto's visualisation of reading will be traced to his family and youth history in the bookish milieu of Lutheran, Wesleyan and Anglican missionising in the former Transvaal (present-day Gauteng and Limpopo Provinces). Subsequently, by drawing on the historical reflection in the work of some more recent South African artists, an attempt will be made to link up again with the 'post-missionary missions' to promote literacy in Africa in our own time.

### **The book as actor when visualising reading**

What does it mean to visualise reading? How to make meaning of images of readers, and images of the object they read? Mitchell's explanation of what images are, aptly applies to the notion of the reader as actor:

Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures 'made in the image' of a creator, to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image (Mitchell: 2006: 297).

But the object of the reader's scrutiny, the letter or the book in his/her hands, on his desk, on her lap, is a prominent actor itself. Mentioning the Zola book in van Gogh's *Oleanders* (1888) as an exception, Stretton (2005: 605) observes (and Casteras 2007 confirms) that books do not often reveal their title or content in works of art. When they do, it is to significant effect: Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present* (1858) features a book by Balzac (Tate 2013), Vittorio Matteo Corcos' *Dreams* (1896) features French Garnier classics in their recognisable yellow binding (Bollmann 2012: 104) and Gerard Sekoto also very consciously revealed the title of Peter Abrahams's novel *Mine boy*

(1946) in a still life of a bentwood chair serving as a bedside table with candle and books (Sekoto 1995: x). “But generally, we do not know the identity of books in the visual arts, which makes their persuasive power all the more remarkable,” adding to “the extraordinary potency of the book as a symbolic object” (Stretton 2005: 605).

The time at which a painting was made, of course, limits the range of books that could have been ‘possible’ at that particular ‘then’ and ‘there’. The little book the Virgin Mary holds in her hands in Simone Martini and Fra Angelico’s famous 14<sup>th</sup> century paintings of the Annunciation could only have been the Book of Hours (Fischer 2003: 168-170). Such knowledge should reign in present-day viewers when trying to imagine what reading matter Mary may have been trying to hide from the Angel. However, adding this contemporaneous accessory to Mary’s image amounted to more than depicting her as just another respectable 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian woman going to mass. As Alberto Manguel (1996) had explained, it instilled in her intellectual power: the Virgin, at the moment of being informed that the Word would become flesh because she would bear Jesus in her body, has already been consuming that Word by means of her reading from the Book. And from here emanates the conundrum of the male artist so well discussed by Conlon (2005:40): what to do with his desire of what the reading woman is consumed in, and what to make of his own superfluity at the sight of immaculate conception.

Thus, even if the image of the book in art is completely anonymous, with no indication of title, language or content, by connotation the object represented still holds the potential of being an icon of divine power incarnate, and as such, desirable. Gerard Sekoto had early on become aware of the Book’s inescapable iconicity as a sign of the Word of God, and as such God’s law (Stretton 2005:606 with reference to Manguel 1996), his omnipresence, (his) sovereignty, knowledge, and power. When he participated in a competition for a ‘badge’ for the Botshabelo Mission School which he attended, the book that Sekoto included in his design, intended as a symbol of learning, was seen as a Bible by the headmaster, and Sekoto thus won the competition (Sekoto 1995: 31). He would have to become a bit older before he also realised and visualised the potential of the book as a secretive and dangerous object of pleasure, awakening and desire (Barthes’ distinction between texts of pleasure and texts of bliss is aptly applied by Conlon 2005: 39).

### **Visualising the reader as a woman**

Having started off with the book-image as actor, we already deduced much about why the image of the reader, at least until the Reformation, would so often have had to fulfil the role of the Virgin Mary, and why the threat of the reading woman to male hegemony had to be “mitigated by visually

valorizing Mary's fiat, her submission to the Word of the father" (Conlon 2005:43). As more people, and especially women, acquired the skill to read, patriarchal institutions, church and state, designed numerous educational and censorial strategies in an attempt to ensure supportive behaviour and submissive reading practices from citizens and subjects. Michel de Certeau's (1984: 165-176) well-known essay on the reader as poacher, emphasises the limitations to such claims to institutional omnipotence. But the subtleness, seductiveness and evasiveness of power in the practices of everyday life, was painted out as artists themselves succumbed to, or subverted it. Stretton (2005: 607) and Conlon (2005: 43) explain the profusion of reading women in paintings from the Victorian era as an attempt to reassign, and resign, reading women to a neutralised and harmless space, at a time now that the skill of reading had become more common, increasingly secularised and commercialised. Middle and upper class female actors are now provided with books in the luxury of gardens, drawing rooms and boudoirs where they have to while away the time, in a conspicuous 'privacy', labelling leisure as a privilege, afforded to her by a male benefactor from whose public world of production and power she is deliberately detached. No wonder, Stretton (2005: 606) remarks, there are "interestingly fewer" portraits of "men with a book in their hands or on their minds, unless they are monks, saints, scribes, students, effete existentialists or famous philosophers", or, in the words of Susan Casteras (2007): nineteenth-century "omnipotent patriarch[s], in charge of gathering and monitoring knowledge of the outside world". Of course, these roles were also precisely the ones which would not lightly be assigned to the colonised, especially those of dark skin colour. One would think that black men would preferably not be portrayed as such custodians of knowledge in colonial images – unless considered as purveyors of submissive reading.

### **Visualising the reading African**

This brings us back to the community development-type image of the African reader which still seems to dominate our visual world: a patriarchal gaze on the black man (or woman) as the perpetual learner, not yet (or only just, in a staged pose) having acquired the knowledge and power which reading supposedly leads to. There is a striking first-impression resemblance between such images and the images of African school children used in promotional material by the Berlin Missionary Society, who was, from the 1880s until at least the 1930s, one of the foremost institutions taking responsibility for teaching literacy to African children in huge parts of what was then called the Transvaal. But there are also the obvious differences. As various researchers had argued, the Berlin missionaries' project was steeped in a tradition according to which the African convert could eventually aspire to master the superior culture of the European races, but at such a slow pace "that no one alive in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries would ever witness it" (Pugach



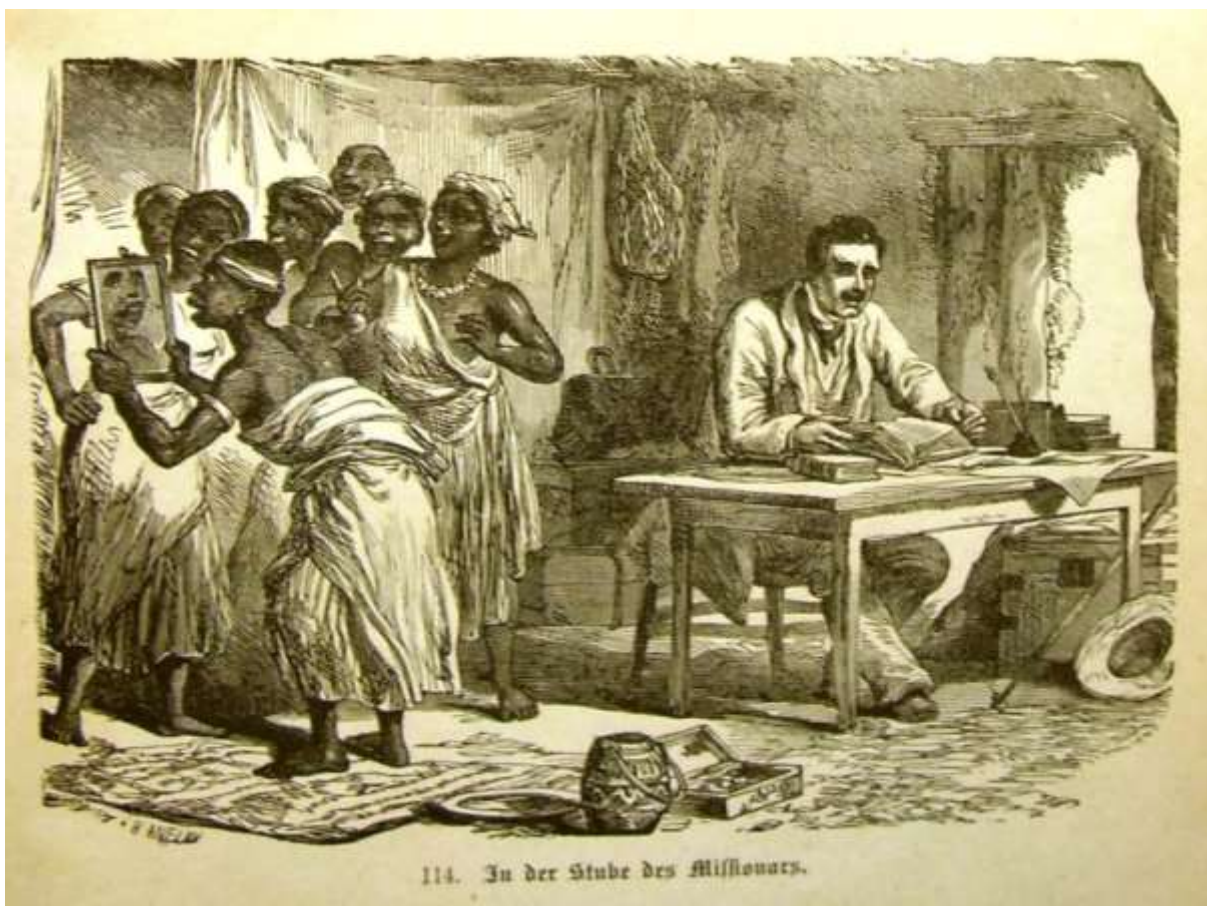
**Image 2** : Reverend Moses Rakoma of the Mabeleke congregation of the Berlin Mission Church as photographed by Missionary Carl Hoffmann in the early decades of the twentieth century. From Hoffmann's book *Auf Finsteren Bergespfaeden* (no date: 17).

2012: 2). But then this was also a missionary society which made a point of producing and distributing images of African men handling books. Carl Hoffmann, the chair of the Literature Commission of the Berlin Mission in South Africa throughout the 1930s, was also a keen writer and photographer, and his regular visual portrayal of Africans who had been ordained as ministers (the highest office to which an African could aspire in their institution), was with huge bibles in their hands (Image 2). The Berlin Mission was relatively slow to endow Africans with this authority – Hoffmann himself somewhat of an exception. Thus, there seems to be an analogy with the Western male artist depicting Mary as a submissive reader: African ministers who were entrusted with the Knowledge and the Power of the Book, would have been expected to read and preach from this book submissively – not to challenge the hegemony of white supremacy in South Africa. (The absence of images of African women handling Bibles in the same way, or at all, is probably due to the fact that custody of the Knowledge in the Book was so obviously perceived to be a patriarchal role).



### Disproportionate representation

In this missionary setting, the disproportionately high representation of actual (male) readers is as telling as the case of reading women being over-represented in Western art: by the 1930s already, women by far exceeded men in numbers as members of African Christian congregations (Robert 2006: 188), and yet, the ones visualised as readers were the men. Whereas in Western art male literacy was taken as a given and female literacy was problematized in a proliferation of works of art, the 'problem', from a patriarchal perspective, of the numerical domination of women in African Christian congregations was downplayed through an overemphasis, by visual reification, of men in powerful positions. Of course the missionaries did not disapprove of any conversions, but the fact that more women than men showed an interest in the Christian faith and a willingness to participate in the religious practices, was such a reversal of the missionaries' own initial expectations, as depicted in nineteenth-century images like the ones Wangemann (1881) reproduced in his book on the Berlin Mission in South Africa (Image 3)..



**Image 3** : A nineteenth-century image portraying devotion in the studious male missionary and vanity in the disinterested women he was supposed to convert. From Wangemann (1881: LXXV)



**Image 4** : An image from the picture book of Wangemann (1881: LXIX) entitled 'A Nicodemus soul'.

In contrast to the iconic 'early significant' conversions (Image 4) and baptisms of women which apparently helped Christian congregations take root in many an African community (Hastings 1993: 112) , Alan Kirkaldy and I found that in certain northern Transvaal communities, women were amongst the most fiery resisters against Christianising throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was probably due to the fact that amongst the Bahananwa and the Vhavenda and many other Transvaal communities, Christianity and literacy were in fact not introduced by missionaries, but by men who had encountered the new faith as migrant labourers in the Cape and Natal. There was an initial phase, it seems, during which women resisted Christianity as a subversive and disruptive influence from outside. The religion would only become attractive to them once the older structures they had

grown up in proved to offer insufficient security to themselves and their families (largely as a result of colonial encroachment on their land and resources). (Kriel & Kirkaldy 2009: 316-336).

### **Missionary (con)tradi(c)tions: Gerard Sekoto's readers**

From this tradition of Transvaal Berlin Missionary Lutheranism, then, from a third generation of Christian elites, emerged Gerard Sekoto: an artist fascinated with capturing people in the act of reading. It is clear from his letters to art historian Barbara Lindop (Sekoto 1995: 1-33) and his interviews with clinical psychologist (and his biographer) Chabani Manganyi (2004: 1-18), that Sekoto's Lutheran upbringing and a childhood spent in Berlin Missionary communities, had an effect on the way he reflected on the world. Sekoto's father, Andries Sekoto, and Carl Hoffmann knew each other well (Hoffmann 1937: 21-22). Gerard himself had already left the farm Wonderhoek, where his father was the teacher and Evangelist, by the time Hoffmann was appointed as head of the nearby Botshabelo training and teaching facility. But, up until that point, Hoffmann had been the Chair of the Literature Commission of the Berlin Missionary Society in South Africa, and thus instrumental in the way the images of the African as reader was envisaged and envisioned by the Missionary society. Therefore, Hoffmann's writings, sketches and photographs form a useful counterfoil against which to read Sekoto's paintings. Sekoto's observations commented on the missionaries' contentions and projections about Africans and the practice of reading.

Sekoto's paintings of readers are not unfamiliar. Most of them featured in biographical studies of the artist; images of some had been distributed as postcards and all can easily be located on the internet. I shall refer to the following ones in the subsequent paragraphs: *Orlando* (c.1940/41, discussed in cultural historical research of township life (Eloff & Sevenhuysen 2011: 28-29)); *Schoolgirls reading* (painted in Sophiatown or Eastwood in the early 1940s); *Young boy reading* (probably painted in Sophiatown before Sekoto departed for District Six in 1942, and appearing on the cover of David Atwell's 2005 book on African literary history); *Interior scene with a seated man* (c. 1945); *Portrait of a young man reading* (1946, painted in Eastwood, Pretoria and featured in John Peffer's history of South African art (2009:7) as "a powerful counterimage to the prevailing view of black life" at the time) and *Annie Pernet* (1973, painted in Paris).

Except for the last-mentioned portrait of Madame Pernet, all Sekoto's readers are absorbed in their texts. Their eyes are turned away from the viewer, fixed on the reading matter. There is a tension between reader and text, none seems bored or complacent. Not one of them is conspicuously busy with the Bible, or reading in an overtly referential or devotional way – although it remains possible that the reading matter may be religiously inclined. The artist keeps the viewer

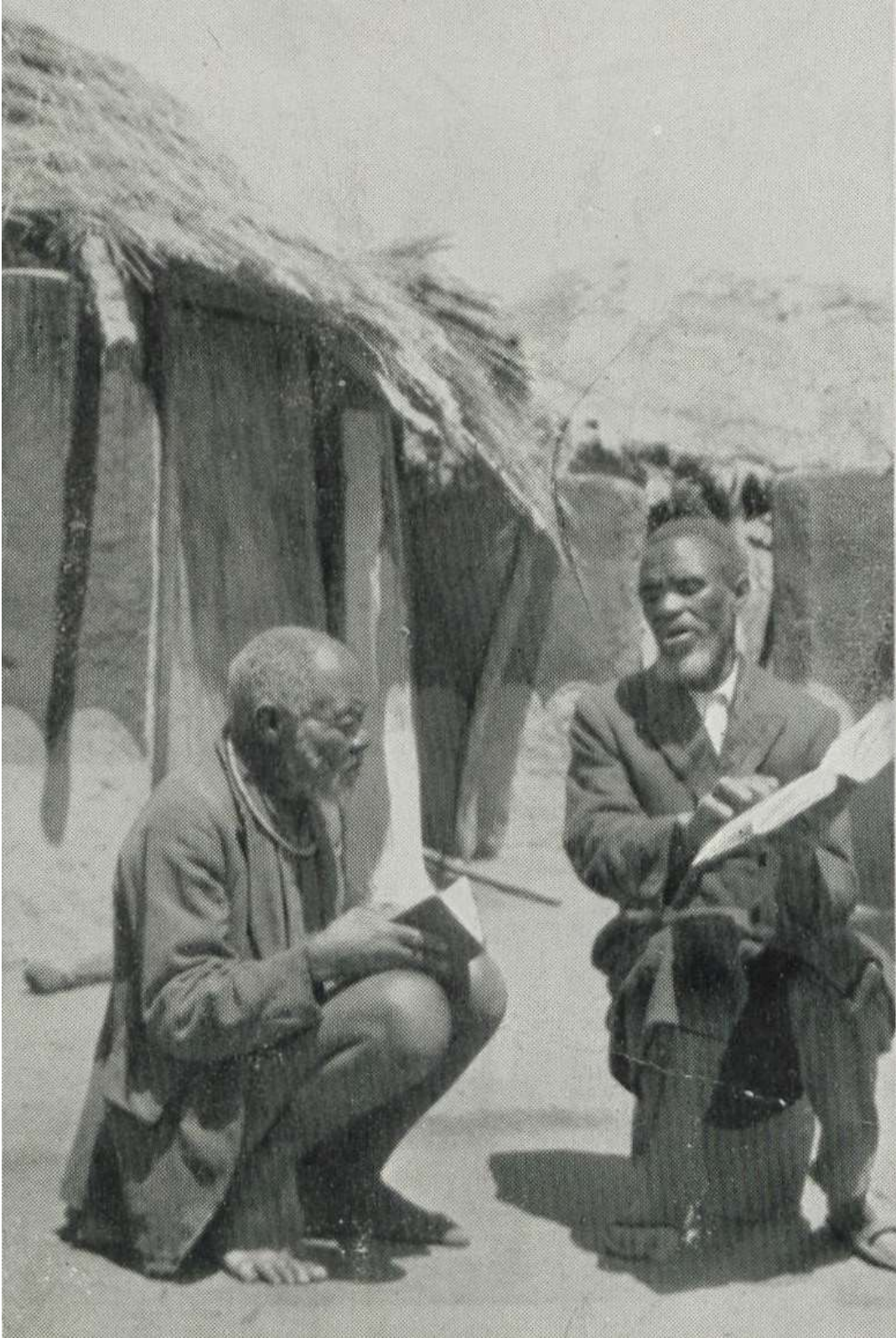
guessing. The *Young boy reading* seems to be nourished by his reading, stabilized, but also enlightened (Barthes' 'text of pleasure'), but the school girls drawn to the red book may very well be peeping into a 'text of bliss'. Their facial expressions range from being perturbed, to perplexed, perhaps shocked, overwhelmed. But they are all enchanted to read more. They seem to be sharing a secret, a knowing which they might not wish to expose to their teacher, lest even dare to discuss amongst themselves. The *Young man reading* on the mat, his one arm rested on the pillow, seems absorbed in relaxed reading, transcended by the text, visualising its content, mentally very far removed from the surroundings in which the artist is observing him. According to Peffer (2009:7) Sekoto

here illustrated with deceptive simplicity the ease with which modern education and vestigial aspects of traditional African culture could and did coexist within black homes in South Africa at mid-century. More important, it showed how natural (and not foreign) access to a Western-style education could be in the context of black domestic life.

All of Sekoto's actors are accomplished readers, they are not performing a parrot-learnedness; they are attracted to the content of their reading matter, the text as object is not fetishised in the way the Bibles in the missionary photographs compelled "devotion and attention" as if the object itself would exude "a supra-human agency" (Hofmeyr 2011: 198). And in this regard Sekoto transcends the "missionary gaze": the readers' composure draws attention to the practice of reading, the privacy and the secrecy thereof. Sekoto's readers are poachers: the Orlando men in the train take from the paper what they need to know about the daily news, the school girls extract from a single book information that leaves expressions on their faces that can only make a teacher or a parent worried; the young man's time and space is not subservient to any master, and he confidently allows his mind to explore wherever the text takes him. He affords himself the luxury of leisurely wandering through a world he can visualise in the privacy of his own imagination. Only one of the African readers is positioned in the conditions resembling what Missionary Hoffmann considered imperative for reading to take off amongst Africans: seated at a well-lit table. It is also questionable whether Sekoto's readers were restricting themselves to texts in their vernacular, which Hoffmann believed the missionary society should have provided, and which he considered a prerequisite for an African reading culture to take root (Hoffmann 1939: 9).

Madame Pernet was the wife of Sekoto's medical doctor in France, the couple were both considered his friends. She looks straight at the artist, and the viewer, allowing herself to be interrupted, but she has not yet quite returned from the world she has visualised for herself through the act of reading. She greets the onlooker's gaze at a vulnerable moment, but remains comfortable enough to look back in a space of domestic familiarity. She is serious, reflective, unpretentious. As





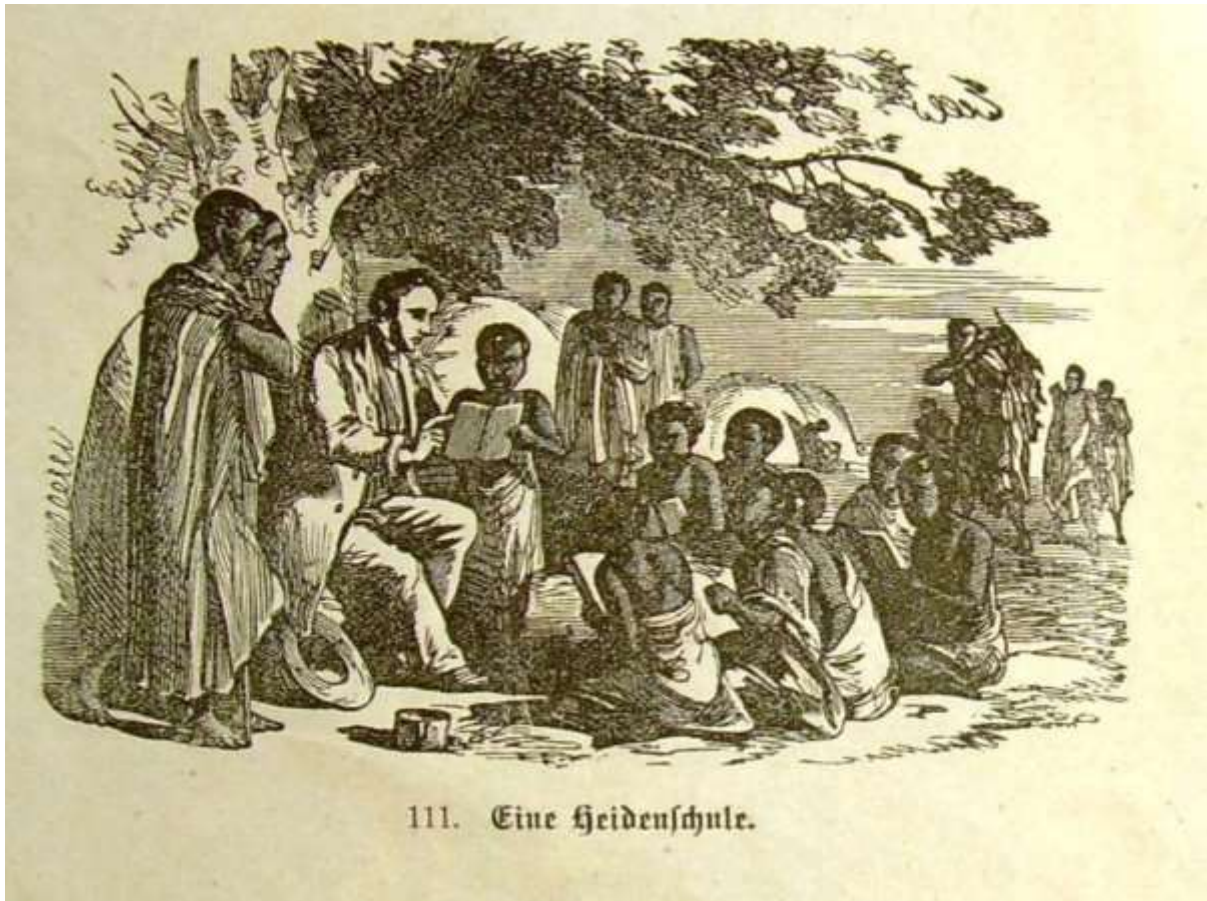
**Image 5** : With this photograph from his publication *Einst und Jetzt im Heidenland* (No date: 16), Missionary Carl Hoffmann of the Berlin Missionary Society attempted to remind his German readers that Christianity and literacy had been transmitted in the northern parts of the Transvaal amongst Africans themselves already prior to the arrival of the white missionaries.

with all his readers, Sekoto here too accomplishes what Jessica Benjamin (1986: 94) calls an “intersubjective mode” of imaging (as discussed in Conlon (2005: 46): presenting actors, in this instance, readers, with a desire of their own (derived from Virginia Woolf’s argument that a writer at least requires a “room of one’s own”.) Benjamin’s argument was that women should not only simply mirror or mimic the desires of men.

Equally so: African readers did not simply mirror or mimic the thoughts and decisions of missionaries, or colonial authorities. Hoffmann’s own observations already pointed in that direction, curiously, with the photographs he had choreographed to convey the message of the spread of Christianity – and literacy – amongst Africans prior to the arrival of the missionaries, and in the absence of missionary agency (Image 5). Recent scholarship no longer allocates missionaries the powerful roles they may have claimed for themselves in their own texts (See Hofmeyr: 2011 as a vivid example). Their lasting legacy seems to have been their meticulously preserved recordings. Hoffmann’s observation of what Africans wanted to read (“the *Star*, *Sunday Times*, *Bantu World*, ... bolshevist pamphlets” (Hoffmann 1938: 3)) outlasted his intentions to alter that (towards “good reading matter”, endorsing the Christian ethos, in the African languages – which, of course, was also read). Inevitably, those who read what they liked would move on to write what they liked<sup>3</sup> – and in the case of Sekoto, paint what they liked.

### **Visions of a mission: African literacy**

Let us now move back to and take another look at the promotional images aimed at visualising the process of advancing literacy in Africa. The idealised way in which missionary publications portrayed teaching in Africa, was a tranquil affair taking place under orderly, almost sedated circumstances in the open air (Image 6). Ironically, this sharply contrasted contemporaneous German artists’ depictions of classroom experiences “at home”. Classroom images like the ones painted by Johann Peter Hasenclever and Carl Hertel (1846 and 1874 respectively, Museum of Fine Arts, Leipzig) portray a fair number of lack-lustre, unappreciative, reluctant (and humiliated) German learners, whereas the missionary protégés in Africa would always be imagined attentive, receptive, almost devotional, strongly resembling literacy campaign material from our current era. It was thus refreshing that the South African Book Development Council moved away from the stereotypical images of African children in a pedagogical setting, and rather chose a work of art as central image for the South African National Book week in 2010 (Bookslive 2009). The shift was from idealising the ardent learner to visualising actual African reading.



**Image 6** : Remarkably placid and attentive African pupils in ‘A heathen school’ from Wangemann (1881: LXXIV).

Yet, in Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi’s “Reading Recorded History” (2007) the focus remains on the male reader. The challenge remains how to represent African woman readers in ways they might consider intersubjective, in ways they could imagine themselves. There are some sculptures in the public domain, representing reading African women in symbolic proportions. Abel Manatsha’s sculpture in front of the Building of the Unit for Distance Education at the University of Botswana (Image 7) depicts a Motswana woman reading from her laptop with a girl child intently watching. The work simultaneously invokes and comments on the well-known Victorian image of mothers reading to children. In front of the main building of St Mary’s Diocesan School for Girls in Pretoria, is a sculpture by Angus Taylor in which a senior girl of African descent teaches a junior girl of European descent the school prayer from a book held open in her hands (Image 8). May these sculptures be read as Southern African renderings of St. Anne teaching St Mary to read? The connotation is there to be made for anyone familiar with the Western canon. Of course, the religious nature of the reading matter in Taylor’s work also invokes the age-old notion of female submissive reading, although the intention was perhaps more probably to instil a sense of devotional confidence, and,





**Image 7** : An Abel Manatsha Sculpture of a mother and child reading in front of the Distance Education Building, University of Botswana. Photograph by Lize Kriel, January 2009.

most obviously, racial harmony aspired to through Christian faith, with the African girl guiding the daughter of the former coloniser in this process.

But both the Gaborone and the Pretoria sculptures were commissioned work. On art auctions one would be more likely to encounter paintings of woman readers depicted in the leisurely luxury typical of this Victorian genre. *Google Image* searches would lead one to a few paintings of African male readers in contemplative or devotional mood (Peter Sibeko's *Man reading* (20<sup>th</sup> century) and Peter Clarke's *Knowledge* (2006)). Johannes Mashego Segogela's sculptures of male and female African readers (featured by Clarke's Book Shop on their website) are also strongly associated with reading as part of religious practice. Art occupied with mature African woman readers who can afford the time to spend with a book, are still remarkably scarce in our world of images, and if they are to be located in a domain like Google Images, they are most likely to be depictions of/by African American women. On the one hand this may suggest that African women had been spared the objectifying male artist's gaze which had resulted in the abundant paintings of fetishised white Victorian woman readers, a commodification that has been carried into our present





**Image 8** : An Angus Taylor sculpture of two girls reading the school prayer, St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls, Pretoria. Photograph by Lize Kriel, April 2013.

by means of romanticising postcards, calendars and celebratory coffee table books. On the other hand, the conspicuous absence of woman readers of darker skin colour in this art-inspired nostalgic popular culture, may lead to a faulty impression about the non-existence of an African reading class, 'then' and 'now'. And of course this actuality is in sharp contrast to the way African women had repeatedly been fetishised in South African art and remain fetishised in popular visual culture – just to think of the 'ethnicising' and 'exoticising' of African women on postcards and in other touristic promotional material (Van Eeden 2007: 193-4).

## Conclusion

Images of people reading are as revealing as they can be misleading about a community's reading practices, or attitudes towards reading, at any particular moment in time. The production, reproduction, distribution and consumption of images affect their meaning. The clearest difference between these processes for images of 'African readers' and 'Western readers' is that the latter had contributed to a gendered art historical discourse, in a way that images of black readers had not. One could argue that representation of African reading should not be sought in art, but in popular culture. Yet, the pervasive proliferation of reader images in the Western tradition, makes it inevitable that a visualisation of African reading would urge at least a response, or a conversation, or then, a decisive negation, of the tropes in the 'Western' images. The most common image of the African reader is tenaciously colonial: the submissive believer or the pre-artistic perpetual beginner. This tends to reduce the visibility of postcolonial African reading – particularly so for African women – in its diversity and its vibrancy from below. Of course literacy in Africa has to be promoted. But so must the awareness that there has been, however small, a long and strong reading tradition amongst Africans – as Archie Dick (2012) had done in his book on this *Hidden History*. And if that tradition can be imagined, visualised, in a way more critically engaging with the historical memory, and the historical record, of practices of the everyday – as Sekoto had, a great deal may be done for the integrity of the image of the African reader ... and for that matter, the woman reader, the accomplished reader and the beginner reader, wherever he or she may be from. In our ocular-centric world, where images play such a forceful role in truth-making processes, the answer probably does not lie in lamenting, or policing, appreciative readings of either misogynist Victorian paintings or of patronising educational posters of African learners. The visualisation of reading can only be perpetuated and proliferated even further, but, then, hopefully, towards the inter-subjective mode, where the voyeur can acknowledge the reader's 'desire of her own'.

This may perhaps be what one encounters in Billie Zangewa's *Exquisite Fantasy*, which will be exhibited at the Contemporary African Art Fair in London in October 2014 (<http://1-54.com/artist/billie-zangewa/>). With her silk embroidery, this Johannesburg-based artist professes to explore the female gaze: "how a woman sees herself as beautiful through her own eyes" (Hunkin 2014: 2). *Exquisite Fantasy's* African woman reader is exquisitely dressed; sitting in a green garden, or park? (or a fantasy veld next to the road?). She is absorbed in what seems to be a fashion magazine – one of the artist's self-confessed indulgences. A (fancy?) car between the green grass and a backdrop of dark trees implies a roadside. Is it the parked car of the reading woman? Behind the trees, tower the city's skyscrapers. *Exquisite Fantasy* simultaneously invokes and transcends the Western trope of the reading woman painted in the garden. This woman is mobile, and at home in the city, not encapsulated in an endless garden like so many of her Victorian predecessors, but she is also not donning any of the staid responsibilities associated with female reading, such as education, as in Cassatt's woman readers in their green parks. Zangewa is expressing a "desire of her own" in her depiction of an urban African woman who can afford her fantasies. Zangewa's African woman-reader-in-art is more ambiguous, more elusive, and her agency more unpredictable than this non-art-practising peddler of scholarly ideas could have anticipated.

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<sup>1</sup>. In his defence, it has to be pointed out that Bollmann also discusses these images, and several others, attesting to the fact that his project is indeed more nuanced and complex than the celebratory reception of his books might reveal, and their 'coffee table' look and feel might prepare the reader for. It would be hard to deny, however, that these publications capitalise on the fetishised image of the woman reader.

<sup>2</sup>. Sekoto seems to have been more fascinated with visually representing the act of reading than most other South African artists of the twentieth century. Ephraim Ngatane also painted many readers, and his works also lend themselves to an extensive contextual reading. In this article my emphasis remains on Sekoto. I also restrict myself to representations of the image of the reader, and set aside the fascinating work of artists like Willem Boshoff, who engage with constitutive elements of reading such as books and words.

<sup>3</sup>. Black consciousness writer Steve Biko's famous collection of essays was entitled *I write what I like*.