

Frontier Mail: The Liberal Subject and the Post Office in South African History

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Abstract

This essay brings postal history and postcolonial theory into an encounter, considering the history of the Post Office in South Africa, stretching from its emergence under Dutch rule at the Cape. Turning to postal history reread under the sway of postcolonial theory may enable a rethinking of apartheid, what apartheid carried from the systems of government and administration that preceded it, and – though this remains at the edge of the essay, largely undeveloped but certainly there – what, in turn, of apartheid has been carried into post-apartheid South Africa. The essay forms part of an ongoing project that considers the relation between social institutions and subjectivity.

Key words

institution, subjectivity, postal history, postcolonial, apartheid, race, liberalism, discipline, biopolitics, frontier, reason, passions.

Introduction

Ivor Chipkin and Sarah Meny-Gibert have observed, from within the discipline of Public Administration as it studies the problems of post-apartheid South Africa, that there is a lack of scholarship on the *histories* of public institutions.¹ The preoccupations of Public Administration scholars, they note, are largely practical and normative, evaluating institutions the post-apartheid state inherited as if they emerged after 1994. ‘The value of postcolonial literature for the study of the public sector in South Africa’, Chipkin and Meny-Gibert suggest, ‘is that it helps us to situate elements of

1 I. Chipkin and S. Meny-Gibert, ‘Why the Past Matters: Studying Public Administration in South Africa’, *Journal of Public Administration*, 47, 1, 2012, 102-11.

contemporary political phenomena (corruption, neo-patrimonialism, institutional failure, for example) in the *longue durée* of the colonial state.²

While not uninterested in Public Administration, I am, in this essay, looking at the situation from the perspective of the discipline of History. It is not necessarily true that historical inquiry on South Africa has neglected public institutions. There is, however, very little historical scholarship on the public institution of the Post Office, outside of what is produced by philatelists. I would like to make the case that there is a productive encounter possible between postal history and postcolonial theory.

In doing so, I place at the centre of my concerns an issue that has long been interrogated by historians, and which has been approached from various angles, namely, 'the demarcation of the sovereign citizen-subject *as* liberal', as Gary Minkley puts it, and the 'racial exclusions' that attend this.³ I follow Theodor Adorno in taking Immanuel Kant as the philosopher 'at the very beginning of the liberal era', the 'bourgeois philosopher par excellence', but also in his provocation that it is Kantian thought that 'reverberates down to the everyday life of our minds today'.⁴ Adorno says as much in the 1950s, but I would maintain that it is true of today, too. The emergence of neoliberalism, many will say, alters things, and yet it is a version of Kantian critique that is routinely marshalled against neoliberalism.⁵

For Adorno, 'social factors lie concealed in the crucial attributes that Kant assigns to the subject'.⁶ The relation between sensation and the cognitive faculties in Kant's conception of the subject, Adorno argues, corresponds with a social division of labour according to which nature has been brought into a relation of progressive domination. Just as natural resources are extracted for processing, sensations are, to Kant, a kind of 'raw material' given over to the cognitive faculties for processing. This is where postcolonial theory has been particularly incisive, building on critical theory. Insofar as the colonised were cast as being, in Kant's words, in an 'untutored [*rohen, raw*]' state, which is to say a 'natural' state, their domination became synonymous

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- 2 Chipkin and Meny-Gibert, 'Why the Past Matters', 104. On the problem of the inheritances of the post-apartheid state, there are few studies more penetrating than Adam Sitze's *The Impossible Machine: A Genealogy of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
 - 3 G. Minkley, 'The pass photograph and the intimate photographic event in South Africa' in P. Hayes and G. Minkley (eds.), *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), 106, emphasis added. I take it as significant that Minkley turns to another, related bureaucratic system, pass photography, to grasp the problem of the liberal subject for apartheid. The relation between pass photography and the Post Office is not one I can develop here, but it is certainly there.
 - 4 T. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, R. Tiedemann (ed.) and R. Livingstone (trans.), (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 6, 77.
 - 5 When it comes to the contemporary use made of Kantian ideas to combat racism, the tendency, as Robert Bernasconi puts it, is to say that, 'although Kant is logically committed to the idea that the entire species progresses in perfection, he is not personally committed'. R. Bernasconi, 'Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up: The Challenge of Enlightenment Racism to the Study of the History of Philosophy', *Radical Philosophy*, 117, 2003, 18. One seldom finds outright Kantian critiques of apartheid today. Peter Vale and Heather Jacklyn, for example, noting 'post-apartheid South Africa's incorporation into the logic and exigencies of global neo-liberal capitalism' – with the consequence that critical thinking has, paradoxically, been diminished since the end of apartheid, the value of humanities scholarship reduced to its capacity to contribute to economic growth – frame their edited volume as 'an exercise interested in promoting Enlightenment values', set against both the 'counter Enlightenment authoritarian tendencies' which the state assumed in South Africa during apartheid, and against the neoliberal constraints of post-apartheid South Africa. P. Vale and H. Jacklyn, 'Framing and Revisiting: Debates Old and New' in P. Vale and H. Jacklyn (eds.), *Re-Imagining the Social in South Africa: Critique, Theory and Post-Apartheid Society* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 7, 11, 17.
 - 6 Adorno, *Kant's Critique*, 171.

with the exercise of sound judgment itself.⁷ In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's terms, this produces – and it is important to note that she asserts as much through a reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* – a 'native informant', a figure that, in its heteronomy, informs the limits of autonomous, free judgment, a figure that is both necessary to, and foreclosed in, Kant's text.⁸

I believe that reconsidering the constitutive limits of the liberal subject by turning to postal history reread under the sway of postcolonial theory may enable a rethinking of apartheid, what apartheid carried from the systems of government and administration that preceded it, and – though this remains at the edge of the essay, largely undeveloped but certainly there – what, in turn, of apartheid has been carried into post-apartheid South Africa.

If its ideologues can be taken at their word, apartheid was an answer to a problem that liberalism could not itself resolve, the question of the political rights of 'non-Europeans', who were seen, within a liberal universe, as eligible but not yet ready for full enfranchisement. A cardinal feature of colonial rule as rationalised by liberalism – 'guardianship' over 'non-European races', and the perpetual deferral of rights – was repeated in and as apartheid.⁹ As a form of 'trusteeship', apartheid responded to the 'Native question' by granting rights in the Bantustans – 'nurseries', as apartheid ideologues saw them, 'sophisticated concentration camps', as Steve Biko judged them – where 'Natives' were, ostensibly, 'full citizens' in waiting.¹⁰

The problem liberalism had created and for which it had no viable response was distilled by Alfred Hoernlé – a philosopher who knew Kant's philosophy intimately – in his 1939 Phelps-Stokes lectures, *South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit*.¹¹ Prior to these lectures, Hoernlé had argued against segregation, which, beyond betraying the 'liberal spirit', would lead to what white South Africa would have been unable to commit to, 'the withdrawal of Native labour from the European labour market'.¹² He had strongly believed assimilation was possible: 'As regards the power to assimilate the white man's civilisation', Hoernlé wrote in 1927, 'the evidence is *for*, rather than *against*, the Bantu'.¹³ It was not that Hoernlé saw no complications with assimilation – the 'detrribalisation' it entailed was anything but uncomplicated. By the late 1930s, however, it no longer seemed to him that, in South Africa, it would be

7 I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, J. M. Creed (trans.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1790/2007).

8 G. C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Along similar lines, Tony Brown argues that when Kant marks the limits of reflective and determinative judgments, anthropological figures tend to appear. It is not, as Brown suggests, an incidental appearance of the exotic, but an 'ethnological constituent'. Brown writes, which 'grounds the third *Critique*'. T. Brown, *The Primitive, the Aesthetic, and the Savage: An Enlightenment Problematic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 107.

9 'The National Party's 1948 Election Manifesto notes 'Christian trusteeship of the European race as the basic principle of its policy with regard to the Non-European races'. A decade later, H. F. Verwoerd underlines 'guardianship', citing the Manifesto. H. F. Verwoerd, 'Bantu Self-Government' in D. W. Krüger (ed.), *South African Parties and Policies, 1910-1960: A Select Source Book* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1960), 439. On guardianship, and apartheid, see H. Giliomee, 'The Making of the Apartheid Plan', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 2, 2003, 373-392.

10 S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador, 2004, first published 1978), 96. On precursors to this formulation in Sol Plaatje and Nelson Mandela, see A. Sitze, 'The Crime of Apartheid: Genealogy of a Successful Failure', *London Review of International Law*, 2019, 181-214.

11 R. F. A. Hoernlé, *South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1945).

12 R. F. A. Hoernlé, 'Native Education at the Cross-Roads in South Africa', *Journal of the International African Institute*, 11, 4, 1938, 406-407.

13 R. F. A. Hoernlé, 'Prolegomena to the Study of the Black Man's Mind', *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2, 5, 1927, 57.

possible, for it would produce ‘a proletariat ... disinherited and discriminated against, not only as an inferior class ... but at the same time as an inferior race.’¹⁴ Resentment and, thus, revolt would be unending.

In his lectures, Hoernlé proposed, rather than either segregation or assimilation, ‘Total Separation’, ‘thereby making him, at least in the eyes of some critics, an early advocate of apartheid in the name of liberalism.’¹⁵ Hoernlé was not, however, as Martin Legassick argues, ‘advocating particular “native policies”’.¹⁶ As Robert Bernasconi suggests, it was not a ‘practical proposal’. ‘Hoernlé was not advocating “Total Separation” in practice. He was arguing rather that in principle it ... would have been ... the best solution.’¹⁷ A philosophical meditation on a tragedy, the proposal ‘was rooted in the *wish* that Europeans had never conquered the Africans.’¹⁸ While there are certainly limits to Hoernlé’s perspective, it is worthwhile noting, as Vincent Crapanzano did in 1986, that ‘tragedy demands a kind of consciousness that is generally lacking in white South Africa.’¹⁹

While it is possible to place these lectures among more recent critiques of ‘the demarcation of the sovereign citizen-subject as liberal’ and its ‘racial exclusions’, they suffer the limitations of melancholic – one might even say Hamletic – autocritique. Situating himself within a tradition of classical liberalism, Hoernlé turned it upon itself: found wanting, liberalism remained the only adequate tool with which he could bring himself to weigh it. As such, Hoernlé’s project remained one of rethinking, according to a constant theme in a heterogeneous liberal tradition, reason in its relation to the passions, the idea that, ‘if man is to achieve anything great, if he is in any way to make the most of his powers, he must master himself, and there can be no self-mastery without a negative side of discipline.’²⁰ A black proletariat, ‘disinherited and discriminated against’, would rise up and demand freedom, and how to discipline such passions was no doubt a question for Hoernlé, but the passions that produced the impasse for liberalism in South Africa, what refused to be rationally mastered and brought under control, were those that welled up from white experience.

Misreading Hoernlé’s Hamletism, Legassick nonetheless puts his finger on the problem this essay takes up when he draws attention, in passing, to ‘channels of communication for the ventilation of grievances.’²¹ The aim here is not to place the Post Office at the very centre of the history of South Africa; it is not the key to the enigma of apartheid – either its genealogy or its recalcitrance – but, as an instrument of

14 Hoernlé, ‘Native Education’, 397–398. He is concerned here with the debate over whether Native Education should be placed under the Department of Education or under Native Administration, fostering assimilation or separate development, respectively.

15 R. Bernasconi, ‘The Paradox of Liberal Politics in the South African Context: Alfred Hoernlé’s Critique of Liberalism’s Pact with White Domination’, *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 4, 2, 2016, 164.

16 M. Legassick, ‘Race, Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa: The Case of R. F. A. Hoernlé’, *African Affairs*, 75, 299, 1976, 226.

17 Bernasconi, ‘Hoernlé’s Critique’, 174, 175, 177.

18 Bernasconi, ‘Hoernlé’s Critique’, 177, emphasis added.

19 V. Crapanzano, *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* (New York: Vintage, 1986), xii.

20 Hoernlé cited in Legassick, ‘Race, Industrialization and Social Change’, 230. I have been unable to access the 1924 essay from which this is quoted. As Legassick reads this: ‘Shaping and controlling the instincts, [the State] gave the individual freedom from the bondage of impulse and passion’. Legassick, ‘Race, Industrialization and Social Change’, 230.

21 Legassick, ‘Race, Industrialization and Social Change’, 227. Legassick mainly has the Joint Councils of the 1920s–1950s in mind.

discipline, it is worthy of more focussed critical attention than it has received.²² The emergence of the Post Office in South Africa – or, rather, the transformation of a military system of posts into a bureaucratic institution of the state – shaped subjectivities across the sociopolitical spectrum, not least in the relation subjects were made to assume between reason and their passions.²³

In approaching the way the Post Office was transformed into an instrument of discipline, waging a gentle war on the passions of its users, I have taken some inspiration from David Graeber's work on bureaucracy. Graeber turns to the Post Office to conjure the allure bureaucratic systems hold for those fastened to, and administered by, them. For Graeber, 'our very ideas of rationality, justice, and above all, freedom, are founded' on bureaucratic systems. Therein lies, Graeber argues, our 'secret joys of bureaucracy'.²⁴ Opposing this war, there is always the risk that one marshals its very logic.

Graeber outlines two versions of bureaucratic reason: one where reason is a 'moral force' and 'exists to keep our lower nature in check, to repress, channel, and contain potentially violent energies', and another, 'bureaucratic populism', where reason 'is a purely technical affair' and 'has nothing to do with morality', as Graeber says of this second form: 'Reason cannot tell us what we should want. It can only tell us how best to get it.'²⁵ Both versions, of course, separate reason from the passions, reason restraining the passions in one version, serving them in the other. For Graeber, it is the separation of reason and the passions, their *apartness*, that is 'at the very core of our conception of bureaucracy'.²⁶ It is the former bureaucratic rationality, I want to suggest, that runs through the Post Office.

Mobility, and life lived at a distance from home, was crucial for the emergence of modern postal systems. Although letters were sent from the Cape to Europe from the sixteenth century, it was only in 1815 that a mail packet service was established between Cape Town and England. On these first voyages, letters took 115 days or more, but, with 'the increasing use of steam as a propelling power, communication with Europe became much more easy and rapid', taking by the 1840s 40 to 50 days, by the 1870s less than 20.²⁷ The improvement of roads to enable 'communication throughout

22 There are, of course, notable exceptions. Particularly relevant is Alan Lester's *Imperial Networks*, which has underscored the importance of 'the communicative circuits of empire' and the movement of 'information between colonial sites, in the form of newspapers, dispatches and letters, as well as produce and personnel'. A. Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth Century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), 6.

23 'The post office', writes David Graeber discussing its longer history, 'first emerged from the organization of armies and empires. They were originally ways of conveying field reports and orders over long distances'. D. Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (London: Melville House, 2015), 155. As Bernhard Siegert puts it, somewhat more pithily: 'The Empire is a postal system, and the postal system is a war'. B. Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, K. Repp (trans.), (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2. There seems every reason to consider the South African situation in this light. As Keith Breckenridge writes: 'The events of the Cattle Killing movement graphically highlight the political significance of communications technologies in the conflict between the empire and its African opponents'. K. Breckenridge, 'Power Without Knowledge: Three Nineteenth Century Colonialisms in South Africa', *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 26, 2008, 10. See also J. Peres, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989), 52, 77.

24 Graeber, *Utopia*, 152, 155.

25 Graeber, *Utopia*, 164, 166.

26 Graeber, *Utopia*, 166.

27 M. H. De Kock, *Economic History of South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta and Co., 1924), 339-340.

the Colony' was soon after the second British occupation of the Cape prioritised under Lord Somerset, who appointed a Central Board of Commissioners of Public Roads, which led to 'a series of public highways, bridges, and mountain passes' being built by convict labourers, many of whom were runaways or deserters.²⁸ Railway lines emerged in the later nineteenth century, the initial stimulus for which was mining, first of diamonds, then gold; raw materials had to be transported to sea ports, and those who extracted them wanted to be linked by writing to 'the outside world'.²⁹

While the acceleration of communication made possible by modern technology – steam power, roads, bridges, railway lines, and so on – is a topic worthy of attention, I am more concerned here with the emergence of a bureaucratic system that aimed to ensure that letters, like their writers, followed an orderly, disciplined course, that they did not wander about the land or the sea, getting lost or delayed. It is into this regime that the 'disinherited and discriminated against' would be required to enter themselves 'for the ventilation of grievances', but also to communicate with those they had left behind. Put differently, the post emerged in South Africa, at least as a means for 'the people' to communicate with each other and with the state, in the wake of the devastations of the second half of the nineteenth century, when scores of people stamped by the colonial state as 'Natives' were forced into wage labour far from the reserves – later homelands or Bantustans – to which they were bound. As Keith Breckenridge notes: 'A constrained form of letter writing has been an essential element of migrant labour in southern Africa from the outset.'³⁰ Along the lines Harold Wolpe has sketched, this can be explained as the creation of solid lines of connection between black labourers on the mines and the reserves, which would lower the cost of the reproduction of labour power: without these 'channels of communication', whole families would have had to be brought to the mines – or to the cities – increasing costs of production.³¹ While certainly a part of the problem, this is not all that can be said about the Post Office.

Breckenridge lodges his questions within longstanding, and largely unresolved, debates about the 'public sphere' beyond western Europe. The 'bourgeois public sphere', on Jürgen Habermas' account of eighteenth century France, Germany and

28 De Kock, *Economic History*, 343. The state of roads when the British reoccupied the Cape in 1805 was, in many accounts, 'primitive [sic]'. 'The only available means of internal transport were ox-wagons over roads which were merely trails or beaten tracks ... Rivers and mountain ranges, moreover, proved to be formidable obstacles, as no bridges or mountain passes had been constructed as yet'. *Ibid.*, 343.

29 E. Rosenthal and E. Blum, *Runner and Mailcoach: Postal History and Stamps of Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1969), 81. Writing of Griqualand West, 'the seemingly desolate tract of land ... where diamonds were discovered in 1867', postal historians, Eric Rosenthal and Eliezer Blum note: 'For the postal communications with the outside world the diggers used runners until 1868, when the famous Inland Transport Company of Adolph Arnholz began conveying mail by wagon from Cape Town across the Karoo via the new village of Ceres'. It would soon become illegal for letters to be carried by anyone except the government carriers.

30 K. Breckenridge, 'Love Letters and Amanuenses: Beginning the Cultural History of the Working Class Private Sphere in Southern Africa, 1900-1933', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26, 2, 2000, 338. As Shula Marks has also pointed out, 'mission-educated Africans helped migrants to maintain their rural links with wives and families by acting as scribes, a way of earning a living for the literate and of providing a vital social service'. S. Marks, 'Class, culture, and consciousness in South Africa, 1880-1889' in R. Ross, A. K. Mager and B. Nasson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume II, 1885-1994* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 130-131.

31 H. Wolpe, 'Capitalism and cheap labour power in South Africa: From segregation to apartheid' in W. Beinart and S. Dubow (eds.), *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London, Routledge, 1995).

England, was comprised of the spaces in which matters of public interest were deliberated upon, and contrary to the hierarchical structure of the society out of which and against which these public spaces of critical thinking formed themselves, social status was ignored; only reason counted. Set against state domination, set apart from the life sustaining labour of the home, and unimpeded by the market, the 'bourgeois public sphere' was supposedly free of private interests, and it eroded, for Habermas and others, to the extent that such interests entered into it.³² From then on – and its erosion was almost immediate – public debate was substituted, so the story goes, by the reaching of compromises between the representatives of particular interests, finding consensus through reason by bureaucratic administration, thinking by processing.³³

For Habermas, the 'private sphere' is the sphere of difference and inequality, but also the space in which the subject first acquires the rudiments for transcending the particular and arriving at general, dispassionate judgments. As both an outside and a foundation for the 'public sphere', the 'private sphere' prepares the subject, in the very structure of their subjectivity, for public reasoned deliberation. A person learned, through letter-writing at home, to take themselves as an object of self-reflection, rehearsing aesthetic judgment which was thought to contain the key elements of sound political judgment. In the eighteenth century European situation with which Habermas is concerned, the home is, thus, a scene of early aesthetic education, and it is aesthetic judgment that provided the aptitude for political judgment.

There are clear problems here, to which feminist scholars have drawn attention. The public sphere 'has unity and coherence', as Iris Marion Young writes, 'by its expulsion and confinement of everything that would threaten to invade the polity with differentiation: the specificity of women's bodies and desire, the difference of race and culture, the variability or heterogeneity of the needs, goals, and desires of each individual, the ambiguity and changeability of feeling.'³⁴ Young, it hardly needs to be stated, invites such an invasion. But, as she notes, simply making the boundaries of contemporary 'public spheres' more porous is not sufficient. Reason is not the transcendental category it pretends to be, but an always already gendered, classed and raced mode of subjection. As such, impartial deliberation can serve, as Nancy Fraser puts it, 'as a mask for domination'. Thus Fraser's argument for 'subaltern counter-publics', which do not attempt to keep spaces of deliberation insulated from difference and particularity, but instead explicitly acknowledge and foreground inequalities,

32 J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, T. Burger (trans.) with the assistance of F. Lawrence, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991/1962).

33 Hannah Arendt calls this 'the rise of the social', the moment at which politics became 'housekeeping', when matters of 'sheer survival', which were previously dealt with in the home, came under the 'light of the public sphere'. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 46, 38.

34 I. M. Young, 'Impartiality and the civic public: Some implications of feminist critiques of moral and political theory' in J. B. Landes (ed.), *Feminism, the Public, and the Private* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 433. Habermas, it should be said, never aimed to restore what was, by the nineteenth century, irretrievably lost – reasoned deliberation among equals – and neither is he blind to the fact that the 'public sphere', however far back one traces its origins, *was never inclusive*. The tension he wants to hold onto is between the ideal of democracy and the ideal of reasoned deliberation.

and include not only historically excluded groups of people but also foreclosed, supposedly 'non-rational' and 'pre-scientific' modes of making sense of the world.³⁵

It is into the thick of these debates that Breckenridge asks whether this 'constrained form of letter writing' – letters sent and received by migrant labourers – constituted a 'private sphere'. Yes and no, he says: 'Letters ... constituted the private sphere of migrant life', although he notes a paradox; the letters were very often 'authored by skilled amanuenses and commonly read aloud'.³⁶ Such a form of reading and writing departs from the idea that letters were constitutive of psychic interiority, of the technologically mediated hollowing out of the eighteenth century introspective bourgeois subject. As Breckenridge notes, 'whilst writing and reading letters helped constitute the private sphere, reading was not private'.³⁷

The emergence of a 'public sphere' at the Cape – entailing an increase in news circulated through the post, but also the establishment of a museum, a library and an art gallery, all of which were pitted against not only the authoritarian rule of the Dutch, but also against British aristocratic authoritarianism – has been characterised as the displacement of sovereign power by disciplinary power.³⁸ The postal system has not, to my knowledge, been included within this Foucauldian framing, and this is a more general phenomenon, extending beyond South African historiography. 'The Post Office', as Kate Thomas notes, 'is something of an overlooked state apparatus by those working broadly within a Foucauldian tradition'.³⁹

If it were to be included, the Post Office might be grasped as a biopolitical – and not only a disciplinary – technology, one that exercised a form of violence waged in the name of life. Biopolitics, for Foucault, has its onset in the late eighteenth century, the age of reason, and the moment that the European bourgeois 'public sphere' flashed up as a possibility for reasoned deliberation among equals; biopolitics – and what Foucault calls its racialising 'death function' – is the underside of the long eighteenth century.⁴⁰ Approaching the Post Office in this way, as an instrument of discipline, and as a mechanism for 'the defence of society', no doubt has its limits and its critics – including Breckenridge – but it does bring into relief the way the Post Office

35 N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 119.

36 Breckenridge, 'Love Letters', 338, 345.

37 Breckenridge, 'Love Letters', 347. On this, see also K. Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons, and Publics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

38 Clifton Crais has made one of the most well-known arguments along this line, writing of a shift from a form of power as the 'property held by the sovereign, as in much of pre-industrial Europe' to one that 'frowned on masters beating their dependents, seeing it as preferable if a 'recalcitrant labourer ... could be "reformed"'. As Crais writes, echoing Foucault, the latter, introduced by the British, 'rested on the accumulation of knowledge on and about the dominated and the production of truth in the exercise of more diffuse but potentially more invidious forms of control'. C. Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-industrial South Africa: The Making of the Colonial Order in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 59, 87.

39 K. Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31.

40 Race and racism are the means by which the biopolitical state establishes 'threats, either internal or external, to the population' and is able to rationalise 'the elimination of the biological threats to the improvement of the species'. M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, D. Macey (trans.), (London: Penguin), 256. The 'death function' of biopolitical sovereignty is a mechanism of discrimination, even of discernment, through which the stated aim of fostering life – of the population and the subjects that make it up – can, at the same time, expose certain lives because of the threat they present to the living. The name Foucault gives to this mechanism is racism: 'In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable... racism alone can justify the murderous function of the state'. Ibid., 256.

has, as I will argue, carried something of sovereign power and slavery into a bureaucratic order from which we have yet to fully emerge.⁴¹

If the postal system has been largely ignored in what is lumped together as post-structuralist scholarship – the exception here, of course, is Derrida's *The Post Card* – it has not figured any more prominently in postcolonial theory.⁴² This, despite Chinua Achebe's invocation of what he calls, in order to pose the problem of 'the reclamation of the African story', 'the rather pedestrian metaphor of the British post office'.⁴³ The Post Office, for Achebe, offers a way to think about a 'dialogue between dispossession and its rebuttal', where the Post Office, while allowing that rebuttal, is also a part of the very machinery that 'dispossessed'. As Achebe states, 'the little post office in my village ... was seen by its immediate beneficiaries as a killer who will not be called to account', one who induced 'great anxiety'.⁴⁴ But rather than burning down the Post Office, or letting it decay in disuse, Achebe encourages rebuttal in a qualified mode of writing back, from Africa: 'Write it where you are, take it down that little dusty road to the village post office and send it!'⁴⁵

It took a trip to London for Achebe to recognise the secret that the Post Office, violent and 'dispossessing', was – and is – driven by its own subterranean 'great anxiety'. The imperial post was not – is not – 'all powerful', Achebe notes: 'The dispossession that caused my shrillness is in retreat though the marks of its pillage are still everywhere'.⁴⁶ As Sarah Janine Da Silva shows, in a study nearer to home, 'white belonging in South Africa, as articulated through the operations of the postal service' was 'unstable ... in a state of flux', postal colonialism, which was no doubt violent, a 'fragile undertaking'.⁴⁷

The 'marks of pillage' of which Achebe writes are on the bodies of formerly colonised cities – roads, district divisions, Post Offices, letter slots, street addresses, post boxes, and so on – and they are psychic.⁴⁸ And there is, for Achebe, a reciprocal, mutually constitutive relation between the outside marks and the marks inside. This

41 I am aware of the volume edited by Breckenridge and Simon Szreter, which presents 'a challenge to some of the simplifying effects of Foucault's arguments about the emergence of biopower and governmentality', and, more pointedly, to those following Foucault in analyses of Africa and Asia, tending to 'overstate the bureaucratic enthusiasm for information gathering', which has 'discouraged research into the limits of bureaucratic knowledge'. K. Breckenridge and S. Szreter, 'Introduction' in K. Breckenridge and S. Szreter (eds.), *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3, 7. The point is not that, in fact, Foucault's analyses can be 'applied' but that it provides a useful point of *departure* to begin thinking about the history of the post, particularly along the lines that have been established by those within media archaeology, to whom I turn below.

42 J. Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, A. Bass (trans.), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

43 C. Achebe, *Home and Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75.

44 Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 75-76, 77, 99.

45 Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 97. 'I put my handwritten documents together, went to the post office, and ...', as he notes, elsewhere, of an early draft of *Things Fall Apart*. C. Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Penguin, 2012), 35.

46 Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 101, 103. Biko, too, puts 'post office attendants' among 'the myriad civil agents' who induce 'a fear that erodes the soul of black people in South Africa'. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 83. And like Achebe, 'the government ... [is] ruled by fear, in spite of its immense power'. *Ibid.*, 86.

47 S. J. Da Silva, 'The Institutions of Literary Colonialism: George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, and the Cape Colony' (Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, King's College London, 2016), 166, 186.

48 Achebe writes of 'peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession'. Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 79. As I read this, what 'people' are 'dispossessed' of through the Post Office emerges retroactively as what learning to post a letter will have required one to relinquish: the dream of the precolonial, with its own systems of communication. Just how new these everyday 'marks' are, is revealed by the fact that, in 1853, there were only 6 mailboxes in London, by 1900 over 32,000 across the United Kingdom, made possible by prepayment of adhesive stamps. M. J. Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office Since 1840* (London: Bloomsbury), 40.

is the conjuncture at which I have attempted to write here, thinking through what might be called the ‘stamping’ of the ‘citizen-subject’.

Let me merely note, before trying to make this case more carefully, that the problem emerged for me while reading – and especially while teaching – *Not Either an Experimental Doll: The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women*, a collection of letters written and posted by Lily Moya, Mabel Palmer and Sibusisiwe Makhanya between 1949 and 1951, published in 1987 and edited by Shula Marks.⁴⁹ These letters have served as a spur for numerous academic fields, and this is due, in no small part, to the frame Marks has given them. In the spirit of radical social history Marks has come to represent, she implicates liberalism in the problem of apartheid, examining the first years of apartheid from the perspective of a young black schoolgirl caught in a net of its institutions. The correspondence is, as Marks puts it, a ‘remarkable record of three exceptional women’, and, in the case of Lily Moya, an ‘intimate and painful account’ of her experience of the first years of apartheid.⁵⁰ In her editorial framing, Marks has, without question, meticulously contextualised the lives of these three women. But despite attention to the practice of letter-writing elsewhere, she has also more or less ignored the medium through which these three ‘remarkable women’ communicated. Marks would not be the first scholar to read letters, as David M. Henkin writes, ‘with little interest in the material and cultural conditions of their transmission.’⁵¹ Whatever this ‘record’ can teach us, it remains a collection of letters written according to imperial codes, but also enveloped, addressed, stamped, posted, carried in mailbags, relayed through the Post Office. The early question that drove this essay was a simple one. What difference does it make if one thinks about the history of the postal system Lily Moya used? Marks attends painstakingly to the experience of being made an object of patriarchal exchange, of philanthropic sympathy, of mission school education, and to Lily Moya’s socially conditioned psychic suffering and, ultimately, her psychiatric institutionalisation. Nowhere does she deal with the history of the postal system that carried her moving letters.

The section that follows is a consideration of the history of the postal system under British and Dutch rule, looking in some detail at the abolition of slavery and the emergence of a disciplinary society. The section after that examines one response to the question of what the postal system was for apartheid, at least during its early days when Lily Moya sent and received letters through it.

49 S. Marks, ‘Introduction’ in *Not Either an Experimental Doll: The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women*, S. Marks (ed.), (London: The Women’s Press, 1987). Lily Moya is a pseudonym Marks gave her.

50 Marks, ‘Introduction’, 1.

51 D. M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communication in Nineteenth Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6. It is peculiar in light of other remarks: ‘Central to the development of the modern South African state was both the mailed fist of force and the velvet glove of “bureaucratic modernity.” Together, these forged its economy, formed its institutions and helped to fashion the ideology of all its inhabitants.’ Marks, ‘Class, culture, and consciousness’, 103–104. Insofar as Marks does theorise the post, it is in resignation that it was taken up by defeated black South Africans: ‘Earlier converts sought the meaning of these events in letters to one another and to sympathetic missionary figures ... To fight with the pen rather than the sword became their leitmotif. Nor is it any coincidence that the years of military defeat inaugurated the real beginnings of numerical growth in mission churches and an increase in the numbers of schools and in school attendance all over the region.’ *Ibid.*, 117.

A powerful engine of civilisation

The nineteenth century transformation of the British Post Office, a ‘service that officially *excluded* private letters into a service claiming exclusive responsibility *over* them’, was driven largely by Rowland Hill, educator and Benthamite postal reformer.⁵² Chief among the reforms Hill instituted from 1840 was the introduction of standard prepayment for letters, paid by the sender, and universal penny postage, making the post, previously ‘an expensive and corrupt institution that served only the powerful and wealthy’, open to all.⁵³ Hill’s reforms were introduced across the British Empire, including in South Africa, and were ‘hailed as a triumph of civilization, an assessment that would be seconded by influential historians for over one hundred years.’⁵⁴ In Hill’s own terms, the Post Office was ‘a powerful engine of civilisation.’⁵⁵

Many wanting to affirm the liberatory potential of the post, wanting to assert that it is not necessarily a Eurocentric ‘engine of civilisation’, will point out that postal communication did not begin in Europe, and that the postal systems that did emerge across Europe in the early sixteenth century saw themselves as advancing, backwards, towards ‘Non-European’ postal antiquity.⁵⁶ There is a tension worth noting here. On the one hand, the relaying of clay tablets and, later, parchment operated in a radically different way from the postal relays through which the British Empire encouraged ‘the people’ to send letters in the nineteenth century; the closed circuits within which sovereign commands and intelligence circulated between military posts bear only a distant kinship with the nineteenth century postal reforms that took hold across the world. ‘The Post Office is a Victorian institution’, as Thomas writes: ‘Postal systems existed before this time, and in other places, but postage stamps, mailboxes, and, most important, the idea that all people in all places are connected by the mail can be traced back to the first years of Victoria’s reign.’⁵⁷ On the other hand, they are related: ‘Communicating messages has always been closely tied to the exercise of power.’⁵⁸ As Siegert puts it: ‘Postal systems are *instrumenta regni*.’⁵⁹ What differentiate postal systems are their modes of exercising power, and, as I have already noted, the Post Office can be understood as an instrument of discipline through which subjects of the British empire learned to conduct themselves within ‘uniformly ruled

52 D. Campbell-Smith, *Masters of the Post: The Authorized History of the Royal Mail* (London: Penguin, 2011, Kindle Edition), loc. 653, 845.

53 Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 10.

54 R. R. John, ‘The Political Economy of Postal Reform in the Victorian Age’, *Smithsonian Contributions to History and Technology*, 55, 2010, 4.

55 R. Hill, *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and its Practicability* (London: Charles Knight and Co., 1837), 6. Hill primarily meant the ‘civilisation’ of the British poor, their education encouraged by low postal rates.

56 Indeed, the Persian royal road was only the most efficient and well-developed network of postal antiquity. The earliest known letters, written not in Latin but Eblaite, come from Syria in the third millennium BC, and there have been cuneiform letters found from 2390 BC in Mesopotamia. P. Michalowski (ed.), *The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur: An Epistolary History of an Ancient Mesopotamian Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011). Indeed, how far back the post goes is impossible to know. Daniel Headrick pushes it back as far back as is possible: ‘Throughout history, governmental and nongovernmental communications systems coexisted, often in competition’. D. R. Headrick, *When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 182, emphasis added.

57 Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 1.

58 Headrick, *Information*, 183. Headrick’s point here is predominantly about censorship: ‘When governments allowed public access to their official networks, they reserved the right to intercept and read messages, sometimes overtly, but more often in secret’. *Ibid.*, 183.

59 Siegert, *Relays*, 7.

space.⁶⁰ As Siegert writes: ‘The penny post functionalized its recipients in the same way the Panopticon did: it made no difference who was entered at the other side of the mailbox or mail slot.’⁶¹ A crucial aspect of this disciplining, for Siegert, is the media itinerary it entails, from ‘murmuring’ orality to standardised ‘writing.’⁶² As Siegert writes, and here Legassick’s ‘channels of communication for the ventilation of grievances’ take on a new meaning: ‘The danger emanating from the noise of the people was dispelled as soon as it was intercepted by a network that controlled, redirected, sorted, and calculated it, thus ensuring that its waves were not emitted at unanticipated speeds or in unanticipated directions.’⁶³ But here is the tension – for rather than marking a clean break from sovereign power and slavery, postal discipline in South Africa incorporated both into its functioning.

This should not occlude what Eileen Cleere calls ‘the feminist and democratic potential of the penny post’. As an instrument of discipline, the Post Office *was* a ‘mechanism for the moral preservation and social control of all culturally suspicious groups of people, from working men to criminals, governesses to revolutionaries.’⁶⁴ Hill’s reforms *were*, as Thomas writes, a ‘way of imagining the expansion and mapping of empire’, the Post Office *was* a ‘finely tuned instrument of imperial control and a cherished emblem of the paper empire’, and it *did* provide ‘the roots of a bureaucratized expansionist state.’⁶⁵ But this same system was also capable of producing ‘queer interfaces and reverberations.’⁶⁶ As Thomas writes of the Post Office, ‘its textual transport systems are as open to play as they are to policing.’⁶⁷ The Post Office has been, in other words, an instrument of discipline for the ‘epistolary colonial state’, as Karin Barber puts it, that could not always be fully controlled, and it was ‘seized upon’ – often, as in the case of Lily Moya, perilously, without guarantee – as a ‘weapon, resource and opportunity.’⁶⁸

The Post Office at the Cape colony, while a ‘Victorian institution’, did not emerge from nothing. Under occupation by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), a rudimentary postal service at the Cape was carried out ‘almost entirely for the convenience, and in the interests, of the Company and its officials.’⁶⁹ By 1781, ‘Post Holders’ were established in outlying regions: ‘Apart from their duties of conveying the mail, these officers were instructed to give warning of enemy ships.’⁷⁰ They would also be

60 Siegert, *Relays*, 8.

61 Siegert, *Relays*, 126. It is frequently pointed out that ‘Hill travelled in some of the same reformist circles as Bentham, and, like Bentham, was determined to simplify government and make it more economical.’ John, ‘Political Economy of Postal Reform’, 9.

62 Siegert, *Relays*, 114-115.

63 Siegert, *Relays*, 103-104.

64 E. Cleere, *Avuncularism: Capitalism, Patriarch, and Nineteenth Century British Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 185.

65 Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 12, 17, 19.

66 Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 2.

67 Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 7.

68 Barber, *Anthropology of Texts*, 181.

69 De Kock, *Economic History*, 352. Riders carried ‘plaacs or dispatches’ but also ‘letters as a favour, between Cape Town and the outlying areas’. De Kock, *Economic History*, 352. Within the Cape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were few options but ‘sending personal messengers, or asking the help of passing travellers’. Rosenthal and Blum, *Runner*, 4. There were thousands of letters carried, in a ‘cleft-stick’ by ‘Hottentot runners [sic]’ or slaves, but they passed directly from writer to recipient, not through a Post Office. See also A. A. Jurgens, *The Handstruck Letter Stamps of the Cape of Good Hope from 1792 to 1853 and the Postmarks from 1853 to 1910* (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1943), 7.

70 Rosenthal and Blum, *Runner*, 4.

instrumental in, among other things, tracking down and returning runaway slaves and European deserters. Instructions for a formal postal system at the Cape under Dutch occupation were received in 1788, and by 1791 the first Post Office was established at the Castle in Cape Town. It is crucial to note the political insecurity, 'the state of tension', both at the Castle and on the northern and eastern frontiers, and the perceived need for reliable information, out of which the Post Office emerged.⁷¹

Under the first British occupation in 1795, little or nothing was done to improve postal infrastructure. Postal services at the Cape under the Batavian Republic were significantly improved, no longer limited to government communications; letter, parcels and passengers were conveyed to the newly established Post Office at Stellenbosch, the District Magistrate, or Landdrost, tasked with receiving and sorting mail, placing it in bags for their conveyance to districts further afield.⁷² Under the improved postal services of the Batavian Republic, received mail had to be dispatched within two hours of receipt, and 'each field-cornet had the right to commandeer a slave or Hottentot [sic] with a horse and supplies from neighbouring settlers, these to be kept in readiness and be available any time when parcels or newspapers could be expected.'⁷³ Mail could be sent this way as far as Algoa Bay: 'It would appear that the Batavian Republic was the first to introduce this organized post into the interior', relaying communications between the Cape and increasingly large numbers of frontiersmen during the late eighteenth century.⁷⁴

Postal services during the early days of the second British occupation at first deteriorated. The mail, the Secretary to the Earl of Caledon wrote, introducing new regulations in a Government Advertisement in 1810, 'was not only irregular, but at the same time extremely tedious ... whole Packets of Letters are either lost or detained for months upon the road.'⁷⁵ Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Collins reported to Caledon: 'The mail to and from Uitenhage, which must be conveyed within four days, is seldom received in less than a fortnight, and is often more than a month on the road.'⁷⁶ The postal services would thus, Caledon declared, include the following changes: 'The carrying of Packets of Letters shall, for as much as possible, be done by Christians, or else by Hottentots [sic] or Slaves on whom a full dependence can be placed.'⁷⁷ But rather than abolishing the previous system, the British undertook a reclassification of roles: 'Hottentot runners' became 'Post Orderlies', who were – as if not only to increase their speed but elevate their mercurial spirits – now 'mounted on horseback.'⁷⁸ Infrastructural development was, from this point onwards, rapid. Until

71 On the 'unsettled state of the interior' in the 1790s, particularly in relation to an 'instability in master-servant relations', see S. N. King, 'The enemy within' in N. Worden and C. Crais (eds.), *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and its Legacy in the Nineteenth-century Cape Colony* (Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), especially 265-270.

72 Jurgens, *Stamps of the Cape*, 15.

73 Rosenthal and Blum, *Runner*, 7.

74 Jurgens, *Stamps of the Cape*, 15.

75 Alexander cited in Jurgens, *Stamps of the Cape*, 23. See also H. Alexander, 'Advertisement concerning the post' in G. M. Theal (ed.), *Records of the Cape Colony from May 1809 to March 1811* (Cape Town: Government of the Cape Colony, 1900).

76 Report from Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Collins to the Earl of Caledon. In G. M. Theal (ed.), *Records of the Cape Colony from May 1809 to March 1811* (Cape Town: Government of the Cape Colony, 1900), 141.

77 Alexander cited in Jurgens, *Stamps of the Cape*, 23.

78 Alexander cited in Jurgens, *Stamps of the Cape*, 23.

1824 there were only 13 post offices in the Cape colony. In 1833, there were only 21, but by 1882 there would be 600 across the Cape Colony.⁷⁹

The expansion placed terrific strain on those in the employ of the General Post Office and those under contracts to relay the frontier mail. Mail had to be received and dispatched more frequently, more District Post Offices had to be established, and the weight of mail bags increased, requiring more contractors, increasing the administrative load. Mail frequently arrived late, or whole packets of letters continued to go missing, but detailed records of everything – including the number of hours and minutes the mail bags arrived late at each station and, thus, the amounts contractors were to be fined, as well as all steps taken to correct these deviations from an agreed schedule – were rigorously recorded in letters to and from the General and District Post Offices, letters that were then conveyed through the post, adding weight to the mail bags that, as one Postmaster complained, led one of the post horses to collapse dead.⁸⁰

After the British occupied the Cape for the second time, the Slave Lodge was emptied of slaves.⁸¹ The Lodge was turned into government offices in 1811, where it housed the General Post Office.⁸² It may oversimplify to say that the General Post Office took over the function of slavery when it occupied its building, but, after the General Post Office was moved from the Castle to the grounds of the Slave Lodge off Adderley Street, it stayed there until 1872, along with the Supreme Court, and, later, the Orphan Chamber, the Receiver of Revenue, and the Attorney-General. From 1811 to 1872, all noise of ‘the people’, any stirrings of discontent, had to pass through the controls of a government communication network housed in the Slave Lodge.⁸³

In thinking about this displacement, it is worth considering what Breckenridge has called ‘the logic of the registry’ and the ‘power of the registry over the movement of black people.’⁸⁴ Runaway slaves were by no means a new phenomenon in the early nineteenth century; from the seventeenth century people had fled, and punishment became, as the eighteenth century wore on, harsher, and more spectacular.⁸⁵ In 1809, however, Caledon proclaimed that runaway slaves could return to their masters, and

79 Jurgens, *Stamps of the Cape*. See also F. Frescura, ‘The Rise of the General Post Office in Cape Town, 1792-1910’, *South African History Online*. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/franco/postal-history-rise-po-capetown.htm> (accessed 5 March 2017). See also Rosenthal and Blum, *Runner*, 4.

80 CO, vol. 608, no. 1238, 12 July 1851, Western Cape Archives and Records Service.

81 ‘By 1807, there were only 283 [Company slaves], still housed in the lodge ... Those remaining were, in 1811, removed from the lodge, and settled in other rented premises.’ J. C. Armstrong and N. A. Warden, ‘The Slaves, 1652-1834’ in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds.), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840, Second Edition* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 128.

82 Frescura, ‘The General Post Office’. Jurgens, *Stamps of the Cape*. For a description of how the different rooms were used, see O. Geyser, ‘The Old Supreme Court Building’ in R. Shell (ed.), *From Diaspora to Diorama: A Guide to the Old Slave Lodge CD* (Cape Town: NagsPro Multimedia).

83 Anthony Holiday has suggested that psychoanalysis may be the most appropriate framework to understand this displacement whereby ‘legislative and judicial activities would be infected by a slave-owning mentality for the next 150 years or more’. A. Holiday, ‘An introduction to the lodge’ in R. Shell (ed.), *From Diaspora to Diorama: A Guide to the Old Slave Lodge CD* (Cape Town: NagsPro Multimedia, 2013), 10. Achebe’s ‘marks of pillage’ are recalled in Holiday’s description of the building to be repurposed: ‘The windowless walls of the original structure served not only to imprison slaves, owned by the Dutch East India Company ... but also to smother the lustful pantings of free citizens and visiting sailors, who made use of the bodies of the slave-women, while their menfolk were out emptying buckets of excrement into Table Bay Harbour’. *Ibid.*, 9.

84 K. Breckenridge, ‘Power Without Knowledge: Three Nineteenth Century Colonialisms in South Africa’, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 26, 2008, 12, 7.

85 N. Penn, *Rogues, Rebels, and Runaways: Eighteenth Century Cape Characters* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1999), 173-174.

they would ‘receive a full pardon, and not be liable to any punishment whatsoever’.⁸⁶ The Caledon Code, as it has been called, placed the previously unchecked authority of masters over their servants under the gaze of the state, but this did not emerge unaccompanied by the counter-force of another set of measures that ‘worked to renew and strengthen slave-era pass regulations’, as Breckenridge writes: ‘After 1809 all Khoisan workers were required to record a fixed place of abode in the office of the district Landdrost. And harnessed to the effort to bind black people to the labour registry was the system of pass controls. Workers were not permitted to move from that address to another in the same district without a pass written by the local field-cornet, and they could not leave the district without a pass issued by the Landdrost.’⁸⁷ Ordinance 50 of 1828, which established the legal status of Khoikhoi descendants, was ‘coupled with another proclamation that transferred the apparatus of the Caledon Code to the Xhosa on the eastern marches of the colony ... Henceforth, individual Xhosa migrants were permitted to enter the colony in search of work only after securing a written pass from the fieldcornet or landdrost of the district they first entered. Like the Caledon Code, contracts between these workers and their employers were not permitted to exceed one month unless they were witnessed and registered by one of the local officials.’⁸⁸ As a mechanism of reform, registration, Breckenridge argues, reconstituted the conditions of slavery: ‘Throughout the nineteenth century it was the feigned practice of registration which served as formal legal disguise for the extension of enslavement in southern Africa.’⁸⁹

The nineteenth century does not, of course, mark the onset of registration as a means of control – it has even been argued that it is ‘a fundamental feature of human life in groups ... throughout human history’.⁹⁰ It does, however, mark a new intensification of registration, and its extension – already loosely in place for ‘Bastaard Hottentots’ [sic] in the late eighteenth century – to all.⁹¹ There is here what can be characterised as a shift between a mode of ‘power that takes life and lets live’ to one that ‘makes live and lets die’ – the onset of ‘biopolitics’, as Foucault put it – in which registration played a new and decisive role, including in the Post Office.

86 Proclamation by the Earl of Caledon, 23 June 1809. In G. M. Theal (ed.), *Records of the Cape Colony from May 1809 to March 1811* (Cape Town: Government of the Cape Colony, 1900), 7-8.

87 Breckenridge, ‘Power without Knowledge’, 7.

88 Breckenridge, ‘Power without Knowledge’, 7.

89 Breckenridge, ‘Power without Knowledge’, 25. It is of course important to note that this argument comes in an article suggesting that colonial power could function quite effectively *without* knowledge, *without* documentation as a means of control. For Breckenridge, the knowledge producing capabilities of the colonial state in South Africa have been grossly overstated. This weakness, however, has often also worked in the favour of colonial discipline. As Posel writes of apartheid bureaucracy and ‘the state’s purported panoptic vision’, which was ‘fractured and partial’, ‘it was impossible to decipher how much was and wasn’t known. And with the state performing as if it could see all, these uncertainties were less potent than the aura, or sensation, of being routinely monitored’. D. Posel, ‘The apartheid project, 1948-1970’ in R. Ross, A. K. Mager, and B. Nasson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume II, 1885-1994* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 364. ‘Racial states’, as Ann Laura Stoler puts it, ‘thrive on ambiguities and falter on rigidities’. A. L. Stoler, ‘Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France’, *Public Culture*, 23, 1, 130.

90 Breckenridge and Szreter, ‘Introduction’, 30. The volume edited by Breckenridge and Szreter is the most substantial study of the history of registration, tracing it much further back, at least a thousand years, and further afield than Western Europe, than historians following Foucault have tended to.

91 On registration in an eighteenth century South African context, see S. N. King, ‘Slavery, race, and citizenship: The ambiguous status of freed slaves at the Cape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ in I. Pesa and J. Gewald (eds.), *Magnifying Perspectives: Contributions to History, a Festschrift for Robert Ross* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, Leiden, 2017), 106-109. See also Penn, *Rogues*, 87-88.

The 'logic of the registry' applies as much to the mail as it does to the bureaucratic racial order that emerged in the wake of slavery in South Africa, and which returned under apartheid.⁹² Registered mail, as Siegert argues, produces a 'biography' for each letter, and with this the life-path of a letter-writer – their delivery, which is to say, their birth, which was registered, their delays, but also their places of residence and work – was doubled in the passage of their letters. The disciplines charged with producing knowledge about the psychological subject and the postal system each guided an object towards its 'goal', signalling those points at which it had deviated, 'strayed from the true path.'⁹³ Letters were – and still are – registered, entered into a register so that they don't go missing, so that they can be tracked down, like a runaway slave who, rather than being punished, could be corrected, reformed. It is with this in mind that one might read what Barber calls, conjuring the capture of runaway slaves, 'the colonial epistolary net.'⁹⁴

Breckenridge and Szepter are no doubt correct that registration may have the effect of either 'empowering individual subjects and citizens' or 'controlling them' – it is 'a historically contingent matter.'⁹⁵ The registration of letters, however – and even unregistered letters are, in effect, registered to some degree by the sender's return address – primed 'subjects and citizens' for dependence upon recognition by the state and the stringent obligations this entailed, providing an 'aesthetic education', one in which, between the subject and the state, a little disciplining situation could be rehearsed.

I realise, in proposing as much, that I am confronting here not only a field of thought resistant to a Foucauldian current in African history, but also an established tradition that has sought to abide by the constrained 'agency' of black letter-writers utilising the postal service. Cyrius Vukile Khumalo, for instance, notes of *amakholwa* letter-writers in late-nineteenth century Natal that letters constituted 'an imagined sphere free of the harsh realities of colonial life ... a space for discussion and dreaming ... a space for experiments', forming a network that 'encouraged horizontal ... and reciprocal relationships.'⁹⁶ I have no qualm with such an argument, except to say that what Khumalo calls 'the social landscape of displacement in nineteenth century South Africa' was not simply the scene in which the post emerged to allow connection between the displaced and their deliberation over the path to resistance.⁹⁷ The mechanisms used for the control of the movement of black people and the institution

92 Sir George Grey's 'hubristic, interventionist, Benthamite and intensely archival' 'documentary order' – one 'imposed on the eastern Cape in the 1850s [and] a product of the logic of the registry' – may have failed, yet aspects of it, as Breckenridge notes, would return in apartheid legislation. Breckenridge, 'Power without Knowledge', 4, 12.

93 Siegert, *Relays*, 28.

94 Barber, *Anthropology of Texts*, 181, 186.

95 Breckenridge and Szepter, 'Introduction', 22. Registration, for them, is not 'intrinsically coercive'. Their warning is that 'glorification of escape' of the 'unregistered' 'can, and probably will, very quickly dissolve into a glorification of the unregulated market'. *Ibid.*, 7, 10.

96 C. V. Khumalo, 'Ekukhanyeni letter-writers: A historical inquiry into epistolary network(s) and political imagination in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa' in K. Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 121, 123. 'The extent of this network ignored boundaries', Khumalo writes: 'It involved men and women living in villages, towns, and cities of Natal, Zululand, Eastern Cape, Cape Town, Johannesburg, St Helena, Great Britain, and the United States'. *Ibid.*, 120.

97 C. V. Khumalo, 'Epistolary networks and the politics of cultural production in KwaZulu-Natal, 1860–1910' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2004), 7.

that allowed them to communicate at a distance, resisting that control, bear a kinship. Providing ‘a space for experiments’, the post tightened control over the ‘discussion and dreaming’ it enabled.⁹⁸ It is, perhaps, in this light that we should read Lily Moya’s parting words to Mabel Palmer, from which Marks takes the title of the correspondence: ‘... I was never meant to be ... an experimental doll.’⁹⁹

Other mail from the other cape

What was the postal service for apartheid? Leslie Witz and Gary Minkley, through a series of articles, offer one response to this in their discussion of the mail-coaches used for the Tercentenary Van Riebeeck Festival in 1952, an event through which a ‘European settler nation’ was constituted by the ‘bringing together of English and Afrikaans speakers whose origins lay in settlement, with the commander, Jan Van Riebeeck, proclaimed as the first founder.’¹⁰⁰

As part of the Van Riebeeck Festival, it was the task of nineteenth century horse-drawn mail-coach replicas to relay ‘settler histories’ from seven interior locations – one of which was Umtata – to Cape Town.¹⁰¹

The 417 daily journeys of the mail coaches took them from town to town, where ‘great and impressive festivals’ were organised by ‘all sections of the European population.’ ... The coach would enter the town, the mayor would welcome it in front of the town hall and a local history written by ‘local experts’ ... was presented to the ‘*ritmeester* [journey master]’ for ‘conveyance’ to Cape Town to be deposited in the South African library. A float procession and a local pageant organised on the day to coincide with the coach’s arrival would take place. ... In some localities the coach would first make a short stop at ‘*die lokasie* [the location]’ before ‘progressing’ to the white settlement. ... In this way each locality, incorporating both the ‘location’ and the ‘town,’ were enveloped by ‘white civilisation.’¹⁰²

As ‘signifiers of the era of “modern” communication,’ the work of the mail-coaches was to repress race and colonial conquest from the ‘settler nation.’¹⁰³ They operated as ‘the mediums of nationing,’ and ‘modernization was cast as an alibi for race.’¹⁰⁴ Through the mail coaches, ‘race and racism found itself almost being outside

98 I am not unaware of the way letters figured in the 1956 Women’s March to the Union Buildings. See A. K. Mager and M. Mulaudzi, ‘Popular responses to apartheid: 1948–c. 1975’ in R. Ross, A. K. Mager, and B. Nasson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume II, 1885-1994* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 381. Importantly, though, these letters did not pass through the Post Office; they were delivered by their writers.

99 Moya, *Not Either*, 186.

100 L. Witz, ‘A Nineteenth Century Mail Coach, a Fifteenth Century Sailing Ship and a Bus Crash: Re-Thinking Collection and Display in Transport Museums’, *South African Historical Journal*, 63, 3, 2011, 435.

101 L. Witz, *Apartheid’s Festival: Contesting South Africa’s National Pasts* (Bloomington, In: Indiana University Press, 2003), 216. See G. Minkley and L. Witz, ‘Sir Harry Smith and his Imbongi: Local and National Identities in the Eastern Cape, 1952’, Paper presented at the History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, 13-15 July 1994, 1.

102 Minkley and Witz citing the festival program, ‘Harry Smith and his Imbongi’, 11-12. See Witz, *Apartheid’s Festival*, 224.

103 Minkley and Witz, ‘Harry Smith and his Imbongi’, 7.

104 Minkley and Witz, ‘Harry Smith and his Imbongi’, 23. See Witz, *Apartheid’s Festival*, 237.

history', excluded by the organisers of the festival in the pageants, but also 'constituted as "pre-modern"' through the apparent randomness of the "golden age" of the mail coaches'.¹⁰⁵

Minkley and Witz describe the float procession in Cape Town: It 'started with Africa "the Dark and Unknown" ... followed by European arrival, some measure of conflict between these settlers, which is then resolved, so that seventy floats later, Africa awakened to "figures in white" symbolising the foundation of "intellectual and spiritual freedom of the enlightened individual" ... followed by the coming together of the European nation'.¹⁰⁶ The itinerary of the float procession reflects the postal routes to Cape Town: the outlying areas assume a relation to Cape Town analogous to the one Africa assumes to Europe. In this way, Cape Town became, in 1952, not only 'the founding city of the settler nation', but also the end-point of a postal itinerary towards Enlightenment rationality itself.¹⁰⁷

Cast into the role of 'the Dark and Unknown', the Eastern Cape was, for 'apartheid's festival', not only one point of departure, but also a site of marked resistance: 'If Van Riebeeck and Cape Town were a symbol, and spatial metaphor, through which the colonial past could be seen as a "foreign country," the eastern Cape reminded the cultural brokers of the settler nation that its "foreign country" was not the past'. The Eastern Cape was a 'reminder', as Minkley and Witz put it, that the 'narrative of the nation's modernity ... contained – at its core – colonial racism'.¹⁰⁸ Put bluntly, East London participants wanted to stage frontier conquest, 'colonial battles, mostly fought by British imperial forces against the indigenous inhabitants'.¹⁰⁹ There was much disagreement over whether or not the towns of the Eastern Cape would even participate in the festivities, and over who would foot the bill for its replica mail-coaches. Once the funds had been raised, there was much deliberation over a name for a coach representing several different towns. One was eventually found: 'On 14 February 1952 the coach "Settlers" departed from the "thriving town" of Umtata ... towards the past of Cape Town's 'bright future'.¹¹⁰ In the doublings being staged – between the itineraries of the floats and the mail coach routes, on the one hand, and between 'European arrival' in 'Africa' and the passage from the interior to Cape Town, on the other – what could not but cause 'great anxiety' was that the Eastern Cape was, exactly, *a point of departure*, just as Europe was. Cape Town was being invaded by 'Settlers'.¹¹¹

105 Minkley and Witz, 'Harry Smith and his Imbongi', 8.

106 Minkley and Witz citing the festival program, 'Harry Smith and his Imbongi', 10. See Witz, 'A Nineteenth Century Mail Coach', 436.

107 Minkley and Witz, 'Harry Smith and his Imbongi', 6.

108 Minkley and Witz, 'Harry Smith and his Imbongi', 5.

109 Witz, *Apartheid's Festival*, 225. '[T]here was little enthusiasm in the eastern Cape for ... riding the Mail Coaches out of the "mists" of time'. Minkley and Witz, 'Harry Smith and his Imbongi', 12.

110 Minkley and Witz, 'Harry Smith and his Imbongi', 13, citing Report of the Activities of the Mail Coach Organising Committee. See Witz, *Apartheid's Festival*, 230. 'Settlers', now exhibited in the Outeniqua Transport Museum in George in the Southern Cape, is 'the bearer', as Witz has later argued, 'of the contradictions that went into the apartheid state attempting to assign itself a settler past'. Witz, 'Nineteenth Century Mail Coach', 453.

111 If Harry Smith was a key figure for the settler histories, it is no coincidence that 100 years earlier, on the 200th anniversary of Van Riebeeck's arrival, Smith had, as his last act, forbidden a celebration. R. Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750–1870: A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67.

It is an artifact from South African postal history that 'apartheid's festival' replicated and set to work. But the South African Post Office was, with slight deviations and delays, the British Post Office.¹¹² The Van Riebeeck Festival placed centre-stage an object that, while undoubtedly recalling the wagons used by the Voortrekkers in 1938 to re-enact the Great Trek, were precisely what the British postal system employed in South Africa to begin replacing their post-carts in the 1840s.¹¹³ The break between 'the century of the ox-wagon and the century of the machine', on which 'apartheid's festival' traded, was, in other words, precisely what was used in the nineteenth century to declare 'a new age ... in South Africa'.¹¹⁴

The mail-coaches, far from being 'symbols without history', were bearers of racialised – and gendered – histories that would not be contained. The very 'functioning and reliability of the mail delivery service', as Da Silva argues of the colonial mail service, 'was based on ... violent repression'.¹¹⁵ The mail-coaches of the Van Riebeeck Festival became props through which the repressed was acted out: 'Women were not permitted on board the coaches in their journeys between towns ... Schoolchildren from the location would sometimes be allowed to ride in the coach, provided they took their place at the back in the special area reserved for "non-European servants" who would look after the teams of horses'.¹¹⁶ Consigned to the back of the mail coach, 'non-Europeans' were cast in the pageant as being on a path towards freedom from the 'primitive shackling of the human soul', but on a separate path that would render their place within the 'settler nation' always already and forever 'prospective'.¹¹⁷

What interests me here is the correspondence between frontier postal routes and a liberal conception of the subject in which reason and the passions are set apart and hierarchised. The postal system was thought of, at the moment apartheid adopted mail-coaches as a symbol of its 'modernity', and certainly prior to this under British colonial rule, as a set of 'relays between sites of unruly corporeality and centres of thought, ... between, on one hand, European metropolises and their colonies and, on the other, colonial administrative centres and areas beyond and at the edges of their control, peopled by those thought to be prone to impulsiveness and instant sensory

112 F. Frescura, 'Errors and Varieties in Early Southern African Postal Cancellers and Obliterators', *South African Journal of Cultural History*, 3, 3, 1989, 195.

113 Mail coaches were put to regular use in 1843 between Cape Town to Swellendam. Rosenthal and Blum, *Runner*, 10. Post-carts had come into regular use in 1827 between Cape Town to Stellenbosch and later Paarl, and the post-carts themselves replaced the 'traditional black runners and horsemen' who would still be employed even after the mail was sent by train. *Ibid.*, 9.

114 To be clear, the developments, culminating with 'the despatch of the mails by railway train between Cape Town and Wellington in 1865 and, soon after, to and from Wynberg', would be used to hail 'a new age ... in South Africa'. Rosenthal and Blum, *Runner*, 14-15.

115 Da Silva, 'Literary Colonialism', 185-186.

116 Witz, *Apartheid's Festival*, 224.

117 Minkley and Witz, 'Harry Smith and his Imbongi', 10. Prospective is a suggestive description: looking out into the distance, with expectation, but also prospecting, looking among the stones of the earth; it implies an itinerary from 'traditional tribal lives' of 'handicraft ... potmaking, basket and bead work' via a "native school" and 'state training institutes' to the manual labour of not just construction – or horse grooming – but mining. *Ibid.*, 10.

gratification.¹¹⁸ In this correspondence, the liberal subject cannot be reduced to frontier postal routes, and vice versa. Neither one is the cause of – or a metaphor for – the other, yet a dualism between reason and the passions impresses itself on representations of the postal routes that ran from the Cape into the interior and back, which, in turn, left impressions on the conception of the liberal subject and its interior post offices that bridged the sensations of the body and the cognitive faculties that synthesised them. The question, here, as I see it, is how to posit this reciprocal relation between the liberal subject, whose ‘abstraction ... is nothing but the internalized and hypostatized forms of man’s domination of nature,’¹¹⁹ and a material undertaking – as precarious as it was violent – in which ‘nature needs to conform to the colonial bureaucratic vision.’¹²⁰

On the account of those in the employ of the Post Office, the routes of the frontier mail were not easy going. In 1866, it was reported that ‘the horses of the mail carrier had been eaten by a lion.’¹²¹ District Postmasters frequently wrote of a desperate state of affairs with the frontier mail: difficulties in getting post across rivers, disagreements about which carrier would ferry it over, mail-coaches and horses falling over ravines.¹²² Riders refused to pass through ‘Addo Bush ... the most dangerous part of the country’ – this was the time of the eighth frontier war, Mlanjeni’s War – making journeys longer, more expensive.¹²³ Certain routes had to be abandoned, and mail carriers had to be accompanied by cavalry, and with requests for extra horses, extra forage, extra men, with bills for added unexpected expenses, frontier mail was a constant headache and source of insomnia for the General Post Office, and ‘great anxiety’ for its contracted carriers.¹²⁴

The grumblings of postal employees allow one to ‘provincialize’ the liberal subject, which was, at least as outlined by Kant, riven by an apartness between faculties that finds its analogue not only in a division of labour but in a geopolitical topography, ‘a whole series of realms compartmentalised and kept in isolation from one another ... separate realms, like countries on a map, lying contiguously, but

118 R. Truscott, ‘Freud’s dream of a royal road: Psychoanalysis and the postal system’, *Cultural Critique*, 108, 75. The British administration at the Cape, particularly after 1824, took upon itself the task of disciplining both ‘European’ and ‘Non-European’ figures on the ‘frontier’ – the former as an example to the latter – and the Post Office was placed in the service of this undertaking. The mailing of literature formed a crucial part of this drive, and the postal routes along which books moved in nineteenth and twentieth century South Africa were seen as ‘arteries of civilization’. S. Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa 1820-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72. By 1875, 95,000 books a year were being mailed across the Cape colony: ‘The high volume of books entering the Colony was facilitated by the Book Post Act of 1862, which allowed for free delivery of overseas literature to any post office in the Colony’. *Ibid.*, 72. ‘Internal book-post within the colony dates from 1854’. Rosenthal and Blum, *Runner*, 14.

119 Adorno, *Kant’s Critique*, 173.

120 Da Silva, ‘Literary Colonialism’, 156.

121 Rosenthal and Blum, *Runner*, 32.

122 A mail cart and two horses, for example, fell down an embankment of the Kromme River, killing the horses, destroying the cart. CO, Vol. 608, No. 1238, letter to the Lange Kloof Post Master from Acting Post Master General, 17 June 1851.

123 CO, Vol. 608, No. 1, 27 February 1851, Western Cape Archives and Records Service. For postal workers a persistent complaint is ‘the dangerous state of the road from marauding Kaffirs’. CO, Vol. 608, No. 1, 11 March 1851, Western Cape Archives and Records Service.

124 See, for example, the letters from Robert Crozier, long serving employee at the General Post Office – he assumed the duties of Postmaster General of the Cape in 1809 – to his superiors in 1850, complaining of his deteriorating health. CO, Vol. 608, No 1, 2 April 1850, Western Cape Archives and Records Service.

independently of one another.¹²⁵ What else allows communication between such ‘realms’ but the mail? And that ‘provincialization’ allows some play to enter the field. But these grumblings are not the only sources available, and I would like to turn to a few short passages before concluding.

Anthony Trollope narrates his experience of postal roads at the outer edges of the Cape colony during the nineteenth century, routes along which he sent himself, noting ‘the relentless galloping pace of the mail carts over the rough roads ... their jolting and frenzied movement against the empty stillness of the natural landscape.’¹²⁶ ‘It is very rough – very rough indeed for old bones’, Trollope says: ‘But it is sure.’¹²⁷ He is describing, here, the mail-carts still in use prior to the widespread adoption of mail-coaches, which ‘looked like a water tank on two wheels, with an iron rail around it’, as Canon John Widdicombe writes: ‘The cart ... was supposed to carry three passengers as well as the mails: one in front, who sat with the driver, and two behind, who sat with their back to the driver and their feet resting on the tailboard ... Roads were for the most part vile, the horses often untrained. [The cart] ... had a fresh team of horses about every 20 miles. The drivers, of course, often changed, too, but the cart went on as a rule for a couple of days.’¹²⁸

We have in Trollope’s words a reflection *on* the Cape colony’s postal routes where-in the act of judgment – ‘very rough ... But sure’ – finds its reflection *in* the experience described; looking over what he has written, Trollope is face to face with a representation of the structure of his own – ‘rough’ but ‘sure’ – liberal thought. If horses have, since Plato’s *Phaedrus*, symbolised a corporeal, passionate element to be brought under the control of a master – each soul divided in three, into two horse-shaped forms, the one white, the other black, and a charioteer, who must control the two horses – does it not matter here that the mail-cart driver is, while on all accounts skilled, as dispensable as the beasts who, ‘every 20 miles’, are substituted? I have no intention of recuperating something redeeming in Trollope, but thought, for him, was not a private affair, not in any case as it was figured in his writings as an overland passage.

Prior to 1905 when railways came into operation in the eastern reaches of the country, on a route not far from where Lily Moya sent and received her letters, one Joe Clarke held a contract to carry the mails from Amabele Junction to Umtata: ‘The mails were carried by a fleet of two-wheeled sprung Cape carts drawn by six mules ... and driven by Coloured drivers [sic] accompanied by Coloured grooms [sic]. The cart’s primary purpose was to carry mail, but if there was room passengers were

125 Adorno, *Kant’s Critique*, 181, 182. Although ‘independent’, they are not equal; ‘there is a kind of indirect rule that comes to structure the conception of the subject ... The homelands of the sensible are ruled, remotely, by reason’. R. Truscott, ‘A rattle: On the other frontier and Chabani Manganyi’s “Making Strange”’, *Psychology in Society*, 57, 2018, 34. By ‘provincializing’, I am clearly drawing on Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*, which appreciates that ‘social factors lie concealed in the crucial attributes’ of the sovereign subject of European thought, but takes up ‘the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody’s heritage and which affect us all – may be renewed from and for the margins’. D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, first published 2000), 16.

126 Da Silva, ‘Literary Colonialism’, 158.

127 Trollope cited in Da Silva, ‘Literary Colonialism’, 158.

128 Canon John Widdicombe cited in Rosenthal and Blum, *Runner*, 15.

permitted to travel perched on top of the mail bags'. It is said that Clarke 'had a stable of fifty mules so as to be sure of having sufficient replacements'.¹²⁹

The collection from which this last account is drawn is itself part of a settler history of a frontier town, celebrating the spirit of the frontier male hardened by war. Yet, can it not be used to 'provincialize' the kind of Enlightenment reason celebrated when we read that Plato's 'model of the human psyche is as illuminating today as it was in antiquity', that it can be drawn upon to 'explain the excesses on the part of those hundreds of "public servants" in South Africa who are regularly caught with their hands in the cookie jar'.¹³⁰ To explain, in other words, the inability to restrain the passions: 'Unless the charioteer (reason) enlists the assistance of the white, obedient horse (spirit), the black horse (desire) cannot be easily controlled, and drags the chariot wherever its fancy takes it'.¹³¹ There are certainly more careful ways of reading Plato, and Bert Olivier is subtler elsewhere in his handling of the chariot metaphor.¹³² My question here, though, is what it would mean to apprehend this postal donkey-cart as a figure of liberal subjectivity within a genealogy that bears a dualism frequently traced back to Plato.

It is significant that Clarke's carts, like most delivering the post across the Cape, had a 'Coloured driver' and that the drivers were substituted, reason thus being a *collective* undertaking; if the most essential element of this donkey-cart subject is *the cart itself*, it surely matters that these instruments of reason were built not by the likes of Clarke, but by skilled 'non-Europeans'. Everything cannot rest on these details, but in them we glimpse something of what Achebe means when he portrays the Post Office as 'dispossessing' but not 'all powerful', and what Da Silva means when she calls postal colonialism a 'fragile undertaking' that was 'based on ... violent repression'.

While there were no doubt 'settler histories' in the mail bags these carts carried, they would have rubbed up against letters from many others. We gain some sense, too, then, of what Thomas means when she suggests that the postal system engenders 'promiscuous' pleasures: 'A dominant fantasy produced by the reform of the postal system was that when you posted a letter, that letter took you places otherwise out of bounds to you, in the close company of a vast miscellany of others. You extended yourself through the post-letter's exploits and got to experience an exuberant displacement of subjectivity'. In the fiction that accompanied postal reforms, Thomas argues, 'the posted letter is always "unfaithful," rendered promiscuous by being passed through the postal machinery and among its many workers'. But this was not limited to fiction. Thomas cites 'scientific gentlemen' who, in 1865, volunteered to have

129 *The 125th Anniversary of Kei Road and District Community, 1875-2000*, G. C. Ranger (ed.), 50, 51.

130 B. Olivier, 'What politicians could learn from Plato', *Mail & Guardian Thought Leader*, 8 February 2013, <https://thoughtleader.co.za/what-politicians-could-learn-from-plato/> (accessed 10 March 2021).

131 Olivier, 'Plato'. Certainly many would argue that corruption is better explained by the history of Bantustan administration. See, for e.g., Chipkin and Meny-Gibert, 'Why the Past Matters'.

132 As Elizabeth Belfiore and others have argued, each figure has positive and negative qualities, and a share in both reason and appetite: 'The charioteer represents a guiding principle in the soul, with desires of its own. The black horse represents an impulse to move in bold and disorderly fashion toward erotic objects, while the white horse represents the impulse to stand still and to resist these objects. Both horses are able to use and to follow reason and are therefore capable of being trained by the charioteer, who must also train himself to guide them... [A]ll three ... have bestial characteristics.' E. Belfiore, 'Dancing with the Gods: The Myth of the Chariot in Plato's "Phaedrus"', *American Journal of Philology*, 2006, 127, 2, 187.

themselves posted, desiring a “‘rough’ ride’ and ‘to experience being jostled around like parcels.’¹³³ Not all of them posted themselves as far afield as Trollope on his ‘very rough’ ride.

No doubt there remain racial and gendered ‘exclusions’ within this ‘provincialized’ figure of a reasoning, liberal subject, compelled and compelling to control ‘often untrained’, stubborn mulish passions, just as in the mail-coaches apartheid replicated. But the frontier mail recalls – and there is no way to say this without recourse to the language of psychoanalysis that a Foucauldian frame would question – not only the secondary repressions of race and conquest from the ‘settler nation’, but a primary repression beyond which lies a ‘polymorphous perversity’ too near to the delivery of the subject into the world to be remembered. It can only appear as a specular possibility withheld by a disciplining institution designed to minimise deviancy.

Conclusion

According to liberal histories of South Africa, the originary figure of apartheid was an eighteenth century frontiersman dragging his knuckles into the twentieth. From *over there*, ‘out of reach of ... the bracing winds from the outer world that blew around the Cape Peninsula,’ were brought, as Eric Walker put it, not only the master servant relations that would ‘permeate’ South Africa, but a psychic disposition defined by a ‘deadened’ imagination, a ham-fisted ‘preoccupation with concrete matter of fact personal things.’¹³⁴ An inability, in short, to transcend the particular and attain a disinterested ‘broadened mind’, in the parlance of Kant’s third *Critique*. In Legassick’s radical critique of the ‘frontier tradition’, he underlines the theories of difference *within* the Cape colony from the outset, suggesting that such theories, and the violent practices to which they gave rise, were neither formed on, nor even more prevalent at, the frontier, but were an integral part of Cape society itself.¹³⁵ Insofar as the frontier matters to the history of apartheid, frontiersmen, in this framing, were the ‘harbingers of capitalist social relations.’¹³⁶ If all of this is familiar enough, I have been suggesting here that, rather than male frontiersmen, it is in the frontier mail – the postal routes that, from the eighteenth century, fanned out from the Cape of Good Hope into the interior – that might matter for a history of apartheid.

The frontier mail can be said to operate as a biopolitical technology waging a war against the passions, and even as it enveloped all in its order, that war was waged against those ‘internal enemies’ most closely associated with corporeal passions, with nature. But in the frontier mail we also catch glimpses of certain liberal elements

133 Thomas, *Postal Pleasures*, 2.

134 E. A. Walker, *The Great Trek* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1961, first published 1938), 10, 49. Or, as I. D. MacCrone following Freud formulated what he called a ‘frontier mentality’, it is not so much *continuity* with the eighteenth century frontier that is at stake as its *deferred arrival*, the ‘afterwardsness’ of the frontier, the unresolved conflicts of the frontier returning as a fearful bodily state expressed in acts of racial hatred. I. D. MacCrone, *Race attitudes in South Africa: Historical, experimental and psychological studies* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1937), 281.

135 M. Legassick, ‘The frontier tradition in South African historiography’, Collected seminar papers, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 12, 1972, 1-33.

136 Lester, *Imperial Networks*, 2.

internal to apartheid's discourse in the process of deconstructing themselves – reason appears if not as an ass then as a postal donkey-cart – and revealing specular traces of a different, collective form of judgment it seeks in its fragile, defensive violence to repress.

Against this characterisation of the Post Office, many would want to assert that 'postal correspondence' entails a 'graceful *combination* of a mental and a physical enactment', a form of thinking with the hand as part of a sensing, passionate body.¹³⁷ While this is always a possibility, the Post Office, through which letters were sent, regulated everyone's passions, and required of everyone that their passions be subjected to a 'muscular self-discipline'.¹³⁸ To reiterate the point, nothing I have written here should downplay forms of postal resistance. Whether the group reading and writing of letters that Breckenridge describes, or the networks of writers Khumalo has in mind – and Lily Moya's letters are never far from my concerns – there is, we might say, the possibility of a vernacular critique of liberal judgment, perhaps even the outlines of what Frantz Fanon called 'African ... collective self-criticism'.¹³⁹ How, I would ask, is it possible to abide by this today?

I have put emphasis, particularly in the first section of this essay, on registration, engaging Breckenridge, who has excavated and conceptualised registration extensively. Placing registration within a longer history of processes of recognition, Breckenridge and Szeleter describe the aim of registration as being 'to fix a record in the collective memory of the individual's identity and place within a group'. Particularly in the work of those drawing on Foucault, they argue, there has been a tendency to focus on the subordinate position of that 'place' under the thumb – or, rather, the eye – of a coercive state. As Breckenridge and Szeleter argue, the coercive effects of registration only work when those subject to it submit to its procedures, and it can be turned around. As they note of Lund's work on South Africa, 'the Population Register, formally stripped of its racial categories, has provided the democratic state with the means to deliver welfare grants to over a third of the national population'.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, these have been delivered since 2018 via the Post Office, and it is the registration with the Post Office that has allowed this.

It would require a separate essay to address the way that the bureaucratic system of the Post Office has been reprised in the twenty-first century. But a reckoning with the thread that runs from the General Post Office in the Slave Lodge to the migration to online everything, including online learning in the time of COVID-19, the administration of social grants through the Post Office, and the registration processes for receiving vaccinations, is required: 'What is email, after all, but a giant, globe-spanning, electronic, super-efficient Post Office?'¹⁴¹ That may be putting it too simply, but let me point out, as former CEO of the South African Post Office, Mark Barnes

137 B. Nasson, *History Matters: Selected Writings, 1970-2016* (Cape Town: Penguin, 2016), 160, emphasis added.

138 K. Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 21.

139 F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, R. Philcox (trans.), (New York: Grove Press, 1961/2004), 2.

140 Breckenridge and Szeleter, 'Introduction', 15, 17.

141 Graeber, *Utopia*, 163. In 1908, mail was delivered 12 times a day in London districts. Daunton, *Royal Mail*, 47. Should we really be checking emails more than 12 times a day?

puts it, that the Post Office, today, is a 'centre of data, which can be ... mined for the benefit of the citizens of South Africa'. Beyond the extensive data it holds, it also has an incomparable 'infrastructural footprint' across the country, and is the primary point of contact between citizens and the state, particularly in the rural areas.¹⁴² The diversified functions of the Post Office today retain *registration* as their key mechanism, and as Barnes underlines: 'Tracking in the digital world is far more effective than in the physical one.'¹⁴³ One cannot but hear in this word – 'Tracking...' – the distant echo of slavery, even if tracking is not only a 'manhunt' for the runaway slave but can also be a means of ensuring payment to the disenfranchised to help them to live. If postcolonial and poststructuralist theory have anything to offer, it is that it is both, and the predicament of the present is to make the former mode of tracking function as the latter, aware of a certain wager that it will be botched.

While wary of the limits of Foucauldian histories of South Africa – the way they may work to push into the background the way colonial power could and did operate, as Breckenridge argues, without knowledge – the notion of biopolitical sovereignty does draw attention to what haunts the project of turning the Post Office around, into an instrument of empowerment: the scene of that institution's emergence. But this should also confront History with certain difficulties, and, indeed, certain impossibilities in attempting to step outside of the history of the Post Office, and outside of a form of liberal reason it has been tasked with upholding. I would certainly refuse the idea that this essay is a liberal letter in the post, but a certain implication with the problem on the table is unavoidable. Can the discipline of History see itself reflected in the frontier mail?

142 'Mark Barnes speaks out following resignation as Post Office CEO', *SABC News*, 7 August 2019, <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=HrBQH5Ajwsc>.

143 A. Slabbert, 'Post Office launches e-registered mail', *Moneyweb*, 19 May 2016, <https://www.moneyweb.co.za/news/south-africa/post-office-launches-e-registered-mail/>.