

Apartheid Modern:
South Africa's Oil from Coal Project and the history of a South African company town
by
Stephen John Sparks

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Gabrielle Hecht, Chair
Emeritus Professor David William Cohen
Professor Adam P. Ashforth
Associate Professor William J. Glover

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ABSTRACT

Apartheid Modern:

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by

Stephen John Sparks

Chair: Gabrielle Hecht

This dissertation explores the relationships between apartheid and modernism, arguing that the South African apartheid state's oil-from-coal project, SASOL, and the company town Sasolburg were key sites for the elaboration of the 'apartheid modern', the particular form which industrial modernity took under apartheid. Moving across a number of domains, the dissertation shows how nationalist discourses celebrated SASOL's technological prowess and the 'pioneering' toil of South African scientists, but the viability of oil-from-coal depended on the cheap cost of black labor in the early apartheid period. SASOL's managers and Sasolburg's burghers envisioned the project transforming rural Afrikaners into respectable industrial citizens. The architect employed by SASOL to design Sasolburg, Max Kirchhofer, valorized congeniality in residential

neighborhoods and leisure as antidotes to the alienating aspects of industrial modernity. Kirchofer's belief that 'lower-income' whites in Sasolburg could be reformed by good planning dissipated because of their reluctance to make themselves in the image of a culture linking respectability with particular aesthetic practices. African women's domestic labor was critical to the making of respectable white families, but the black subculture which emerged around these women in Sasolburg made this dependence subversive of white respectability. The intensity of a co-produced 'paternalistic' culture in the SASOL compound in nearby Zamdela township until the mid-1960s saw the compound manager facilitating migrants' attempts at encapsulating themselves from the corruptions of industrial modernity. Zamdela's aspirant middle class similarly enrolled white officials in their attempts at constituting a respectable local community. Increasingly pervasive capitalist commodity culture, the emergence of assertive forms of black politics and workforce 'South Africanization' in the 1970s undermined 'paternalism' at SASOL. The company belatedly extended home-ownership schemes to Africans, but in the 1980s, in the context of unprecedented labor militancy it renounced 'paternalism', undertook retrenchments and subcontracting increased. With the end of apartheid both 'paternalism' and the jobs which defined this company town and the 'apartheid modern', have disappeared. In the apparent ruins of the 'apartheid modern', young African residents of Zamdela are demanding for their township the civic infrastructure which the 'apartheid modern' produced in Sasolburg.

Introduction:

The ‘Apartheid Modern’ and the SASOL project

This dissertation joins a small but growing body of scholarship exploring the nature of the relationship(s) between apartheid and modernism. Apartheid South Africa, like Nazi Germany, has often been imagined to be the opposite of modern. Such a view is in large part an artifact of liberal anti-apartheid discourses which emphasized the irrationality of apartheid ideology and, in particular, the backwardness of its rigid racial regulation of labor markets through the ‘color bar.’¹ Lurking behind such claims is the old stereotype of the unsophisticated, viciously racist Afrikaner or ‘Boer’, out of step with the post-World War II world of decolonization and modernization.²

In the 1970s an ill-tempered fight (the ‘race-class debate’ as it became known) broke out between liberal and Marxist ‘revisionist’ scholars over the status of the relationship between apartheid and capitalism. Revisionists critiqued the aforementioned liberal argument which suggested that apartheid was the product of Afrikaner atavism

¹ A narrative installed in Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, *The Oxford history of South Africa*, Volumes 1-2. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969-1971).

² The ‘parting of ways’ between South Africa and other former African colonies is explored in Frederick Cooper, ‘A parting of the ways: Colonial Africa and South Africa, 1946–48,’ *African Studies*, 65:1, (2006), 27-44.

with its roots in iniquitous rural relationships between Afrikaners and Africans on racial frontiers of the eighteenth century and the claim that free-market capitalism was color blind and that capitalism would ultimately lead to the end of apartheid.³ Marxist ‘revisionists’ argued that apartheid’s labor regime (what they called ‘racial capitalism’) was essentially functional to capitalist accumulation.⁴ In many ways these fights were really disagreements over the ‘modernity’ of South African racial capitalism.

This dissertation’s originality does not lie in a claim to be the first piece of scholarship to explore the relationship(s) between apartheid and modernism. Deborah Posel and Saul Dubow’s work in particular has been impressively trailblazing in this regard.⁵ Nor does its real significance hinge on it filling an undoubted gap in South African historical scholarship about a key strategic industry under apartheid, which has to date attracted no serious scholarly attention with the exception of brief analysis buried in a chapter of Nancy Clark’s monograph on the history of state corporations in South Africa.⁶

³ As argued most forcefully and controversially by Merle Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, (Aldershot: Wild Wood House, 1986).

⁴ Harold Wolpe, ‘Capitalism and cheap labor-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid’, *Economy and Society* 1:4 (1972), 425–56.

⁵ Deborah Posel ‘A Mania for Measurement: Statistics and Statecraft in the Transition to apartheid’ in Saul Dubow, ed., *Science and Society in Southern Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 125-126; Deborah Posel ‘The Apartheid Project, 1948–1970’ in *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, Vol. 2, ed., Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager and Bill Nasson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge. Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820-2000*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶ Nancy L. Clark, *Manufacturing Apartheid: State Corporations in South Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

The dissertation's originality lies instead in its insistence that scholars have moved a little too quickly and in too narrow a fashion in explicating the links between apartheid and 'high modernism' and in the process have paid insufficient attention to the other dimensions constituting what I term the 'apartheid modern'. Through the jarring juxtaposition of the 'apartheid' and 'modern' terms, this notion draws attention to the apparently (though in fact hardly) paradoxical combination of a virulently racist state whose incumbents are often imagined to epitomize irrationality and backwardness, and a major techno-scientific project, such as oil-from-coal. The concept is also meant to denote the various experiences and manifestations of modernity under apartheid and in its aftermath. The 'apartheid modern' might usefully be thought of as what Dilip Gaonkar has termed an 'alternative modernity': the particular form which industrial modernity took in apartheid South Africa or the peculiar path which the country took at mid-century, in belligerent contradistinction to the rest of the former African colonies.⁷

I intend the concept to be deliberately capacious, encompassing a wide range of different aspects of the relationship(s) between apartheid and modernism across the domains of materiality, discourse and subjectivity. These aspects include the SASOL project itself as a large-scale techno-modernist project; industrial planning and discourse; urban planning discourses and practices; everyday practices; the formation of particular subjectivities amongst multiple groups of people and, to borrow James Ferguson's unsurpassed phrase, the 'expectations of modernity' of various groups of people in

⁷ Dilip Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

relation to the SASOL project.⁸ Through this broad sweep, the dissertation aims to move scholarship beyond simply seeing the relationship between apartheid and modernism as defined chiefly by the ‘high-modernism’ of the apartheid state’s hubristic ambitions. Before I offer a fuller elucidation of what these other aspects entailed and the specific arguments in the individual chapters of the dissertation, I will first provide a detailed historiographical review of existing scholarship on the relationship between apartheid and modernism.

Apartheid’s ‘Modernity’

Freed of the strictures which the liberal-revisionist camps imposed on South Africanist scholarship and of the compulsions of the social history tradition of the 1980s to provide serviceable histories detailing for nationalist anti-apartheid struggles, a small group of scholars have more recently begun to explore the relationship of apartheid to modernism. Deborah Posel has taken the lead in reframing apartheid’s bureaucratic practices as suggestive of the apartheid state’s ‘modern’ ambitions, arguing that this optic allows us to see the “resonances between the political logic of apartheid and more global adventures in modernity.”⁹ What made apartheid different from the segregationist regimes in South Africa before 1948, Posel suggested, includes the extent of the ‘modernization’ of racial domination through a series of practices imagined by particular actors as befitting of a modern state. Focusing on Apartheid’s infamous racial

⁸ James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁹ Deborah Posel ‘A Mania for Measurement: Statistics and Statecraft in the Transition to apartheid’, *Science and Society in Southern Africa*, 125-126.

classification system Posel argued that the state pursued a “high-modernist fantasy, a hankering for totalizing order, positioning the eye of the state at the pinnacle of an orderly bureaucracy, with a panoramic view of the racial landscape and everything constructed upon it.” This was a state possessed by a “mania for measurement”, engaging in “comprehensive and systematic information-gathering, coupled to modes of orderly regulation and surveillance.”¹⁰

Emphasizing the modern South African state’s indebtedness to “Enlightenment rationality,” and its “insatiable appetite for information about the population it managed”, Clifton Crais argued that “apartheid represented the authoritarian culmination of the modernity of the colonial state, the endpoint of its social engineering,” claiming that “in many respects apartheid was modernity gone mad.”¹¹ While Keith Breckenridge has demonstrated that the biometric systems which the apartheid state deployed were largely a failure, and insists that the ‘homage to reason’ proved to be “neither pervasive or persuasive”, this was most certainly a self-consciously ‘modern’ state.¹²

¹⁰ Deborah Posel, ‘Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth Century South Africa’, *African Studies Review*, 44: 2 (2001), 100.

¹¹ Clifton Crais, *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power, and the Political Imagination in South Africa*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 9-10.

¹² Keith Breckenridge, ‘Verwoerd’s Bureau of Proof: Total Information in the Making of Apartheid’ *History Workshop Journal*, 59, (Spring 2005), 83-108; Keith Breckenridge, ‘The Virtues of Ignorance: the 20th century collapse of civil registration in South Africa’ Unpublished paper.

Technology and the ‘Apartheid Modern’

Employing ‘modern’ techniques of governance were one thing, demonstrating the state’s modernity to national and international audiences was quite another. New scholarship on the history of science and technology in South Africa has underlined the importance of large-scale techno-scientific projects and their discursive accompaniments to the apartheid state’s assertion of its technological modernity. Gabrielle Hecht and Paul Edwards have argued that through its nuclear program the apartheid state “sought to enact a ‘western’ national identity and demonstrate technological self-sufficiency.”¹³ Saul Dubow argues that Afrikaner nationalist leaders specially valued “state-controlled prestige projects and trophy technology.”¹⁴ National(ist) discourses of technological prowess and the technological sublime were absolutely central to the construction of the French modern and the American modern, as Gabrielle Hecht and David Nye have shown respectively.¹⁵

Techno-nationalist discourses are similarly central to the story which I tell in Chapter’s One and Two. I make a point of demonstrating that these discourses did not emerge fully formed with the establishment of SASOL. For starters, South African interest in oil-from-coal as an alternative to conventional crude oil refining predated apartheid and the project began life as an initiative of a private mining capital. I show

¹³ Paul N. Edwards, and Gabrielle Hecht, ‘History and the Technopolitics of Identity: The Case of Apartheid South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36: 3, (2010), 620.

¹⁴ Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge*, 263.

¹⁵ Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); David Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

how the newly ascendant Afrikaner nationalist elites came to see oil-from-coal as a prestige project particularly deserving of the national state's financial attention. Afrikaner nationalist elites, the new state incumbents, were certainly eager to have oil-from-coal be seen as a symbol of their power rather than that of private capital, still largely synonymous at this time in Afrikaner nationalist circles with Jewish and British imperial interests.¹⁶ The biggest part of oil-from-coal's appeal for apartheid elites, though, was the cutting-edge and largely untested character of the technology. As became clear when there were nearly catastrophic technical problems with the operation of the oil-from-coal plant in the 1950s, apartheid's technical and political elites had very little grounds, beyond trust, for believing that the technological processes involved would actually prove efficacious.

This last point is especially important to register because South Africanist historiography is replete with studies of capital, industry and technology but one is hard pressed to locate instances where such technological difficulties occur. Technologies in South African history invariably work – and they work apparently without difficulty to effect the extraction of profit and to oppress. The initial technological difficulties at SASOL are a critical part of the story I seek to tell. The major technical problems which this state corporation encountered over a period of almost a decade in the 1950s both demanded and provided the grounds for the elaboration of a techno-nationalist 'pioneering' discourse celebrating the toil and ingenuity of South African engineers and scientists in working to make oil-from-coal 'work'. Discourses celebrating SASOL's

¹⁶ Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934-1948*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

technological prowess emerged out of the context of both technological difficulties and the internationality of the technological processes which SASOL combined in Sasolburg. Pronouncements in press statements, parliamentary debates and newspaper editorials made much of the fact that the two separate technological processes which SASOL combined were of German and American provenance – the world’s best, which were initially apparently irreconcilable, such was the extent of the technological difficulties. The logic at work here implied that South African scientists and engineers made oil-from-coal technology succeed in spite of its complicated, foreign origins.

By virtue of the fact that the company produced a product which citizen-consumers motorists could put in their cars, SASOL (perhaps more than apartheid’s other large-scale technological projects) became a firm fixture in white South African popular imaginations. SASOL’s ubiquity in everyday life under apartheid and its status as a key touchstone of whiteness under apartheid weren’t simply the result of official discourses; it was also the work of commercial advertising which used techno-nationalistic discourses to sell SASOL products to a fast-growing car-centered consumer market in post-World War II South Africa. The ultimate success of oil-from-coal technology in spite of initial technical difficulties was itself critical to the success of techno-nationalist discourses celebrating SASOL’s products and achievements.

Hecht and Edwards have noted the ways in which official discourse in the context of the apartheid state’s nuclear program alluded in coded terms to the critical fact of the cheapness of black labor through depoliticized references to “South African conditions.”

Chapter One of this dissertation makes a similar observation about similarly coded allusions to the country's racialised political economy. I go further to argue that the country was only able to 'pioneer' oil-from-coal production on a commercial scale in the manner which it did because of the fact that, for the first two decades of apartheid, at least, getting coal out of the ground was much cheaper in South Africa than it was in any other settings where oil-from-coal was contemplated. Cheap hyper-exploited black labor and the 'apartheid modern' were inextricably bound together.

Hecht and Edwards have also shown how anti-apartheid activists counteracted the apartheid state's techno-nationalist narratives by tracing and targeting the international geopolitical networks which underlay South Africa's nuclear and computing technology.¹⁷ As I discuss in Chapter Two, anti-apartheid activists targeting SASOL used similar methods, amplifying the connections of SASOL's oil-from-coal technology with Nazi Germany. Both the state and SASOL's deliberate positioning of the company at the centre of white South African imaginaries as a bastion against anti-apartheid oil boycotts ensured that it became synonymous with the survival of white South Africa in the eyes of both apartheid apologists and anti-apartheid activists after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. This marrying of SASOL's interests with those of the white nation occurred in spite of the fact that SASOL was in no position to 'save' the apartheid state from an effective oil boycott.

¹⁷ Edwards and Hecht, 'History and the Technopolitics of Identity', 630.

As both Nye and Hecht show, while state and expert elites have often embraced techno-modernism and its entailments whole-heartedly, ordinary people falling outside of political and expert elites have often approached the changes associated with large-scale techno-modernist projects with considerable ambivalence. Some of that ambivalence is reflected in my discussion in Chapter Two of the responses of white farmers in the farming districts surrounding Sasolburg to pollution from the SASOL factory, or in the fleeting allusion to “dispersed native villages” who “made way” for the project. I want to suggest, however, that while the ‘apartheid modern’, has begun to be powerfully elucidated in the small body of scholarship I have reviewed, we have the opportunity to give the concept fuller ethnographic elaboration or, to invoke Clifford Geertz, important cultural thickening.¹⁸ This is the primary goal of my dissertation.

Saul Dubow argues that the apartheid state used science and technology “in support of an ideology of modernizing techno-nationalism” which celebrated “white – and particularly Afrikaner – intellectual prowess” as key ideological tools in battles against communism and African nationalism.¹⁹ Dubow rightly flags the particularly accented character of the ‘apartheid modern’ here; whether they involved massive dams or nuclear programs, these large scale technological projects were imagined by apartheid elites to be monuments to Afrikaner modernity, first, and a more generic, bilingual, white modernity, second. Hecht and Edwards similarly show how apartheid leaders portrayed (white) South Africa and its purported techno-modernity as ‘western’ while simultaneously

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, ‘Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.’ *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

¹⁹ Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge*, 258.

giving the nuclear program an Afrikaner nationalist imprint through technical meetings conducted exclusively in Afrikaans and the invention of an Afrikaner vocabulary for nuclear technology.²⁰ I advance similar arguments in Chapters One and Two about the Afrikaner nationalist imperatives at work in the SASOL project. However, stressing the ways in which the ‘apartheid modern’ was imagined to be a particularly ‘Afrikaner’ modernity should certainly not be where the cultural thickening stops. This dissertation therefore aims to show that the ‘apartheid modern’ can be usefully made to be more than a short-hand for an Afrikaner inflected techno-nationalism or “high-modernism.”²¹

‘Thickening’ the ‘apartheid modern’

Perhaps part of the reason why the ‘apartheid modern’ has attained a certain cultural thinness is because ‘high modernist’ arrogance issues so powerfully from the concrete dam walls and brutalist architecture of the period. The focus on the notoriously unbending Hendrik Verwoerd has proven especially over-determining in this regard. What Saul Dubow has described as Verwoerd’s “conspicuous lack of religiosity” and his American social science training mark him out as not entirely representative figurehead for the ‘apartheid modern.’²² Apartheid’s elites were, unlike Verwoerd, overwhelmingly ‘Christian nationalist’ in character, as Deborah Posel has argued:

²⁰ Edwards and Hecht, ‘History and the Technopolitics of Identity’, 624.

²¹ On ‘high modernism’ see James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, (New Haven Yale University Press, 1998), 87-102, 376-81.

²² The characterization in quotation is Dubow’s, *Commonwealth of Knowledge*, 258.

From the outset, the norms and values of Christian nationalism informed the rendition of the problems and the recommended solutions. Resolutely patriarchal, and critical of the moral laxity of the ‘liberal’ ways proliferating elsewhere in the West, apartheid officialdom authored a regime of moral authoritarianism. It peaked during the late 1960s, in tandem with the ideological broadsides against ‘communism’, encompassing any aspect of anti-Christian politics and ways of life. Strict media censorship restricted the circulation of images and text deemed immoral; the introduction of television was delayed by fears that this would contaminate the nation’s morality with decadent and/or subversive programmes from abroad.²³

William Beinart has perhaps come closest to capturing the particular characteristics of the ‘apartheid modern’ which I have in mind when he describes “the peculiar mix of ideology that characterized Afrikaner views of themselves: a celebration of the *volk* married with a determined sense that this could prosper along with technical advance in an industrial state.”²⁴ Or put differently, “the Nationalists liked to think of the country [as] a conservative but modern industrial, capitalist, Western-oriented nation.”²⁵ As the esteemed South African photographer David Goldblatt has noted, this conservative modernism (perhaps akin to Jeffrey Herf’s notion of “reactionary modernism”) was captured in the bold concrete verticality which characterized the architecture of newly constructed Dutch Reformed churches at the height of apartheid.²⁶

²³ Posel ‘The Apartheid Project’, 335.

²⁴ William Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 163.

²⁵ Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa*, 144.

²⁶ Cited in Dubow, *Commonwealth of Knowledge*, 259; Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar Germany and the Third Reich*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Making ‘modern’, respectable (white) industrial subjects

SASOL’s managers envisioned their project transforming the subjectivities of Afrikaners of recently rural backgrounds on the *platteland* of South Africa into ‘modern’, industrial citizens. From the perspective of Afrikaner nationalist prescriptions, however, it was important that they not be deracinated proletarian subjects. They should identify with ethnic nationalism rather than communism.²⁷ Thus, as I discuss in Chapter Two, when SASOL’s founding managing director, Etienne Rousseau, addressed the congregation at the opening of a new Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in Sasolburg in the late 1960s, he lamented the fact that the DRC’s liturgy was interwoven chiefly with agricultural metaphors. He called for a reorientation of Afrikaner religiosity away from the *platteland* towards modern industry. SASOL’s industrial Afrikaners would still be members of a religious *volk*, then, and as Chapter Three suggests, officials and self-consciously ‘respectable’ burghers in Sasolburg expected the town’s white residents to engage in everyday life practices which confirmed respectable subjecthood.

The culture of respectability in Sasolburg which I describe for the period from the 1950s to the 1970s can be traced to ambivalence about industrial modernity itself. Since the 1920s and 1930s there had been considerable concern among Afrikaner nationalists in politics, church, welfare and academic circles about the effects of accelerating urbanization and industrialization on Afrikaners moving to urban areas in increasing

²⁷ Louise Vincent, ‘Bread and Honour: White Working Class Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the 1930s’ *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (Mar., 2000), 71.

numbers from the *platteland* in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁸ In 1930, one such figure warned that Afrikaner leaders need to “teach Afrikaners to retain their souls in the cities where they have settled: in the midst of foreign elements.”²⁹ Elaborating and popularizing an imagined ethnic Afrikaner communal identity and past that papered over class differences was a key response of the cultural organizations that emerged out of this perceived crisis, and so were moral reform efforts aimed at producing respectable urban Afrikaner subjects.³⁰

The privileging of respectability was, in other words, a defensive response to the experience of industrial modernity among both Afrikaner nationalist elites seeking to remake wider Afrikaner constituencies as well as on the part of many ordinary Afrikaners themselves.³¹ It would be a mistake to imagine that the preoccupation with producing respectable urban Afrikaner subjects had become redundant by the time the SASOL project begins in the 1950s. As Neil Roos has recently shown in his study of work colonies, the apartheid state was deeply invested in engineering white subjectivities as “respectable, uncritical and middle class.”³²

²⁸ Phil Bonner, ‘South African Society and Culture, 1910–1948’ in *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, Volume 2, 307.

²⁹ Cited in Bonner ‘South African Society and Culture, 1910-1948’, 307.

³⁰ Albert Grundlingh ‘The politics of the past and popular pursuits in the construction of everyday Afrikaner nationalism, 1938-1948’ in Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves, ed., *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of possibilities*, (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005), 192-211; Albert Grundlingh ‘Gone to the Dogs’: The Cultural Politics of Gambling - The Rise and Fall of British Greyhound Racing on the Witwatersrand, 1932-1949’ *South African Historical Journal* 48 (May 2003), 174-189.

³¹ Elsabe Brink, ‘Only Decent Girls Are Employed: The Respectability, Decency and Virtue of the Garment Workers on the Witwatersrand during the Thirties’, Unpublished paper presented at History Workshop conference, 9-14 February, 1987.

³² Neil Roos, ‘Work colonies and South African historiography’, *Social History*, 36: 1, (2011), 64.

Deborah Posel has described how the apartheid state employed precisely the kinds of ‘biopower’ strategies Foucault theorized, extending its reach into the ‘domestic sphere’ in the interests of rehabilitating “poor whites to take their place in a ‘modernizing’ society and workforce.”³³

The interventions of SASOL’s social worker, which I discuss in the dissertation, and the policing of respectability I describe in Chapter Three certainly need to be thought of in the context of these preoccupations with subject formation – they were not necessarily particular to Sasolburg’s status as a company town, but rather, typical of the cultural politics of the ‘apartheid modern’. The policing of respectability among white, predominantly Afrikaner communities like Sasolburg during apartheid represented the effort to manage the uneasy articulation of apartheid’s moral pretensions and the increasing social differentiation among Afrikaners produced by industrial capitalism.

Planning, modernism and aesthetic practices in Sasolburg

It was just over fifteen years ago that Alan Mabin and Susan Parnell invited scholars of South Africa’s urban history to free themselves from their racial fetish by beginning to explore the resonances of South Africa’s urban development with the preoccupations of modernist planning interventions globally.³⁴ Mabin and Parnell argued

³³ Posel ‘The Apartheid Project, 1948–1970’, 334-335; For discussion of ‘poor white rehabilitation’ see A. Teppo, ‘The making of a good white: a historical ethnography of the rehabilitation of poor whites in a suburb of Cape Town’, PhD dissertation, Research Series in Anthropology, (University of Helsinki, 2004).

³⁴ Susan Parnell and Alan Mabin ‘Rethinking Urban South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, (Mar., 1995), 39-61.

that “modernist thinking clearly lent itself to apartheid”, and Ivan Evans and Derek Japha have discussed the influence of ideas developed by Corbusier, Ebenezer Howard and even Lewis Mumford on a generation of modernist South African architects who were centrally involved in the planning of the apartheid’s state segregated African townships beginning in the 1950s.³⁵ Rather less explored has been the role of modernist planners in the design of white residential areas under apartheid and in particular, their relationship to the production of respectable white subjects.

My analysis in Chapter Three of Max Kirchhofer’s insertion into a fractious class politics in Sasolburg in the 1950s provides us with a rich case study of modernist town planning in action on South Africa’s Highveld. Kirchhofer’s plans for Sasolburg valorized unmediated face-to-face sociality in local residential neighborhoods and leisure in green spaces as antidotes to the threat of encroaching rationalization which, like Weber, he believed industrial modernity entailed.³⁶ Kirchhofer was forced to contend with both official hostility to the ways in which his plans made the allegedly ‘unrespectable’ habits of poorer residents in Sasolburg visible, and the apparent unwillingness of recent Afrikaner migrants (‘*backvelders*’) from rural areas to develop their residential stands in the ways he hoped that they would. Kirchhofer initially held a classically modernist position, expecting ‘lower-income’ white residents could be ‘uplifted’ and their subjectivities reformed if they were provided with appropriate

³⁵ Derek Japha, ‘The social programme of the South African Modern Movement’, H6 in J. Hilton and I. Vladislavic, eds., *Blank___:architecture, apartheid and after*, (Rotterdam: Nai, 1998); Ivan Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race: Native Administration in South Africa*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

³⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 182.

environmental conditions out of which they could be transformed.³⁷ This position was very different to the class cynicism of officials who opposed his plans because they made local ‘unrespectability’ visible and sought to hide ‘*backvelders*’ rather than reform them. Kirchhofer’s reformist optimism ultimately floundered, however, in the face of the apparent refusal of ‘*backvelder*’ residents in Sasolburg to remake themselves in the image of the dominant local culture linking respectability to everyday aesthetic practices including the management of gardens. In design terms, Sasolburg’s socio-spatial form was produced out of the interaction of Kirchhofer shifting modernism, resident and official preoccupation with the performance of respectability, which reflected wider concerns with respectability, and ‘*backvelder*’ subjectivities. This culture of respectability was certainly cultivated by SASOL, and enforced through local municipal by-laws, but unlike Neil Roos, who treats apartheid hegemony chiefly as an imposition of the state and Dutch Reformed church, I show that it was white residents themselves who wrote letters of complaint to the municipality reporting and denouncing their neighbors for violating the local code of respectability in relation to its key external signs: neat gardens, clean yards and ‘proper’ comportment.

Letter writing practices, domestic labor and racial respectability in Sasolburg

The respectability in question was, of course, inherently racialised, as Chapter Four makes clear. Afrikaner nationalist reform efforts directed at poor white Afrikaners from the 1920s through to the apartheid period were chiefly about the ‘upliftment’ and

³⁷ Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 4.

disaggregation of Afrikaners from the black women and men that they lived and worked cheek by jowl with in the first half of the century.³⁸ Making respectable, ‘modern’ white families in apartheid Sasolburg required the services of an obedient African domestic worker. Labor bureau regulations designed to secure the labor of white farmers made it illegal for white residents in Sasolburg to employ African women who were living on white owned farms in the town’s vicinity as domestic workers. In the mid 1960s, in the midst of a factory expansion in Sasolburg, the refusal of labor officials to register the ‘domestic servants’ in the employ of white residents prompted the latter to write letters of complaint, requesting officials to register their ‘servants’. These letter writing practices entailed elaborate epistolary performances, as letter-writers formulated a language of appeal and claims-making designed to convince bureaucrats of the merit of their requests for permission to employ their domestic workers in contravention of apartheid laws. They positioned themselves as apartheid’s constituency, white citizens and supporters of the National Party, demanding the domestic ‘servants’ they believed were their right, a non-negotiable component of their expectations of (apartheid) modernity. Because letter-writers had to justify why they required the assistance of domestic workers, letters detailed the reasons why white wives, in particular, couldn’t perform domestic labor:

³⁸ D. O’Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934-1948*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Marijke du Toit, “Women, welfare and the nurturing of Afrikaner nationalism: a social history of the Afrikaans Christelike Vroue Vereeniging, c 1879–1936”, (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1996); Elsabe. Brink, “‘Maar Net ‘n Klomp Factory Meide’”: Afrikaner Family and Community on the Witwatersrand during the 1920s’, in Belinda Bozzoli ed., *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987); Robert Morrell, ed., *White but poor: essays on the history of poor whites in southern Africa, 1880–1940*, (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 1992); Susan Parnell and Caroline Hart, “Church, state and the shelter of white working class women in Johannesburg, 1920-1955”, *South African Geographical Journal*, 71, 25-31; Jeremy Seekings, “‘Not a Single White Person Should Be Allowed to Go under’: Swartgevaar and the Origins of South Africa’s Welfare State, 1924-1929”, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (2007) 375-394; Jonathan Hyslop, “White Working-Class Women and the Invention of Apartheid: ‘Purified’ Afrikaner Nationalist Agitation for Legislation against ‘Mixed’ Marriages, 1934-9”, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1995), 57-81.

because of age, ill-health, their own engagement in wage work, or their efforts towards furthering their education. Explaining why particular domestic ‘servants’ needed to be registered entailed claims that individual African women were irreplaceable. This irreplaceability – markedly different to Jacklyn Cock’s vision of domestic workers under apartheid as “disposable nannies” – related to letter-writers claims that particular African women were exceptions to some sort of imagined racial rule: that they were trustworthy and possessed the ability to work hard.³⁹

The other letters of complaint written by Sasolburg’s white residents which I discuss in Chapter Four complained about the presence and comportment of African women and men in the streets of the town’s residential neighborhoods. I argue that the specter of “another location in the white town” figured as a threat to white respectability. If African women’s domestic labor was essential to the making of respectable white homes, this dependency was contradictory in its effects, working to subvert the apartheid modern’s respectable pretenses. Chapter Four unsettles the dominant historiographical vision of the relationship between white towns and African townships under apartheid as bounded spaces. Since the 1950s the seSotho folk name used by black male workers living in nearby Zamdela township to refer to the former ‘white town’ of Sasolburg has been *ditamateng* or ‘place of tomatoes’, an allusion to the intimate pleasures which many of these men associated with the African women employed as domestic ‘servants’ in white homes. The metaphor hints at the existence of a subterranean culture of courtship and sexual intimacy centered around the ‘servant quarters’ in the backyards of white

³⁹ Jacklyn Cock, ‘Disposable Nannies: Domestic Servants in the Political Economy of South Africa’ *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 21 (May - Sep., 1981), 63-83.

owned and rented properties in Sasolburg during apartheid. The women working as domestic workers in Sasolburg were clearly not sealed off from the predominantly migrant African male working class in Zamdela. Sasolburg may have been Apartheid's company town but it was also *ditamateng*: a town which African women and men made their own, in spite of apartheid.

'Paternalism', Respectability and 'New Black Apartheid Moderns' in Zamdela

What of Sasolburg's nearby African township, Zamdela? I suggest that one of the defining features of the 'apartheid modern' in Zamdela in the early period of the 1950s and 1960s was what a number of scholars working across a range of geographic regions have called 'industrial paternalism.'⁴⁰ It is hardly surprising that 'paternalism' should be a feature of a company town. Company towns were invariably established in the nineteenth and twentieth century's with the aim of attracting and retaining the services of workers in often isolated locales close to particular resource sites, such as mineral deposits. Above all, the proprietors of company towns have tended to focus their energies on securing the discipline of their employees. Sasolburg was not a 'closed' company town, in the model of De Beers' diamond mining company town Kleinzee described by Peter Carstens, but SASOL certainly shared the preoccupation with ensuring a disciplined

⁴⁰ Donald Reid, 'Industrial Paternalism: Discourse and Practice in Nineteenth-Century French Mining and Metallurgy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27, 4, (1985), 579–607; Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa c 1860-1910*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994), 71-80; Wilmot James, 'The Erosion of Paternalism on South African Gold Mines', *Industrial Relations Journal of South Africa*, 12 (1992) 1-15.

workforce through its adoption of a ‘paternalistic’ ethos.⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, SASOL’s relationship with its African employees and the residents of the local African township, Zamdela bore the imprint of ‘paternalism’ to a much greater degree than was the case with the company’s white workers in Sasolburg proper. SASOL’s managers saw themselves occupying the position of fathers in relation to the company’s male, adult African employees who were imagined to be children (or ‘boys’ in the infantilizing language of ‘paternalism’) allegedly in need of tutelage and protection in this industrial setting. Apartheid laws prevented Africans from owning property in urban areas which meant that the company played an especially active role in the feeding and housing of Africans in Zamdela, whereas in the white town a fairly normal private housing market developed, though SASOL still subsidized home ownership for white workers through its housing installment scheme. But this wasn’t some sort of disinterested benevolence on SASOL’s part: what was at stake in the elaboration of particular paternalistic practices from the perspective of the company was the production of a suitably compliant industrial subjectivity among its African employees.⁴²

I begin Chapter Five by delineating an initial period after Sasolburg’s establishment when what I call a ‘feminized reproductive regime’ held sway in both Zamdela and the backyards of Sasolburg’s white neighborhoods. African women who earned incomes by

⁴¹ Peter Carstens, *In the Company of Diamonds: De Beers, Kleinzee, and the Control of a Town*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001); Margaret Crawford, *Building the Workingman’s Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns*. (New York: Verso, 1986); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, (Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁴² These were the considerations which, as Robert Turrell has shown, lay behind the ascendancy of the mine compound in late nineteenth century South Africa as the preeminent institution for securing the discipline of ‘pre-industrial’ African migrant laborers. Robert Turrell, ‘Kimberley: Labor and Compounds, 1871-1888’ in Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa*, (London: Longmans, 1982).

brewing and selling beer or by providing the “comforts of home” to migrants as ‘prostitutes’ represented the messy, uncontrolled world of the old urban African ‘locations’ of the pre-apartheid era, precisely the sort of reproductive regime which the Native Affairs Department’s new township project was designed to supplant. SASOL was similarly determined to prevent such ‘independent’ women, stereotyped as immoral vectors of disease and disorder, not to mention strong alcohol, from endangering the discipline of its African workforce.

Whatever their agreement on the undesirability of the earlier feminized reproductive regime, I show how SASOL’s managers saw the Native Affairs Department’s black township project as fundamentally at odds with these goals of attracting workers to Sasolburg and ensuring their discipline. SASOL worked to defend what it saw as its paternalistic prerogatives (its ‘right’ to exercise control over its ‘boys’) from Hendrik Verwoerd’s insistence in the early apartheid period that the company’s workers be incorporated into a larger township together with other Africans not working for the company. The stakes of paternalistic authority from the company’s perspective are clear enough in this disagreement about the layout of the company town: it wanted control over their employees and it would not trust the Native Affairs Department or municipal officials charged with ‘native administration’ with this task.

Given the vexed history of the scholarly application of the ‘paternalism’ concept and the fact that it has become commonplace to assume a significant gap between the assumptions of ‘the paternalists’ and the worldview(s) of those condescended to by

‘paternalism’, it is essential to ask what investment, if any at all, the company’s African male employees may have had in the practices falling under the rubric of ‘paternalism’? Part of Chapter Five focuses on perhaps *the* key site – for the negotiation of ‘industrial paternalism’ in Zamdela, namely SASOL’s compound housing male migrant workers. Apartheid era critics of the compounds (and hostels) housing migrant laborers in Zamdela were given to describe these spaces as akin to prisons in the tradition of anti-apartheid civil society narratives to this effect. Historical scholarship in the 1980s similarly depicted mine compounds in general as ‘total institutions’, explicitly deploying the prison analogy.⁴³ Patrick Harries subsequently challenged this view of compounds in his study of migrant labor on the gold mines, insisting that “the labor relations forged under this form of racial paternalism were negotiated between capitalist employer and migrant worker on a daily basis.”⁴⁴ My analysis of compound ‘paternalism’ resonates with this account, as I argue for the intensity of a co-produced paternalistic culture at SASOL in the early apartheid period (the 1950s and early 1960s) which was founded on a moral economy which saw the company employing particular remunerative practices, including providing ‘free’ food and accommodation to its workers over and above wages.

From the company’s perspective, by shielding African workers from the vagaries of the free market, it hoped to maintain a greater degree of control over the maintenance of a disciplined workforce. This belief was part of a long-standing colonial trope claiming

⁴³ Robert Turrell, *Capital and Labor on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871-1890*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 155-58; Frederick Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold: A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), 38-39; Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, II, New Nineveh*, (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1982), 179.

⁴⁴ Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity*, 74.

that Africans needed protection from “the evils of industrialism.”⁴⁵ In its earlier colonial instantiations this trope was produced out of weariness with traumatic aspects of European experiences of industrial modernity – especially the threat of working class radicalism – and subsequently projected onto African workers. Similarly, Afrikaner nationalist elites had spent much of the three decades preceding the beginning of apartheid worrying about the effects of industrialization and urbanization on Afrikaners. It is important to recognize however, as scholarship by the likes of Philip Bonner has underlined, that reticence about the characteristics of industrial modernity were also shared by many African migrant laborers working on South Africa’s mines, anxious that the decadent temptations of their urban setting might seduce them into neglecting their rural kin and homestead building responsibilities.⁴⁶ If this is borne in mind, there is a sense in which ‘paternalism’ was the answer to industrial modernity of both manager and migrant. The undeniable centrality of paternalistic practices on South Africa’s mines since the late nineteenth century until the 1970s cannot therefore be dismissed as the product of the ideological fantasies of white managers alone, however iniquitous the context. Paternalistic practices at SASOL in the 1950s and 1960s saw SASOL’s compound manager and migrant laborers working together towards securing the latter’s encapsulation in ethnic and village peer associations in the compound. Such co-operative work might not appeal to postcolonial sensibilities in search of evidence of ‘resistance’ to white authority, but it must nonetheless be reckoned with.

⁴⁵ Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity*, 72. Saul Dubow, *Scientific racism in modern South Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 285-286.

⁴⁶ Phil Bonner ‘Labour, Migrancy and Urbanization in South Africa and India, 1900-60’ *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2009) 44, 72.

While there is no doubt that the African workers who moved into SASOL's workforce in the early 1970s with the 'South Africanisation' of the coal and gold mining industry had little inclination to recognize the paternalistic authority of either compound managers or *indunas*, the same cannot be said of migrant laborers whom they replaced.⁴⁷ Compounded African workers' investment in 'paternalism' at SASOL rested on their engagement in the kinds of rural homestead building life projects which have been described by Dunbar Moodie for migrants to South Africa's gold mines.⁴⁸ Like all mine compounds in the country, migrant networks penetrated the SASOL compounds walls, and in the mid-1960s, political organizing around a minimum wage campaign by an African National Congress aligned trade union precipitated a strike which led to SASOL's compounded workers rejecting the substitution of food for higher wages which lay at the heart of the moral economy of the compound until this point. I suggest that this move on the part of at least some of SASOL's compounded workers reflects broader cultural shifts associated with pervasive capitalist commodity culture and newly assertive black politics in the country, which by the early 1970s began to undermine the basis of compound 'paternalism' on mines throughout the country.

Before moving into the 1970s, the chapter turns its attention to Zamdela's aspirant African middle class, SASOL's married male employees and their families who rented homes in Proteam, the local elite neighborhood. Respectability was clearly not just the preoccupation of Sasolburg's burghers: the 'Protemas' were self-consciously respectable

⁴⁷ Dunbar Moodie, with Vivienne Ndatshe, *Going for Gold, Men, Mines, and Migration*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 106-107.

⁴⁸ Such homestead building investments are perhaps best traced (in relation to gold miners) in Dunbar Moodie's *Going for Gold*.

black apartheid moderns. In a similar fashion to my argument about the co-production of compound ‘paternalism’, I argue that Proteem residents enrolled white officials on the local Bantu advisory board – a ‘paternalistic’ consultative body – in their attempts at making a moral, ‘respectable’ community in Zamdela. Like the ‘backvelders’ and ‘respectable’ burghers of Sasolburg, Zamdela self-consciously respectable African women and men living in Proteem defending their respectability from male African migrant laborers and independent African women beer-brewers and ‘prostitutes’ who they regarded as irredeemably unrespectable.⁴⁹ These residents struggled to secure a civic infrastructure of parks, playgrounds, bus stops and paved streets which could compare to those provided to residents in Sasolburg’s white neighborhoods. Zamdela’s aspirant middle class would appear to have had an ally in Max Kirchhofer, the modernist architect commissioned by SASOL to plan its company town who regrettably ultimately had very little role to play in shaping the longer term development of Zamdela. In the mid-1960s, Kirchhofer wrote critically to SASOL about the fact that his understanding of the original intention of creating a “balanced community” with significant family housing had not materialized: the township was instead scarred, in his mind, by the “mass housing of men” in “mass accommodation devoid of privacy, rife with pilfering and incapable of fulfilling the most modest human endeavors.” He called for a return to “more human concepts.”⁵⁰ Frustration at the lack of responsiveness of various white officials responsible for ‘Bantu administration’ to similar demands for “more human concepts” meant that relationships between African representatives of Zamdela residents and white

⁴⁹ For similar distinctions between ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ African residents in urban townships see Belinda Bozzoli, ‘Explaining Social Consciousness: The Case of Mrs. Molefe’ *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, Vol. 31, 123 (1991), 297.

⁵⁰ Sasolburg Town Clerk Files (STCF), 2/9/69 Max Kirchhofer to Town Clerk, Sasolburg, 30 July, 1965.

took increasing strain towards the late 1960s and early 1970s. While the demands of Zamdela's aspirant middle class fell on mostly deaf ears, by the early to mid-1970s there were important shifts happening in South Africa's political economy which were beginning to be felt within SASOL which would allow at least some of these demands (particularly home-ownership and the upward mobility denied them by apartheid's artificial skill ceiling) to be met.⁵¹

SASOL managers, like the German businessman in Weimar Germany Mary Nolan analyzes, became increasingly infatuated with the American 'gospel of productivity' in the 1960s.⁵² In a context where the skill-shortages created by apartheid's color bar really started to bite across many key industries, SASOL slowly pushed against legal restrictions on the employment of Africans in skilled positions. There were significant increases in African wages in the early to mid-1970s because of a general shift to a stabilized 'South Africanized' workforce in the gold and coal mining industry. The new generation of African workers at SASOL in the 1970s was increasingly cosmopolitan and aspirantly consumerist subjects – new black apartheid moderns, if you like – reflecting the reconfiguration of blackness which black consciousness ideas, in particular, helped to effect in this period.

⁵¹ For analysis of the color bar and the growing black 'middle class' under apartheid see Owen Crankshaw, *Race, Class and the Changing Division of Labour Under Apartheid* (Routledge, London, 1997).

⁵² Nick Tiratsoo and Jim Tomlinson 'The 'Gospel of Productivity': United States Technical Assistance and British Industry 1945-1960', *Business History Review*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), 41-81; Mary Nolan, *Visions of modernity: American business and the modernization of Germany*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

The biggest casualty of these larger shifts was the older form of ‘paternalism’ at SASOL. In a period where the apartheid state eased restrictions on black property ownership in an effort to co-opt the aspirant black middle classes, the company belatedly extended its home ownership scheme which had hitherto been reserved for white employees in Sasolburg to its black employees. This was part of the company’s deliberate policy of creating a black middle class in Zamdela: Protema’s who for the first time could own their own homes. This policy change aimed to attract skilled Africans to the company. This policy change helped many of the company’s better paid and ‘higher-skilled’ African employees and their families fulfill long frustrated dreams of being able to own their own homes. One of the bitter ironies of this history is that this small window was only open for a decade from the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s, when the company ended its involvement in financial subsidization of employee housing, so it could release capital tied up in its housing installment schemes. SASOL began subcontracting in earnest in the late 1980s and early 1990s, shedding jobs as it repositioned itself for a post-apartheid era which would see it setting up oil-from-coal and other plants in countries throughout the world. With the original SASOL plant by now producing a range of other chemicals for both national and international markets, oil-from-coal operations were focused in SASOL’s other company town, Secunda in the former Eastern Transvaal. The Sigma colliery in Sasolburg was closed down, resulting in the retrenchment of thousands of workers.

The end of influx control and the end of apartheid resulted in massive growth of informal ‘squatter’ settlements on Zamdela’s periphery. These were the men and women

and children that apartheid's labor bureau regulations had tried to hold down on farms and keep out of Sasolburg in the 1950s and 1960s. Branded 'surplus people' and 'black spots' as farm mechanization on white owned farms accelerated in the 1970s, they were removed to homeland 'dumping grounds' like Qwa Qwa, forced to live in overcrowded rural slums with little prospect of work.⁵³ When they were finally able to make their way to urban centers of opportunity like Sasolburg with the end of apartheid, the jobs and 'paternalism' which had defined this company town, were a thing of the past.

Life in the ruins of the 'apartheid modern'

The final chapter of the dissertation turns to an analysis of life in the ruins of the 'apartheid modern' in contemporary Zamdela township, exploring the lives of a group of young men living in a company town marked by the unavailability of employment and the disappearance of the paternalistic practices which were an important feature of its history. I show how these young men – members of a local theatre group – have endeavored to make post-apartheid government discourses which promote neo-liberal models of cultural entrepreneurship, work to their advantage. They have striven in vain, to become successful 'ethnopreneurs' by turning themselves into the subject that Foucault called '*homoeconomicus*': they have become entrepreneurs of themselves.⁵⁴ Through interviews, itinerant ethnographic observation and a close reading of a play

⁵³ Colin Murray, 'Displaced Urbanization: South Africa's Rural Slums' *African Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 344, (Jul., 1987), 311-329.

⁵⁴ John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff. *Ethnicity Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 226.

which the theater group wrote and performed for a government funded program, the chapter traces their attempts at making sense of the relationship between the history of Zamdela and the familial alienations which they believe were created by South Africa's migrant labor system and the fate of individual young lives in a post-apartheid present defined by what the Comaroff's have characterized by the "millennial promise of democracy and the free market."⁵⁵

In the chapter's epilogue I describe the emergence of a new local civic organization in Zamdela, after the bulk of my research was completed. As bleak as life in the ruins of the 'apartheid modern' in Zamdela may appear, there are signs that some of the young people who proved unable to successfully re-make themselves into 'entrepreneurs' on the terms of neo-liberal discourses, are pouring their energies into trenchant critiques of post-apartheid life in the shadows of SASOL, and as I suggest in the dissertation's conclusion, like Max Kirchhofer and members of the local Bantu advisory board before them, they are demanding for Zamdela the civic infrastructure which the 'apartheid modern' produced in the white neighborhoods of Sasolburg. But before we can see the sparks in the ruins of the 'apartheid modern', we must start at the beginning, with the story of how apartheid South Africa came to produce oil-from-coal in the second half of the twentieth century, on a scale and with a success that was not matched anywhere else in the world.

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⁵⁵ John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff. 'Reflections on Youth, From the Past to the Postcolony' in G. Downey and M.S. Fisher eds., *Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on the New Economy*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

Chapter One:

‘Tailor Made for South African Conditions’: The Technopolitics of South Africa’s Oil-from-Coal Project

The establishment of SASOL, (Suid-Afrikaanse Steenkool, Olie en Gaskorporasie or South African Coal, Oil and Gas Corporation) the South African state’s project to produce oil from coal through a synthetic chemical process, is popularly believed to have resulted from the apartheid state’s determination to ensure its survival of international oil boycotts. This chapter challenges this view by showing that the central South African state first became interested in oil-from-coal as a route to national fuel sovereignty and securing the nation’s modernity in the 1930s. SASOL, like the other state corporations established before it such as Eskom and ISCOR, can be seen as part of a longer-standing project aimed at shifting the locus of industrial power in South Africa away from its historic basis in the offices of private mining capital towards a more diversified industrial economy, under greater state control.¹

Interest in establishing an oil-from-coal industry in South Africa started out as an initiative of a private mining company, Anglovaal, in the mid-1930s, but as I show, by the time the Afrikaner nationalist government came to power in 1948, newly ascendant Afrikaner elites had come to regard the oil-from-coal scheme as a national prestige project which was especially deserving of the state’s largesse. Anglovaal’s financial

¹ Bill Freund ‘The Union of South Africa: A developmental state?’ Unpublished paper.

attentions were ultimately drawn to the opening up of gold mines in the Free State, but Afrikaner nationalism's longstanding hostility towards English-speaking and Jewish owned mining houses also provided the political rationale behind the apartheid state's decision to establish a state corporation to undertake the oil-from-coal scheme, instead of subsidizing a private company to undertake the project. It was important that the project should symbolize the modernity of the apartheid state and its new Afrikaner incumbents, and not the achievements of private capital.

While the national fuel sovereignty which the project promised was undoubtedly important, I argue that the largely untested, cutting-edge nature of oil-from-coal technology was part of the appeal of the project to the apartheid state. Oil-from-coal was an experiment in the name of techno-modernity by elites who had little grounds for believing with any great confidence that the technological processes involved would prove efficacious. What gave apartheid elites any confidence that the project would succeed? The answer I propose is that the relative inexpensiveness of getting each ton of coal out of the ground under (early) apartheid labor conditions, as compared to other international settings, was one of the biggest reasons why oil-from-coal was thinkable as a practical proposition in South Africa. In classic technopolitical fashion common to other large technological projects in the country in this period, SASOL's managers repeatedly presented the intensely socio-political fact of cheap black labor as a depoliticized technical fact.² While SASOL may have been established as part of the effort to shift industrial development in the country away from its emphasis on the

² Edwards and Hecht, 'History and the Technopolitics of Identity', 624.

mining industry, and while its technological sophistication was much heralded, its coal-mining practices remained firmly rooted, until the 1970s, in dependence on cheap black migrant labor.³

Genealogies of Autarky and Synthetic Fuel

While local newspapers often provoked excitement in the opening decades of the twentieth century speculating that prospecting might turn up oil in South Africa's sub-soil, the country has no known domestic oil deposits. Throughout the first half of the last century, importing oil was regarded by most prominent South African economists as a drain on the national fiscus. In addition, after World War I South Africa's budding class of 'experts' argued that because the country imported its entire fuel needs, it was particularly vulnerable to fuel shortages during times of crisis, such as war. In this context, the oil-from-coal research occurring in Weimar Germany attracted considerable attention among this class of 'experts'.⁴

Like South Africa, Germany was a country rich in coal deposits but possessing little natural petroleum. Before World War I, Friedrich Berguis the Nobel prize winning chemist who became (in)famous for his involvement with IG Farbenindustrie's chemical plant in Auschwitz, pioneered the hydrogenation of coal at high pressures and temperatures. In the inter-war period, German-Jewish chemist Franz Fischer and his Czech colleague Hans Tropsch developed a coal gasification process to produce 'syngas'

³ Clark, *Manufacturing Apartheid: State Corporations in South Africa*

⁴ 'Coal Liquefaction in South Africa' *The Chemical Age*, April 20, 1929.

(a mixture of carbon monoxide and hydrogen), using intense heat and pressure while they were working in a government sponsored laboratory at the Kaiser Wilhelm Coal Institute in Mulheim. This syngas was then converted into liquid hydrocarbon fuels such as diesel and petrol. Farben bought the Berguis patent and built the first hydrogenation plant at Leuna in 1927.⁵ A German company called Ruhrchemie bought the patent rights to the Fischer-Tropsch process and built the first commercial plant of its sort at Holten in 1934. These tentative forays into synthfuel were about to be aggressively energized by Hitler's rise to power and Nazi fantasies of fuel sovereignty.

In March 1936, Hitler's 'Fuel Commissar', Hermann Goring, implemented an ambitious 'four-year plan' to make Germany completely independent of foreign sources of fuel.⁶ Farben's hydrogenation approach was favoured by the Nazis over Ruhrchemie's Fischer-Tropsch approach because it produced a higher grade gasoline for use as aviation fuel in Goring's Luftwaffe and because Farben's managers were well-connected figures in the Nazi military-industrial complex.⁷ The plan floundered. Importing crude oil was still considerably cheaper than the synthetic route, despite the stiff tariff the Nazi state imposed on imported oil products in an effort to protect indigenous synthetic production. Nonetheless, by the time war broke out in 1939 there were fourteen hydrogenation and Fischer-Tropsch plants operating at full capacity, with a further six plants planned for

⁵ Anthony N. Stranges, 'Friedrich Bergius and the Rise of the German Synthetic Fuel Industry' *Isis*, 75 (4): 643-667.

⁶ Raymond G. Strokes, 'The Oil Industry in Nazi Germany, 1936-1945' *The Business History Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Summer, 1985), 254-277 and Arnold Krammer 'Fueling the Third Reich' *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (July, 1978), 394-422.

⁷ Anthony N. Stranges, 'Friedrich Bergius and the Rise of the German Synthetic Fuel Industry' *Isis*, 75, 4): 643-667 and Thomas Parke Hughes, 'Technological Momentum in History: Hydrogenation in Germany 1898-1933', *Past & Present*, No. 44 (Aug., 1969), 106-132.

start-up. These synthetic plants helped Hitler prolong the war until Allied bombing effectively destroyed the existing plants and halted production.⁸

Farben suffered heavy plant damage and the company's implication in war crimes led to its dissolution after the war. The Soviet Union seized most of the company's plants falling within the Soviet Occupation Zone while the United States Bureau of Mines undertook secret missions aimed at securing the German synthetic oil industry's 'know-how'. Until this point, interest in synthetic fuel production in the US had been dulled by the apparently endless deposits of petroleum in US oilfields and the entrenched interests and lobbying power of the big crude oil companies, as it would be for much of the remainder of the century. The budding American synthfuel industry would nonetheless figure centrally in the story of SASOL's establishment in the 1950s. Bombed and plundered, the German synthetic fuel industry lay in ruin by the end of World War II. The men who dreamt of establishing an oil-from-coal scheme in South Africa soon made their way through these ruins on their visits to Germany in the late 1940s and early 1950s. South Africa was about to pick up where Nazi Germany had left off.

The first serious interest in establishing a synthetic fuel industry in South Africa emerged in the mid-1930s, in the shape of the mining company Anglo-Transvaal Consolidated Investment Corporation (Anglovaal). In September 1935, C. Feldman, an English engineer with a background in electric power plant design in England and South

⁸ Raymond G. Strokes 'The Oil Industry in Nazi Germany, 1936-1945' *Business History Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Summer, 1985), 54-277 and Arnold Krammer 'Fueling the Third Reich' *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (July, 1978) 394-422.

America and a budding interest in coal carbonization and oil production, was sent by Anglovaal to Germany to examine the performance of the catalyst chamber at Ruhrchemie's Holten plant and to carry out tests on South African coals to determine their suitability for synthfuel production. He also undertook preliminary negotiations with Ruhrchemie about Anglovaal acquiring its oil-from-coal license for South Africa.

In 1936, Anglovaal appointed a committee to carry out further tests on Ruhrchemie's catalyst chamber. The tests were declared a success, but in private correspondence between the Chairman of Anglovaal, Bob Hersov and national South African government officials Hersov wrote: "the process has not entirely emerged from the experimental stage, and as such will require government assurances until the economics of its potentialities have been established."⁹ The extent to which oil-from-coal had 'emerged' from this 'experimental stage' and therefore required special financial support from the state would remain a source of contestation among South African and international political and expert communities for much of the next two decades. Crucially, at this stage, the national cabinet was reluctant to commit the £15 million in financial support which Anglovaal had requested from the state.

South Africa's role in supporting the Allied campaigns in World War II gave concerns about the country's fuel sovereignty renewed urgency. In 1947, the year before the election which would see the Afrikaner Nationalists rise to power, the national parliament passed the Liquid Fuel and Oil Act which empowered the government to grant

⁹ SASOL Archive, Sasolburg (SAS). 8/18 Historical Documents, A.S. Hersov to A. Fourie, Minister of Commerce and Public Welfare, 13th August, 1936.

a license for the synthetic production of 'motor spirit' from coal. At this stage, Anglovaal was the only applicant for the license, although its plans were about to be upset by the discovery of gold in the Free State province of South Africa, and the rise to power of the Afrikaner nationalists. In the meantime, however, the company set about finalizing the technical details of the oil-from-coal scheme. The Berguis hydrogenation route was not considered a viable option because the country's coals are non-caking, which affects their performance in combustion and gasification. The capital costs of Fischer-Tropsch processes were also generally expected to be lower. Anglovaal had lost contact with Ruhrchemie, the Fischer-Tropsch licensees, during the war. Anglovaal had opened up a new set of oil-from-coal connections in the United States during the war with an American Fischer-Tropsch practitioner, Dobie Keith. Keith had developed a bubbling fluid bed reactor process at Hydrocarbon Research Inc., after first observing Fischer-Tropsch at Ruhrchemie's plant, when he was sent there by his former employees, M.W. Kellogg, the major engineering and construction firm. After World War II, Anglovaal told the South African government that it would ask Hydrocarbon Research Inc. (HRI) to design both the gasification and synthesis sections of the proposed plant. Anglovaal's synthesis section would employ the fluid bed approach similar to that which Keith's company was planning to use at its new plant in Brownsville, Texas. For gasification, HRI proposed using the generators typically used in the original German Fischer-Tropsch approach, designed by another German company, Lurgi. These technical choices would prompt the emergence of the first tensions between Anglovaal and the rising stars of the Afrikaner chemical engineering fraternity, the men who would soon be at the forefront of the SASOL project.

Technical disagreements and the beginning of apartheid

It was in 1948, the year the Afrikaner Nationalists rose to power, that the first significant disagreements surfaced among South African engineers and scientists about the technological (and financial) direction of the oil-from-coal project. Significantly, it was Johnny van der Merwe and Etienne Rousseau, two rising stars of the Afrikaner chemical engineering fraternity who first broke rank. Both men were employed at SATMAR, an Anglovaal subsidiary, which had been established in 1932, and produced oil from shale. They were concerned that the coal which Anglovaal intended gasifying hadn't been tested in the Lurgi-designed generators which the company had decided to employ for gasification.¹⁰ Both men were convinced that it would be too risky to proceed without further tests: "it [is] unwise to spend the very large capital required on a process which has never been proved operable....the only proper way to tackle this problem would be to install a full scale pilot generator and test it out on the coal for several months."¹¹

Anglovaal responded to van der Merwe and Rousseau's dissenting views by insisting it trusted HRI's assurances that the coal would gasify. In an effort to satisfy its critics, Anglovaal agreed to send a technical advisor to Germany to investigate, who reported that while Lurgi had no experience of long-run performance of its generators on the sort of coal Anglovaal intended gasifying, the Germans did not "anticipate any

¹⁰ SAS, 8/18 Historical Documents, J.W.van der Merwe to A. Parker, April, 1948.

¹¹ SAS, 8/18 Historical Documents, Liquid Fuel and Oil Industry Advisory Board: Report on a meeting of representatives of the Board and the Anglo-Transvaal Consolidated Investment Co on question of gasification, April, 1948.

difficulty' with gasification.¹² Lurgi couldn't carry out pilot tests on South African coals because the only generators that were set up to operate were in the occupied Russian zone. Anglovaal's manager S.G. Menell argued "there is no alternative process to the Lurgi and there is no reason to believe that the Lurgi's could not be made to work by the introduction of modifications." Rousseau clearly had his doubts, insisting that the coal be tested in Lurgi's generators, and questioning Anglovaal's evaluation of HRI's claims.¹³

Rousseau privately told long-standing civil servant, Broederbond and Senior Industrial Advisor in the Minister of Commerce and Industries, Frans du Toit, that he didn't think Anglovaal would be able to raise the necessary loan capital to go ahead with the scheme, arguing that the project should be taken over as a national state undertaking under the control of the Industrial Development Corporation. The project could then be financed "by the petrol-using public through a small levy per gallon of petrol." Significantly – given the serious technical problems which haunted SASOL – Rousseau argued it was best to wait before going ahead with the construction of a large scale plant. In the meantime, the fuel levy could be used to fund exploratory work on gasification of South African coal. Rousseau argued that two or three years after this work was complete synthetic fuel technology in the United States would likely have progressed to such an extent that "we could erect a factory *without any doubt*", because by then the hydrocol plant in Brownsville, Texas would have been operating long enough to allow for the evaluation of an actually existing plant.¹⁴ At this stage, it seems Rousseau was not even

¹² SAS, Sasolburg. 8/18 Historical Documents, Menell memorandum on oil-from-coal, 15th July, 1948.

¹³ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, E.Rousseau to F. du Toit, 3 Feb, 1949.

¹⁴ Italics my addition.

particularly impressed by the breathless talk of impending international crises and the urgency of the national interest: “I see the synthetic fuel industry in South Africa as a long-term undertaking. It will make no difference to any international crisis during the next ten years.”¹⁵ Before long SASOL would come to be imagined by many interest groups, including many apartheid partisans and anti-apartheid activists, as a bulwark against international oil sanctions imposed against South Africa.

Momentum was gathering behind the idea that the synthfuel scheme should be a state-controlled undertaking. In March 1950, industrialist-civil servant, H.J. Van Eck, Chairman of the Industrial Development Corporation, the state-owned financial institution charged with bankrolling major state-led industrial projects, noted that the recently elected National Party government was “not disposed to guarantee a private concern.”¹⁶ The newly-elected Afrikaner nationalist government endeavored to shift the locus of industrial power in the country away from private enterprise towards the state. Van Eck would shortly embark on a trip to the United States, knowing that while Anglovaal was officially still the licensee for the scheme, the chances of it remaining so were becoming increasingly slim. He would enter into negotiations with the World Bank in Washington promising that the South African government would guarantee any World Bank loan for the project, through the Industrial Development Corporation. Or put differently, the newly elected government had decided that the project would definitely be undertaken by a state corporation.

¹⁵ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, E. Rousseau to F. du Toit, 3 Feb, 1949.

¹⁶ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, H.J Van Eck Memorandum on Oil from Coal Project, 30 March 1950.

While he was in the United States, Van Eck undertook “further examination” of the hydrocol plant which P.C. Keith was erecting at Brownsville, Texas and investigated the work which the American Bureau of Mines had done on synthetic fuel since ‘Project Paperclip’. In the meantime, Anglovaal’s fall from favor in light of the increased assertiveness of newly ascendant Afrikaner elites continued. Writing to Frans du Toit in April 1950 in his new capacity as a fellow national industrial advisor, Johnny van der Merwe wondered if Anglovaal needed to continue its involvement in the project at all: “we know Anglo-Transvaal have done a lot of spadework, but on the other hand, it has had its chance.”¹⁷ In April, Frans du Toit wrote to van Eck, still on tour in the United States, reporting that there was a “strong feeling in Afrikaans-speaking circles”, that the project “should be a more directly state controlled undertaking.”¹⁸ The ‘Afrikaans-speaking circles’ to which Du Toit referred almost certainly included the Afrikaner Broederbond (Afrikaner Brotherhood), the secretive Afrikaner nationalist organization formed in 1918 to further the interests of Afrikaners, of which he was an influential member.¹⁹ With the National Party installed in government and the Broederbond flexing its muscles, Anglovaal stood little chance of being awarded the synthfuel licence. Anglovaal’s fall from favor after the 1948 election reflected longstanding determination

¹⁷ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, Van der Merwe memorandum, 11 April 1950.

¹⁸ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, F.J du Toit to Hendrik Van Eck, 21 April, 1950.

¹⁹ Du Toit’s Broederbond membership and influence were confirmed by former SASOL managing director and chairman, David de Villiers, who was also SASOL’s first company secretary and served with Du Toit on early SASOL boards of directors. Interview with David de Villiers by author. Du Toit’s Afrikaner nationalism is the stuff of legend. Etienne Rousseau recalled how, in a period when the bastion of English speaking capitalism in Johannesburg, the Rand Club, told H.J. van Eck “we don’t talk that language”, Frans du Toit “walked in there and spoke Afrikaans to everyone, even with the waiters. When I travelled overseas with him, when he filled out forms, next to nationality he would write ‘Afrikaner’. At the Savoy hotel he spoke Afrikaans to the waiters and he ordered South African sherry, nothing else” Commentary by P.E Rousseau, Sasolburg Public Library Africana Room (SPLAR), Johannes Meintjies Papers, 20 April, 1974.

among Afrikaner nationalists for a challenge to be mounted against what its rhetoric characterized as “Jewish” capital’s dominance of the South African economic landscape.²⁰ In his most unguarded correspondence with Afrikaner nationalist heavyweights in government like Dr. Nico Diederichs, Etienne Rousseau referred glibly to his former employer, Anglovaal, as “the Jews.”²¹ The broader, (less obviously anti-Semitic) political imperatives at play in the move to establish oil-from-coal as a state corporation are suggested in a comment made in national parliament in 1951 by Dr. Diederichs himself, that he was glad .that we can establish an enterprise not controlled from abroad or by international monopolies and cartels but by the South African state.”²²

In addition to seeing the oil-from-coal project as an opportunity for asserting its particular vision of the role of the state in relation to private capital, by 1950 the South African state’s new incumbents considered the oil-from-coal project to be a national prestige project worthy of receiving its unconditional financial support. In March 1950, Frans du Toit wrote to the Minister for Economic Affairs, Eric Louw, explaining that he believed oil-from-coal was “of such national importance” that it would be acceptable for the state to make “big concessions” to place the industry on a “healthy economic footing.” Du Toit’s next sentence captured the generally forgiving arithmetic of the apartheid state’s approach to financing the project in the coming decades: “I won’t be in

²⁰ Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975,) 15.

²¹ See National Archives Repository of South Africa (SAB), H.4/7; SASOL, Etienne Rousseau to Nico Diederichs, 30 Sept, 1959.

²² *Hansard*, South African Parliamentary Debates, 10th April 1951, Columns 4150-4151.

the slightest bit panic-stricken if it makes a little more or less profit occasionally.”²³ Later the same year, Du Toit told Louw that “the profit motive...will have to be subordinated for several years”, and was clearly conscious of the criticism that the government could expect to get “from private enterprise” because of the generous support that the company would receive from the state coffers. Throughout these discussions, the likes of Rousseau and du Toit worked to ensure that in setting up SASOL, “sufficient flexibility” was maintained to allow the company to cease to be under government control in the longer term if this might prove desirable or necessary.²⁴

‘Tailor made for South African conditions’

That same year, the South African government announced the establishment of an Interim Committee to finally bring the synthfuel project (now bearing the name SASOL) to fruition. The committee comprised Frans du Toit as its Chairman, Dr. H.J. Van Eck representing the Industrial Development Corporation, Dr M.S.Louw of Afrikaner nationalist financial giant SANLAM but also representing the Industrial Development Corporation, Etienne Rousseau, and S.G.Menell and A.P. Faickney (both of Anglovaal). Having previously been highly critical of Anglovaal’s stewardship, and reticent about the veracity of the technological processes involved, Etienne Rousseau was now tasked with personally steering the project. He traveled to West Germany with project stalwart, Hendrik Van Eck to investigate the Lurgi-Rurhchemie Fischer-Tropsch processes first

²³ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, F.J. du Toit to Eric Louw, 9th March, 1950.

²⁴ SAB. HEN 7/5/50, P.A. 11/2, Vorm en Finasiering van olie-uit-steenkool Maatskappy, F.du Toit to Min of Econ Affairs, 17 Nov, 1950.

hand. While he had previously been skeptical about the Lurgi gasifiers, from a distance, he now wrote excitedly to Frans du Toit from Germany: “we are no longer uncertain about the process. The more we think about it, the more we feel that South Africa must have this industry.”²⁵

First hand witnessing in Germany appears to have changed Rousseau's mind. He now believed that both Lurgi and Ruhrchemie had substantiated their claims about the efficacy of their processes. While on tour in America, Rousseau and Van Eck had also learned via the grapevine that “from all accounts Brownsville is a mess.” HRI had apparently had problems with the fluidisation of its catalyst. On this basis Rousseau and van Eck had decided that it would be “dangerous” to consider “any proposal based on the Hydrocol principle.” Returning to South Africa in August 1950, they penned a comparison of what they imagined to be distinct national-cultural approaches to fuel: “the Western Germany economy is founded on coal and coal gas and their approach to our problems, which are based on the same raw materials, are realistic. The American thinking habits are bound to petroleum and natural gas economy and they do not see our problems as they should be viewed.”²⁶

While the South African state had decided to establish a state corporation to run the synthfuel project, an initial government guaranteed loan of £15 million from the World Bank would still be necessary to fund the start-up. Rousseau and van Eck’s

²⁵ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, E. Rousseau to F.J. du Toit, 18 June, 1950.

²⁶ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, Memorandum by E. Rousseau ‘Comparison of Ruhrchemie and Hydrocol Processes’ 12 August 1950.

meetings with the World Bank in Washington were held in secret, outside of the Bank's offices because of the hostility of 'big oil' in the US to oil-from-coal.²⁷ There was one issue which World Bank officials kept coming back to during the meeting, and it wasn't the tariff protection levels which the South African state would have to implement to support oil-from-coal. Rather, they simply could not fathom that the labor costs for mining coal – presented by the South African delegation as a depoliticized technical fact – were as low as they were. They clearly didn't have any grasp of the political economy of South African racial capitalism. As Rousseau reported to his colleagues: "they did not seem to appreciate that the whole South African economic set-up is vastly different from that of America."²⁸ The viability of the entire project, including the likelihood that the World Bank would provide a loan to fund it, hinged on the cheapness of black labor in the early apartheid period. Oil-from-coal was only thinkable as a practical (and fundable) alternative to the importation and refining of crude oil because the political economy of the early apartheid period kept labor costs in the mine-shaft much lower than other international contexts where oil-from-coal had proven a more expensive prospect.

The new apartheid elite, including the likes of Rousseau, started to frame the project in terms of its supposed geopolitical importance to the 'Western World' in the context of the Cold War and the instability associated with rising anti-colonial nationalisms. These constructions presented South Africa as unambiguously part of the 'Western world' and a kind of final bastion, at the tip of Africa, against the

²⁷ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, Report to the Interim Committee, 16 August, 1950 and Etienne Rousseau Commentary.

²⁸ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, Report to the Interim Committee, 16 August, 1950.

collapse of its strategic defenses. In a 1951 memorandum on SASOL's strategic significance, Rousseau wrote: "in the event of a major war, the Suez canal will be closed to shipping, and South Africa will be the logical link between the West and the Middle East. Convoys will again have to be supplied with food and South Africa will have to make its contribution in munition production."²⁹ Rousseau presented South Africa as a strategically critical node in a 'Western' geopolitical network ensuring 'the West's' access to the petroleum resources of the Middle East. This positioning of the country in relation to an imagined future Cold War crisis invoked South Africa's historical dependency by citing the country's role supplying Allied convoys during World War II with food and munitions.

It is important to note that language invoking a geopolitical alignment of South Africa as 'western' may not always have been about the unreflective expression of a deeply held civilizational identity politics. There were also instrumental reasons for the deployment of such discourses and they were co-produced by American and South African officials and experts, as much as they were articulated by overeager apartheid elites anxious for membership of an exclusive 'Western' club. Cold war rhetoric was useful in such mundane matters as speeding the delivery of equipment orders SASOL placed with manufacturers in West Germany and the United States. In October 1951, American officials explained to a SASOL representative worrying about delivery schedules that "in Washington today the greatest emphasis is being placed on the general strengthening of our Western defences against Communism, and any project concerning

²⁹ SAB, Etienne Rousseau memorandum, 22nd December, 1951. 'Considerations regarding the establishment of an oil from coal industry in South Africa'.

it which can be shown to add to the defences of the Western alliance receives practically automatically the greatest assistance.”³⁰ The official in question instructed the SASOL representative to organize a memorandum from a South African government official framing the project in these terms. Sometimes official American interventions were even more hands-on. In January 1953, a diplomat from the South African Embassy in Washington approached a US State Department official about delayed steel supplies. The State department official suggested that “insufficient attention was perhaps being paid to the military and strategic considerations involved in the project.” The official proceeded to draw up a memo “setting out these aspects” which he then presented to a State Department interdepartmental meeting. The South African diplomat reported to his superior that the memorandum “presented concisely and well all the arguments we have put forward on the military aspect of the project.”³¹

Accepting Rousseau and Van Eck’s preference for the ‘German approach’, the interim committee recommended the immediate installation of the Lurgi-Ruhrchemie Fischer-Tropsch process. The committee argued that “the explosive international situation” – a likely reference to the Korean war, the reverberations associated with the establishment of the state of Israel and rising Arab nationalism – coupled with the fact that most of South Africa’s oil supplies at the time came from the Middle East gave the project “a sense of urgency which it did not have before.” The committee anticipated there would be some concern in government circles that the Ruhrchemie-Lurgi process

³⁰ SAB, HEN 3513/ 539, SA Coal Oil and Gas Corporation (SASOL) General, D.P. de Villiers to F. du Toit, 29 Oct, 1951.

³¹ SAB, HEN, 3212/506/1/4/4, Memo on ‘Oil-from-coal Project’ to South African Ambassador to US, Washington.

would produce a smaller proportion of motor fuel than the Hydrocol process, but argued that the plant would form a basis for future expansion, concluding that the synthfuel industry was “a practical proposition of great economic possibilities and of prime importance for the future of South Africa.” The committee insisted that the project was “tailor-made for South African conditions”, a common formulation in explanations of the viability of such large technological projects in South Africa; it referred, once again, to the cheap cost of mining coal.³²

The nascent character of the synthfuel industry, particularly the fact that there were no large scale, commercialized examples of oil-from-coal plants operable at this time, brought a sense of flux to the technical deliberations. In early 1951 on another trip to the United States, Rousseau learned of a new version of the kind of ‘fluidized’ synthesis reactor which had been employed at Brownsville by P.C. Keith. This new synthesis approach had been developed by M.W. Kellogg Corporation of New York. Rousseau explained on his return to South Africa that the reactor employed at Brownsville had reflected the state of research in the period from 1943-45, when P.C. Keith had left Kellogg’s employ to form Hydrocarbon Research Inc. The plant had been erected in 1950 and Rousseau now argued that it was already ‘out-dated’ by the time it started-up. When Rousseau asked M.W. Kellogg managers why he hadn’t heard of its new approach before, they told him it was the result of brand new research which hadn’t yet been publicized. He described the new reactor to his colleagues as “a complete break”

³² SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, Report of Interim Committee to establish a South African Synthetic Oil Industry, 2nd Sept 1950. For an identical formulation referring to ‘South African conditions’ in the uranium industry see Edwards and Hecht, ‘History and the Technopolitics of Identity’, 624.

from the static fix bed catalyst customarily employed in Fischer-Tropsch processes and “totally different” to the reactor employed by P.C. Keith at Brownsville.³³ While Rousseau admitted the new Kellogg synthesis had only been tested on a small pilot plant, he argued that the company was a “pioneer builder” with “wide experience of increasing production from the pilot stage to full-scale commercial operation” – what chemical engineers call ‘scaling up.’³⁴

Rousseau’s reference to Kellogg as a “pioneer builder” and the language of technological rupture used to describe its reactor are an indication of the modernist appeal of oil-from-coal’s cutting-edge nature for the likes of Rousseau and other members of apartheid’s new technical and industrial elite. There was undoubtedly a substantial amount of risk entailed in adopting the new Kellogg synthesis, but neither Rousseau nor the Interim Committee appear to have made too fine a point of this. The enchanting promise of technomodernity appears to have held sway. More concretely, part of the appeal of the fluid catalyst process was that it was explicitly designed for ‘motor fuel production’ whereas the Lurgi-Ruhrchemie process was really a chemical synthesis plant designed to produce chemical by-products. An area of more mundane concern for Rousseau about Kellogg’s process was the possibility of serious erosion taking place in the pipe lines of the reactor vessels. Kellogg told Rousseau it didn’t anticipate this being a significant problem, once again emphasizing its experience as a ‘pioneer builder’ of fluidized catalyst crackers in conventional oil refineries. Rousseau - and the committee he reported to – appear to have been persuaded that Kellogg’s experience gave their claims

³³ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents. Report on the Kellogg Proposal Jan, 1951.

³⁴ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, Minute 26th January, 1951 of SASOL Board of Directors.

about the efficacy of their process substance. He pointed out to the committee that Kellogg had erected and successfully started-up over fifty conventional refineries containing fluidized catalyst crackers.³⁵

Rousseau declared unanimity among the interim committee members that they “would be very unhappy” not to use the services of M.W Kellogg on SASOL’s first project as they had “complete faith in their ability to do as good an engineering and construction job as has ever been done in South Africa.”³⁶ Once again the language emphasizing the unprecedented, pioneering nature of the project is striking. But for all the talk of technological rupture, Rousseau’s evaluation of Kellogg’s process hinged on its reputation in engineering circles in the United States for their “conservatism”, which he took as a sign that he could trust that they were not pushing an untried process onto SASOL.

As a result of their new-found liking for what its members now routinely referred to as the ‘American approach’ represented by Kellogg, the interim committee had decided that the SASOL plant would be – in the language of techno-nationhood – “one third German and two thirds American”, incorporating the perceived advantages of both the Lurgi-Ruhrchemie and the Kellogg proposals. Kellogg would be asked to act as the coordinating construction and engineering contractor.³⁷ The project was finally about to

³⁵ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, Report on the Kellogg Proposal Jan, 1951.

³⁶ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, Memorandum by Etienne Rousseau ‘Factors to be considered in comparing the Kellogg and Ruhrchemie Proposals and Recommendations’, 26th Jan, 1951.

³⁷ SAS. 8/18 Historical Documents, Report on the Kellogg Proposal Jan, 1951.

get off the ground. SASOL took over Anglovaal's licenses to the German Fischer-Tropsch processes, and secured the South African license to Kellogg's fluidized process.



Figure 1:
Inaugural SASOL Board of Directors (1950)
Standing from left: Dr. M.S. Louw, P.E. Rousseau (managing director), D.P. de Villiers
(company secretary)
Seated from left: A.P. Faickney, F.J. du Toit (Chairman), Dr. H.J. van Eck (deputy chairman)

In late 1950 SASOL was registered in terms of the Company Act. Etienne Rousseau was appointed the first managing director, and the inaugural board of directors was constituted. The board was packed with key members of the Afrikaner nationalist elite, including Dr. M.S. Louw, founding figure of SANLAM; Frans du Toit, Broederbond member and national bureaucrat, who as we have seen was a key mover behind the establishment of SASOL; and Dr. Hendrik van Eck, industrialist-civil servant heavy-weight and head of the Industrial Development Corporation. Dawid de Villiers, who would later become SASOL's managing director, was appointed company secretary, while A. P. Faickney, the only non-Afrikaans speaking director, was included

as a gesture of good faith for the work he had done on oil-from-coal inside Anglo-Vaal. He was regarded by Rousseau as an “Afrikaner sympathizer”, but his influence on the board was minimal and his tenure on the board was mostly given over to nursing his gravely ill wife.³⁸ Rousseau and de Villiers had both previously worked closely together at Federale Volksbeleggings, the investment company established by SANLAM to encourage Afrikaner-controlled industrial undertakings. Their fathers, both former school-inspectors in the Cape, knew each other well and M.S. Louw’s father-in-law was related to Rousseau. SASOL’s inaugural upper level technical team was similarly interlocked. Etienne Rousseau, Johnny van der Merwe and Bill Neale-May (another English-speaker) were all at SATMAR, the Anglovaal subsidiary, together. SATMAR produced oil-from-shale and was arguably employing as experimental and economically risky a process as SASOL would. These men were accustomed to working on the left-field of the fuel industry, in projects that were considered marginal compared to conventional oil refining.

They were also accustomed to working in industries that required special state protection to ensure their viability.³⁹ SASOL would benefit from lower excise duties and special taxes because of its favored status throughout apartheid, far more than SATMAR ever enjoyed. Etienne Rousseau described SASOL as “the government’s tool in the oil field, stand[ing] close enough to the state to be trusted to place the interests of South

³⁸ SPLAR, Johannes Meintjies Papers. Etienne Rousseau commentary.

³⁹ SPLAR, Johannes Meintjies Papers, Johnny van Der Merwe commentary.

Africa first.”⁴⁰ However, despite the fact that the state clearly envisioned SASOL as a kind of a pet prestige project, and in effect poured large amounts of money into it over almost half a century, it would be a mistake to present this as an unconditional, unchanging relationship. Before the project got off the ground, the company had to make the case for it being deserving of special treatment. Frans du Toit wrote to Eric Louw, the Minister of Economic Affairs in November 1953, arguing that “no synthetic oil industry in the world has started without fairly generous protection.” While the interim committee report had presented the doubts about the technical soundness of the project as being “resolved”, in correspondence with government ministers SASOL’s board members were careful to prepare the ground for possible technical complications. Du Toit warned Louw that “the factory that we are in the process of erecting here is the first of its kind in the world and it can be expected that during the first year or two it will undergo a painful teething process.” Du Toit implied that it was precisely because of the “teething process” that a factory which was the “first of its kind in the world” could be expected to entail that the project needed special treatment from the state. But above all it was the project’s national importance which Du Toit argued justified such support. “A national undertaking” such as this, he insisted, “must be helped for at least a few years. Once we have cut our teeth, we will be the first to tell the state that we no longer need any special treatment.”⁴¹ Such comments prepared the ground for possible initial ‘teething problems’ at SASOL while insisting that the financial support which the state granted the project

⁴⁰ SAB, HEN, 3513/H4/7/1, SASOL Algemeen, Etienne Rousseau to Minister of Econ Affairs, 10th December, 1969 and SAB, HEN 3513/H4/7/1, SASOL Algemeen, Etienne Rousseau to Nico Diedrichs, 9 March, 1962.

⁴¹ SAB, HEN, 4698, SC8/20/1547, South Africa Coal, Oil and Gas Corporation Ltd, Johannesburg, F.J du Toit to Minister of Economic Affairs, 23 Nov, 1953.

would be temporary. It lasted for the duration of apartheid and even increased over time with the establishment of SASOL II and III after the oil shock and the Iranian revolution.

‘groping with the unknowns of a developmental project’

SASOL’s plant finally started operating in 1954 but there were immediate problems with the new-fangled Kellogg synthesis unit. The Kellogg unit suffered from serious catalyst loss, excessive acid production and corrosion. Poor quality mechanical equipment was partly to blame for the latter, but the Kellogg synthesis generally failed to perform up to the levels guaranteed by Kellogg. The yield of product per unit of gas was much lower than expected which resulted in a lower output of saleable product. The plant had to be repeatedly shut down and did not run smoothly “for even 48 hours at a stretch” for significant periods of time over the first few years of operation.⁴² It was, in short, calamitous. The National Party government had already weathered a storm of criticism for the amount of money which it had committed to the project. Initially, government officials and SASOL managers tried insisting that these were “normal teething problems” faced at the start-up of any plant, but it quickly became clear that there was something much more seriously wrong with the Kellogg synthesis unit.⁴³

⁴² SAS, Sasolburg. 30/11/1 M.W. Kellogg Co, Memorandum on Sasol's past and present activities' 6th August, 1959.

⁴³ *Hansard*, 24th Feb 1955. Column 1686.

The full extent of the problem is revealed in the remarkable, often vitriolic correspondence between SASOL and the Kellogg Corporation in New York after the start-up. SASOL's management felt that Kellogg had sold it a dud and that it had misrepresented the efficacy of the synthesis process. The process that Kellogg had sold to SASOL had only been tested on a small scale pilot plant in New York and it patently didn't work when scaled-up to the level of a commercial plant in Sasolburg. Rousseau must have been aware of these risks. He conceded some responsibility in a letter to Frans du Toit: "we are not absolved from blame", but he insisted that Kellogg "did not tell us the full story" and that they had sold SASOL a scheme "drawn up in a hurry that was in many instances half-baked."⁴⁴ The interim committee including Rousseau had in fact characterized Kellogg's proposal as "well prepared" at the time. Rousseau clearly felt betrayed. He wrote again to Frans du Toit: "the South African public holds the two of us responsible. We in turn regard Kellogg more than any other single factor responsible for the trouble we are in...Kellogg came to us as an organization with a world reputation for sound and conservative engineering. We accepted them as such."⁴⁵ The centrality of trust and reputation in this story is not in fact particularly unusual. As the historical and sociological literature on science and technology has shown, trust, social evaluation and reputation are often decisive to the resolution of supposedly narrow 'technical' questions.⁴⁶ Rousseau had witnessed the

⁴⁴ SAS, Sasolburg. 30/11/1 M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau to F. du Toit, unknown date in 1954.

⁴⁵ SAS, Sasolburg. 30/11/1 M.W. Kellogg Co, Etienne Rousseau's Memorandum to F. du Toit, 26 May, 1955.

⁴⁶ See Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer. *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) and Steven Shapin. *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Kellogg pilot plant at work in New York but he had little basis, beyond trust in his peer networks and faith in peer evaluations, to convince himself that the scaling-up from the pilot plant to the large-scale commercial plant would work.

SASOL's management believed that Kellogg had failed to meet the guarantees it had made in its contractual agreement. Kellogg had sent a group of engineers and plant operators to Sasolburg to work on the start-up of the plant and the company now proposed sending out its 'best technical men' to work on getting the plant to operate properly. Rousseau objected strongly to this "army-commander approach", arguing that it would be better "to consult with SASOL first and then to bring out in agreement with SASOL the few selected experts to work on specific problems with the SASOL personnel."⁴⁷ Rousseau bristled at suggestions by Kellogg that the synthesis unit wasn't working properly because of the incompetence of SASOL's own staff.⁴⁸ Reading in-between the lines of this territorial language we can discern the drawing of national technical boundaries and the delineation of 'South African' and 'American' expertise and technical practices as distinct from each other, in much the same way as Rousseau and his colleagues had earlier distinguished between 'German' and 'American' approaches to oil-from-coal.

There are hints in Rousseau's reference to an 'army-commander approach' of his sense that the relationship between Kellogg and SASOL was marked by a certain

⁴⁷ SAS, 30/11/1 M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau Memorandum regarding Discussions with Kellogg Representatives.

⁴⁸ SAS, 30/11/1 M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau Memorandum regarding Discussions with Kellogg Representatives.

asymmetry. In internal correspondence, Rousseau began to suggest that SASOL was “paying for (i.e. subsidizing) Kellogg’s experience.”⁴⁹ Certainly, much of the appeal of the project from Kellogg's perspective was the opportunity for synthfuel experimentation, at SASOL’s expense, on a scale which it would not otherwise have been able to undertake in the United States. There is a sense, here, that the oil-from-coal project in South Africa was characterized by multiple, techno-scientific experiments occurring simultaneously, on the part of both the South African state company and the American engineering firm headquarters in New York. Rousseau’s letters to Kellogg grew increasingly angry and accusatory, as he strategically suggested that its “good reputation” – which he had trusted – was being sullied in parliament and the press in South Africa. After initial prevarication, Kellogg responded to Rousseau's anger by insisting that SASOL knew that it was buying a “developmental unit” and that both companies were “groping with the unknowns of a developmental project.”⁵⁰ Rousseau was scandalized:

I do not think that anybody in sound mind can deny that SASOL has been let down to a quite fantastic degree by the M.W.Kellogg Company. It is not a matter of a developmental unit, but a series of mistakes, some of which were incredibly elementary.⁵¹

Production was so seriously imperiled by the problems with the synthesis that management decided that “until substantial production has been achieved, operations must be regarded as developmental both as regards plant and processes.” In the end of year report in his capacity as Chairman of the SASOL board of directors, Frans du Toit

⁴⁹ SAS. 30/11/1, M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau to Kellogg, 15th Dec, 1955.

⁵⁰ SAS, 30/11/1, M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau Memorandum, 28th March, 1956.

⁵¹ SAS, 30/11/1 M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau to Kellogg, 13th July, 1956.

explained that “the balance on operating account amounting to £4.7 million has been charged to a separate plant and processes development account.” They were effectively fudging the numbers: SASOL was being temporarily re-framed in the interests of budgetary cosmetics as a full-blown experiment, a research project, rather than a company running at a substantial loss because of the amount it was having to spend on its ‘operating account’. Du Toit justified SASOL’s bleak financial figures by reasserting that “South Africa has been the pioneer of this venture and while the pioneer always pays initially, he reaps his reward in due course.”⁵² This became both the company and the national government’s stock answer to criticisms of the production problems in Sasolburg.

Such was the extent of the mess that SASOL even flirted with the possibility of suing Kellogg for ‘misrepresentation’ and ‘fraud’ in American courts in 1956. Rousseau insisted: “we would have been very wary indeed of buying the Kellogg process if we had known the facts.”⁵³ But these ‘facts’ were not knowable before the scaling-up. Rousseau did not appear to have seen it this way himself, but he admitted “we have been very rudely shaken in some of the things in which we have had confidence...we have put all our eggs in the Kellogg basket...our eggs have been thoroughly smashed.”⁵⁴ SASOL had persuaded Kellogg to restart work on its pilot plant in New York and assist with troubleshooting the commercial scale plant in Sasolburg. SASOL had also built its own pilot plant in Sasolburg – its first foray into independent research – by 1957, but ‘scaling up’

⁵² ‘Chairman’s Report’, *SASOL Nuus*, Jan 1957.

⁵³ SAS. 30/11/1 M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau Memorandum 29th August, 1956.

⁵⁴ SAS. 30/11/1, M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau to Kellogg, 21st June, 1956.

was clearly still presenting a problem. Rousseau complained: “the behavior and development of the catalyst on the pilot plant is not the same as on the commercial plant.”⁵⁵ In September 1957, SASOL decided to take over responsibility for running the synthesis plant from Kellogg, which Rousseau claimed meant “greater freedom of action” with the result that “significant progress” was being made.⁵⁶ In July 1958, Frans du Toit wrote to the Minister of Economic Affairs, claiming that “SASOL is on the threshold of significant improvements of our processes. Our people feel that they are no longer groping in the dark.”⁵⁷

As government ministers defended SASOL from the growing chorus of critics in national parliament and the press, the outlines of a nationalist toil narrative and language emphasizing the pioneering nature of SASOL – and the appeal this held for apartheid elites – began to emerge. During parliamentary debates in April 1956, the Minister of Economic Affairs, Albert van Rhijn, invoked “the whole history of scientific development in the world”, arguing that “where new and big products were undertaken, there are disappointments and losses until success was eventually achieved.” In trying to explain the source of SASOL’s difficulties, the minister underlined the importance of local context and uncertainty to the practical working out of techno-science – in terms strikingly resonant with the scholarly literature on the complexities of ‘technology transfers’:

⁵⁵ SAS, 3/1/2 Catalyst-Kellogg-Performance and Research. E. Rousseau to President of Scientific and Industrial Research, London, 14th May, 1957.

⁵⁶ SAS, 3/1/2, Catalyst- Kellogg-Performance and Research, Undated Etienne Rousseau handwritten diary notes, likely late 1957.

⁵⁷ SAS, 3/1/2, Catalyst-Kellogg-Performance and Research, F.J. du Toit to Minister of Econ Affairs, 11 July, 1958.

The difficulty is that the same type of coal is not found in every country. A certain method may be applied successfully in one country and when it is applied to our coal, where the ash content is different and the chemical composition is different, where the organic acids are different, one comes across problems which people have not had to contend with before, and these problems have to be overcome as they occur... In addition to that there is the fact that if an experiment is made on a small scale it is perhaps quite successful, but as soon as it is attempted on a bigger scale, as we are trying to do here, these difficulties occur. This type of difficulty arises when a process is transferred from one place to another where the conditions are different.⁵⁸

The Minister worked to reframe these “difficulties” as a challenge which South Africa had to meet if it wanted to claim membership of the international scientific community: “a country and a people who lack the courage to face those difficulties which crop up in the scientific world, are not worthy of taking part in scientific development.” If ‘local conditions’ (the ash content of coal in South Africa) could prove an obstacle to untroubled techno-scientific practice, this was cancelled out by the fact that, as the Minister suggested, what gave South Africa an edge, or at least allowed it to punch above its weight by attempting oil-from-coal, was precisely the fact of “South African conditions” or cheap labor: “we are a small nation but we have the cheapest coal in the whole world.” Once more, the socio-political fact of cheap black labor is presented in depoliticized terms, as if owed to the accidents of geology, rather than political design.

Van Rhijn tried to defuse criticism of SASOL by gesturing to an unimaginably bountiful future: “I predict that the time will arrive when the petrol that we make at SASOL will be regarded as a by-product, and that the success of the chemical industry

⁵⁸ *Hansard*, 25th April, 1956, Column 4313.

that will develop in South Africa will be so enormous that we cannot visualize it at this stage.” When parliamentarians questioned the government’s decision to combine two technological processes – the ‘American’ and the ‘German’ ones – his response employed the language of technological pioneering and experimentation: “members now say that this is the only country in the world where there are two units [i.e. processes]. But good heavens, if other countries have not got two units, why should we not have two units here? We are breaking new ground in South Africa.” In the next chapter, I will further explore the construction of this techno-nationalist pioneering narrative.

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Part of oil-from-coal’s appeal to apartheid’s political and technical elites, I have suggested, was the fact that it held the promise of placing them on the international cutting-edge as they self-consciously positioned themselves as techno-moderns in the international scientific community. In the mid-1960s, when oil was still plentiful and cheap, Rousseau recounted being told by an industrialist on an overseas visit that “for any country, the possession of coal is an embarrassment these days, like having colonies!”⁵⁹ This quote is doubly ironic because of the fact that apartheid South Africa had placed itself deeply out of step in at least two senses during the second half of the twentieth century: by belligerently continuing on a white supremacist political path in an era of decolonization and by pursuing an unconventional technological method for the production of fuel products. In addition, I have argued in this chapter that it was precisely

⁵⁹ SAS, J.W. van der Merwe (Assistant Gen Manager Operations, SASOL) to H.N. Hepker, Anglo-American Corporation of SA, 17th July, 1964.

the fact of a colonial labor regime in the early apartheid period that made oil-from-coal both doable and thinkable in South Africa. This was a factor in oil-from-coal's arithmetic in South Africa of which SASOL's managers were acutely aware from the beginning, though they elided its socio-political basis by rendering it as a naturalized, technical fact.

The point, as the quote about coal and colonies makes clear, was that so long as oil prices were low, oil-from-coal was generally economically 'marginal,' requiring both heavy state subsidization and dependably low mine labor costs. SASOL could depend on both in the early apartheid period, but only the former after the early 1970s when its mine labor costs rose significantly (by as much as 60%) as it 'South Africanized' its workforce because of concerns about labor productivity and decolonization jeopardizing migrant labor supplies. The oil price shock of 1973 was a boon for SASOL, not just because it made oil-from-coal much more financially profitable than it had hitherto been, but because, for reasons which I discuss in chapter five, the company could no longer depend on the cheap black labor which was the chief reason why apartheid South Africa was able to be a 'pioneer' in oil-from-coal in the first place.

Chapter Two:

Pioneering Work of (Inter)National Importance: Techno-nationalism and Modernization at SASOL

SASOL's managers saw oil-from-coal as a project that would modernize Afrikaners, creating modern industrial citizens out of rural, farming people and turning their language into a scientific one. In a similar fashion, the accounts of women and men who imagined themselves as SASOL 'pioneers' depict the establishment of Sasolburg and the oil-from-coal project in the northern Free State through the means of a settler discourse, bringing modernity to the *veld*. The technological difficulties experienced at SASOL in the 1950s became the grounds for the construction of a nationalist pioneering discourse celebrating the fact that role of toiling and ingenious South African scientists and engineers in making this unconventional method of oil-from-coal work on a scale unprecedented elsewhere in the world until this time. I show how this discourse coupled with the self-conscious identification of 'SASOL know-how' beginning in the 1960s, and its licensing as a salable commodity to other companies from the 1970s onwards, were key to the construction of national(ist) boundaries of expertise by SASOL engineers and scientists within the company.

SASOL's public image was severely imperiled by the operating problems in Sasolburg. Unlike other state corporations in apartheid South Africa, SASOL had to sell its products to ordinary individual South African consumers to make a profit. If, as

I argue, SASOL became a key site for the elaboration of white South African identity under apartheid, this occurred in part because the company worked deliberately to place itself at the center of white consumer imaginaries and national identities through discourses and imagery celebrating the project's technological prestige. It is important to recognize, however, that SASOL's exalted status wasn't simply the product of discourse. The fact that the company ultimately succeeded in large-scale oil-from-coal production, subsequently expanding into manufacturing other consumer products were important to securing SASOL centrality in white South African imaginaries under apartheid. In other words, we cannot lose sight of the fact that SASOL was in many ways a remarkable achievement and its ultimate technical success was critical to the effectiveness of techno-nationalist discourses celebrating the project.

Finally, I suggest that as the prospect of anti-apartheid oil sanctions increased after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, SASOL became metonymic with the survival of white South Africa, adding a new heightened preoccupation with national security to the nationalistic and modernizing imperatives underpinning the project. National self-sufficiency had certainly been one of the original motivations for South Africa adopting oil-from-coal. After Sharpeville, however, SASOL's managing director Etienne Rousseau was instrumental in initiating what historians have come to call the apartheid security state. SASOL became a central plank of the security state. This, together with the historical connections of oil-from-coal with Nazi Germany which anti-apartheid activists worked hard to amplify, made SASOL a symbolically rich target for the African National Congress' paramilitary wing, *Umkonkho we Sizwe*.

‘Ten years of blood and toil’

A techno-nationalist toil narrative was taking shape against the backdrop of continuing technical problems at SASOL. When Dr. Albertus van Rhijn, Minister of Economic Affairs defended SASOL against its critics in the national parliament in 1956 he described SASOL’s staff in terms which suggested they were engaged in pioneering toil for the nation. “They were “doing everything in their power, they are working day and night.” He hoped that they wouldn’t “break down” observing that “the strain on these people, particularly the scientists, the engineers, is great.”¹ An article in the popular Afrikaans language magazine, *Die Huisgenoot* claimed that SASOL engineers “even had their beds in their offices.”² Frans du Toit had told SASOL employees at the end of 1955 that they had “made history that will stand as a landmark on the road of human achievement” but gravely warned that “a great task still rests on all our shoulders, because in the new year hard work and perseverance awaits us all: the monument of which you have helped to lay the foundations so thoroughly must now be finished off like a true work of art.”³ Another article (titled “on the *veld* a dream comes true”) depicted a pre-modern rural emptiness filled in with modernist industrial dreams.⁴ The recollections of ‘pioneer’ SASOL men and women collected in the commissioned official history of SASOL present both the project and the establishment of Sasolburg as technological and settlement frontiers. Ms. Pienaar remembered “the dust storms...it was just one dust

¹ *Hansard*, 25th May, 1956.

² ‘Hulle se so’ *SASOL Nuus*, October, 1956; citing *Die Huisgenoot*, 22 Oct, 1956.

³ ‘Xmas Greeting’, *Sasol Nuus*, December 1955.

⁴ ‘On the veld a dream comes true’ *The Outspan*, Sept 1st, 1954.

storm after another. At night you had to stay in the house because everything was pitch black outside and without a powerful torch you'd fall in a ditch." This was a "glorious time when Sasol was just a dream and there was just sand and mielie-fields.⁵" Aart Jurrianse, the horticulturalist employed by SASOL to transform dusty plains into a densely treed landscape recalled:

...how rustic the whole area looked. There was no sign of the company's activities. [there were] dispersed native villages, each with a few pigs, a group of cattle, donkeys, horses or bucks which grazed freely because the barbed wire fences for the most part were rusted and neglected and lay flattened in places. We were not entirely without neighbors. Just a few hundred yards ahead of our house there were two communities of our black fellow-man. Unhappily for them, their villages had to make way about a year later for more modern houses.⁶

If we can discern a certain intersubjective sympathy for the African people who "had to make way" for SASOL – for modernity and for history – in Jurrianse's comments, they are all the more unusual for it. These pioneer discourses are generally uniformly comfortable in their modernizing assumptions; the rusted and neglected barbed wire fences in Jurrianse's account provide symbolic confirmation of the necessity and desirability of the modernizing transformation SASOL promised. A 1963 *Sasol News* editorial celebrated the "SASOL stalwarts" who "braved the sand and dust....and snakes and mosquitoes, not to mention the privations and lack of amenities that usually go with any pioneering venture."⁷ Such 'pioneering' work required unceasing toil and sacrifices from the company's managers and engineers. As another editorial from 1960 (the year

⁵ 'Commentary by Ms. Pienaar.' 'Mielie' is a colloquial South African term referring to ears of corn.

⁶ 'Alles het 'n begin' commentary by Aart Jurriaanse, SPLAR, Johannes Meintjies Papers.

⁷ 'Editorial' *Sasol Nuus*, April 1963.

SASOL first turned a profit) memorialized “ten years of blood and toil” and singled out Etienne Rousseau’s “unbounded faith and unwavering determination”⁸

The role of black labor is predictably supplanted in pioneer accounts by an emphasis on the labor of white male managers and engineers and, importantly, of their wives. When Etienne Rousseau, reflected back on Sasolburg’s early history in a newspaper interview, he “paid a special tribute to the [white] women of Sasolburg”, saying:

When our town was half desert and the trees had not yet had time to grow; when streets were ruts in the sand in winter and very often stretches of mud in summertime; when we men had to work long and exacting hours and had neither the time nor the mood to be considerate husbands and fathers; the women of Sasolburg took the brunt of the battle with patience and fortitude and encouraged their men to carry on the good work.

This emphasis on the role of resilient, patient wives and hard-working, inconsiderate husbands engaged in the ‘good work’ of oil-from-coal is typical of SASOL pioneer talk. After his retirement, Etienne Rousseau recounted the early period of SASOL’s ‘teething troubles’ in romantic terms detailing the hard work in the face of adversity, the self-doubt and the masculine heroism entailed in making oil-from-coal work:

I must tell you honestly that there were times in Sasol’s early years, times when we had trouble, big trouble, when I felt that my charge was to keep up the courage of our men. I certainly could not allow myself a moment’s despair. One afternoon a week I drove over to chat to Van Eck or to Frans

⁸ Editorial ‘Ten Years of Unwavering Determination’ , *Sasol Nuus*, June 1960.

du Toit in Pretoria – just to pick up pluck. A lot of nervous energy went into the project. Had SASOL been standing in any other country...I mean, in a heavily industrialized country, people would certainly have walked off for other jobs. They would not have seen the thing through. But we virtually had a captive senior staff, and they had to see it through. When I walked through the works-office on a Friday afternoon, quarter to seven, the men were still there. It went on for years that they were at the factory every day, Saturdays and Sundays as well. I recall Neale May and John Carr and Johnny van der Merwe coming to see me at half past five one afternoon, having had three failures in getting a unit to work that day, and John saying to me, ‘Etienne, do you think we’re any good?’ What a battle it was! South Africa should have the finest soldiers in the world. I saw men standing at the control board with their backs to fire and explosions while shutting down the plant. It took some doing. At section 800 I saw men rushing through fire to close valves. They were good men.⁹

Rousseau’s claim that SASOL’s staff would have quit if it had been established in a “heavy industrialized country” serves to underline the alleged unique modernizing role of the project in South Africa while perhaps also implying that part of the reason the country succeeded in making oil-from-coal work against such odds was precisely because these men were not from the complacent metropole. Perhaps only (white) men with something to prove in the up-start colonies could dare to undertake such an audacious and unconventional project.

The pioneering toil discourse was also often couched in explicitly religious terms. Rousseau claimed that he and his staff “spent much time in prayer during the initial construction and consequent commissioning and production years.” It became commonplace for SASOL News editorials to remind readers that “this venture has frequently been described as an act of faith”, that it “started as an act of faith.”¹⁰ One of

⁹ SPLAR, Johannes Meintjies Papers. Sasolburg Public Library, Etienne Rousseau commentary.

¹⁰ ‘Still the same’, *Sasol Nuus*, July 1971.

Etienne Rousseau's three daughters, Adele Retief recalled seeing her father "many times on his knees in his room, in his bedroom, and people said they found him in his office on his knees. The whole SASOL thing was an act of faith. Nowhere in the world was this process commercially successful so it was very difficult."¹¹ These kinds of religious narratives in pioneer accounts clearly have a self-mythologizing quality to them: besides drawing attention to individual self-doubt and suffering, they catapult oil-from-coal into the domain of the miraculous, the object of divine intervention and attention, the stuff of Manifest Destiny.



Figure 2:
SASOL 'pioneers'
(from left) David de Villiers, Etienne Rousseau and Johnny van der Merwe

¹¹ Interview with Adele Retief by author, Sasolburg, 2009.

Drawing national technical boundaries

In the midst of the political storm about the problems at SASOL, Minister van Rhijn had made a point of arguing in parliament that over the course of just “two and a half years” SASOL had built up “an organization which knows more perhaps about the oil-from-coal industry as a whole than any other organization in the world.” Because SASOL was “an entirely new industry in South Africa”, training schemes had been introduced and, he claimed, “together with a small number of imported technicians who are now in the permanent employ of SASOL, these South Africans have already accomplished miracles in the technical sphere.” The American and German technicians who were centrally involved in the start-up of the plant quickly disappear from view in the late 1950s, replaced by the figure of the hard-working, ingenious South African engineers who made oil-from-coal work. SASOL’s own retrospective presentation of this process was premised on claiming that the ‘American’ and ‘German’ technological processes which SASOL bought licenses to in the 1950s were “only developed to an experimental level”, with South African engineers doing the greatest amount of heavy-lifting in terms of building oil-from-coal into a “profitable industry.” Most importantly, this process was increasingly presented in media discourses after Sharpeville in 1960, as being about the country becoming “more self-sufficient” in terms of both expertise and fuel supplies in the face of international boycotts.¹² The ‘pioneering’ work of SASOL engineers and scientists, of these ‘settlers’ who brought industrial modernity to the northern Free State *veld* would save apartheid South Africa from its international critics

¹² ‘Editorial’ *SASOL Nuus*, July 1961.

and enemies. SASOL's South African engineers, so the story went, made the 'American' and 'German' processes their own; combined them into a new "South African" technology which they developed to such an extent that the company was able to patent the 'new' processes and sell them to other companies as a distinct commodity, as SASOL (read *South African*) 'know-how'.

Thus an article in a leading Afrikaans language newspaper could claim that the "difficulty beginning in the fifties" occurred because of "technical problems imported from overseas." Here the techno-nationalist pioneering discourse is reduced to its crudest nationalist formulation. "Sasol is today a monument", the article concluded, a monument, of course, to South African ingenuity.¹³

The Kellogg debacle had made SASOL's managerial and technical elite reluctant to "accept anybody's bright ideas as gospel" and the company established an in-house research program in 1958.¹⁴ Leading catalyst scientists who were centrally involved in SASOL's research program argue that this was motivated chiefly by the desire: "to be completely independent of the overseas research organizations."¹⁵ Such language emphasizing the imperatives of self-sufficiency became increasingly common both with reference to the company's research activities and, of course, SASOL's contribution to national oil supplies amidst threats of international oil boycotts. Increasing references within the company to 'SASOL know-how' as a body of identifiable knowledge

¹³ 'Wat Ander van Ons se', *SASOL Nuus*, Sept 1965.

¹⁴ SAS. 30/11/1 M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau Memorandum re Lurgi discussions, 4th July, 1958.

¹⁵ 'Brothers cracked the secrets of elusive know-how' in *Financial Mail*, September 22, 2000; Interview with Mark Dry by author, Cape Town, 2008.

somehow distinguishable from the original ‘German’ and ‘American’ processes also reflected a new drawing of techno-nationalist boundaries by SASOL’s scientists and engineers within the context of an overarching nationalist pioneer discourse. SASOL’s in-house research program would focus initially on catalysis development in particular since the catalysis at the heart of oil-from-coal technology had been the central problem during the 1950s. The entire process of converting coal into oil hinged on the performance of the catalysis. By the mid-1960s, the research department had developed a “tailor made catalyst” for the Kellogg units which prompted *SASOL News* articles triumphantly claiming that ‘Sasol Leads the World in Catalyst Research’.¹⁶

At a party celebrating the research department’s work, Etienne Rousseau cited an instance when Kellogg’s vice-president in charge of engineering, who had worked on the start-up of the Sasolburg factory, had warned SASOL that “catalyst research is a deep hole -- do not get into it. The further you go the more money it takes and the deeper you get into the hole.” If this comment was designed to discourage SASOL from ending its dependence on Kellogg for catalytic ‘know-how’, Rousseau’s defiant subtext in his comments at the party was clear enough. SASOL, he implied, had ignored Kellogg’s advice, did not need its help, and would succeed, indeed was succeeding without it. This was something of what Rousseau had himself described in 1963 as SASOL’s “determination to show the world.”¹⁷ Since setting up its research program, Rousseau explained, SASOL had “learnt a lot about this catalyst, and the effect of various impurities upon its characteristics”, and in time the company’s researchers would “be

¹⁶ ‘Sasol Leads the World in Catalyst Research’ *SASOL Nuus*, May 1965.

¹⁷ ‘Christmas Message’, *SASOL Nuus*, December 1963.

able to manufacture a catalyst which will be so well trained that it will do exactly what we tell it to do.”¹⁸ Further catalyst research at the end of the 1960s produced ‘dramatic breakthroughs’ which prompted further discursive boundary work. The breakthroughs were described in in-house and public newspaper publications as having happened “against overseas advice.”¹⁹ This research is presented as the work of South African scientists, in defiance of the advice and nay saying of foreign expertise. In the words of one of the researchers centrally involved in this research, “all those German and American engineers were there at the start of the process. By the time our basic research was done, they were all gone. It was a South African effort.”²⁰ Another argued: “nobody overseas had the information we needed to make the enterprise profitable.”²¹ Much of these claims are true, but in their nationalist self-consciousness they also concealed the continuing presence of international experts in the company’s activities, including its research.

By the early 1970s, SASOL started selling licenses for oil-from-coal technological processes to international buyers, including – in a development that must have been especially sweet for managers bruised by the Kellogg debacle – American companies.²² In the mid-1970s, SASOL managers and top technical and research personnel held meetings whose specific aim was to aid in the “the identification of

¹⁸ “‘Bottomless hole’ warned American”, *Sasol Nuus*, May 1965.

¹⁹ ‘Dramatic Breakthrough in Catalyst Chemistry’, *Sasol Nuus*, Sept 1970.

²⁰ Interview with Mark Dry by author, Cape Town, 2009.

²¹ Len Dry speech on ‘Industrial Research’ at National Convention for Teachers of Science and Mathematics, 4th July, 1972.

²² ‘USA company buys Sasol know-how’, *SASOL News*, November, 1972.

SASOL Know-How.” This was driven partly by a concern with the protection of Sasol know-how, but in particular by a desire to fully capitalize on the increasing opportunities for the selling of oil-from-coal licenses to international companies. The most striking aspect of the meeting minutes is the sense that those present were unsure where ‘SASOL know-how’ began and ended; there would be some difficulty “identifying know-how in production areas”, for instance, because, of course, know-how which went into the design and operation of the SASOL oil-from-coal plant was sourced from so many different places: the ‘American’ and ‘German’ processes which SASOL had itself bought licenses to, the unacknowledged ‘cribbing’ of ‘know-how’ from other companies which engineers frequently did as a matter of course during overseas ‘research’ trips and the undoubted substantial process development and innovation which SASOL had itself undertaken since the Sasolburg factory started-up.²³ In other words identifying “SASOL know-how” was in some senses based on a sleight of hand which erased the varied sources of the oil-from-coal technology which it was now selling under its brand. There were undoubtedly real differences, even ‘improvements’ which distinguished the technological processes which SASOL sold to international buyers from its ‘German’ and ‘American’ prototypes. But “SASOL know” how was hardly simply the product of the ingenuity of South African engineers.

²³ SAS, Minutes of Meeting held to discuss the identification of SASOL Know-How, 28 Nov, 1975.

“propaganda emphasizing SASOL’s technological prestige”

The generally discursive emphasis on the difficulty and technological intricacy of oil-from-coal represented SASOL’s answer to the technological difficulties in Sasolburg during the 1950s. Faced with increasing criticism in Parliament and the press in the mid to late 1950s, Rousseau explicitly instructed SASOL’s public relations department to step up “propaganda emphasizing SASOL’s technological prestige”²⁴ The company started lobbying parliamentary politicians, trying to convince them that SASOL was different to other state corporations because it had to sell its petrol to the “man on the street” and therefore had to be “kept out of political disputes.” Together with its advertising consultants, the company decided to “underplay the synthetic aspect of the petrol” it was producing because, polling suggested that “the public regarded synthetic products as inferior” to non-synthetic products. In a memorandum in the late 1950s, David de Villiers, the company secretary, effectively banned the word ‘synthetic’ from advertising copy and press statements, and suggested reframing SASOL’s technological process as “the most advanced method of producing petrol.” The memorandum also called for greater emphasis on “the general value of SASOL for South Africa.”²⁵

²⁴ SAS. 30/11/1, M.W. Kellogg Co, E. Rousseau to Dr van Rhijn, 3 November, 1955.

²⁵ SAB, Memorandum on SASOL Public Relations by David de Villiers, undated, but definitely 1950s.



Figure 3:
The national flag flying in front of SASOL



Figure 4:
SASOL plant, Sasolburg

This emphasis on technological prestige and the national importance of SASOL was epitomized by the iconography on cover images of the company’s monthly in-house publication, SASOL News, which also served as the newspaper of the company town, Sasolburg, until the 1960s. These were mostly variations on a techno-nationalist theme, showing the South African national flag flying in front of the SASOL factory in Sasolburg, or the pipes and valves of the factory gleaming in the bright sun. From the late 1950s, in advertising copy and in various public speeches by managers and engineers, SASOL started to emphasize the pervasive presence of SASOL products (and by-products) in everyday life in South Africa. One such example employed the narrative device of following an imaginary housewife through her daily routines (in the tradition of DuPonts’ “Better Chemistry for Better Living”) to illustrate the pervasiveness of the

company's products, while underlining the fact that she was largely unaware of the origins of many of their constituent parts in SASOL's factory.²⁶

But SASOL's products weren't only used in unwitting middle class white homes as one of the company's leading engineers claimed in a speech to the Association of South African Engineers:

There is a true story about an African that was arrested on a charge of being drunk and disorderly...Incidentally the presiding magistrate was the former Secretary of Sasol, Oom Gert Meiring. In the course of the trial the magistrate tried to determine how much alcohol the accused has in fact consumed and asked him how many drinks he'd had. The reply was: only one. When pressed, he admitted that this drink was one part methylated spirits - the ethylalcohol part of that also made at SASOL – and one part SASOL Highveld 6000 Formula 1 premium petrol.²⁷

Unlike the middle class consumers who are unaware of the provenance of the products they use in everyday life, African users consciously choose SASOL's petrol for their libations, but, rather like the novel uses for soap developed by Africans in colonial Zimbabwe, these practices are presented as a kind of technological misrecognition: Africans 'misusing' the product of "the most advanced method of producing petrol."²⁸ The story about the 'drunk and disorderly' African man serves to emphasize the alleged potency of SASOL petrol at his expense, for whatever credit the unnamed African man might receive for recognizing the quality of SASOL product is simultaneously

²⁶ 'The Use of Sasol Products in our everyday lives', speech by Dr David Day to Association of South African Engineers, 13 May, 1974.

²⁷ 'The Use of Sasol Products in our everyday lives', speech by Dr David Day to Association of South African Engineers, 13 May, 1974.

²⁸ Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Consumption, Commodification and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

undermined by the backhandedness of the compliment. We are still left, in other words, with the image of an African man misunderstanding the purpose of this ‘modern’ product.

White-boy-child-with-his-toy-car imagery quickly became a hallmark of SASOL iconography, whether on *SASOL Nuus* covers (see image) or in advertising campaigns. The image of a barefooted fair-haired (white) boy standing next to a SASOL petrol pump about to re-fill his toy SASOL petrol tanker became a stock device, right through the end of apartheid, into the post-apartheid period.²⁹ One way to read the image would be to suggest that the white boy-child represents the youthful promise of the white apartheid nation and SASOL the nation’s fuel.



Figure 5:
Boy refuels toy Sasol tanker

²⁹ In 1991, as apartheid drew to a close, the company first aired its famous ‘Glug, Glug’ advert on national television, featuring a boy (and his pet dog) shocked when the toy car he pretends to fill up with SASOL petrol comes alive, speeds off and creates a car-shaped hole in his bedroom wall. The ‘Glug Glug’ advert ran for over a decade on national television, becoming a firm fixture in post-apartheid popular culture, just as SASOL’s campaigns under apartheid had positioned the company at the heart of white South African imaginaries.

Techno-nationalist celebrations of SASOL were a firm fixture during apartheid at the massive annual consumer exhibit, the Rand Easter Show in Johannesburg, and at annual national festivals (see second image below). These festivals, and their more local varieties (see image immediately below) were regarded by SASOL as an opportunity to construct exhibits which performed the company's technological prestige and national importance.



Figure 6:
Parade participants, Sasolburg, 1956.



**Figure 7:
SASOL's Republic Festival float, Pretoria, 1966**

The apotheosis of the SASOL project's apartheid era prestige was its emblazonment on the lowest (and the most widely-circulated) paper denomination of the national currency, the two Rand note (see below). The obverse side of this ubiquitous note featured the standard image of Jan van Riebeeck, a foundational figure of Afrikaner nationalist mythology, in addition to an electricity pylon, the reverse side was given over to a highly stylized rendering of the Sasolburg factory, presented as the embodiment of the national techno-modern. A commemorative stamp was also issued to mark SASOL's twenty-fifth anniversary.



Figure 8:
Two Rand note



Figure 9:
SASOL Stamp

The trajectory which is implied on the note – from the ‘father of the Afrikaner nation’ who ‘founded’ Cape Town in the seventeenth century to the hyper modern SASOL project in the second half of the twentieth century – is one which echoes throughout representations of SASOL’s purported significance to South African, and specifically, Afrikaner history.



**Figure 10:
SASOL ‘Great Trek’ Cartoon**

A cartoon originally published in an Afrikaans language agricultural weekly, *Landbouweekblad* in 1966 before being re-printed in SASOL News the same year, directly invoked the Great Trek, the voluntary migration of Boers (Afrikaans speaking farmers) from the Cape in the nineteenth century to inland parts of Southern Africa. The trek figured in Afrikaner nationalist mythology as a heroic attempt by the descendants of twentieth century Afrikaners to retain their independence from British colonial attempts at control. The cartoon depicted a Boer trekker whose ox-wagon has apparently stalled on a hill, stopping at a SASOL petrol pump. The cartoon’s incongruous juxtaposition is the chief source of its humor, but it is the suggestion that the Great Trek and SASOL are historical parallels, heroic, ‘pioneering’, belligerent acts undertaken in the name of Afrikaner independence, which gives the cartoon its real weight. Such resonances with historical antecedents of Afrikaner heroism were similarly invoked in a SASOL News

article in 1957 about SASOL petrol becoming available in the national capital Pretoria. The SASOL petrol tankers had passed in front of the Pretoria statue of Paul Kruger, the former Afrikaner leader of the Boer republics in the late nineteenth centuries and another key figure in Afrikaner nationalist mythology, on their way to delivering their loads. “The future must have looked very colourful to him when SASOL’s blue and white tankers passed at his feet... Oom Paul must have been very proud to see his faith in his country he loved so well, vindicated once more. One could not help but be conscious of the historical significance of the moment Sasol petrol – South Africa’s own – had arrived in its capital.”³⁰ The article draws a direct line between Paul Kruger’s Afrikaner republicanism and SASOL as the symbol of the Apartheid Republic’s quest for independence.

Celebration of SASOL’s techno-modernity wasn’t always framed with mythological nationalist pasts in mind; sometimes it was worked into imaginings of science-fiction futures, as in a short-story published in *SASOL News* in 1963, titled ‘Sasolburg, 1993’. The Cold War had apparently turned hot, resulting in World War III in 1973, with two “gigantic” atom bombs being dropped in New York and Moscow. In their aftermath, deformed babies are born all over the world and the human race is desperately looking to re-locate to other planets. The author of the short story imagines SASOL – and one presumes, a still white-ruled South Africa – as savior of the human race by providing the super-sophisticated jet fuel powering rockets into space.³¹

³⁰ ‘Pretoria extends warm welcome to Sasol petrol’, *Sasol Nuus*, July 1957.

³¹ ‘Sasolburg – 1993’, *SASOL Nuus*, January 1963.

For all the celebration of SASOL as the embodiment of the techno-modern, the shift from an agricultural past to an industrial modernity which many of these accounts took for granted was not uncontested or without ambivalence. For local farmers in the rural districts of the Northern Free State province where Sasolburg was established, SASOL's emergence was shot through with ambivalence and anxiety. To begin with, as I show in chapter four, there were complaints about the loss of African farm labor. A number of farmers sold farming land to the company, while others hoped to continue farming in spite of the new factory and company town. Once the SASOL factory started operating in the mid 1950s, local farmers were alarmed by the pollution which covered "all animals and especially sheep" in black soot. The members of a local farmers union explained to the Secretary of the regional Free State farmers union that they hadn't complained directly to SASOL because they feared that their complaints would be dismissed with "lies." The farmers worried that the pollution was unhealthy for their animals, whose breathing and grazing land might be affected. They worried that they would suffer financially as a result of their inability to sell animals affected by SASOL's pollution. These farmers appear to have felt that their entire way of life was imperiled by the encroachment of industries like SASOL in this region of the country. "Our farming community is in the process of being encircled by the big industries of the Northern Free State, we are already afflicted by smoke from the power stations, the Leeukop Farmers Union feels anxious about the future."³² For SASOL managers, these Afrikaner farmers

³² SAS, 22/3/7, Besoedeling van Omgewing deur Verbranding van Afvalprodukte te Sasolburg, W. Greeff, Secretary of Leeukop Farmers Union to Secretary Vrystate Agricultural Union, 9 May, 1956. See also 'Sasol(burg) in 1951', *Sasol Nuus*, December 1967.

were just the sort of rural subjects that the project envisioned reforming into modern industrial citizens.

Some of this ambivalence about the fate of agricultural lives encountering industrial modernity is similarly reflected in the 1960 film, *Rip van Wyk*, a fascinating Afrikaans vernacular version of Washington Irving's *Rip van Winkle* story, in which an Afrikaans farmer asleep for a hundred years wakes up in 1959 to find the SASOL factory built on his former farm. Shot in Sasolburg and directed by South African film-maker, Jamie Uys (best known for *The Gods Must be Crazy*), the film presents Uys' typically wistful, amusing, but also slightly anxious reading on modernity. The Afrikaner protagonist, Rip van Wyk, is intimidated by the imposing, gleaming factory when he first stumbles upon it. He is bewildered by the modern, and in an amusing scene, he imagines himself the target of its hissing and belching machinery which, in his rurality, he is presented as unable to comprehend.



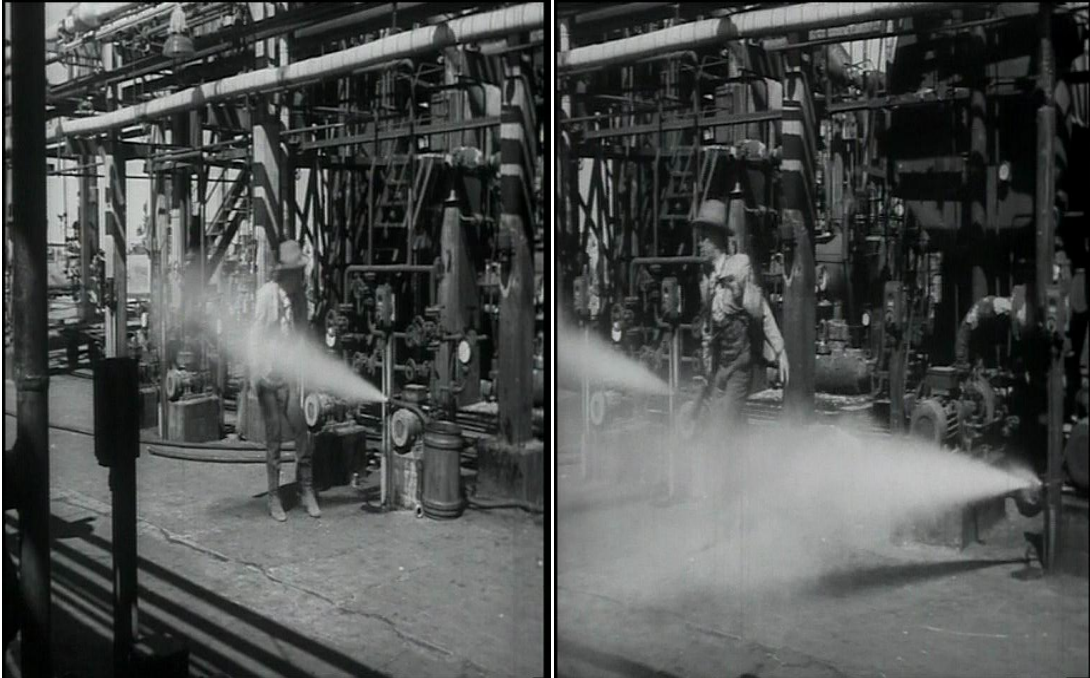


Figure 11:
Stills from the Jamie Uys film ‘Rip van Wyk’ (1960)

Modernizing Afrikaners, Modernizing Afrikaans

The fact that Jamie Uys chose the SASOL factory in Sasolburg as *the* symbol of the modernity which Rip van Wyk woke up to is certainly apt. SASOL’s managers saw oil-from-coal as a project that would modernize Afrikaners. In 1969 Etienne Rousseau, the company’s managing director, spoke at the opening of a new Dutch Reformed church congregation in Sasolburg. He began by remembering how he had been warned by immigrants during the construction period in the early 1950s that a number of workers could be expected to die during the construction work. This hadn’t ended up happening, he explained, because the “majority of us...were people who prayed daily by ourselves and with our families about our big charge.” Construction deaths were diminished by prayer, he claimed, and this related to the supposedly unusually religious caliber of the

company's management. "I know of no other industrial community in the world where the leaders are such faithful church people as here in Sasolburg. I know of no industrial community where such a high percentage of the management hold family prayers in their homes. Many of us at SASOL believe in a practical faith. We believe that a Higher Hand leads us in our decisions and in our behavior every day in the business life and industry," he explained. And yet, he continued, "our churches acquired their character and traditions on the *platteland* [rural districts]. Many of our priests and many of our congregants grew up on the *platteland*. The city, the business life and industry are foreign to the Church and priests." The Dutch Reformed church's "religious vocabulary" and its sermons were, he noted, "interspersed with references to the land...we pray for rain and for plentiful harvests...figures of speech are seldom drawn from technical and industrial life and if we analyze the prayers in our churches, it would seem that industry doesn't exist."³³ The future of the church, Rousseau insisted, lay in industrial communities and the church would have to change to reflect this. Rousseau was proposing a fundamental retooling of Afrikaner religiosity and identity, more in line with industrial modernity: the kind of reconfiguration which would provide religious Afrikaner subjects with a vocabulary with which to pray for the success of a major national industry.

Rita Marais, the woman employed as SASOL's industrial social worker for three and a half decades from the mid 1950s described her work to me in terms which suggested her role was chiefly about policing the transformation of Afrikaner farmers from the *platteland* into modern industrial workers subjected to time work-discipline:

³³ 'Our Chairman about the relationship between church and industry at Sasolburg', *Sasol Nuus*, July 1969

It was quite hard and it was pioneering work. Industrial work in the country was just beginning. Farmers had to come and work shifts, so they had to settle down...what is the word I am looking for...and change their lifestyles. Men had to work shifts and were not their own bosses anymore. So that was quite difficult. Some of them could not adjust, some found it difficult.³⁴

Farmers who struggled to “change their lifestyles”, were unable to adjust to being men who were “not their own bosses anymore” and didn’t submit themselves to time-work discipline became the object of Marais’ interventions. Marais remembers having to “go to the homes saying: ‘why are you not at work? You need to come back’. They had to work. And if not, we sent them off.”³⁵ ‘Absenteeism’ was an indication of the reluctance of individual farmers to submit themselves to industrial discipline, ‘alcoholism’ a symptom of the difficulty many such men experienced no longer being “their own bosses.”

SASOL, together with Afrikaans language universities and the South African Academy of Arts and Science, also actively pursued the modernizing of Afrikaner vocabularies. SASOL established a Technical Language Committee in March 1960 which worked for over a decade to invent a formalized Afrikaans technical vocabulary. Articles in SASOL News presented the committee as a response to the “demands of Afrikaans speakers to be able to use their own language” but who found their intentions frustrated because of “the lack of Afrikaans terms” for the technological objects and

³⁴ Interview with Rita Marais by author, Sasolburg, 2009; E. P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work-discipline, and Industrial Capitalism’, *Past and Present* (1967) 38(1): 56-97.

³⁵ Interview with Rita Marais by author.

processes constituting the SASOL I factory. In addition, employees were apparently “inventing their own usages” so there was no standardization of language use. The problem, the committee members explained, was that “many of the technical terms in use at SASOL have American, Dutch and English origins and are not used anywhere else in South Africa, “except in Sasol.”³⁶ The product of the committee’s work over more than a decade was a ‘SASOL Terminology’ list, first published and distributed within SASOL in 1972, described in the forward as “a practical vocabulary, not normally found in dictionaries’.³⁷ A 1959 *SASOL News* editorial boasted that older generations of Afrikaners “looking back a mere thirty years” could remember when “hardly any technical literature” was available in Afrikaans. “We find it possible today to write and talk in Afrikaans about processes and equipment as modern and complex as that of SASOL. We at Sasol have...contributed to the development of technical Afrikaans.”³⁸ In a sense then Etienne Rousseau’s call for a retooling of Afrikaner identity were answered by the company and its technical staff, in partnership with Afrikaner universities and intellectuals.

³⁶ ‘Vaktaalkomitee’, *SASOL Nuus*, July 1961.

³⁷ *SASOL Terminologie*, 1978 edition, pp 1. Similar Afrikaans technical vocabulary invention occurred in the South African uranium industry. See Edwards and Hecht, ‘History and the Technopolitics of Identity,’ 624.

³⁸ Editorial, *SASOL Nuus*, May 1959.



Figure 12:
SASOL's Technical Language Committee, July 1961

Modernizing the language of Afrikaans was only part of the story; it was Afrikaner subjectivities themselves which SASOL managers regarded as especially in need of reforming. In 1974, the then managing director Dawid de Villiers reviewed the draft manuscript of the official company history marking SASOL's twentieth fifth anniversary. In his written commentary he claimed that the technical experts responsible for starting-up the coal-to-oil plant in Sasolburg in the 1950s "took a bunch of farm children and taught them to do the thing [converting coal to oil]. They brought a bunch of kitchen *kaffirs* here, who are now completely sophisticated people."³⁹ De Villiers' metaphor combines intensely racialised notions of class and gender. If the metaphor was meant to invoke an image of Afrikaners as poor, uneducated, witless *boers* or farmers, he implied that SASOL made Afrikaners modern and saved them from their subjugation, emasculation and, above all, from racial transgression. De Villiers' remarks place SASOL in a lineage of Afrikaner nationalist reform projects aimed at securing the racial

³⁹ SPLAR, Johannes Meintjes Collection, Dawid de Villiers commentary.

modernity of Afrikaners by disaggregating them from Africans who were imagined as always intrinsically rural. In chapter three, I demonstrate the attempts of SASOL, the local municipality in Sasolburg and residents themselves to cultivate particular performances of respectability in the town. In chapter four I show how the disaggregatory imperative referred to above found expression in Sasolburg's neighborhoods through the racialised policing of space in a context marked by claims upon black domestic labor and its simultaneous disavowal.

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In the late 1950s the Minister of Economic Affairs who had overseen the establishment of SASOL, Eric Louw, asked Rousseau to speak to the National Party's parliamentary caucus to ease the mounting political pressure regarding SASOL's technical problems within his own party. Rousseau was tasked with reassuring the caucus that oil-from-coal would work. He told the caucus: "we are absolutely certain that it will work, but...anything can happen." Louw was furious about this unscripted hedging. Rousseau responded by telling Louw: "I am not a politician, I'm an industrialist."⁴⁰ Rousseau's distinction is misleading. As this chapter has shown, he and other SASOL managers regarded the oil-from-coal project as a means towards ensuring the incorporation of Afrikaners into a racially circumscribed modernity. The heroic nationalist discourses which they helped to construct emphasized the pioneering and cutting-edge nature of the oil-from-coal project and the toil required to make oil-from-coal work; the toil required of them in the forging of apartheid's technological modern.

⁴⁰ SPLAR, Johannes Meintjies Papers, Etienne Rousseau commentary.

SASOL's managers, engineers and research scientists engaged in nationalist boundary work as part of their articulation of a narrative of how South African experts made 'German' and 'American' technological process their own, in the process of making oil-from-coal 'work'. Rousseau may have been an industrialist and a highly respected, internationally decorated chemical engineer, but he was also undoubtedly engaged in political work of various kinds. After the Sharpeville massacre provoked international condemnation of apartheid brutality and talk of oil boycotts, Rousseau advocated the setting up of a special state controlled fund, in partnership with SASOL and the local subsidiaries of international oil companies, for the acquisition of stock piles of strategically important fuels which would be secretly stored in disused former gold mines.⁴¹ Rousseau was central involved, in other words, in intensely political work, re-positioning the apartheid state to manage the political threats associated with anti-apartheid oil sanctions: he was a key player in the inauguration of the apartheid security state.

Rousseau was aware of the fact that in the context of possible oil boycotts, publics and political elites believed that SASOL would save (white) South Africa. In fact, SASOL's single oil-from-coal plant was only capable of producing a small proportion of the country's growing fuel needs. As he went to some lengths to explain to officials in private, in a period of plentiful and cheap oil, buying imported crude oil in bulk and stock-piling would still be considerably cheaper than building further oil-from-coal plants. International interest in oil-from-coal had decreased accordingly. The oil shock of

⁴¹ Etienne Rousseau Memorandum 'Oil Supply in Times of Crisis', 18th July, 1960.

1973 and the overthrow of the Shah in Iran (Iran being South Africa's main source of imported crude oil) changed the autarkic arithmetic immeasurably. Rousseau's advice that the South African government avoid building additional oil-from-coal plants when oil was inexpensive no longer held. After the oil shock and the Iranian Revolution the government went ahead with the construction of two additional SASOL oil-from-coal plants in its second company town, Secunda. Both plants dwarfed the size of the Sasolburg plant.

In the meantime, however, the popular view that SASOL would save apartheid South Africa was a misperception that Etienne Rousseau and SASOL were happy to perpetuate and exploit, ensuring that the state kept pouring public funds into the project. SASOL only registered its first profit in 1960, the year Sharpeville happened, but it was to SASOL that the apartheid state looked to secure white South Africa's future and it was to SASOL that the African National Congress' paramilitary wing, MK (*Umkonktho we Sizwe* or Spear of the Nation), would look for a key symbolic target of its sabotage campaign. As anti-apartheid activists traced the international connections which it argued were constitutive of apartheid as a techno-political system, they eagerly seized upon Nazi Germany's use of oil-from-coal technology, claiming that SASOL hired Nazi scientists when it started up in the 1950s, "including poison gas specialists"⁴² There were, activists claimed, "Nazi scientists...developing gas in Sasolburg," part of a project by the apartheid state to develop an unspecified "secret weapon" which would secure white

⁴² J.J. Jabulani, 'Bonn-Pretoria Axis' *The African Communist*, No. 31, Fourth Quarter, (1967), 55-65. For discussion of anti-apartheid activists tactics in relation to the provenance of apartheid's techno-political systems as well as similar claims about West German connections in apartheid South Africa's nuclear industry and strategy of see Edwards, and Hecht, 'History and the Technopolitics of Identity'.

South Africa's future. Instead of a technology with a complicated provenance in Weimar Germany (or the imagined product of white South African ingenuity, for that matter) anti-apartheid activists presented oil-from-coal and SASOL as Nazi to their technological core. When MK bombed SASOL's plant in Sasolburg on the 1st of June 1980, the symbolic over-determination of the company as *the* strategic heart of the apartheid security state, and the town as some sort of evil citadel of Nazi scientists, meant that even though the bombs did not cause significant physical damage, it was an extremely significant symbolic moment in the struggle against apartheid. The attack was quickly immortalized in an anti-apartheid struggle song's lyrics: "we are going, we are going, there is Sasolburg on fire; we are going, we are going, the young men lit the fire."⁴³ SASOL's transformation from a project defined by the combination of nationalist and modernization imperatives in the context of apartheid South Africa into a metonym for the survival of white supremacy was complete.

⁴³ Historical Papers, University of Witwatersrand, Delmas Treason Trial, 1985-1989, AK2117-I2-22-297, Vol. 297, 16687.

Chapter Three:

“Spoiling the neighborhood, pulling down the town”: Town planning, Class and Respectability in Sasolburg

This chapter, like the one that follows it, explores the politics of everyday life in the white residential neighborhoods of Sasolburg under apartheid. SASOL’s managers, as we have seen, envisioned the oil-from-coal project as one that would produce modern, industrial Afrikaner citizens. Dawid de Villiers’ claim that SASOL “brought a bunch of *kombuis kaffirs*” to Sasolburg and transformed them into “completely sophisticated people” is best understood in the context of the longer history of Afrikaner nationalist moral reform efforts aimed at remaking Afrikaners into respectable racial and ethnic subjects.¹ This entailed the erasure of *bywoner* (tenant farmer) and urban slum-dwelling pasts where multi-racial proximity and intimacies defined everyday life much more than racial segregation. The ‘modern’ industrial (white) citizens that SASOL’s managers imagined they were producing in Sasolburg were meant to be ‘respectable’ subjects. I argue that this was an absolutely central component of the model of subjectivity which SASOL, the local municipality, wider Afrikaner elites and many local residents sought to cultivate in Sasolburg.

¹ There is a large literature: O’Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*; du Toit, ‘Women, welfare and the nurturing of Afrikaner nationalism’, Morrell, (Ed.), *White but poor*; Susan Parnell ‘Creating Racial Privilege: The Origins of South African Public Health and Town Planning Legislation’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Sep., 1993), 471-488; Parnell and Hart, ‘Church, state and the shelter of white working class women in Johannesburg’, Seekings, ‘Not a Single White Person Should Be Allowed to Go under; Brink, ‘Only Decent Girls Are Employed’; Hyslop, ‘White Working-Class Women and the Invention of Apartheid’; Elizabeth van Heyningen ‘A tool for modernisation? The Boer concentration camps of the South African War, 1900–1902’ *South African Journal of Science*, Vol. 106, No. 5/6, 1-10

SASOL's managers commissioned Max Kirchhofer, a Swiss émigré architect, to design its company town because they wanted it to be in line with contemporary international planning trends. Kirchhofer's plans were inserted into a fractious class politics where officials and self-consciously respectable residents were preoccupied with the conspicuous presence of purportedly unrespectable 'lower-income' white residents in the town. Kirchhofer related somewhat uneasily to what he regarded as an overly petty concern with the latter's visibility in Sasolburg's *misé-en-scène*. He initially believed 'lower-income' residents' habits could be reformed, but his optimism dissipated in the face of the apparent unwillingness of these residents to remake themselves in the image of a culture which linked respectability to particular aesthetic practices in relation to gardens and backyards. While Neil Roos has argued that hegemonic white subjectivities in apartheid South Africa were produced chiefly through church and state power from above, this chapter argues that whatever the ambitions of apartheid elites, it was residents themselves who reported and denounced their neighbors for failing to conform to the local code of respectability in relation to its key external markers: neat gardens, clean yards and proper comportment.²

“dit gaan maar nog sukkel sukkel”

The search for respectability has proven to be one of the key aspirational motors of identity-making in modern South African history. Various historians have shown the importance of respectability to the shaping of South African subjectivities lying at the

² Roos, 'Work colonies and South African historiography'

intersection of race, class and gender throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century.³

What constituted respectability among white residents of Sasolburg in the period covered by this chapter? At a general level, respectability was a synonym for whiteness inflected with particular class and gender emphases. More specifically, the dominant model of respectability in Sasolburg in this period privileged economic independence, tidiness and cleanliness, Christian piety, sobriety and sexual restraint. Respectability's key external markers in Sasolburg were properly tendered gardens, houses and yards. Public appearance and comportment were also important measures of respectability.

Respectability was necessarily also inflected with the peculiarities of Sasolburg's company town status. 'Pioneer' SASOL cliques, and successor company and municipal elites circumscribed the terms of respectability which subsequent arrivals of more lowly origins have had to measure up to. As I discussed in the previous chapter, SASOL was involved in attempting to engineer disciplined white industrial workers in Sasolburg, through the social worker interventions of women like Rita Marais, whose work, as we saw in the previous chapter, was explicitly about securing the successful transformation of former farmers into industrial workers. Failure to conform to the company's model for respectable, disciplined subjects meant losing one's job and house.

³ Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750-1870: A Tragedy of Manners*; (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Lynn Thomas, 'The modern girl and racial respectability in 1930s South Africa' *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006), 461-90; David Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance: A History of Sophiatown*. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004); Elsabe Brink 'Only Decent Girls are Employed'; Belinda Bozzoli with Mmantho Nkotsoe *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983*, (London: James Currey, 1991); Bridget Kenny, 'Servicing Modernity: White Women Shop Workers on the Rand and Changing Gendered Respectabilities, 1940s-1970s', *African Studies*, 67: 3, (2008), 365-396.

It is important to note, however, that respectability was a category of aspiration as much as it was something that those who claimed to possess it condemned others for lacking. The letters of complaint written to the local municipality during this period, denouncing the failure of neighbors to conform to local notions of respectability were written by residents who fell well outside pioneer or elite networks. Sasolburg may have been segregated from the nearby black township Zamdela, but like the vast majority of company towns, it was also defined by internal residential class segregation. SASOL managers or members of the local civic elite did not live in close proximity to working class white Sasolburgers. The physical addresses of letter-writers who wrote complaining about their neighbors indicate that they were living in neighborhoods on the cusp in terms of Sasolburg's class geography, in close proximity to "lower-income" whites. A handful of such letter-writers were most likely themselves on the class cusp: not securely middle class, but aspirantly so.

We get a glimpse of both the importance of home-making to respectability and its affective and aspirational qualities from a letter which a Mrs. Moore wrote in October 1965 to the Town Clerk. She wrote complaining about the hand prints on the walls of her kitchen and bathroom, asking for her house – built by the municipality, which she was in the process of paying off – to be repainted with oil-based paint:

I tried to wash marks off the wall; other marks take there [sic] place. My kitchen and bathroom walls are in a shocking state as I cannot get the marks off. Water splashes all over the bathroom wall and marks remain. It splashes on kitchen walls near the stove. Just what must I do to keep my house clean of marks when one has children? One has to continuously

wash walls but with this type of paint used it's just impossible to keep the place clean.⁴

A municipality maintenance team was sent to inspect. The municipal inspector reported that Mrs. Moore quickly lost her temper, accusing him of collusion with the building contractor:

She resented my statement that I could not help her under the circumstances and went off the deep end at me and said that I could speak decently to her. The more I tried to explain that I meant no offense, the more she shouted at me. I became so disgusted that I turned round and told the other men to come along, and I left the house. As we went to the door she shouted that I was having rubbish put on to the walls. When she got to the door she shouted 'Damn you!' and don't put your feet in my house again. I turned round and said 'Thank you' as she slammed the door.⁵

We do not have to necessarily accept the inspector's account of events, but there is certainly a tangible air of desperation to Mrs. Moore's original letter; exasperation at her apparent inability to maintain the level of cleanliness she felt she must attain in her efforts to make a respectable home. Home-ownership has been a key marker of social mobility and personal and familial progress in Sasolburg since its establishment in the 1950s. SASOL offered its white workers generous housing subsidies and the waiting list for houses was famously long. Letter writers undertook elaborate epistolary performances aimed at persuading officials to help them meet the implicitly understood measures of respectable whiteness: to "put a word in", so that they could secure the homes they desired.⁶

⁴ Sasolburg Town Clerk Files (STCF), 18/10/25; Klagte, Mrs. Moore to Town Clerk, October 12, 1965.

⁵ STCF, 18/10/25; Complaints, Clerk of Works to City Engineer, 22 October 1965.

⁶ STCF, 29/6/67; Housing, H.J. A. Lubbe to Town Clerk, 11th May, 1970.

The stakes entailed in class respectability for white residents in Sasolburg are further revealed in a letter which a Mr. W. Willemse wrote to the Town Clerk in January 1971 asking for permission to allow his step brother to lodge in the “empty servant quarters” at the back of the house he was renting from the municipality. Willemse and his step brother were artisans, and he explained that he didn’t want his step-brother to stay in the notoriously rough local hostel which housed single white male workers. Remarkably, having his step-brother stay in the ‘servant quarters’ trumped the hostel in respectability terms. Willemse explained that “the extra couple Rands” his step brother was willing to pay to stay in his backyard would “help a lot” since he had been married for just three months to a woman who was recently divorced and had two children from another marriage. His letter concluded plaintively: “*dit gaan maar nog sukkel sukkel [it is a constant struggle]*”⁷ This quotation underlines the affective dimensions of the struggle for respectability among residents aspiring to more secure middle class status in Sasolburg.

“where people meet beyond social boundaries and property fences”

In the late 1960s, a South African newspaper published a feature story on Sasolburg which described a “[remarkable] metamorphism that has converted this once flat, featureless tract of farmland – then the haunt of the jackal, the meerkat and the guinea-fowl, where the harsh croak of the koorhaan mingled with the distant sound of a

⁷ STCF, 18/10/25, Complaints, W. A Willemse to Town Clerk, 4th Jan, 1971.

tractor – into a bustling, thriving town.”⁸ The article quoted then Chairman of SASOL, Dr. Etienne Rousseau, talking about how the company had “tried to create not only an attractive, but functional, home for our employees, in spite of climatic and natural conditions, which had the threat of the desert in them.” Trees were planted en masse and “green belts and gardens” lain out according to the planning vision of the Swiss émigré architect, Max Kirchhofer.

Born in a small town in St. Gallen Canton in the east of Switzerland in the early 1930s, Kirchhofer attended Switzerland’s pre-eminent architectural school at the ETH, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, where he studied with a group of twelve other trainee architects, including his future wife, Tanja Labhart. This group of students, he recalled, were mostly in the thrall of Corbusier, the giant of modernist architecture at the time.⁹ Both Kirchhofer and Labhart were in attendance at the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) congress of 1933 out of which emerged the *Athens Charter* which significantly influenced planning and architecture in the post-World War II period towards high rise, high density urban living.

With the storm clouds gathering in pre-World War II Europe, and hungry for “more varied” architectural experience, Kirchhofer and Labhart emigrated to South Africa. Setting up an architectural practice in their home in Johannesburg they started to establish their reputation by designing a number of homes in the city’s leafy white suburbs. During the war, Kirchhofer enrolled in the very first town planning class ever offered in South

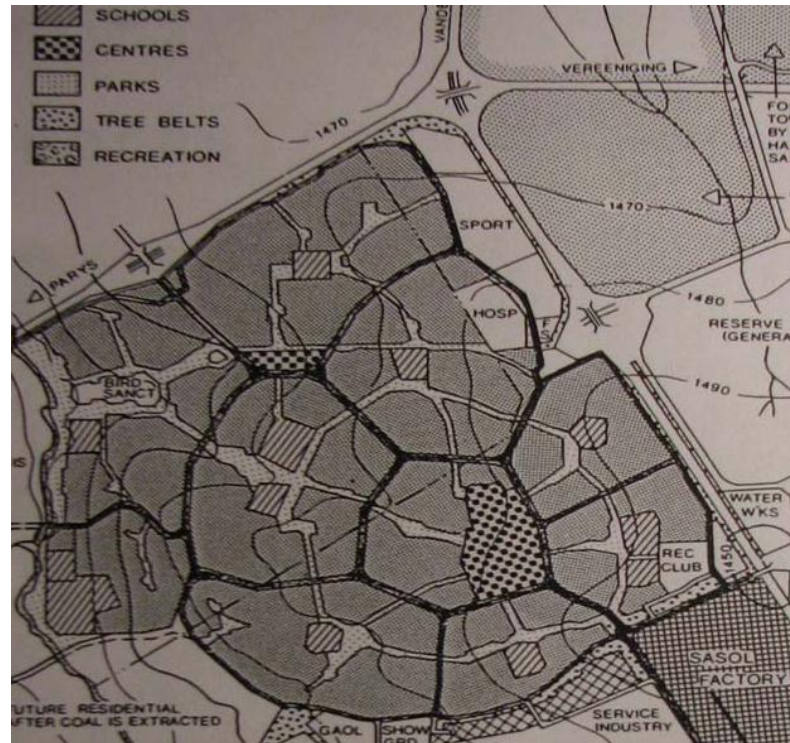
⁸ ‘Sasolburg coming of age’; Unknown newspaper article, likely published in the late 1960s.

⁹ Interview with Max Kirchhofer, Zurich, 2007.

Africa, at the University of Witwatersrand. The class was what Kirchhofer called “an experiment”, and in the years to come would develop into one of the key sites for the working out of modernist town planning in South Africa, focused especially on the planning of black townships in the early apartheid period.¹⁰ By the time Kirchhofer started moving in Wits architectural circles, the ‘modern movement’ in South African architecture had begun its estrangement from its earlier enthrallment with Corbusier. For this group of architects, including Kirchhofer, Lewis Mumford’s valorization of regionalism, the ‘garden city’ and ‘neighborhood unit’ provided fertile grounds for their striving for an ‘authentic’ and practical modernist interventionism.¹¹

¹⁰ Derek Japha, ‘The social programme of the South African Modern Movement’, H6 in J. Hilton and I. Vladislavic, (eds.) *Blank__:architecture, apartheid and after*, Rotterdam: Nai, 1998.

¹¹ Derek Japha, ‘The social programme of the South African Modern Movement’, Lewis Mumford, “The Neighborhood and the Neighborhood Unit,” *Town Planning Review* 24 (1954): 250-70.



**Figure 13:
General layout of Sasolburg**

Note schools located in middle of neighborhood precincts and extensive park spaces and ‘green-belts’ running through and linking up precincts.

Formalistically speaking, Sasolburg’s ‘European’ residential areas were laid out in self-contained units highly redolent of progressive-era American planner Clarence Perry’s ‘neighborhood unit’ design concept. Perry developed his concept (with some debt to the English garden city) while living in and researching the model suburb Forest Hills near New York which had been designed at the behest of the Russell Sage Foundation, America’s “financial mainstay of social welfare causes in the period just before the First World War.”¹² Perry’s focus on neighborhoods was influenced by American sociology which saw them as an incubator for the shaping of individual morality, as well as by the

¹² Larry Lawhon , ‘The Neighborhood Unit: Physical Design or Physical Determinism?’, *Journal of Planning History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (May 2009), 116; Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 163.

trans-Atlantic progressive era settlement house movement's emphasis on intensive associational interaction and the value of open space and parks.¹³

The plans for the 'European' section of Sasolburg placed a school at the centre of each residential precinct within a walking distance of less than half a mile from the most distant house so that school children wouldn't have to cross busy main roads on their way to school.¹⁴ Although Kirchhofer had been commissioned to build a town to house the employees of an oil company, one of his main design aims in Sasolburg was the domestication of the private motor car. Writing in the late 1950s he noted with concern that the ratio of motor vehicles to people in South Africa was "close to that of the United States." Kirchhofer's plans were, in other words, a response to the emergent car centric consumer economy of the early apartheid period.

Wide, curvilinear main roads sweeping across town formed the boundaries of each neighborhood precinct, with narrower internal through-roads within each precinct kept to a minimum by careful configuration of residential stands. Cul-de-sac street design was used in an effort to encourage the development of neighborly community. The insistence on self-contained residential precincts (which catered to "local shopping needs") and extensive use of green strips and pedestrian walkways were aimed at encouraging a pedestrian and biking culture as well as providing "a breath of Nature to dispel the

¹³ Larry Lawhon , 'The Neighborhood Unit: Physical Design or Physical Determinism?', *Journal of Planning History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (May 2009), 111-132.

¹⁴ Max Kirchhofer 'Sasolburg O.F.S: Report on the New Town by Max Kirchhofer', *South African Architectural Record*, Volume 43, 1958, 19.

feeling of claustrophobia that large stretches of detached dwellings engender.”¹⁵

Throughout the 1960s into the 70s, Kirchhofer repeatedly refused to provide additional parking in the popular Dutch Reformed churches in Sasolburg because he insisted they were “organized on a parochial basis,” and congregants could (indeed, *should*) walk to church.



Figure 14:
Max Kirchhofer (right) with Sasolburg municipal officials

Like Max Weber, Kirchhofer was ambivalent about the effects of rationalization in modern societies.¹⁶ The ‘structure of feeling’ undergirding his plans for Sasolburg valorized unmediated face-to-face sociality of the local neighborhood and leisure as antidotes to the threat of what he called “encroaching rationalization.”¹⁷ Like other New

¹⁵ Max Kirchhofer ‘Sasolburg O.F.S’, 19. See Chapter 5 for analysis of planning of Zamdela township.

¹⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 182.

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *Country and the City*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Towns designed and built in Britain from the 1940s (and like Vanderbijlpark and Welkom) Kirchhofer's plans for Sasolburg owe much of their intellectual debt to the early twentieth century progressivism of Ebenezer Howard and Raymond Unwin's 'garden city' work in Britain with their emphasis on egalitarian, self-contained residential communities surrounded by green-belts and parks. In his published commentary on his plans, Kirchhofer invoked what he called "the English pattern", whose genealogy he traced back to the English "village green", through the "Inns of Court" (the precincts where barristers lived, trained and worked on the outskirts of the old city of London), via Ebenezer Howard and the New Towns of post-World War II Britain. The 'English pattern', Kirchhofer wrote, held the promise of "a restful atmosphere" – the opposite, perhaps, of the alienating modern metropolis.¹⁸

He included a club site in each precinct, with tennis courts, a bowling green, a hall and other minor sporting facilities. A democratic (white) civic culture was to grow up around these facilities, managing them "in an informed manner to the benefit of all." Hobby clubs, "cultural groups" and youth organizations were also supposed to find a home at each site. Kirchhofer's elaborate description of the social worlds which he hoped would inhabit the parks in each precinct warrant lengthy quotation:

Benches under shady trees...invite a rest or reading or a little knitting over a chat with neighbors. The pleasant scenery of the parks would call for a walk on a glorious Highveld evening, away from the closely spaced houses, either alone in pensive mood or in the animated company of relatives and friends...the parks are the heart of the precincts where the inhabitants would meet in social gatherings at charity fetes and

¹⁸ Max Kirchhofer 'Sasolburg O.F.S', 19.

commemorative functions, at a *braaivleis* [barbecue] and in the friendly competitions of social games. They are, so to say, the *stoep* [veranda] of the residential units providing an opportunity for the people to get to know each other and to become good neighbors and possibly friends. On a summer evening an amateur string quartet might come out on the central ‘square’ and play to the people sitting in groups on the lawn. The high school might stage their annual theatrical performance under the canopy of the park trees and the *volk* dancers would do their rehearsals and displays there...the parks make for easy communication on foot, facilitating the informal good-neighborly calls, between the various sectors of the precincts.¹⁹

There is an expectation here of rich associational life and good neighborliness and even a (racially circumscribed) egalitarian politics: parks and sports clubs were intended to grow into spaces “where people meet beyond social boundaries and property fences.”²⁰

“an atmosphere of easy friendship and sincerity and the absence of class distinctions”

The egalitarian conviviality of the green-belt would, as I show in both this and the next chapter, be fundamentally compromised in both racial and class terms, but some Sasolburg residents undoubtedly did experience everyday life in Sasolburg under apartheid in ways which resonate with Kirchhofer’s visions. When a woman who self-identified as a SASOL ‘pioneer’ reflected back on the first decade of life in Sasolburg in the late 1950s, she claimed that visitors to the town “sensed an atmosphere of easy friendship and sincerity and the absence of those class distinctions which are generally so

¹⁹ STCF, Town Planning, Max Kirchhofer to Secretary of Village Board of Management, Sasolburg, 13 February, 1958.

²⁰ STCF, Town Planning, Max Kirchhofer to Town Clerk, Sasolburg, 22 October, 1970.

prevalent in a town like this.”²¹ We might expect to find such self-mythologizing claims about a congenial SASOL scene in the company’s in-house newspaper. Pioneer accounts repeatedly claim that ‘Sasolites’ were given to remarkable displays of generosity towards new arrivals in town. “Newcomers to Sasol were always very heartily welcomed – there was even a welcoming committee. Cake, food, fruit and vegetables were given, and a welcome mat was placed in every new house.”²² An editorial in 1959 similarly pronounced: “it is traditional in this country, and we think more so in Sasolburg, to welcome new inhabitants and to congratulate friends and acquaintances on their birthdays and births in the family. Elderly people are treated with respect and visiting parents of Sasolburg inhabitants are usually thrilled at the courtesy calls they receive from the friends and neighbors of their children.” Sasolburgers may have been “compelled to be purposeful” but, the editorial insisted, they had “remained kind.”²³ Congeniality, with apologies to Clifford Geertz, is a story which ‘pioneer’ Sasolburgers liked to tell themselves about themselves.²⁴ As will be clear later in this chapter, the archive of letters written by residents complaining about their neighbors tells a very different story.

Behind many ‘pioneer’ wives’ kitchen doors were reminder notes, one woman recalled, “with the inscription ‘I owe’ at the top” and names like Mavis etc underneath.”²⁵ Such practices of neighborly exchange are presented in pioneer accounts as a temporary feature of the early years of the project, when the rules of respectable, self-sufficient

²¹ ‘Tribute to Sasol’ *Sasol Nuus* Jan 1957.

²² SPLAR, Johannes Meintjes Collection, ‘Commentary by Ms. Pienaar.’

²³ ‘Editorial’ *Sasol Nuus*, November 1959.

²⁴ Clifford Geertz ‘Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight’, In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 448.

²⁵ SPLAR, Johannes Meintjes Collection, ‘Commentary by Ms. Pienaar.’

bourgeois home-making did not apply quite so strictly. They continued in the form of a culture of hospitality reserved for new arrivals. Such practices in Sasolburg could certainly be deeply felt and they sometimes helped smooth over ethno-linguistic boundaries among white residents, differences that could in fact be quite pronounced in Sasolburg between some English and Afrikaans speaking white residents. The daughter of immigrants to South Africa from Zimbabwe in late 1981 remembers how, at the age of seven she had “never heard a single word of Afrikaans” when her family moved to Sasolburg, in the Orange Free State, a kind of “Afrikaans heaven”:

My very first memory of the language sees me weeding the garden on our first Saturday in South Africa and the woman across the road (sixty-ish, buxom and an original Afrikaner) calling me repeatedly. “Meisie! Meisie!” she trilled from across the street. Of course, I had never heard the word before and so ignored her, assuming she must be suffering from dementia and talking to someone else. Eventually, she pushed open her garden gate and hurried across the road to our fence, all the while calling me “Meisie! Meisie!” She was holding a tart of some sort (turned out to be my first exposure to “melkert”: god, I love the Afrikaners) and she broke into a full speed account of what I now suspect may have been “Welcome to the neighborhood! Etcetera, etcetera.” Peering up at her from my crouching position in the flower bed, her looming figure and incomprehensible language seemed downright terrifying. So I did what any self-respecting seven year old would. I burst into tears and ran into the house, crying for my mom. Needless to say, once our well-intentioned neighbor had figured out that none of us spoke Afrikaans, she immediately switched to English and all was well.²⁶

While ethno-linguistic differences between different white residents were easily overcome in this anecdote, needless to say these hospitality practices were powerfully circumscribed in both class, and of course, racial terms. Neighborly

²⁶ <http://www.oldtakkiesindaba.com/2009/08/27/afrikaans-alles-is-mos-reg/>

Accessed on 22nd December 2010.

congeniality reached its apotheosis in pioneer Sasolburg in the over-booked social calendar and dense associational life of its more securely middle class families.

This world was affectionately conjured as a not-too-distant future

[‘Sasolburg...some time in 1960’] in the monologue of a ‘Public Spirited Woman’, published in the ‘Women’s World’ column in *Sasol Nuus* in 1954:

“Darling...honestly, our calendar gets more confused daily. Remember when we first came in ‘54. How simple it all was. Just drop in on people any evening...and now, goodness! Just look at our little black book!...There's going to be a lovely row at Monday's [housing] meeting. It's the motion to repaint all those yellow front doors...you see the Candy Pink Paint School of thought are at the throats of the Baby Blue...its ‘Rokkies will sy Dra’ at the Rec club...Really it's wonderful how the Dramatic Society varies its stuff...Shakespeare last week and farce this...Sasol Clean Up Duty... Now darling, do see that all tricycles are put away in Precinct Nine, honestly the children just swarm there. Well, really next week end is terrible...Church of course. Gardener's club. Bowls, Rugby Finals, Chess Championship, the swimming gala to open Precinct 25's new bath. Safety First Presentation to the School Bus Driver... Enlightenment Club lecture on ‘What the Factory Means to you, Mr and Mrs Sasol’, get together of the Amenities Sub-Committee of the Ways and Means Committee for compiling a Sasol Social Register...”²⁷

Though the monologue invents a future, the female author's expectations were based in her sense of already existing associational socialities in the Sasolburg of 1954. The monologue charts a shift from the spontaneous visiting culture of the ‘pioneer’ period to an elaborate social calendar marked out in a ‘little black book’. We get a sense also of the primacy given to the performance of social status through external markers of class respectability and to home-making in particular, through the gently mocking allusion to housing committee fights about which color to paint rented houses. There are

²⁷ ‘Women's World’ in *Sasol Nuus*, May 1954.

also the beautification projects and ‘amenities sub-committee’s’ which would become mainstays of the civic culture of Sasolburg throughout the second half of the century, the obligatory church going and hobbying culture.



Figure 15:
‘Sasolburg, 4pm’ drawing by Helen Neale-May



Figure 16:
‘Sasol women have the opportunity to relax over a cup of tea’

Sasolburg's middle class scene in this period has been most witheringly characterized by a former resident as peopled by "trophy wives [who] kept themselves busy with raising kids with high morals, and drinking tea at quilting clubs."²⁸ An article in *Sasol Nuus* in July 1964, with an accompanying photograph of a women's tea party describes such occasions stereotypically, as an opportunity to "chat about topics that are closest to a woman's heart: children, needle work, servants, recipes, clothes, shoes and hats."²⁹ The women's tea-party was the subject of a rather more affectionate drawing, titled 'Sasolburg, 4pm' by Helen Neale-May, the wife of Bill Neale-May, one of SASOL's top managers during this period. The drawing was itself a product of the associational life of the town, part of the Sasolburg Art Club's first exhibit in May 1956.

Evidence of the denseness of associational life in Sasolburg conforms to the outlines of Kirchhofer's planning visions. Indeed many older white residents tell stories of inhabiting the spaces Kirchhofer crafted in much the way he had hoped when they or their children were younger. A woman who grew up in Sasolburg recalled the green strips as spaces where "after 5 o' clock [in the evening], you found families on bicycles, families walking their dogs, old people walking hand in hand. Maybe I just had a beautifully deluded childhood."³⁰ Many long-standing residents mourn the ruination of Sasolburg's green-strip culture in the face of criminality and the alleged failure of the post-apartheid ANC dominated municipality to maintain the strips.

²⁸ http://drawformeadragon.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html
Accessed on 22nd December, 2010.

²⁹ *Sasol Nuus*, July 1964.

³⁰ http://drawformeadragon.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html
Accessed on 22nd December, 2010.

As will be clear from evidence presented in both this chapter and the next, even at the height of apartheid Sasolburg's green-strips were ambiguous spaces which had the potential to unsettle local codes of respectability. Behind the image of convivial green-strips, as my analysis of letters of complaint suggests, there lay a fractious politics of everyday surveillance, and denunciation.

“The readiness of the lower income groups to develop their sites is very modest”

While Kirchhofer envisioned Sasolburg's neighborhoods as spaces “where people meet beyond social boundaries and property fences” the class stratification typical of company towns was inscribed in the plans from the town's conception. Kirchhofer's noted during a planning meeting in early 1951 that SASOL expected smaller residential plots or stands to be set aside “for the working man” with larger plots “for the better class resident.”³¹ These early planning meetings with provincial and national government officials quickly revealed the intensity of official preoccupation with the inclination of ‘lower-income’ white residents to “keep gardens.” The National Housing Commission warned Kirchhofer that it “tended to be cautious with plot sizes since experience had shown that in general garden space was badly kept” in public housing schemes. Smaller gardens were “more likely to be nicely kept than a bigger one,” and “persuasion and suitable inducement in the form of competition were needed.”³² Gardening competitions had apparently been held in public housing schemes with “prizes annually awarded for

³¹ Wits Historical Papers, Max Kirchhofer Collection, Report on an interview of a deputation from SASOL with the Chairman, O.F.S. Townships Board, 9th March 1951.

³² Wits Historical Papers, Max Kirchhofer Collection, Preliminary Planning Scheme, Coalbrook, Survey Record No. 10: Housing, 2nd June 1951, Interview with officers of the National Housing Commission.

the best kept gardens, and this has often led to a considerable improvement in the general standard.”³³

While much of the funding and building specifications for white public housing came from the National Housing Commission, at the provincial level the Orange Free State Townships Board retained significant planning oversight. Like the National Housing Commission, the Board was preoccupied with the apparently conspicuous presence and spatial proximity of poor white residents in the new town. The board was “strongly opposed” to the placing of the self-consciously prestigious civic centre of the new town “in close proximity” to the first residential precinct explicitly designed for ‘lower-income’ whites.³⁴

Kirchhofer did not share the class cynicism of officials in Pretoria and Bloemfontein, or at least not initially. His plans for the ‘lower-income’ residential precinct reflect a more optimistic view of the reformability of ‘lower-income’ whites. He set out “to give the lower income groups an opportunity of creating congenial settings for their houses, planting vegetables to supplement cash earnings and raising healthy children in outdoor surroundings.” Rather than a class embarrassment waiting to happen, the open space of a residential stand was “the outdoor extension of the living space of the house,” available for use as a garden for “recreation and pleasure”, as a vegetable patch “for

³³ Wits Historical Papers, Max Kirchhofer Collection, Memo regarding discussions with the Technical Advisers of the National Housing Commission, unknown date in 1951.

³⁴ Wits Historical Papers, Max Kirchhofer Collection, Dawid de Villiers Notes on visit to Bloemfontein for meeting with O.F.S. Township Board, 11th June 1951.

exercise and nourishment”; the back yard a space for “household activities” and a “play ground for the children.”³⁵

Besides quarreling with the fact that Kirchhofer did not reduce the precinct plot-sizes, the Township Board also complained that his plans meant that significant amounts of stand space on south-facing plots backed onto the new town’s main streets. This spatial configuration would make the presence of ‘unrespectable’ poor whites in Sasolburg visible in plain sight. The Board also wanted Kirchhofer to curtail the use of pedestrian pathways because experience in other precincts had shown “it is very difficult to keep them neat, litter is thrown there, native loiterers gather there and vagrants soil it in the night.”³⁶ The board was questioning one of the key principles underpinning his plans. Increasingly frustrated by the small-mindedness of the Bloemfontein officials, he admitted to “feeling rather like a Kindergarten teacher telling the same story for the umpteenth time.”

It is pathetic and disappointing too - to see how the Board after the full discussions we had on my planning concepts and their implications and having agreed to them, now start bickering about certain points in a haphazard manner and out of context of the scheme as a whole...town planning is becoming more and more cumbersome as it is becoming duller.³⁷

³⁵ SAS, 19/1/4, Planning Scheme Sasolburg, Max Kirchhofer Memo, 9th July 1962, Layout of Precinct 12.

³⁶ SAS, 505/3, Planning Scheme Sasolburg , Precinct 1, J. le Roux Sec, OVS Township Board to Mr Pretorius and Gordon Fraser, ? May, 1956.

³⁷ SAS, 505/3, Planning Scheme Sasolburg , Precinct 1,Max Kirchhofer to Mr. Pretorius and Gordon Fraser, 4th June 1956.

Nonetheless compelled to engage with the Board's objections, Kirchhofer observed that "on the whole," stands along main streets were "being developed in a satisfactory manner. Some layouts are delightful." He conceded that there were "certain stretches that are unsightly," but insisted this wasn't because of backyards backing on to main streets, but rather "a general air of untidiness spreading about the houses."

Fowl shacks, odd bits of fencing, untended gardens, propped up motor cars, miscellaneous litter and undisciplined children would all remain noticeable just the same even if the gates of the properties were turned to give access from the main street. These are matters of social concern and are to be remedied with guidance and administration.³⁸

The issue, as far as Kirchhofer was concerned, was whether it was desirable to change the planning pattern "to hush up the evidence of low standards of living" and thereby deprive the whole population of the benefits of the plan.³⁹ Kirchhofer explained "evidence of disorderly manners" in sociological terms which strikingly echoed Dawid de Villiers' modernizing 'kitchen kaffir' narrative:

Living in towns is a new experience for a large portion of the white population of this country. It is understandable that the backvelder when he moves into the closely knit urban pattern will bring with him a mode of life conditioned by the vast open space. Since sprawling backyards and a general air of untidiness about dwellings are in conflict with the good neighborly atmosphere indispensable for life in town, the newcomer will have to adapt himself to the changed environment. A certain amount of guidance would be helpful and strict application of the laws should do the rest. Given time and coaxing, there are no reasons to assume that the

³⁸ SAS, 505/3, Planning Scheme Sasolburg , Precinct 1, Max Kirchhofer to Secretary, OFS Townships Board, 4th June 1956.

³⁹ SAS, 505/3, Planning Scheme Sasolburg, Precinct 1, Max Kirchhofer to Secretary, OFS Townships Board, 4th June 1956. Bracketed word my addition.

backvelder will not make a reasonably good town dweller in a comparatively short time. The problem at hand is a temporary one.⁴⁰

When Kirchhofer published a report on the planning of Sasolburg in the *S.A. Architectural Record* in 1958, he again noted that there were stretches of main roads where “the regrettably low standard of living of a section of the white population stares the passer-by in the eye.” These “manifestations of dirt and disorder” were bound to disappear, he wrote, with a combination of legal inducement in terms of municipal by-laws and ‘words of friendly advice’.⁴¹ He insisted, in other words, on a position which held out hope that ‘backvelder’ habits could be reformed in time.

However, when Kirchhofer worked on plans for a new precinct in 1962, six years after the occupation of Precinct 1, he was forced to concede that the “greater part of the majority” of stands occupied by “the lower income groups” had “remained unused, lying fallow, overgrown with weeds or scantily planted with a few unkempt peach trees.” “The readiness of the lower income groups to develop their sites is very modest,” he pessimistically noted. Having defended larger stands, he characterized “unused” land as “a costly waste with far-reaching consequences for assessment rates, transport and cost of living.” He even cited the effect on “the spiritual well-being of the inhabitants of the town.” It would be “misguided idealism”, to design stand sizes “in excess of the dimensions necessary for the correct siting of the houses in relation to an extent of open

⁴⁰ SAS, 505/3, Planning Scheme Sasolburg , Precinct 1, Max Kirchhofer to Chairman, Townships Board, 11 Sept, 1956; Wits Historical Papers, Max Kirchhofer Collection, A2207, B4, Planning Scheme, Sasolburg, Max Kirchhofer to D.P. de Villiers, 3 August, 1957.

⁴¹ M. Kirchhofer, ‘Sasolburg O.F.S’, 25.

space likely to be developed by the occupants.”⁴² This was a startling shift and it represented the defeat of the more utopian reformist aspects of Kirchhofer’s modernism. From this point he significantly reduced the plot sizes designed for occupation by lower-income whites. His planning commentaries soon started to refer to the reduction of stand sizes as though they were simply part of ongoing rationalizing efforts to increase “density of accommodation” and “curb wastage of land.”⁴³ The cost of servicing sprawling urban development certainly became an increasing preoccupation around this time in South Africa and internationally, but it was the apparent refusal of “lower income groups” to respond to “persuasion and suitable inducement” which first precipitated this shift in Sasolburg.

Those ‘lower-income’ white residents who failed to “develop their sites” were swimming against the tide of a hegemonic culture which saw gardens as a key marker of respectability, which the company had actively sought to cultivate since the town’s establishment in the early 1950s. “To make Sasolburg a pretty town,” SASOL’s horticulturalist, Art Jurrianse, wrote in the second edition of *SASOL Nuus*, “every resident must play their part by developing pretty and neatly tended gardens.” This could be done “economically” by acquiring compost, plants and seeds from the plant nursery which the company had established not far from Sasolburg on the banks of the Vaal River. It could be a real source of pleasure, he concluded, to “play every afternoon after

⁴² SAS, 19/1/14, Sasolburg Town Planning, Max Kirchhofer Memo, 9th July 1962, Planning Scheme Sasolburg, Layout of Precinct 12.

⁴³ SAS, 19/1/14, Sasolburg Town Planning, Max Kirchhofer to Manager, Sasol townships Ltd, 23rd August, 1962.

work for an hour in one's garden and to forget all one's other difficulties.”⁴⁴ Sasol Dorpsgebiede Beperk, the company's housing subsidiary, sponsored annual gardening competitions, beginning in 1955.⁴⁵ *SASOL Nuus* editorials admonished residents who “who have done very little, if anything at all, to develop their gardens. Let each of us during this favorable time of the year decide that it is our duty to ourselves, our families and the community as a whole to make and develop our gardens to the fullest extent possible.”⁴⁶ What was entailed in this ‘duty’ to individual, family and community is not clear, but the implication certainly seems to be that the management of gardens was key to the cultivation of self, family and community and that failure to perform particular aesthetic practices imperiled the standing of all three.

Underpinning the general emphasis on gardening was a reformist metaphysics which held that gardening facilitated the cultivation of respectable subjects.⁴⁷ Monthly gardening columns in *SASOL Nuus* provided advice to resident-employees, fastidiously instructing those who planned on participating in the annual company sponsored gardening competition that: “your garden should be scrupulously clean and free from weeds. The lawn is to be cut and neatly trimmed along the edges.”⁴⁸ Such gardening pedagogy also often pointed to the punitive sanctions following from failing to heed such advice. In May 1964, as winter neared, a column entitled ‘Use your garden rubbish for compost’ warned readers that “this is compost time in Sasolburg's gardens. Most annuals

⁴⁴ ‘Die Verfraaiing van ons dorp’ *Sasol Nuus*, September 1953.

⁴⁵ ‘Proud Gardens’, *Sasol Nuus*, May 1955.

⁴⁶ Editorial, *SASOL Nuus*, November, 1958.

⁴⁷ This applied equally to the nearby black township, Zamdela. See chapter 5.

⁴⁸ ‘Garden Strolls’ *Sasol Nuus*, Dec 1959; ‘So moet ‘n mens tuin maak!’ *Sasol Nuus*, June 1959.

have reached the end of their useful life and must be cleared away to prevent the garden from becoming unsightly.” It concluded by warning “the compost heap must be neat otherwise the Village Management Board’s health inspectors will be on us in no time.”⁴⁹ The Village Management Board – a body set up by SASOL to act as a local authority in the period before the declaration of Sasolburg as a municipality – defined ‘public nuisance’ deliberately widely, so that aesthetic concerns such as “untidy” compost heaps could be constructed as constituting a threat to public health, falling under the domain of its health inspectors.

“Keep Sasolburg Clean!”

In the late 1960s, the newly established Sasolburg municipality established a committee to ensure the “tidiness of the town”, incorporating representatives from SASOL, local schools, the Women's Agricultural Society, the local business chamber and local branches of Rotary, Round Table and Rapportryers, (an Afrikaner-nationalist service organization.) Litter in the green strips throughout the town and “untidy properties” were the chief targets of this concern.⁵⁰ The constant refrain in *SASOL Nuus* articles and editorials was that residents needed to discipline themselves to keep their gardens, yards and town as a whole clean and tidy. Residents who failed to discipline themselves would need disciplining. *SASOL Nuus* carried warnings that “the health and traffic officers will in future take drastic steps” against residents “whose gardens, or *lack*

⁴⁹ ‘Use your garden rubbish for compost’ *Sasol Nuus*. May 1964 .

⁵⁰ ‘Clean Town’ *Sasol Nuus*, May 1968.

of gardens, create an untidy or dirty impression.”⁵¹ Disciplining was to start early: the municipality held a competition in 1968, asking local school children to design a logo and slogan for a fully-fledged tidiness campaign. In 1970 the “Keep Sasolburg Clean” campaign was launched with accompanying cartoon characters, ‘Orderlike Okkert’ and ‘Jors Gemors’, or their English-language counterparts, ‘Tidy Tim’ and ‘Sloppy Sam’, emblazoned on municipal dust bins.⁵²

The “Keep Sasolburg Clean” cartoons provide an elaborate visual vocabulary for Sasolburg’s inner class geography. Sloppy Sam/Jors Gemors is represented as a bare-footed scraggy monster with unkempt blackened hair all over his body with jagged and missing teeth. His noble counterpart, Tidy Tim/Orderlike Okkert, is white in color (and in an obviously Manichean dichotomy, we can assume racially too), has neatly combed and trimmed hair, sports a bow tie, wears shoes and has a clean and perfect set of teeth. In the first image, Sloppy Sam is wreaking havoc, leaving dirt, litter and detritus in his wake as Tidy Tim looks on disapprovingly with his hands on his hips. An old car tire, an important marker of lower class status in these images and in numerous letters of complaint sent to the municipality, lies in the corner of the cartoon. In the second image, Tidy Tim performs his civic duty, dumping Sloppy Sam in a rubbish bin, together with the rubbish associated with his presence in Sasolburg.

⁵¹ ‘Tidiness in Town: Competition and Campaign’ *Sasol Nuus*, Sept 1968. My emphasis.

⁵² ‘Keep Sasolburg Clean’ *SASOL Nuus*, November 1970.



Figure 17:
Sloppy Sam/Jors Gemors



Figure 18:
Tidy Tim/OrderlikeOkkert



Figure 19:
'Jors se Keffie'

The third image makes the class valence of the campaign and Sasolburg's civic culture clearer. Jors Gemors is shown standing indifferently at the entrance to his 'Keffie'.⁵³ The building is covered in scrawled signs advertising 'Vies en Tjeeps', invoking a taste hierarchy in which fish and chips are associated with blue-collar eating preferences. Another sign advertising 'Vars Groente' or Fresh vegetables, but "fresh" is deliberately placed in inverted commas to indicate the opposite, as well as the dishonesty and irresponsibility of Jors. There is a cat (black of course) prowling on the roof, foul black smoke pouring out of the chimney, a collapsing boundary wall abutting the next property, a rubbish bin jutting out onto the pavement with rubbish strewn around it and on the street. Tidy Tim glowers disapprovingly at Jors. Tidy Tim's wife has her hands on her hips, while Tidy Tim shields his nose from distasteful odors.



Figure 20:
Jors Gemors/Sloppy Sam and car

⁵³ 'Keep Sasolburg Clean' *SASOL Nuus*, December 1970.

The final image drives the semiotics home even further. Jors is leaning casually against a “dismantled motor car” holding what we might fairly assume to be a can of beer in his hand.⁵⁴ There are old rubber tires on the ground and on the roof of his house. A house window is smashed, a gutter is hanging down from the roof, there is rubbish strewn across the yard, the grass is uncut. There is no “garden” to speak of. There are “ramshackle fowl houses.” Tidy Tim is hand-on-hipping again, standing in his yard with its nearly trimmed lawn, a pretty tree and his well-maintained house in the background. There is otherwise little discernable difference between the two houses in the final image and they are in close proximity to each other. This underlines the fact that the culture of respectability in Sasolburg was produced out of a context where there was great proximity (both literally and psychically) between residents obsessively performing the aesthetic practices of respectability and those who did not.

“our fight against dirt and untidiness”

While ‘pioneer’ accounts claimed that Sasolburg was a town without “class distinctions”, letters of complaint written by white residents to the municipality in which they denounced their neighbors for failure to conform to local codes of respectability give a very different picture of a fractious class politics.⁵⁵ The apparent pettiness of these complaints suggest the existence of a deeply felt class anxiety among aspirant middle class residents: a real fear of falling back into unrespectability. These were letters, in other words, that were produced out of spatial, socio-economic and *psychic* proximity to

⁵⁴ ‘Jors is nog hier! En moet verdwyn’ *SASOL Nuus*, May 1971.

⁵⁵ ‘Tribute to Sasol’ *SASOL Nuus*, Jan 1957.

whites regarded as ‘unrespectable’. The authors of these letters lay on the class cusp and sought to disaggregate themselves from their ‘unrespectable’ neighbors.

This boundary work serves to highlight the relational quality of respectability. In March 1972, Mr. Classe wrote to the Sasolburg Town Clerk, pleading for the resident occupying a particular stand on his street (he named the house number) “to be asked to keep the property clean” because “it has become a wilderness full of weeds.” This resident, Mr. Classe concluded, was “spoiling the neighborhood, and pulling down the town.”⁵⁶ This last quote captures the relationality of respectability in Sasolburg, where one resident’s contravention of the local code was interpreted as a threat to the respectable status of a street, even the entire town.

In March 1968, a woman identifying herself as ‘A Clean Stand Lover and Lawn Proud Lady’ wrote to the municipal health department apparently thinking that her complaint about disorderly spaces in her vicinity somehow related to the health of the wider public. She asking the municipality to come and inspect her street: “you will find, No. 2, 4, 6, 8, 12, and 14, a pleasure to see how nice the people keep their stands”, she said, but No. 10 was apparently “a disgrace...there the weeds are coming into seed already and will of course blow into other stands and create a lot of extra work for people round about.”⁵⁷ Weeds here threaten to spread the seeds of unrespectability.

⁵⁶ STCF, 18/10/25, Complaints , Mr Classe to Town Clerk, 13th March, 1972.

⁵⁷ STCF, 18/10/25, Complaints, ‘A Clean Stand Lover and Lawn Proud Lady’ to the Health Dept, Sasolburg, 27th March 1968.

In November, 1969, Mr. Turner wrote:

I am appealing to you about keeping our town clean. We have in this street here a few people who have no pride whatsoever, their yards are overgrown with weeds etc and we who keep our yards clean have to put up with the mess from yards of those who are too lazy to keep the place clean. I am sure it must be a pleasure for any member of the municipality when passing a house with a nice green and tidy lawn. The house directly behind me...well a lion could lay there without being seen. No. 75-74 lawns are both the same... Sir, I feel that the sooner you are able to take steps against such people the sooner Sasolburg will be rid of weeds and be a pleasure to live in...I am sure something could be done to keep the lawn clear of such messy sights.⁵⁸

The specific listing of property numbers in both of the previous two letters highlights the fact that residents carefully surveilled their neighborhoods, noting the signs believed to indicate the absence of respectability in neighbors. Weeds clearly function in these letters as a key signifier of spatial disorder, “matter out of place”, in Mary Douglas’ sense.⁵⁹ Uncut lawns, dirt, improperly tended gardens, messy back yards, ferocious dogs that bark incessantly and attack arbitrarily are all read by these observers as symptomatic of a lack of discipline displayed by persons expected to be ‘stand lovers’ and ‘lawn proud’. There is also an element of critique of the failure of neighbors to display the necessary husbandry of nature by eradicating weeds, not to mention a psychological vulnerability tantalizingly suggested in the phrase condemning the neighbors’ overgrown lawn by complaining that “a lion could lay there without being seen.”

⁵⁸ STCF, 18/10/25, Complaints, Mr Turner to Town Clerk, 19th Nov, 1969.

⁵⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 44; Tim Cresswell, ‘Weeds, Plagues, and Bodily Secretions: A Geographical Interpretation of Metaphors of Displacement,’ *Annals of Association of American Geographers*, 87: 2, (1997), 335.

These letters were above all, epistolary performances, and Mr. Turner's letter invoked a shared commitment to respectability with the Town Clerk. Like all such authors, Mr. Turner wrote with the expectation that his complaint would result in the municipality intervening to effect the disciplining of an allegedly ill-disciplined resident. It is not always clear exactly what action followed from the municipality receiving such complaints. In the case of Mr. Turner, however, it seems, from the Town Clerk's reply, that disciplinary action of some sort was pursued:

The conditions to which you refer are not new to us. Neither, unfortunately, are they limited to your particular vicinity. Neglect of gardens can be noticed throughout the town. The municipality begs the inhabitants to keep Sasolburg clean and tidy and this is done through the news media, lectures and competitions at schools etc. In other words, we are trying to educate people to keep their town clean and presentable and where necessary, legal steps are taken. In this case, the responsible officials have been asked to attend to the matters raised by you. A special committee was formed about two years ago whose sole task is to devise new methods of getting the cleanliness message across to the people...little progress is noticeable however...I am extremely glad that there are people in town like yourself, who exhibit a sense of civic pride and responsibility by setting a good example of what gardens are supposed to look like and trying to do something to lift others out of their apathetic attitude. I sincerely hope you will persist in setting a good example to everybody around you. I further hope that, if you have any constructive idea about the education of the inhabitants of Sasolburg, you will come forward with them and help our cleanliness campaign. I have faith that eventually, with the help of people like yourself we will win our fight against dirt and untidiness.⁶⁰

This letter highlights the importance of the garden, in particular, to the performance of respectability in Sasolburg. The performative aspects of gardening are underlined through repeated invocation of a politics of exemplary display – “setting a good

⁶⁰ STCF, 18/10/25, Complaints, Sasolburg Town Clerk Files, Town Clerk to Mr Turner, 9th December, 1969.

example” – and exhibiting “civic pride and responsibility.” It is extremely significant that the vast majority of letters analyzed in the next chapter make demands upon black labor for work performed in the home and rarely ever in gardens. With the exception of the residential properties of SASOL managers, gardening was performed primarily by white residents – both men and women – themselves. Tidy gardens with manicured green lawns were meant to embody the respectable persons behind their production, as if respectable residents distributed their personhood through the different components of the well-tended garden: perfectly manicured green lawns, carefully raked flower beds and delicately trimmed rose bushes. Properly performing respectability through gardening in Sasolburg required the toil of respectable white bodies. This was the magic of the gardens of Sasolburg.

“The people think badly of us”

Comportment was a persistent concern in *SASOL Nuus* editorials during his period. In part this reflected the moral politics of respectability in Sasolburg and the country more widely at the time, but the company had also endeavored to tie individual Sasolburgers' comportment to the fate of the company's financial performance, regardless of whether or not they worked for it.⁶¹ After the town's establishment, Sasolburg's car license plates were distinctively marked with the letters OIL. Numerous editorials were quick to remind residents that while “we can be proud of the letters...they bring

⁶¹ For discussion of concerns about cultural change within ‘Afrikanerdom’ see Albert Grundlingh, ‘Are We Afrikaners Getting too Rich?’ Cornucopia and Change in Afrikanerdom in the 1960s’ in *Journal of Historical Sociology* Vol. 21 No. 2/3 (June/September 2008).

responsibilities.” The OIL plates made “every one of us an ambassador for SASOL and its products,” an editorial insisted. “If we are not courteous and careful, SASOL and everything it stands for will be branded and we will lose friends and clients.”⁶²

An alleged “increase in vandalism” in 1954 prompted an alarmed editorial in *SASOL Nuus*, appealing to parents to “warn their children not to take part in these acts of vandalism.”⁶³ In the late 1950s, the ‘Ducktails’, a white youth gang subculture associated with rebelliousness, hedonism, petty criminality and above all, rock and roll, was the subject of a national government report on ‘juvenile delinquency’ which claimed that in areas in and around the Witwatersrand, including Sasolburg, the ‘Ducktails’ ‘agitate the public, participate in premarital sex and offend the church’.⁶⁴ In May 1966 a robbery of a local Dutch Reformed church building was described as an “act of desecration...nothing less than sacrilege.” A *SASOL Nuus* editorial called “every right-thinking person” to join it “in roundly condemning such acts in no uncertain terms,” claiming that South Africa was an especially moral society, respectful of the sacred to the last:

In some other parts of the world people may think differently but we in South Africa still hold the Church and the buildings consecrated to the service of the Lord, in the highest esteem. May we, in this country, never reach a stage where the service of our Lord and the building consecrated to serve His purpose will be accorded less respect.⁶⁵

⁶² Editorial, *SASOL Nuus*, October 1955.

⁶³ ‘Vandalism’ *SASOL Nuus*, May 1954.

⁶⁴ Katie Mooney, ‘Die Eendstert Euwel’ and societal responses to white youth subcultural identities on the Witwatersrand, 1930-1964’, unpublished Phd thesis, (University of Witwatersrand, 2007), 269.

⁶⁵ ‘Vandalism’, Editorial, *SASOL Nuus*, May 1966.

This “act of hooliganism” was apparently on a par with the recent “wanton destruction” of a piece of sculptural art of two wild buck located at the front of the municipal library in downtown Sasolburg. This piece of vandalism was compounded, an editorial claimed, by the fact that according to rumors, “a Bantu who witnessed this vile deed drew a European’s attention to it with the request that he call the police” but the “European” in question had refused to summon the police saying it was “none of his business”:

Words really fail one to describe such deeds and such an attitude. Not only are such deeds completely foreign to Sasolburg but such an attitude towards public property, especially works of art in a country known for the paucity its sculptural art in public places, borders on the caddish. It stamps both perpetrators and the person conniving in it as unworthy of living in a decent community. The maxim ‘the receiver is as bad as the thief’, is applicable in this case. Both types are not wanted in Sasolburg. Their acts are alien to our tradition and must be eradicated.⁶⁶

If the dismembering of a symbol of Sasolburg’s civic pretensions unsettled the rectitude of Sasolburg’s ‘decent community’, the honorable “Bantu” and the unprincipled “European” inverted the assumed moral hierarchies of apartheid.

Comportment mattered intensely to the gendered respectability of women. In 1966, a Mrs. Erasmus wrote to the Town Clerk complaining that her neighbors “drink, swear and get terribly rowdy.” She asked the Town Clerk to help her family find a new house because, she insisted, “we cannot live here anymore...my nerves are finished. I cannot tolerate it any longer. We are quiet people.” Tellingly, she concluded: “when they

⁶⁶ ‘Vandalism’, Editorial, *SASOL Nuus*, May 1966.

drink, the people [i.e. other neighbors] think badly of us.”⁶⁷ Acute social embarrassment, and the fear of being lumped together with the town’s ‘unrespectable’ white residents, lay at the vulnerable heart of these comments and the culture of aspirant respectability in Sasolburg more generally.

In 1971, a Mr. G. Jenkinson wrote complaining about “the people across the street”:

...a woman with the surname Delport and three of her daughters, from a previous marriage, whose surnames are De Villiers. For the past three weeks they have been playing rock and roll music in the nights...at full volume and this class of music is played until one in the morning so that we cannot sleep. There are all sorts of people who come in the night to visit Mrs Delport and her daughters and make a racket until one in the morning. I work and I have to get up early in the morning to work but our rest at night is disturb by Mrs Delport, her daughters and their guests.⁶⁸

The specter of ‘immoral’ sex reverberates through the phrase alluding to “all sorts of people who come in the night to visit.” There is a very deliberate stress placed on the intimate details of her neighbors’ familial lives. The implication is that a founding sin, perhaps infidelity and certainly a more general familial disorder has delivered this family to immorality. There is a further moralistic undertone through which Mrs. Delport is condemned for failure to discipline her daughters. The absence of a husband and/or father figure is implicitly pinpointed as responsible for the deepening scandal. The complaint also incorporated a rather hackneyed objection to rock and roll music. Of course, such puritanical responses to the ascendancy of modern popular music were hardly unique to

⁶⁷ STCF, 18/10/25, Complaints, Mev. Erasmus to Town Clerk, ? 1966.

⁶⁸ STCF, 18/10/25, Complaints, Mr G.A. Jenkinson to Town Clerk, 4 Jan, 1971

apartheid South Africa.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, Mr. Jenkinson's letter also undoubtedly reflected the notoriously censorious tendencies of 'Christian nationalism' under apartheid, which (in)famously delayed the introduction of television in the country until 1976.

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In the early 1980s, Sam Pellissier, the much-loved principal of Sasolburg's most prestigious high school wrote panicked letters of complaint to Afrikaans language newspapers railing against the "subversion of the morals of the youth" through the broadcasting of pop music and the American soap opera 'Dallas' on national television.⁷⁰ Pellissier's letter of complaint about 'Dallas' explicitly invoked common cause with conservative Christian "Moral Majority" campaigns against the show in the United States in the same period. In a letter portraying pop music as "South Africa's greatest enemy", Pellissier lamented: "our children no longer sing our own *volksmusiek* [people's music.]"⁷¹ While he was evidently given to hyperbolic moral panic, read alongside scholarship of Afrikaner cultural history in the late apartheid period, his comment can be reliably interpreted as reflecting genuine cultural shifts. Albert Grundlingh and Jonathan Hyslop have argued that the increasing upward mobility of Afrikaners during apartheid and their increasing exposure to capitalist commodity culture and cosmopolitan styles of consumption worked to undermine conformist Afrikaner cultural worlds more

⁶⁹ W.H. Chafe, 'The backlash against social protesters' in W Dudley (ed.), *The 1960s*, (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000), 218–223.

⁷⁰ 'Watse flou protes teen Dallas?' *Die Beeld*, 24 June 1981

⁷¹ 'Pop-musiek is SA se grootste vyand, se skoolhoof,' *Die Oorsterlig*, 14 Nov, 1980

generally.⁷² The letters of complaint written to newspaper by Pallisser – dubbed “Mr. Sasolburg” for his embeddedness in local mores – suggest that the pattern discerned by Grundlingh and Hyslop also applied in Sasolburg. While panics about ‘ducktail’ gangs in the late 1950s and rock n’ rolling neighbors in the early 1970s may have reflected sub-cultural exceptions to the hegemonic rule in Sasolburg, Pelliser’s letters in the early 1980s angrily announced the eclipse of respectable modernism by an increasingly cosmopolitan modernism.

This chapter has argued that Sasolburg’s socio-spatial order was produced out of the interaction of the modernism of its town’s planner, Swiss émigré architect, Max Kirchhofer, the hegemonic local culture of respectability in the town and the seeming disinclination of ‘lower-income’ white residents to conform to its conformist injunctions linking respectability to the appearance of gardens and backyards, in particular. Kirchhofer’s modernism had to contend with the obduracy of both ‘backvelders’ and respectable burghers on the Highveld. While he had little patience with the petty respectable obsession with the visibility of ‘lower-income’, his reformist desire to “give the lower income groups an opportunity of creating congenial settings for their houses” resonated with the hegemonic culture in Sasolburg privileging neat gardens, clean yards and proper comportment as the key markers of respectability. In the next chapter, I explore the racially accented character of respectable aspiration in Sasolburg.

⁷² Jonathan Hyslop, ‘Shopping during a Revolution: Entrepreneurs, Retailers and “White” Identity in the Democratic Transition’ *Historia*, 50, 1, (May 2005), 173-190 and Grundlingh, ‘Are We Afrikaners Getting too Rich?’ Cornucopia and Change in Afrikanerdom in the 1960s’.

Chapter Four:

“another location in the white town”: Domestic labor, letter writing and the politics of space in Sasolburg

This chapter analyses letters of complaint written by Sasolburg’s white residents to various local, provincial and national officials in the 1960s and 70s. The letters address two issues (often within the same letter): their author’s inability to register the African women in their employ as “domestic servants” at the local labor bureau and the fact that a black sub-culture centered around African female domestic workers embedded itself in the town’s residential neighborhoods during this period. I argue that these letters were epistolary performances through which aspirantly middle class white residents, particularly women, learnt to plead and make claims upon officials, claiming what they regarded as their right to employ black domestic servants. Black domestic servants were taken to be, in this sense, what apartheid owed them. Their demands underline the importance of black domestic service – with emphasis placed upon service – to aspirant middle class white Sasolburgers expectations of modernity under apartheid.¹ This genre of letter required the rhetorical dexterity of authors attempting to persuade their recipients of the merit of the request for intercession. Through the elaborate explanations offered for the necessity of domestic ‘help’, the letters make visible the ways in which African women’s labor was crucial to the making of respectable homes, and the comfortable and

¹ With apologies to James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*.

leisured lives which came to be expected as a ‘right’ of middle class white South Africans in this period. Demonstrating need entailed female letter-writers (or their husbands) claiming that they couldn’t perform domestic labor for reasons related to age, health, their own engagement in wage work, or their efforts towards furthering their education. It also entailed the claim that the domestic servant in question was irreplaceable. This irreplaceability – markedly different to Jacklyn Cock’s vision of domestic workers under apartheid as “disposable nannies” – related to the claim that particular African women were exceptions to an imagined racial presumption of African unreliability: that they were trustworthy and possessed the ability to work hard.² I argue that the labor bureau regulations created the contingent circumstances in which African women in Sasolburg were able to claim higher wages and leverage for more advantageous conditions of service.

The letters of complaint written by white residents complaining about the presence and comportment of African women and men in the suburbs indicate that the specter of “another location in the white town” figured as a threat to white respectability in Sasolburg in this period. If African women’s domestic labor was indispensable to the making of respectable white homes, this dependency was inherently contradictory in its effects by working to subvert Sasolburg’s and apartheid’s respectable pretenses. This chapter suggests that Sasolburg in this period can usefully be treated as a sociological microcosm of the foundational contradiction at the heart of apartheid: the demands upon the labor of African women and men and the simultaneous disavowal of their presence.

² Jacklyn Cock ‘Disposable Nannies’, 63-83.

The real import of Dawid de Villiers “kitchen *kaffir*” remark lies in appreciating the fact that this transformation would entail Afrikaners exchanging racially transgressive pasts for a modernity where only African women would be subordinated in the position of ‘kitchen kaffirs’.

The chapter complicates our understanding of apartheid’s suburbs by putting meat on the bones of William Beinart’s suggestive claim that the country’s suburbs under apartheid “looked more black than white” on weekends, and especially on Sundays when African domestic workers had time off.³ Since the 1950s the seSotho folk name used by black male workers living in nearby Zamdela township to refer to the former ‘white town’ of Sasolburg has been *ditamateng* or ‘place of tomatoes’, an allusion to the voluptuous pleasures which many of these men associated with the women living and working in the suburbs as domestic workers. The metaphor hints at the existence of a subterranean culture of courtship, sexual intimacy – and ‘prostitution’, centered around the ‘servant quarters’ in the backyards of white owned and rented properties in Sasolburg.

If we approach the *ditamateng* metaphor with Phyllis Martin’s study of leisure in colonial Brazzaville in mind, we get a very different picture of Sasolburg’s suburbs in this period than the purified suburbs of Verwoerdian imagination.⁴ The women working as domestic workers in Sasolburg were not sealed off from the predominantly migrant African male working class compounded in Zamdela. I explore the racialised spatial

³ Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa*, 188.

⁴ Phyllis Martin. *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) See especially chapter 2, ‘Taking hold of the town’.

politics flowing from this fact. While African women and men were often harassed by police or property owners, they could also inhabit the suburbs in a manner that could be both relaxed and effusive, which evidently disturbed many white residents. There were even occasions in encounters at garden gates, on suburban streets, in kitchens and in backyards, where power relations could be momentarily inverted. Sasolburg may have been Apartheid's company town but it was still *ditamateng*.

“servant problems”

The expansion of the SASOL factory during the mid-1960s resulted in the doubling of both the local white and African populations. There was a concomitant increase in the demand for domestic workers in the expanding suburbs.⁵ In the middle of this period of expansion, the Director of Bantu Labor in the Ministry for Bantu Administration and Development reported the “endless difficulties” which white residents in Sasolburg were encountering in “recruiting domestic servants.” He explained that the town was “in the unhappy position” that it had been “built from the ground up” and there was therefore “no local Bantu population from which labor can be drawn.” Paradoxically, until this point farmers in the surrounding district had “enjoyed a surplus of (male and female) labor” but this labor was now “undeniably being attracted by the higher wages and better working conditions offered in town.”⁶ An estimated 1800 African women were working in Sasolburg as domestic workers in early 1965, but only

⁵ SAB. BAO, 105/A1/1604, Stadsgebiede Administrasie, Sasolburg, Bill Sharp to Mr. Froneman, 1st May, 1965.

⁶ SAB. BAO 105/A1/1604, Stadsgebiede Administrasie, Sasolburg, Director of Bantu Labour to Under Secretary of Bantu Labour, BAO, 7th April, 1965.

800 of these were legally registered to do so with the local labor bureau which was responsible for legal authorization of individual Africans right to work in putatively 'white' urban areas. During the first decade or so of Sasolburg's existence, local white farmers had complained repeatedly to the municipality, to SASOL and the provincial and national government about African women living on farms (most often with their husbands who worked there) who were making their labor available to residents in town as 'wash-women' and domestic workers.

The majority of African people living in farms surrounding Sasolburg in this period were labor tenants who were only able to live on white owned farms on the condition that they provided their labor to farmers – they were labor tenants. Many had been alienated from land by processes of conquest and dispossession in this region as recently as the late nineteenth century. Since the early 1950s, the emergence of the new industrial town and the varied opportunities it presented had attracted many men and women from the surrounding farms. White farmers, almost all Afrikaans-speaking, complained bitterly about squatting on their farms. "Ons plaas is hulle lokasie [our farms are their location]," the Secretary of the Sasolburg District Agricultural Union had written to Sasolburg's parliamentary representative in the early 1960s. "Maids and men work during the day [in town] and sleep on our farms at night and leave their little ones with us. If we remonstrate with them we lose the other farm workers. The town worker encourages the farm Bantu to not work after 12 on Friday and 5 o'clock on week days."⁷ White farmers believed that even a brief spell of wage labor in town meant that these

⁷ SAB. BAO, 1433, A17/1603, Dorpstiging.G.F. van L. Froneman to Adjunct Secretary, White Areas, 6 Feb, 1962.

woman and men had begun a transformation from “farm workers” into “town workers.” They were likely to claim the clearly demarcated working hours entailed in waged work and even encouraged “the farm Bantu to not work” beyond these hours. Farmers wanted their former farm laborers working in Sasolburg as domestic workers to stop sleeping on their farms and they demanded an embargo be placed on any further women being allowed into Sasolburg without their written permission.

After a number of meetings and much deliberation, the Department for Bantu Administration and Development granted an amnesty allowing existing ‘illegally’ employed domestic workers to be registered. No further exceptions would be made after 1st January, 1965 in an effort to stop the leakage of African female farm laborers into Sasolburg. The official claim that the root of the problem was that Sasolburg was a new town unable to draw on an existing reservoir of black labor was only part of the story. Obviously apartheid’s ‘influx control’ regulations restricting African women’s movement into urban areas prescribed as “white” – a legacy of long-standing resistance to the presence of independent African women in urban areas in South Africa – was chiefly to blame.⁸ Another important reason why women from surrounding farming districts were in such demand in Sasolburg homes was because of the alternative sources of income open to single African women living in the nearby African township, Zamdela. Officials reported that they were “earning extra money through immoral means” (beer brewing and ‘prostitution’) while “married women” sold fruit, maize and other food stuffs to the large

⁸ Phil Bonner, “Desirable or Undesirable Women? Liquor, Prostitution, and the Migration of Basotho Women to the Rand, 1920-1945,” in Cheryl Walker, ed., *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990)

African male migrant population working at SASOL.⁹ In other words, ‘single’ African women in Zamdela maintained a measure of autonomy, and were not drawn into waged domestic labor in Sasolburg precisely because of the alternative livelihood strategies open to them, while ‘married’ African women avoided domestic work in white homes by supplementing what conjugal resources they were able to access with income drawn from ‘respectable’ informal economic activities.¹⁰

African women living in farming districts and small rural towns around Sasolburg responded with alacrity to the demands for their domestic labor in the new company town. If, as the letters analyzed in this chapter suggest, many of Sasolburg’s white residents believed they were entitled to the services of African domestic labor, apartheid’s Kafkaesque bureaucratic regulations over African labor and its movements conspired to confound this expectation. Though white residents were unable to secure their servants’ legal registration, they were sufficiently desperate for the domestic labor provided by these women, that they employed them regardless. A peculiar situation developed in Sasolburg where otherwise self-consciously law-abiding white citizens employed African women in contravention of apartheid laws. Once the initial registration amnesty passed, there were still a number of residents who had not registered their domestic servants or who, apparently unable to attain ‘legally’ employable African women, insisted on employing ‘illegal’ African women. The municipality threatened to

⁹ SAB. BAO, 105/A1/1604, Stadsgebiede Administrasie, Sasolburg Director of Bantu Labour to Under Secretary of Bantu Labour, BAO, 7th April, 1964.

¹⁰ The distinction between the categories and livelihood strategies of married and single women here is one which takes fairly clear form in the cultural politics of twentieth century South African township life. See Belinda Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*.

fine residents who its inspectors found in contravention of labor bureau regulations, and to have the African women who were illegally employed arrested.

Their inability to secure the services of ‘legal’ domestic servants (rather than, say, concern about the fate of arrested African women) prompted a number of affected white Sasolburg residents – mostly, though not exclusively women – to write letters to a range of officials, pleading for their domestic servants to be registered. From the mid-1960s into the early 1970s, the local municipal controlled labor bureau, Sasolburg’s parliamentary representative, the Chief Bantu Commissioner in Johannesburg and the BAO Ministry in Pretoria received an increasing volume of written complaints about the registration of domestic workers. Such was the extent of the ‘servant problem’ that in mid-1965 the municipality reported to Pretoria that the “Sasolburg public has lost faith in the labor bureau.”¹¹ The significance of this should not be underestimated: the labor bureaus were *the* single most important local instantiation of apartheid’s bureaucratic power across the country.¹²

Whether letters invoked age, pregnancy or ill health, white women’s inability to perform domestic labor provided the most common justification offered for claims upon African women’s domestic labor. In September 1972, Mr. D.J. Marais wrote to the Chief Bantu Commissioner in Bloemfontein explaining that his wife was pregnant with their third child and she was due to have a third caesarian operation, and “so has been warned

¹¹ SAB. BAO, 105/A1/1604, Stadsgebiede Administrasie, Sasolburg Secretary of BAO to Adjunct Secretary of White Areas, 12 May, 1965.

¹² For more on the labor bureaus see Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race* and Breckenridge ‘Verwoerd’s Bureau of Proof’.

against working and aggravating” her caesarian wound. They had placed their names on a waitlist for a domestic worker at the local labor bureau but the clerk had told them there was a shortage of legally employable women. They had tried unsuccessfully to transfer a woman from another town. With his wife’s “confinement, two babies, lots of housework and wet nappies,” he wrote “something had to be done.” Out of desperation they had employed an ‘illegal’ women whose passbook was only valid for work in the nearby Kroonstad farming district. Mr. Marais was scandalized by the municipality’s warnings that “soon a police van will drive past here to prosecute people with servants whose passbooks aren’t right, to lock up the servants and to fine us.”

The unavailability and overburdening of white women’s domestic labors were also frequently cited in letters, as women sought to convince officials why they themselves couldn’t perform domestic work. In April 1972, Mrs. A.M. Swart wrote to the municipality “out of pure desperation” complaining that she had been “without a servant, or someone deserving of that title” for two years. A succession of African women had, she claimed, “almost burnt-out my stove, done nothing in the house or cleaned me out.” The week before she penned her letter, a “promising one” had apparently been steered her way by a neighbor, but “her pass[book] isn’t right” – she wasn’t (and couldn’t be) legally registered to work in Sasolburg. “Now, I’m stuck without a servant.” Mrs. Swart explained that she was working full-time at SASOL and was also studying for her Bachelor of Arts degree through UNISA, the largest distance education university in South Africa. Her teenage daughter’s labor was also unavailable, she explained, because she was in her final year of high school and couldn’t be expected to “cook and clean the

house in her study time, because she is not clever and must study very hard.” Her son was nine years old and “can’t make food for himself.” Both children came home from school “late and I have to ensure that they have food.” She asked the manager of the Department of non-white Affairs to help find her a “legal servant.”¹³

As Shireen Ally has noted, white employers of domestic workers in South Africa have often presented their employment of African women as a form of charity, thereby obscuring the exploitative wage labor relationship at the heart of the institution.¹⁴ Letter-writers in Sasolburg marshaled similar moral arguments when they argued that employing particular African woman constituted a necessary, compassionate act. In 1966, Mrs. A.J. Meyer wrote explaining that she employed a “young Bantu woman” who she knew as “Jane Seele” from “Kuruman native reserve” in the Northern Cape. As all African women were classified as legal minors, Jane Seele’s father, who was her guardian, had given permission for his daughter to work in Sasolburg. Mrs. Meyer couldn’t understand why she couldn’t register Seele and claimed (perhaps rather opportunistically) there was a moral obligation to employ her: “in the reserves there are lots of women and they sit without work and they die from hunger.”¹⁵ Mrs. Meyer insisted that Seele was “very trustworthy” and, significantly, that she was carefully policed: “I don’t let her out of the yard without my permission and she doesn’t walk around.” This kind of gesture towards the performance of employer vigilance was clearly

¹³ STCF, 3/11/2, Bediendes, Mrs. A.M. Swart to Manager of Department of Non-white Affairs, Sasolburg, 18 April, 1972.

¹⁴ Shireen Ally. *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ STCF, 3/11/2, Bediendes, Mrs. A.J. Meyer to Mr. Froneman, 12 October 1966.

thought by letter-writers to be an important rhetorical strategy in a context where officials and residents were preoccupied with the association of African women in suburban Sasolburg with ‘immorality’ and general disorder. Mrs. Meyer’s letter also suggested that the shortage of legally employable domestic workers in Sasolburg created the contingent conditions in which African women were able to claim higher wages and more advantageous conditions of service than they may otherwise have been able to. She complained that “Those [African women] that are going around here fix their wages, conditions etc as it suits them because we are now at a loss, there are no servants.” Another woman self-identifying as a ‘housewife’ complained that “after the whole registration business, they demand a salary of R18. What ordinary salary man can afford to pay a servant that?”

Letter-writers’ appeals on compassionate grounds could sometimes be less nakedly opportunistic. Mrs. E. Lamprecht wrote to the municipality explaining that the woman she wanted registered, Meriam Cindi, was from a farm in Frankfort, not far from Sasolburg. The farmer had downsized his workforce and Mrs. Cindi and her husband had been forced to leave and look for work, leaving their children on the farm with their grandparents. Cindi and her husband were themselves disqualified from working in Sasolburg because they were from a farming district nearby so “they had a big problem trying to rectify things.” Somehow, despite his ‘illegality’, Cindi’s husband had managed to get the necessary endorsement on his passbook allowing him to work in Sasolburg, and he secured accommodation in a hostel in Zamdela. The problem was that Mrs. Cindi could not go back to the farm; she couldn’t work legally in Sasolburg; she couldn’t live

with her husband, and yet, Mrs. Lamprecht exclaimed, with perhaps some appreciation of the Kafkaesque absurdity: “she has to feed and clothe her children!” In the interim period since leaving the farm Mrs. Cindi had been doing odd-jobs like washing and ironing in the suburbs, but the white residents she was doing this for had no servant quarters, an indication that they were most likely lower income residents whose houses did not include such accommodations.

Unlike other letter-writers Mrs. Lamprecht’s request did not hinge on her demonstrating need. She wrote that she didn’t want a “maid that will bake and cook while I lay about all day.” Her children were grown up, she explained, and helped out around the house. “This woman has made a great impression on me; a person feels very small when an old maid cries and pleads that one must help her so that she can get a little bit of food and money in her hands.” Pity, tinged, perhaps, with embarrassment, had apparently moved Mrs. Lamprecht to employ Meriam Cindi, though we shouldn’t reduce their interaction to a morality play of a kind-hearted white woman taking pity on a powerless, suffering black woman. Once more, it is important to remember, as Shireen Ally’s work demonstrates, that domestic workers like Cindi performed “emotional work” as they negotiated their relationships with white employers.¹⁶ In her letter, Mrs. Lamprecht herself went beyond the easy morality of pity, engaging with the terms of the apartheid state’s claims to philanthropic intent in its dealings with African people: “we have to hear the whole day how our government helps the Bantus and how much upliftment work is done for them.” She echoed official and anthropological discourses constructing the

¹⁶ Ally. *From Servants to Workers*, 103.

“urban Bantu” as detribalized and beset by familial strife, arguing that “the primary reason for the immorality and bad character of the Bantu is the fact that they have no family ties and we as their superiors, must help to recreate these ties, so that they can also realize and shoulder the obligations and responsibilities of a family.” Cindi and her husband afforded an opportunity, Mrs. Lamprecht suggested, for the nurturing of a respectable, urban ‘Bantu’ family. “There are certainly people who think that we should chase all the non-whites into the sea, but I believe this is not the policy that we should have in our minds, and no person with anything more than pumpkin seeds between their ears will heed such suggestions.” The letter finished with a request for a “sympathetic hearing for the case”, especially because she couldn’t see how Meriam Cindi could “make a living” without being legally registered to work in Sasolburg. Cindi’s situation was precarious; she was working on a temporary permit which would soon expire, leaving her vulnerable to imprisonment.¹⁷

By contrast, the majority of female letter-writers were wedded to a rather less complicated understanding of the apartheid social contract, where their expectation as white women, mothers and wives was that the state would deliver black domestic servants to their families. Mrs. Meyer, a SASOL employee, couched her complaint in terms of her interlinked allegiances to company and country: “I am loyal to my country and my company but I will be forced to resign if I can’t get my servant registered.” There were, she claimed, two other women at SASOL who were “going to resign over the servant question if things don’t get better. We women are incensed and are planning on

¹⁷ STCF, 3/11/2, Bediendes, Mrs. E. Lamprecht to Mr Jacobs, 28 Aug, 1967.

drawing up a petition.”¹⁸ For these women, SASOL was synonymous with the nation and the interests of the nation, company and home are treated as synonymous. In December 1967, Mrs. A.J.R. Swart wrote complaining about her inability to get an African woman named Lydia Senowe registered. She had apparently been pushed “from pillar to post” between different labor bureau offices in her efforts to get Senowe registered. Senowe – who would have had her own reasons to want to be legally employed – had accompanied Mrs. Swart on multiple car journeys to the labor bureau offices, because both employer and employee were required to be present at registration. All such efforts were unsuccessful, but it was not long after Mrs. Swart had given up her efforts that she learnt that Lydia Senowe had been successfully registered by another woman living in Sasolburg. In a furious letter, Mrs. Swart insisted that she was “strong supporter of Apartheid” but this was “the kind of thing that caused people to be suspicious of the government.”¹⁹ A woman named Mrs. H.A Labuschagne who self-identified as a “housewife who does some office work”, wrote to the “Minister of Bantu Affairs” wanting to know why there were “hundreds of women” in Sasolburg “on the waiting list for servants”, warning “I have helped with the organization of the National Party and many nationalists do not want to vote because of this servant problem.”²⁰ What else was apartheid good for, these letters asked, if white homes couldn’t secure the services of domestic servants?

¹⁸ STCF, 3/11/2, Bediendes, Mrs. A.J. Meyer to Mr. Froneman, 12 October 1966.

¹⁹ SAB, BAO, 1/1603 481/313 Stadsgebeide Administrasie, Sasolburg: Huisebediendes, Mrs. A.J.R Swart to Chief Bantu Commissioner, Johannesburg, 4 December 1967.

²⁰ STCF, 3/11/2, Bediendes, Mrs. H.A. Labuschagne to Minister for Bantu Affairs, 17 November, 1970.

“I’m not here to wash hands, I’m here to work”

Mrs. Swart’s angry response to ‘losing’ her preferred domestic servant underlines the ways in which the ‘trustworthy’ and ‘hardworking’ domestic worker was constructed as the precious commodity at the heart of Sasolburg domestic labor market.²¹ Mrs. S.J. Van Rensburg wrote complaining that she had employed an African woman from a farm near Parys, (a small rural town not far from Sasolburg), but she had not been able to get the woman legally registered because of the law prohibiting the employment of Africans living on farms in white urban areas. Like many such letter-writers, Mrs. van Rensburg claimed that she couldn’t perform domestic work for health reasons. Her request for an exceptional registration to be made after the expiry of the registration amnesty was founded on a claim to the racial exceptionality of the African woman in question, who Mrs. van Rensburg insisted was a “trustworthy, hard-working maid unlike the majority of these women who are so cheeky and disloyal.”²²

Shireen Ally has argued that domestic workers in South Africa have long deployed “the affective performativity of deference” as a way to informally assert limited control over their work situations.²³ We can read the premium placed on trustworthiness and obedient comportment in letters such as this as indicative of the fact that African women working in suburban homes in Sasolburg were often disinclined to perform

²¹ Individual African women often moved between white households on the basis of housewives vouching for their ‘trustworthy’ character.

²² SAB. BAO, 1/1603 481/313 Stadsgebeide Administrasie, Sasolburg: Huisebediendes, Mrs. S.J. van Rensburg to Secretary of Prime Minister’s Office, 16 Sept, 1966.

²³ Ally. *From Servants to Workers*, 104.

deference *unconditionally*. Letters often explicitly refer to women refusing to conform to expectations of black submissiveness. Individuals, like a woman known to us through the archive only as ‘Elizabeth’, prompted her female employer to complain “she doesn't want to work or speak courteously.”²⁴ ‘Elizabeth’ was not alone, as became clear from an interview I conducted with a former domestic worker, Ma Mabasa.

Ma Mabasa was born on a farm in the farming district Heilbron, not far from Sasolburg, in 1931. In 1952, when the town was still a dusty construction site and there was no electricity, Ma Mabasa first started to “iron and cook for the whites.” She bitterly recalled sleeping in a “small passage” in the back of the house of her first employer, and she likened the small out-houses at the back of white properties which were – and often still are – commonly used to house African domestic workers in South Africa to “toilets.” Such segregatory spatial practices extended into the policing by some (though not all) white employers of the touching and use of household objects. Ma Mabasa recalled how “everything you touch, you must wash your hands. Before you touch a broom you must wash your hands every time.” Touching taboos, expressions of racialized pollution beliefs, appear to have been especially strictly enforced around food and eating. “They think Africans are unclean. The dish that you are using for eating – as a domestic worker, your dish stays outside.” While many white employers expected domestic workers to obediently follow such humiliating injunctions, the complaints in middle class white letter-writing suggest that African women did not necessarily conform to such expectations. Ma Mabasa similarly insisted that she had a limit. “I refused. Every time

²⁴ STCF, 3/11/2, Bediendes, Mrs. Muller to Manager, Non-white Affairs, Sasolburg, 30 June, 1971.

when they said I must wash my hands – every now and then I refused and said I’m leaving.” She defiantly told her employers: “I’m not here to wash hands, I’m here to work.” Ma Mabasa worked for a range of different employers in Sasolburg: Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking white families and Greek and Portuguese immigrant families. One apparently “very rich” white family she worked for were “ok, they were not racist. I used to eat in their dishes.” Ma Mabasa remembered another family with particular bitterness:

The others were treating me like a dog. I worked too hard. Toilets, ironing, plates, kitchen, polishing. On Tuesdays and Fridays when I go to work there, they make sure the house is filthy so that I could work, work. I was only getting R5. I put my dish with their dishes and the women she says why did you put your dish there, it mustn’t stay there. I said if you’re going to treat me like a dog, I’m going to leave and go back to the other one. R5 in a month. I did whole job on the house. Sweeping, cleaning windows, washing the curtains, polish the floors. R5. You Iron, wash clothes but at the end of the month you get only R5.²⁵

Such accounts of endless toil, exploitative wages and racial humiliation are certainly a central theme of former domestic workers’ accounts of working in suburban Sasolburg’s homes. It is important to note, however, that Ma Mabasa, like other African women working as domestic workers, distinguished between employers who were “not that racist” and those who treated her “like a dog”; those who were comfortable eating from the same plate as her and those who were not. Ma Mabasa’s admonishment “I am not here to wash hands, I’m here to work” points to the existence of a ‘moral economy’ at the heart of relationships between white employers and black domestic workers, where women recently drawn from farming contexts (which as Timothy Keegan and Charles

²⁵ Interview with Ma Mabasa.

van Onselen have demonstrated were defined by paternalistic social relationships with white farmers), engaged for the first time in wage labor in Sasolburg with the expectation of a minimum level of mutuality and fairness in return.²⁶ But this wasn't a simple matter of how different employers treated the domestic workers in their employ; as Ma Mabasa's allusion to her threat to leave and "go back to the other one" suggests domestic workers were not necessarily passive recipients of treatment, ill or fair. They endeavored in what small ways they could, in always contingent though generally very unfavorable circumstances, to leverage for better employment conditions, playing employers off against each other for better wages, for intersubjective recognition – even if that merely meant being able to eat off the same plates as their employers.

If farmers believed that Africans who had worked even briefly in town were no longer fit for farm labor, many white residents expressed a preference for women who were directly drawn from rural districts or farms, rather than those who had lived and worked in urban areas like Sasolburg for any meaningful period of time. The difference they perceived centered on African women's comportment. One woman ruefully complained to the Sasolburg Parliamentary representative that it was "hard to find servants" and "those that are in Sasolburg are so bad and untrustworthy, they have

²⁶ For farm paternalism see Charles van Onselen 'The Social and Economic Underpinning of Paternalism and Violence on the Maize Farms of the South-Western Transvaal, 1900-1950' in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (June 1992), 127-155 and Timothy Keegan, *Rural Transformation in Industrializing South Africa :The Southern. Highveld to 1914*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1986) p. 157; For 'moral economy', see James C. Scott. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) and E.P. Thompson 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present* (1971) 50(1): 76-136.

previously robbed and stolen from me.”²⁷ In early 1968, Mrs. H. Griessel wrote to the Minister in charge of “native affairs” in Pretoria, asking for help in securing a “Bantu woman from the neighboring farms” near Sasolburg, whom she wished to employ twice a week to perform “the heaviest work” in her house. She complained that the “location women” – women living in Zamdela township – “don’t want to work because their husbands work in the factory and get them food.” In any case, she wrote “if you are able to get one, they are so untrustworthy.”²⁸ A teleological vision of the transformations of African women’s comportment entailed in the move from the rural to the urban underpinned this politics. The complicated migratory itineraries and identities of African men and women were reduced to the tired tropes of “the rural Bantu” and “the urban Bantu.”

Having missed the initial amnesty deadline, all of the registration requests contained in these letters were refused. The labor bureau’s renewed commitment to securing farm labor for the farmers surrounding Sasolburg was the overwhelming policy consideration at work, but in his responses to the registration requests the Chief Bantu Commissioner based in Johannesburg also invoked the apocalyptic demographic arithmetic of “the rate of growth of the Bantu population in the urban areas.” “Whilst the individual is inclined to regard the matter from a somewhat narrow point of view of personal interest and convenience, [the government] must, of necessity, have regard to

²⁷ SAB, BAO, 1/1603 481/313 Stadsgebeide Administrasie, Sasolburg: Huisebediendes, Mev A.J. Meyer to Sasolburg’s MP, Mr. Froneman 12 October 1966.

²⁸ SAB, BAO, 1/1603 481/313 Stadsgebeide Administrasie, Sasolburg: Huisebediendes, Mrs. H. Griessel to “Minister of Native Affairs”, 23 February, 1968.

the interest of the public in general and the country as a whole.”²⁹ The starkness and confidence of this formulation disguises the fact that the contradiction between white dependence on black labor and anxiety about the “*oorstroming*” (swamping) of white communities by African people was the foundational and enduring contradiction at the heart of apartheid.³⁰ It was a contradiction very much in evidence in Sasolburg.

Sasolburg’s aspirant middle class residents begged officials to register the ‘domestic servants’ living in the cramped rooms in their backyards, but they also complained bitterly, sometimes in the same letters, about the effervescent black subculture which embedded itself in Sasolburg’s streets during this period.

“ditamateng”

When Mr. Turner wrote to Sasolburg’s Town Clerk in late 1969 complaining about the gardens of his white neighbors he added a postscript in which he reported: “at the houses from 74 and 78 in the same street you will find natives sleeping with girls in the rooms every night.”³¹ The ‘girls’ in question were African women employed as domestic workers, housed in the small back rooms which were a close to standard feature of middle class, white suburban architecture under apartheid; the ‘natives’ were African men who most likely worked for SASOL and otherwise lived in nearby Zamdela township. Like Mr. Turner, officials and residents who wrote to complain invariably invoked an underspecified ‘immorality’, when they referred to the relations between

²⁹ SAB, BAO, 1/1603 481/313 Stadsgebeide Administrasie, Sasolburg: Huisebediendes, Chief Bantu Commissioner, Witwatersrand to Mr W.H.J. McCluskey, 21st December, 1966.

³⁰ Deborah Posel ‘The apartheid project, 1948–1970’, 336.

³¹ STCF, 18/10/25, Complaints, Mr Turner to Town Clerk, 19th Nov, 1969.

African men and women in these backrooms. Because, of SASOL's use of an overwhelmingly migrant labor workforce and apartheid's 'influx control' mechanisms, there was a heavily skewed local sex ratio of approximately 9 men for every African woman in the general Sasolburg area. In April 1964 the Director of Bantu Labor observed that "the large number of single women in servant rooms" represented a "big attraction to the white town for the 4,400 men" living in the single-sex hostels in Zamdela township, as well as "for others that don't have proper accommodation and would like to go to bed in backyards. There are complaints about the immorality going on."³² African women were not only coveted by white Sasolburgers as domestic servants; their bodies, their labor and their company were also sought after by male African migrants, who longed for what Luise White called the "comforts of home."³³ As a result – in spite of police efforts to enforce curfews and pass laws – a black subculture embedded itself in Sasolburg's backyards and streets. The oral accounts of life under apartheid by older men living in Zamdela are interspersed with allusions to this effervescent social world of leisure, sociability, and courtship. Mr. Jacob Sibisi, a former driver at SASOL who moonlighted as a concert promoter told me:

There was a law that blacks mustn't be in town 9 o'clock. There was a standing curfew. If you had a girlfriend in town you just make sure you go and visit and make sure that 9 o'clock you must be out. Sometimes there's a circus in town, and when you go out from the circus near where the speed cop stands by SASOL, there was a belt that transfer[ed] coal to the factory. They used to stand there, all the policeman. We are coming from the circus; you have to rush at 9 o'clock because if you're late you're

³² SAB. BAO, 105/A1/1604, Stadsgebiede Administrasie, Sasolburg, Director of Bantu Labour (in BAO) to Under Secretary of Bantu Labour, BAO, 7th April, 1964.

³³ Luise White. *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1990).

arrested. There was a lot of ladies there [in Sasolburg]. *We called them tomatoes*, [laughs] *we called Sasolburg ditamateng – the place of tomatoes*. On Sundays all these girls that worked in town used to come here [to Zamdela] to watch soccer and tribal dancing. They were so beautiful! Beautiful women! After 5 o'clock we take them back now to town again.³⁴

To this day *ditamateng* is the folk name used by older men in Zamdela to refer to Sasolburg. This metaphorical allusion to the intimate pleasures which many such men associated with the African women living and working in town invites us to reconsider the common assumption in the South African historiography that black townships and the white towns they serviced were “bounded” spaces under apartheid, sealed off from each other.³⁵ The African women living in Sasolburg’s backyards were clearly not sealed off from the predominantly migrant African male population in Zamdela. Nor was it a fleeting phenomenon. It seems transactional sex in Sasolburg’s backyards remained a feature of everyday life in this town right through to the end of the apartheid period, at least. In a scene in Rrekgetsi Chimeloane’s autobiographical novel *The Hostel Dwellers*, African migrant men employed by SASOL who lived in a hostel in the late 1980s are portrayed discussing ‘quarters’, another reference to the ‘servant quarters’ in Sasolburg:

“You know,” Dambuzo lowered his voice, resuming his position next to me. “That Jan, he loves the front part. Every pay day...you must check him out...he does not sleep here at the hostel. He sleeps at quarters with matekasi.”

What is quarters?” I asked, pretending that I didn’t know. I had already heard a dozen stories about quarters, but I wanted to know more about it.

³⁴ Interview with Mr Sibisi by author. Emphasis added. See next chapter for further discussion of Mr Sibisi’s life.

³⁵ See for instance, most recently, Belinda Bozzoli, *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 20-21.

“You don’t know quarters do you?” Dambuzo laughed at me. “Quarters is where things are happening. Quarters is where men are milked dry – of their money. It’s where men lose their families.” I could feel excitement in his voice. He was moving all over the chair as he spoke with a dry mouth. “Quarters is the name given to white suburbs. Matekatse are the female domestics. Some of these women sell the front part for a price. Most of the men in the hostel have been there. Young and old. Good and bad. You may find yourself there one day as time goes on.” I didn’t know how to respond to that. In an area where the ratio of men to women was out of reasonable proportions, it was going to be practically impossible to find a girl.”³⁶

Matekatse carries heavily gendered meanings: in seSotho it is most often used to denote women thought of as ‘prostitutes’, and is derived “from *ho teka*, ‘to roam about’, and *ho tekatasa*, ‘to abandon one’s husband’, signifying an independent woman, free of the control but bereft of the support of father, old brother or husband.”³⁷ The reference to men losing their families in ‘quarters’ is in fact a dominant trope in oral histories of Zamdela, as indeed it is in oral histories of migrant labor in South Africa more generally.³⁸ Even the township’s name is commonly believed by residents of both sexes and all generations to relate directly to the failure of African migrants men working at SASOL to return to their rural homes from SASOL. As will be especially clear in the final chapter, the women who provide temptations at “*ditamateng*” or ‘quarters’, are specifically blamed – to the point of demonization – for encouraging men to form new relationships, new marriages and new families in town.

³⁶ Rrekgetsi Chimeloane, *The Hostel Dwellers: A first hand account*, (Kwela Books, 1998), 37-38.

³⁷ David Coplan, *In the time of cannibals: the word music of South Africa’s Basotho migrants*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1994), 170.

³⁸ Dunbar Moodie and Vivienne Ndatshé, ‘Town Women and Country Wives: Migrant Labor, Family Politics and Housing Preferences at Vaal Reefs Mine’, *Labour, Capital and Society*, 25: 1, (April 1992), 116-132.

“Matekatse”

For African women too, migration to Sasolburg from the early 1950s could afford considerable independence, freed from the constraints of kin that they may have desired to leave behind in rural districts in a similar manner to African women moving to other towns in industrializing South Africa from the early decades of the twentieth century.³⁹ Archival evidence suggests that husbands and fathers often tried to enlist the help of white officials in their efforts to regain control of their errant wives and daughters who moved to Sasolburg. In November 1972, a man from Steynrus in the Free State complained to the local magistrate that his wife had “run away” and was living with her mother in Sasolburg, where her mother worked as a domestic worker. The Bantu Commissioner of Sasolburg told the Steynrus magistrate to order the women to “go back to her husband.”⁴⁰ In February 1966, Simon Maseko, a Golden Gate national park employee at Clarens in the eastern Free State wrote to the superintendent of Zamdela location complaining that his wife:

Ran away from me and left my children alone in the house while I was at work. I hear from the rumours that she is there in Sasolburg though I cannot quite [be] sure about the place where she is working...she is known by the name of Christian Dladla...I am now making a petition to the superintendent to help me as I am still in search.⁴¹

³⁹ Bonner, ‘Desirable or Undesirable Women?’

⁴⁰ STCF, Magistrate, Ref N7/13/2, Steynrus to Bantu Commissioner, Sasolburg; 23 Nov, 1972.

⁴¹ STCF, 5/10/2, Simon Maseko to Superintendent of Zamdela location, 22nd Feb 1966.

Christian Dladla had apparently left Clarens just over a year before, in March of 1965 and, having not apparently broken ties with her parents, returned to her parental home for a visit in Clarens that December. Having gotten wind of Christian's presence in Clarens, Simon had confronted his wife at her parent's house, but she had refused to comply with his demands to return to him, and had "departed totally from Clarens", returning to Sasolburg.

The backyard relationships between African men and women in Sasolburg were about more than simply sex, though they most certainly often pivoted around sex. The government official's allusion in the quote above to "others that don't have proper accommodation" who "would like to go to bed in backyards" hints at the logics other than sex at work in these backyard relationships. What constituted 'proper accommodation'? For migrant laborer men living in cramped single-sex hostels in Zamdela Township this must have included the kinds of domestic (and sexual) labors performed by wives and female kin in rural districts. Further interviews confirmed the intuition that like the African women in colonial Nairobi that Luise White describes, African women in Sasolburg's backyards provided "conversation, cooked food, and bathwater [to] revive, flatter and revive male energies."⁴² They helped to reproduce both Zamdela's male migrant population, and Sasolburg's white families through their domestic labor.

⁴² White, *Comforts of Home*, 11.

“another location in the white town”

While the letters analyzed in the first half of this chapter illustrated the ways in which Sasolburg’s aspirant middle class white residents worked to secure the services of African domestic workers, many of these same residents wrote to officials complaining about the presence and comportment of African women and men in the town’s streets. It was precisely the threat of the phenomenological blurring of the white town and black township or ‘location’ which was at issue for such residents. In September 1966, Mrs. H. Scheepers wrote to the manager of the Sasolburg Labor Bureau asking for “maids” living on farms near Sasolburg to be allowed to work in town because, she said, “they don’t want to sleep in the servant’s quarters.” She explained: “there are many of us housewives here in Sasolburg that have let our maids end their service because their husbands work on the farms.” Some African women returned to their conjugal homes on local farms every night after working in the suburbs during the day. They may have done so out of preference, obligation or compulsion. The point, of course, was that such women could not legally be registered as domestic workers in Sasolburg. She had just had to terminate the services of a woman who had worked for her for a year, and she complained that this had placed her “in great difficulty because she can’t work for medical reasons.” She asked for an exception to be made so that the woman working for her could continue to do so, despite the fact that she was “sleeping on the farm.” The municipality’s threat to fine residents who employed illegal domestic workers riled because of the racial category confusion she believed it entailed: “we white employees might as well be penalized as non-white servants.” By the end of the letter it becomes clear that having domestic

workers sleep on local farms suited her for other reasons: “the municipality boasts of having a clean town, but what is happening here with servants sleeping in the town? It is a dirty nest, another location in the white town.”⁴³ The language invoking cleanliness and dirt here is extremely significant because, as Mary Douglas argued, the metaphorical invocation of dirt invariably implies the presence of “matter-out-of-place” – in this case, the presence of black people in a white town, like so much dirt spoiling a white surface.⁴⁴ The spectre of the ‘location’ overwhelming the white town returns us to the fear of ‘*oorstrooming*’ or swamping, apartheid’s founding phobia.

While transactional sex was an important part of the subculture which African men and women co-constructed in Sasolburg’s suburbs, scandalized claims about “natives sleeping with girls in the rooms every night” merely skim at the licentious surface of what African conviviality in the town entailed. It took much more mundane forms. Sasolburg, as older white residents never tired of pointing out, is not just a factory town. It is a town of trees. In 1965, an article in a Vaal Triangle newspaper claimed that the town “must surely be the most tree conscious town in the country, if not the world.” In the “European area” it boasted “there are three trees for every European resident” – 27.167 trees to 10.937 persons to be exact. “It is hoped”, city engineer Nic Ferreira wrote in a report on census returns, “that for a long time to come the ratio of three trees to two European residents will be maintained in Sasolburg and that the number of trees in the

⁴³ STCF, 3/11/2, Bediendes, H.P.C. Scheepers to Manager of Labour Bureau, Non-white Affairs, Sasolburg, 21 September, 1966.

⁴⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44.

town will never be less than the number of European residents.”⁴⁵ Trees and whiteness in Sasolburg were intimately related and the thickening arboreal landscape of the town was thought of as a marker of the maturing of a town established, apparently against all odds, by white SASOL ‘pioneers’ in the maize fields of the northern Free State. But Sasolburg’s bountiful trees and their plentiful shade could also inadvertently disturb an otherwise seemingly untroubled whiteness. In 1968, a resident named H. Vermeulen wrote to the Town Clerk:

I think it’s objectionable. Every day, in your parks and gardens you can see Bantu men and women under the trees and on the grass, lying in the shade of the trees that you have planted for beautification. In the evenings and especially on Sundays you can’t walk in the business district without coming across a Kaffir and a maid who ruin the place by making a big racket. Why is nothing done about this? The Bantu have their own residential area, keep them there and let us whites live in peace. They also make a mess, leaving litter everywhere.⁴⁶

The presence of African people is here again explicitly linked to “matter out of place” - to dirt, to litter, but also, in the figures of the “kaffir” and the “maid”, to noise as nuisance. In 1969 Mr. O.Keyser similarly complained about a tree near the side of his house in one of the green belts that he insisted needed to be cut down because it was a “gathering place for natives who are disturbing us residents.”⁴⁷ In 1970 Mr. P.W. Rawlins wrote complaining about “Bantus drinking alcohol” in the green belt walk-way passing between his house and that of his neighbor, a Mr. Venter. In his response, the Town Clerk sympathized, confirming that such activities were commonly occurring elsewhere in

⁴⁵ ‘Sasolburg very conscious about trees’, *Vereeniging and Vanderbijlpark News*, Friday, July 9th, 1965

⁴⁶ STCF,5/17/1, Complaints, H.J. Vermeulen to Town Clerk, 20 Sept, 1968.

⁴⁷ STCF, 5/17/1, Complaints, O.Keyser to Town Clerk, 1st August, 1969.

Sasolburg, including (as claimed to have witnessed himself) in the “business center of town.” He blamed the “exceedingly limited Bantu police force” which he explained was “poorly positioned to deal with the illegal movements of Bantus” Unless the (white) police could help deal with this kind of “trespassing” – a suggestively proprietary metaphor to describe segregation’s transgression – the Town Clerk explained “we are left powerless.”⁴⁸

In 1972 Mr. R. Mulder bitterly complained to the Town Clerk: “I am sick of the Bantus right in front of my house in the A.J. Jacobs school grounds.” A building had originally been built in the corner of the school grounds five years previously, to accommodate the African workers employed by the school as cleaners. The nation-wide tightening up of regulations restricting the number of African employees allowed to be accommodated in sleeping quarters in urban areas meant that the school was only allowed to house one employee on premises during the winter months (May-August) when the school’s heating system needed to be lit in the early morning hours. Construction work at the school meant that additional male African workers were living on site, apparently without the permission of the municipality. Mulder complained that especially on weekends, but also during the week, there were “groups of Bantus” who walked “freely in and out of the school grounds.” After complaining to the school principal and the police, Mulder claimed “things improved”, but “in the last year it’s gotten worse.” Additional “huts” – as he called them – were erected in the school, directly opposite his house. Since then, “other Bantus (mostly women) visit, sit and drink

⁴⁸ STCF, 5/14, Bantusake, Town Clerk to Mr. P.W Rawlins, 19 June, 1970; Town Clerk Memorandum, 10 February 1972.

and make a racket [*lawaaai*].” When Mulder complained to the police, the men and women concerned were “taken away”, but “within half an hour or so it starts again because most run away when the police van arrives.” At two and three in the morning, the “disturbance” continued; it was a “breach of the peace”:

When I speak with the Bantus and try to get them to be quiet, they were very imprudent and said directly to me bluntly that they were not on my property and they could do what they liked. When they have had a lot to drink the language directed towards me gets filthy and I stand there powerless because no one can help you. Can the Bantu huts be removed? As long as the huts are there [there] will always be Bantus.⁴⁹

What are we to make of such expressions of powerlessness on the part of those whom apartheid hierarchies placed in positions of authority and power? Of course, these letters, like the ones analyzed in the first half of this chapter are epistolary performances and these expressions of powerlessness may have been specifically designed to elicit desired interventions. I argue that such claims are more than merely rhetorical; they suggest that everyday interactions under apartheid were sometimes marked by a greater degree of flux, unsettlement and contradiction than conventional narratives of apartheid suggest. We cannot assume *a priori* where power was located in such encounters. Mr. Mulder *experienced* his encounter with the group of African women and men as placing him in a position of weakness, characterized by his inability to secure the desired results expected to flow from his attempted intervention. We can infer from his description of the response which his intervention prompted that the African women and men he sought

⁴⁹ STCF, 5/14, Bantusake, R.Mulder to Town Clerk, 7th Feb, 1972.

to discipline were anything but passive: their verbal response was both “blunt”, direct and defiant: “they could do what they liked.”

The next year another resident, Mrs. A. Graskie, wrote a letter to the municipality’s department of health. Like a number of such letter-writers she imagined that her complaint related to the public well-being. She had written before, complaining about the “Bantus who use this street as a walk-through.” On this second occasion, she complained bitterly about the daily clearing up of “everything that they throw away” on the pavement which she claimed she and other women in the neighborhood (“our women”) did; she complained of the “noise that we have to hear the whole day.”⁵⁰ She went on:

Every time I come out of my front gate I see a native urinating against a tree. It’s not something that one wants to speak of, but how can one go and kick up a fuss with such a native? I am embarrassed to speak with you about this, even just on paper, but things cannot go on like this. I would like to ask you CAN you help? Or WILL you help? If it falls outside the jurisdiction of your department, then let me know WHO a person can get a reaction to this kind of complaint from. As a tax payer, I have a right to such a response. It’s all very well to always be told by the municipality to “keep your premises and pavements clean or else you will be fined” but what must WE the ordinary public do to get justice? I WISH one of you would live on a street where this sort of thing happens. THEN an effort will be made to prevent drunken fighting on Sundays. I ask you again to do something. It’s not as if this is a backstreet, or that people are not looking after or neglecting their properties. I am just as fond and proud of my house as the State President is of his, because I have two small boys who must live here for years to come but hopefully not in such circumstances.⁵¹

⁵⁰ STCF, 5/14, Bantusake, A. Graskie to Dept of Health, Sasolburg, 18 April, 1973.

⁵¹ STCF, 5/14, Bantusake, A. Graskie to Dept of Health, Sasolburg, 18 April, 1973. Capitalization in original document.

Mrs. Graskie's real or feigned embarrassment at committing her allusion to such a spectacle to paper – in a letter addressed to a local male official she may have known personally – suggest the urinating African man transgressed the assumed rigid demarcation of the public and private spheres where bodily practices involving human excretions (and possible pollution) are confined solely to 'private' ablution facilities.⁵² But more than this, it is the black phallus which threatens (white) middle class gendered propriety. Indeed, Mrs. Graskie's letter is redolent of the phobic panics around racialised sexual affrontery and 'black peril' sexual panics which defined late nineteenth century and much of twentieth century South African cultural politics.⁵³ Her exasperated rhetorical plea: "but how can one go and kick up a fuss with such a native?" performs powerlessness in a manner indicative of the fact that in encounters such as these, where white residents sought to discipline disorderly African presences in space, momentary inversions of apartheid's power hierarchies were occasionally, fleetingly possible. Such inversions were situationally and contingently enabled as well as historically determined in a larger sense by intersecting apartheid era cultures of race, class and gender. A middle class white woman paralyzed by the prospect of confronting a urinating working class African man may have felt 'powerless' in a way that, for instance a white man may not have; but a lone middle class white man such as Mr. Mulder, confronting a group of

⁵² For a discussion of excreta in relation to the elaboration of the distinction between the 'public and private' in Britain see Leonore Davidoff, "Gender and the 'Great Divide': Public and Private in British Gender History" *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 15 No. 1 (Spring, 2003), 14.

⁵³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: race and the intimate in colonial rule*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 58-60; Timothy Keegan. 'Gender, Degeneration and Sexual Danger: Imagining Race and Class in South Africa, ca.1912' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, (Sep., 2001), 459-477; Jeremy Martens, 'Settler Homes, Manhood and 'Houseboys': an Analysis of Natal's Rape Scare of 1886' *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 28 No. 2, (2002), 379-400; Jonathan Hyslop, 'Incident at Ziman Brothers: The Politics of Gender and Race in a Pretoria Factory, 1934' in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1995), 509-525.

apparently inebriated, and defiant, African women and men, felt both powerless and was apparently confidently rebuffed by the targets of his ire. The African women and men he confronted were in turn mostly able to elude the attention of a hastily summoned police van. Such inversions, and the writing of letters of complaint to officials, were perhaps less likely to occur in white working class neighborhoods of Sasolburg and elsewhere in the country, where residents were more likely to themselves employ violence in the everyday policing of space.

Mrs. Graskie's letter, like the "servant problem" letters, worked to position its author as deserving of the favorable attention of its bureaucratic recipient while making specific claims upon him. Like other middle class letter writers she hoped that her writing might force the responsible officials to pay heed to her requests. Mrs. Graskie's letter is unusually confrontational; with repeated capitalized emphases it baldly employs discursive strategies designed to shame municipal officials into action. Beginning by demanding official attention because of her "tax payer" status, she implied that the behavior she was complaining of would be stopped if municipal elites ("one of you") lived on her street, where, she claimed, the "ordinary public" live. Anti-elitist indignation is followed by an assertion of the respectability of her street, claiming that its residents are looking after their properties, as if that might have some bearing on the official's inclination to respond favorably to her complaint. She turned the terms of the local municipality's cleanliness campaign against it ("it's all very well") and used a house-proud discourse to frame her claim in terms of a respectable national citizenship: claiming herself to be as "fond and proud of my house as the State President is of his."

Finally, she buttressed her quest for what she called “justice” (stopping African men from urinating against trees outside her garden gate and preventing “drunken fighting on Sundays”) through the assertion of her families continued presence in Sasolburg as the home of her “two small boys who must live here for years to come.”⁵⁴

The white residents who wrote these letters of complaint aimed to prevent Kirchofer’s vision of green-strip conviviality, where residents could laze on the grass under the cool shade of trees, from being extended to African people. We can read the existence of these letters of complaint as indicative of the fact that African women and men nonetheless claimed shade for themselves. Black women and men made Sasolburg, its parks, its gardens and its green belts their own *in spite* of a racial politics of the policing of space which forbade it.

It is also important to recognize that not all white residents of Sasolburg were opposed to African conviviality in the suburbs. In 1974, Mr. L. Volschenk wrote to the Town Clerk complaining about his (white) neighbor whom he believed was actively enabling African conviviality in the suburbs by operating a business selling ice-cream. Volschenk complained of his neighbor’s facilitation of the “incessant movement of Bantus” in the street outside “all Sunday”, to the annoyance of the residents in the neighborhood. The ice-cream shop clientele were, he went on, making “constant use” of the “servant latrine” at the back of the property. “From my property I look directly into this latrine. There is no partition or screen in front of it.” He did not feel that he had to

⁵⁴ STCF, 5/14, Bantusake , A. Graskie to Dept of Health, Sasolburg, 18 April, 1973.

provide any further details, the scatological imagery he employed was, he apparently hoped, sufficient to convince the Town Clerk that no respectable white person should have to endure this kind of thing. He moved on to describe the neighborhood descending into an atmosphere resembling a “Saturday afternoon soccer match in Zamdela” – a reference to the soccer matches played in the nearby African township every weekend during this period, a firm fixture on local African leisure itineraries. This comment once again invoked the specter of both the African township and unbridled black conviviality overtaking the white town. Volschenk warned the Town Clerk that this was a “distasteful situation in a white residential area”, which “places the prestige and honor of our street in jeopardy.”⁵⁵ Respectability, in his eyes was imperiled even by the black conviviality mulling around the ice-cream shop; the weekend strolls of lovers, friends, and the young. Theirs was not the harassed walk of African men and women rushing to elude apartheid’s curfews or policemen. As they licked their ice-creams they jeopardized the “prestige and honor” of Sasolburg’s respectable streets.

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Through my analysis of letters of complaint demanding the registration of African domestic workers at the Sasolburg labor bureau during the 1960s and early to mid-1970s, I have argued that domestic labor performed by black women was central to aspirant white middle class Sasolburgers expectations of racial modernity under apartheid. These letters exemplify epistolary performances through which I suggested white residents, particularly women, worked to find a vocabulary through which to persuade officials of

⁵⁵ STCF, 5/14, Bantusake, L.P. Volschenk to Town Clerk, 6 November, 1974.

the merit of their requests for intercession and demand the domestic servants they believed were their due. By offering both their own and their family's private circumstances up for evaluation in terms of merit, letter-writers endeavored to enroll officials in individual and familial projects aimed at the "cultivation of whiteness."⁵⁶ The discursive emphasis in letters of complaint on the special trustworthy and hard-working capabilities of individual domestic workers suggests that African women often did not perform deference in their relationships with white employers. The labor bureau regulations were designed to prevent the loss of further farm labor in the district, but the artificial shortage that resulted allowed African women in Sasolburg to claim higher wages and leverage for more advantageous conditions of service. Through letters of complaint addressing the presence and comportment of African women and men in Sasolburg, the specter of "another location in the white town" and racial disorder lurked in the shadows of the town in the form of the *ditamateng* subculture. I have suggested that scholars need to re-examine assumptions about the boundedness of black township and white town under apartheid. White residents' dependence on black labor subverted Sasolburg's respectable pretenses. This contradiction between the desire for black labor and the repudiation of its presence wasn't just Sasolburgers; it lay unresolved at the heart of apartheid until the very end.

⁵⁶ Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

Chapter Five:

‘Paternalism’, Respectability and ‘New Black Apartheid Moderns’: SASOL and the making of Zamdela township

In November 1985, Reverend Douglas Wessels head of the local Anglican church in Sasolburg wrote an angry letter to F.J. Botha, the general manager of the SASOL 1 plant. His letter criticized SASOL’s involvement in the “system of migratory labor” through its continued building of new hostels for migrant workers in Zamdela township:

This evil has been a blot on our national character for the past hundred years! I have had another look at the hostel complex but did not go any further than the high walls. The overall impression is that of a prison. Even that is not a good comparison as prisons have generally moved away from the idea of high surrounding walls. Something I cannot understand is why no effort appears to have been made to integrate this complex with Zamdela. In fact the opposite appears to be the case. The architects seem to have gone out of their way to say that it has nothing to do with Zamdela.¹

“We have been destroying black family life since the days of Van Riebeeck,” Reverend Wessels went on, invoking the seventeenth century Dutch explorer-colonist popularly mythologized as the founder of the Afrikaner nation. This vision of South Africa’s migrant labor system and hostels as the embodiment of the evil injustices characteristic of the country’s industrialization and symptomatic of the associated

¹ SAS, 8/2/5/3, Housing Black Personnel, Revd, Douglas Wessels (St Michael and All Angels Church, Sasolburg) to Mr F.J. Botha, 26 Nov 1985.

destruction of black family life has proven to be a very compelling narrative, whether articulated by liberal or Marxist critics. The Irving Goffman-eseque analogy comparing compounds or hostels to prisons is, of course, a well-established trope of its own in scholarship on the southern African mining industry.² The ‘families divided’ narrative which Wessels’ letter employs has also been a central thread of key scholarship on migrant labor.³ Older residents who I interviewed in Zamdela suggested to me that the origins of Zamdela’s name lie in the deleterious effects of migrant labor on African familial life. A number claimed the name refers to ‘sacrifice’. In the words of one informant: “when these migrants left their families and came here to work, they were sacrificing a lot. Some men didn’t go back. Zamdela is to sacrifice your home back there.”⁴

Divided families also emerge as an important theme in the family histories and historical thinking of the group of young men in contemporary Zamdela who form the focus of the final chapter of this dissertation. The cultural and social consequences of families divided by migrant labor are a source of serious anxiety for these young men, as I show in the next chapter, and the history of Zamdela township in the context of the SASOL project which this chapter attempts to construct could certainly be written with these concerns at the center of analysis. There is little quarrelling with the fact that one of the most profound tragedies of modern South African history was the denial of African

² Charles van Onselen ‘The 1912 Wankie Colliery Strike’, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (1974), 287.

³ Colin Murray, *Families Divided: the impact of migrant labor in Lesotho*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982).

⁴ Interview with Mtentwase Fani by author.

women and men rights to permanent urban settlement through apartheid's laws and the persistence of migrant labor system and its vivid physical manifestation in compounds and hostels.

However, work by the likes of Patrick Harries and Dunbar Moodie has helped moved Southern Africanist scholarship on the mining industry beyond the vision of African communities and migrant laborers as passive victims of capital and compound.⁵ While the anti-apartheid movement worked hard to portray SASOL as the embodiment of apartheid's evil, the history of Zamdela township which I work towards constructing in this chapter aims to avoid the pitfalls of simplistic accounts of apartheid which amount to little more than narratives of black suffering. This chapter certainly details aspects of the history of Zamdela and the SASOL project which resonate with Reverend Wessels' vision. As we will see, Max Kirchhofer, one of the most perceptive observers of Zamdela's development in the context of apartheid and the migrant labor system would certainly have concurred with our critical priest. The chapter ends up in an undoubtedly bleak place, underlining the lack of employment opportunities for the many thousands of people previously shut out of Sasolburg by apartheid's labor bureau regulations who end up settling on Zamdela's periphery in squatter settlements with the collapse of influx control at the end of apartheid. But the chapter also reaches for the shades of grey, the ambiguities and the strange and sad ironies of history: none more so, perhaps, than in my account of the shifting place of 'paternalism' in Zamdela's history.

⁵ Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity*, Moodie and Vivienne Ndatshe, *Going for Gold*.

I trace the ways in which SASOL's 'paternalism' and the apartheid state's township project represented competing visions of the ways in which to secure a disciplined African workforce at SASOL. SASOL worked to defend what were in many ways classic company town prerogatives from Hendrik Verwoerd's insistence in the early apartheid period that its workers be incorporated into a larger township. I then analyze perhaps the most important site for the negotiation of 'paternalism' in Zamdela in the 1950s and 60s: SASOL's compound which housed male migrant workers. Drawing inspiration from the work of Patrick Harries and Dunbar Moodie to complicate the simplistic vision of migrant labor and compounds and hostels articulated by Sasolburg's Anglican priest at the beginning of this chapter, I show the intensity of a co-produced 'paternalistic' culture at SASOL until the mid 1960s. At this point in time, compounded workers rejected the substitution of food rations (and accommodation) for wage increases. This delicately poised arithmetic represented SASOL managers' attempt at shielding African workers from the vagaries of the market in the interests of inoculating the company against wage demands and the production of disciplined subjectivity amongst its African workforce. I then move on to analyze argue the social world of Zamdela's aspirant African middle class, who I argue enrolled white officials on the local Bantu advisory board in their efforts towards the making of a moral, respectable and self-consciously 'modern' community, in the midst of a predominantly migrant laborer population which they perceived to be irredeemably unrespectable.

Broader cultural shifts associated with increasingly pervasive capitalist commodity culture and the emergence of more assertive forms of black politics, together undermined

older forms of authority at SASOL. Increasingly preoccupied with productivity in the context of a terminal skilled labor shortage, SASOL's slowly pushed against legal restrictions on the employment of Africans in skilled positions, and there were significant increases in African wages in the early to mid-1970s. In this context, SASOL belatedly extended home ownership installment schemes previously only reserved for white employees in Sasolburg to the creation of a black middle class in Zamdela. The installment scheme helped many of the company's higher-skilled and better paid African employees realize their dreams of home-ownership, their 'expectations of modernity', in James Ferguson's phrase. But this moment lasted for only a decade from the mid-1970s. In the mid 1980s, in the midst of unprecedented black labor militancy the company renounced any involvement in its employees housing, moving to free up capital tied up in its housing schemes and begun subcontracting in an effort to save on costs and shed jobs as it repositioned itself for a new age of global expansion. Wilmot James has described a similar process of what he terms the "erosion of paternalism" on South Africa's gold mines over the same period, resulting in a similar 'privatization' of the costs of accommodation as mining companies abandoned any responsibility for the provision of housing to its African employees in the name of renouncing a 'paternalism' tainted by its association with apartheid.⁶ The repeal of influx control and the end of apartheid would see a massive growth of informal settlements on Zamdela's periphery – men and women and children that apartheid had shut out from Sasolburg – who, tragically, would have no prospect of formal employment opportunities.

⁶ James, 'The Erosion of Paternalism on South African Gold Mines', 1-15.

“our native problem has become quite acute”

Construction work on the SASOL factory started in mid-1952. The first mine shaft of the company’s colliery, Sigma, was completed in August 1953. Both SASOL and the Native Affairs Department were determined to prevent the chaos associated with the early stages of the development of the Free State goldfields and the manufacturing boom on the Witwatersrand during the 1940s. Squatting would be strictly prohibited in the vicinity of the new town, factory and mine; standards of accommodation would be stipulated and the company would have to “provide accommodation of reasonable standards including sanitation and feeding.”⁷ Predictably, once construction began, squatters reportedly caused “great difficulty with their beer brewing” on SASOL’s property, prompting complaints chiefly relating to the consensus that this situation jeopardized worker discipline. There were reports of fights between SASOL workers living in the company’s informally constituted labor camp and the squatters. On a handful of occasions these resulted in serious injuries and death, with squatters fingered as the chief culprits.⁸

SASOL’s compound manager, J.F. Giesekke complained that when workers’ contracts expired there was “no arrangement as far as native labor is concerned” i.e. there was no way to remove workers from the district once they had completed their contract or of bringing the punitive force of contract to bear upon workers who absconded from

⁷ SAB, BAO, 481/313 Sasolburg. Stigting van lokasies, Notes on Interview with Director of Native Labor, 23 July 1951 by Max Kirchhofer.

⁸ SAS, 504/1, SASOL Compound, J.F. Giesekke to Mine Manager, 18 August 1952.

work. This appears to have been especially difficult because in the absence of a local labor bureau labor contracts were being entered into verbally, rather than in the written form embodied by the *dompas*. Giesekke warned that the “situation can easily get out of hand and create great difficulty. Steps must be taken to ensure that law and order can be maintained.”⁹ Until the town was officially proclaimed by the Free State provincial authorities (bringing the area under a magistrate’s court, a native labor bureau and its own police force), such control – and the hegemony of (written) contract – would prove elusive. The police based at the nearest existing small towns, Vijjoensdrift and Kroonstad were overstretched.¹⁰ SASOL managers pleaded with the South African Police for the establishment of a local police station to “keep things in order” in a situation where the company claimed “our native problem has become quite acute.”¹¹ In 1953, a labor bureau office was established, which, SASOL’s in house magazine informed its readers, would prevent “loafers and other undesirable people” from living in the emerging town.¹² Sasolburg was officially ‘proclaimed’ in 1954, a police station and magistrate’s court established and a night curfew requiring Africans to leave ‘white’ Sasolburg by 9pm daily imposed.¹³

The labor bureau, court, police station and curfew were especially designed to stem the tide of African men and women moving in and out of Sasolburg from the

⁹ SAS, 504/1, SASOL Compound, Maandelikse Verslag, Junie 1952, Kampong-Bestuurder, D.P de Villiers to Compound Manager, 6 August 1952.

¹⁰ SAS, 504/1, SASOL Compound, J.F. Giesekke to Mine Manager, 18 August 1952.

¹¹ SAB, South African Police (SAP), 48/21/52, Beskerming. Coalbrook en Sasolburg. DP de Villiers to General-Major J.A. Brink, Police Headquarters, Pretoria, 4 November, 1953.

¹² ‘New registration office’, *SASOL Nuus*, November 1953.

¹³ SAB, Native Affairs Department (NAD), 481/313B, Sasolburg Curfew/Aandklokregulasies: Sasolburg.

countryside surrounding it. For much of the first decade after the town's establishment, labor bureau officials in Sasolburg fielded complaints from white farmers that SASOL was pinching "their" labor. These officials in turn observed that there was little need for SASOL to conduct recruitment amongst the African population living and working on white owned farms in the Northern Free State because the company "offers better terms than farmers."¹⁴ Once the local magistrate and police got to work a large number of African women and men were charged and fined for 'trespassing' in a crackdown on squatting on land SASOL had brought. With the legal and policing mechanisms in place, there was an explosion of pass law offences; contraventions of the night curfew; workers absconding; possession and brewing of 'kaffir' beer or *skokiaan*; gambling; arrests for attending 'beer parties', and an array of comportment offences: 'swearing in the street'; 'drunkenness', 'fighting in the street', 'urinating in the street.'¹⁵ The majority of those charged with 'beer-brewing' and 'swearing' and/or 'fighting' in the street were women. These were the 'undesirable' Sotho women Phil Bonner has written about: considerably autonomous because they were single or widows or their husbands were working in other towns or farms. These women engaged in a variety of activities: they were temporary 'washer-women', domestic workers in Sasolburg's white owned and rented homes, brewers and sellers of *skokiaan* and a number were also prostitutes. The Director of Bantu Labor warned a colleague:

¹⁴ SAB, NAD, 289/280 (2)(25) Local Labour Bureau, Sasolburg. WerkverskaffingsKommissaris, Westerlike Gebiede to Chief Native Commissioner, Potchefstroom, 28th April, 1954.

¹⁵ Free State Archive, LSB, 1/1/3/1, Admissions of Guilt; LSB 1/1/2/1/1, Admissions of Guilt. A small number of white SASOL workers were fined for 'not registering native employee at local pass office'. A number of Africans were fined for 'not being in possession of bicycle license'.

Because no proper control is exercised over these women chaotic conditions are quickly developing... There are hundreds of idle women who are not gainfully employed who come from different locales, such as Evaton, Meyerton, Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Johannesburg and many from Basotholand.¹⁶

These women were the opposite of what officials imagined to be an “adequate female labor corps” of “urbanized Bantu women.” As we saw in the previous chapter, the local demand for domestic workers in white homes was being met by African women living in the surrounding farming districts. Zamdela’s allegedly “idle women” did not work as domestic workers in Sasolburg because they were in fact already earning money through what officials called “immoral means” (i.e. prostitution), while many married women in Zamdela engaged in income-generating activities supplementing their husband’s industrial employment by selling “fruit, mielies [corn] and other food stuffs” to the large migrant male population.¹⁷ Continuing failed efforts aimed at “trying to control the influx of native women into the town” provided the motivation for Sasolburg’s local authority joining the chorus of white authorities supporting the Native Affairs Department’s decision to extend apartheid’s draconian pass laws to African women.¹⁸ As elsewhere in South African during this period, securing a disciplined workforce in the terms prescribed by officials and employers would require smashing a ‘feminized reproductive regime’ and the entrepreneurial independence of African women

¹⁶ SAB, Native Affairs Department, 1/1603 481/313 Stadsgebeide Administrasie, Sasolburg: Huisebediendes.

Director of Bantu Labour (in BAO) to Under Secretary of Bantu Labour, BAO, 7th April, 1965.

¹⁷ SAB, Native Affairs Department, 1/1603 481/313 Stadsgebeide Administrasie, Sasolburg: Huisebediendes.

Director of Bantu Labour (in BAO) to Under Secretary of Bantu Labour, BAO, 7th April, 1965.

¹⁸ SAB, 481/313I Sasolburg: Kerktereine, Town Clerk to Sec for Native Affairs, 21st May 1956.

in the location, whether they were selling home-made beer or sexual and other services to male migrant laborers. Unless African women also carried passes like men and were under the control of husbands (and/or fathers), there was close to nothing that could be done to curtail their movement and activities.

Besides pass books, another strategy for curtailing African women's independence and neutering the libational cultures of male African workers (well-honed in other South African urban settings) was the establishment of a beer-production monopoly under the control of the local authority. While SASOL provided free low alcohol content beer to its employees, home-made beer (*skokiaan*) of much higher alcohol content was widely brewed by African women in Zamdela location. SASOL's chief objection to the prevalence of home-brewed beer was the fact that it meant it could not control the alcohol level of the beer drunk by its workers. As long as the more powerful *skokiaan* was available locally, (along with the sexual temptations offered by many of the women responsible for brewing it), there were plenty of reasons for compounded laborers willing and able to elude the surveillance of compound and ethnic kin, to venture into the location.¹⁹ Once the municipality started brewing and distributing beer in 1964 and police crackdowns on 'illegal' brewing increased, officials reported that there had been a "substantial decrease in drunkenness."²⁰ The beer monopoly allowed the local authority to apply the infamous 'Durban system' through which revenue generated through the sale

¹⁹ SAB, BAO, W. Sharp to Native Commissioner, Vereeniging, 1 March 1957, Administrasie van Naturellekamponge; SAB, BAO 481/313 A7/1603, Sasolburg Kaffir Beer, W.Sharp to Sec for BAO, 15 Dec 1959, Uitsluitende Munisipale Verskaffing van Kafferbier en Afkondiging van Biersaal en Regulasies op uitgeloopte graan.

²⁰ SAB, BAO, A19/1603 481/313N, Stedelike Bantoewoongebiede, Sasolburg, Magistrate, Sasolburg to Sec of Justice, Pretoria, 28 July, 1964.

of beer could be plowed back into the administration of the township.²¹ This was especially important because, as elsewhere in the country, there was such hostility towards the notion that white rate payers in Sasolburg should subsidize the infrastructure in Zamdela. The war on African women's independence and entrepreneurship represented an admission that the character of the African male workers in Zamdela also depended critically upon the nature of the world outside the compound walls. The varied labors of African women in Zamdela, and in the backyards of Sasolburg – whether they were brewing and selling beer or providing the “comforts of home” to migrants were not the kinds of reproductive regimes which SASOL or the Native Affairs Department envisioned as likely to produce disciplined male African workers. While SASOL and the NAD were similarly fearful of the disciplinary consequences of a ‘feminized reproductive regime’, their respective visions of the route to disciplinary order differed markedly.

“under our direct control and not in a loose native township”

SASOL did not originally intend to establish a ‘native location’ or ‘township’ where Zamdela lies today. The company had wanted to establish a small ‘native village’ close to its colliery and factory which would exclusively house its African employees in both compounds and family accommodation. However, the acquisition of land on the banks of the Vaal River, not far from Sasolburg, by a real-estate developer provided an unanticipated planning complication. The plans of the real-estate developer to turn this

²¹ Maynard Swanson "The Durban System": Roots of Urban Apartheid in Colonial Natal, *African Studies*, 35: 3-4, (1976).

land into a white suburb (present day Vaal Park) posed a problem for Hendrik Verwoerd, the future Prime Minister, head of the Native Affairs Department in the early 1950s when Sasolburg's original planning occurred. From Verwoerd's perspective Apartheid's cartographic imperatives distributing racialised labor across space needed addressing: where could the black labor which would 'serve' Vaal Park be accommodated? He would not allow more than one 'native area' in this region of the northern Free State otherwise there would be "several black spots in European areas which is considered most undesirable."²² Verwoerd's solution was to insist on SASOL agreeing to the construction of an expanded township, incorporating both its own African workers and Vaal Park's future one's. SASOL had little enthusiasm for the development of a larger township, wishing instead to exercise its prerogatives as proprietor of a company town, as Etienne Rousseau's internal memorandum on the subject makes clear:

We really wish to house our native workers, both single and married, properly, and it would actually be to our advantage if all these workers were under our direct control and not in a loose native township. If the Department of Native Affairs wish to build a native township somewhere else, it may even suit us, as we would then have only SASOL natives and possibly natives from other associated industries to deal with...it is essential that we should have our native workers close to our industrial area, where we can create for them the necessary facilities to attract them to our service.²³

In contrast to these classic company town imperatives, Verwoerd insisted on his widescreen racial view, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the horizons of white power. A

²² SAB, BAO 481/313 Sasolburg. Stigting van lokasies. Proposed Native Location and Village, Coalbrook, O.F.S Sec Native Affairs to Construction Manager, Sasol, 30 August, 1951.

²³ SAS, 504/1, Works Native Compound, Etienne Rousseau to D.P. de Villiers, 19th Nov, 1951.

stand-off of sorts occurred. When I interviewed Dawid de Villiers, SASOL company secretary at the time, he recalled:

I had to go and visit Verwoerd and I remember...he said to me, Mr. de Villiers, I never realized how important this was going to be for you and how strongly you feel about it. I'm really sorry but you will understand – it is important; but it's not as important as keeping South Africa white.²⁴

Verwoerd prevailed, but in the mid-1950s, SASOL again endeavored to delineate – and defend – a domain of self-consciously 'paternalistic' authority over its African employees, in the face of the NAD's insistence on a universal system of 'native' urban administration in which "all Natives must in the course of time live in locations", under the control of local authorities.²⁵ SASOL attempted to persuade the NAD that there were important disciplinary reasons why it needed to maintain control of its compounded labor.²⁶ SASOL's compound manager warned:

The natives living in the Sasol compound today are very happy and contented and that we have a good type of boy who will work hard in order to retain his job. As opposed to this, if the compound passes into the hands of the local authority, the natives undoubtedly will be worse off since it will be quite impossible for them to feed and house themselves in a manner comparable to that in which they are living at present. As a result, dissatisfaction will arise resulting in absenteeism, lack of discipline, loafing and a general falling in the standard of efficiency. [also] ...at present when a sudden demand for increased native labor arises, the compound is always able to supply the necessary boys on demand. This would not be the case in the event of control by the local authority.²⁷

²⁴ Interview with Dawid de Villiers by author, Stellenbosch, 2008.

²⁵ SAB, Native Affairs Department, 481/313M, Sasolburg, Memo 8 Jan 1955, Kampong vir Enkellopende Naturellewerkers en gesinskware vir getroudes: SASOL.

²⁶ SAB, 501/1, Works Native Compound, Etienne Rousseau to H. Verwoerd, 17 Feb, 1955, Administrasie van SASOL Naturellekampong.

²⁷ SASOL Archive, 504/1, Works Native Compound, Neale-May to Etienne Rousseau, 10th Feb, 1955.

Retaining control over the company's married quarters had similar disciplinary imperatives: it allowed the company to engage in what Jacques Donzelot called the 'policing of families', the bio-political surveillance, regulation and shaping of subjectivity in the interests of securing healthier, better comported, more disciplined working class subjects:

In the married quarters there is also much stricter control than in a location. In the four years we have not had a single assault in any of our married quarters. There is not a single case of malnutrition amongst the children. In comparison there have been numerous assault cases in the 70 houses [in the location] and the standard of living in our married quarters is also higher. Should a house owner in our married quarters be absent from work for one or other reason and not receive his earnings, at least his family is reasonably cared for, they even receive medical assistance. There is not a single child of school going age who does not attend school.²⁸

So insistent was SASOL about retaining control over the housing of its workers that it quite deliberately reminded the Secretary of Native Affairs of the operational difficulties the company was encountering at this time, highlighting oil-from-coal's technological complexity and suggesting that removing workers from the company's direct control would place yet another obstacle in the way of oil-from-coal's success. In this way SASOL implied that opening up the 'native' labor question to uncertainty by putting its workers in the "inexperienced" hands of the local authority (the Sasolburg municipality) might prove disastrous for this major national project.²⁹

²⁸ Jacques Donzelot. *The Policing of Families*, (New York: Random House, 1979); SASOL Archive, 3/6/10, 'General remarks' by J.F. Giesecke, 11 Feb 1955.

²⁹ SAB, Native Affairs Department, 481/313M, Sasolburg Provision of Accommodation by Employees, J.J.S. van der Spuy to Secretary of Native Affairs, 30 Oct, 1956, Administrasie van Naturellekamponge.

Internal correspondence suggests that, above all, the company feared that transferring control of its labor to the local authority in Sasolburg would undo the arithmetic of the company's remunerative practices. The company covered the full cost involved in operating the compound, and African workers housed there were paid a cash wage from which no deduction was made for food and accommodation. As SASOL's financial manager explained in a memo: "the native employee's true wage was therefore A+B where A=Cash Wage; B=cost to SASOL of operating the Compound, i.e. housing and feeding the employee." In the case of African workers living in SASOL's married quarters, 4/- per week were deducted from their wages for the "extra benefits" they enjoyed (living in houses with their family). The 4/- deducted from married workers wages was the amount which SASOL estimated the domestic labors of wives absolved it from having to cover.

The company was concerned was that if African workers were required to pay an "economic charge in cash each week" to the local authority for accommodation (as appeared inevitable because the municipality could not afford to subsidize workers to the extent SASOL did) "they would very quickly demand to be allowed to feed themselves." If that request was refused, the company anticipated labor trouble; if it was met the company predicted that African workers would spend money on location 'temptations' instead of food. It is important to note the latter was not simply a colonial trope. As we will see, the enclaving of earnings from the corrupting influences of urban life was a primary concern of compounded workers themselves in this earlier period at SASOL, as it was for many migrant laborers at the time elsewhere in southern Africa. SASOL's

financial manager warned that the move from company to municipal control would mean “the introduction of the profit motive would inevitably bring in the risk of economics being attempted”, with the local authority raising rents. This again ran the risk of labor troubles. In order to “safeguard its interests,” SASOL wanted to continue to be in a position to “decide the standards of housing and feeding which its native employees are to enjoy.”³⁰ To an important extent, therefore, this system entailed an attempt at shielding African workers from the vagaries of the free market. Keeping control of accommodation available, in typical company town fashion, allowed it to protect its workers from buffeting by the market economy. Crucially, it also allowed the company to secure workers consent to their subordination by binding their jobs at SASOL, their housing and their officially endorsed presence in a putatively white urban area inextricably together. The company ultimately negotiated a compromise arrangement with the NAD where the municipality took over nominal control of the compound with SASOL’s compound manager, J. F. Giesekke, continuing in his role. SASOL clearly believed Giesekke’s personal ‘charismatic authority’ was *the* essential ingredient to ensuring discipline in its compound.³¹ It is to an analysis of ‘industrial paternalism’ at SASOL that I now turn.

³⁰ SASOL Archive, 504/1, Works Native Compound, T.Lindsay, Manager Financial Dept to J.J.S. van der Spuy, 18 May, 1956.

³¹ Max Weber *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. (2 vols.). (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 244.

‘Industrial paternalism’ at SASOL

SASOL’s compound regime was a classic combination of the ‘paternalistic’ and authoritarian labor management traditions characteristic of the coal and gold mines of southern Africa since the late nineteenth century.³² The man appointed by SASOL as its first and longest-lasting compound manager, J.F. Giesekke, was born into a Lutheran mission family which worked under the auspices of the Berlin Mission among the VhaVenda people in the Soutpansberg beginning in the nineteenth century.³³ Unsurprisingly, much of his appeal to SASOL (and, as we will see, to the African workers he was tasked with ‘managing’) was his claim to expert “knowledge of [native] language and customs.” Giesekke, *SASOL Nuus* articles boasted, had “known the native since he was small.”³⁴ A key episode in the elaboration of the Giesekke mythos occurred some years before his recruitment by SASOL, in 1936, when a VhaVenda smelting ‘demonstration’ was incorporated into the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg. As part of one of the fair’s exhibits, a group of “old Venda smelters” were asked to demonstrate the “almost extinct technique” employed by VhaVenda smelters. Giesekke was apparently required to persuade the reluctant VhaVenda smelters to conduct the demonstration, because “there was a rumor circulating among them that their bones were to be used in ISCOR” – the South African Iron and Steel Corporation, one of SASOL’s cousin state-

³² Peter Alexander, ‘A Moral Economy, an Isolated Mass and Paternalized Migrants: Transvaal Colliery Strikes, 1925-49’. in Stefan Berger, Andy Croll and Norry LaPorte, eds., *Towards a Comparative History of Coalfield Societies*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 238-52; Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity*, Moodie, *Going for Gold*; Turrell, *Capital and Labor on the Kimberley Diamond Fields*.

³³ For more on the missionary work of Giesekke’s relatives in the Soutpansberg see Caroline Jeannerat ‘An Ethnography of Faith: Personal Conceptions of Religiosity in the Soutpansberg, South Africa, in the 19th and 20th Centuries’, PhD dissertation, (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2007).

³⁴ ‘Sasol dra goeie naam as werkgewer’ *SASOL Nuus*, June 1956.

run industrial corporations. Giesekke, so the legend has it, had to convince the VhaVenda smelters “that this was not the case, and they then informed him that the Venda in the early days had used bones in the smelting process and that human bones were especially good for this purpose.”³⁵

Petrus Mahlangu was one of the African workers under Giesekke’s control in the SASOL compound. Mr. Mahlangu was born on a white-owned farm not far from Sasolburg, where he was a farm laborer until he started working for SASOL in the 1960s. Life on the farm was marked by the sort of violent ‘paternalistic’ relationships which Charles van Onselen has argued defined rural relations between black and white on the South African *platteland* for much of the first half of the twentieth century at least.³⁶ Every Sunday, Petrus told me, “die baas” [the boss] would summons his family into the farm house to listen to a church service on the radio:

He told us Jesus is white and Jesus provides. I provide everything. I am Jesus. And we believed him! He did provide everything - food, clothing, shelter, everything. Everything on the farm was free, except we worked, every day from early until late. And he would hit us. If you did something wrong he would come with the *sjambok* [whip].

Did they hit you at SASOL?

No, they didn't hit you at SASOL, but the farmer taught me to listen. At SASOL if you didn't listen or you did something wrong they would shout.³⁷

³⁵ U.S. Kusel ‘Extractive metallurgy in Iron Age South Africa’, *Journal of the South African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy*, (Jan, 1974), 246.

³⁶ Charles van Onselen ‘The Social and Economic Underpinning of Paternalism’.

³⁷ Interview with Mr. Petrus Mahlangu by author.

There is in fact evidence, as I discuss below, that African workers were hit at SASOL, particularly underground in the Sigma coal mine. Mr. Mahlangu's comments are particularly illuminating because they suggest the ways in which earlier experiences of violence on the farm had disciplinary effects which helped to secure submission to white authority at SASOL. Moving from the farm to SASOL in the period when Petrus made this move involved moving out of the ambit of farm 'paternalism' into the domain of what scholars have dubbed 'industrial paternalism.'³⁸

Beyond the remunerative practices outlined above, 'industrial paternalism' at SASOL was manifested in concrete co-produced practices which suggest that African workers living in SASOL's compound in this early period invested particular compound institutions (and the person of the compound manager, Giesekke) with a significant level of trust. For instance, as was common at many other gold and coal mines in the country, workers preferred their complaints about assaults by white employees to be directed to the more sympathetic ear of compound manager Giesekke, rather than the police. Perhaps the most striking instantiation of the extent of trust invested in the compound manager by miners was the "holding of money and valuables on behalf of natives" by Giesekke, a phenomenon similarly noted by Patrick Harries among African migrant laborers to the Witwatersrand gold mines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's.³⁹ Besides cash wages, valuables included belongings which workers feared might be stolen, such as

³⁸ For more on 'industrial paternalism' see Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity* and James, 'The Erosion of Paternalism on South African Gold Mines', 1-15.

³⁹ Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity*, 73.

“sewing machines, gramophones, cycles, watches, purses etc.”⁴⁰ These were practices which the company’s legal and financial department’s explicitly disapproved of, but Giesekke and the migrant laborers housed in the SASOL compound worked to carve out and defend them from modernization.⁴¹ On the 27th of August, 1966, shortly before the service was stopped, a total amount of R5, 377 was deposited in the compound office.

Giesekke interpreted African workers willing participation in such practices as an indication of trust in his person and he believed that the system had “recruitment value” for Sigma colliery. Workers received a receipt with every deposit and withdrawal of monies they made and Giesekke observed that workers were “proud of their savings, showing their saving books to their friends.” Giesekke was similarly proud, showing individual workers savings books – symbols of worker satisfaction and thriftiness – to guests visiting the colliery. While many migrant workers in this earlier period may have remitted monies to their rural homes, it seems others preferred to keep the majority of their earnings within reach, entrusting them to mine manager Giesekke, rather than to each other, as Keith Breckenridge has claimed was more common on the Witwatersrand gold mine compounds.⁴² The enclaving of earnings through ethnic saving associations was a common practice on the mines of the Witwatersrand, part of what Phil Bonner

⁴⁰ SASOL Archive, Giesekke, Chief Compound Manager to the Chief Accountant, 12 August, 1954, 7/50, Money and valuables held in safe custody.

⁴¹ SAS, 7/50, Money and Valuables Held in safe custody, C.A. Becker Chief Accountant to Chief Compound Manager, 26 August, 1954.

⁴² SAS, P14/1/11, Spaarskemas vir Bantoes. B. Leach to H. Potgieter, 27 August, 1966; SAB BAO 35/4/2378, Remise en Spaarfond Skema, Sigmamyn, B. Leach to Bantu Commissioner, 19 Oct, Spaarskema vir Bantoes. For discussion of ethnic savings associations on mines see Keith Breckenridge 'Money with Dignity': Migrants, Minelords and the Cultural Politics of the South African Gold Standard Crisis, 1920-33' *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (1995), 292-294.

describes as a “migrant moral code, which required migrants to encapsulate themselves in ‘homeboy’ networks in the urban employment centers and to insulate themselves as completely as possible from the corrupting influences of the towns.”⁴³ Through the Sigma savings scheme, SASOL’s compound manager was intimately involved in the enclaving of earnings in Sasolburg and assisted with the making of encapsulatory migrant cultures, in partnership with male migrant workers.⁴⁴

When Giesekke characterized the workers under his control in the mid-1950s as having “no wish to detribalize,” he may have been a more accurate participant-observer than postcolonial sensibilities might appreciate.⁴⁵ The popularity of the compound saving scheme at SASOL during this early period, points to the centrality of co-produced ‘paternalistic’ practices in SASOL’s compounds. By the mid-1960s the administrative costs of running the scheme in Sasolburg had grown to an apparently intolerable level and the system was reluctantly ended, amidst concern in managerial circles that its termination might “strain good relations.”⁴⁶ In fact, there is evidence that there were already signs of strain. The saving scheme’s closure occurred two years after a strike, in which, as I discuss below, workers challenged the remunerative arithmetic of the compound at SASOL by demanding cash wages instead of food rations.

⁴³ Phil Bonner ‘Labour, Migrancy and Urbanization in South Africa and India, 1900-60’ *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2009): 44, 72.

⁴⁴ Similar depositing of savings with the compound manager are cited for an earlier period on the Witwatersrand mines in Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity*, 73.

⁴⁵ SAS, 3/6/10, ‘General remarks’ by J.F. Giesekke, 11 Feb 1955.

⁴⁶ SAB BAO 35/4/2378, Remise en Spaarfond Skema, Sigmamyn, B. Leach, Mine Manager to Bantu Commissioner, 19 Oct, Spaarskema vir Bantoes.

In addition to the saving scheme, another practice which Giesekke believed marked SASOL as a sympathetic employer was its involvement in African workers funerals. The company had decided to provide coffins for African employees beginning in December 1951. In a letter to the manager of SASOL's mine he recounted the circumstances of the death and funeral of one of the compounded workers at length:

A native was sick in our hospital for a number of months and when it looked like he was close to death his family in the Transkei were notified. Three family members came to see him and a few hours after they arrived, he passed away. As usual the burial was held in the Sasolburg graveyard and the compound was well represented. There were as many as 50 native women from the married quarters in attendance. After the funeral oration and after one of the white personnel members said a few words, one of the family spoke: 'I am a old man and have worked all over this country but this is the first time that I have seen a white man standing at the grave of a kaffir. This is the first time I have seen an employer remember its employee when he can no longer work and accommodate him in such a lovely coffin. Here a kaffir is buried like a person. In the reserves we hear so often that mothers say that their sons have died in the city, but the mother of this young man will say that her son was buried at SASOL. I am just sorry about one thing and that is that I do not have many children, because there would be just one place where they must work and that is SASOL.'⁴⁷

Giesekke went on to cite instances when, a few days after burials, male family members came to his office asking for work at SASOL. The company's contribution of a coffin, and the firm insistence on the attendance of a white member of staff at African worker funerals who could express condolences was, Giesekke claimed, encouraging "natives to develop a sense of allegiance towards the company."⁴⁸ As skeptical as we might be of the self-aggrandizing aspects of these claims and Giesekke's ventriloquising

⁴⁷ SAS, 7/50, Native employees, J.F.Giesekke to Mine Manager, Papendorf, 7 Sept, 1954.

⁴⁸ SAS, 7/50, Native employees, J.F.Giesekke to Mine Manager, Papendorf, 7 Sept, 1954.

of the “old man” at the grave, the contrast between the company’s funeral policy and gold mining company indifference described by Garrey Dennis on the Witwatersrand, is certainly striking.⁴⁹ Many workers who engaged in oscillating migrant labor and encapsulated themselves in ethnic and village-based associations in the SASOL compound in this period doubtless relied on collectively-organized burial associations whose chief goal was “bringing the body home” to rural, cosmological moorings. However, it became increasingly common over time, for workers to stop returning home, and there were clearly exceptions, such as the worker cited above, where the failure to return to the Transkei doesn’t seem to have been regarded by his kin as a compulsory cultural injunction. Whereas burial at the mines of the Witwatersrand might have “represented an ignominious burial”, at SASOL, it may genuinely have meant “a lovely coffin”, and a white man paying respect for once: “here a *kaffir* is buried like a person.”

We get a richly textured sense of the ‘paternalistic’ culture at SASOL in this early period from a letter written to mine manager Giesekke by a literate married employee in 1957, expressing gratitude for medical assistance rendered to workers during that year’s flu epidemic. Originally written in *seSotho*, the letter employed unmistakable ‘paternalistic’ idioms and addressed SASOL managers through *seSotho* honorifics:

We greet you dear Sir. The sun is shining again; your people and even the animals and the birds can sing and whistle once more. Men, women and children again live happily and in peace, like a blossoming flower. The great blessing and love which we have received from our fathers is like a miracle; for this we are thankful with our whole heart. Illness is like a

⁴⁹ See Garrey Dennie, ‘The Cultural Politics of Burial in South Africa, 1886-1990’, PhD dissertation, (Johns Hopkins University, 1997), 78-87.

raging monster; it knows no friends, but our fathers, in particular ‘Seanamorena’, Mr. van der Spuy and our Compound Manager spared no pain in helping our people during this heart-rendering disease. We ask you to bring our thanks to our great fathers. Let them always remain like children who get up every morning with the same face and do not change, but always come to our assistance. Our gratitude is limitless, like the stars in heaven. God be with you so that you may grow old. Your children remain thankful. Peace! Rain! Happiness and Prosperity! Yes, believe me, Sirs, we are thankful for the great task which you, ‘Seanamorena’, and Mr. van der Spuy have done for us and our children. There are the words of gratitude from your people and from the committee. Let the sun shine on.⁵⁰

Of course, the “great fathers” of SASOL did not always “get up every morning with the same face” – ‘paternalistic’ social relationships by their nature rapidly swing between benevolence and violence. Similarly to the gold mines analyzed by Dunbar Moodie and the collieries studied by Peter Alexander, the consent of African mine workers was delicately poised upon a moral economy profoundly sensitive to its own transgression.⁵¹ The social compact which managerial ‘paternalism’ purported to establish were, in other words, emergent and fragile, constantly in need of (re)negotiation. As in other gold and coal mines in the country, assaults by white workers were a bitter source of grievance among SASOL’s African mine workers. In mid 1954, Giesekke overheard a group of African workers complaining in the company compound about repeated instances of assault at the construction site run by Kellogg, the American engineering contractor hired by SASOL to build the oil-from-coal plant. Giesekke reported that “the tone of their conversation suggested that next time there was an assault they would stand together and fight back....they believe that they’re being treated

⁵⁰ SAS, Native employees, File 7/50, Secretary, Joseph Lelahlu to Giesekke, 15 August, 1957.

⁵¹ Moodie and Ndatshé, *Going for Gold* and Alexander ‘Paternalised Migrants, Policing and Political Economy’.

unjustly.” African worker frustration was intensified by their observation that the police were invariably “called in to ensure that they were on the worse side.”⁵² The complicity of the police and white supervisors only deepened their resolve to “take the law into their own hands in order to protect themselves.”⁵³

Most importantly of all, in the mid-1960s, compounded workers fundamentally rejected a central platform of the company’s remunerative practices: its substitution of food rations in place of paying workers higher wages. On the 3rd of February 1964, two thousand African employees working on the first shift of the day went on strike, complaining about the food they were provided with in the SASOL compound. The workers on the 2nd shift of the day demanded “cash in lieu of food.” The workers on the 3rd and final shift of the day indicated – in the words of a Department of Labor official – “that the real dispute was for increased wages” and the food issue was “only pretext.” The strike explicitly attacked the arithmetic at the heart of the SASOL compound system. As we have seen, this involved paying compounded laborers a lower wage amount than they would otherwise have received if food rations (and accommodation) were not supplied to them by SASOL. An official from the Native Commissioner’s office at Vereeniging addressed the workers at 6am on the 4th of February but he was “shouted down” when he requested the workers appoint ‘representatives’. SASOL threatened to sack the workers if they didn’t return to work, before offering a 2 cent per hour wage

⁵² SAS, 504/1, Assaults on natives, J.F. Giesecke to Mine Manager, 5 Aug, 1954. The tacit support of police and white supervisors/foremen for assaults on black workers has a long history on the South African gold mines. See Keith Breckenridge, ‘The Allure of Violence: Men, Race and Masculinity on the South African Goldmines, 1900-1950’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, (Dec., 1998), pp. 669-693.

⁵³ SAS, 7/50, Native employees, Etienne Rousseau to A. Brink, 11th August, 1954, Native Affairs: Construction.

increase, which the workers apparently reluctantly accepted before returning to work with the “dispute remaining.”

The Labour Department believed the “suspected agitation” behind the strike had its source in the Transkei, a major recruiting area for SASOL’s mine workers, and a key nodal point linking oscillating migrant labor networks and militant labor politics in urban centers in this period.⁵⁴ The Labour Department reported that the SACTU (South African Congress of Trade Unions) “R2.00 per day” slogan was invoked during the strike.⁵⁵ SACTU, a prominent non-racial union of this period (very closely aligned to the African National Congress), had a strong presence in rural migrant networks in the Transkei, and its campaign for a national minimum wage of R2.00 per day had been launched at its 1963 conference as part of its fight against the “system of cheap labor” in South Africa. In his report on the strike the labor department official dismissed the legitimacy of SASOL workers “agitating for higher wages” on the grounds that the “concerned Bantu workers do not appreciate that they are compensated for their service by the provision of food and housing.” In other words, wage increases were supposedly delegitimized by SASOL’s ‘paternalistic’ provisions. Shielding African workers from the vagaries of the free market economy was clearly meant to inoculate the company against these kinds of wage increase requests. While the Labor Department officials had decided that the complaints about food were “only a pretext”, there is also evidence that African workers

⁵⁴ William Beinart, ‘Worker consciousness, ethnic particularism and nationalism: the experiences of a South African migrant, 1930-1960’ in Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido (Eds) *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, (London: Longmore, 1987).

⁵⁵ SAB, Labor Department, 1042/11/1964 Strikes and Disputes, SASOL, Sasolburg Strike 3 February, 1964.

were genuinely dissatisfied with the food being provided in the compound when the strike happened. The strike resulted in SASOL terminating its provision of food to compounded laborers. During the second half of 1966, workers would be allowed to prepare food for themselves in a “small kitchen unit” in the compound.⁵⁶ The strike served notice that the paternalistic culture in SASOL’s compound was not immune to changes occurring outside its walls. Besides the fact that SACTU’s politics appear to have entered the compound through migrant networks, there were, as I discuss later in this chapter, larger cultural shifts beginning to be felt. Before we get to these shifts, our attention turns now to the world of SASOL’s married employees.

Protem, respectability and the Zamdela Bantu Advisory Board

When the original discussions about the planning of Zamdela Township occurred in 1951, SASOL had announced its intention, with the blessing of the Native Affairs Department’s then labor stabilization policy, to house as many of its workers on family basis as possible. The notes from these discussions by Max Kirchhofer, the Swiss planner commissioned by SASOL to design its company town even talk of the gradual fading out of migrant labor. Kirchhofer’s original plans for Zamdela were effectively Sasolburg in austere miniature, with many of the same Perryesque touches in the neighborhood units. The plans were worked out in conformity with NAD’s elaborate requirements. Kirchhofer never seems to have quibbled with the fact of racial segregation, but he did squabble with the NAD over the size of Hendrik Verwoerd’s legendary buffer-strips

⁵⁶ SAB, Behuising Sasolburg, 20/1603 A 6/6/2/510, Memo: Under Secretary, White Areas, 27th June, 1966.

separating the white town from the township and he grumbled about interference and Verwoerd's notorious inflexibility. After his initial involvement in the planning of Zamdela, Kirchhofer was to have no further meaningful involvement in the further planning of Zamdela. However he evidently kept a close eye on its development during his various 'site-visits' to Sasolburg in the years that followed, and his papers indicate that he grew increasingly critical of its trajectory from a distance. Such was his unhappiness with the township's development that in the mid 1960s he made a deliberate move to intervene in a letter to the Sasolburg municipality in which he objected to the "gradual process of transformation" from "the original design intention" of creating "a balanced community" to one defined by the "mass housing of men." He recoiled at "mass accommodation devoid of privacy, rife with pilfering and incapable of fulfilling the most modest human endeavors", calling for a return to "more human concepts."⁵⁷ Kirchhofer's attempt at getting his foot back in the door in Zamdela did not succeed. Cost saving and increasingly intransigent political objections to a permanent black urban presence in the country ensured that the single-sex migrant labor compound and hostels dominated the Zamdela landscape right through to the end of apartheid, as the letter written by Sasolburg's Anglican priest cited at the beginning of this chapter makes clear.

What was the fate of the families making up the original "balanced community" Kirchhofer invoked? To begin to answer this question, we must start with a story about SASOL's white workers. Once construction was well under way in the early 1950s in Sasolburg, the housing shortage was so dire that SASOL decided to house white workers

⁵⁷ STCF, 2/9/69, Zamdela, Max Kirchhofer to Town Clerk, Sasolburg, 30 July, 1965.

and their families in houses which were ultimately intended to be occupied by African families in Zamdela. Apartheid's racist arithmetic meant that SASOL built "permanent native family dwellings" in Zamdela which "European workmen" would temporarily live in, at a cheaper price per square foot than "temporary European houses." SASOL had originally hesitated to do this because the area had been racially zoned, and the company would "run a risk of having serious objections from the European workmen if it became generally known that they were housed in buildings which were in the native area and which were later to be occupied by natives."⁵⁸ But with the special permission of the Native Affairs Department, it built 150 such houses. The NAD applied strict conditions: they would only be occupied by whites for a maximum of two years; were not to be built at a cost (i.e. white standards) which couldn't subsequently be recouped through rental to Africans; and white residents were to be 'completely terminated' before Africans could live there.⁵⁹ The white workers and their families lived in Protom (as the area became known) until early 1956, when the residential precinct specially built for lower-income whites in Sasolburg was completed. While the NAD had called for fiscal restraint, electricity and warm water were laid on, and the houses were built to sufficient quality and size, and rental low enough that a number of white families refused to vacate when the new houses in precinct one of Sasolburg were ready. Some even had to be literally dragged out of the houses.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Wits Historical Papers, Max Kirchhofer Collection, Sasol Project, A2207: B(5), Correspondence 1961-1964, A. Brink Memo to PER, 16th August, 1951, Report on Present Stage of activities of construction department

⁵⁹ SAB, BAO 481/313 Sasolburg. Stigting van lokasies, Tydelike Huisvesting van Blankes in Naturelle-woongebied, Memo of J.J.S. van der Spuy, 1st November, 1955.

⁶⁰ Anna Dippenaar commentary.

The Protem houses which white residents temporarily inhabited in the 1950s until their occupation by Africans quickly acquired the *seSotho* folk nickname ‘*dikgarebeng*’ (‘beautiful ladies’), affectionately named for African women who lived there, who, “wanting to look like white ladies”, applied expensive skin-lightening lotions to their faces.⁶¹ The Protem houses were much sought after. Mr. John Ntetshe, a former driver at SASOL who I interviewed married the women he met through his moonlighting as a concert promoter so that they could rent a house in Protem. “You know the apartheid laws; you have to be a married man to have a house,” he told me. These houses were the envy of visitors to Zamdela, signaling the modernity of their inhabitants: “We were the first black people in the whole country to have a toilet in the house, electricity in the house and hot water...people from Johannesburg when they visited here, they were very impressed!”⁶²

⁶¹ Jonas Mohale Mofokeng ‘An Introduction to the historical development of Zamdela 1947-1997’, (Vaal Triangle Campus, Vanderbijlpark, 1997), 47.

⁶² Interview with Mr. Ntetshe.



Figure 21
Respectable Black moderns: Companionate domesticity in Protem, Zamdela
The SASOL News accompanying the photo was ‘A cup of coffee is served to the
working man while the day’s happenings are talked about’⁶³

By offering family housing of the quality available in Protem, the company hoped to secure the services of more skilled and educated workers, as an official stated in 1955:

In our experience, skilled laborers that have their wives and children with them have less reasons to leave. The man is happy and contented to have his family with him, otherwise he’s inclined to be away from work for long periods of time every year to be with his family. Temptation by other women and alcohol are for the greater part eliminated. The cultural development of the skilled laborer in our employ is of such a standard that he chooses his family life over licentiousness and insists on having his family living with him. We have found that this kind of laborer believes intensely in the education of his children.⁶⁴

This is a fairly accurate description of the cultural politics of Zamdela’s aspirant middle class. These residents engaged in moral projects, aimed at making themselves and other residents in Zamdela in the image of respectability. Their key platform for this

⁶³ ‘Sasol dra goeie naam as werkgewer’ *SASOL Nuus*, June 1956.

⁶⁴ SAS, Housing, Steyn van der Spuy to Sec of Native Affairs, 21 November, 1955.

project was the local Bantu advisory board. While these advisory boards were largely toothless consultative bodies, Gary Baines has shown that they were nonetheless important sites for the constitution of patrimonial networks between white administrators, urban African elites and wider urban African populations.⁶⁵ This patrimonial logic certainly applied in Zamdela. Advisory board members used their influence to secure what few opportunities existed for the awarding of business licenses in Zamdela, and they positioned themselves as gatekeepers through which residents could gain access to housing, in particular.



Figure 22:
‘Sasol’s Gift to Zamdela’
Advisory board members Mr. M.M. Masike and Reverend D.P. Lebakeng Dutch Reform mission church, Zamdela) hand over letter to managing director Dawid de Villiers, thanking SASOL for tarring the parking lot in front of the Zamdela business centre. Tarring prevented dust kicked up by vehicles and feet settling on business stock.

⁶⁵ Gary Baines ‘The Contradictions of Community Politics: The African Petty Bourgeoisie and the New Brighton Advisory Board, c. 1937-1952’ *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1994), 79-97.

One of the most successful local African business families in Zamdela under apartheid were the Masike's who also lived in Protem. Mr. Moses Masike (pictured above giving a SASOL manager a letter of thanks for its philanthropic gift giving) was a long-time member of the advisory board and school teacher. Through his close relationship with local municipal officials, Mr. Masike was able to secure a number of municipal contracts to operate businesses in the township, with the assistance of his wife Pauline – who like a number of Protem wives was actively engaged in business interests together with her husband. In 1965 Pauline and Moses had started a milk shop, hiring staff who delivered milk on bicycles throughout Zamdela.⁶⁶ In the late 1960s, Mr. Masike formed a company, the Thabo Investment Corporation, with a Dr. H.A.M. Tsolo, G.Tabe and Dr. P.Mokhesi, three other Vaal Triangle businessmen, through which they were able to position themselves to take over township bottle stores in the region.⁶⁷

The letters which the Masike's and other aspirant Zamdela residents wrote to the municipality petitioning to be granted trade licenses by the municipality testify to both their authors aspirations and their subjective self-positioning as respectable (and respected) members of the local Protem community. To cite one example, in September 1967 Pauline Masike wrote to the Sasolburg Town Clerk asking for permission to operate a business on certain vacant properties in Zamdela. Introducing herself as “the wife of Moses Masike”, she described herself and her husband as “an asset for the local community”, proceeding to proudly list her husband's credentials: “teacher at the Bantu community school”, Chairman of the local ‘Bantu’ branch of the South African National

⁶⁶ Jonas Mohale Mofokeng ‘An Introduction to the historical development of Zamdela’.

⁶⁷ Jonas Mohale Mofokeng ‘An Introduction to the historical development of Zamdela’.

Tuberculoses Association, member of the Advisory Board, President of the local Football Association and “representative of the ‘Barolong’ tribe of Sasolburg.” Pauline Masike emphasized the length of her presence in Zamdela, having lived “in a house” in Protem since 1954. “Since I came here,” she explained, “the community of Sasolburg has had no reason to complain about my character.”⁶⁸ The general emphasis on comportment and good character were clearly important strategically here, in a letter designed to persuade a white official of its authors (and her husband’s) credentials, but these were also clearly key measures of respectability within the aspirant middle class African community of Zamdela.

In early September 1965, the Sasolburg city engineer drove through Zamdela noting where there were fences, where there weren’t any, and where they needed repair. He reported that eleven residents in Botshabela section of the township were “keeping their fences neat”, but few fences remained “between the stands” in Tsoape section; “only street fences look good.” The city engineer recommended that the municipality fix street-front fencing to improve the “aesthetic appearance of the township.” Ironically, the narrow streets bequeathed to Zamdela by apartheid design meant that the street-front fences could not be expected to last long. Many Zamdela residents now owned that classic twentieth century symbol of modernity – motor cars – and they removed the wire fences to make room for them.⁶⁹ “It is difficult to locate the aesthetic approach of the Bantu residents”, he mused, “residents sense of neatness is very poor.” He suggested that

⁶⁸ STCF, 5/18, Trading Licences, Pauline Masike to Town Clerk, Protem Location 2143, Sasolburg, 1st September, 1967.

⁶⁹ STCF, 5/3/1; Fencing in Bantu township, Botshabela and Tsoape, 2 Sept 1965.

the municipality undertake “upliftment work” and the advisory board should “give an indication in what light they view the neatness of their town.” Fences figured in the city engineer’s imagination as a visual marker of township resident’s ability to cultivate a modern, individualistic subjectivity in much the same manner that gardens did in Sasolburg.

While the removal of fences between stands in Tsoape section might be read as indicating that residents there viewed fences as an impediment to sociality, it would be a mistake to present the preoccupation of fences as his obsession alone. Aspirant middle class residents were preoccupied with securing their privacy and respectability in the township. These residents preferred renting detached houses to semi-detached houses because “people can hear each other talking through the walls.”⁷⁰ For such residents, neatly fenced yards delineated houses from one another and increased much sought after privacy by preventing yards from being used as thoroughfares. Board members frequently relayed residents’ requests for fence materials in advisory board meetings, as well as complaints about the cutting of wire fences.⁷¹

Like Sasolburg, gardens were also an important marker of respectability and status among certain residents in Zamdela. Gardening competitions where gardens were judged in terms of ‘neatness’ and ‘planning’ were immensely popular among aspirantly middle class African residents in Zamdela. In 1969, the gardening competition sponsored by the

⁷⁰ SCTF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, Sasolburg, 8 March 1966.

⁷¹ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 13 June 1967 and Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee Meeting, 8 March 1966.

municipality's non-white affairs department and the Bantu advisory committee was won by Samuel Maboe, with Bles Rathethe winning 2nd prize and Johannes Radebe winning 3rd prize. At least fifty other residents were given honorable mentions. Advisory board members suggested that in future, cash prizes could be introduced instead of gardening equipment to encourage residents to "keep their stands neat."⁷² At the prize-giving for that year's gardening competition, the chairman of the native advisory board, H.P. Malan made a speech which directly connected the cultivation of gardening with the cultivation of persons. He implored residents to:

Keep their gardens neat, not just to win a prize, but that it is essential for the upbringing of children since a person's immediate surroundings are an important factor in raising people. Gardening is not just a pleasant hobby but an opportunity to channel creativity into that which is pretty, clean and noble; to reach greater heights.⁷³

Reformist metaphysics underpinned this emphasis on gardening as a route to respectability and the transformation of individual subjectivities. The aspirant African middle class and the local municipality engaged in shared projects to produce a respectable and ordered landscape in Zamdela. Rather like the comparable efforts in Sasolburg, these efforts were doomed to failure. In addition to dilapidated fences, car wrecks on stands were a persistent feature of Zamdela's landscape.⁷⁴

⁷² STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 26 Feb, 1969.

⁷³ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 28th April 1969, 'Gardening competition' report

⁷⁴ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 15 January 1975

Like their Sasolburg counterparts, Zamdela's aspirant middle class was especially preoccupied with the moral aspects of respectability and they enrolled white officials in a moral project aimed at making a moral community defined by properly comported women and men. Protéma women's use of 'technologies of the self' like skin-lightening creams (which earned them the '*dikgarebeng*' or 'beautiful ladies' nickname), certainly reflected what Lynn Thomas has characterized as "the convergence of racial hierarchies, capitalist commerce, and individual desires for betterment."⁷⁵ It is important to note, however, that these aspirations were produced in explicit opposition to a local context regarded by Protéma's as fundamentally insalubrious.⁷⁶ African migrant laborers were to Zamdela what 'unrespectable' working class whites were to Sasolburg. The admiring gaze of male migrant laborers indexed by Protéma's local folk nickname '*dikgarebeng*' was certainly not returned in kind. In this context of a predominance of male migrant laborers, the small percentage of aspirant middle class residents living on a 'family basis' were alarmed by "immorality taking place on a large scale" during the factory expansion in the mid 1960s. There were complaints of Protéma's "wives and daughters" being "molested."⁷⁷ Board members reported men and women "drinking together" and behaving "very commonly", requesting gender-segregated drinking facilities for men and women.⁷⁸ The 'illegal purchase of beer' (home brewed beer) and "associated bad behavior" attracted particular condemnation.⁷⁹ Members were particularly preoccupied

⁷⁵ Lynn M. Thomas 'Skin Lighteners in South Africa: Transnational Entanglements and Technologies of the Self', Glenn, Evelyn, ed., *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 209.

⁷⁶ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 3 December 1974.

⁷⁷ STCF, 5/15, 'Beheer en Administrasie: Sasolkampong en getroudekwartiere', 9 June, 1965.

⁷⁸ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 13 July 1965.

⁷⁹ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 26 May 1969.

with the task of getting men to not urinate in public, calling for “strict action” against perpetrators; condemning the lack of toilet facilities in one breath, while blaming individuals for their failure to conform to moral codes around the distinction between the public and private.⁸⁰

As we have seen, SASOL boasted about its successful policing of families in married accommodation in terms of prevention of physical assaults, malnourishment of children and better school attendance, but such policing was evidently also undertaken by members of Zamdela’s self-consciously respectable elite. Board members sought the superintendent’s help with the policing of “family difficulties in the township”, reporting conjugal quarrels between men and women in the township. Members expressed their impotence in their attempts at resolving domestic struggles, complaining that “certain residents do not want to talk to committee members about their domestic disputes to find solutions.”⁸¹ They suggested that police constables be used to “round up” the persons in question or that the superintendent intercede on their behalf, using his power to take away houses from ‘undesirable persons’. The board members were clearly determined to constitute a moral community purged of individuals who would disturb conjugal respectability in Zamdela. The superintendent cautioned against “rashness” in such situations, arguing that if residents’ homes were taken away, as was being suggested by the advisory board, “the family could be completely dislocated.”⁸² This wariness was

⁸⁰ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 12 Sept 1967.

⁸¹ SCTF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 28 April 1969.

⁸² SCTF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 29 Sept 1969.

apparently not shared by the advisory board members for whom, like Sasolburg's aspirantly respectable residents, respectability imperiled required purificatory measures.

This privileging of harmonious conjugal lives is hardly surprising in a context defined by the kind of conjugal instability associated with oscillating migrant labor, a heavily skewed sex ratio and apartheid regulations which artificially turned marriage into an obligatory passage point through which Africans could gain access to housing.⁸³ For Zamdela's aspirant middle class, conjugal lives were meant to offer domestic harmony and companionate stability, rather than their 'unrespectable' counterparts – the domestic squabbles heard through the thin walls of semi-detached houses; the 'unrespectable' men and women fighting in the streets, the migrant laborers paying prostitutes for “the comforts of home.”

None of this is to suggest that the aspirant middle class in Zamdela was homogenous. As letters written applying for business licenses suggest, there was fierce competition over scarce local opportunities. There were important differences among members of the Advisory Board. The naming of township streets in the 1960s was a “long and drawn out task because of underlying differences between members.” Members self-consciously identified themselves in ethnic terms, claiming to represent local ethnic constituencies from the ethnically delineated zones of the township and some of the squabbles related to the apportioning of names to different ethnic groups.⁸⁴

⁸³ Deborah Posel, 'Marriage at the Drop of a Hat: Housing and Partnership in South Africa's Urban African Townships, 1920s-1960s' *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 61, (Spring 2006), 57-76.

⁸⁴ STCF, 5/2/1, Report of Manager of Non-White Affairs, 6 Dec 1966.

While board members were strongly invested in an atrophied ethnic politics not far removed from Bantustan ideology, they were increasingly frustrated by the government's unbending policies. Members pleaded for "old people who stop working" to be given the opportunity to work as *togt* (temporary) laborers in the area so that they wouldn't lose their houses in the township. Government policy meant that even if Africans qualified for 'permanent' housing in urban townships by working for a particular employer for a long period of time, their domicile was not truly 'permanent' – they were expected to "return" to the homelands upon retirement, even if they had never lived there.⁸⁵ In 1966 when members enquired about the possibility of a housing-subsidy scheme that would allow residents to build their own houses with financial assistance, they were bluntly reminded that "Bantus are in white areas temporarily, the homelands are black people's homes; they can build houses there, large Bantu townships had been built in Bantu areas."⁸⁶ The frustration of repeated requests resulting in little improvements took their toll and there were signs of growing discontent with the lack of responsiveness of officials to the advisory board's requests beginning in the mid to late 1960s.⁸⁷

In 1973 Zamdela stopped being administered by the Sasolburg municipality's 'non-European affairs department' and fell under the newly constituted Vaal Triangle Bantu Administration Board, which was responsible for multiple African townships in

⁸⁵ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 14 March 1967.

⁸⁶ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 6 Dec 1966.

⁸⁷ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting, 14 Feb 1967.

the region. This administrative change brought higher rentals for residents renting former municipal owned properties. In a context of continued complaints about the “bad condition” of the townships playgrounds, long grass in the ‘Bantu’ graveyard (a key symbolic site of negotiation), street lights that weren’t working and a lack of bus shelters, advisory board members warned Bantu Administration Board officials that residents were “dissatisfied with the raised rentals.” White officials blamed ‘vandalism’ for the state of the township’s infrastructure and tried to placate frustrations, telling members that “every area had to wait its turn”, insisting that the situation in Zamdela was “not at all worse than in the rest of the Vaal Triangle.”⁸⁸

Curiously, the disillusionment of advisory board members with this kind of cap-in-had politics occurred belatedly in Zamdela compared to elsewhere in the country.⁸⁹ Ivan Evans has argued that political mobilization in other South Africa’s urban townships in the 1940s and 50s was “propelled in no small measure by the immediate issues of rents, housing, and transport.”⁹⁰ There may be grounds for believing that these were all aspects of the costs of everyday social reproduction were rendered less immediately pressing for Zamdela residents by the township’s incorporation into a company town which provided at least some cushioning against the harsh winds of the apartheid state’s insistence on forcing the urban black working class to carry the costs of its own social reproduction. Everyday transport costs were likely less of a burden for Zamdela residents than they proved to be elsewhere because of the proximity of the township to the SASOL

⁸⁸ STCF, 5/14, Minutes of Bantu Advisory Committee meeting , 7 May 1974.

⁸⁹ Baines, ‘The Contradictions of Community Politics’.

⁹⁰ Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race*, 125.

factory, to Sasolburg itself and other employers in the area. It was a fairly short walk or bicycle ride down the road from Zamdela to SASOL, or to Sasolburg town itself. The cost of housing was also lessened by SASOL's subsidization policies. This may explain why there appears to have been no serious political radicalization in Zamdela until the 1980s, and why even then the township was much less febrile than others in the Vaal Triangle. In the next section, however, I turn to investigating important shifts at the intersections of race, skill and wages at SASOL in the early to mid-1970s.

Race and the 'gospel of productivity' at SASOL

When sixty-nine protesting Africans were massacred on the 21st of March 1960 outside a police station in Sharpeville Township, just 10 miles from Sasolburg, a *SASOL Nuus* editorial expressed nervous gratitude for the absence of similar trouble in Zamdela:

The seriousness of the Bantu unrest on our doorstep has made a deep impression on Sasolburg. ...we realise how fortunate we are that in the 8 years of our existence, there hasn't been one semblance of a similar occurrence in our town....we are determined to have a happy and prosperous Bantu community in our town, and the conduct of our personnel who are responsible for Bantu affairs has helped establish loyalty of the Bantu towards SASOL and to ensure that Sasolburg to date, has not been a fruitful field of activity for agitators. We as whites must ensure that our Bantu employees remain favorably disposed....we all have a duty to promote this favorable disposition at work, in our homes, on our streets; to keep Sasolburg a place where the Bantu can work and live happily.⁹¹

⁹¹ 'Editorial', *Sasol Nuus*, April 1960.

Heavily belabored claims about “good race relations” at SASOL after Sharpville do little more than confirm the suspicion that the opposite was the case but there was undoubtedly a definite shift in the tone of managerial discourse after 1960. While this shift barely registered through the company as a whole, this section examines these discursive shifts in an effort to explain how the company moved away from apartheid’s ‘color bar’ restrictions on the employment of Africans in skilled positions as it embraced the American derived ‘gospel of productivity’.⁹²

In 1962 the company’s compound manager Giesekke delivered a lecture at a white Sasolburg school expressing concern that “young white children are being taught to fear blacks. The Bantu should be regarded and treated as people of value with whom the normal rules of courtesy should apply in interactions.”⁹³ Of course the deep structure of everyday life under apartheid fundamentally failed to extend anything resembling the ‘normal rules of courtesy’ to Africans. There was a gradual realization among SASOL managers, beginning in the 1960s, that this fundamentally jeopardized productivity by valuing ‘man-hours’ differently according to race. These connections were articulated most clearly by SASOL’s managing director Dawid de Villiers in a speech in 1971:

There is a general tendency to think that the time of Bantus is not precious, so that the different places that serve Bantus do not care about keeping them waiting a long time for service. How often we see groups of Bantus standing in front of offices where they have to be registered...Most of us can recall occasions when Bantu domestic servants have to leave work for three consecutive days because there are not enough personnel at these places to serve them. We are all aware of how often business

⁹² Nick Tiratsoo and Jim Tomlinson ‘The ‘Gospel of Productivity’’.

⁹³ ‘Goeie rasseverhoudings op SASOL’ *SASOL Nuus*, June 1962.

undertakings make Bantus wait to be served and if whites arrive they [whites] must be served first. Since it is bad manners to keep someone waiting for longer than is necessary, this lack of quick service must make the Bantu believe that his time is not important and that his work is also not important. The most productive worker is the one that believes that he is making an important contribution and that his contribution is valued...thousands of man-hours of Bantus are being wasted.⁹⁴

As Stuart Coupe has shown, the National Institute of Personnel Research (N.I.P.R) was at the forefront of research into ‘Bantu productivity’ and the formulation of tests designed to ‘select’ Africans mentally equipped to perform particular kinds of labor in industry.⁹⁵ Such testing initially received a rather frosty reception at SASOL because it was regarded by the likes of SASOL compound manager Giesekke, as a threat to his prerogative to personally distinguish between “useful and un-useful Bantus.”⁹⁶ Giesekke had retired by 1973, when the company introduced a training school at its coal mine, Sigma. By this stage the ‘gospel of productivity’ (which SASOL managers had been absorbing enthusiastically through American business literature for some time) had begun to make headway: the school’s establishment was prompted by signs of “Bantu productivity becoming static.” The school represented the attempted rationalization of the labor regime at Sigma.⁹⁷ Since the 1950s SASOL had trumpeted the level of mechanization of the mine. Mechanization was celebrated for increasing productivity and decreasing overall dependence on African labor. The company claimed, however, that

⁹⁴ SAS, 4/1/4, Speeches, D.P de Villiers, Kongres Noord-Oos Vrystaats Streekontwikkelingvereniging, Bethlehem, 22 Feb, 1971.

⁹⁵ Stuart Coupe ‘Testing for Aptitude and Motivation in South African Industry: The Work of the National Institute for Personnel Research, 1946-1973’ *The Business History Review*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Spring, 1996), 43-68.

⁹⁶ SAS, 15/3/9, Bantu Training, J.I. de Villiers to J.S. van Vollenhoven, 7 March 1961. Keuringtoetse Bantowerknebers.

⁹⁷ SAS, 19/40/1, S.P. Ellis, Mining and Finance Corporation Ltd to Manager Operations, Sasol, 7th April 1972, Audit Report No. 4: Sigma mining department.

mechanization made it especially dependent on more skilled African laborers, particularly machinists. This was true, though only up to a point. As I argued in chapter one, the viability of the SASOL project depended on cheap black labor which defined the early apartheid period. But by the early 1970s the arguments in favor of a labor regime geared towards productivity became harder to ignore. The Sigma school set out to modernize the mine's *mteto* [the rules], the set of informal conventions governing everyday life at Sigma which had emerged out of negotiation between managers, white and black supervisors and miners. Specially appointed African 'instructors' helped write down the *mteto* for the first time.

Like the white farmers who became the target of Rita Marais social work interventions, Sigma's Bantu training school training program was designed to instill the principles of time-work discipline: "the Bantu is being taught to work motivatedly [sic], to develop awareness of time and of the importance of time."⁹⁸ The training was also aimed at pre-empting the kind of labor unrest which had occurred just four months earlier at Western Deep Levels gold mine near Johannesburg when a wage dispute ended with a violent confrontation between miners and police, with 11 miners shot dead.⁹⁹ Whatever the goals of SASOL managers, the African instructors working in the training school were most personally invested in the project of reforming Sigma's racialised labor regime. One such instructor, Jan Mbamba complained in an internal report that when an African machine operator in the mine who had recently completed his training made a mistake he was invariably told to "forget the rules he learnt at school." While African

⁹⁸ SAS, P27/14/3/3/1, Sigma Bantu School, 'Views of Bantu instructors', 28 December 1973.

⁹⁹ SAS P27/14/3/3/1, Sigma Bantu School, 'Views of Bantu instructors', 28 December 1973.

workers were being taught to “respect his fellow man”, underground they were “sworn at and told ‘Fuck the *mteto* of the school.’”¹⁰⁰ White supervisors interpreted the training school as a threat to the existing racial supervisory culture at Sigma.

The training school started against the backdrop of other important trends, in particular, the fact that African workers salaries at SASOL increased by “as much as 60%” between December 1972 and February 1974.¹⁰¹ These wage increases were part of the wider shift in both coal and gold mining in the country, aimed at attracting more South African workers to the mines and decreasing longstanding dependence upon migrant laborers from Lesotho, Mozambique and Malawi. This was precipitated by both accelerating mine mechanization, requiring more skilled workers who were otherwise more attracted to manufacturing, and concerns about the withdrawal of ‘foreign’ labor sources from decolonizing territories in the wider southern African region.¹⁰² As a result of these changes, the company observed that “Bantu labor is in the process of becoming a more sophisticated form of labor, which demands more sophisticated handling and treatment.” The effects of the artificial ceiling which apartheid labor protections for whites placed on African skill development could no longer be ignored. The associated shortage of skilled labor in the country and increasingly irresistible productivity imperatives meant that Africans started being used at this time in “semi skilled and skilled work which previously was executed by whites.”¹⁰³ In 1974 the company decided

¹⁰⁰ SAS, P27/14/3/3/1, Sigma Bantu School, ‘Views of Bantu instructors’, 28 December 1973.

¹⁰¹ SAS, P27/14/3/3/1, Sigma Bantu School, ‘Views of Bantu instructors’, 28 December 1973.

¹⁰² Jean Leger ‘Coal mining: Past Profits, Current Crisis?’, in Stephen Gelb, ed., South Africa’s Economic Crisis, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991), 143.

¹⁰³ SAS, 8/2/1, Memorandum: J.L.J. Bezuidenhout to Chairman and Directors, Sasol, 20 Feb, 1974.

that it would henceforth only employ Africans who had completed at least Standard 8 (Grade 10) or higher.¹⁰⁴ All of these transformations lay behind a manager's wistful comment in a 1976 meeting, noting that "Bantu labor was no longer an inexpensive commodity and serious attention has to be given to Bantu productivity."¹⁰⁵

Housing, aspiration and work at SASOL

While African wages had finally started to increase significantly in the early 1970s and the 'color bar' was slowly lifting, there had been little improvement, (as SASOL recognized), in housing for African workers. The Vaal Triangle Bantu Administration Board which had taken over responsibility for the administration of Zamdela from the municipality in 1973 was described by a SASOL manager as "completely impotent" within a year of its establishment. SASOL managers complained that it could at best "only just keep up with providing housing of normal standard." In a context of "urgent need for better housing", but paralyzed by a lack of funds, the Administration Board threw the responsibility for housing of workers back at SASOL and other employers. In the early 1970s, ISCOR had built what was described as "much better quality" hostel accommodation for its residents in nearby Vanderbijlpark and the Anglo-American owned AECI planned a "luxury" hostel in Zamela including "better quality" family housing. Competing for precious 'skilled' African workers, SASOL

¹⁰⁴ SAS, 8/2/1, Memorandum: J.L.J. Bezuidenhout to Chairman and Directors, Sasol, 20 Feb, 1974.

¹⁰⁵ SAS, 14/1/1, Minutes of Management Committee Meeting, 18th Nov, 1976.

started to feel pressure to join these efforts. “The standard of housing in general has not kept up with the times”, the company admitted.¹⁰⁶

Remarkably, the old SASOL compound was still in use in the early 1970s, housing 1064 employees in what the company conceded were “unfavorable conditions.”¹⁰⁷ Because of the housing shortage, more workers were being squeezed into rooms and food preparation, (which had previously been provided by the company), was occurring in each room “on the floor with primus stoves.” The company had to abide by influx control regulations which meant houses could only be given to workers who had worked in the area for the same employee for at least 10 years. SASOL had happily worked within influx control’s parameters prior to this point, when it depended almost entirely on ‘lower-skilled’ oscillating migrant laborers. By the early to mid 1970s, however, with increasing productivity pressures and the South Africanisation of its workforce, influx control regulations directly impeded the company’s ability to remake its workforce at a higher skill level and in a more stabilized manner.¹⁰⁸ The company negotiated special permission for the housing of 146 workers who did not ‘qualify’ for housing in terms of the influx control laws. During negotiations with government, SASOL insisted that providing better quality housing was critical to its policy of “developing a middle class black employee group.”¹⁰⁹ This new policy was facilitated by

¹⁰⁶ SAS, 8/2/1, Memorandum: J.L.J. Bezuidenhout to Chairman and Directors, Sasol, 20 Feb, 1974.

¹⁰⁷ SAS, 8/2/1, Memorandum: J.L.J. Bezuidenhout to Chairman and Directors, Sasol, 20 Feb, 1974.

¹⁰⁸ SAS Archive, 8/2/1, Memorandum: J.L.J. Bezuidenhout to Chairman and Directors, Sasol, 20 Feb, 1974.

¹⁰⁹ SAB, Director General, Cooperation and Development to Dr G. de V. Morrison, Adjunk Minister of Cooperation, A12/2/6/S10/8, Swart Behuising Sasol Een, Natref en Sigma-Steenkoolmyn, Voorsiening

the central state itself altering its restrictions on black property ownership in certain (though not all) urban areas, though SASOL's motives were driven by concerns about skill-shortages and their relationship to productivity rather than the apartheid state's transparently co-opting tactics. In 1974, SASOL finally extended the home ownership scheme it had long offered to white employees to black employees.¹¹⁰ For employees like Benjamin 'Ace' Motloun, a clerk in the SASOL post office, the prospect of attaining home ownership was a god-send. Having been recruited into SASOL because the African *indunas* running the company's black soccer team were impressed by his soccer prowess, Mr. Motloun initially stayed in the SASOL compound in a room with a group of other soccer players. Because they were in the soccer team, Mr. Motloun explained to me, they had to be disciplined and wouldn't drink as much on weekends as the rest of the workers in the compound. "On Friday night's perhaps, but not on Saturday or Sunday." The compounds were "terrible", he recalled: "people were drinking heavily and always fighting about dice and gambling. Sometimes the police caught people for gambling." I interviewed Mr. Motloun during his lunch break in the SASOL I post office. Our conversation about his early years at SASOL shifted from exuberant soccer tales to painful (and absurdist) memories of apartheid's petty humiliations at SASOL:

If we had just got into the lift in the SASOL building and two white men came into the lift, we had to get out. We waited for the lift to come down then two white women came. And we had to wait again. We had to wait all day! Then we would get to the office late and the boss would shout at us. Where

Instandhouding Swartdienste Geriewe op spesifieke myne en bedrywe behusing Sasol I, Natref en Sigma-Steenkoolmyn Sasolburg.

¹¹⁰ SAS Archive, Memorandum by P.V. Cox: 'Sasol's involvement in the housing of its employees' 23 July 1987.

have you been? What have you been doing? You are always talking, talking, talking!

As he spoke he gestured towards the empty office of his boss, an Afrikaans speaking middle aged white woman named Anna. “We can’t have this conversation with her here. She doesn’t want to know about apartheid. But I know. We know. We know about her and apartheid. I’ve worked here for maybe 10 years more than her, a long time. But she is my boss.” With the company’s home ownership policy change, work at SASOL also brought much cherished rewards. In 1979 he moved into what he calls his “SASOL house” in Zamdela together with his wife, who was also from Pietersrus. He paid off the house with the company’s help over a period of twelve years. He proudly told me: “I own the title deeds and I will leave my house in a coffin!”¹¹¹ He subsequently made extensions to the house, and, he informed me with unabashed pride, he had brought a double-cab *bakkie* [pick up truck.]¹¹²

Another former SASOL employee I interviewed, Amos Mthetwa, was from Sterkspruit in the former Transkei. As was common on South African mines, he was recruited along with his brother by SASOL to work at Sigma coal mine in Sasolburg. He worked underground at the conveyor belt which carries coal from the mine to the SASOL factory. His job was to make sure that the coal travels correctly on the conveyor belt, not falling off the sides of the belt. He lived in a compound at first, sharing a room (with bunk beds) with 7 other men, including his brother, two other Xhosa speaking men also from the Transkei, and three seSotho speakers from Lesotho. He claimed they were “like

¹¹¹ Interview with Mr. Motloun by author.

¹¹² Interview with Mr. Motloun by author.

a family”, sharing everything. They risked losing their jobs if they fought. They had to abide by curfew hours, and if they arrived late back to the compound gates, or late to work they would be punished, both by the compound security and by their room-mates: self-discipline was enforced out of the surveillance of company and peers. “If you were late you were told to fetch coal from the mine dump for the next week for the room, or you will fetch beer for a week. On one such occasion, compound security took Mr. Mthetwa to the security room, a tin-roofed building “which was hot in summer, and they would tie you to a chair there, and light some coal next to the chair and lock you inside, leaving you to sweat. That was how it was.”¹¹³

By the time SASOL started subsidizing the purchase of homes by African employees Mr. Mthetwa’s wife (who he had married customarily in the Eastern Cape in the early 1970s) joined him in Zamdela. As was typical of migrant laborers, Mr. Mthetwa returned home to the Transkei for a weekend a month and for three months leave each year before his wife was able to join him in the house which SASOL helped him to buy. His father lived at home in the Transkei, and kept cattle, and Mr. Mthetwa used his SASOL earnings to help build up his father’s homestead or umzi (isiXhosa).¹¹⁴ Mr. Mthetwa told me he “looks forward to his retirement when he can spend time at home in the Eastern Cape.” But he also liked living Zamdela, proudly telling me: “I own this house.”

SASOL believed the local housing crisis (which really bit during the early 1970s) could be solved through its home-ownership scheme, in combination with the new single-

¹¹³ Interview with Amos Mthetwa by author

¹¹⁴ For more on such homestead building life strategies see Moodie with Ndatshe, *Going for Gold*.

sex hostel which it had erected. The “better quality” of the new migrant hostel was apparently reflected in the fact that the rent was set at R10.40 per bed, per month, while the rent for older, “less luxurious” local hostels was R3.50 per bed, per month. This was a significant difference, but it immediately filled up and there was a lengthy waiting list of some 200 men who wanted a space. Such was the extent of the desire for better accommodation that when migrants went home they paid their rent early because they were anxious not to lose their spaces.¹¹⁵ In truth the housing crisis and administrative impotence which SASOL complained about in 1974 were not substantially overcome. In 1984, shortly before the labor strikes which well and truly shattered the social compact between SASOL and its African employees, SASOL launched a new five-year “hostel improvement” program amounting to R15.6 million to “maintain competitiveness in the labor market and stability in the workforce.” Explaining the need for the improvements, the company noted that “the expectancy of black employees with regard to the quality of life had changed considerably during the preceding few years.” The signs of this shifting cultural terrain among the company’s African employees had emerged in the mid 1960s, as we have seen, when workers demanded increased cash payments instead of food provisions. In the late 1970s, SASOL discontinued its long-standing (and classically ‘paternalistic’) practice of distributing “Christmas gift parcels” to its African employees. A manager observed that these parcels “had lost much of their appeal and value as the average level of sophistication and maturity of Black personnel had increased considerably during the past few years.”¹¹⁶ Such gift-giving practices could not compete with the increasing intensification of capitalist commodity culture in the country – what

¹¹⁵ SAS, 0/2/1/1, Huisvesting van Swartpersoneel, T.A. Conradie to J.A. Stegmann, 6 May, 1977.

¹¹⁶ SAS, Liason Committee Meeting Minutes, 14 November, 1978.

Ivan Evans has called the “materialist culture of modernity” – or the emergence of increasingly assertive models of black nationalist and black consciousness identities: new black apartheid moderns.¹¹⁷



Figure 23:
Mr. Sibisi, proudly displaying a poster for one of his concerts.

These shifts were doubtless reflective of the fact that black South Africans who increasingly came into the company over time, tended to be more cosmopolitan than the encapsulated oscillating migrants who were originally at the core of SASOL’s mining workforce. One such man is Mr. Sibisi, who started working as a driver for SASOL in the mid-1960s, and immediately started moonlighting as a music promoter. “They sent me to Joburg to collect post; I would go to Alexander township to make concert posters there. I

¹¹⁷ Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race*, 288.

was promoting music since 1965, doing local concerts here, going bigger and bigger.” At first he held concerts at the local school, church hall or tennis courts in Zamdela. “I used to go and talk to the church committee and give them something.” The concerts were effervescent, stylish occasions: “Yo! Yo! Yo! People used to dress up!” Mr Sibisi’s wife was a singer and dancer in a group called the Space Queens who he promoted in Zamdela. His large LP music collection represented a cosmopolitan mixture of popular black South African urban music from the 1960s and 70s and leading international black reggae and soul artists like James Brown, Percy Sledge, Peter Tosh and Bob Marley. The assertive and affirmative black imagery entailed in this musical inventory meant that for men like Mr. Sibisi, older forms of authority at SASOL had little purchase. For such men (and their wives), the wage increases of the early 1970s helped unlock the pleasures of consumption, as Mr. Motloug recalled when I interviewed him: “When pay day comes at the end of every fortnight, it was so nice! We could get whatever we wanted with that.”¹¹⁸

Unions, strikes and the end of apartheid

Little more than a decade after SASOL belatedly extended its home ownership scheme to black employees, what was left of a long attenuated ‘paternalistic’ compact with management was shattered. This rupture was precipitated by the new labor militancy among newly unionized black workers across the country in the mid 1980s. It exploded into view with a ‘general strike’ (and undoubted instances of intimidatory union activity)

¹¹⁸ Interview with Mr. Motloug by author.

at SASOL's second company town, Secunda, in the then Eastern Transvaal, in November 1984. SASOL's managing director Johannes Stegmann responded to these events in terms which suggest he and other company managers took these developments as a personal affront:

SASOL has a history of more than 30 years of labor peace. A general strike is unheard of in our group. The management of labor relations was always the highest priority and Sasol's people were the key to our success. That this incomparable record was disturbed last week at Secunda, by unlawful behavior not at all related to work affairs or the relationship between employer/employee but the incitement and intimidation of a large group of employees who made a choice which bought about their dismissal, is a very sad development for me personally and for all my colleagues in the management of SASOL. In the process people who provided long and first-class service to us did not stand up to intimidation and incitement and in some cases themselves took part in the agitation.¹¹⁹

It is worth noting both the tone of disappointment and the sense of betrayal in Stegmann's language, with his invocation of the supposed disloyalty of employees who had provided loyal 'service'. SASOL dismissed approximately 6000 striking workers at Secunda, crushing the strike with the assistance of the police and apartheid state's security forces. It was much the same story in Sasolburg the next year when workers from the South African Chemical Workers Union (SACWU) went out on strike for higher wages in early October. Minutes of secret security meetings between SASOL and state's intelligence officials confirm that union organizing in SASOL's hostels in Zamdela had been a focus of close surveillance since the year before, at least.¹²⁰ Strikers were attacked by police and *Witdoeke* (a group of thugs cultivated by the apartheid state's

¹¹⁹ SAS, 9/6/11, Labour Incident at Secunda, J.A. Stegmann (MD) Memo, 14 Nov, 1984.

¹²⁰ SAS, 9/6/11, 10 June 1986, SASOL 1 Security Meeting.

security forces.) Striking SACWU workers also directed intimidation at black SASOL workers who did not go on strike.¹²¹

Evidence quickly emerged (via informants cultivated by SASOL and the police) that the SACWU strike ballot had in fact been far from unanimous. The majority of workers balloted hadn't in fact voted in favor of striking and a significant number did not stay away on the first two days of the strike. It was only later, as union intimidation undoubtedly increased that the figures of people staying away from work rose significantly. There was also evidence that employee 'clock numbers' had been written down on ballots. As the workers who voted against striking doubtless understood, events at Secunda the previous year had proved that SASOL needed no excuse to dismiss workers. One SASOL employee, Mr. Hlabane, told me he was scared to lose his job and voted against striking: "how are you going to pay for your house, for your children?"¹²² As it had done in Secunda, SASOL summarily dismissed workers who failed to turn up for work. The company immediately started to evict dismissed workers from the Boiketlong and Umgababa hostels with the assistance of the police.¹²³ Employees in the process of paying for their houses on installment were required to pay the full price within thirty days of their dismissal or lose their houses. In the case of employees who had brought houses through external financing, SASOL informed building societies that they had been dismissed and that the company was no longer subsidizing their

¹²¹ SAS, P22/6/1, 19/8/11, 2 October 1987, Telex to SACWU from H.F.Jacobs, SASOL 1.

¹²² Interview with Mr. Hlabane by author.

¹²³ SAS, 19/8/11, 3/39, General Manager, Sasol 1 to All employees, 13 October, 1987, Labour Situation.

installments.¹²⁴ The union charged that the dismissals were “overly hasty and unjust” and occurred “after a very short ultimatum” with no regard paid to the long service records of many striking workers.¹²⁵ The Stegmann quote above suggests that the opposite was in fact the case: SASOL’s ruthless responses to these strikes were intimately related to the fact that workers regarded as loyal, ‘long-serving’ employees went out on strike. Because SASOL managers still imagined they were in a paternalistic, generously benevolent relationship to the company’s African employees, this unprecedented rejection of managerial authority provoked a furious response.

Employees who had come to work on the first day or two of the strike and then stopped coming because of union intimidation got their jobs back in time. One such employee, Mr. Motloun, told me he stayed at home until he was called back to SASOL for an interview with his old boss. “He asked are you ready to come back to work? He was very relieved that I was!” This was much more likely for African workers in better paid, clerical positions which required more skilled candidates that were harder to replace.

Many others were not re-employed. To this day, every Sunday, a group of men meet in a local community hall in Zamdela. Their weekly meetings are legend in Zamdela; every resident I spoke to knew about them. They were all dismissed in the 1987 strike and have pinned their hopes on a class action law suit being pursued against SASOL in the United States by the Khulumani Support Group. They meet every week,

¹²⁴ SAS, 8/2/9, Gen Manager to Messrs Samela and Mavivha (SACWU), 23 Oct 1987.

¹²⁵ SAS, 18/7, Elmine Worthington to Senior Legal Advisor, 2 Oct, 1987.

when they are able to make it, to hear news of the progress of the campaign. Mostly, though, they pass time together, talking about their families, about soccer, about their dreams. About a past still weighing so very heavily on their minds.

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Ironically, the repeal of influx control in 1987, which opened the way for SASOL to provide family housing across the board for its African employees, happened at precisely the point when the company decided to pull back from direct involvement in the housing of its workers. The primary motivation for this shift was SASOL's desire to no longer have capital tied up in its housing schemes which could be used in its business. The financing of home ownership schemes by the company would end, and be transferred to the Building Societies and Banks where, the company now insisted, "it in fact belonged."¹²⁶ "It is generally accepted", SASOL's managing director Peter Cox could now claim, "that an employer should not become directly involved in the personal affairs of its employees. Housing could be classified as such a personal affair." The discursive terrain had shifted to such an extent in favor of 'free-market' neo-liberal ideology that Cox's reflections on the company's previous practices (typical of the way proprietors of company towns historically have looked to intervene in employees' private lives) now took on an almost embarrassed tone:

The establishment of the SASOL activities at Sasolburg...unfortunately necessitated direct company involvement in the housing of employees.

¹²⁶ SAS, Memorandum by P.V. Cox: 'Sasol's involvement in the housing of its employees' 23 July 1987.

Literally thousands of houses had to be built by SASOL to accommodate employees. Apart from the undesirable side effects that accompany a housing activity on such a scale, several million Rands of capital are locked up in housing and thus not available to SASOL for investment in its main stream activities.

He was practically apologizing for establishing a company town. In his discussion of a similar renunciation of 'paternalism' by gold mining company's in the 1980s, Wilmot James noted that this abandonment of any responsibility for assisting African workers with their accommodation needs allowed management to wash their hands of their duty to "remedy the racial inequalities" associated with the mining industry's role in South Africa's political economy.¹²⁷ That this renunciation of 'welfare paternalism' at this time occurred in the gold and mining industries in large part because of the radioactive association of 'paternalism' with apartheid is one of the ironies which this chapter has sought to highlight.

The labor action in 1987 occurred in the wider context of the rent and rate boycotts in the Vaal Triangle townships over housing, infrastructure, public transport, rental and rate increases and the illegitimacy of local government structures.¹²⁸ Zamdela residents participated in the rent and rate boycotts in the late 1980s, though the township was significantly less febrile than others in the Vaal Triangle region and elsewhere.

Writing in 1990, a manager from Karbochem, a local chemical company observed:

"during all the uprisings in the Vaal Triangle, Zamdela was relatively calm. I can't put my

¹²⁷ Wilmot James, 'The Erosion of Paternalism on South African Gold Mines', 14-15.

¹²⁸ Matthew Chaskalson, Karen Jochelson, Jeremy Seekings, 'Rent Boycotts, the State, and the Transformation of the Urban Political Economy in South Africa', *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 40, (Dec., 1987), 47-64.

finger on the reason why, but we'd like to keep it that way.”¹²⁹ The answer, this chapter has begun to suggest, might well relate to Zamdela’s incorporation in a company town, where SASOL had a mediating presence subsidizing the costs of at least the most basic elements of everyday social reproduction.

¹²⁹ SAB, D.J Cilliers, Administrative Manager of Karbochem to Minister of Constitutional Development, G. Viljoen, Vanderbijlpark, 24 July 1990.

Chapter Six:

‘their cultures were not well invested in them’: The Patriots Theater Group and the Production of History in Zamdela

The familial dislocations associated with the history of South Africa’s migrant labor system are inscribed in Zamdela’s name. A number of older residents told me the township’s name was derived from the isiZulu *samdela* – “we better forget about him” – reflecting the resignation and disappointment of rural kin frustrated with the failure of migrant laborers working at SASOL to return to rural homes. The cultural consequences of Zamdela’s place in South Africa’s migrant labor system are a central preoccupation of a group of young men, core members of a short-lived theater group who I spent much of my time with during my fieldwork. The Patriots theater group was established in 2008 in an effort to secure a financial grant from the South African government’s Department of Arts and Culture’s *Investing in Culture* program.¹ The play which they wrote for the program, ‘Here and Now’, offers a sensitive rendering of the familial strife and ontological dilemmas facing the isiZulu migrant who is the play’s key protagonist. The play comments perceptively on the history of their township and its place in South

¹ Established in 2005 *Investing in Culture* was designed, “to provide empowerment opportunities for unemployed people through skills development, training, and job creation” through its particular focus on arts, culture and heritage. The program provides ‘seed’ funding (and skills training through workshops) to support the start-up of community development and entrepreneurial projects, such as bead-work co-operatives or similar small, medium and micro enterprises (SMME’s) in poor rural and urban communities. See <http://www.polity.org.za/article/sa-xingwana-speech-by-the-minister-of-arts-and-culture-at-the-state-of-the-nationdebate-in-parliament-04062009-2009-06-04>. Accessed 22nd December 2010.

Africa's migrant labor system. 'Here and Now' is a production of history that is deeply personal, intimately related to their family histories and their imperiled sense of themselves as cultural subjects.

This chapter explores the lives of a group of young men living in a company town marked by the precipitous decline of employment and 'paternalism' over the last two decades: life in the ruins of the 'apartheid modern.' As such it speaks to the apparent crises of social reproduction in Africa and elsewhere at the millennium. These young men have sought to make the post-apartheid South African government's discourses and programs explicitly targeted at 'youth empowerment' and promoting a model of cultural entrepreneurship, work for them. They have tried, ultimately in vain, to become successful 'ethnopreneurs' and in the process they have become entrepreneurs of themselves, in Foucault's sense.² This chapter charts their efforts towards making sense of the relationship between the past and the present, between the alienations associated with South Africa's migrant labor system and the elusive promise of personal triumph in the present – their attempts at making good on the "millennial promise of democracy and the free market" in post-apartheid South Africa.³

'Here and Now' embodies these imaginative labors in its insistence that despite the failure of its key protagonist to fulfill his fatherly responsibilities and secure orderly cultural reproduction, young poor black South Africans can still attain the personal

² John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff. *Ethnicity Inc.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 226.

³ Comaroff and Comaroff. 'Reflections on Youth, From the Past to the Postcolony', 278.

triumph after which they long. While the play narrates its protagonist's inability to escape from history, it is ultimately an assertion of the ability of young poor black South Africans to transcend history, to succeed as self-actualizing individuals in spite of the weight of an apparently insurmountable past. Perceived failures in terms of notions of personal achievement in the present are imagined to be tied to failures in terms of putatively 'traditional' modes of creating persons in the past. The overarching pedagogical message of the Patriots play may be that poor black South African youth can succeed in spite of a history (and childhoods) marked by absentee fathers and improperly consummated cultural identities, but the disintegration of the theater group charted near the end of the chapter, suggests that the Patriots repeated insistence that they live in a 'dog eat puppy' world has proven sadly accurate. On a somewhat more hopeful note, in the epilogue appended to the chapter, I describe the involvement of one of the key members of the theater group in a new civic organization which emerged in Zamdela after the bulk of my field research was completed. As bleak as life in the ruins of the apartheid modern in Zamdela may appear, there are signs that some of the young people who have proven unable to make themselves into 'entrepreneurs' are increasingly putting their energies into trenchant critiques of the realities of life after the decline of employment and 'paternalism' in this company town.

The scene and its actors

There is only one access route to Zamdela township from Sasolburg, along Eric Louw Weg. Residents of Zamdela who do not have the use of private cars can catch

mini-bus taxis from the taxi rank in downtown Sasolburg to the township, but many walk or bicycle the route. On its Northern stretches the road cuts through Sasolburg's leafy oak tree lined suburbs with their manicured gardens, neighborhoods reserved until recently for white residents only. The road is dotted with several neo-Calvinist Dutch Reformed Churches catering to the predominantly Afrikaans speaking local white communities. A little further south, in the direction of Zamdela and the original SASOL factory, is Zio Cash 'n Carry, a wholesale store; a bottle store and a take-out; all popular spots with Zamdela residents and some of Sasolburg's poorer local white residents. Then the SASOL factory comes into view, with its metallic labyrinth of pipes and hissing, belching stacks. Concrete-slab security walls, guard towers and barbed wire surround the plant, a result of attacks launched by the African National Congress' armed wing *Umkonktho we Sizwe* during apartheid. Opposite the factory, on the other side of the road are the massive Sigma coal mine dumps, monuments to the labor of the black migrant laborers that SASOL housed in Zamdela. These days, little human or motorized traffic passes beneath the massive steel arch made from mining jacks with the Sigma insignia splayed across it. As Eric Louw Weg curves to the left, Zamdela's northern entrance is on the right, marked by the customary advertising billboards which mark the entrance to many South African townships: a large 'Love Life' HIV-AIDS prevention sign, the obligatory advert for various soaps and laundry detergents, and an advert for Black Label beer featuring an image of a black industrial worker wearing the unmistakable blue overalls of the South African working class, quenching his thirst with an ice cold beer as sweat drips off his rippling chest.

Thembelethu hostel (the focal point of much of the Patriots daily activity during my time with them) is situated directly opposite the south facing end of the SASOL I factory, next to the township cemetery. Built by the chemical company AECI (African Explosives and Industries) the hostel was designed to house both single male workers, and married workers and their families. AECI managed the hostel until it sold the property in the early 1990s. Today, the hostel is owned by a local African National Congress (ANC) councilor who sits on the Sasolburg City Council. He contracts a security company to control access to the hostel at its main entrance, but otherwise appears to do little in the way of maintenance. The hostel grounds include a soccer field where residents complain the grass is rarely cut, the buildings' exterior is in dire need of a paint job. There are many broken windows and a hole in the wall on the southern side of the soccer field. The Patriots organizational base was located down a dark corridor in the hostel block adjacent to the soccer field, in a store room which they had appropriated as their own which also contained the power mains for the hostel block. On the wall directly opposite the doorway there were banks of metal lockers with stickers warning of possible electric shock.

When Styx, the group's leader, first showed me to the room one afternoon in early 2009, I entered a scene of youthful, relaxed homo-sociality. Two men were sitting on upturned plastic beer crates scattered around the room, another two were lying on the bed on the left as we entered, their bodies casually intertwined. A young muscular man with a gleaming, shaved head was sitting on a stool at a table with two desktop computers and keyboards placed on it, and a printer underneath. As we entered, the man at the computer

(introduced to me as Khosi) stopped the playback of a movie, the Hollywood hip-hop dance movie, *Stomp the Yard*. Styx introduced me to Fanyane, who he describes as his ‘sidekick’; Msiga, ‘the baby of the group’ at nineteen, the towering Paul, and Thabo, Paul’s younger brother. The young people assembled in the room were what remained at this time of the Patriots Theater Group, which formed in 2008 and at its height, and its first and only public performance, numbered twelve people, including four young women. These women were no longer members of the group by the time I started spending time with the six remaining young men I met that night.

Most of these young men were approximately my age, in their late twenties to early thirties. They paid no rent and no-one had yet asked them to. In the right hand corner of the room there was a collection of musical drums, next to a table housing an unplugged fax machine, a CD-player, a kettle, some utensils and enamel plates and mugs. On the floor beneath the table were a series of buckets and food containers, a hot plate, some dish-washing liquid, a cooking pot and an iron. Against the opposite wall, next to the bed, there was a white-board leaning against the wall, a white briefcase and a filing cabinet with a family photograph appended to the top draw. In the corner, a shopping cart packed with clothes, shoes and a suit-case. On one wall were posted images of Bob Marley and Haile Selassie I; on another wall a piece of paper with the Patriots rehearsal and training timetable printed on it, and a motivational quotation: *“If it leads, it bleeds.”* On the opposite wall, a similarly inspirational page extracted from a newsletter, featuring a story titled ‘Business and Development: Women on the Move’, about a Mrs Modise, a resident

from nearby Deneysville who started an upholstery business for herself in 1994 after the sewing factory she worked at closed down.

That first night, the members of the group spoke excitedly to me about their group (strategically named for the purposes of applying for financial support from the national government) their play, and about their township. Styx had summonsed the group to its headquarters to meet this researcher. As I would come to understand over the coming months, Styx was the *de facto* leader of the group, who took such summoning powers for granted; he also took it upon himself to hire and fire members at will. But what had brought this group of young people together in the first place? They certainly had a shared passion for dramatic performance. But what other solidarities tied them together? Comprising a number of first language *seSotho* speakers and *isiZulu* speakers, they are a fairly typical multi-lingual and multi-ethnic group of contemporary young South African township dwellers. They enjoy pretty much unimpeded mutual linguistic intelligibility and what ethno-linguistic differences do exist appear mostly inconsequential to shared everyday intimacies. Ethno-linguistic joking is common, and occurs at everyone's expense, although like many other Zamdela residents their most unsympathetic discourses are directed at older migrant laborer men (many former miners) who live in apartheid era single-sex hostels, not far from Thembaletu, who they speak of as 'backward' and 'stubborn'.

They also have a shared sense of the township as a space, or what they call the 'loxion', a youthful reworking of bureaucratic nomenclature. They identify themselves as

part of that most clichéd category of official and popular discourse in South Africa: ‘the youth’. In their everyday talk the ‘youth’ category is invoked as an encompassing term incorporating themselves, but in their everyday folk sociology, the category quickly comes apart. For instance, they think of themselves as separate from the self-consciously machismo *Pantsula* street sub-culture which has become immensely popular among male adolescents and young men in Zamdela, and other post-apartheid townships. A significant part of the grounds for the Patriots positioning in contrast to the dominant *amapantsula* sub-culture, is their own performance of Rastafarian stylings. When they are in each others’ company, or that of those otherwise assumed to share their sensibility, their speech and gestures contain frequent references to *Rastarafi* culture. They greet each other with ‘Fiah!’ (fire), a reference to the smoking of marijuana, but also an offer of encouragement, affirmation and solidarity. When group members part ways, the greeting ‘more fiah!’ or ‘one love!’ (the Bob Marley song) is commonly exchanged. When the members smoke marijuana they speak of ‘burning up Babylon’. The music of Bob Marley and other reggae artists are played often on the organization’s computers at Thembaletu. Their performance of *rasta* stylings do not extend to growing their hair in dreadlocks, or to clothing (beyond an occasionally rasta hat or Marley t-shirt) or the sorts of dietary prohibitions typically followed by strict adherents to Rastafarianism. Nonetheless, the *rasta* idiom is clearly an important aspect of the construction of their identities and of the group’s shared subcultural stylings. Hip-hop culture is also important to the construction of their imaginative worlds. Hollywood’s visions of American hip-hop culture provides the soundtrack and symbolics to much of their homosociality. Of course, South African *kwaito* (a popular musical genre combining hip-hop with indigenous

dance-musical forms) also features prominently. Kwaito, hip hop and Rastafarianism each model affirmative, effervescent black identities, and fuel the imaginative possibilities of global fantasy which Brad Weiss has written about in Tanzania.⁴

But how do these imaginings relate to the Patriots frequent invocation of ‘African tradition’ in everyday conversations with each other and kin; in interviews, and in the narrative of their play? Certainly, their sense of themselves as *isiZulu* or *seSotho* cultural subjects is central to the construction of their subjectivities. They share a serious concern about the obstacles to their becoming ‘proper’ cultural subjects. These concerns relate both to the space of Zamdela township itself, imagined as generally inhospitable to the ancestors and to the proper performance of key rituals, and to their sense of how contemporary conditions of joblessness and apparently accelerated commodification are inhibiting the very rites of passage (bride-wealth payments and initiation) which they speak of as central to marking the proper coming-into-being of *isiZulu* and *seSotho* cultural subjects. But their subjectivities reflect their *bricoleur* engagement with the diverse imaginaries of Rastafarianism and hip-hop, ‘loxion culture’; with Christianity in its various vernacular and evangelical forms, with Islam and the fluid realm of socialized ‘traditions’ which they gloss in everyday talk as ‘African culture’, and with fantasies of personal achievement, fame and fortune encountered through national television talent shows and the *Investing in Culture* program which funded them. While the Patriots (like many other township residents) construct themselves in part in opposition to supposedly

⁴ See Brad Weiss. *Street dreams and hip hop barbershops: Global Fantasy in urban Tanzania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) and Brad Weiss, ed., *Producing African Futures: Ritual and Reproduction in Neoliberal Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

traditionalist hostel dwellers, they nonetheless feel the burden of fashioning themselves in the (reified) image of cultural ‘tradition’. Their sense of themselves as ‘African’ cultural subjects clearly does not preclude their identifying with hip hop and *rasta* subcultures but they worry deeply about their ability to properly consecrate marital, ancestral and other social relations in what they imagine to be the appropriate manner. A significant part of this anxiety relates specifically to personhood: to their ability to properly become men in *emic* terms. (*indoda*: isiZulu; *monna*: seSotho).

Styx was born and spent most of his adolescence in Qwa Qwa, a tiny former Bantustan dumping ground for black farm laborers displaced from white owned farms during apartheid.⁵ He often came to Zamdela during school vacations because his mother, and maternal grandparents lived in the township, as did his father, who died two years ago. When Styx completed the final year of high school in 1999 he decided to relocate to Zamdela because of its proximity to Johannesburg, and the presence of his family members. Fanyane, Styx’s ‘side-kick’, was born in nearby Sebokeng, one of the largest black townships in the Vaal Triangle region, which is attached to Vanderbijlpark, another industrial town, established in the 1940s to house workers of the former Iron and Steel Corporation of South Africa (ISCOR). Fanyane came to live in Zamdela with his grandmother, in 1988, when he began his schooling. Khosi, a first language isiZulu

⁵ See Colin Murray, ‘Struggle from the Margins: Rural Slums in the Orange Free State’, in Frederick Cooper, ed., *Struggle for the City: Migrant Labor, Capital and the State in Urban Africa* (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1983), 287–291; Isak Niehaus, ‘Relocation and Deprivation in Qwaqwa: the Experiences, Problems and Responses of Closer Settlement Residents’, papers presented to the conference of the second Carnegie inquiry into poverty and development in Southern Africa, (University of Cape Town, April 1984).

speaking senior group member, was born in Zamdela, although his father and mother were originally from KwaZulu-Natal.

Styx, Fanyane and Khosi were originally brought together by the Zamdela Performing Arts Center (ZAPAC), which was established in the mid 1990s, as part of the post-apartheid government's drive to build arts and cultural centers in poor urban and rural communities. Styx first saw Fanyane on television, delivering an electrifying gumboot dance performance at the South African National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, as part of a performance troupe from ZAPAC. The center has been directed since its establishment by Tony Campbell, a Jamaican-Canadian and self-described "repatriated African." Until their parting of ways with Campbell, Styx and Fanyane were able to use the center and its director's connections to South African and international performing arts networks to extend their talents beyond Zamdela. Through performers passing through the center, Styx learned about bursaries which could support studying performing arts at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He applied for a bursary from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Applicants were required to provide proof of financial eligibility, but he was not able to get hold of a pay slip from his father because, in Styx's words "by that time I [didn't] know where my father is. You know – family crisis and all those things..."

At ZAPAC, Styx also heard about bursaries at Johannesburg's legendary performing arts institution, the Market Theatre, one of the key sites of the protest theater movement during apartheid. Having successfully auditioned for admission to the theater's

‘Laboratory’ drama school program, Styx applied for and received a bursary. He also received funding support from the Sasolburg municipality after writing a letter asking for help making up the cost of tuition at the theatre. He has participated in a number of international arts exchange programs which have taken him to Europe and North America.

‘It’s dog eat puppy here’

In 1999, Fanyane successfully auditioned to be a dancer in the opening ceremony of the 1999 All-Africa athletic games in Johannesburg. He thoroughly enjoyed the experience, especially the opportunity it afforded him to learn about dance choreography, though he bitterly recalls the moment he received his minuscule wages for his efforts. In a manner similar to that noted by James Ferguson in other African settings, a sense of subjugation and a desire to escape to a more hospitable “elsewhere” overseas is a major theme in Fanyane’s narration of his experiences in the arts, and his life as a whole:

Ever since then [the All Africa Games] my life has been bad. I am sick of South Africa. I want to go overseas, I want to do this overseas, in New York. I can make even \$500 and invest it here in South Africa. I don't want to live here, I want to invest here. I think I can get a good job on that side. Its dog eat puppy here.⁶

The ‘dog eats puppy’ metaphor used by Fanyane was a constant refrain in Patriots conversations during my time in Zamdela. Meant by its users to capture the Darwinian

⁶ James Ferguson. *Global Shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 191.

logics of everyday life in Zamdela, I take it to be a suggestive folk theory of life in contemporary South Africa.

One summer's evening, Fanyane and I were hanging out at Tembelethu. Styx had gone to Qwa Qwa for the week to join his family in marking the one year anniversary of his father's death. Fanyane started preparing *pap en wors* for our dinner, and I asked him to tell me why he was so hostile towards Tony Campbell, the director of ZAPAC. As he spoke his brow furrowed and his voice grew strained:

Tony – he used me a lot. As I'm talking now, I'm not supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be overseas doing my stuff. I made lot of money for them [ZAPAC]. Every time I won the best performer award. I promoted his organization a lot. Locally, provincially, nationally, internationally. Check? I thought – this guy is trying to use me. I would have ended up...I would have ended up dying poor.

It was the thwarted opportunity to go on an arts exchange program to Canada which was the ultimate, bitter source of Fanyane's disenchantment with ZAPAC and with the charismatic personality of its director:

I heard about Canada at the center. I ask Tony about it and he said, 'yes you can go'. I was very much excited. Then I ask him about it, because time was going. He said 'no this is not for you. Canada only pay the plane ticket, you have to pay for accommodation and food. This is not for you.' But he was lying! And I know he was lying because I was in his car one day and he went into the shop. And there were papers on the seat. And one of them was from Canada and it had all the information. And it said everything is paid. It said that, man! I know he lied! [pointing his index finger angrily to the ground]. I know!

Such bitter disappointments, compounded by the deception and sense of betrayal which they entailed, prompted Fanyane to break with ZAPAC and establish his own “organization” which he dubbed SKF (Success Kingdom for Freedom) Productions. There is a proliferation of such shoestring organizations in Zamdela, the aspirational intent of their founders similarly reflected in their names. During its first brief incarnation, SKF incorporated a handful of younger local school children, but depended mainly on Fanyane’s own charismatic labors. Fanyane would visit local furniture stores and clothing stores in Sasolburg, asking store managers if they would be prepared to pay SKF a small fee in exchange for the group doing ‘promo’ dance performances outside their premises in an effort to attract passing customers. The predominantly white, Afrikaans speaking store managers and owners he encountered tended to treat his overtures dismissively or regard him with the suspicion typical of a notoriously racist town. As Fanyane remembered: “I go to a shop and ask a lady for funding. White people say to me I must go to my president and ask funding.” SKF in its first incarnation did not last long. Fanyane had originally intended the organization to undertake “community development programs”, which in practice involved offering dance workshops and performances to local schools, for a fee. Zamdela school principals did not respond very enthusiastically to Fanyane’s pitches.

Investing in Culture

In a 2009 parliamentary speech, the South African Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, explained the purpose behind the *Investing in Culture* program thus:

We need to invest in such a way that our investment results in thriving communities who ultimately can stand on their own and grow. Culture must be rooted in the realities of our people, in their daily lives, struggles and victories. Creative industries are critical for our country and for nation-building. They create critical opportunities to uplift and empower our people, *especially the youth*.⁷

The implicit sense of the pressing need for interventions to act upon ‘the youth’ as a problematic demographic is a persistent feature of elite political discourse in contemporary South Africa. It is also a common topic of concern and debate in popular discourse, especially, though not exclusively, among older generations. In South Africa there is much breathless talk of intractable crises surrounding “the youth” (invariably coded as black), of a generation apparently lacking moral and vocational purpose, imperiled by sexual proximity in the age of HIV-AIDS, of young black men thrown into criminal activities because of unemployment. The young men that I spent time with in Zamdela share many of these concerns about the fate of their generational cohort, and about their own lives.

Styx first learnt of the *Investing in Culture* program offered by the Department of Arts and Culture from a poster pinned to the signboard at ZAPAC in early 2008. He decided that he would work towards constituting a group of fellow arts enthusiasts from Zamdela so that they could apply for a grant from the program. Fanyane’s organization, SKF, was moribund, having limped along unconvincingly for a short while. Styx had recently returned to Zamdela from his latest spell at the Market Theatre. He knew Fanyane from ZAPAC. Khosi, a first language isiZulu speaker born in Zamdela, had also

⁷ <http://www.polity.org.za/article/sa-xingwana-speech-by-the-minister-of-arts-and-culture-at-the-state-of-the-nation-debate-in-parliament-04062009-2009-06-04>.

participated in programs at ZAPAC during periods when he was not away from Zamdela doing contract work as a fork-lift truck driver in Witbank. Styx persuaded Khosi and Fanyane that together they should form the core of a theater group and apply for an *Investing in Culture* grant. The Investing in Culture ‘project proposal’ form which they filled out and submitted to the Department of Arts and Culture required that they identify a ‘project manager’ and describe ‘what products/services’ they would ‘produce/render’. Styx’s role in initiating the application appears to have made him the obvious choice as ‘project manager’.

When I first asked Styx to tell me about the grant, he began by reeling off a succession of policy acronyms: “the whole idea is Black Economic Empowerment⁸, it’s accelerated, short income, its ASEGP.⁹ It’s all these laws. GEAR¹⁰ and all these things.” These comments accurately placed the *Investing in Culture* program in its broader national policy context but also reflect Styx’s familiarity with national policy nomenclature. Styx explained that after hearing that the Patriots grant application had been successful, he and Fanyane were invited to Bloemfontein, to attend a training workshop hosted by the Free State Department of Arts and Culture, along with the other grant winners. The workshop had apparently begun with the regional *Investing in Culture*

⁸ A legislated program undertaken by the post-apartheid South African government to redress historical inequalities, through affirmative action and preferential procurement for previously disadvantaged demographic groups. The program has attracted intense criticism for not being ‘broad based’ enough and producing a new black elite.

⁹ Actually, AsgiSA or Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative, a macroeconomic policy aiming to bring together government, business and labor.

¹⁰ Growth, Employment and Redistribution – the macroeconomic strategy adopted by the Mandela administration in 1996. Criticized by some leftists as a ‘neo-liberal’ policy replaced the more socially redistributive Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the African National Congress’ macroeconomic strategy when it was elected into power in 1994.

program director ponderously explicating some policy background, programmatically outlining the various phases which the Department of Arts and Culture expected ‘program beneficiaries’ to move through. The end goal of these phases was to make beneficiary projects “marketable, self sustaining, community driven” and of “direct benefit to the community in terms of job creation and skills development.”¹¹ The workshop was conducted in the top-down manner rather typical of post-apartheid citizen-pedagogy, with government officials seeing their task as imparting skills to citizens constructed as unskilled vessels. An important component of the workshop involved teaching participants budgeting skills, including crash-courses in using computer software to compile project budgets. The grant was disbursed in the form of stipends (staggered over two years) to individual members of the group. The total grant amount was the not inconsiderable amount of R200, 000 (\$29, 000). Styx as the ‘project manager’ received the largest amount, Fanyane and Khosi the next largest, with the remaining amount distributed in equal proportions among the other eight people who were members of the group at the time the stipends were disbursed. If the South African government has represented the program as an investment in the cultural heritage of “the nation”, the expectation is that the ‘beneficiaries’ of the program will themselves become ‘investors’ in culture and marketers of culture; that they will treat culture, including their own identities and histories as commodities; that they will become entrepreneurs of themselves.¹²

¹¹ ‘Investing in Culture Brochure’.

¹² Foucault’s original wording: “Homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself.” See Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 226.

‘Making Moves’

During my time in Zamdela the greatest amount of Fanyane, Styx and Khosi’s time was given over to just such self-entrepreneurship:

Styx: We must always come up with new ideas and see who can buy these ideas and give us money. Its so we can get something like an income into the organization. We ask for a performance or a donation from enterprises in town. If we've never spoken to people we agreed we don't want to print letters – it will be our loss – we will lose paper and lose ink. So we need to go and understand which people are interested. These furniture shops – these private sectors. We request maybe something from them. Like a donation. Then we come and perform for them live in front of the shop then people pop maybe R1, R5. But we've already agreed to an amount. This one is just a boost. It gets people to come to the shop. We are promoting the shop. Maybe when they've got discount or whatever, instead of them having someone who has to sit there with a mic we call them with drums and singing. The person will come as if he or she is going to watch us. Then she might be interested in something else and then buy it.

They refer to these approaches to businesses as ‘making moves’, a revealing phrase suggestive of their attempts at gaining traction in the world, but also implying a strategic purposefulness. Styx, Fanyane and Khosi were constantly ‘making moves’, talking about ‘making moves’, about different tactics for ‘making moves’ and which businesses to approach. In any week they often went out on as many as four of the days, making their way through the Sasolburg business district, knocking on doors, often having doors slammed in their faces, and only occasionally glimpsing hope: a manager who tells them to come back the next day. By the end of my time in Zamdela, it appeared increasingly unlikely that these efforts were going to turn the group into the ‘sustainable business’ which the *Investing in Culture* program envisioned. After one of many days spent

knocking on doors, Styx looked dejectedly at the floor as he told me: “It’s very difficult. It’s a struggle.” Fanyane concurred: “it’s a struggle.”

In their funding proposal, under a section asking how the project would contribute to ‘community development’, the Patriots had indicated that they planned to perform their play at local schools. They envisioned the play being about:

...information dissemination on careers or opportunities that are available for youth of South Africa from the government, private sectors and all those things. When we were applying [for the grant] we had a primary target group, it was high school students. Then our secondary target group was youth out of school. And the tertiary target group was private sector, people who have information. But there's a breakdown in between and the youth can't access the information, so we become the mediator.

When I first started spending time with the Patriots, they had recently completed their first, and to date, only public performance of the play. Over the coming months they tried in vain to secure performances at local schools.

The plays thematic emphasis may have the ring of national government pedagogy but Styx insisted it was no imposition:

The theme came out of us. We thought, what can we do? Shall we do a play and go and teach them...about drugs or Aids? [sarcastic] Okay, we’re not ignoring those issues, but what is it that can make them feel that there is a need to watch this play so we can make income? I said no, what if we do it for career-wise. That we show them how everyone struggles and then how it becomes at the end of the day that no matter what comes in your way – but if that's what you want to achieve, there will be uphill, downhill movements, but one thing for sure – if you keep on going you'll achieve your goal.

Such language, with its promise of ultimate personal triumph is a central element of the play's message, and of the Patriots everyday talk about their fates.

'...their cultures were not well invested in them'

While the play incorporates the themes of 'information dissemination' and 'career opportunities' and perhaps bares the imprint of post-apartheid citizen pedagogy in these ways, it is also a richly textured portrayal of Zamdela's history, firmly placing the township in the context of South Africa's migrant labor system. The play's main protagonist is that figure once so central to Southern African historiography: a black male migrant laborer living in an urban township who takes up with "township girlfriends", rarely returning to his nominal rural 'home' and family, until eventually he stops remitting wages 'home'. The Patriots see the play's subject matter resonating with their own personal biographies and familial histories:

Styx: when you look at Zamdela, most of the people here are like me. We were not born and bred and buttered here. I come from wherever I come from, my father used to work here. And then there was a problem of family. My father was not going back home, he was not sending money because now there's this girlfriend in here. [Zamdela] We realized that most of us even in this project, we're living with single parents. Its either they're divorced, but mostly you find the youth in Zamdela, they are living with single parents – but they are still surviving both parents, but they are no longer staying together. Maybe their mother is back *emakhaya* at rural area or she came to this side but she's staying in Protea [the oldest neighborhood of Zamdela] and the father is staying in Chris Hani [another section of Zamdela] with the other women. You understand? So there's a lot of polygamy, but it's illegal because it was not done according to

African culture, but everything was done like that. [snapping fingers together twice, suggesting improper partnering]

Styx's claim about the prevalence of improperly contracted polygamous marriages, "not done according to African culture", reflects a more widely held view among many residents in Zamdela of the township as a space of cultural transgression. While these sentiments might be expected among older residents, I found that my young interlocutors express similar concerns about the difficulty of cultural reproduction, while they nonetheless also express ambivalence, even ridicule towards the older isiZulu-speaking men in Zamdela's hostels who are treated as metonymic of a stubborn ethnic chauvinism. The tenor of my interlocutors discourse about the obstacles to orderly cultural reproduction, and the consequences believed to follow from such failure are nicely captured in Styx's excavation of what he believes are the root causes of the ill fates which he suggests face Zamdela's youth:

Styx: You find that there's lot of primary schools in this township but there's little of high schools which means education starts and ends at primary level immediately when people need to go to tertiary – I mean to high school level, they can't – based on one thing: its an industrial area. They are hungry for money. Because there's poverty in house they just go and look for piece jobs. The other thing is most of the people in this township they are from the farm so when they arrive here in the township and when they get a little bit of money they don't see the necessity of going to school. I don't have shoes but at least theres a contract that can give me R150 or R200 a week. At least I'll be able to drink every week, date my girlfriend; lay-by some clothes; have some airtime; lay-by a phone. And the other thing is crime rate and drugs and alcohol in this area and HIV and AIDS. That's the top list for youth of this township. So we said no there must be a problem why the majority of youth don't realize that this is one of the economically rich area in Free State province and they have to use that opportunity – that I must go to school and study science and maths and complete it and go to SASOL firm and get this

Skilltech¹³ whatever and become somebody in this world. Or I can do commercial subject and have a good passing rate and apply for bursaries? Because there are certain students they are studying all over the world with the bursaries that they got from SASOL. Some are the CA's [Chartered Accountants]. So we said, no we must look at it and we must juxtapose it with this program that funded us, *Investing in Culture*. What's the whole meaning of Investing in Culture? It means the whole of the majority of the youth here in our township – that's why they've got this unfinished businesses in their careers. There is a possibility that their cultures were not well invested in them. Or their traditions. Because we Africans, we know that when your child is born there are certain ceremonies that has to happen and we believe that if certain things were not done correctly it might cause havoc in your life.

SS: Do you think so?

Yes, it has, it has – it has side effects and psychological effects. For instance, let's say I did my traditions. Because my father married my mum. And they did our Basotho traditions that when we were a young baby they are supposed to cut your hair and put *letsoku*¹⁴. The other thing about Zamdela – I think in the whole of South Africa, its one of the township that has lot of these initiation schools. We believe initiation schools are for villages [rural villages], but it happens here in the township. You find that a person is a Xhosa and he's supposed to go to the initiation school of Xhosa's but he comes to Basotho's because of peer pressure, wanting to belong to this gang or whatever. It does have some effects in his life. Another thing is there are people from this mountain¹⁵ and people from that mountain coming back to the township and they know each other from that and they form gangs and they see someone from the other mountain wearing these different colored beads around their neck and they rip them out. Or they fight over a girlfriend. This is how us young people practice culture in Zamdela now. Initiation is a journey to manhood, learning how to be *Mosotho*, how to be *monna* [sesotho: man]. Learning your traditions. As a black man you are learning where you originated, as your forefathers before you. You white people, you might go to hospital for circumcision for your tradition, we go to initiation school. The witch doctors, people who know our culture and tradition teach us. But culture changes. Its a business now. You pay to go to initiation school, and you go to the police station and you get a stamp. You can go here, on a farm

¹³ A skills development partnership between SASOL and the local Flavius Maleka Further Education and Training College, the former SASOL artisan training college.

¹⁴ Sesotho: a reddish-brown clay ointment smeared on the body.

¹⁵ Basotho initiation schools are colloquially known by the name of the mountain where they are located.

nearby but that is more expensive than going far away in the rural areas. Here you pay R400, R500. there you pay R200, R300. You can do it in Qwa Qwa or Lesotho for much cheaper. Because people think there is lots of money here. You don't do the initiation here in the township. Its not allowed. It must be far away where there are no women who can see and others who haven't been through this.

There is much to comment on here. First, there is Styx's delineation of the brutal logics of an industrial town and the pressing poverty which drive young people in their adolescence into piece work, perhaps best captured in the phrase: “they are hungry for money.” His depiction of the newly arrived rural migrant to the township from “the farm” is a withering caricature, typical of the kind of folk social Darwinism with which I became very familiar from conversations with Styx. But with its references to the widespread dependence on lay-by credit, sex and alcohol, it also quite accurately sketches the rough sociological outlines of a culture of shoestring leisure activity and consumption among young men in Zamdela which is most visible in the high traffic in customers at low-end cell phone and clothing stores in Sasolburg's CBD and in the ebullience of street and shebeen sociability on weekends. But it is Styx's explanation for the predicament of Zamdela's youth – the “unfinished businesses in their careers” – that is perhaps most striking. The implication is that young people in Zamdela are unemployed, or stuck doing poorly paid, itinerant piece-work or generally ‘fail’, in the language of personal achievement and self-fulfillment – to “become somebody in this world”, because they are imperfectly consummated cultural subjects. The language used by Styx to describe this failing warrants special attention: “their cultures were not well *invested* in them.”

The deployment of the investment metaphor to characterize the making of cultural identities is certainly jarring. If the South African government imagines that its investments in ‘culture’ will ultimately secure profitable returns, whether in the shape of protecting the nation’s cultural heritage or producing self-sufficient citizen-entrepreneurs, the logic of Styx's statement implies that through an apparent failure of socialization, and the failure to perform important rituals, elders, parents and other kin have failed to ‘invest’ in the new-born child; that they have failed to inscribe culture into their person. This failure, in the terms of the logic implicit in Styx’s framing, results in greatly diminished value or ‘returns’: young people who have no employment, no hope of becoming, in Styx's words, “somebody in this world.” There is some startling footwork here: a perceived generalized lack among the youth of Zamdela in terms of cultural discourses of individual personhood is ascribed to a perceived lack in that realm of cultural practices reified in everyday discourse as ‘tradition’: the rites of passage which have been central to the constitution of seSotho personhood at least since Moshoeshe, the founder of the Basotho kingdom, sought to make such practices the glue binding the Basotho in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Here, then, we have an emblematic irony: the putatively ‘traditional’ rites and routes to becoming and personhood, such as *lebollo* (seSotho: initiation), which Styx characterized as “a journey to manhood, learning how to be a *Mosotho* man” – are pressed into the service of explaining reputed failures of personal achievement: “becoming somebody in this world.”

¹⁶ S. Guma, ‘Some Aspects of Circumcision in Basutoland.’ *African Studies*. 24: 2-4 (1965), 241-51.

There is also some sense here, of the township as a transgressive space, regarded as an inappropriate space for the performance of initiation, in part because such rituals are understood to conventionally require the seclusion of male adolescents, but also because the urban is both gendered female, or constructed as a space which, in contrast to the rural, is marked by the uncontrolled presence of women, and because the rural is understood as the space of tradition, and the urban as the space of its violation. Similar transgression is suggested in Styx's reference to Xhosa's attending *lebollo* (Basotho initiation schools) "out of peer pressure", in an apparent effort to join the youth gangs cohering around particular *lebollo* or "mountains"; and the suggestion, again, that such persons' ethnic/cultural mis-placement "have some effects in his life." As I argue below, such mis-placement is a central theme in the Patriots play. While Styx has lived in urban townships such as Zamdela and Alexandra for much of the last decade, and his diverse cosmological itinerary and *bricoleur* practices appear radically different to those of 'traditionalists' that he and many other Zamdela residents imagine to be 'backward' and 'stubborn', he nonetheless thinks of his family's rural homestead in QwaQwa as his home, as the space where his ancestors reside:

My home is at Qwa Qwa. That's where my forefathers are. That's why my father was living and then he had to come to this side and when he was working he just met with my mum – my mum was working at a certain somewhere. They start making us and they start marrying each other. My roots are in QwaQwa, that's my homeland. That's where my spirits are. Sasolburg will never be my home – unless I can have a family here. I can have a family here for time being. But I've told myself I cannot survive here because I don't want my kids to have what I experience here.

While Styx may have acquired his sense of seSotho ‘tradition’ through the socialization of kin, while growing up in QwaQwa, and age cohort, his particular cultural vision is not the result of an unreflexive cultural embeddedness. Styx has instead moved through a varied and complicated imaginative itinerary, and like a *bricoleur* has fashioned the patchwork quilt of his identity out of the diverse array of imaginative materials at hand.¹⁷ Styx has come to first objectify, and later revalorize, his received ‘traditions’, augmenting them with infusions from elsewhere. Islam, Rastafarianism, Pan-Africanism and black consciousness are all important passage points through which Styx has fashioned his subjectivity. Listening to him describe the shifting topography of his thinking, the ‘Africanism’ which he now professes as capturing his beliefs comes slowly, idiosyncratically, into view. Finding a safe space for the ancestors and ancestral rituals appears to have served as a lodestar for his evaluation of the suitability of different cosmologies, coupled with a critique of the relationship between colonization and Christianity.

‘Here and Now’

I started my research in Zamdela a couple months after the play was first performed at a local community hall. I watched a DVD copy of the video of the performance with Styx and Fanyane on a bitterly cold Sunday afternoon during the 2009 South African winter. They had just moved from their Themba lethu base to a room in a

¹⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss. *The savage mind*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ in Alan Bass trans, *Writing and Difference*, (London: Routledge, 1966), 278-95.

house in the Chris Hani section of Zamdela. They told me the winter had become unbearable at Thembaletu. Styx and Fanyane were determined that I should watch the play in their presence, so they could make sure I got, in Fanyane's words, “the true story of what we were trying to do.”

The video camera, held by one of the Patriots’ friends, pans shakily across a community hall. There is a very small audience present to watch this, the first, (and to date only) performance of 'Here and Now'. The sparse audience is seated in blue plastic chairs, and the overwhelmingly concrete setting means there is a large echo which reverberates around the room with every delivered line. The audience include a small group of friends and family of some of the Patriots group members; two policemen, attending as invited representatives from the local police station, a couple of local business representatives who the group hoped would sponsor their future activities, and a representative from the Investing in Culture program. Every time the camera sweeps in their direction, the two policemen are slouching in their chairs, asleep.

The play begins with the Patriots ensemble reciting the lines to a poem. The words belong to the main protagonist, Baba Gumede, an *isiZulu* migrant laborer, working on the mines in Sasolburg. Gumede is the “father of two families”, the one at his *umuzi* (*isiZulu*: homestead) in Mahlabathini in rural KwaZulu-Natal, and the other in Zamdela township. It quickly emerges that he has died a miserable, lonely death. Over the course of the play it becomes clear that he was a broken man, ruined by his inability to reproduce himself as a cultural subject and as a man. The lines are delivered with suitable weight.

Life.
I can't sleep when I think about it,
I scream when I dream about it.
My heart bleeds when I speak about it.
I've tried to escape it but I'm stuck in it.
This life.

What was 'this life'? What prompted Baba Gumede's descent into existential crisis? The rough outlines provided in the script of 'Here and Now' are as follows: Gumede leaves his rural home in Mahlabathini in KwaZulu-Natal in his early twenties, and comes to Zamdela as a migrant laborer, to work in SASOL's coal mines in the not too distant past. He had recently married his sweetheart. During the first two years working in Sasolburg, Gumede returns home every six months to Mahlabathini for short leave, and during one such visit, Ma Gumede – his wife – conceives their daughter, Joy. Time passes and Baba Gumede stops returning home, and he stops remitting his wages to his wife and family. He begins a love affair with a *seSotho* speaking woman – Mamatobo Matobo – who came to Zamdela from QwaQwa when she was eighteen years old. Their relationship results in a baby boy, Thabo. For reasons which will become clear below, Gumede stops visiting Mamatobo and baby. He becomes increasingly bitter and afraid of visiting either his Zamdela family, or returning to his family in Mahlabathini.

'Here and Now' does more than simply underline the alienating effects of migrant labor on black familial and affective orders. The Patriots go further to insist that South Africa's poor black youths can transcend this particular history; that they can succeed in spite of history. This much is clear from Styx's discussion of an early scene in the play in

which Gumede's daughter in KwaZulu-Natal, Joy, complains to Ma Gumede about her father's absence from her life. When she was growing up she used to go to the nearest town to Mahlabathini with her mum at end of every month. Her mum would buy sweets and ice cream, but they had since stopped going to town altogether because her mother had told Joy: "your daddy is no longer sending money back home."

Styx stopped the playback:

We believe every province in South Africa has a father who is a migrant laborer in Zamdela, either working in SASOL or under the ground. But the children they leave behind in their rural homes still end up being mechanical engineers, civil engineers, doctors, even if they no longer support them and their mothers had to struggle. We're saying, let's leave the past for the past. That never impeded her to become what she wanted to be. That's basically what we're trying to portray with that character.

Baba Gumede, it seems, could not "leave the past for the past." The play depicts him still living in an old mining hostel right up to his death, surviving off his SASOL pension funds – incarcerated by history. Styx continued: "there are fathers like that in Zamdela, remember the father of Khosi about the Witdoek stories?" Khosi's father, Baba Ngubane, worked for SASOL until he and a thousand other workers went on strike in 1987. SASOL fired the striking workers and deployed a vigilante gang known as the 'Witdoeke'¹⁸ created by apartheid security forces, to intimidate other workers into not joining the strike. I had hoped to speak to Baba Ngubane, but despite Khosi's earnest mediation he wouldn't speak to me for fear of jeopardizing the class action law suit

¹⁸ Afrikaans term denoting a white item of clothing similar to a bandana.

which he and other workers were pursuing in American courts under the Khulumani Support Group.

Styx: Baba Ngubane didn't want to tell you anything. It's something from 1987 that happened but still even today they are still having meetings. You can just imagine, someone who was retrenched from that period. How does he survive? Where do they live? Like this hostel next to Tembalethu. Number 1. You see these old men there. They are always there. You don't know how they survive. What about their family, do they go home to them in the rural areas? From January to December they are still there.

SS: You don't think they send money from their pensions?
No, they drink it. But you may find that some of them send it but you know as Africans we've got a belief that its not only about you [the father] supporting us [the family]. Its all about me waking up and knowing that my dad is in here, going out and then I come and I say to my friend this is my dad, this is my dad. And the neighbors say oh the father of this house is here. That is one of our cultures. That's what we've got. To sit with your father, even if maybe the life will change in the house. So we're questioning a lot of things about the present life in our township and no one is doing anything about it.

There is a sense of profound loss here, beyond the absence of fatherly financial support. Baba Gumede, the play's main protagonist, can be read as a stand in for Styx's own absentee father, who came to Zamdela from QwaQwa in the 1980s, and who, like Baba Gumede, failed to return home to his wife and kin in QwaQwa after a period of time. In Styx's rendering: "there were family problems and my mum took this maintenance." For Styx, the fact that he could not locate his father to get hold of a copy of one of his pay slips meant that he could not study at university. But if Baba Gumede is unable to escape the hold of history, the play's pedagogical point is to convince its youthful audience – the sons and daughters of many Baba Gumede's – that they shouldn't allow the fact of their fathers absence from their lives, or the fact that their mothers were

‘township girlfriends’, or indeed the perils believed to follow from failed cultural reproduction, prevent them from ‘becoming somebody in this world’.

The mine scene

A group of black miners are working on shift in SASOL's coal mine. It's shortly before lunch, and their white supervisor is not within earshot. The miners start to talk among themselves.

Miner A: The boss is giving the other guy extra money.

Gumede: Don't speak to me about money, I'm busy working. I don't want to hear that someone else has been given more money while I'm working.

Miner A: you call that work? [gesturing towards Gumede] Let me show you what work is!

Miner A, played by Fanyane, starts a gum-boot dance. Gumede responds in kind. They engage in a competitive display of gum-boot showmanship. The gum-boot dance suggests a playful competitiveness among the miners, but the reference to unequal pay is meant to highlight the iniquitous workplace politics with which migrant workers working for SASOL had to contend:

Styx: We're saying even while they are working there is politics. It's not like life for them as our fathers was like there's nothing happening. There is certain things that are happening that breaks their soul but no-body knows about it. Even underground, the *mlungu* is giving the others big money because there's always competition.

But Styx almost immediately undercut the apparent humanizing logic behind the scene, insisting that the pedagogical point of this scene – directed at the young audience – was rather more Darwinian:

Styx: We're instilling that again to society, you must know that there's somebody who is always better than you – there's somebody who is always worse than you. Competition will always be there.

SS: is that a bad thing?

Styx: No that's not a bad thing, it's just the way it is.

Miner A continues with a fresh burst of gum-boot virtuosity:

Miner A: That's work! If you are working you must use your POWER!
[the word explodes from his lips] You just can't work for the sake of work.
How's that power? [commenting on his performance]

Miner B: HOT! That's the work that we want.

The siren goes off. It's lunchtime. Only one of the miners has food, which he shares with the others. Gumede is eating alone, slightly to the side of the group of other miners. They start talking about food – musing on the comparative cooking abilities of their female companions. The shift from food to sex is quick and effortless. Gumede's interest is piqued and he explains that his 'roll on' or secret township girlfriend provides the 'comforts of home'¹⁹ in the absence of his rural wife – apparently cooking as well as his wife in Mahlabathini, while conforming to a long-standing view of township women as more sexually adventurous and adept than rural women:

Gumede: My 'roll on', the one that survives here, she's the best cooker!
She reminds me of my real wife back at home. But *abafazi* (isiZulu –

¹⁹ White, *Comforts of Home*.

women, here denoting women in the township) they can give you better than the one at home!

Miner C: I have a problem, I'm no longer giving my wife the way I'm supposed to.

Miner D: you see those pipes [pointing to the pipes leading from the mine to SASOL's factory] they have a very negative effect towards our bodies. They are killing us slowly, slowly.

Miner B: uGumede, when was the last time you went back home?

Miner D: Madoda [isiZulu: man], you must go home, you mustn't forget you have family at home.

The other miners evidently know that Gumede hadn't been home for a long time. He doesn't respond well to the criticism. His comment presents apartheid's coercive infrastructures of control over black workers bodies as an impediment to the consummation of affective relations – to love.

Gumede: Fifteen years not being in public transport, only company transport, going under ground and coming back to the compound. But now we speak of love?

The play provides a generally sympathetic reading of Gumede's predicament, constructing him mostly as a victim of circumstances; of history. Styx insisted: "It's not like he was not having a moment when he feels that I must go home. But he couldn't. It's not like he's not remembering back at home."

Mahlabathini Flashback Scene

Through a flashback, Gumede remembers when he and Ma Gumede were newly married. Ma Gumede and her friend are cleaning clothes in the river at Mahlabathini. The river – and their domestic labor – are used to mark a pastoral, traditionalist rurality and gendered order. Mahlabathini is constructed as Gumede's real home – as the space of tradition and of culture. It is also gendered as the space where his wife waits passively and obediently for the male migrant's return, and for his wage remittances. Gumede was working in Sasolburg by this stage. Ma Gumede's friend asks her: “do you trust a person who works at the mines?” Ma Gumede responds sentimentally to her friend's probing: “you don't know what he's writing in the letters.”

Back in the mine, Baba Gumede also fondly recalls this period when he and Ma Gumede, like many other black South African women and men, used love-letters to bridge the gap between town and countryside.²⁰ Such reminiscing is then suddenly disturbed by the miner's white supervisor bursting onto the scene – speaking Afrikaans – ordering them to get back to work. The miners jump back to feverish work, with a sarcastic call of 'SASOL today, SASOL forever' (the tagline of a famous post-apartheid SASOL advertisement). There's a quick segue-way into an isiZulu worker song: “We are working very hard under the ground but working for peanuts”, before a parallel song, this time about the play itself; a tipping of the hat to the *Investing in Culture* program and its

²⁰ Keith Breckenridge. ‘Love Letters and Amanuenses: Beginning the Cultural History of the Working Class/Private Sphere in South Africa, 1900-1933’ *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26.2: (2000), 337-48.

watching representative: “we as the Patriot Theater Production we are working together and we will do it together from here until the Parliament.”

A burst of further gum-boot dancing follows and against this backdrop, Styx's narrator figure links the miner's effervescence with the bright prospects for 'the youth' in the post-apartheid era:

That's the beauty, even though they were miners underground, they still have life, they still enjoyed what they're doing. And that joy comes back down to us. This is the New South Africa, you just have to stand up and do it for yourself because the government at the national level has created many structures for you. But youth of today we are not aware, we want our mothers to do everything for us. Here and now, here and now, there are a lot of things for us.

Again, it is striking how laudatory the language about the enabling role of the post-apartheid government is, as is its coupling with rhetoric emphasizing individualistic striving and denigrating dependence on others in gendered terms. The repetition of the play's title, 'here and now' underlines the Patriots insistence that their pasts are surmountable. The next scene centers on the birth of Joy, Baba Gumede and Ma Gumede's daughter in KwaZulu-Natal. Shortly after her birth, Gumede went back to Mahlabathini to assist in performing the rituals involved in marking the birth of the baby and inaugurating a new isiZulu cultural subject. In Styx's words:

He went home because he was a cultural activist and as a cultural activist you always feel that there is a need that you must implement your own culture within your children.

'Zamdela started to be alive'

After assisting with these rituals, Gumede returned to Zamdela, and in Styx's words, "after a certain period", the township "started to be alive" – an under-described allusion to the appeal which township life could hold for black South African migrants to towns during the twentieth century. In Baba Gumede's case Zamdela 'came alive' in part through the pleasures of intimacy with Mamatobo Matobo, his 'roll on' or 'township girlfriend', the women with whom he would have a son named Thabo. The play presents such pleasures receding in the face of the crushing weight of cultural expectations and Matobo's supposed deception:

Styx: Ma Matobo was also a cultural activist. But Ma Matabo lied to Baba Gumede. She said there's a ceremony at home back in QwaQwa, saying her sister was getting married. But it was not like that. They were doing a ceremony of Thabo. Thabo is going to fall under his mama's culture and tradition. And then Baba Gumede didn't know about that. That's why Thabo, when he was living here in Zamdela now, nothing was going straight. He will do this, its not coming out. He will do this, its not coming out. It's because there was no implementation of the relevant culture to this man.

The description of both Ma Matobo and Baba Gumede as cultural activists invokes a vision of their respective cultures opposed in competitive relation to each other. Culture is imagined to be a contested terrain that must be defended or aggressively asserted. The gendered ascription of blame in these comments is especially telling. Gumede is deceived by Ma Matabo, and the assumption is that Thabo's 'relevant culture' – the 'culture and tradition' he should 'fall under' is his father's *isiZulu* culture and not his mother's *seSotho* culture. Once more there is the notion that the incorrect

'implementation' of culture in the child may have dire consequences. It is apparent that Ma Matobo's deception is presented as crucial to Gumede's ultimate existential collapse. The implication is that the pain associated with Gumede's failure to instill his culture into his son results in a generalized failure of cultural reproduction in his life, but also especially in terms of how Baba Gumede conceives of himself as a man. Because of his inability to shape his son as a cultural subject, Baba Gumede cannot reproduce himself as a cultural subject or as a man, and, most importantly, a deceitful woman is portrayed as responsible for thwarting such efforts. The audience's final sight of Baba Gumede has him crying out in despair: "oh my ancestors, where is our culture? I'm crying now because I couldn't manage to practice our culture and traditions. My ancestors help me!"

If Gumede cannot escape the consequences of his past, our final encounter with the characters of Thabo and Joy underlines the play's overarching pedagogical point: that these young people can still succeed in the world in spite of the ghosts of their father's past; that they can transcend history. A slightly more sympathetic portrayal of the women in Baba Gumede's life emerges as the play reaches for redemption. Thabo complains to his mother that "nothing is going well." He shouts at his mother, demanding to know "who am I?" His mother answers exasperatedly: "after these many years that I've made you who you are you want to ask me who you are?" Back in Mahlabathini, Ma Gumede is complaining about her daughter's behavior: "you're always frustrated, you're no longer going out to the street, the other kids don't know about you." She senses that her father's absence might be to blame. "It's not my fault that your father left you. I'm trying all my

best to see you being someone. Although we're struggling and there's poverty in the house, that won't stop you from being whatever you want to be.”

In the final scene, Styx plays a government official from the Department of Arts and Culture who has come to speak to a class of high school students at a local school:

I'm here to tell you about opportunities. It's very important. At the national level in the Department of Arts and Culture we have decided to invest in our culture. Which is why I'm here today. I want to see what you guys do, so I can take you to see all the theaters. I can take you to companies so that you can entertain them and dance, so you can get paid and do what you do best. You can survive, you only have to believe in what you do. You need to do what you do best guys. Can you show me what you can do?

The Patriots ensemble starts gum-boot dancing and singing with gusto.

As the play finally draws to a close, and we watch the twelve person Patriots ensemble perform the final celebratory dance, I asked Styx what had happened to the rest of the group since the performance we had just watched. Of the twelve performers, I recognized only Fanyane, Styx, Khosi and Msiga – one of the younger members of the group. Even Msiga was no longer around.

SS: What happened to the rest of the group? I don't see any of these guys around anymore. What happened to Msiga?

Styx: He's not part of us now.

SS: Why, what happened?

Styx: He fucked up. All these people, they were fired. Because of the way they represent themselves. They want to be spoon fed. They don't...they fail to accomplish their duties in time and if there's a problem they can't explain to you. They behave like spoilt kids. We don't want these spoilt children.

Styx was watching the dancing on the computer screen with a critical eye. His voice became increasingly angry and dismissive: “they were not fit for this show. It strains them. They were not physically and mentally fit. And they stole the camera, one of them....these...one of them. We don't know which one.” Fanyane echoed Styx: “Yes, they stole the camera.” Pointing at Khosi performing on the screen, his shirt drenched in sweat, Styx continued: “If you're not sweating, you're not working. Look at that man!” Glancing at the women performers in the group, he went on: “look at these bitches, they are dry. Go, fuck! Don't come back.” Such language was as much a feature of everyday discourse about women among the Patriots, as language objectifying women sexually. Styx was now in full flow:

We used to rehearse for the show every day. I think I've fired more than thirty-five people since the group started. Some people have to be fired because they don't know why they are here. You cannot come late to work and say to your supervisor: ‘no I had certain home-chores.’ Its means you don't really get it, that you're trying to make life here. We're not playing monkey games. This is our life. This is what we can work, this is what we can sleep, this is what we can eat.

As ‘project manager’ Styx clearly believed his position gave him powers analogous to those of a supervisor or boss. He certainly hired and fired group members in this fashion. His unsympathetic response to group members arriving late for rehearsals, his dismissal of the excuse that group members may have legitimately had to help with house chores in their various home settings is certainly suggestive of ‘dog eats puppy’ Darwinianism coming home to roost.

One night, after an afternoon spent hanging out at Thembaletu, Khosi invited me to his family's home on the other side of Zamdela. As we pulled into the drive way in my car, Khosi's wife, Buhle, walked out the gate, passing the front of the car. Khosi called out to her through the open window on his side. She ignored him. 'Eish', he sighed. 'Fighting?' I ask. 'She wanted me to take her to college this morning but I couldn't because I had to do these promotions'. Earlier that morning Khosi and Fanyane had both visited the kitschy Emerald Resort and Casino, just to the north of Sasolburg. Fanyane had told me that he had visited the casino the day before too, and it seems on both days the Emerald staff had sought to rebuff the unwelcome presence of the young men who didn't look like Emerald's clientèle. Earlier that afternoon, when I had arrived at Thembaletu, Khosi and Fanyane were doing some troubleshooting on the organization's desktop computers. Both computers always seemed to be freezing, and no amount of fiddling appeared to get them to work. The one computer clearly had no space left on it, though neither Khosi or Fanyane seemed especially keen to delete the huge amount of video and song files on the hard drive. The other seemed to have a virus problem. The frozen computers were especially problematic that afternoon because they were working on additional proposal letters for promotional performances which they were planning on submitting to other local businesses the next day. After listening to Khosi and Fanyane relate their unsuccessful efforts at Emerald casino, I asked "don't you sometimes feel discouraged?" Khosi's response was disarmingly sweet. He grabbed Fanyane tightly across his shoulders and said: "how can I with this guy? He always has hope!" Fanyane smiled broadly.

Then Khosi pointed at the pictures of Bob Marley stuck to the wall: “he is giving us strength,” he said, before an affirmative “fire!”, and pumping his chest with a clenched fist.

Khosi was evidently having some difficulty balancing the demands placed on his time and labor by his attempts at helping turn the Patriots into a ‘sustainable’ proposition and the obligations entailed in his relationship with Buhle. Buhle was studying at a local mining college, finishing her final year of schooling. Khosi had recently finished school too. As we sat outside his house in the car and watched Buhle walking out of sight, he told me that he wants to “put something symbolic” on Buhle’s finger. He told me that he is starting to think about “planning financially.” Khosi and his wife are still living in the same small house as his parents. He wants to build a house for his own family. He told me that he paid “a little bit” towards *lobola*, showing a small gap between his index finger and thumb. He had paid R2000 (\$292), but he still had to pay the rest to pay the cost of the number of cows agreed upon in negotiations between his and Buhle’s families. The problem, as many other young men in a similar position complain, is that the price of cattle has skyrocketed in recent years:

R1400 a cow! I wouldn't pay R4000 for a human! I still have to perform some rituals, which will combine the spirits of our ancestors. She is Xhosa. Her parents were difficult. Like I say, these Xhosa people are so close minded!

Khosi’s situation is by no means unique: the vast majority of young men of comparable age in South Africa face similar difficulties in an era where financial opportunities,

especially employment, are simply not available for young men in the way that they were say, twenty years ago. The consequences are clearly significant, as Khosi's comment above makes clear. What is at stake is the imagined appropriate reproduction of cultural subjects, the proper consummation of relations with living kin, and of relations with the ancestors. If the rituals combining the spirits of Khosi and Buhle's ancestors (including the slaughter of *lobola* and associated rituals) are not performed timeously – or worse, at all – the consequences for both parties and their relationship, are understood to be potentially dire. As we have seen already, the young men in the Patriots group believe that such failures in cultural reproduction can potentially inhibit the ability of the children who might result from such a relationship from 'becoming somebody in this world'. As we got out of the car and headed inside the house, Khosi told me that he would again not be able to give Buhle a lift to college the next door, because he and Fanyane would be going to Emerald casino for one more try.

Styx expected the other members of the Patriots to display similar self-disciplining priorities, there would be no room for 'spoon-feeding', or 'spoilt children'. To remain in the Patriots and receive a stipend, required one to be a responsible, self-disciplining subject, who keeps to a timetable, draws up a budget to manage your stipend, and internalizes one's *real* priorities as existing in the timetabled rehearsal schedule under the surveillance of the supervisor; in pitching 'promotions' to prospective buyers of your cultural product, instead of in the realm of the reciprocal social relations and obligations of everyday life. Dog eat puppy indeed.

On my last day in Zamdela in 2009, when I went to say goodbye to Fanyane and Styx, the later asked me if I could “lend some money.” He explained that the second half of the *Investing in Culture* grant hadn’t yet been paid out by the Department of Arts and Culture. The next time I spoke on the telephone with Styx, he told me he was in Bloemfontein the provincial capital about four hours drive from Sasolburg, taking a training course in business management at a small business college. He was still waiting for the government to pay out the second half of the stipend. I asked him how Fanyane was doing, and he told me that Fanyane had left the Patriots and formed his own organization. The signal was terrible and we had to cut the conversation short. When I called Fanyane, he confirmed that he was no longer working with Styx. He told me he had restarted his old organization, Success Kingdom for Freedom. He didn’t say why he was no longer working with Styx and there were more signal problems. I assumed that there had been some kind of falling out or that Styx had fired him, since it seemed unlikely that Fanyane would voluntarily forgo the second half of his stipend. I later learn from Khosi that there had been a fight and that Styx and Fanyane were having what he called ‘management problems’. Fanyane had put so much of his time and labor into trying to turn the group into the ‘sustainable business’ envisioned by the *Investing in Culture* program. No-one had made more ‘moves’ than Fanyane. The Patriots, it seems, have disintegrated.

epilogue

When I next visited Zamdela in June 2010, I learned that Fanyane was arrested in May that year for his involvement in a march on the local municipality offices in downtown Sasolburg. Since the beginning of 2010, while I was overseas, he had become a key mover in an umbrella community organization dubbed the Zamdela Concerned Youth Residents Consortium (ZCYRC). ZCYRC incorporates a number of local organizations, mostly shoestring bodies like Fanyane's SKF Productions, which are registered with the Department of Social Development as not-for-profits but which mostly survive (to the extent that they do) on their founders' individual energies. Moral concerns about channeling youthful energies into sport and art activities are an important aspect of what seems to unite the young people in the ZCYRC, though these preoccupations are not necessarily driven by the evangelical Christianity which has become such a force in Zamdela, as elsewhere in postapartheid South Africa. The language in the ZCYRC constitution suggests that theirs is in many ways a broader redemptive project, longing for "rediscovery and true understanding of potential and purpose for existence, restoration of authentic self, rehabilitation of high level morality and character."²¹

The ZCYRC can also be understood as offering a critique of local government practices, and of the realities of life after the decline of employment and 'paternalism' in a company town setting. In passing conversations on street corners, at organizational

²¹ ZCYRC Constitution.

meetings and in the ZCYRC's multiple memoranda a familiar list of issues is singled out as grievances: corruption, service delivery, poverty, crime and jobs. Their anger towards municipal officials and politicians is chiefly expressed in terms of critiques of the conspicuous display of wealth, of their remoteness (apparently councilors tend to move from Zamdela to nearby upper-middle class suburb Vaal Park) and of said local elites "stealing" Zamdela's beautiful women from their (almost entirely male) grasp. These young men speak in dire terms about the implications of joblessness in Zamdela in terms of the township's sex-gift economy. Sons, they say, cannot buy "things" for their girlfriends; fathers help their sons meet the costs of gifting only in exchange for sexual relations with their son's girlfriends.

ZCYRC members insist that their quarrel is not with the ANC or national government. Some, like Fanyane's house-mate Shaun Hadebe, a physically challenged man in his mid thirties, are ANC members. Hadebe has a history of party organizing and activism and claims that he was forced to leave his home near Durban, on South Africa's east coast because of persistent violent tensions between the ANC and its Zulu nationalist rival the Inkatha Freedom Party. Over lunch one day in his government built house, he suggests that the ANC doesn't exist in Zamdela; there are rather "people using the ANC's name for own purposes." ZCYRC members tell me they are following what they call the South African President Jacob Zuma's "presidential mandate" for the removal of corrupt municipal officials and politicians. Dismissive of suggestions of similar corruption accusations surrounding national ANC leaders – including Zuma – they insist on the disaggregation entailed in the phrase "fake ANC leaders." Their frustrations with SASOL

and other locally based companies center on a perception that what jobs there are in local industries do not go to needy local Zamdela residents who they insist have the necessary skills, but rather to residents from other towns. They suggest that jobs are given in exchange for bribes or sexual favors with ‘our mothers and sisters’ or – in a still very Afrikaans company – go to Afrikaner pals and family members. The “outsiders” fingered in this critique are sometimes spoken of as being from other towns nearby, or sometimes from rural provinces like Limpopo and Mpumalanga. In its barest arithmetic the employment grievance is articulated in terms of a critique of SASOL’s profits coupled with a gesture towards an almost Faustian bargain: it is implied that residents would better tolerate the high pollution levels in Sasolburg in exchange for jobs.

In mid-April the ZCYRC organized a march through Zamdela and Sasolburg, incorporating memorandum hand-over’s at the SASOL administrative block; the local Karabo Community Radio Station; the Zamdela Arts Centre; before finishing at the municipality offices in town. Students from three local Zamdela high schools were roped into the march. The targeting of the radio station and arts centre (not to be confused with the Zamdela Performing Arts Centre) reflects the fact that the ZCYRC is driven in large part by a number of frustrated young performing artists who believe that neither the radio station or the arts centre are “doing enough for local talent.” Fanyane was arrested during this march. On the 3rd of May a group of fifteen ZCYRC members – including Fanyane and his friend and the organization’s chairman Sylvester – snuck past security into the mayor’s office, demanding to know why their memoranda hasn’t received the municipality’s attention; insisting that they wouldn’t move out of the mayor’s office until

they received a written response to their concerns. By this stage their demands had boiled down to a handful of specific requests related chiefly to the provision and maintenance of civic infrastructure in Zamdela:

1. That the Zamdela swimming pool be handed over to the ZCYRC for management
2. That the municipality provide land for a youth centre
3. That the municipality turns open spaces in Zamdela into parks
4. That the municipality ensure that long grass in the township is cut

The ZCYRC left the mayor's office with a letter requesting that the organization identify vacant open spaces in Zamdela which could be turned into parks; that the municipality would "seek legal opinion" about the swimming pool [which the municipality claims was closed because of repeated cable theft] and a commitment from the municipality that it would provide land for the building of a youth centre, providing the ZCYRC secured funding for the project.²² ZCYRC envision SASOL as the source of these funds, and its latest memoranda to the company go beyond their usual requests for monies to cover transport costs to attend youth summits, for t-shirts, laptops and printers; to demanding in increasingly threatening language that it contribute to a 'youth trust fund' to provide bursaries to young residents and possibly also the setting up of a "care centre", including a clinic. SASOL has rejected almost all such requests, though it is considering funding the proposed youth centre.²³

²² Executive Mayor's Letter, 3 May, 2010.

²³ SASOL letter to ZCYRC.

One morning in June we headed south in my car to the Iraq²⁴ section of the township, which sprawls to the south of the SASOL I plant and Natref refinery. The ZCYRC had decided to make an intervention in a construction project where they had heard that a contractor was not employing artisans from Zamdela. We drove for some distance before we reached the construction site, where a water storage tank farm was being built. Upon arrival, Kopano (a member of the local GroundWork environmental NGO) lead the group of five ZCYRC members over to the entrance to the construction site, in search of the project manager. After listening to Kopano explain the group's grievance, the security guard at the gate tells the group that the manager is not on site. Kopano asks to speak to the 'CO' (Communications Officer) of the project. The guard disappears. Then the safety officer, a twenty something year old man, makes his way to the gate, enquiring about the source of the group's animus. Kopano recapitulates their grievances with the construction project's hiring practices. Kopano started building up a head of steam, coupling an assertion of the group's putative legitimacy – "we are a registered structure!" – with more strident language: "We are not patient. We want a new Zamdela. We are tired of the old Zamdela."

The safety officer tried to calm things down, expressing sympathy, even solidarity with their grievances. The safety officer, it turns out – as I had surmised from his accent – was from Wentworth, a working class 'coloured'²⁵ community near Durban and was

²⁴ This newer section of the township emerged during the second Iraq war and was named after as such. A number of newer areas of the township are similarly named – 'France' section emerged around the time of the 1998 soccer world cup hosted and won by France.

²⁵ The category 'coloured' is used in contemporary South Africa to designate a person of apparent mixed race ancestry. It became commonly used during the apartheid period when it was one of the state's official racial categories, but has continued to be used in the post-apartheid period in both official and

familiar with the frustrations associated with hiring practice in working class communities living in the shadow of petrochemical industries.²⁶ “I understand where you're coming from. It's the same by us in Wentworth. You have to know people.” This drew some of the heat out of the confrontation for a moment, though Kopano insisted: “we will stop the project.” After a while longer the CO, a young, smartly dressed black woman, returned from lunch to be confronted by the group. Kopano recognises her as having gone to the same high school in Zamdela as him. Grievances were restated. Demands to speak to the project manager were made. After further discussions and not so veiled threats cell phone numbers were exchanged and the CO promised the group that the project manager would phone before the end of the day. When I spoke to Fanyane last month he told me that the contractor had since hired a few local residents, but hadn't hired any artisans. Fanyane's energies have meanwhile been taken up by auditions and practicing for the ‘South Africa's Got Talent’ television show. What he calls his “acrobatic drums” have made it through to the semi-finals so far. He teaches dance lessons at a school in Sasolburg once a week. He hasn't been able to attend to ZCYRC matters much lately. He says meetings are still happening and members are determined to hold the mayor to his promises. And though the kinds of work which first brought their fathers and grandfathers to this company town are no longer available to these young men, and the ‘paternalism’ of the past is long dead, they will keep pressing SASOL for

popular racial classifications. Most people to whom the category is imagined to apply use the category themselves unproblematically, though there is some contention over its legitimacy and historical lineage. As is customary in most scholarship on South Africa, I use inverted commas to indicate my own reticence about the category.

²⁶ Wentworth lies alongside a major oil refinery to the south of Durban.

funding. SASOL dumps its pollution on Zamdela day in, day out. They want the pound of flesh which they believe is their due.

Conclusion

When the National Party belatedly stepped away from foundational aspects of apartheid policy in the 1980s by relaxing enforcement of influx control and the laws forbidding sex and marriage across color lines, it infuriated the more conservative ranks of Sasolburg's white populace. In 1985 the far right HNP (Herstigte Nasionale Party or Purified National Party) candidate Louis Stofberg won the Sasolburg by-election, defeating the ruling party candidate from the National Party to claim a seat in the national parliament. Stofberg's campaign focused on the marriage of a local white man and a 'mixed-race' women, who lived together in a caravan park in Sasolburg. The vote became a referendum on the principle of racial integration more generally and bi-racial partnering specifically.¹ Stofberg's victory signaled a shift to the far right among the National Party's former white working class and lower middle class support bases. Jonathan Hyslop has argued that the increasing upward mobility of Afrikaners as they benefited from apartheid policies had the effect of undermining the social basis of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid itself.² In the mid-1980s, in industrial towns like Sasolburg, however, there were still substantial white working class and lower middle-

¹ 'Mixed marriage an election issue' *The Star*, 28 September, 1985

² Jonathan Hyslop, 'The White Poor at the End of Apartheid', *Itinerario*, 27, 3/4, (2003), 226-242. Stofberg's victory was hailed by the far white right-wing throughout South Africa, and in the United States, Australia and Europe.

class constituencies inclined to feel threatened by the prospect of the dismantling of apartheid's key segregatory mechanisms.

A majority of voters in Sasolburg rejected the prospect of desegregation out of hand in 1985. Bill Sharp, the longstanding Town Clerk to whom most of the letters of complaint analyzed in chapters three and four were addressed, was subsequently elected to the Sasolburg city council as a representative of the Conservative Party, another breakaway to the right of the National Party. Sharp opposed the repealing of influx control and defended petty apartheid to the very end, but writing in January 1989 he reluctantly advised the municipality to "recognize what is happening elsewhere in the country and its cities." The Johannesburg city center was "in the process of becoming black", he noted, and Sasolburg would also "become black if the opening of white business areas to all races continues. We live in changing times." Explicitly invoking British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's famous 1960 'winds of change' speech which warned the South African parliament that decolonization could not be defied, Sharp concluded: "the winds of change are raging in our country."³ Apartheid South Africa denied history for close to three more decades after Macmillan's speech, and the majority of Sasolburg's white voters clearly fantasized about prolonging this defiance in 1985.

But the writing was on the wall. That same year, in 1985, SASOL sponsored a symposium on urbanization in South Africa where the dismantling of apartheid and permanent African urbanization were assumed to be inevitable. As we have seen, since

³ STCF, 4/7/5, Town Planning Scheme, 30 Jan, 1989, Comments of Town Clerk W.H.S. Sharp

the 1970s, the company had been forced to employ Africans in positions previously reserved for white employees. As chapter five suggested, the gradual easing of the ‘color bar’ at SASOL and elsewhere in the country in the 1970s can retrospectively be read as one of the key shifts (together with the limited granting of property ownership rights to Africans) consummating the emergence of a black middle class in the country. The intensive capitalist commodity culture associated with the unprecedented 1960s economic boom in the country had laid the groundwork for the emergence of more assertive forms of black identity politics: new black apartheid moderns who were increasingly cosmopolitan and aspirational consumers.⁴

The kind of newly assertive category of black South African employees who moved into SASOL in the 1970s and 1980s is epitomized by the lead protagonist in Rrekgetsi Chimeloane’s auto-biographical novel, *The Hosteldwellers*.⁵ A seSotho-speaking apprentice tradesman in his twenties from Soweto, Chimeloane lived in one of the single-sex hostels housing SASOL’s African workers in Sasolburg in the 1980s. Possessing a youthful Sowetan arrogance and flashily dressed from head to toe in consumer brand-names, Ditshipi recalls imagining himself to be an urbane sophisticate and an expert in American popular music. Before joining an African fiction writing group and embarking on an Ngugi wa Thiong’o-eseque vault-face, Ditshipi saw the older Sesotho-speaking men living with him in the SASOL hostel from rural areas around Sasolburg as unclean, uneducated and tradition bound. Ditshipi benefited from the

⁴ Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race*, 288.

⁵ Chimeloane, *The Hostel-Dwellers*.

relaxing of the color bar at SASOL, and employees such as him were deeply cynical towards the vestiges of racial ‘paternalism’ in Sasolburg.

In 1987 internal documents announce the company’s intention to become a ‘colourless establishment’.⁶ This managerial commitment was in many ways fundamentally at odds with the dominant *verkrampte* (conservative) culture which middle and lower level whites employed inside the company had cultivated over the course of apartheid. Former SASOL employees I spoke with in Zamdela testified to the petty apartheid racism which they experienced at SASOL under apartheid. The *verkrampte* culture at SASOL was entrenched and intense. A retired white operator at NAREF, the conventional oil refinery operated by SASOL in Sasolburg told me he was “hit hard by a certain group at NATREF” because he was both Catholic (“next to being a communist”) and because he was liberal politically, sending his children to a multi-racial Catholic convent school in Vanderbijpark. He eventually joined the predominantly black trade union organizing at SASOL in the 1980s, the South African Chemical Workers Union (SACWU).⁷

SACWU’s organizing presented a major challenge to the still dominant *verkrampte* culture at SASOL. A retired white artisan who worked at SASOL for a long time told me: “before the unions in the 80s, we sorted them out. Now they’re [unions] on you. We used to say you fucking didn’t do it right, they would say sorry *baas* [boss].” He

⁶ SAS, 19/51/21, 27/1/1/1, Proposal Sasol One Strategy project, Assistant Gen Manager, SASOL to Chairman of SASOL 1 operations committee, 3 August 1987.

⁷ Author’s fieldnotes.

mimicked deferent, apologetic hands above his head as he finished the sentence. This gap between emergent managerial policies and the dominant company culture was something the HNP's Stofberg manipulated, publicly claiming in 1992, that SASOL would no longer hire white people. Such was the response among SASOL's white rank and file employees that the company had to issue a statement denying this was true, while insisting that "in the long term SASOL's workers will be more representative of the country's population", but qualifying this sentiment with an assertion that it would employ people on the basis of merit and "doesn't discriminate on grounds of race."⁸

The easing and eventual abolition of apartheid's influx control measures removed the mechanisms preventing African women and men from making their homes in Zamdela regardless of whether they were employed in Sasolburg or not. As in many other urban centers, the late apartheid period saw a dramatic emergence of informal 'squatter' settlements on the edge of Zamdela. Between June 1986 and December 1988 the Sasolburg municipality estimated that there was a population increase of approximately 109% in the vicinity of Zamdela, somewhere in the vicinity of forty to sixty thousand people. Managers at SASOL and other local companies insisted that there simply wasn't enough work for the new arrivals: "a very serious situation is developing here", warned a municipality memo.⁹

⁸ SASOL Archive, 19/6/4, 3/39/1, Speciale Nuusbrief aan alle Werknemers, Memo from Managing Director, E.E. Marshall SASOL I on 15th Sept, 1992.

⁹ STCF, 8/1/2, Squatting, Memorandum on Squatting, 16 November, 1989.

Rather than workers with particular skin colors losing out on jobs, as the HNP's Stofberg claimed, the new reality which slowly began to crystallize in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a much bleaker one. In 1992, the company announced a new policy "to ensure cheap and reliable production by employing less people."¹⁰ The original SASOL plant in Sasolburg had by this stage shifted into the production of a range of other chemicals for national and international markets, with oil-from-coal operations focused in SASOL's other company town, Secunda in the former Eastern Transvaal. Thousands of workers were retrenched when SASOL closed down the Sigma colliery in Sasolburg.

In a terrible irony the end of apartheid coincided with a shift into a new era of increased subcontracting and significantly decreased jobs at SASOL. The African women and men freed of influx control's constraints who established themselves in informal settlements on Zamdela's periphery beginning in the late 1980s had no prospect of formal employment. These were the women, men and children that apartheid labor regulations had tried to keep out of Sasolburg and hold down on farms surrounding SASOL in the 1950s and 1960s. Accelerating mechanization on white farms in the 1970s turned them into "black spots" and "surplus people", in the language of the apartheid state. They were removed to "dumping grounds", rural slums in homelands like nearby Qwa Qwa.¹¹ By the time these people were finally in a position to legally make their way to Sasolburg, the jobs and 'paternalistic' practices which had defined this company town, and the

¹⁰ SAS, 19/6/4, 3/39/1, Speciale Nuusbrief aan alle Werknemers, Memo from Managing Director, E.E. Marshall SASOL I on 15th Sept, 1992.

¹¹ Colin Murray, 'Displaced Urbanization: South Africa's Rural Slums' *African Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 344, Jul., 1987, 311-329.

apartheid modern, were a thing of the past. People are still coming today. There are still no jobs.

However, in the apparent ruins of the ‘apartheid modern’, there are nonetheless sparks of hope: energies directed, as they were decades earlier in the minds of Max Kirchofer and of the members of the Bantu advisory board in Zamdela, towards the building of a better present and future in Sasolburg. This is a vision of a post-apartheid present and future founded on what Max Kirchhofer, angrily denouncing the state of Zamdela township in the mid-1960s, had termed “more human concepts.” As we saw chapter six, the memorandum which the Zamdela Concerned Young Residents Consortium (including its prime-mover, Fanyane) submitted to the African National Congress controlled municipality in Sasolburg demanded (like Max Kirchhofer and the Bantu advisory board members before them) that Zamdela enjoy the kind of civic infrastructure which older white residents of Sasolburg speak nostalgically about the decline of in post-apartheid era: a working public swimming pool, a youth centre, parks and cut grass. It is of course difficult to disentangle such nostalgia among Sasolburg’s white residents from the racial politics of regime change. But the ZCYRC, like the Bantu advisory board members before them, did not have to look far for models of “more human concepts.” For all the complaints of older white residents in Sasolburg about the post-apartheid decline in the maintenance and safety of green-strips, parks, pools and sports clubs, the civic imprint of the ‘apartheid modern’ is still very much in evidence in the former whites-only neighborhoods.

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Adele Retief (Sasolburg)

Mark Dry (Cape Town)

Rita Marais (Sasolburg)

Max Kirchhofer (Zurich)

Ma Mabasa (Zamdela)

Mr. Sibisi (Zamdela)

Ma Fani (Zamdela)
Mr. Mahlangu (Zamdela)
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