

Love Letters and Amanuenses: Beginning the cultural history of the working class private sphere in southern Africa, 1900-1933.

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Introduction

This is a study of letter writing amongst migrant workers on the Witwatersrand before World War Two. It is an effort to begin to answer two related questions. Was there a private sphere amongst the rural poor before Apartheid? And, if so, what were its characteristics? The argument moves from a consideration of the paradoxical character of literacy amongst migrant mineworkers to some sweeping observations about the history of privacy in South Africa. It proceeds along the following lines. Literacy on the mines presents a rich field of contradictions and I focus on two in particular. First, migrants made (and continue to make) very heavy use of letters to communicate across the gap between town and countryside. This reliance on the written word was true from the very establishment of the mining industry. It was true despite the overwhelming illiteracy of working people in southern Africa. Here I want to make a corollary point that the popular conception of widespread ‘functional illiteracy’ as a national failure misconceives the character of household communication and family politics.¹ On the contrary migrant heads of households have actively and deliberately cultivated a radically constrained form of literacy specifically organized around the writing of the vernacular letter.

A second related problem emerges out of the consideration of the authoring and content of the letters. I have argued elsewhere that explicitly political letters were very important in the shaping of events on the Witwatersrand, at least before 1933. But they were always very small in number.² The vast majority of the letters written to and from the mines were concerned with matters more personal. Often the most personal forms of affection between men and women were expressed in stylized love letters. These intensely affectionate messages, especially between courting couples, stood in pronounced opposition to the ubiquitous emotional conservatism of *hlonipha*—the etiquette for respectful demeanor between genders and generations. Letters, as Schapera observed in 1933, constituted the private sphere³ of migrant life. But here lurks another paradox. For these deeply affectionate letters—which Habermas has described as the ‘purely human relations’ of the European private sphere and which surely qualify for the adjective ‘private’—were usually authored by skilled amanuenses and commonly read aloud. Letter writing in southern Africa, even within the household, was intrinsically indirect and collaborative.⁴

Which brings us to the character of the private sphere in southern Africa. There is a wealth of evidence from Europe and the United States that the epistolary novel, and private letters, helped construct both new kinds of bourgeois individuals, and new relations of

¹ ‘Illiteracy: South Africa’s Economic Time-bomb.’ *Mail and Guardian* (7 March 1997) <http://web.sn.apc.org/wmail/issues/970307/BUS40.html> 30/08/99 10:49:25.

² K. Breckenridge, ‘An Age of Consent: Law, Discipline and Violence on the South African Gold Mines, 1900-1933,’ (PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1995).

³ By the term ‘private sphere’, I mean an overlapping set of concerns focussed on the economic and affective management of the household, explicitly conceived in opposition to the ‘public sphere.’

⁴ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Translated by T. Burger and F. Lawrence, (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1989), p. 48.

affection between them in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁵ In 19th century South Africa, mission educated young people enthusiastically used letters for different reasons, but with some similar effects. At the outset, then, we can observe a fairly straightforward confrontation between marriage shaped by the concerns of kinship and the public negotiations of the extended family, and courtship organized by individual desire and the private love-letter. ‘How,’ to restate Justice Nhlapo’s question, ‘do you command your daughter to marry a man of your choice when a missionary education has exposed her to reading and writing, and courtship by letter—not to mention financial independence through wage labour?’⁶ But this straightforward dichotomy between communalism and individualism masks more than it reveals. Outside the ranks of the most enthusiastic and literary converts, letters did not, in fact, conjure emotionally individualized selves amidst the blurred ranks of the lineage. Precisely because South African patriarchs sought to limit the domestic consequences of literacy, and because the state exercised a national educational policy of malign neglect, the literary domain of courtship has necessarily remained collaborative. The amanuensis has constructed the private sphere in South Africa, either from within the family or networks of peers. Working class South Africans have constructed private lives, and individual selves, out of an unusual combination of literary affect and collaborative authorship (and reading).

But what does the character of the African private sphere have to do with popular culture and democracy? In short, a great deal. For the character of the private sphere (or private life, if you prefer) determines the very character of political individuals. Every major political philosopher after the French Revolution, from Hegel to Proudhon (with the notable exceptions of Marx and Engels) argued that the family--defined as a private domain in opposition to the public, provided the foundation of political ethics.⁷ The modern notion of citizenship is premised on what Taylor describes as ‘free, self-determining subjects’ constituted and constrained by the affective and economic interests of the family.⁸ ‘The Bourgeois individual,’ Chakrabarty observes, ‘is not born until one discovers the pleasures of privacy.’⁹ In part, then, this is an attempt to ask questions about the relationship between selfhood and democracy in southern Africa that have been answered in very interesting and provocative ways for India.¹⁰ ‘Nationalist thought was premised precisely on the assumed

⁵ E. Fox-Genovese, ‘Women and the Enlightenment,’ *Becoming visible: women in European history*, Edited by R. Bridenthal, C. Koonz, S. Stuard. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 259. G. Rudé. *Europe in the Eighteenth Century: Aristocracy and the Bourgeois Challenge*. (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. 150. Jan Lewis. *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson’s Virginia*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 179-187.

⁶ T. Nhlapo, ‘Women’s Rights and the Family in Traditional and Customary Law.’ *Putting Women on the Agenda*. Edited by S. Bazilli. (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1991) p. 121.

⁷ M. Perrot, ‘The Family Triumphant’ *A History of Private Life: Volume IV, From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*. Edited by M. Perrot. Translated by A. Goldhammer. (Cambridge MA, 1990) pp. 99-113.

⁸ C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge MA, 1989), p. 395.

⁹ D. Chakrabarty, ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?’, *Representations*, 37, (1992), p. 9

¹⁰ See A. Ghosh in this volume and P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and ostcolonial Histories*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993).

universality of the project of becoming individuals, on the assumption that ‘individual rights’ and abstract ‘equality’ were universals that could find home anywhere in the world, that one could be both an ‘Indian’ and a ‘citizen’ at the same time.’¹¹ The stakes here are high. If the failure of the nationalist project in India (and by sleight of hand, the Third World) follows from its incomplete grasp of the form of selfhood, and the power of private life organized by ‘tradition’, then the presence and character of privacy in southern Africa determines the very viability of the liberal democratic revolution in South Africa in particular, and the movement away from what Mamdani as ‘rural despotism’ in general.¹² I believe that there are grounds for believing that the form of the private sphere is recognizably modern in South Africa, but in order to discover them we must begin the investigation.

Of Letters

The public history of literacy—from the first transcription of isiXhosa in 1799 to the first publication of *Imvo Zabantsundu* almost a century later—is well documented.¹³ Opland, for example, has recently remarked on the ambivalence of the idea of the book in *isiXhosa* praise poems reflecting, perhaps, the dramatic technological advantages gained from fixed long distance communication and the devastating political mischief associated with writing. His general point that despite the rapid spread of literacy, schooling and publishing in the Eastern Cape between 1860 and 1900, the *isiXhosa izibongo* ‘have proved remarkably resilient and persistent ... heedless of the technology of print and unaffected by it’ confirms the peculiarly constrained quality of literacy in South Africa.¹⁴ Opland’s commentary also confirms the symbolic importance *isiXhosa* speakers attached to personal and official letters (and books, for the word *iincwadi* does not distinguish between them).

Occasionally real evidence of the workings of the lettered private sphere does make its way into the files of the archives. In 1897, for example, James Scott, the rector of the Empolweni mission near Greytown complained to the Postmaster-General of Natal that ‘for some time the native girls attending our training Institution have been pestered with filthy abominable letters forwarded unstamped.’ He attached, as an example, a letter from a young man working in Durban. This long missive, written in beautiful hand in isiZulu, on lined paper apparently torn from a pass office register, contains a litany of complaints against Mntyali, ‘the favourite of the missionary.’ Far from being a ‘filthy abominable’ proposal of love, the letter (a translation of which is attached as Appendix 1) is a study of the complexities of courtship by letter writing on the mission.

At its heart was a furious complaint against Mntyali’s censorship of love letters:

¹¹ Chakrabarty, ‘Postcoloniality’, p. 9.

¹² M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, (Cape Town, James Currey, 1996).

¹³ J. Guy, ‘Making Words Visible: Aspects of Orality, Literacy, Illiteracy and History in Southern Africa.’ *South African Historical Journal*. (November 1994, 31) pp.3-27. A. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973) pp. 37-102. J. Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition*. (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983) pp. 1-19. L. Switzer, *Power and Resistance in an African Society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the Making of South Africa*. (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993) pp. 113-33.

¹⁴ J. Opland, ‘The Image of the Book in Xhosa Praise Poetry.’ *Current Writing*. (7:2, October 1995) p. 44.

Cease this which you do of taking our letters which we write to the children and reading them, they say truly that you suck position at the cost of people, what do you think. I have heard something bad it seems that you take the letters of the boys of your people at beer drinks and give them to the girls of the College notwithstanding you take our letters and read them, why, then, you court for the boys of your people.¹⁵

The image of the 19th century schools that emerges from the Rector's appeal for official intervention, and the detailed description offered here, is certainly far from the staid scholarly atmosphere presented by the missionaries. Sexual play was clearly a very important new use for literacy. 'I was ringleader in fruit-stealing from the orchard, taking sugar from the mission kitchen and sending love messages to girls,' Gilbert Coka relates of his time at the Swedish Mission boarding school at Dundee in the 1920s. 'All three tasks required dexterity.'¹⁶

That writing, and especially the composition of love-letters, was enthusiastically adopted by the converts on the missions seems apparent. An obvious analytical question emerges from this prolific correspondence: Did writing define a new class, separated and alienated from the broader mass of peasants in the nineteenth century? Putting aside, for the moment, the implications of the Mayers' work on the distinction between 'Red' and 'School' ideologies amongst the isiXhosa speaking people, there are very good grounds for seeing writing as a definitive marker of class. Ngilambi Sohlathi, who was born soon after the turn of the century, made a very clear distinction between the manual jobs underground which all 'cause damage to one's blood' and the work of the clerks, the *amabhalana*, literally the ones who cause writing. 'The clerks are the better ones, because they work sitting down like this here.' In an effort to get his aged uncle to differentiate forms of work underground, Jones Mzayifani (who attended three years of school) responded: 'Educated people can't be like us, the uneducated people, who don't know anything.'¹⁷ No one has expressed the sense of alienation that writing can prompt amongst uneducated migrants more clearly than the informant Guy and Thabane have called Johannes Rantoa. 'You know as for me I did not study', Rantoa related, 'I just see blackness on these things'.¹⁸

Yet the migrants wrote. As early as the first decade of this century, A M Mostert, an independent recruiter for the mines on the West Rand, for example, provided paper, envelopes and postage to the workers in his compounds. 'I find that the boys are very fond of writing these letters,' he told the committee drafting the 1912 Native Labour Regulation Bill, 'and write more than 4,000 a month.' (His compounds housed about 8,000 workers.) He was also careful to take advantage of the free advertising that traveled with each letter. On the back of the envelopes he provided was printed the name of the mine, and across the front the slogan, 'I stokwe sa kwa Mostert'. The literal translation of this Zulu phrase was 'A tobacco-roll at Mostert's place', but—taking it's meaning from an earlier understanding of the value of labor—it also meant 'Piece-work with Mostert'.

¹⁵ Natal Archives Depot (hereafter NAD) PMG 46, GPO3/1895 Obscene letter sent through post to native of Impolweni Mission station complaint from Reverend JAS Scott, 1895, 15 December 1897.

¹⁶ G. Coka, 'The Story of Gilbert Coka.' *Ten Africans*. Edited by M. Perham. (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1963) p. 276.

¹⁷ Interview of Ngilambi Sohlathi by Jones Mzayifani and Keith Breckenridge, 17 October 1992.

¹⁸ Guy and Thabane, 'Literature in Another South Africa', p. 12.

The letters that built the twentieth century private sphere in South Africa tended not to end up in the archives of the state or the Chamber of Mines. Nor are they easily found in private collections today. But there can be little doubt that almost all of the '4,000 envelopes a month' dispatched Mostert, contained such letters.

Certainly by the time Isaac Schapera completed his fieldwork in Bechuanaland in the early 1930s 'letter-writing [had] developed into one of the most useful agencies for keeping the town Native in touch with his relatives and friends at home.'¹⁹ Some of the best examples of the letters that built friendships and families across the gulf of migrancy in this period can be found in Schapera's *Married Life in an African Tribe*.

The letters are inadequate in some respects. Schapera had strong ideas about the usefulness of vernacular quotation, believing it 'more annoying than helpful, especially where it serves no obvious purpose other than to lend an air of greater authority to what is said.' And he obviously had little interest in the semantic or idiomatic analysis, which would be possible for fluent Tswana readers. He also sought to protect his informants by erasing their identities completely.²⁰ The result is a disembodied corpus of letters, which resist intense sociological or literary scrutiny. It is difficult not to echo Malinowski's prim comment: 'There is such a thing in social science as documentation, that is, the presentation of data really at first hand.'²¹ We are forced to rely (and this was probably Schapera's intention) on the ethnographer's interpretation.

But they do allow us to answer a number of important questions. Was letter writing an elite form of correspondence restricted to clerical workers? What was the relationship between interest and emotion in the constitution and management of migrant households? What was the character of affection for migrant men and their wives and children? If there was an African private sphere, how was it defined? These letters, as Schapera explained, give us 'among the most valuable evidence of what the people feel and say to one another in private.'²²

Schapera conducted his fieldwork in British Bechuanaland between 1929 and 1934. He was, as far as I know, the only ethnographer working in southern Africa who collected letters from his informants. (Aside from noting the 'courtesy of their recipients' he is mysteriously silent about the ways in which he came into possession of the letters.)²³ Nonetheless, what is clear is that letter writing, whilst clearly associated with those who had attended some school, was not an elite activity in Bechuanaland in the early 1930s. 'The

¹⁹ I. Schapera, 'The Native as Letter Writer.' *The Critic: A South African Quarterly Journal*, 2, 1 (September 1933), p. 20.

²⁰ I. Schapera, *Married Life in an African Tribe*, (New York, Sheridan House, 1941), p. 9.

²¹ *Ibid.* Malinowski goes on. 'Indeed, it would have been probably better if the author had given us a brief appendix including a native glossary with its English equivalents, and maybe even a few characteristic texts in native which illumine and document the tribesman's ideas on procreation, kinship, legitimacy, and other typical Bantu aspects of sex, marriage, and family.'

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Jean and John Comaroff asked Schapera directly about the 'ethnographic basis of *Married Life in an African Tribe*.' His answer mentioned written survey responses from female informants but makes no reference to the letters. J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, 'on the founding fathers, fieldwork and functionalism: a conversation with Isaac Schapera.', *American Ethnologist*, 15, 3, (1988), pp. 559-560.

writers were in most cases not classed as ‘educated’ even by the Natives themselves’, Schapera explained in 1933, ‘they had acquired just sufficient learning in the village schools to be able to read and write.’²⁴ We can see here the same imperative towards a strictly limited literacy, a mastery of writing determined in the final analysis by the capacity to read and write the vernacular letter.

For its time Schapera’s ethnography is astonishingly open-minded. And much of the refreshingly direct, and romantic, discussion he offers of sexual life in Bechuanaland is presented by means of the love letters of migrants and their partners. One of the most eloquent was written by a young man in Johannesburg:

I still think of how we loved each other; I think of how you behaved to me, my wife; I did not lack anything that belonged to you. All things I did not buy, but I just got them, together with your body; you were too good for me, and you were very, very sweet, more than any sweet things that I have ever had. We fitted each other beautifully. There was nothing wrong; you carried me well; I was not too heavy for you, nor too light, just as you were not too heavy for me nor too light; and our ‘bloods’ liked each other so much in our bodies.²⁵

Schapera’s informants offer metaphysical celebrations of love and commodity fetishism that echo and perhaps surpass John Donne. Letters were not always celebrations of love. Some dealt with the intense pain of betrayal and abandonment made only more intense by the prolonged absences of migrant employment. Almost all of the letters combine a detailed consideration with the micro-economics of household reproduction with an affective interest in personal relations with kin and lovers.

Of course, some of the letters that Schapera quotes were not written to or by mine workers. Tswana men who went to the Witwatersrand often tried to find work away from the dangers of the mines.²⁶ But there are sets of letters here that explicitly dealt with the predicament of workers on the mines in the Depression years. One such set was composed by a man at Crown Mines to his wife in the Kgatla Reserve. They are remarkable for their preoccupation with the calculus of household management. Here is one fairly typical example:

First receive my letter. I greet you and ask how you are. I have got a sore shoulder, I don’t use its hand. All this time I have not been writing to you because I heard you say that you were going to the cattle-post. Now just lately R__ came here and told me that you are still at home. I let you know that I sent a shawl with S__ when he left here to go home; I don’t know whether he has given it to you. I have heard your word when you say that a plough is also needed. My wife, there you have spoken the truth; but I don’t know whether we can manage in one year all the things that we lack, for I am still thinking that when I come home I must bring with me some shillings with which we can help ourselves. And now the winter is coming, and it is going to be cold; there are no good blankets for the night. I will try to send you a blanket, because I have stopped using one of the blankets, the white which was already getting old.²⁷

²⁴ Schapera, ‘The Native as Letter Writer’, 21.

²⁵ Schapera, *Married Life*, p. 46. An extended version of the same letter, although edited, was published in ‘The Native as Letter Writer’, p. 24.

²⁶ Schapera, *Married Life*, p. 147.

²⁷ Schapera, *Married Life*, p. 145.

Amidst their careful discussions of how to make a tiny wage cover many pressing needs, we can see the banal force of the state's documentary regime, and their attempts to use their own letters to circumvent it.

I also let you know that I always forget about my tax-receipt. You must ask M__ (her brother) to send it. If you can go to Mosanteng (where he formerly lived in Mochudi), get me a little yellow paper, it is (a pass) for work, it is in the big yellow book, and put into your letter. I want to get this paper because I want to show it to people when I look for work. As I haven't bought anything for myself I shall come home in summer. Greet all your people and my children.²⁸

Collected during the famine of the Depression years, these letters speak of bitter poverty, and the complete dependence of parents, wives and children on the wage earners in the city. A widowed mother writing to her son working in Johannesburg revealed the interior of financial extremity, the humiliation of betrayal by some children and a searing demand for empathy.

I greet you and ask how you are living. I am sick, my child, I have nothing to say except starvation. You have left me in loneliness. The starvation is very, very serious. I beg you to send me just one bag of corn, so that I can help my child who is at the cattle-post..... The whole day, my child, we sit at the store hoping to get a little corn (as relief rations) but we come back empty. I don't know what to do, but you must know that I depend upon you, and put all my hopes in you. You must 'carry' us, as you usually do. Other men are striving for themselves, but M__ does not care for anything; he looks to me, but I have nothing for him. Do not let the eyes of the people look at me (with scorn). You complain that I do not write to you, but you know that I have nothing with which to buy stamps. That is all I can tell you. Many greetings, my child.²⁹

The letters that Schapera includes in *Married Life* reveal more directly than almost any other source the terrible ordeal that migrant families faced in the Depression years. Note, for example, in this extract the overlaying of loneliness and starvation, humiliation and idleness. Partly because of the emotional insights these letters offer I have sought for many years to collect personal letters from migrant informants, with spectacularly little success.

It is, I think, an indication of the intensely private character of letters that so few have ended up in the hands of social historians. Perhaps the most famous cache of personal letters, the 'black plastic bag containing five hundred or more pieces of paper which Kas Maine had been careful to preserve' was only delivered to Charles van Onselen after the old man's death—seven years after the oral research project was initiated, and several years after researchers began asking for personal papers. My own informants will happily discuss the writing of letters but they are politely but resolutely reticent in the face of my badgering--the letters were burnt on the male migrant's final return home.

Jones Mzayifani, my friend, informant and guide, attempted to explain the absence of letters and diffuse my scepticism with the following story.

²⁸ Schapera, *Married Life*, p. 144.

²⁹ Schapera, *Married Life*, p. 152.

She says, 'I am staying with a wife at the Place of Gold.' And she writes: 'Tata I hear that you're staying with a wife at the Place of Gold'. Then I refute that, and after some time she discovers that indeed I have a wife at the Place of Gold. So when I return these letters must be burnt so that we can talk about a problem which is not there, finish. For if we keep these letters she will say all right let us open these letters. Then I will find that the problem that she wrote about in the letters is there. So the letters must be burnt. So that we can talk about something that is not there.³⁰

He means, of course, 'so that we *cannot* talk about something that *is* there.' There is an important element of truth in this account; it does seem likely that women would have been more likely to make use of archived letters in conflicts over resources within the household. For the moment, however, I must simply acknowledge that I do not know what has become of this correspondence. It may serve as something more than rationalization to note that the very extensive studies of the influence of reading on the emergence European private life have had similar difficulties tracing personal letters, relying instead on books—the form and content of libraries, guidebooks, memoirs, and diaries.³¹

The Politics of the Amanuensis

While it is important, and I hope interesting, to examine the lettered activities of workers on the Witwatersrand in the early years of this century, we must not lose sight of the essentially limited character of literacy in southern Africa even into the present.³² The evidence is clear that African literacy in this region was constrained in two fundamental ways. The first and most obvious of these constraints was regional. The development of particular mission churches was in every instance as complex as regional politics, but it still seems fair to suggest that the 'School' people of the eastern Cape, the Amakholwa of Natal and the converts of the GammaNgwato kingdom in northeastern Botswana were important exceptions to the general rule of the rejection of Christianity, and literate education. The centralized states of Zululand, Pondoland, Sekhukhuneland, and even Lesotho, were very hostile to the establishment of mission stations prior to conquest, and the expansion of Zionist churches in the twentieth century suggests that these regions have remained resistant to lettered Christianity.³³

³⁰ Discussion with Jones Mzayifani, Vukile Khumalo and Keith Breckenridge, Isiyaya 19/10/1996. See also the instructions for disposal on the exquisite love letter above: 'These letters have got secret matters, you mustn't lose them, if you don't want to keep them burn them all in the fire.' Schapera, 'The Native as Letter Writer', p. 24.

³¹ *A History of Private Life: Passions of the Renaissance*, Edited by R. Chartier. Translated by A. Goldhammer, (Cambridge, 1989) pp. 111-159, 327-361, 363-395. (A final, somewhat parenthetical, point on this subject of the missing letters. In the course of my very brief stays in the village of Isiyaya, I was on several occasions witness to the writing of letters—about the fining of delinquent children and the negotiation of marriage. In each case, a school-going child took down the letter. More importantly, the same families that are currently involved in an elaborate set of correspondences make every effort to protect their archived letters, if indeed any exist, from my prying social scientist search for source material.)

³² J. Guy, 'Making Words Visible' p. 13. Guy reports that the National Union of Mineworkers estimated that 62% of its members were 'functionally illiterate' in 1994.

³³ P. Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender and Power in a Southern African Kingdom*, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1995) p. 96. N. Etherington, *Preachers*

The kings usually motivated this resistance to the spread of Christianity, but it is also clear that an important constraint on the development of literacy operated at the level of the household. There can be little doubt that African patriarchs—in a pattern that mimicked the political stance of the monarchs—sought to control the spread of Christian education amongst their children. In 1957, an unnamed informant presented what is almost a stereotypical account of rural education in southern Africa in this century: ‘All that my father wanted,’ the informant explained to Philip and Iona Mayer, ‘was that I should be able to read and write a Xhosa letter. One of the reasons was that when he received a letter from anywhere he had to take it to an educated man to read it for him. He disliked this, because the contents might be strictly private family matters.’³⁴

One way to think about this limited literacy would be to describe it as utilitarian or functional. It surely was that. Rural African households at least before the second world war sought to have some control over the most common, and the most powerful, elements of the documentary world—letters, forms, signatures, tax receipts, invoices—whilst preventing children from entering the domain of the thoroughly literate. In this world, the figure of the amanuensis took on particular significance.

A particularly constrained form of letter writing has been an essential element of migrant labour in southern Africa from the outset. The evidence from recruiters is unequivocal on this question. Migrants expected them to pay for, read and write letters and to handle the repatriation of money. Charles Green, one of J S Marwick’s recruiters in southern Natal in 1897, complained bitterly about this literally thankless task.

I have so far written and received more than 100 letters which I have hitherto acted for them as amanuensis and beyond pens ink and paper have I shd think affixed quite 40/- worth of stamps ‘postage’. Which is a dead loss besides the continual bother of reading and writing their letters. Which however amusing or affording an insight into Native ideas the continued reiteration of the same thing has become dull stale and unprofitable.³⁵

(In a puzzling effort to stop workers from Ixopo from using Green as an interpreter, Marwick posted a letter on the notice-board of his Johannesburg compound explaining that he would, in future, levy a 10% surcharge on any cheques cashed.) In the years after the emergence of the Native Recruiting Corporation, recruiters and shopkeepers were formally charged with the task of the amanuensis. They had little choice but to endure the ‘dull, stale and unprofitable’ task.

The cultural division between ‘Red’ and ‘School’, traditionalist and progressive, is real in the lives of rural people even into the present. But the relationship, as the Mayers’

Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835-1880, (London, Royal Historical Society, 1978), pp. 71-86. P. Delius, *Land Belongs to Us: the Pedi Polity, the Boers and the British in the Nineteenth Century Transvaal*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), pp. 120-123, 169-178. E. Eldredge. *A South African Kingdom: The Pursuit of Security in Nineteenth Century Lesotho*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 95.

³⁴ P. and I. Mayer, *Townsmen and Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanization in a South African City*, (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 28. See also C. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine A South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985*, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1996), pp. 123-4 for an extended account of the constraints on the expansion of literacy amongst rural South Africans.

³⁵ NAD, SNA I/1/241, 574/1897 Chas Green: Refuses to read letters or receive moneys for natives from their friends and relatives in Johannesburg, 1897, 26 March 1897.

pointed out, is not fixed and the technology of letter writing in fact encouraged a kind of mutual interdependence. 'School' people in the countryside were called upon to act as amanuenses for unlettered relatives or neighbours.³⁶ On the Witwatersrand, and especially in the compounds, the distribution of political power encouraged literate workers to act as amanuenses for the much more powerful networks of migrant homeboys. 'These tough guys respected me,' Beinart's informant M explained about his association with the Mpondo *Izitshozi* gangs in the 1930s, 'because I used to write letters and read papers.'³⁷

For some time, and perhaps for several decades, the role of the amanuensis in southern Africa has been domesticated. Almost all letters from partially or completely illiterate rural correspondents are written and sometimes read by members of an extended household tasked with that responsibility. 'Some of the workers interviewed read and wrote their own letters,' Catherine Kell reports from her research into literacy education in the contemporary Western Cape, 'others drew on a person 'well-known to them' to do it for them, either as children within the family, or as adults upon entering the migrant labour system.'³⁸

The general point here is that migrant workers have achieved a partial mastery of literacy that is sufficient for their particular needs. They have sought a mastery of the technology of writing whilst remaining free of the regime of ongoing technological transformation, standing back from the cascading remaking of individual subjectivity that has driven so much cultural change in this century. A more specific claim, however, is that the very idea of authorship amongst southern African migrant workers runs counter to the intensely private and individualized concept of writing that emerged in Europe in the 18th century. While the amanuensis has been a fairly common feature of almost all partially literate societies, in southern Africa even the intensely affective 'private' domain of courtship seems to have been shaped by a pattern of displaced, and collective, authorship.

In the 1930s the compounds of the gold mines housed approximately 300,000 young African men, many of them single and in search of appropriate wives. Older migrants remember a distinct practice of collective authorship on the mines. Lahlekile Mphephandaku worked briefly on the mines in the later 1930s, and then spent most of his adult life working for Reef municipalities. To his own and general hilarity he related to Vukile Khumalo and myself the art of writing love letters in the compounds.

³⁶ P. and I. Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen*, p. 35. On the Highveld the definition of distinct 'School' and 'Traditionalist' communities seems to have been much more fluid, in large part, probably, because of the relative weakness of mission activity. See, for example, Kas Maine's manoeuvring for amanuenses in C. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine*, pp. 75-6, 138, 178, 202, 269, 279.

³⁷ W. Beinart, 'Worker Consciousness, Ethnic Particularism and Nationalism: the experiences of a South African migrant, 1930-1960,' *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa*, Edited by S. Marks and S. Trapido. (London, Longman, 1987).

³⁸ C. Kell, 'Teaching Letters: The Recontextualisation of Letter-Writing Practices in Literacy Classes for unschooled Adults in South Africa,' (unpublished paper, Cape Town, 1998) p. 7 and see p. 8 for informant's account.

During Sundays and Saturdays we used to go out of our rooms and lie down on the lawn. Then we would write letters to the girls at home, yes. A person would mention his girlfriend - and others would follow, and others would be sitting and writing letters [here]. After that we would say; 'on Monday these letters must go to the Post Office', yes. It must be clear when November comes whether this girl rejects us or not.

VK: I see.

Lahlekile Mphephanduku: Then we would stay and wait for the letter [he] had sent. When the letter arrives we would gather again to hear what the girl says. Awu! she rejects [us], she says; she wants to see [us] face to face.

VK: Ha! then what do you do?

Lahlekile Mphephanduku: [but] The one who is fortunate [among us] receives good news, the girl accepts his request. Then we would go home.

Whilst we should interpret this joint authorship as a kind of play, it does also bear the distinct imprint of Mpondo peer organizations. For the girls receiving the letters at home would also 'write together' in response to the love letters from the mines.³⁹

The point here is not simply that migrants made use of collective authorship because of their illiteracy. They appear, on the contrary, to have chosen to make use of skilled letter writers, even where they were able to write themselves. David Sogoni, for example, is a well-educated man by the standards of his peers, and he certainly spent enough time at school to write a letter comfortably. At the mines, however, he stayed with his older brothers in 'one room at the mine' and the process of courting by letter he describes seems to have required the skills of more than a single individual. 'Yes,' he answered in reply to the question of whether or not he wrote letters,

we talked with a lady at home. We would call someone who was able to write, and come together to share opinions. And talked to a lady there. Each one of us would come with a plan.... Ha! Once the lady responds favourably you would leave your job and go home to your new girlfriend.⁴⁰

The very form of eloquence described here seems to have demanded the efforts of more than a single individual. In a similar fashion, Vukile Khumalo has observed that amongst the community of letter writers that developed around the Colenso's Ekukhanyeni Mission station it was a common practice to call upon those, like Magema Fuze, who were recognized as skilled writers to 'look for good or beautiful words.'⁴¹

³⁹ Interview with Lahlekile Mphephanduku by Vukile Khumalo and Keith Breckenridge, Isiyaya, 19 October 1996. We can see a similar collective project of translation in Kell's research of contemporary practices of reading letters amongst isiXhosa speakers in the western Cape. Here too the economy of letter writing amongst the migrant population encourages the collectivisation of the private sphere. 'I used to be tactful, skip the bad message until I call other people there', one of her informants described the difficult task of relating bad news, 'then tell, that is if you know something is not well, then you read it as is in front of people who can help me to ease the situation.' C. Kell, 'Teaching Letters', p. 8.

⁴⁰ Interview with David Sogoni by Vukile Khumalo and Keith Breckenridge, Isiyaya, 19 October 1996.

⁴¹ Twala cited in V. Khumalo, 'Ekukhanyeni letter-writers: Notes towards a social history of letter writing in KwaZulu-Natal, 1890-1900,' (unpublished paper, Ann Arbor, 1999), p. 13.

Conclusion

Modern letter writing in South Africa seems to have broken completely free from its Protestant moorings. Under the combined influence of state neglect and the deliberate efforts of homestead heads, literacy, whilst ubiquitous, was radically constrained and necessarily collaborative. Literacy on the mines—and therefore in the subcontinent more generally—was never the intensely private activity that formed the core of protestant Christianity. For the nonconformist missions, the Comaroffs have suggested, the act of reading itself was central to the idea of ‘self improvement’, the fulcrum of the epistemological revolution the missions brought to southern Africa in the nineteenth century. ‘In addressing the written word,’ they have argued, ‘readers internalized it, reflected upon it in the deepest recesses of their being, and entered into silent conversation.’⁴² The movement towards silent, individualized reading—which Chartier has shown had extraordinary cultural significance—has been much more limited than was the case in the most literate regions of early modern Europe and north America.⁴³ Indeed, whilst writing and reading letters helped constitute the private sphere, reading was not private. Letters, and letter writing were, as Barber has observed for a very different literary form, ‘about the individual self, but not about interiority.’⁴⁴

The practice of letter writing helped constitute new kinds of individualized subjects substantially made from the overlap of economic and emotional interests. In the first instance, workers were shaped by, and preoccupied with, an array of personal economic constraints and requirements. We can see this quite clearly from the content of the letters examined here. From the mournful complaints of the abandoned mother that ‘other men are striving for themselves’ to the intimate domestic arithmetic between husband and wives, letters provided a medium for (and insight into) the development of a new kind of *homo economicus*. In a similar way, the letters between young male migrants and their lovers reveal forms of desire and romantic love at a great remove from the imperatives of lineage and the idioms of *hlonipha*.

Was there an African private sphere in South Africa prior to the rise of the Apartheid state? Yes, certainly. Even this very small sample suggests that migrants adopted the literary technology of the colonial state to construct a new individualized and affective domain. But the evidence is also clear that the working class private sphere was simultaneously personal and collaborative. Did the working class private sphere in South Africa produce autonomous individuals free to articulate their rights and expectations of the state independent of the communal demands of their families, villages and chiefs? I don’t know, yet.

⁴² J. and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, Volume 1, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 34.

⁴³ *A History of Private Life: Passions of the Renaissance (Volume III)*. Edited by R. Chartier, Translated by A. Goldhammer. (Cambridge MA, 1989), pp. 124-144.

⁴⁴ K. Barber, ‘Reasons for Writing: Autonomy, self-realisation and the public in the Yoruba intermediate classes’, (unpublished paper, Birmingham, 1995) p. 7.