# Confounding the Documentary State: Cape Workers' Letters on the Early Witwatersrand.

KEITH BRECKENRIDGE

Sir Godfrey Lagden, the Secretary of Native Affairs, in the new and self-consciously rational Transvaal government was very clear about his intentions for the elaborate system of paper-based controls that expanded across the Witwatersrand after 1902. The new order, he explained, would document "the whole of a man's service, his movements and character, and so … control his career as to check the vicious habit of desertion formerly prevailing."[1] The forms and documents controlling the movements of African workers were to form part of a meticulous archive. The interlocking pass, contract and ticket controls established by the Milner government sought to subject migrant mine workers to Foucault called "power of writing." He seems almost to have had the Witwatersrand in mind when he coined the term:

> The examination that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them. The procedures of examination were accompanied at the same time by a system of intense registration and of documentary accumulation. A 'power of writing' was constituted as an essential part in the mechanisms of discipline.[2]

I have written about the documentary order that developed during the Reconstruction of the Transvaal in some detail elsewhere, the focus of this chapter lies in its antithesis. Here I am interested in the ways in which workers used letters to defeat the state.

I want to show that South African workers in the first decade of the last century were able to use the technologies of literacy--the postal system, letter writing, forgery, and the procedures of official correspondence—to subvert the documentary order that was so carefully designed to control them. (To restate the point, for those who have a taste for these problems, I want to show that Foucault's account of archival power massively understates the complexity of the relationship between the utilitarian state and its subjects. Indeed, in some ways, he underestimates the powers of the archive itself.) Along the way I want to explore a set of political questions. How did workers apprehend the power of the state over them? By using the letters to explore the phenomenology of the state's power I want to chart both how they understood their own predicament, and how they estimated the limits of that power. I believe, also, that these letters allow us to investigate the expectations that migrant workers had of their own citizenship. And, finally, the letters give us important insights into the kinds of people being made on the anvil of migrancy.

## "Fire with your pen": An Insurgent Literacy

Soon after the Anglo-Boer War, officials charged with the operation of the highly rationalised system of documentation that expanded across the Witwatersrand realised that they were fighting an ongoing battle against the deliberate subversion of documents. In the last half of 1905, for example, 18 Africans were arrested for forging the passes workers needed to break contracts, change jobs or return home. The primary agents of this subversion were a new group of migrants on the Witwatersrand—Xhosa speakers from the eastern Cape. The Benoni District

[1] Sir Godfrey Lagden, "Memorandum by Sir Godfrey Lagden upon Proclamations relating to: (1) General Pass Regulations; (2) Special Regulations for Labour Districts; (3) Regulations for controlling, procuring, and engaging Native labourers and their management at mines ... Amendment of Law 19 of 1898. Parliamentary Papers, 1902, LXIX [Cd. 904], 19 cited in van der Horst, Native Labour 161.

[2] Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (London: Penguin Books, 1977) 189.

Controller complained bitterly of the “craftiness of the educated Cape Colony natives”. They were, he explained, “the class mostly employed on clerical work in the mines’ Time Offices, and are the greatest offenders”.[3]

The mines were forced to recruit very large numbers of workers form the eastern Cape by the impending closure of three preferred sources of long-distance recruitment. After 1907, 60,000 indentured Chinese workers were repatriated. (To replace them the new state established the Government Native Labour Bureau under the direction of Henry Taberer. Born and bred on a mission station in the Ciskei, his brief was the recruitment of large numbers of isiXhosa speaking workers.[4]) In 1911, in response to the appalling mortality rates of workers from tropical areas, the new Union government placed a ban on the recruitment of migrants from north of the 22nd parallel.[5] By 1910, the temporary increase in recruitment from Zululand that followed the crushing of the Bambatha rebellion had subsided, and thereafter Zulu workers undertook mine labour only in very small numbers. During these years, the mines came to rely on four major centres in the eastern Cape for the overwhelming majority of the South African workforce.

By 1927 the four districts of Umtata (18,680), Queenstown (11,865), Butterworth (9,859) and Kingwilliamstown (7,962) supplied over half of what was called the “British South African” workforce and just under a third of the total number of workers on the gold mines.[6] These four districts incorporated and abutted the territory of what, in the nineteenth century, had been called British Kaffraria. From the end of the eighteenth century they formed the battleground between encroaching settlers and the Ngqika and Gcaleka Xhosa kingdoms. But they also composed the region with the most prolonged and intensive encounter with Christian missions in the sub-continent.[7] Not accidentally, these eastern Cape districts also have a rich history of literacy.[8]

In the aftermath of the Cattle-Killing, mission activities exploded throughout Xhosa territory. "By 1884, there were more than a hundred mission stations in the eastern Cape", Switzer observed, "The vast majority were founded by Africans emanating from the mission's expanded 'native agency' program."[9] Alongside this geographical expansion was an unparalleled

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[3] Moroney, "Industrial Conflict" 95.

[4] Peter Richardson Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal (London: Macmillan, 1982) 185.

[5] Randall Packard, White Plague, Black Labor: Tuberculosis and the Political Economy of Health and Disease in South Africa (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 161-2. The average mortality rate amongst "Tropical" workers was 64.8 per 1000. Alan Jeeves Migrant Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1985) 234. On some mines the figures were considerably worse, at Durban Deep for example, the mortality rate in 1911 was 96 per 1000. BRA Durban Roodepoort Deep Native Labour, 1910-1954, 5, 123, Cazalet, Percy Consulting Engineer, H. Eckstein & Co to Manager, Durban Roodepoort Deep, "Mortality of Tropical Natives", 24 November 1911.

[6] CMA Native Labour Supply, 1930, Anderson to Jansen, 10 June 1930. The total number of recruits from Basutoland--considered a single district by the Native Recruiting Corporation--was 18,849. The "British South African" workforce was composed of recruits from all the British Colonies--South Africa, Swaziland, Basotuland, and Bechuanaland.

[7] Les Switzer Power and Resistance in an African Society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the Making of South Africa (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993) 114.

[8] Peires The Dead Will Arise, 32. Clifton Crais The Making of the Colonial Order: White Supremacy and Black Resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770--1865 (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1992) 199. Switzer, Power and Resistance 113-4. Similar events took place amongst the Tswana, although somewhat later. In 1900 a locally owned weekly--*Koranta Ea Batswana* (The Newspaper of the Tswana)--was established by one the Tshidi royals, and edited by Sol Plaatje. Comaroff and Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution 289.

[9] Switzer Power and Resistance, 123.

increase of church membership. By 1891 there were 63,400 members of the Methodist church alone in this region.

The history of the missions in the eastern Cape stands in marked contrast to those of the other regions of southern Africa. Owing to the sustained hostility of the Zulu, Mpondo, and even the Pedi sovereigns mission penetration was much more limited in their domains.[10] The exceptional cultural history of the eastern Cape was even more pronounced in the field of schooling. By the turn of the century there were over 500 state-aided schools in the region. Of the approximately 40,000 students attending classes, about half had achieved the level of Standard Two--the fourth year of primary schooling.[11]

Workers from the Eastern Cape were well equipped with the basic literary tools they needed to subvert the documentary regime. Supplementing the subversion of contracts, passes, letters and even official stamps and inks, was a conflict over the actual content of personal letters. The Cape workers made particular use of correspondence to friends, chiefs or even magisterial officials in their home districts in the first decade of this century. These letters bridged the isolation of the compounds, and sometimes led to the investigation of the contractual conditions stipulated by recruiters in the eastern Cape. They also provide us with insights into the character of early migrancy on the Witwatersrand.

One year after the signing of the Peace of Vereeniging, the President of the Chamber of Mines—Percy Fitzpatrick—visited Lagden to complain about the widespread subversion of the new pass system. He referred to a report on a spate of desertions from Langlaagte Deep. "It is a practice of the Cape Colony natives here to get their brothers in the Colony to procure from the local Magistrate travelling passes," the report complained. "These passes … are posted to the would-be deserter in the Transvaal, who on receipt thereof destroys all his papers and presents himself as a newly-arrived native seeking employment."[12] The Secretary for Native Affairs assured Fitzpatrick that five separate communications had been despatched to the Cape Native Department "drawing attention to specific instances in which passes have been sent from the Transkei through the post to enable Natives to desert."[13] Year after year thereafter similar complaints issued from the Transvaal. "Where large numbers of passes are applied for," the Cape Magistrates noted three years later, "many of the applicants are unknown to the Issuer, and it is hardly to be expected that any precautions, however stringent, can prevent the occurrence of a few cases of misuse."[14]

Underpinning the migrants' use of letters as a weapon against the pass law, was a remarkably cheap and efficient postal system. Letters sent from Johannesburg to the Eastern Cape bore the standard Imperial 1d stamp. This was the smallest monetary unit in circulation, and an astonishingly small price for the utility offered by a reliable postal system. (The average daily wage on the mines at the time was around 1s and 6d). Yet more striking is the speed with which letters were delivered. These same standard letters moved between the gold mining centre

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[10] Norman Etherington *Preachers, Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835--1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1975) 71-86. Delius, *The Land Belongs To Us* 120-123, 169-178. Hofmeyr, "We spend our years", 46-47.

[11] Switzer, Power and Resistance, 133.

12 Acting Secretary, Transvaal Chamber of Mines. to Secretary for Native Affairs., re Native Deserters, Monday, May 11, 1903, TAD SNA 128, 1107/03 Native Deserters, 1903.,

[13] Secretary for Native Affairs., Secretary, Transvaal Chamber of Mines., , Thursday, May 14, 1903, TAD SNA 128, 1107/03 Native Deserters, 1903.,

[14] Edward Dower, Secretary to the Native Affairs Department, Cape Colony.to Secretary for Native Affairs, Pretoria, Transvaal., "Irregularities in the use of Passes issued to Natives.", Saturday, September 08, 1906, TAD SNA 325, 1657 Forwards Two Travelling Passes and letter taken from C. C. Native at Municipal Compound, 1908.

and the rural towns of the Eastern Cape in two weeks. If the postal system had been only marginally less efficient it would have been impossible for migrants to use the twenty-day travelling pass to desert. (Letters posted today, with all the advantages of automated handling, internal-combustion engines and a far more sophisticated and extensive road and rail infrastructure often take as long to travel the same distance.)

The connection between letters as the carriers of family news and migrancy has become almost cliché in the decades since the publication of Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, but it remains important. Consider the letters of William Mbelu, (see Appendix B) who journeyed to the Witwatersrand in 1905 in search of his brother Stephen only to find himself trapped and abused at the George Goch mine. "I have not yet found Stephen at the same time I have no time to look for him as I contracted for work [ndajoyina] at another place," he wrote to his younger brother, "and it is not easy for a person to go without a pass." The strength of kinship ties, especially between brothers, often forced men to make the journey to Johannesburg. Letters, then as now, offered the possibility of re-establishing the family relationships broken by great distances separating work and home.

> Help me younger brother, get the address from Stephen's letters, and send it to me, I am going to write to him. Ask Mtshazi's mother for the letters, they are in a book belonging to my mother look carefully in the letters which came just before I left. Let me know about my mother if she has come or not and if she has not yet returned, go to fetch her from Indwe.[15]

Letters, properly safeguarded, offered the possibility of preserving the ties between brothers, between mothers and sons, and between lovers. Mbelu ended his letter to his brother, "call at Nosanza's Kraal and let her know where I am and write to me."

These same relationships also provided the resources necessary for workers to break the web of documents. William Mbelu called on his brother to "get me a pass, put it in the letter, you must say you want a pass to proceed to Johannesburg to look for employment."

> The reason I want the pass, it is very bad here, one has no chance at all, if you have no pass from home. We have not yet got employment because this work is no good. We do not get tickets, the work is very hard, it is like prison. The reason I want the pass I want to run away. [16]

This letter, and many others like it, show a clear appreciation of the documentary character of the power exercised over them. The state's rule by means of passes and the mining companies' control of work tickets left new workers with "no chance at all" in an environment which van Onselen has convincingly argued was "like prison."[17]

Letters provided not only a simple means of defeating the pass system, they also allowed those at home to draw on the more favourably disposed local recruiters to find the possibility of better local jobs. Two weeks later William Mbelu's brother Thomas duly posted another twenty-day travelling pass (Appendix D), and he included in the letter advice from one of the local recruiters.

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[15] William Mbelu, New George Goch GM Co, to Thomas Mbelu, , Saturday, May 12, 1906, TAD SNA 325, 1657 Forwards Two Travelling Passes and letter taken from C. C. Native at Municipal Compound, 1908.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Charles van Onselen. "Crime and Total Institutions in the Making of Modern South Africa: the life of 'Nongoloza' Mathebula 1867-1948." *History Workshop* (1985, 19).

> There is a whiteman who wants natives [abantu]. I heard of him from Boyce. I enclose a paper I received from Boyce, on receipt of this paper, enquire for that white man and show him that paper. He lives on a farm adjoining Johannesburg.[18]

In the short space of a month, Mbelu's correspondence provided him with the means to desert and at least the prospect of a new job.

It is also from this early correspondence that workers understood that beneath the struggle over the possession of documents lay a much more complex conflict over the possession of individual identity. "Have your own name put on the pass, because my name is already here," Mbelu explained in despair,

> everything is here, and the name of my chief, my finger marks were taken on a piece of paper. I have put myself in a fix, all my names are here, then have your own name and that of my father put on the pass. Oh!, help for all those things.

While workers clearly feared the overlapping systems of identification used by the colonial state, they also had few qualms about dissembling in order to protext themselves or their kin. "These are the passes," Mpayipel Gcuku was advised by his brother in law, "and we had to call your father's name Ntsokwana and you must say the same thing if you remain there." [19] In this effort to deceive the colonial archive workers were greatly assisted by the racist arrogance of white officials which represented migrant workers as anonymous 'boys'. Both Compound Managers and the clerical officials in the countryside had only the loosest possible grip on the identity of their nominal subordinates.

It would be a mistake, of course, to imagine that amidst all their protest over the perfidy of migrant workers that the Transvaal government and mine management remained idle. They did not. Taberer, in his capacity as Director of Native Labour, sought to ensure that all Railway Ticket offices were ensued with a special stamp "wherewith to stamp one, and only one, pass in respect of each Railway Ticket issued to a native." Workers who found themselves in the pass offices on the Witwatersrand without a Railway stamp on theit travelling pass faced a new bureaucratic hurdle "as we would look upon a pass not so stamped with suspicion, and detain the holder pending a full investigation." Taberer's informal scheme for validated the travel pass was implemented in the Eastern Cape and the Transvaal after 1908, and later in Natal. This new formality may well have reduced the power of disobedient letters and it certainly increased their cost. What Taberer did not foresee was that it also placed a premium on the value of stolen Railway stamps.[20]

One more important question about the politics of these personal letters remains. How did they end up in the Archive? They were clearly seized illegally by the compound managers. Like many of the most important elements of power on the mines—the Compound 'Police', 'lock-ups', Compound Manager's 'powers of arrest'—these letters were taken by force and accepted without protest or comment by Government officials. But the importance of illegal violence in the management of the mines should not blind us to the pivotal role of the 'power of writing' on the Witwatersrand, nor to the possibilities that these bureaucratic practices afforded

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[18] Thomas Mbelu. Southey Ville to William Mbelu., , Friday, June 01, 1906, TAD SNA 325, 1657 Forwards Two Travelling Passes and letter taken from C. C. Native at Municipal Compound, 1908.

[19] Dwana Ndwalaza, Ncoga to Mpayipel Gcuku New George Goch, , Monday, April 30, 1906, TAD SNA 325, 1657 Forwards Two Travelling Passes and letter taken from C. C. Native at Municipal Compound, 1908.

[20] Taberer, H M Director of Government Native Labour Bureau, Rissik, J Minister of Native Affairs, , Thursday, October 08, 1908, TAD SNA 87, NA3262/08 Certain points regarding Natives in Natal which he suggests that the Colonial Secretary should urge with Mr Moor, the Prime Minister of Natal, 1908. See Keith Breckenridge. "An Age of Consent: Law, Discipline and Violence on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines, 1910-1933." (PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1995) 89-94.

workers in their battles with mine management. This was especially true when workers engaged directly with members of the colonial state.

The system of documentation carried with it the source of its own weakness. For, however subordinate their authors, letters quickly took on the force of bureaucratic procedures used to maintain the state.[21] Letters—often retained in the original or copied verbatim—took on the authority, and reference numbers of their addressee. And it was those reference numbers and signatures that held unquestionable authority over the officials on the ground.

Consider, as an example, the history of a group of workers, recruited for the first time from the Transkei district of Mqanduli, about 25 kilometres southeast of Umtata. To get them to take up work on the Witwatersrand, a recruiter had promised them work on the surface of the mines. But, as their leader, Philip Nthloko, later explained to the Mqanduli magistrate: "When we arrived at 'Umzilikaas' [the Native Recruiting Corporation's central compound on the Witwatersrand] we were told that there was no surface work and that we might either engage for underground work or return to our homes … we agreed to work underground since we had come here."[22] Soon after their arrival at the Driefontein mine, Nthloko had taken up this clear violation of the terms of the contract they had signed in the Transkei, added accounts of two vicious assaults underground and the underpayment of wages, and despatched a set of letters back to his home district.

The first of these letters was directed to the recruiting agent, who duly made a trip up to the Driefontein mine and "investigated his complaints." But Nthloko was unhappy about the resolution of their grievances, and he resolved to write "to the Magistrate of Mqanduli complaining that we were ill-treated [and] that we were working underground." And the immediate result of this letter was the arrival on the Witwatersrand of the Resident Magistrate of the district of Mount Fletcher, Frank Brownlee. Much to the fury of the Transvaal District Controller, Brownlee announced on entering the Driefontein Compound, that he "had been sent from the Cape Colony to investigate their complaints." [23]

Some interesting features of this brief correspondence emerged from Brownlee's visit to the Witwatersrand. The first was the simple explanation of Nthloko's letters to Mqanduli. "I wrote to the Magistrate," he explained, "because the recruiter said if there was anything wrong, we should write, and I wrote because we were engaged for surface work and there was no surface work for us."[24] There is some evidence here (and more below) that recruiters offered the possibility of letter writing as ballast against the immense distances and long periods of the mine contracts. But, of course, letter writing for most migrants was never as simple as the recruiter and Nthloko might have liked each other to believe. For Philip Nthloko, like the great majority of migrants on the mines, was illiterate.

"These complaints … are the outcome of a letter, or letters, " the very annoyed local NAD official noted in his written response to the report of the Cape magistrate, "[but] 'Nthleko' cannot write." In order to get his message to his home district, Nthloko had "secured the services of a native who can." The indirect 'authorship' of the letter is presented as evidence of

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[21] As Weber noted at the onset of this century, "the management of the modern office is based upon written documents ('the files'), which are preserved in their original or draught form". H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 197 & 214.

[22] TAD SNA 259, 656/05 Report on the Complaints of Native Labourers from Mqanduli. Resident Magistrate, Mount Fletcher to Pass Commissioner, 1 March 1905. Statement by Philip Nthloko.

[23] TAD SNA 259, 656/05 Report on the Complaints of Native Labourers from Mqanduli. Resident Magistrate, Mount Fletcher to Pass Commissioner, 1 March 1905. Statement by Philip Nthloko. TAD SNA 259, 656/05 Report on the Complaints of Native Labourers from Mqanduli. District Controller, Boksburg to Pass Commissioner, 21 March 1905.

[24] TAD SNA 259, 656/05 Report on the Complaints of Native Labourers from Mqanduli. Resident Magistrate, Mount Fletcher to Pass Commissioner, 1 March 1905. Statement by Philip Nthloko.

the doubtful character of its content. Yet what is most remarkable is that the question of authorship seems to have had no bearing upon the complaint at all.

Of course there was much about the particular historical circumstances of the decade before the formation of the united South African state which gave letters from migrants to their home magistrates special powers; powers that were significantly altered by the formation of the Union in 1910. In the first instance, queries between the independent Cape and Transvaal Native Affairs Departments were conducted at the level of ministerial secretaries. This meant that letters from migrant workers were attached to correspondence bearing the signature of the most powerful members of the bureaucracy. Similarly, while there was undeniably a strong element of colonial solidarity between the two groups of officials, there is no doubt that the Cape officials were more interested in protecting their authority than ensuring the continuous operation of the mines. The implications of this kind of intervention were not lost on the officials on the Witwatersrand. "If a Resident Magistrate of the Cape Colony," the Boksburg District controller complained, "is to be sent up to investigate complaints contained in letters written from Mines, I greatly fear that in a very short time the authority of the local Departmental Officials will be undermined."[25]

At a significant distance from the mines, the senior members of the Transvaal NAD believed that the presence of their Cape colleagues, far from undermining the authority of the local officials, "probably rather strengthened our hands … as the natives from the Cape Colony will now probably be more disposed to realise the position and to be generally more amenable to control."[26] So, in the short term, nothing was done to prevent the Cape magistrates from investigating the complaints and appeals of their district residents.

The opportunities for invoking the support of the Cape NAD were not restricted to letters of appeal to the magistrates. Migrants were also able to call upon their chiefs, especially lettered ones. In 1905 Charles Ngcelwane's reply to his chief's concerns, written in English, was forwarded to the Cape Secretary of Native Affairs. It is deeply informative of the practices of correspondence adopted by the literate Cape workers who arrived on the mines after the South African war. He wrote:

> From our very deepest regret we drop you these few lines. Yours of the 10th inst at hand though found us not quite well so therefore we could'nt be able to answer it so quick. In reference to our treatment here it is altogether very bad.We are just like convicts convicted in a prison. We do not know even to which manager we can appeal stating and describing the treatment as the whole in the compounds for the white men who worked in the Company are beating and thrashing us with shamboks, then sir, we do not know as whether this must be the Law or the mine regulations then sir upon all our bad treatment we ask you kindly send us quickly copy of our term of contract for then they say up here we have, to undergo the contract, of six months instead of four months. Then we wish you sir, to send us the copy with our own term of contract from the magistrate so that at the end of our third month we can give notice and at the end of the fourth we can go as our time would have expired. Trusting that sir you will do us that favour with thanks and with very best regards and compliment to all, an early reply at your convenience.[27]

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[25] TAD SNA 259, 656/05 Report on the Complaints of Native Labourers from Mqanduli. District Controller, Boksburg to Pass Commissioner, 21 March 1905.

[26] TAD SNA 259, 656/05 Report on the Complaints of Native Labourers from Mqanduli. Pass Commissioner to Secretary for Native Affairs, 23 March 1905. See also Secretary's annotation on TAD SNA 259, 699/05 Report on the complaints of Natives from Mqanduli. c.7 April 1905.

[27] TAD SNA 273, 1561/05 Complaint re the treatment of Native Labourers employed on the Mines of the Witwatersrand. Ngcelwane, Chas to Mabandla, B. E Kwezana Lower Chumie. Tuesday, March 28, 1905. TAD SNA 273, 1561/05 Complaint re the treatment of Native Labourers employed on the Mines of the Witwatersrand.

The letter begins with a curious mixture of an intimate writing style—"drop you these few lines"—and the consciously bureaucratic grammar of official correspondence—"Yours of the 10th inst at hand." It highlights the writer's understanding of his legal subordination with the binding "conviction" of the contract. But it also reveals a form of appeal that turned on the personal predicament of the plaintiff by "stating and describing the treatment"—a phrase that was repeatedly used in the correspondence. This personal testimony was easily and quickly absorbed and transmitted into the stream of correspondence maintained by the NAD officials and their customary employees.

When Ngcelwana's chief, B E Mabandla, wrote to the Secretary of Native Affairs in Cape Town he was careful to indicate that his end of the business of recruiting migrant workers was conducted by correspondence. "Since the beginning of this year," he explained, "I have been hindered by some letters from certain gentlemen who write to me and asked me for men who could join in their contracts." And in his appeal on behalf of his client, Mabandla repeated the very phrases of his supplicant's letter.

> On the 4 of April, 1905 I received a letter from my people stating and discribing their treatment that is altogether very bad for they said that the white men who worked in the Compounds for company are beating and thrashing them with shamboks. It is also said that they are to go under the contract of six months instead of 3 months.

This letter highlights the interesting reciprocal relationship between written letters of appeal and the understanding of freedom, especially as it was juxtaposed with slavery. For the basis of Mabandla's appeal to the Secretary of Native Affairs rested squarely upon the fact that the Xhosa workers were not part of a "system of slave trade or demestic servitude." The officials' failure to address their complaints would, as Mabandla argued with studied Victorian understatement, "make the Natives of the whole Colony to disincline to go and work in the Compounds." Without pointing out that a large scale withdrawal of Cape workers would have been devastating—for the mines, the Cape and Transvaal officials, and the Xhosa chiefs—Mabandla closed his appeal by attaching Ngcelwane's letter which, he reminded the Secretary, "states and describes the treatment in the Compounds as a whole."[28]

Of course, as we all well know, letters to the state are no guarantee of reply or remedy. In the first instance, it took Ngcelwane's letter almost three months to make the circuit from Germiston to Mqanduli, Cape Town and Pretoria. By the time that the Witwatersrand Pass Commissioner, S M Pritchard, arrived to investigate his complaint in July, he had opted for a swifter and surer remedy. He had deserted.

Pritchard's report to Lagden revealed two important characteristics of the state's response to the political correspondence of the Xhosa workers. "I do not think," he explained, "that either his letter or the statement of the native John as to their being flogged, & generally illtreated, need be taken seriously." In an uncharacteristic deviation from his usually careful bureaucratic practice Pritchard vented his anger against the Xhosa workers. "The evident falsity of their complaints as to illtreatment, is characteristic of the Cape Colony native, who, although he does receive more general rough handling than other natives, has his own personality, and his intolerance of discipline, to thank for it."[29]

The idea that Xhosa workers displayed "intolerance of discipline" had much to do with their literacy, and to access to a state apparatus inclined to intervene on their behalf. Lagden made it very clear that the Transvaal government was not about to challenge the Cape

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[28] Mabandla B E, Kwezana Lower Chumie to Secretary for Native Affairs, Cape Town. Monday, May 08, 1905. TAD SNA 273, 1561/05 Complaint re the treatment of Native Labourers employed on the Mines of the Witwatersrand.

[29] Pritchard, S M Pass Commissioner to Secretary for Native Affairs, Pretoria. Wednesday, July 19, 1905 TAD SNA 273, 1561/05 Complaint re the treatment of Native Labourers employed on the Mines of the Witwatersrand.

magistrates in this arena. "Although some of the Cape natives have been irritating and unreasonable in their complaints," he admonished Pritchard, "I welcome the enquiry of the Cape, or any other Govt. in regard to their natives. It keeps us all up to the mark." It is also true that in the period before the Great Depression, the Native Affairs Department took seriously its responsibility as an arbiter of consent in the compounds. Lagden rebuked Pritchard, reminding him that one of the primary functions of the NAD bureaucrats was the investigation of complains, oral or written. "Inform the Pass Commissr. that I trust he is rigid about treatment fairly and fully of all legitimate and real complaints," he minuted Pritchard's report, "We must not be deterred by some complaints."[30]

Written documents proved a thoroughly unreliable means of maintaining discipline. Many workers were able to establish some means of control over the disciplinary procedure, and most importantly, literacy lent itself to powerful communicative interventions into the workings of the state and the mines. The reason for this disciplinary failure was, as Isabel Hofmeyr has explained, because "forms of communication are a focus of political struggle".[31] But practices of letter-writing were not restricted to the domains of subversion and petitions, they also offered migrants powerful tools to shape the politics of the mines directly.

After 1910 the new Union government quickly set out to control and systematize the regional recruiting economy. The means of the state's expanded regulatory power was to be an extension of the web of licenses, forms, contracts and receipts to the agents of the recruiting system. Recruiters and their agents now worked only at the documented pleasure of the Government Native Labour Director. Where recruiters were required to obtained licenses from Johannesburg, their "runners" were had to secure licenses from the magistrate in whose district they sought to recruit, with the explicit provision "that the magistrate shall have full permission to refuse to issue any permit".[32] The law established a close supervisory relationship between the recruiting organizations and the two primary centers of the Native Affairs Department—the Native Labour Bureau in Johannesburg, and the Transkei magistrates.

It is striking that in the midst of their deliberations over this remarkable expansion of the powers and procedures regulating migrant workers, officials were worrying about the powers of letters to undermine the recruiting apparatus. Henry Taberer, who had by this time started what would be his lengthy tenure as manager of the Chamber of Mines' Native Recruiting Corporation, sought to have new and unusual criminal sanctions introduced into the bill. "Another offence which should be made punishable", he complained to the committee, "is when a native wilfully misrepresents the terms and conditions under which he is employed or the way in which he is treated". What made these alleged misrepresentations so dangerous was the medium in which they were made. As Taberer explained:

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[30] Secretary's annotation on TAD SNA 259, 699/05 Report on the complaints of Natives from Mqanduli. Undated but after 11 April 1905.

[31] Hofmeyr, "We spend our years" 60, 61--63. In her discussion of the correspondence between the leaders of Valtyn, a rural chiefdom in the northern Transvaal, she observed the manner in which African correspondents sought to "to 'oralise' the written word and make it bear the 'imprint' of the human voices and relationships that necessitated its creation in the first place." A similar substantive and relational emphasis was a central feature of mine workers' treatment of texts.

[32] B. A. Wiggett, The Native Labour Regulation Act (No. 15 of 1911) (Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1924) 8-12 & 15.

> I inquired into a case the other day where a native working on one of the mines wrote home to say that he was working very hard, but received practically no money as wages. I ascertained that this particular native had been regularly earning £3 and £3 10s per month. On asking him why he wrote to his people saying that he received no money, he informed me that his people were always worrying him for money, and he thought that the letter he wrote would put a stop to it.[33]

This account reveals the startling powers of letter writing. In the first instance, it suggests much about the ways in which letters mediated familial politics even in the earliest years of this century. But it also highlights the intriguing phenomenological power of letters. Had the allegations of mistreatment been made—as they easily might have been—by reported speech, it is unlikely that they would have to come to Taberer's notice, or been treated with the same seriousness by the author's kin. The presence of the letter in the countryside served as an enduring sign and indisputable testimony to the social conditions of the compounds.

Letters also enabled workers to engage the bureaucracy or the mine hierarchy from a geographical position, markedly less subordinate than their anonymous presence in the compounds. "It often happens that a boy will not make any complaint to the Compound Manager", Charles Mostert, one of the leading independent recruiters, observed in 1910, "but he will write home to his brothers and friends and through that I get information of what is going on". Of course, it would be a mistake to assume that the recruiting officials necessarily responded to the grievances in each letter: Mostert concluded his observation saying, "by the time we hear from our recruiter the boy is all right again and we wire the fact to his home".[34]

By the early 1920s state and mine officials had come to view the letters of petition that Taberer received from workers in the compounds as a threat to the "status and authority" of the compound managers. In July 1921, the Johannesburg Inspector of Native Affairs reported, that Taberer had brought an anonymous letter sent by the "Cape Colony" workers in the Wolhuter compound back to the attention compound manager. The mine official "very wisely, took it to the Mine Manager", the Inspector observed, "As the latter was averse to any interference, no reply was made, and nothing done". The anonymous letters from the compounds, and the Native Recruiting Corporation's reaction to them, "interfered" with the managerial lines of authority on the mine, and the bureaucratic procedures of the Native Affairs Department. "I rather fancy the letter concerned my Complaint 122/21", the Inspector noted in a response that vividly illustrates the conflict over styles of correspondence and identification, "relative to a Pondo named Zindoka 1385/151054, a voluntary native, who alleged he was ill, and asked for discharge".[35]

## Conclusion and Theoretical Implications

Political letter writing on the mines continued into the 1920s, and well beyond.[36] But in general we can discern a clear shift after the 1920 strike; a movement which accelerated after the

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[33] Union of South Africa, Native Labour Regulation Bill 222.

[34] Union of South Africa, Native Labour Regulation Bill 139.

[35] TAD GNLB 334, 178/21/110 Compound Managers: Status and Authority Of, 1920--22, Edmeston, F. A. H. Inspector, NAD Johannesburg East to Director of Native Labour, Confidential--Authority and Influence of Compound Managers, undermined, and status lowered, by employees of senior rank, 7 July, 1921.

[36] Indeed, two months before the massive strike that swept across the Reef in February 1920, a letter was sent by the workers at ERPM, at one end of the Witwatersrand, to Randfontein Estates, at the other, urging workers to "wake up the people we must speak for ourselves." Letters to Taberer remained an important means of drawing wider political attention to local problems, and, after 1925, letters to the ICU occasionally opened up the closed world of the compounds. See Keith Breckenridge. "We Must Speak for Ourselves: The Rise and Fall of a Public

moves to quash the ICU in 1927. In that year, and after some initial confusion, the Chamber of Mines introduced a strict policy of ignoring letters of appeal or demand sent from African trade unions that lasted into the 1970s. Similarly, the Compound Managers' Association (which was formed in 1920) served as a formidable vehicle of official solidarity, and adamantly opposed interference from workers or their representatives. And at the level of the state, the dissolution of the Government Native Labour Bureau and the general decline of the influence of individual Cape magistrates, coincided with an increasingly powerful segregationist ethos within the Native Affairs Department. David Sogoni, who worked on the mines after 1939, expressed the dissolution of state institutions of appeal when he explained:

> There was no way we could write to the government to tell it about this thing, for we were afraid of white people. We did not think that the government could be of help to us, since we did not know it and we did not have its address.[37]

Before the 1930s, when procedures were introduced to deflect the appeals of African correspondents, letter writing proved the most effective means of mobilizing the support of a rigidly documentary bureaucracy.[38] In the face of the "mine regulations", letters were one of very few resources that migrants had to loosen the grip of the written contract and impose some form of communicative restraint onto the actions of their white supervisors.[39]

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Sphere on the South African Gold Mines, 1920-1931." Comparative Studies in Society and History 40:1 (January 1998) 71-108.

[37] Interview with David Sogoni by Cyrius Vukile Khumalo and Keith Breckenridge, Isiyaya, 19 October 1996.

[38] In practice the activities of the South African Native National Congress, and its provincial branches, relied heavily on private and public letters of appeal. Sol Plaatje, one of the leading figures behind the establishment of the SANNC in 1912, and the organization's secretary-general, mastered this form of political letter writing. As his biographer has observed, letters "confidential in tone and written as one politician to another, were one of Plaatje's specialties; he knew exactly the compliments to pay, the names to drop, the tone to adopt".[38]. Brian Willan, Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist 1876--1932 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 147.

[39] Moroney also cites other letters that directly challenged the legitimacy of contracts signed in the countryside. SNA 55/1561/50 cited in Moroney, "Industrial Conflict" 89.

[40] Michael Warner The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990) 12.

[41] Many of the cultural characteristics of the printed world were brought to the Transvaal fully formed. In particular, the ideas that Warner seeks to unveil--public, reason, individual, print--had long since been defined in the North Atlantic basin. But they were to require continuous endorsement in the course of the expansion of the colonial state.