

Flesh Made Words: Fingerprinting and the Archival Imperative in the Union of South Africa, 1900-1930. ♦

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Fingerprinting lies at the core of the modern state's relationship with its subjects. It is the most pervasive and intimate engagement between the rationalising state and individual citizens. And yet it has received virtually no scholarly attention of any kind. What follows is a piece of a larger study of the intellectual place of fingerprinting in the emergence of modern South Africa. It is, as you can see, very much a work in progress and I will do my best to provide the contextual significance and theoretical implications in my oral presentation. I would greatly appreciate any comments.

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The Identification Branch of the Foreign Labour Department.

Before almost any of the other elements of the new British administration were in place in the Transvaal the Secretary for Native Affairs requested that each of the mines begin to collect the fingerprints of their African employees. Without suggesting specific procedures for either the recording or cataloguing of the prints, Wyndham asked that mine officials should write the passport numbers and names on the back of the fingerprint records in order, as he optimistically put it, "to prevent desertion from the mines."¹ It was, in fact, to be many years before even the most well organised mines would begin the project of collecting fingerprints, nor were the collections or the practice of fingerprinting ever to have the effects that Wyndham imagined. But the turn to fingerprinting as the solution to the failure of the documentary order was to remain the characteristic and consistent feature of the rationalising order that emerged on the Transvaal after Reconstruction.

♦ My thanks to Daniella Scrazzolo, Paul Rouillard and Vanessa Noble for invaluable assistance with the data processing for this project.

¹ CMA Assaults on European Women by Natives, 1912 (1) Wilson, Edward. Acting Chief Pass Officer, Native Affairs Department, Johannesburg to Native Affairs Joint Committee 8 May 1912.

The first systematic effort to record, classify and catalogue the fingerprints of a large group of people using Sir Edward Henry's New Scotland Yard method began in November 1902 in Natal. By the end of the Reconstruction period, the Pietermaritzburg collection, larger than any of the others by several orders of magnitude, consisted of the fingerprints of 100,000 indentured Indian workers printed on arrival in Durban and a group of approximately 230,000 prints taken from prisoners awaiting trial and African applicants for posts in the Police and Gaols. This second group was further broken down into three racially defined sets: 12,742 European, 211,377 Natives, and 101 Chinese.² This enormous fingerprinting effort formed part of the anaemic colony's effort to quash African protest. Indeed, early in 1908 a Sub-Inspector of the CID in Pietermaritzburg posted a set of photographs to his counterparts in Johannesburg and to the Identification Clerks of the Foreign Labour Department in search of the perennially elusive Cakijana kaGezindaka. Reminding the Identification Clerks of the £100 price on Cakijana's head, he asked that "you will place these prints in your files and inform me should he fall into your hands." While this unrealistic sense of the tentacular powers of fingerprints was common, then as much as now, the large number of African prints on record in Natal in this early period was an exception. The focus of the fingerprinting enterprise in South Africa before 1910 was on the effort to control indentured Asian workers, and particularly the very large numbers of Chinese men contracted to work on the Witwatersrand gold mines.

Chinese workers presented the officials of the Foreign Labour Department, and their counterparts on the individual gold mines, with formidable problems of identification and regulation. There was practically no linguistic proficiency on the Rand in any of the languages spoken by the migrants, many of the workers had similar or identical names, the officials were completely incapable of distinguishing individual physical characteristics, and, simply put, workers had very good reason to dissemble about their own identities.

² CAD JUS 0862, 1/138. Acting Chief Commissioner, South African Police to Acting Secretary for Justice. Finger Print System as applied to the detection of Criminals in South Africa. 13 May 1912. CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12 Establishment of a Central Finger Impression Office, 1912. Deputy Commissioner, CID to Secretary, Transvaal Police. 18 December 1912.

The state initially sought to address the problem of establishing reliable personal identity by using a new system of numerically indexed photographs. When the first group of workers left the Receiving Compound at Tientsin, British officials took photographs of each worker holding a slate with the number of the Government Passport issued to him immediately before the departure of the ship bound for Durban. The photographs travelled with the workers to the Transvaal where they were carefully filed in numerical order in the FLD's Identification Office in Johannesburg.

The photographs proved singularly incapable of the work required of them. The rapid processing demanded on the Chinese side of the recruitment procedure meant that many of the images were in fact useless for the purposes of identifying individuals. And even when, by chance, the pictures were well taken, photography was of little help in presenting the officials with a set of easily distinguishable physical criteria. And, "when they ran into thousands," as the officials put it, they had little chance "to survive the ordeal of constant handling."³

To bolster the flimsy evidentiary qualities of the photographs the officials turned to the Parisian Police bureaucrat Alphonse Bertillon's cutting-edge identification system which "combined photographic portraiture, anthropometric description, and highly standardized and abbreviated written notes on a single *fiche* ... within a comprehensive, statistically based filing system."⁴ This system, which must have seemed omniscient and elegant on display at the 1893 Chicago Exposition, simply added to the problems of identifying large numbers of workers on the Witwatersrand. Far from resolving the empirical inadequacies of the photographs, Bertillon's complex measuring instruments demanded more time and more skill than the FLD could muster. Nor did this effort "to ground photographic evidence in more abstract *statistical* methods" do much to address the intrinsic unreliability of the body as a point of mathematical comparison. The measurements, as officials complained at the time, "were not reliable owing to physical changes."⁵

³ CAD JUS 0862, 1/138. Burley, Henry to Registrar of Asiatics, Department of the Interior. 22 April 1912

⁴ Allan Sekula. *The Body and the Archive*. 354

⁵ *ibid.*

Fingerprints, as Galton had argued some twenty years earlier, proved significantly more efficient and dramatically cheaper than Bertillon's anthropometrics.⁶ Soon after the arrival of the first group of Chinese workers in June 1904, officials in the Foreign Labour Department began to collect, classify and file their fingerprints. Within a year they had collected some 13,000 sets, and were steadily increasing the catalogue at a rate of 4000 fingers a day. Building, classifying and filing this mountain of identifying data required the labour of just two registrars at the receiving compound and three cataloguers at the FLD's Identification Office in downtown Johannesburg.⁷

Fingerprinting the Chinese workers offered the state one particular advantage: the record set was limited and complete. Every single worker—indeed every Chinese or Indian adult male in the Transvaal--was fingerprinted. Similarly, while the total figure of 70,000 was large, it was small compared, for example, to the millions of potential African workers. The FLD was able to maintain the size of the record set by organising all aspects of the recruitment and control of the Chinese workers—including the fees and wages charged to the mines—around their fingerprints. From early in 1905 the Mines were required to dispatch a set of fingerprints along with the notification of death of Chinese workers. The integrity of the collection was nicely maintained by linking these records to each company's wage bill. "Your company will be saved the sum of Ten Shillings per month on the allotment payments," the FLD memo carefully reminded the Mines' secretaries, "which cannot be stopped until the right coolie is reported as dead."⁸

The effort to fingerprint the Chinese workers came to serve as a model of state-worker discipline. When, two years after the last of the Chinese workers had been repatriated the collection was completely destroyed, the officials of the FLD (who had now been transferred into a new 'Asiatics' unit within the Interior Ministry) looked back on the Chinese era as a period of faultless state control.

⁶ Galton. *Fingerprints*. 166-8.

⁷ TAD FLD 171, 35. Identification Branch, Foreign Labour Department. "Report on the Work of the Identification Branch of the Foreign Labour Department." 01 September 1905

⁸ TAD FLD 173, 35/54. Foreign Labour Department. Circular Letter. No. 35/54. 11 March 1905

It will of course be understood that the Chinese resorted to all sorts of devices in order to make some attempt to lose their identity ... Passports were exchanged, false names given, the names of employers were wrongly given and in a number of cases even the mutilation of fingers that existed at the time they were originally taken... It is therefore a tribute to the excellence of the system that during the seven years these 70,000 labourers were employed in the Transvaal there is NO case on record of mistaken identity having occurred!

The Chinese episode seemed to offer disciplinary possibilities that would dissolve the most persistent barriers to the proper organisation of an enormous colonial labour force. These obstacles, first cultural—"the Chinese aptitude for prevarication"—and, second, linguistic—"no one of the finger print experts spoke the Chinese language"—collapsed under a regime where officials confronted the migrant exclusively "through his finger prints and the classification under which they fell."⁹

This triumphalist vision of the Chinese era, drawing on the grandiose tones of Francis Galton's original study, came to underpin the notion, fondly held by compound managers, police commanders, and mine managers, that fingerprinting could solve the entrenched and ubiquitous failures of the documentary Pass system. In fact, of course, the system was never quite as faultless as its advocates, or Foucaultians, would have us believe. There were many problems.

In the first case, the identification system was only as reliable as the actual prints taken from workers. Here the scope for failure was as wide as the range of competence amongst officials and the variety of physical predicaments that workers faced on the Witwatersrand. Throughout the period of Chinese indenture the secretary of the FLD complained about the quality of prints individual mines despatched to identify deceased workers. "Observe the manner in which the finger prints of deceased coolies are sent to this Department," he complained to the Chamber of Mines in June 1906, "notwithstanding the repeated requests, which have been made to the employers of Chinese coolies, that the utmost care should be exercised in obtaining clear and legible impressions for the purpose of identification." The medical officer at the Durban Roodepoort Deep had allowed the deceased man's fingers to be "daubed on to a thick coat of ink" and carelessly painted onto a sheet of paper. The prints, as the FLD

⁹ Burley, 22 April 1912, *op. cit.*

secretary observed, were “perfectly useless for the purpose for which they are intended.” Complaints like this, and others of the sort where the “right hand has been marked as the left hand and vice versa and the fingers have been taken in the wrong place,” were frequently and repeatedly directed at individual mines, like Durban Deep and East Rand Proprietary Mines, the South African Constabulary, and even the special Inspectors of the Foreign Labour Department itself.¹⁰

For mine workers’ fingers, like the rest of their bodies, ended up in places that were little suited to fine printing. The man employed at the Durban Roodepoort Deep, whose sloppily taken fingers had so enraged the secretary of the FLD, had been dead for many hours by the time that the MO reached him. Turning two thumbs and eight fingers “over with a rolling movement, so that the nail which faced to the left now faces to the right, and in such a manner that the whole front of the top joint is coated with the ink” and, then, rolling each finger “lightly in the space marked ... care being taken to keep a firm and even pressure during the movement” proved impossible after the stiffening of rigor mortis. In the face of the persistent complaints from the Identification Office about the quality of impressions, the manager of ERPM offered the tart response that “it is by no means easy to obtain good prints from the stiffened fingers of a dead man.”¹¹

Officials were forced to confront the grim world of the early compounds by the requirement that every worker to leave the Witwatersrand, through repatriation or death, be fingerprinted. In the absence of anything resembling a medical infrastructure, the Chinese workers were usually repatriated for chronic diseases—the most common of which seem to have been the dietary disease *beriberi* and syphilis. It was the Identification Clerks of the FLD who had to do the bulk of the fingerprinting of these workers, whether diseased or deceased, evidently with little enthusiasm. In March 1906, less than a year after the first set of prints had been taken, the Identification Clerks—

¹⁰ TAD FLD 173, 35/54. Secretary, Foreign Labour Department to Manager, East Rand Proprietary Mines Ltd. No.35/54. 20 March 1905.

¹¹ TAD FLD 171, 35. Identification Office, Foreign Labour Department. Instructions for Taking Finger Prints. 01 March 1906. TAD FLD 173, 35/54. Manager, East Rand Proprietary Mines, Limited, to Secretary, Foreign Labour Department. 19 April 1905.

including Henry Burley who looked back in 1912 to this period with unqualified nostalgia—wrote to the Superintendent of the FLD, protesting “the particularly distasteful duty” they were compelled to perform in identifying the bodies of workers who had died by accident or disease on the mines. To make the point unmistakably they explained their work “entails a great risk of sickness, subject to the handling of the putrified [sic.] bodies of the deceased coolies, and the inhaling of nauseous gases” and requested that “special remuneration be allowed the officer performing this duty over and above the ordinary subsistence allowance.” The Superintendent duly forwarded their protests, advising that each Clerk should receive a £1 bonus on the successful identification of an unmarked body.¹²

When these protests failed to elicit any official or financial acknowledgement of the difficulties of their work the ID Clerks sought a more conventional local solution to the problem: the employment of Africans to collect the fingerprints of the criminal and the deceased. The “distasteful” work, they argued two weeks later, was “recognised by other finger print departments (namely Native Affairs, and other branches in the Colonies) [as] ‘infra digni-tatum’ and therefore classified as native labour.” And, in absence of the £1 bounty per body, they requested that “one or two natives ... be trained and worked on the same basis as the natives employed in the finger print branch of the Native Affairs.” The Superintendent tersely responded that he was “averse to employing kaffirs for work of such a nature, and ... directs that the work should be carried out in the satisfactory manner it has hitherto been performed.”¹³

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that errors of classification and identification were considerably more frequent than the FLD officials would later remember. This was especially true in the first year of operation of the system. But the penalties for failing to identify prints correctly were severe, and the errors cannot obscure the fact that the Foreign Labour Department’s Finger Print system worked. The

¹² TAD FLD 173, 35/54. Lees, Cecil F., Haigh, J.M., Burley, Henry to Superintendent, Foreign Labour Department, Johannesburg. Identification Branch. 15 March 1906.

¹³ TAD FLD 171, 35. Identification Office, Foreign Labour Department. Superintendent, Foreign Labour Department. Foreign Labour Department, Johannesburg. 02 April 1906 and Secretary, Foreign Labour Department, to Lees. 03 April 1906.

records of complaints in the archive are clearly rigorously policed exceptions to the general rule that the fingerprinting of the Chinese migrants was well done, carefully catalogued and very effective.

Examples of systematic, panoptic, identification abound—"I enclose the finger impression of a strange coolie who was caught in the Angelo Compound yesterday with twenty-three packets of opium in his possession valued at £23-0-0, and shall be glad if you will inform me as to his registered number and employer."¹⁴

And the statistics are unequivocal. In 1906 the FLD registered and classified in excess of 10,000 newly arrived migrants, they identified 12,000 Chinese workers released from prison, 15,000 appearing in court, 5,000 repatriations and a small number of criminal and miscellaneous identifications. By 1910, after the last of the workers had returned to mainland China via Singapore, the collection had been completely destroyed. But the legacy of a working example of Fingerprinting as an all-inclusive solution to the inadequacies of the documentary order would remain for years.

At the heart of this enterprise—and one of the reasons for its success—was a racialising project that isolated 'Asians' for particular state treatment. In 1907 the fingerprint system developed around the control of the Chinese workers was extended and applied to all adult men of Chinese or Indian origin in the Transvaal. "After four years experience I had come to the conclusion," the Registrar of Asiatics explained later, "that it was absolutely impossible to identify through their signatures or photographs this class of Races who think nothing of changing their names and their history, the history of their Fathers and Mothers and everything else to further their own purpose." The British officials' anxieties about 'inscrutable asiatics,' who were certainly linguistically and culturally unfamiliar, laced together powerful fears about class hierarchy, personal identity and the significance of a truthful biography. Fingerprinting,

¹⁴ TAD FLD 171, 35/1. Manager, East Rand Proprietary Mines, Limited, to Superintendent, Foreign Labour Department. East Rand Proprietary Mines, Limited. 28 May 1906.

many officials believed, was a means of controlling these tendencies and served as a biological indicator of race itself.¹⁵

When Sir Edward Henry, the author of the New Scotland Yard method used so widely in the colonies, requested a summary of the classifications of the Transvaal workers' fingerprints he could not resist a summary observation of the racial features of the collection. "The return is very interesting, shewing, as it does", he observed self-importantly, "the decided difference in the character of the patterns, which exists between the finger prints of Mongolian, and those of the Western races." That Francis Galton, who publicly formulated the fingerprint system, the founding figure of modern eugenics and an intellectual with a singular desire for identifying 'racial indicators' had abandoned his exhaustive research into the statistical comparison of fingerprint classifications and racial groups when "hard fact had made hope no longer justifiable" seems to have had little effect on those who took up the practical work of implementing it. The fact that Sir Edward Henry mistook the classifications he was sent as those of Indian workers suggests that he, unlike Galton, was determined to find "racial" indicators regardless of the evidence.¹⁶

The Native Affairs Identification Department

In the Transvaal, Chinese and Indian men, and their families, were subjected to the fingerprinting regime earlier, and more systematically, than other people, but it was the Native Affairs Department's interest in the system that would shape its long-term role in South Africa. In 1906, as soon as the viability of the Chinese system had been demonstrated, the Chamber of Mines began to pressure the Native Affairs Department for an "extension of the system of recording finger prints" and the introduction of a "universal system of registration." Sir Godfrey Lagden, the Commissioner for Native Affairs, promised to take up the mines' suggestion "at an early date."¹⁷

¹⁵ CAD JUS 0862, 1/138, 1910. Registrar of Asiatics, Department of the Interior to Acting Secretary for Justice. 23 April 1912.

¹⁶ Galton. *Fingerprints*. 183.

¹⁷ CMA Assaults on European Women by Natives, 1912 (1), Wilson, Edward. Acting Chief Pass Officer, Native Affairs Department, Johannesburg to Native Affairs Joint Committee, "The Native Pass Laws Of The Transvaal", 08 May 1912.

This idea of the universal system of fingerprinting, classification and identification was to become—and, indeed, still remains—the Holy Grail of the rationalising state's confrontation with its disobedient subjects in South Africa.¹⁸ Implementing a universal system of registration—not to speak of the problems of classification and identification—for the millions of potential African workers in the subcontinent was simply beyond the capacity of the Reconstruction state, and so an alternative had to be developed. The solution that the Native Affairs Department began to implement in 1909 fed off the individual fingerprint programs that had been developed on each of the mines. Rather than establish a centralised, state controlled mechanism of fingerprinting, the Native Affairs Department altered the law to allow for the compulsory detention for 6 days of all African men applying for work permission on the Witwatersrand. During that period workers were to be housed in a special Identification Compound long enough to allow the mines to come up with their fingerprints, or for compound officials to attend identification parades.

The Native Affairs Identification Department was constructed on the site of the old Wemmer Compound, immediately to the south of the city of Johannesburg, on the extension of Eloff Street and on the rail-line between the Faraday and Village Main stations. The procedure that was supposed to sift out workers who had illegally deserted their mines in search of better work opportunities was framed in unmistakably Benthamite terms.

Workers despatched from the Pass Offices on the Witwatersrand underwent an elaborate documentary and visual processing at the Wemmer Compound. The compound was laid out with a central processing area and six adjacent yards each containing a dormitory cell and a fenced exercise area. Immediately after their arrival workers would be registered, "issued Compound Registration Tickets," and their fingerprints taken on special forms marked with their Registration numbers. These records would be sent "as soon as possible to the [Native Affairs Finger Impression

¹⁸ See <http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/pr/1996/pr1209a.html> "Tender for Home Affairs ID System" 9 December 1996.

Records Department] where they will be classified, looked up, and if not known, filed in a Special series of files, which could be called N.A.I.D. Compound Files.”

In order to detain each of the workers the six days that officials believed was required for the mines to become aware of deserters, identify them, find their finger prints and then despatch them to the Native Affairs Department, workers were “drafted into the different detention yards, corresponding to the number of days of their detention.” Inside the yard each worker was required to wear a metal disk bearing the number of the yard in a conspicuous place. Every morning workers in the last yard, No 6, would be released “making thus room for the occupants of yard No' 5 and so on till No' 1 will be emptied for the reception of the daily arrivals.”

The NAID compound was laid out in the unmistakable pattern of the panopticon. The detention yards were separated from each other by 12 foot walls made up of corrugated iron sheets but “the wall facing the central yard of the Compound, to which visitors will be admitted, and where the N.A.I.D. Policeman will patrol, take the form of a 10 foot barb wire fence to allow for more sun, better ventilation, and also to afford to the ... visitors and Compound Guards, a full view of each detention yard.” The visitors who would be allowed into the centre of the Compound were not friends or relatives, but “employers and native constables from the different Mines.” On their arrival the occupants of each yard would be forced to “line up near the fence (barb wire) and will thus be afforded an opportunity of seeing every detained native without entering in the different pens.”¹⁹ The NAID compound, more than any other institution on the Witwatersrand, represented a particularly nasty version of the prison that Jeremy Bentham made famous more than a century before.²⁰

Yet it never worked particularly well, and its failures had little to do with the design of the prison. (Although it is certainly easy enough to imagine how the disciplinary integrity of a corrugated iron prison would unravel on the Witwatersrand.)

¹⁹ TAD GNLB 004, 2337/09. Lautrés, E. I. Inspector, N.A.I.D. Compound. Memo of procedure that will obtain at the N.A.I.D. Compound as regards the treatment of natives to be detained there. 01 February 1909 and Supplementary Notes to the Memo of procedure which will obtain at the Native Affairs I.D. Compound. 08 February 1909.

²⁰ Michel Foucault....

The failure of the NAID compound was related to a simpler problem: It generally took the mines well in excess of six days to discover a deserter and secure his fingerprints. "It is a common occurrence," Henry Wellbeloved, the Manager of the nearby Witwatersrand Native Labour Association compound reported over a decade later, "that this same native is reported a few days later as a deserter from some mine but, owing to the lapse of time in reporting the desertion, the native has made good his escape."²¹ The numbers make this point clearly. Of the 17,000 men who deserted from work on the Witwatersrand in 1911, just 4,000 were recaptured by the NAID. The panopticon, at least on the Witwatersrand, had few of the disciplinary powers that have been inferred for it by Bentham and Foucault. It was more of a grotesque nuisance than a mechanism for internalising the normative apparatus of bourgeois subjectivity.

The Establishment of a Police Central Fingerprint Bureau

The fingerprinting regime established by the Native Affairs Department after 1910 was a far cry from the omniscient identification system that Galton and Henry had intended, and which had functioned during the brief period of Chinese recruitment. The combination of the collection of deserters and other miscreants held by the Native Affairs Finger Impression Record Department and the elaborate procedures of the Wemmer Compound could do little more than randomly select individuals from the thousands of men who deserted from the mines in a given year (a figure that varied between 1 and 3 percent of the total workforce of 200,000 men between 1910 and 1930). The fingerprinting systems established by the individual mines were yet more haphazard, relying entirely on passport numbers or names to index their catalogues. The mines could produce prints for workers already registered on their books, but, quite unlike the system in place at the FLD, they could not identify workers from their prints. Once a worker had successfully thrown off his name or passport number (which was, as we've seen in the previous chapter, relatively easily done) there was little that the officials could do to track him. The large recruiting bodes, the Native Recruiting

²¹ CMA Native Labour--Miscellaneous, 1924-5. Wellbeloved, H. Assistant Native Labour Advisor to Gemmill. 3 September 1924.

Corporation and the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association made no attempt to collect fingerprints, and once a worker had managed to secure a pass from home, or passed through the Wemmer Compound, he was, so to speak, free.²²

It was the desire to be able to regulate all African workers through a carefully organised and complete collection of fingerprints that had motivated the mines' original enthusiasm for fingerprinting, and it remained a powerful imperative, within the mining industry and beyond. Unlike the mines and the NAD, the newly formed South African Police had maintained the separate provincial collections using the New Scotland Yard method. Most of the prints were taken from prisoners serving sentences of more than three months, with the exception of the very large collection in Pietermaritzburg where all convicted and awaiting trial prisoners were registered. In July 1912, Theo Truter, the Chief Commissioner of the SAP, proposed that the separate collections of the NAD and the Police be amalgamated. "With the whole of the finger prints under the control of the Police," he explained with hubris typical of the panoptic utopians, "in a very short time not only will the finger impressions of every Native on the Rand be on record, but practically those of every Native within the four Provinces of the Union, which would be of the utmost assistance to the Police in the detection and prevention of crime."²³

Major Mavrogordato, the Deputy Commissioner of the CID, was duly despatched by his boss to investigate the Native Affairs fingerprinting operation. The results were rather unsettling. At the CID operation, ten members of the South African Police worked on a collection of some 110,000 records growing at a rate of 20,000 records per year. At the NAD offices, 14 staff members controlled a similarly sized catalogue. The two different branches were conducting a similar number of searches, around 30,000, per year. But to the astonishment of the Police, the NAD collection was connected to a vast reservoir of 500,000 unclassified records held by the mines and indexed by serial pass number. When the implications of incorporating this enormous mass of records

²² TAD GNLB 055, 1464/1912 Finger Print System, 1912. Dix, C. W. Secretary, Witwatersrand Native Labour Association to Under Secretary for Native Affairs, 29 April 1912.

²³ CAD JUS 0862, 1/138. Acting Chief Commissioner, South African Police. Acting Secretary for Justice. Finger Print System as applied to the detection of Criminals in South Africa. 13 May 1912. CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12 Establishment of a Central Finger Impression Record Office. Truter, Theo. Chief Commissioner, SAP to Secretary for Justice. 27 July 1912.

into a single collection began to emerge, Mavrogordato backed rapidly away from the idea of amalgamating the two collections. "I do not think that it would desirable to swell the records of the CID which are purely criminal," he explained in an effort to forswear his boss' panoptic enthusiasm, "with hundreds of thousands of finger prints as this would lead to unavoidable congestion and increase the difficulty of searching." He concluded his report by advising that, in the event of the amalgamation of the two offices, the two record sets should remain separate.

As the likely effects of absorbing the Pass Office collections began to filter into the Police command structure, the Justice Department sought to neutralise the paradox of the massive data set of unclassified mine workers finger prints by pressuring the NAD to organise its collection properly. For a year a debate ensued between the two departments. The Secretary for Justice charged that "the Police Finger Prints are classified scientifically and the Native Affairs Finger Prints are not." And his counterpart in Native Affairs answered this extreme accusation by shedding blame on to the individual mines. "Although there is a large number of finger impression records unclassified," he responded, "such records are not held by this Department but by the employers of Native labourers."²⁴ While much of this bad tempered argument centred around the efficiency and reliability of the NAD collection, there were much more intractable, structural problems at work.

Some of these, as Mavrogordato had indicated, related to the very different functions of the two collections, but others were built into the system of fingerprint cataloguing itself. In the first instance, none of the officials involved with either of the two classified collections wanted anything to do with the completely unclassified and uncorrected records held by the mines. "The desire of any officer in charge of a collection of records," the Director of Native Labour explained to his boss, "is to avoid as far as possible adding any unnecessary records, since the larger the collection the greater the labour of every search and the greater the possibility of identifications being

²⁴ CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12 Establishment of a Central Finger Impression Record Office. Secretary for Justice to Secretary for Native Affairs. 11 February 1913. and Secretary for Native Affairs to Secretary for Justice. 20 March 1913.

missed." Adding to the elastic demands of an increased collection was a much more sinister difficulty. The two classified collections (each of which amounted to some 100,000 records) had begun to use their own, unique, extended set of sub-classifications "further than those laid down by Sir Edward Henry."²⁵

At its core the Native Affairs Department's position was a rejection of the utopian fantasies of a panoptic fingerprinting system. "There is no practical possibility of securing that no native can enter or leave the Labour Districts without the knowledge of the Department", Edward Wilson, Chief Pass Officer on the Rand explained soon after the original suggestion from the Police emerged. For the system to "secure the instant identification of any native found in the Labour Districts" it would require the registration of "every native in South and South-Central Africa and to keeping every such record for some forty or fifty years."

The resulting dataset of some twenty million records would have been physically enormous, immensely expensive to construct and maintain and quite unlike anything else in existence at the time. Edward Wilson had been involved with the FLD's fingerprinting system and he had an intimate understanding of the classification procedures and their implications. He knew that, notwithstanding the open-ended claims that Galton, and many others, had made for the accuracy and reliability of fingerprinting classifications, that the utility of any collection was proportional to its size. There were, he conceded, "five thousand million possible classifications" from which it should follow that a collection of some "twenty million records could be easily handled." But the statistical probabilities and physical realities of fingerprinting were at odds.

In the largest classified collections of up to 100,000 records there would always be some classifications that contained several hundred fingerprint sets. Increasing the collection by 200-fold would have involved produced gridlock in the popular classifications. While it would, normally, be possible to conduct "further sub-

²⁵ CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12. Director of Native Labour. Suggested Amalgamation of the Finger Impression Record Offices of the Criminal Investigation and Native Affairs Departments. 13 September 1912.

classification" as necessary to isolate individual patterns, one particular weakness in the Henry classification could not be overcome. The classification, "in which all ten fingers are of the "arch" variety, a type of record rare among Asiatics but by no means uncommon among African natives, defies further subdivision and will always be troublesome and laborious to deal with in handling very large collections of African natives."²⁶

²⁶ CAD JUS 0862, 1/138. Wilson, Edward. Acting Chief Pass Officer, Johannesburg, NAD. "The Employment in the Union of South Africa of the System of Identification by Finger Impressions." 5 August 1912.