Containerizing Politics, Politicizing Containers:

Struggles over Representation in the Durban Harbor, 1959-1985

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Paper presented to the History and African Studies Seminar, University of Kwazulu-Natal,

September 18, 2004

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Introduction

What is a container? For those in the maritime industry, containers are twenty or forty ton boxes of a standard size that have come to occupy an indispensable place within their market since the 1970s, a technological innovation that has been celebrated as rescuing linear shipping from its relative decline in significance in the 1950s and 1960s.[1] Prior to containerization, goods were packaged in a relatively uneven fashion, and stored within the holds of ships. This required workers, known as stevedores or longshoremen, to load and unload cargo from ships into warehouses and onto trucks. As a technological innovation, containerization limited the numbers of workers integral to the process as cargo was stored on the decks on ships and, with the assistance of computer operated cranes, loaded onto trucks. By limiting the numbers of workers necessary to its operation, the maritime industry created the conditions for, in Marxian terms, capturing "relative surplus value", and for new regime of profit in the industry.[2]

In broad terms, containerization dramatically increased the "turn-around" time of cargo and demanded an increasingly smaller and flexible workforce which seems to follow, in the most general sense, Harvey's theorization of the growth crisis within Fordism and its spatial resolution within a new mode of "flexible" accumulation.[3] While recent studies of containerization in ports worldwide have sought to show the nuances of the process and the difficulties with the general characterizations, it is clear that ports have undergone substantial

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[1] Frank Broeze. "Containerization, or the globalization of liner shipping" in David Starkey (ed) *Global Markets*. Research in Maritime History, vol. 14, 1998.

[2] "Relative surplus value" is means for the acceleration of accumulation by driving down the amount of social necessary labor power in the production of a commodity, and can be distinguished from "Absolute surplus value" where capitalists seek to extract as much as possible from the labor, by, for instance, increasing the working day. Braverman's discussion of Taylorism is a good example of the latter. See David Harvey. *The Limits to Capital.* (Verso, 1999), esp. pp. 30-32 and Harry Braverman. *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism.* (Monthly Review, 1974), esp. pp. 99-107.

[3] David Harvey. *The Condition of Postmodernity.* (Blackwell, 1989). pp. 141-188.

transformations.[4] While the degree of retrenchment has varied greatly, all ports have experienced significant changes: both in a decline of the numbers of dock workers and nature of work itself.

The social and cultural conditions within which containerization in Durban developed in 1977 bore the profound weight of South Africa's past. Between 1959 and 1979 stevedores were part of a political system that placed them in a wholly different type of container: a local system of labor administration that professed to perfect Verwoerd's Apartheid ideology through stringently attempting to maintain them as ethnically or "culturally" pure subjects. The logic of this ideology was Herderian in origin, developing directly out of German-trained Eiselen's "volkekunde" at the University of Stellenbosch, and maintained that people should develop as "national subjects" rather than individuals.[5] Attempts to implement this policy against backdrop of the exclusion of Africans from cities was haphazard at best, and never really worked (at least according to the intentions of its architects) as a system of controlling migrant laborers in cities, maintained only through state violence and compromise.[6] Yet in the Durban Harbor, according to the reports of local officials, this scheme of control appeared, for a decade at least, to provide efficient and effective ordering principles.

The infrastructure of Apartheid control within the port began to decline in the early 1970s and by the end of the decade two further systems of representation gained prominence. Both rejected the Apartheid container of unskilled African workers. The first saw the development of private stevedoring companies as a response to the emergence of technological changes within the port. These companies offered a "liberal" solution within the South African context: they rejected the idea that workers existed as a relic to an "authentic cultural past" and suggested instead that workers needed to be treated as

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[4] Joseph A. Blum. "Degradation without Deskilling: Twenty Five Years in the San Francisco Shipyard" in Michael Burawoy (ed). *Global Ethnography*. (California, 2000). Helen Sampson and Bin Wu. "Compressing Time and Constraining Space: The contradictory Effects of ICT and Containerization of International Shipping Labor" in Aad Blok & Greg Downey.(eds) *Uncovering Labour in Information Revolutions, 1750-2000*. (Cambridge, 2003) Bernard Dubbeld. "Breaking the Buffalo: The Transformation of Stevedoring Work in Durban" in Aad Blok & Greg Downey.(eds) *Uncovering Labour in Information Revolutions, 1750-2000*. (Cambridge, 2003).
[5] Of course, Herderian ethnology influenced Franz Boas to take a profound stand against racism in the early decades of the twentieth century in the United States. For more on Eiselen and Afrikaans anthropology see Robert Gordon. "Apartheid's Anthropologists: The Geneology of Afrikaner Anthrorpology" in *American Ethnologist*. (15, 3, 1988)
[6] Deborah Posel. *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961: Conflict and Compromise*. (Claredon, 1991), Doug Hindson. *Pass Controls and the African Urban Proletariat*. (Ravan, 1987). Keith Breckenridge (Forthcoming)

individuals and trained to meet the standard of stevedores worldwide. The second system was a particular refraction of the growth of radical trade unionism in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, and organized workers along class lines.

Over the course of twenty-six years in the harbor, these modes of thought struggled for prominence over the right to represent the stevedores. Each of these arguments over representation had been rehearsed, in some form or another, around the academic table. On the docks, the implementation of these arguments had profoundly practical and political implications. In her celebrated essay, "Can the Subaltern speak?" Gayatri Spivak points to the profound gaps that exist between academic portrayal (*darstellen*) and political representation (*vertreten*). She argues that it is within this gap that ideology is articulated, and that amongst the clutter of voices, the subaltern voice cannot be heard.[7]

By presenting an account of the politics that surrounded the organization of Durban harbor both before and during containerization, I will seek to problematize the epistemological containers that were critical in the management of the harbor. Through this investigation I hope to shed light on these schemes of representation as they became instruments within the practice of a local politics of production. These instruments ultimately failed to become naturalized, that is, they failed to become working ideological systems for the stevedores. Finally, I will consider the identities of the stevedores themselves and tentatively reflect on the politics of emasculation that characterized the 1980s in the docks.

Who lives where? Strikes and struggles over migrant labor in the 1950s

It is by now well established that 1950s in South Africa was a period of highly militant and visible struggle over the right to control space, especially in urban areas. From the attempts to systemize control over African workers and reinstitute a new and more tightly regulated system of migrant labor in Ministry of Native Affairs to sustained efforts at peaceful protest by the African National Congress (and a host of other groups) to oppose these incursions into the everyday life of Black South Africans, this decade had profound implications for the shaping of the rest of the century in the country.

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[7] Gayatri Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* (Illinois, 1988)

During the first half of the twentieth century, Durban's harbor developed as the largest harbor in the country and a critical hub of cargo within the country.[8] Like the mines, the harbor came to stand as a site for the convergence of government interests and private business interests as a site that was at once potentially immensely profitable and critical to the economy of the country. Within the stevedoring industry, the numbers of casual workers living informally in Durban and working on the docks had grown together with the increased demands of the war economy in the 1940s. Yet unlike other industries that had experienced a similar growth of workers, casual (or togt) labor was justified through an economic logic: the constant fluctuations in the numbers of ships in the harbor on any given day suggested the utility of hiring people on a casual basis. This was a feature of harbors throughout the world during this period.[9]

A significant promise by those victorious in the 1948 election that brought Apartheid into being was to cleanse cities of its African inhabitants and re-introduce, in more stringent form, a system of migrant labor under which Africans would merely be guest workers within white cities and could make no claim to being permanent inhabitants of those cities. As early as 1949, the State made preliminary investigations into the "problem" of surplus African workers in Durban. Through the Durban City Council, work-seekers were prohibited entry into the city if full employment was reported in any industry and the Native Commissioner for Durban reported that, within a few months, the estimated surplus of African workers in Durban was reduced from 10000 to 6000.[10]

These attempts to re-institute migrant labor were vigorously opposed by employers within the stevedoring industry. They reacted by obtaining *togt* (casual) licenses, exempting them from the City Council regulations, arguing in their applications that these workers were integral to the industry.[11] Stevedoring workers also protested any attempts to remove them

[8] Natal Regional Survey. *The Port of Durban: History and Development* (Dept of Economics, University of Natal, 1969). Trevor Jones. *The Port of Durban and the Durban Metropolitan Economy.* Research Monograph, Economic Research Unit, University of Natal, Durban, 1997.

[9] From the docks of Shanghai to those of Liverpool and New York, casuals were the predominant category of worker until at least the mid 1950s, were governments very different to those described here attempted to regulate the industry in the face of containerization. See Klaus Weinhauer. "Power and control on the waterfront: casual labor and decasualisation" in Sam Davies (ed, et. al) *Dock workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labor History.* (Ashgate, 2000). pp. 580-603.

[10] Report of the Department of Native Affairs, 1950, cited in David Hemson. "Dock workers, Labour Circulation and Class Struggles in Durban", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4, 1978. p. 116.

[11] At that time, the major private stevedoring companies were African Associated Stevedoring, Consolidated Stevedoring, Brock and Company, Storm and Company, and Jack Storm Stevedoring.

from Durban claiming, amidst the more general register of strikes over wages and working conditions that Durban was their home.[12] While these strikes frustrated employers, they were determined to maintain the structural availability of casual laborers in their industry. In a report to the state, the group of major stevedoring employers presented the industry as stable in spite of recurrent strikes.

In 1957, the state and employers clashed again, this time over Verwoerd's (Minister of Native Affairs at the time and future Prime Minister) declaration that only 2000 stevedores would be allowed in the point area, and that employers should be responsible for housing these workers.[13] Employers again protested that this would cause congestion in the harbor and ships would go to ports outside the country. While considerable pressure was put on employers, the casual workers remained working in the port, although moves were made by employers to find suitable accommodation for stevedores that would house all stevedores in the same place, irrespective of which company actually employed them. Making employers responsible for housing stevedores, constraining and containing their movements, would be the initial step in creating the conditions for the migrant labor system.

What would ultimately disarm the stevedoring employers' stance was the largest strike of the decade, on the February 24, 1959. The strike begun when over 200 workers refused to start work at African Associated Agency and Stevedoring Company.[14] The main grievance of the striking workers was the increase in wages for Izinduna[15] without any similar increase for ordinary stevedores. By the following day, the harbor had been brought to a standstill when about 1400 workers refused to work. Following a meeting between state officials, somewhat ambivalent employers and workers, the latter were given an ultimatum to

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[12] South African Archives Depository, Pretoria (Hereafter SAB). ARB 3317, 1196/5/4/1, vol 1. "Report on Conditions of Employment of Stevedoring Workers".

[13] As Hemson points out these dockers emphatically rejected the former system of migrant labor. David Hemson. "Dock workers, labour circulation and class struggles in Durban". pp. 91-93, 116-117.

[14] SAB ARB 1229 1042/15/1959. Strachan, P. (Divisional Inspector Labour: Natal). "Strike: Stevedoring Industry" addressed to the Secretary for Labour, Pretoria.

[15] Induna (pl. Izinduna) refers to an African supervisor or foreman in this context. As I will discuss below, the term was borrowed from "traditional" Zulu practice where it referred to main assistants to the King. Many workplaces throughout South Africa, the Izinduna became critical figures of authority. The authority of Izinduna appears to have been vastly different before the Labor Supply Company, and much more like a traditional foremen on the docks in the sense that they were relatively autonomous from heavy handed "cultural categories" and responsible to employers alone (not in the state- which in some sense was represented by the Labor Supply Company). Their roles in this earlier period might be compared with those of the union mobster bosses in the classic Marlon Brando film "On the Waterfront".

return to work or be arrested. By February 26, work resumed as normal, except that some workers had been fired, and that a plan had been made to re-organize the dock labor pool.

The minutes of the meeting are revealing.[16] The issue of the increase in wages of the Izinduna was clearly the central issue, with workers remarking that "stevedoring workers are forced to eat from the ground, while indunas (sic) are able to eat from a plate". While they resolved to remain on strike until the issues of unequal wages were addressed, the Bantu Affairs commissioner replied that there was "no question of negotiation since the law has been promulgated and must be complied with". He urged the stevedores to resume work and file complaints through the proper channels. Despite a firm resolve by the workers to remain on strike, operations did resume in the port the following day. Casual labor, an institution of the port since the nineteenth century, was summarily abolished. Some of these workers were given weekly or monthly contracts, subject to being "screened" as to whether they were disruptive elements.[17] In addition, a plan was hastily drawn up to reformulate labor supply on the basis of a "pool system", comprising both members of the Native Affairs Department and employers.

On March 29, 1959, management from the various stevedoring companies had met and drafted an agreement that would bring the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company into existence.[18] The main aim of the company was to centralize control of the workforce in a compound, from where all stevedoring employers would draw their necessary daily labor, and to control all the administration and recruitment of stevedoring workers. The companies would have to bear an extra cost for administration and a small guarantee fee for workers. However, this was compensated for by the promise of industrial order and the ever expanding port industry, with greater loads of cargo. The reordering of the system offered the potential for a smooth operation based on the elimination of worker militancy over wages and the conditions of work, a system built on the re-establishment of migrant labor. The belief was that order would be created through the control of every aspect of working life on the docks, from recruitment, through the labor process to the accommodation of workers.

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[16] SAB ARB 1229 1042/15/1959. Strachan, P. (Divisional Inspector Labour: Natal). "Notes of a meeting held at 150a Point Road, Durban on 25 February 1959"

[17] SAB ARB 1229 1042/15/1959. Telex from Arbeid Pretoria to Arbeid Cape Town.26 February 1959.

[18] SAB BAO 3075 vol. C39/1171/1."Memorandum of Agreement entered into between African Associated Stevedoring, Consolidated Stevedoring, Brock and Company, Storm and Company, Jack Storm and Peter Kemp (trustee). 1 April 1959.

The Architecture of Apartheid Control

However haphazard, contradictory and incomplete the attempts at building Apartheid in South Africa may have been during the 1950s, government policy did appear to straddle two discrete discourses. On the one hand, Apartheid operated within a universalist register, seeking to inscribe racial supremacy in South Africa by circumscribing and controlling the position of non-white subjects as underclass subjects without possibility of advancement. On the other, the architects of this edifice did display a commitment towards a discourse that emphasized particularism: the African as an ethnically "pure" subject, bounded and to be developed within of their "nations".[19] These discourses congealed uneasily with the practice of capitalism: Africans could work in the cities; indeed they were indispensable to the functioning of these spaces, but could never fully become "laborers" in the Marxian sense of the term, that is, they always had other, but never sufficient, means of subsistence. These forms of "livelihood", at least in theory, came from the agriculturally declining reserves to which they, as migrant laborers, had been designated.[20] The careful labor of scholars have shown that even this was to some extent illusory: the pass system created to control migrants never worked, nor were Africans ever completely removed from urban life.[21]

But even illusions, especially when they receive substantial investment from a state, may be believed enough to produce effects. Indeed, as Ashforth has shown, the Apartheid government worked especially hard at maintaining popular belief in its vision.[22] Moreover, simply demonstrating the incoherence of the actual workings of Apartheid fails to grasp that the state *did* function despite contradictions both in its theory and its practice. That contradiction plagues governance is, after all, wider than the Apartheid state or even the colonial state; it is perhaps intrinsic to any form of governance.

The order that was created among the Durban stevedores certainly emphasized their "cultural" position first and foremost as members of "Zulu society", and through a system of authority based on Izinduna sought to create conditions, if not of a Zulu past, then of a

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[19] John Comaroff. "Reflections on the Colonial State, in South Africa and Elsewhere: Factions, Fragments, Facts and Fictions" in *Social Identities*. (4, 3, 1998)

[20] This is merely to restate Harold Wolpe. "Capitalism and Cheap Labor Power in South Africa" in *Economy and Society*. (1, 1, 1972)

[21] Deborah Posel. *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961*, Doug Hindson. *Pass Controls and African Urban Proletariat.*

[22] Adam Ashforth. *The politics of official discourse in twentieth century South Africa.* (Oxford, 1991)

present that would be defined through the lens of the Zulu nation. Administrators seemed to believe that the disorder in the port was a product of these subjects being exposed to an alien environment; if that environment could be made to replicate a particular cultural logic, then disruption would disappear from the port.

Introducing this order to the port primarily involved the control of recruitment, the housing of the workers and the practice of work itself. Izinduna would be at the center of all of these processes and would take a substantial portion of the supervisory function themselves. Practically, Izinduna could communicate with the workers in their language, thus smoothing tensions based on the misunderstandings of language commonly felt between White foremen and African workers. Ideologically the Izinduna were supposed to replicate a position of homestead superiority as conceived as following customs that were "traditionally" Zulu. The Labor Supply Company thus designated Izinduna as those who could legitimately represent (in the sense of "speaking for") the Zulu stevedores.

The model for the recruitment of stevedores followed a pattern already established by the Apartheid state. In 1952, the Native Affairs Department discussed the introduction of labour bureaux as limiting labor in the cities by the use of the *bewysboek* (pass or reference book) and by being able to streamline recruitment in African areas to bring labor into the cities, "only when it was necessary". The secretary of Native Affairs, Eiselen, claimed that it was the first attempt in the history of the South Africa to develop a comprehensive system of labour administration.[23] In the docks, workers were recruited on nine month contracts from predominately remote and so-called traditional Zulu areas.[24] This recruitment was handled by African "leaders" in these areas, who found themselves in the powerful positions of deciding who was "culturally appropriate" to work in Durban. It is clear that to get a job, substantial patronage was involved, to this second group of "representatives". Within a year, over 80% of the stevedoring labor force were migrants.[25] These homestead leaders also sought out connections with Izinduna working on the docks, and any "misbehavior"

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[23] SAB NTS 9794 1031/400 Dept of Native Affairs Head Office. "Discussions about Labour Bureaux". 21 October 1952.

[24] Meaning, quite simply, areas in KwaZulu where traditional African administrators had substantial influence. Two of the most notable areas of this influence were Nongoma and Mhlabathini, in Northern Natal.

[25] SAB BAO 2401 31/3/36. Report by Kemp and Dreyer (Manager and Assistant Manager of the Labor Supply Company) "History and functions of the Labor Supply Company", October 1965.

(especially militancy, but not exclusively) resulted in the worker losing the possibility of work anywhere.[26]

The Bantu Labour Act of 1964 facilitated the establishment of the recruitment system. The Act provided for a more developed network of labor bureaux developing directly from the Bantustans (that is, designated African tribal areas) to urban centres and workplaces. It increased the power of chiefs and homeland officials to regulate and cancel the contracts of workers, and ultimately cemented the dependence of African workers on Bantustan administrators for employment.[27] The attempts by state policy to link the urban and the rural through control of migrant labor appeared embodied in the Labour Supply Company. An example of this is suggested in an *Ilanga* article discussing the "generous" donation of money from the Labour Supply Company to a school in Mahlabathini (the home district of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the most powerful of all African administrators in Zululand).[28]

The compounds, where workers lived for the duration of their contracts, were policed by senior Izinduna. Izinduna who worked at the compounds were most often those with direct links to the homelands and frequently had no history of work on the docks. The most powerful of these Izinduna was J. B. Buthelezi, who was an uncle of Mangosuthu Buthelezi. The conditions of the compound accommodation in which stevedores lived were dreary, with poor lighting and between 12 and 20 stevedores per room.[29] There were no lockers and workers had no way to safeguard their belongings. During especially busy periods in the port, when it was operating for 24 hours solidly, two people would rotate using the same bed.[30] The Management of the Labor Supply Company likened the structures of authority to that of a prefect system, with the senior Induna as head prefect.[31] There was a two-tiered structure to the authority of the Izinduna. On one hand, the Izinduna were figures controlling discipline within the compound, on the other they were responsible for booking people on to work on particular days. Simply put, this latter function stemmed from the fact that, despite the restructuring of labor relations, it was still uncertain how many

[26] Interview. Siza Makhaya. (Personnel Officer, Labor Supply Company, 1973-1987) 11 July 2001.
[27] For a more detailed discussion of the Bantu Labour Act, see David Hemson, "Class Consciousness and migrant workers", p. 385-391, 410.
[28] *Ilanga lase Natal* , 4 January 1964. "The help offered by Stevedoring Company to KwaZulu.".
[29] D.M. Ross-Watt. *Housing for Bantu Stevedores.*(B. Arch Thesis, University of Natal, 1970) p. 20. Interview: July Ntshangase. (Tina Sideris, 1982)
[30] Interview. Les Owen. 4 June 2001.
[31] David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 546

ships would be in port on any particular day. The authority of the Izinduna to determine who worked on any single day reflected how substantial their power actually was. It was common practice to give some workers more shifts than others, and comments about favoritism resounded in many of the interviews of management and workers.[32]

Actual stevedoring work was regularized in the Labour Supply Company by Stevedoring Labour Units. According to this system, Izinduna were appointed by the Labour Supply Company and they selected eight stevedoring hands to form a Unit or a work gang: this remained unaltered unless somebody was incapacitated or took leave. The role of the Izinduna was to direct the process of work, to train new workers, and it was they who were ultimately responsible to management for the successful completion of each task. White foremen were also present during each stevedoring operation, but they played virtually no part in the specifics of the labor process. The Labor Supply Company noted that often their role was best served by laying out the general tasks and standing aside from the process. Very rarely, according to Company officials, did the units break up or was there any cause for complaint. In fact, supervisory problems were few and labor relations "between White supervisors and African workers were excellent".[33] In addition, this system allowed detailed records to be kept monitoring injury, illness, absenteeism and work record.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the massive reorganization of work and the militant traditions of the past, the 1960s was not a period of visible industrial organization in the port. For Apartheid labor administrators, it was during this period in the docks that the system of carefully controlled Apartheid labor practice was perfected. The economic strength of South Africa during this period had direct benefits for stevedores, who, while employed on nine month contracts, received substantially more income during the economic boom of this period. After their contracts, workers would return home for the rest of the year.[34] From both the perspective of the Stevedoring Companies and that of the state, the operation of the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company appeared an overwhelming success. Record turnover of cargo loads was experienced, with an industrial calm in the ports that contrasted dramatically with the two preceding decades. Even weekly employment was

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[32] Interviews: (conducted by the author), Thulani Zwane (20 December 2000), Siza Makhaya (11 June 2001), Gordon Stockley, (25 June 2001), By Tina Sideris. Absalom Ngema. (17 November 1982)
[33] SAB BAO 3049 C39/29. W. Dreyer, Deputy Manager, Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company. "Some notes on the establishment, methods and organization of a stevedoring labour pool". February 1966.
[34] David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 512.

dispensed with, and although stevedores didn't actually work every day, they were classed as permanent employees. It is critical to note that their actual wages depended on the amount that they worked, so it was clearly in workers' interests to work as much as possible and not to have too large a pool of workers. The economic boom contributed so significantly and directly to the stevedoring industry, such was the demand to clear ships of cargo as quickly as possible, that more than half of workers' average wages derived from overtime pay.[35] Despite an initial limiting of the labor pool after 1959, the numbers of stevedores increased with increased productivity, peaking at 2923 stevedores in 1964 and stabilizing at 2600 in 1966.[36]

In a report issued to the Department of Bantu Administration and Development in 1966, the deputy manager of the Labour Supply Company noted the success of this system of African administration in producing unprecedented industrial calm during the first five years of operation of the company. Kemp (the deputy manager) attributed this success primarily to the fact that virtually all of the workers lived in the centralized compound.[37] Discussing the functioning of stevedoring labor units, the Labour Supply Company suggested that these units were efficient because they related to the "*distinct social organization of the Bantu that values the clan or family unit above that of the individual*", and because of the authority of the Induna in selecting the gang and being able to communicate with its members.[38] The apparent success of this new system of labor control had officials hubristically claiming the Labor Supply Company as the "model Apartheid institution", a site which had found order and profitability that should be replicated everywhere.[39] It appeared that the Apartheid system had found a viable system of representing (and controlling) African workers.

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[35] David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 526.
[36] SAB BAO 2401 31/3/336. Letter from P. Kemp to P. van Rensburg, Dept of Bantu Administration and Development and David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 512.
[37] SAB BAO 2401 31/3/336. Letter from P. Kemp to P. van Rensburg, Dept of Bantu Administration and Development.
[38] SAB BAO 3075 C39/1171/1. Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company. "Stevedoring Labour Units". The emphasis is my own.
[39] SAB BAO 3075 C39/1171/1 "Some notes on establishment, methods and organization of a stevedoring Labor Pool", compiled by Dreyer, assistant manager of the Labor Supply Company, February 1966.

Rethinking Order in the Harbor: Practicing Authority and Constructing Identities

As Lisa Rofel has shown in her study of space and factory discipline in China, local configurations of order often produce interesting and unexpected results for those trying to re-order the space of the factory.[40] In this vein, interviews with stevedores and management about this period produce a rather more nuanced picture of the structures of authority, discipline, and surveillance in the port. While the interviews describe in rich detail the cramped conditions of the compound and the hazards of the labor process, they also reveal the complex relationships between workers and Izinduna and offer some clues to understanding how discipline operated and was produced in the port.

Interviews with members of management reveal the processes of domination that unwrote these systems of representation. Siza Makhaya recalled that the Izinduna enjoyed substantial privilege in the docks, and that their command of authority appeared to be "total".[41] Under a system in which the Labor Supply Company was under no obligation to retain workers, anything that could be construed as ill-discipline was met with dismissal. He also suggested that the Izinduna were popular, almost by virtue of their power and privilege. Hugh Wyatt echoes Makhaya's account, suggesting that within the compound, Izinduna were "like gods", and recognizing their position as indispensable within the labor process.[42] It appeared that a total system had been created, remaking the social worlds of workers. Captain Gordon Stockley, who worked as general manager of the major stevedoring company during the 1980s, added to the account of the conditions of surveillance in the port;

> "… something that I had always been ashamed of; they used to put a rubber bracelet on him [the worker] so that you could identify him, because you had this problem of communication between the management and the worker. You couldn't tell him what to do and you couldn't ask him any questions… When we took a guy on we put a rubber bracelet around his wrist, which was heat-sealed onto his wrist with a number on it. It you wanted to report something, when you were paying something … you would look at the bracelet and see the guy's number. I was always ashamed of the rubber bracelet, because I felt it was very much like slavery, and we stopped it eventually. I asked the workers what they felt about the bracelet. They said "that when we went out on the weekends, we always used to wear long shirts so that people couldn't see our bracelets, because if you went into the

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[40] Lisa Rofel. "Rethinking Modernity: Space and Factory Discipline in China" in *Cultural Anthropology* (7, 1, 1992). Also see Leslie Salzinger. *Genders in Production.* (California, 2003)

[41] Interview: Siza Makhaya, 11 June 2001.

[42] Interview: Hugh Wyatt, 6 September 2001.

township and they saw the bracelet, everybody would know that we had money, they knew that we were working full time". [43]

The manager felt shame for reducing workers to conditions akin to slavery, while workers hid their bracelets because it marked privilege among an impoverished African community. It is in the statement that I believe we find scattered clues towards understanding the more general relationships of authority and the incoherent operation of this system of representation within the port.

Interviews with workers and Izinduna conducted in the early 1980s offer more clues to the conditions of working in Durban.[44] Labor in the cities was a necessity for many of these workers, as conditions in rural areas had worsened. Stevedores spoke of having a home in traditionally Zulu areas, under government control and emphasized the necessities of sending remittances home and the traumas associated with migrant labor.[45] Ntshangase further noted that he lost a potential wife while working away from home.

Stevedoring work was a dangerous and intensely physical operation. Many workers spoke of the accidents they witnessed or they experienced themselves, and of the difficulties associated with handling cargo such as asbestos and manure.[46] Working in gangs appeared to compensate a little for this; both workers and Izinduna emphasized how important the spirit of the gang was in the process of work.[47]

The structures of authority between stevedores and Izinduna were softened by the racial divisions existing in the port. While Izinduna were expected to supervise and co-ordinate the operations from within the belly of the ship, white foremen would remain outside the ship, reading the newspaper. Stevedores spoke of the role of Izinduna as teachers. Ntshangase and Ndebele revealed that it was the Izinduna who trained them in the techniques of stevedoring work. Ndebele noted that the positions of authority on a ship were more porous than the company imagined, having stood in for Izinduna on many

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[43] Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001

[44] These interviews were conducted by Tina Sideris in 1982 and 1983 on behalf of the South African Institute of Race relations. Despite their richness, many of these interviews are unfortunately not as coherent as the archival documents. The other interviews in this paper were conducted by the author between 2000 and 2002.

[45] Interview: Mr July Ntshangase (by Tina Sideris), 19 November 1982. My thanks go to Muzi Hadebe for translating this interview. Interview: Mr Ngcobo (by Tina Sideris) 23 September 1982.

[46] Ngcobo speaks of working directly with asbestos and problems it caused his lungs. Ntshangase claimed that "Carrying bags used to kill us here, when dealing with manure it was tough- it burnt, scalding the flesh from our hands… even the gloves they gave us, are torn apart the day after you have used them". Interviews Ntshangase, Ngcobo, op. Cit

[47] Interviews. Ngema, Ngcobo and Ntshangase.

occasions when the latter were absent.[48] Ngcobo and Ngema became Izinduna after starting as ordinary rank and file stevedores during the period of the Labor Supply Company, and spoke about the contradictory conditions under which they found themselves. Ngema emphasized his role in training workers and the relationships of fear and trust existing simultaneously between themselves and workers.[49] It is also clear that even these Izinduna feared J.B. Buthelezi and the compound Izinduna, although they acknowledged his encouragement of their work. Other workers believed that Buthelezi was responsible for creating divisions within the workplaces.

Dock workers around the globe often regard taking some of the cargo they handled as a legitimate way to gain extra income.[50] Stevedores in Durban suggested many "shortcuts" that gangs used to take in their work operations to reduce the amount of work they needed to complete.[51] Mike Morris, a union organizer in Durban from 1980 to 1985, was even more explicit:

> "Dockworkers are both individualists and team workers. They are highly individualistic in the sense that they bugger off and do all sorts of things. If you walk around the docks you find workers walking around doing their own thing, sometimes getting rid of all the stuff that they have stolen. But they are also team workers, they operate in and rely on a gang".[52]

More guardedly, workers and Izinduna echoed Morris' sentiment, emphasizing their dependence on the gang. They also complained of the way they were randomly searched for stolen goods by police on the docks.

How do we begin to make sense of these fragments of evidence? For one thing, it was fairly clear that stevedores were threatened by the position of Buthelezi.[53] But most of the relationships that developed between workers and Izinduna on ships did not follow a straightforward top-down hierarchical pattern, as the state and the Labor Supply Company had expected they would. It is clear here that both the model of Zulu culture offered by the

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[48] Interview: Mr Ndebele. (by Tina Sideris) 23 June 1983.

[49] Interview: Mr Absalom Ngema, (by Tina Sideris) 17 November 1982. My thanks go to the late Thami Sibiya for translating this interview.

[50] This is commonly referred to as pilferage. Dock workers saw pilferage as a right owed to them, while employers regarded this as criminal. For an excellent discussion of this in various ports, see Linda Cooke Johnson. "Criminality on the Docks" in Sam Davies (ed, et. al) *Dock workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labor History.* (Ashgate, 2000). pp. 721-745.

[51] Interview: Mr Khanye. (by Tina Sideris) 23 June 1983.

[52] Interview: Mike Morris. 28 June 2001.

[53] Hemson presents much evidence for this sentiment of fear and antagonism towards Buthelezi. However he interprets these sentiments as a coming to consciousness of their class position. See Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". pp. 561-574

Apartheid government, and David Hemson's account of Izinduna as repressive agents of class consciousness, are inadequate to speak to the complexities of hierarchy and subjectivity that existed in the port.[54] Far from being able to represent based on clearly defined norms of hierarchy, the process of speaking for others seemed to involve a constant negotiation and renegotiation of the politics of the workplace.

One possible way to approach this would be to suggest a "moral economy" governing the relations of authority in the port. E.P. Thompson's seminal essay used the term to describe the emergence of acceptable norms for the price of bread through the development of relationships between the community and bread sellers in 18th century England.[55] This moral economy could not be understood as following a strict economic logic of supply and demand, defined instead by customs determining a fair price that developed in the marketplace.[56] The problem with the frame of moral economy is that too large a burden is placed on assumptions of "a hidden level of resistance" and on "customarily developed normative obligations". Furthermore, "moral economy" entails a notion of a "pre-capitalist" past existing within a transforming capitalist present. In the docks, reciprocal relations of exchange (for instance of pilfered goods) certainly mediated structures of power, but these

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[54] Anne-Maria Makhulu notes in a parallel analysis of *isibonda* (The Xhosa equivalent of Izinduna) in the Cape that relationships of authority were always constructed through some degree of negotiation. See Makhulu. "Dismantling Homes, Dismantling Apartheid: The Politics and Practice of Squatting in Cape Town:" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2003). pp. 45-92

[55] E.P. Thompson. "The moral economy of the English Crowd" in *Past & Present*, 1971.

[56] A salient example of the conceptual use of the moral economy comes from Peter Linebaugh's study of labor control in the 18th century London docks. Linebaugh presents the case of dockers stealing wood chips from the ships they were working to supplement their income. Despite the development of a disciplinary device known as the Panopticon by Samuel Bentham, a certain master of the port and brother of the famous liberal Jeremy, workers found new ways to continue to steal chips. According to Linebaugh, this was not simply about gaining more income, but instead a moral economy that gave workers the right to appropriate a certain portion of the shipyard for themselves, by virtue of their labor. In the South African context, in a recent study of compound authority in the mining industry, Dunbar Moodie employed this concept to understand the "mutually acceptable rules for resistance within systems of dominance and appropriation", within a highly unequal and constantly contested set of power relationships. Between Hemson's crudely defined class consciousness and Moodie in the historiography lies Charles Van Onselen's early study of Rhodesian gold mines. Van Onselen claims in this work that acts of foot dragging, absenteeism and theft constituted forms of "everyday class consciousness", in which people deliberately upset the operation of capital without being strong enough to formally oppose it. Note that despite its slightly earlier publication date, *Chibaro* is already a step beyond Hemson in the recognition of the fact that if class consciousness existed at all, it could not be actualized in explicit class consciousness. Moodie does away with the notion of class, but retains resistance. See Peter Linebaugh. "Ships and Chips: Technological Repression and the Origins of the Wage" in *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in 18th Century England.* (Cambridge, 1992). pp. 371-401 and Dunbar T. Moodie. *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration.* (Johannesburg, 1994) pp. 86-88, 103-105. See Van Onselen. *Chibaro: African Mine Labor in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1933..* (Johannesburg, 1976).

did not belong to a structure of the past. They instead reflected a politics of a particular moment that was confronted by an idiom of the past, but subverted it by its practices.[57]

Given this, Michael Burawoy's notion of the "politics of production" is useful here.[58] Simply put, this idea rests on the notion that workplaces are social spaces and produce their own political relations, which are specific to the maintenance of order in these spaces, and cannot be reduced to the larger processes of abstract categories such as "capitalism". By examining the games workers play on production lines, Burawoy does away with a search for "resistance", focusing instead on the ingenious manner that workers both resist their objectification at work and contribute to their own subordination.

Recognizing that politics is produced in the workplace should not allow us to forget that significant portions of stevedores' lives were lived outside the production line, both within the context of work and within the structure of the migrant labor system as a whole. Noticing a politics even within the circumscribed sphere of the production line does allow us to go beyond a popular position in South African history that believes that the 1960s was a moment of political quietude, following the outlawing of the organizations fighting for the liberation of South Africa and imprisonment or exile of prominent figures within these movements. I am thus arguing that despite the absence of overt resistance to the state or capital during this period, a local politics existed which was never quite on even footing with major political parties and events, and this politics was significant in construction of the identity of African workers.

Furthermore, it becomes clear that in this concrete realm that the reduction of the identity of the worker to an abstract idea of the laborer, with nothing to sell besides his labor power, misses the complexity of the overlapping structures of domination that constitute stevedores' lives. It seems to me that it also cannot be a choice between "class" identity and "cultural" identity. In privileging one of these categories over another, we forget how these ideas intersect in the concrete realm, themselves ideological products. These modes of representation ("darstellen") lie in an abstract realm that translates a multi-dimensional world

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[57] Any notion of a pre-colonial Zulu past continuing in the colonial period through indirect rule has been shown to be fraught with problems concerning the reconstitution of Zulu authority tied fundamentally to a system of wage labor. See Jeff Guy. "The destruction and reconstruction of the Zulu Kingdom" in *Journal of Natal and Zulu History.* (1996)
[58] Michael Burawoy. *The Politics of Production.* (Verso, 1985)

into a single one.[59] This is not to suggest that stratification and privilege do not exist, but it is to emphasize that in their concrete instantiations, social distinctions are multilayered and historically constituted.

The opacity of technology? Strikes and a new "representative" management

Strikes were not to remain absent from the port forever. The first strike that the stevedoring industry in Durban had seen in a decade occurred on April 5, 1969 over the issue of wages. An economic explanation for the strike may suffice here: For much of the period of the Labor Supply Company, the South African economy had been booming and the turnover of cargo reached unprecedented levels in 1966. The wage structure in the port rested on a basic wage of R6 per week plus overtime. During periods where much overtime work was available, workers gained much of their income from overtime, sometimes earning most of their wages from overtime allowances. The years 1967 and 1968 had seen a temporary slump in the economy, and suddenly workers were earning a great deal less. The government board of wage determinations, regulating stevedoring wages, met in 1968 and decided that no increase would be necessary the following year and that workers should be taxed on any overtime earnings.[60] When this decision was made known, dissent quickly spread through the compound. Without overt organization, some 2000 workers struck work over the Easter weekend, demanding an increase in basic wages and an end to taxation on overtime.

This strike dealt a blow to the illusions of a stable workplace held by private stevedoring companies and by the government. The latter's response was characteristic of the politics of the time.[61] Management of the Labour Supply Company invited police to their meeting with striking workers, and demanded that strikers return to work. They then dismissed more than 1000 workers, with Kemp publicly claiming that there was ample

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[59] I introduce this argument because it seems to me that a veiled economism remains a significant element of literatures that include and extend well beyond South African historiography. There have, of course, been many critiques of economism. The position that captures my own feelings best is suggested by Pierre Bourdieu: "In reducing economy to its objective reality, economism annihilates the specificity located precisely in the socially maintained discrepancy between the misrecognized, or one might say, socially repressed, objective truth of economic activity and the social representation of production and exchange". Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* (Cambridge, 1977). p. 172.

[60] David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and migrant workers". p. 518-520.

[61] Posel suggests that by 1968, the Bantu Administration Department entered its most rigid phase, uncompromising in its implementation of influx control and African labor regulations. Deborah Posel. *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961.* p. 249.

manpower to call on.[62] Ngema recalled how, during the time of the strike, scabs were hired and protected by armed police to ensure work continued in ports.[63]

Committed to its model of workplace control through cultural order, the state representatives in the docks sought to find solutions to the unexpected worker militancy in 1969. They decided that the stevedore workforce was still constituted by too many people from outside traditionally Zulu strongholds, and these people were the elements that caused the strike. In search of control, the Labor Supply Company altered its recruitment pattern, with a marked increase in the numbers of workers from Nongoma and Mhlabathini and the substantial reduction of workers from the Eastern Cape, who were not of Zulu origin.[64]

In spite of the replacement of half of the workforce, strains were already beginning to show in the architecture of control that the Labor Supply Company enforced. While the White press did its best to show that the grievances of 1969 were unfounded, the company officials attempted to ensure that a strike did not happen again.[65] In a tense environment over the next three years, stevedores constantly complained about the conditions of work and the wages. In addition, the myopic dismissal of workers did not help things. Essentially the dismissal was only conceivable because African workers were assumed to be unskilled workers. Because one African was in principle as good as the next, workers could be easily replaced. Practice in the port proved this incorrect: accidents in the port increased dramatically over this time, contributing further to the volatility of the workplaces.[66] After several threats to strike, workers eventually struck work in October 1972. With the Labor Supply Company already in some disarray, police restored order to the port but dismissal was limited. Searching for new strategies of control, and quickly losing the faith of employers, this state organized project of labor control began to show serious fissures.[67]

The strikes are perhaps the strongest part of the evidence that Hemson uses for his suggestion of the re-articulation of class consciousness. Wages were certainly an issue for workers, as many of the interviews attest to, and many recognized that employers did make money off their backs. In suggesting that the reduction to class consciousness is too

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[62] *The Natal Mercury*, 7 April 1969. "Half of Durban's Dockworkers sent home".
[63] Interview: Mr Absalom Ngema, (by Tina Sideris) 17 November 1982
[64] David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 581.
[65] *The Natal Mercury*, 4 November 1972. " 'Mercury' probes dock workers' complaints".
[66] Accidents increased dramatically between 1967 and 1970. David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 534.
[67] Izinduna working on ships did not actively participate in the 1972, but gave tacit support to the striking workers. David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 649.

simplistic an explanation, I would not deny that workers were aware of the economic conditions of their environment, but instead that a consciousness of wages is not equivalent to whatever class consciousness may be.

These strikes resulted in a feeling of unease from both the local companies and the International Shipping lines. Port delays characterized the harbor in the early 1970s, prompting frustration from these port operators. These delays were, in part, a result of the temporary upturn in the economy and the fact that many of these newer workers were ill-equipped to handle increased expectations of efficiency. Even before the 1972 strike, shipping owners suggested that mechanization would solve the problem of port delays, in effect solving the problem of labor supply and control.[68] And they were right, as over the next decade technology would come to the aid of international shipping lines in solving local labor "problems."

It is at this moment that private companies begin to emerge as authors of a new system of representation, independently of the state. While the Apartheid state and capitalist private companies had appeared to collude during the 1960s, or at least had shared common interests in the regulation and supply of cheap African workers, this was the beginning of the end of this relationship in the port.[69] The strikes and shortages of skills had led the company to lose faith in the ability of the state to continue the supply of workers. It was also the period in which gradually the onset of new technologies in the port led to the questioning by business interest in the need for cheap, highly routinized, large groups of workers. Instead, from this period onwards, companies would try to re-orient the workforce towards becoming 'flexible', well trained and in substantially smaller groups of workers. The moment of an older order of industrial work was passing and the struggle for a new dynamic of workplace control was emerging.

Considering this moment also raises the relationship between private business interests and the Apartheid state in constituting capitalism as a whole. While for Marx capitalism appears as authorless, often masking its own agents, in this case at least,

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[68] *Natal Mercury.* 23 Jan 1970. "Mechanization the Answer to Port Delays".

[69] At a historiographical level, it is precisely this moment where Wolpe's assertion of the necessary relationship between Apartheid and capitalism begins to lose validity, ironically almost at the moment of his writing Harold Wolpe. "Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid." *Economy and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1972. These are moments of degradation of work, where it becomes especially clear that the labor of African workers are establishing the producing the conditions for its very destruction. Karl Marx. *The Grundrisse.* (Penguin, 1971) pp. 698-714

capitalism's abstracting tendency was guided along by particular actors. The revolutionizing technology of the container would come to Durban, but its particular reception would not be anonymous. Instead its moment would be one guided by the interests of private capital, operating at local and international levels, both in opposition to the state.[70]

These interests manifested most significantly in the move by Stevedoring Companies in 1973 to employ workers from outside the Labor Supply Company on a casual basis to make up the shortfall of work. A number of newspaper articles between 1969 and 1972 tell of the continual buildup of ships outside the harbor, attesting to the severity of the situation. [71] This caused serious commotion among state officials, to the extent that stevedoring employers were called to meetings of the local Bantu Administration Board and Regional Labor Office to answer for their heresy. The main concern of the state, acting through these two bodies, was not how efficient the Labor Supply Company was, but rather that the employment of casual workers on the docks threatened the entire basis of the migrant labor system.[72] The response from the private companies was predictable: that they could not operate profitably within the limits of the legal restraints. The vague agreement that emerged from these meetings was that casuals could be temporarily employed as long as they were registered with the state, and that these state boards would investigate the possibility of establishing "reserve armies" of African workers in traditional areas should such a crisis arise in the future.[73] This agreement was a critical concession: within a brief period the state officials had turned their backs on an organization they had held for ten years to be the model of Apartheid control.

In practice, neither the registration of casual workers nor "reserve armies" of labor proved particularly realistic. Casual laborers continued to be used to make up the daily excess of work required. The stevedoring companies did not want to employ them on a permanent

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[70] Primary agents on the docks that remain unexplored here are officials of private companies. People such as Gordon Stockley typified many business leaders who expressed discomfort with the efficiencies of Apartheid control and the normative implications of this system. The relationship between local stevedoring companies and international shipping lines is further developed in Bernard Dubbeld. "Breaking the Buffalo: The Transformation of Stevedoring Work in Durban" in Aad Blok & Greg Downey. (eds) *Uncovering Labour in Information Revolutions, 1750-2000*. (Cambridge, 2003). pp. 104-107.

[71] *The Natal Mercury*, 23 January 1970, 20 May 1971, 29 November 1971, 24 October 1972.

[72] Durban Archives Repository (DAR). PNAB Sub Committee on Labour and Transport 2/3/7/1. "Labour Problems: Point and Harbour Areas". Meeting held on 20 November 1974.

[73] DAR. PNAB Sub Committee on Labour and Transport 2/3/7/1. SB Bourquin. "Chief Directors Memorandum: Establishment of teams of Casual workers in the Neighbouring Bantu Homelands". 28 February 1975.

basis, give them accommodation or pay them retainers when there was no work. Bringing in workers from rural areas would have meant these extra responsibilities for companies. From 1969 and 1972 it was also not clear to employers that migrant workers would be especially disciplined or docile subjects. Lacking support from the government, and undermined by private companies the Labor Supply Company dwindled in significance and was eventually closed in 1979.

The undermining of the Labor Supply Company in the 1970s was not simply a victory for the workers. It was certainly a transformation in the management of labor in the port, affected by business interests. Gordon Stockley, the general manager of the largest stevedoring company in Durban suggested that there was a need to destroy the vision of the worker as a pre-modern, "cultural" artifact and produce a new kind of specialized and skilled worker in the port.[74] Casual labor during the 1970s in South Africa was marked by racial discrimination, as the Labor Supply Company had been. With the stark history of racial domination in South Africa weighing on his mind, Captain Gordon Stockley described the recruitment of casual labor in Port Elizabeth during the early 1970s:

> "In my first six months or so, I can remember going down at six one winters morning, and surrounded by guys in big coats smelling of wood smoke because they had been sleeping around the fire. And that morning there weren't many ships. In those days you had six or seven hundred men coming to work in Port Elizabeth, and you would only have employment for half of them. And it was a daily paid thing, so if a guy didn't get his pay at night, he and his family didn't eat the next day. And it was a big joke amongst the foreman when there was surplus labor. They would throw two or three tickets out into the crowd to see the guys fight at six in the morning to be employed. You can understand why he did it, he had a family to feed, he had to do something about it. And I thought 'shit, we've got no future if this carries on'."[75]

While the companies was certainly in favor of allowing African workers to "speak for themselves", Stockley perceived that the Apartheid social context had created an environment under which this system of representation would have been difficult to sustain. To allow stevedores to speak for themselves necessitated the construction of new social landscape in the harbor, one that did not reduce workers to cultural artifacts or pretend that

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[74] The new kind of work suggests that amidst these massive technology, the search for profit by stevedoring companies would take the form of the drive for "absolute surplus value", that is, the attempt to squeeze more work from the stevedores themselves. Interview. Gordon Stockley 25 June 2001. On absolute surplus value, see David Harvey. *The Limts to Capital.* pp. 30-21.

[75] Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

these histories of domination could simply be disregarded. In order to foster its system of representation, these private companies actively encouraged trade unionism.

Organizing Revolution, Organizing Nothing? Trade Unionism on the Docks

African Trade Unions in South Africa were built from foundations often far more radical than their counterparts in Europe and North America. Particular workplace and shop floor concerns such as wages and working conditions provided a platform from which explicitly political organizations were built, challenging the manner in which Africans were exploited both as a race and as a class. These unions rose to substantial prominence by the mid 1980s. Class appeared to provide a language of struggle for many South Africans against Apartheid.

Before 1979, Trade Unions representing African workers were formally illegal, and activists seen as responsible for fermenting workplace dissent faced the possibility of detention and banning orders. Throughout a number of workplaces in Durban and in the major centers in South Africa, the early and mid 1970s had seen the emergence of quasi-union organizations known as wage commissions and benefit funds. Their explicit purpose was to gain remunerative benefits (such as pensions, injury and illness) and investigate the wages African workers were paid in terms of the standards of poverty.[76] More covertly, these organizations sought to politicize the exploitation of African workers and perhaps even to instigate strikes, hoping to raise worker consciousness and ultimately challenge Apartheid and capital. These organizations were run through radical student groups at universities, especially the University of Natal in Durban, the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand. David Hemson, who was to become a prominent scholar by virtue of his research on the Durban docks, was at the forefront of these organizations, and he was investigated by the security police and issued a banning order by the state in 1974.[77]

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[76] For an excellent discussion of the wages commissions and the political motives of the students, see D. Grace Davie. "Making poverty research political: Student Wages Commissions in Durban, 1971-1973" , Unpublished Paper, presented at the History and African Studies Seminar, University of Natal, Durban, January 2003.

[77] Hemson's PhD Dissertation sought to establish the prominence of class consciousness among the stevedores working in Durban, and suggested that the local manifestation of Apartheid was a profound attempt to destroy the militant class consciousness that he argued existed on the docks in the period preceding Apartheid. He asserted that the strikes of the early 1970s were marks of the re-articulation of this sublimated consciousness and confidently claimed that the dockers would play a leading role in the coming struggles against the state and capital in South Africa. On returning to South Africa in the 1990s, Hemson revisited the site and revised his

On the docks, it was clear that the local wages commission had some involvement in the 1972 strike, putting up posters alerting workers to their inadequate wages and encouraging them to strike.[78] Yet to assume that these students activists had significant influence in the organization of the strikes suggests that their organizational language proved convincing to the stevedores. Before evaluating this conclusively, more developed and sustained trade unionism in the port, deploying a similar language of class, should be considered.

Between 1977 and 1981, two trade unions, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) struggled for a limited amount of influence amongst stevedores in Durban. Senior management in the major stevedoring companies did not actively prevent this development, because they believed workers should have the right to choose their representatives.[79] With the decline of the Labor Supply Company, private companies in the harbor attempted to establish new forms of relationships with the workers, hoping to be able to retrain many of them for the imminent technological changes about to remake the industry.[80] This is not to suggest that relations between these private companies and trade unions were smooth, particularly at lower echelons of management. There were a number of recorded disciplinary incidents, and one particular case where a white foreman told workers to collect their wages from the union.[81] By early 1981, these two unions were hardly able to claim anything near majority

thesis. He argued that Containerization had divided workers' organization and unionization, retrenchment had destroyed their consciousness and solidarity, and they were left in a position unable to take up their role in the forefront of the struggle against the state and capital. In short, Hemson now posed an argument of technological determinism. See David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The dockworkers of Durban" (PhD diss. Warwick, 1979) and "The Eye of the Storm" in Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards. *The People's city: African life in Twentieth Century Durban.* (Pietermartizburg, 1994). pp. 162-165

[78] For a University of Natal wages commission document on the stevedoring industry in Durban see University of the Witswatersrand, Fosatu Collection, AH 1999 C3.19.12.1 Wages Commission, University of Natal. Also see Hemson's somewhat exaggerated account of the role of the Benefit Fund in the 1972 Stevedore Strike in David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The Dockworkers of Durban"*, p. 605-670. For an account of student involvement in the 1973 Durban Strike, see Gerhard Mare (ed) *The Durban Strikes 1973 "Human beings with souls",* Durban: Institute for Industrial Education, 1976. p. 69-76.

[79] Stockley recalled his bemusement in the ways that workers choose their representatives. He wished to introduce a secret ballot, which would allow workers to indicate the union of their choice "in private". Workers demanded instead that elections be held through a "show of hands". Interview: Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

[80] Interviews: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001, Siza Makhaya, 11 June 2001. Makhaya commented that many in middle management regarded senior management as taking 'crazy and radical' steps in reforming the workforce.

[81] Wits Dept of Historical Papers, FOSATU Collection AH 1999 C.1.9.12.8.3 Grindrods Discipline

membership in the stevedoring industry, with the SAAWU being able to claim the most members in 1980 of 300 stevedores of a possible 2500.[82]

These unions were not only struggling with each other and with convincing workers of the potential of representation, they were also battling the casualization and retrenchment of the workforce. Neither of the two unions really had significant success in these contexts. It is against this backdrop that a third union, the General Workers Union (GWU) came into the harbor in 1981. Established in Cape Town, this union had grown out of the former Western Province Advice Bureau (akin to the benefit funds in Durban), and comprised a significant number of white intellectuals. The union had organized in a number of industries in the Cape, most notably the meat workers.[83] They had considerable success in organizing stevedores in Cape Town, and following their defeat in the meat industry, they decided to move towards organizing a national union of stevedores. By the beginning of 1981, they had organized stevedores in Port Elizabeth and East London, and sent organizers, led by Mike Morris, David Lewis, 'Rev' Marawu and Di Cooper, all experienced union officials from Cape Town, to establish a base in Durban.[84]

As we have already seen, social relationships structuring authority in Durban were far from straightforward. Durban was the largest harbor, and the only one to have fully developed its own Labor Supply Company during the 1960s.[85] Organizers came to Durban with an established sense of how to organize and represent stevedores and immediately encountered difficulties. Mike Morris recalled an incident where he attempted to call a meeting at the same time as an induna, and nobody arrived at his meeting.[86] The unionists also struggled against the other unions, whom Morris believed were just causing trouble, having no clue about the industry or about unionization.[87]

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[82] Jeremy Baskin. "The GWU and the Durban Dockworkers" in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*, vol. 8, no. 3, December 1982. p. 20.

[83] Mike Morris. "The Stevedoring Industry and the General Workers Union, part 2" in *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 11, no. 5, 1986. p. 101-103.

[84] Interview: Mike Morris. 28 June 2001.

[85] Captain Gordon Stockley emphasized this particularity, having worked at all four major ports in the country. Interview conducted on 25 June 2001.

[86] Mike Morris cited in David Hemson. "Beyond the Frontier of Control" in *Transformation*, no. 30, 1996. p. 89.

[87] Interview: Mike Morris. Organizer: General Workers Union, 1981-1985. 28 June 2001. Worker testimonies bear this point out, suggesting that SAAWU and TGWU made promises that they could not keep and did nothing for them. See interviews with Khanye and Ntshangase, op. cit. Yet the claim that other unionists did not "understand" bears out an important particularity in 1980s South Africa— Many white academics became directly involved in workplace politics, and claimed, based on their training, to "know" how to organize workers.

The organizers struggled with workers. The workers also struggled with the idea of another trade union, and suggested that the unionists were "whites and Xhosas meddling in our affairs."[88] Yet the dockworkers did eventually gain some faith in the union. Ntshangase explains his conversion to the union and the joy of having his decision vindicated:

> "They said 'Mr. Ntshangase, we are not fighting with you, but we plead with you to join the union.' I left them and told them 'fuck you, I won't join you- you are fooling us'. I went away… I slept, I had a dream and my grandmother from my fathers side called me… she said that go and join the trade union that is going to be very useful in future… The following day I returned and joined the union… then I fell ill and was diagnosed as diabetic… I went home. I asked for two months and it got worse. When I came back at the beginning of 1982 I discovered that the compound manager [Siza] Makhanya had removed my name because they did not know where I was and they told me there is nothing they can do for me. I went to the union office the next day and showed them my membership card and explained that I went home because I was sick but now I'm told I have been removed here, he understood and phoned Makhanya and we went to see him the following day… I went back to work and realized this trade union was a real trade union."[89]

Other workers spoke of their difficulties with accepting the union initially, and that the sheer determination and achievement of the union ultimately convinced them to join. Their interviews reveal that this was the first time that management discussed retrenchments with the workers, that the General Workers Union broke their perceptions that "a white man can never help a black man", cut through the divisions of authority between the Izinduna and the stevedores and that they managed to increase both wages and the opportunities for work.[90]

All these achievements were genuinely remarkable given the dual contexts of the 1980s in the Durban harbor: an industry that containerization had "by the throat" and a workplace still reeling from the stark racial and ethnic categories of Apartheid.[91] The General Workers Union managed, at least for a moment, to alter the terms of this context. In an industry in which African workers had formerly been simply dispensed with, without any compensation, until at least 1981, the union helped establish both due process for retrenchment and compensation based on the length of service.[92] Furthermore the union

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[88] Mr. Khanye: Stevedore in Durban. Interviewed on 23 June 1983 by Tina Sideris. University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers Collection, SAIRR Oral History Project #51.

[89] Interview: Ntshangase. Op. cit.

[90] Interviews: Khanye, Ndebele, Ngema. Op. cit. Also see *The Daily News*. 23 December 1982." Wage increases for Stevedores"

[91] Interview: Les Owen, Industrial Relations Manager, South African Stevedores, 1980-1984. 6 June 2001.

[92] Interview: Captain Doug Dudley, Branch Manager, South African Stevedores, 1975-1984, 20 August 2001.

fought casualization in port, establishing a guaranteed system of work rotation that both limited retrenchment and attempted to safeguard unfair allocation of employment through a system of favors.[93] Part of the success of the union was undoubtedly due to the liberal attitude of managers such as Stockley, who by 1982 was in charge of the South African Stevedores, the company that handled almost all of stevedoring work in Durban. This liberal attitude was part of a change in the identity of private companies that sought to create a new kind of stevedoring industry that aspired to survive containerization. In order to achieve this, a new worker had to be created— highly skilled, flexible in operation which whom the company could communicate.[94]

Retrenchments and the eventual collapse of the guarantee system notwithstanding, are these sufficient grounds for claiming that the union was successful in *representing*, that it managed to create a coherent political discourse that stevedores could relate to and follow? Unfortunately, at least in this context, this was not the case.[95] This is borne out in two related ways: the first lies in the subtle identification of the union in the language of the workers, the second in the dissolution of the General Workers Union in 1985.

Worker interviews conducted in 1982, when the union was probably at its strongest, show them speaking very fondly of the union and its successes in altering the character of workplace relations in the harbor. Yet embedded in this admiration was the persistence of discussing the union as something foreign, as emanating from outside the workplace itself. While workers discussed the Labor Supply Company as a negative organization, they discussed the union as a positive institution, but never suggested that the union belonged to them. They were pleasantly surprised that white people actually assisted Africans, they were delighted that the union forced the company to recognize them as people, but there was

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[93] Interviews: Owen, Stockley, Morris. Stockley gestured towards the masculinity of the entire workplace, suggesting that "the guys running the GWU- Lewis and Morris- were certainly not patsies… they fought like hell against retrenchment."

[94] One way of thinking about this would be to discuss the birth of an information age worker and the necessity of the company to destroy the vision of the African worker as a pre-modern, cultural artifact. This is the sense that Stockley conveyed in his interview. Interview Gordon Stockley 25 June 2001.

[95] This is different from accounts in mining and steelwork that suggest the success of trade unionism in the 1980s. This is surely related to both different organization strategies and to those workplaces being slightly less fraught by the immanence of capitalist re-organization and their potential destruction. Yet the analytic tensions implicit in the two senses of representation are not dealt with in these studies. See Ari Sitas. "African worker responses on the East Rand to changes in the Metal Industry, 1960-1980". (PhD diss, University of the Witswatersrand, 1984). Dunbar Moodie. *Going for Gold*. Karl Von Holdt. *Transition from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa*. (University of Natal Press, 2003)

never a sense in which the union belonged to them. One of the key union organizers in the harbor, Mike Morris reflected on the failures of his model of representation:

> "The *problem* with the majority of guys was that they were rural and didn't really *understand* the purpose of a union. There was always confusion between union structures of power and tribal structures. It was highly problematic, and there was always this interesting tension, and it taught me a lot, between dealing with tribal structures and union structures, but there was literally no way around it."[96] (my emphasis)

This became all too clear in 1985. Wave upon wave of retrenchments hit the industry, and the guarantee system collapsed. Morris and other unionists spent their time negotiating retrenchments. Demoralized by this, they left the stevedoring industry and the General Workers Union merged with the larger Transport and General Workers Union whose presence in the port had ended in 1981 but which had made large strides among workers in other transport sectors. With the commitment of a union who had specialized in this industry gone, retrenchment increased substantially over the next five years.[97] What quickly became clear is that the stevedores had not become leaders of the organization, or understood or been entirely seduced by the very local political discourse of the General Workers Union. This discourse had failed perhaps most significantly in its creating a shared understanding and language of workplace struggle. This was not because the workers were too rural or incapable of understanding this language; it was due to the failure of the union's engagement with the multiple social imaginaries of the migrants, imaginaries formed in relation to the context of particularly South African version of containerization.

As it existed in the docks, trade unionism was over-determined from the start by the different meanings it evoked for the various participants in the port. In the first instance, trade unionism was encouraged by "liberal" business interests, as a mechanism for allowing workers to speak for themselves as individuals during a period of massive restructuring and retrenchment. Secondly, trade unionism had the potential of becoming a "community" for the group of stevedores working in Durban, an expression of their own changing lives. Finally, the predominately white trade unionists from outside the workplace understood it as a mechanism for the realization of theoretical and political ambitions. This latter group

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[96] Interview. Mike Morris, Organizer, General Workers Union, 28 June 2001. Gordon Stockley noted in my interview with him the case of workers refusing secret ballots in the election of shopstewards. He attributes this to the workers wanted to establish a direct connection between those elected and those who supported them. Interview. Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

[97] *Natal Mercury*, February 18, 1985. "600 Durban dock workers to lose their jobs".

proceeded from their own container: that of an understanding of "class" as a sufficient analytic to explain the stevedores' lives and to transform society.

At least one of the many problems of this approach to political organization has been discussed by Spivak in her "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value".[98] Her reading of Marx's analysis of the production of value suggests that many scholars have imposed a "continuist chain" on the formula of value creation (Labor is transformed into value, represented by Capital). She maintains that this imposition means that the creation of value becomes a unidirectional, historically given phenomenon that negates the role of use-value in mediating the social worlds of laborers. She argues that such an approach merely produces a metonymical understanding of value, where the western account of the transformation to capitalism is privileged as the genuine account of the workings of capital, the subject is reduced to mere labor power, and the international division of labor is ignored. The idea that a use-value, produced out of the social worlds that the workers themselves inhabit, is constantly relevant to the production and reproduction of capitalism has direct implications for the political scene of the Durban harbor. Proceeding from an analysis that understood the actual worlds of stevedores as "problematic tribal structures" and suggesting they were "too rural to understand the purpose of the union", the unionists failed to recognize the use-values from which stevedores constructed their social worlds. Spivak captures the distance between political activist, grounded in "theory" and the political subject:

> "Between metaphor and metonymy, symptom and desire, the political subject distances itself from the analyst in transference [The white trade unionist, for instance!] by declaring an interest by way of a "wild" rather than a theoretically grounded practice."[99]

Migrant Identity and the politics of emasculation

Neither class nor ethnicity had proved sufficient containers to describe the social worlds of stevedores. The other descriptive mechanism for describing the stevedores, casting the worker as a "rational, individual subject" was also put to the test during the early 1980s. A striking example lies in one of the more interesting innovations to the industry that both the union and the company tried to implement. In 1983, South African Stevedores commissioned a study of the compound conditions in the harbor. As I have already

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[98] Gayatri Spivak. "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value" in *Diacritics,* 1985, pp. 155-175.
[99] Gayatri Spivak. "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value", p. 174

established, these compounds were intended as spaces of the intimate control over workers during the days of Labor Supply Company, and their conditions left much to be desired. Liberal Management saw these compounds as relics of the past they wished to move beyond— Stockley had a vision of stevedores living in self-catering units near the harbor and riding a bicycle to work every day.[100] Much to their and the unionists' surprise, dockers recommended that the compounds be retained, provided that they be cleaned up and each person provided with a bed and secure space to store their possessions. [101] Ntshangase states his position as a worker with rhetorical poignancy:

> "I would love it if my family came to stay with me [but]… in rural areas we have cattle and my wife is looking after all that, if she came here who would be left in charge?".[102]

As James Ferguson has shown in Lesotho, cattle remained valuable for migrants even when this made no explicit economic sense. He argues that the symbolic value of cattle inhered in masculine control over productive and reproductive spaces in the homestead, and despite an inability to sustain these beasts, male migrants were loathed to sell them.[103] The imaginaries of stevedores did not reside merely in creating better conditions of work. Indeed, by the early 1980s, many stevedores imagined returning home if retrenched or when they retired.[104] These expressions cannot have been uttered without a sense of complication: these men came to work in Durban because their rural lives were unsustainable.[105] As a mode of life, however differently it may have been practiced from the conceptions of the Apartheid planners, migrant labor had become inscribed in the lives of these stevedores.

Certainly by the 1980s, then, the politics of production exceeded the specific bounds of the workplace, indexing two fraught social worlds. Of course, to confine the understanding of workers to their specific workplace was never sufficient. In a completely different context, one not so imminently threatened by its own destruction, Jacques Rancière has argued that to recapture the politics and subjectivity of the workplace we need to look to

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[100] Interview: Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.
[101] Lawrence Schlemmer (et al) *Future Dwelling Preferences of Hostel Dwelling Migrants: A study of the housing needs of stevedores in the Durban metropolitan area.* (executive summary). Also Les Owen, senior industrial relations manager of South Africa Stevedores, interview with the author, 6 June 2001. I must thank Les Owen for providing me with this document.
[102] Interview. Mr Ntshangase by Tina Sideris, 19 November 1982
[103] James Ferguson. "The Bovine Mystique" in *The Anti-Politics Machine.* (Minnesota, 1990)
[104] Interviews: Ntshangase, Ngema by Sideris.
[105] Workers attribute the reasons for working Durban variously as the need to sustain their parents, the need to buy cattle for bridewealth or simply because their lives in rural areas could no longer feed their families. Interviews: Ntshangase, Ngcobo, Khanye by Sideris.

the dreams of the laborer that go beyond his own immediate working life to imagine a different existence.[106] The imaginations of the stevedores in the 1980s profoundly recognized the changing order of industrial labor in South Africa and spoke less to a progressive conception of a world beyond work then to an affirmation of a secure place outside the collapsing regime of industrial work.

Rich scholarship has been produced about migrant identity in South Africa. In the 1960s, Philip Mayer argued that the South African urban environment was a site in which African subjects can be conceived of as "men of two worlds". These two identities can be understood as replicating a difference in the rural landscape of the Eastern Cape; a division between migrant workers schooled in mission education and those retaining a strong sense of "tribal" allegiance. While the former category of workers integrate well with urban life, the latter remain "encapsulated" in the cultural identity of the town and can be considered as conservative. In Meyer's model, these two worlds reside in different individuals, it is not a tension that existed within each worker, but rather within the landscape of different workers in East London. Jean and John Comaroff stress dual conceptions of the social worlds within the consciousness of a migrant laborer. They point to a distinction that Tswana migrants made between domestic work within the community and urban wage labor; the former as being a site of self-creation within the community, the latter as being destructive force in their lives. Dunbar Moodie suggests instead that migrant labor forms a bridge between these different worlds and argues that it is not useful to conceive of two competing forms of identity. Because his study emphasized the manner in which the workplace itself is a site of the production of identity, he resists the idea that the Tswana conceive of the workplace merely as a site of destructive and alienating wage labor. Moodie's analysis does not deal with the domestic space, focusing squarely on the contested and creative site of the workplace. This is certainly an important move, akin to my discussion of Burawoy above. Yet I would argue that the domestic sphere remains important, and that to dismiss it as a competing site of social production misses its influential role in migrants lives. Indeed for scholars such as Wolpe and Meillassoux, capitalism depended on the reproduction of particular relations of authority in the domestic sphere. To these arguments I would merely add: migrants were

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[106] Rancière pours scorn on the idealization of the workplace as the only site of struggle in the lives of French artisans. He speaks of their aspirations as poets for a world beyond. Jacques Rancière. *The Nights of Labor: The workers' dream in 19th century France.* (Philadelphia, 1989)

men of multiple, incoherent and overlapping worlds and that certain sites of social imaginaries were privileged contextually; for instance, what it meant to emphasize urban life for a young migrant in the 1950s was based on the possibilities of constant work inherent in that space, possibilities that were different for an older migrant in the docks in the 1980s.

Migrant Labor, then, reproduced itself uneasily between two modes of existence.[107] The collapse of this system in the mid to late 1980s across South Africa ushered in a new crisis of social reproduction, especially for the predominately African male workforce across South Africa. The patriarchal control of the mythical rural household unit began to collapse, and as communities resorted to rituals to find some form of employment, it became clear that something had profoundly changed in structures of South African social life.[108]

The evidence from the stevedoring industry in Durban is suggestive as an early example of wider patterns of this crisis: it was a language that the white Marxist trade unionists in the docks did not care to speak or understand. Perhaps, for all their theoretical training, they could not have learnt it.

Conclusion: Breaking Containers?

Over the last decade, South Africa has appeared to stand on the edge of a "new world". Politically, one of the most organized systems of social repression collapsed and a liberal democracy was brought to life, promising profound new opportunities for people to represent themselves. Economically, the country has been faced with a neo-liberal crisis of the restructuring of work that has led to the loss of almost a million jobs in the public sector. What does it mean, in this context, to represent people? What are the effacements that the liberal model of the "rational, individual subject" introduces into the dynamic social worlds of these former migrant laborers?

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[107] Migrant Labor, it could be argued existed as an ideological system for many South Africans. Recalling Žižek, "Ideology is not the dreamlike illusion that we build to escape unsupportable reality: in its basic dimension it is a fantasy construction that serves to support our reality itself… the function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us social reality as an escape from trauma". The collapse of migrant labor, has, ultimately, been incredibly traumatic in post Apartheid South Africa. See Slavoj Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology.* (Verso, 1989). p. 45.

[108] Ngwane has problematized the stability of paternal control over the household even during the Apartheid period, when the return home for Christmas was a moment of the expenditure of different commodities within a ritual for control over domestic space. Zolani Ngwane. "'Christmas Time' and the Struggles for the Household in the Countryside: Rethinking the Cultural Geography of migrant labor in South Africa" in *Journal of Southern African Studies* (29, 3. 2003). Hylton White "Ritual Haunts: The Timing of Estrangement in a Post-Apartheid Countryside" in Brad Weiss. *The Crisis of Social Reproduction in Africa* (Duke, Forthcoming)

The narratives of control over stevedores and their responses to these controls have revealed that the attempts at representing workers failed in a profound sense. In a shifting historical landscape, social containers, whether realized through the harsh forms of Apartheid control or through the "liberation" offered through class consciousness, did not adequately capture the multiple social existences of those working in the port. Yet the physical container remains unbroken: if nothing else, it represented the end of a system of the circulation of illicit goods in a harbor, a manifestation of a larger "moral economy" that depended not on "pre-capitalist" forms of circulation, but was produced out of a particular historical moment. This was a container that could not be broken, and yet its mere presence masked the social relations that existed (and surely continue to existence) beneath the imposition of epistemological containers that homogenize these conditions and forget the complexities of ideology that underwrite any social world. This has been a preliminary attempt to suggest the importance of understanding the construction of meaning and subjectivity in practice of politics, and to demonstrate the politics of dramatic technological change in Durban's harbor.