

Histories of Empire, Nation, and City: *Four Interpretations of the Empire Exhibition, Johannesburg, 1936*

Cati Coe

On September 15, 1936, the Empire Exhibition opened in Johannesburg, South Africa. One and a half million people passed through its turnstiles during the four months it was open, and schoolchildren traveled by train from all over southern Africa to see the exhibition. Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Johannesburg's founding and the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand (otherwise called the Rand or Reef), the Exhibition presented a narrative of civilization and technology. It displayed various marvels, including exhibits of minerals, diamonds, and postage stamps; a rock garden; a replica of Victoria falls; an animal zoo; and a model of the Rand. Other attractions included a Jubilee parade, an ice rink, a cinema, musical performances, and a pageant presenting South African history.

This international fair, taking place in the colony rather than the metropole of Britain, was part of a tradition of international exhibitions dating from the 1850s. Scholars have argued that world's fairs are hegemonic public displays sponsored and financed by private corporations, the social and economic elite, and local and national governments. In effect, world's fairs construct the organization, harmony, and unity of the city, nation, or world through their layouts, exhibits, and entertainment, glossing over class-based and racial inequalities.

However, as I investigated the meaning of the Empire Exhibition within its social and historical context in South Africa, I began to see divergent representations of the Exhibition in the South African press more interesting than the event itself. Although world's fairs are organized to tell a particular narrative, newspapers in fact told multiple stories about the event, highlighting various angles, commenting on different symbolic elements, and variously interpreting the

representations because they had different “imagined communities” as their readerships (Anderson 1983). Scholars have argued that world’s fairs are displays of strength by those in power (Rydell 1984; Greenhalgh 1988), yet newspaper portrayals of the Empire Exhibition sometimes underscored or undercut that display by ignoring or highlighting different aspects of the fair. The event sponsors themselves could not control the variety of historical narratives produced in response to the fair’s version of the past.

Contemporary newspaper accounts reveal that the Empire Exhibition’s representational fixing of history opened up discursive battles over that representation, rather than closing it off once and for all; in other words, they demonstrate the ongoing contestatory nature of hegemonic projects.

This paper explores three different narratives of progress that emerge from newspaper coverage of the Empire Exhibition, as well as one critique of those narratives. One representation of history was generated by the speeches of the various officials of the British empire, the South African Commonwealth, and Johannesburg governments, who were all white men born and raised in Britain.¹ Their speeches were part of the opening ceremony, and they saw the Exhibition as an instrument to promote trade and union throughout the British Empire. A different interpretation of the Exhibition’s significance in history was given at the Women’s International Conference, which took place during the week of November 7, in the midst of the Exhibition. The speeches by white women defined progress in terms of women’s rights and envisioned the conference as promoting the international exchange of ideas—rather than goods—among women. The speeches by government officials and by the women’s conference attendees focused on visions of international cooperation and union and were reproduced in the pages of two newspapers, the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Times*, whose readers were the white English-speaking community in South Africa. Both newspapers were owned by the same syndicate, were heavily influenced by the British journalistic tradition, and promoted loyalty to Britain and the Empire (Hachten and Giffard 1984). The *Sunday Times* was published weekly; the *Rand Daily Mail* was published six days a week. Both were written entirely in English.

The third narrative of progress appeared in the black, middle-class South African press, which presented the Empire Exhibition as

a celebration of Johannesburg's fiftieth anniversary. This concentration on the "local" allowed writers for the *Bantu World* to stress black contributions to the growth of Johannesburg as a city. Their history emphasized the black labor that built Johannesburg and asserted that whites were coming to recognize that blacks deserved a greater share in the wealth for their labor. (No doubt this narration was meant to be read ironically, since the legislative acts of the previous two decades had increasingly disenfranchised blacks, dispossessed them of their land, and made them unwelcome in cities.) The *Bantu World* was founded in 1932 by Bertram F. G. Paver—a white ex-farmer and itinerant salesman—with the help of the liberal establishment (Switzer and Switzer 1979).² Fourteen months later, it was taken over by the British-owned Argus Company, one of the strongest presses in the country and one that had close ties to the mining industry. Twenty-five hundred copies of the *Bantu World* were sold each week in 1935, although the total circulation was estimated to be 5,700. The *Bantu World* was a medium for the elite section of black society—the middle class who were educated in mission schools, urbanized, and working in professional jobs such as nursing and teaching. Virtually every member of the black literary elite wrote for this newspaper. Published weekly, the *Bantu World* was written in six languages: English, Afrikaans, SiXosa, SiZulu, SeSotho, and Sechuana.

Finally, in its newspaper *Umsebenzi* (*The South African Worker*), members of the predominantly black South African Communist Party criticized these narratives of progress by comparing the representations of the Empire Exhibition to "reality": the living and working conditions of blacks.³ They also criticized the British Empire for not fulfilling its promises: according to the paper's writers, the fault of imperialism was not in its discourse of barbarism and civilization, but rather in its promotion of war and its refusal to share the benefits of civilization with blacks. *Umsebenzi's* circulation in 1937 was 4,500, and the newspaper was aimed almost solely for a black audience. Published weekly and decidedly pro-labor and anti-colonialist, it was written in the same six languages as the *Bantu World* and in the language of the mines, Shangan.

The disparate newspaper accounts of the Exhibition speak to black and white segregation, a situation that was being institutionalized by various legislative decrees during the inter-war years. During the

Depression of the 1930s, government attention was focused on poor whites, primarily Afrikaners, who were migrating to the city and who were unskilled except as farmers. Blacks were also migrating to the city in huge numbers because the Native Land Act of 1913 had prohibited black ownership of land outside of specific areas. The 1920s and 1930s were a time of increased segregation and loss of black rights. The four narratives generated by the presses in response to the Empire Exhibition, as well as their representations of black participation in the fair, were all part of a larger debate that resulted in—but certainly did not end with—the rise of the white, conservative Nationalist Party, the institutionalization of Apartheid in 1948, and independence from the British Commonwealth. Reports of the Empire Exhibition present dramatic testimony to the institutionalization of segregation, as the newspapers forged group identities and community memories for their separate readerships (cf. Fentress and Wickham 1992), eliding certain aspects of the Exhibition and focusing on others.

Here, I am arguing for the role of the press—as “the public sphere’s preeminent institution” (Habermas 1993:181)—in constructing community and commemorative history.⁴ In 1936, in South Africa, newspapers presented radically different versions of the Empire Exhibition, and with it, conceptions of the world. They organized different narratives of the past, constructed social memories for different groups, and thus helped create a variety of imagined communities for different public spheres. However, these representations relied on the same tropes: history primarily meant progress—from barbarism to civilization and from disorder and division to unity and peace. Because the difference between barbarism and civilization was defined through “culture,” representations of black expressive culture were crucial to these narratives of progress. As V. Y. Mudimbe has pointed out, European representations created an Africa that, in the Western imagination, served as a mirror to Europe’s past (1994). Yet the same objectification of the past and cultural traditions could be appropriated and glorified to defend African communities against Western incursions, just as peasants in Europe appropriated elite representations of folk culture (Bausinger 1990). Thus, although the tropes of progress, civilization, and unity governed political discourse in South Africa’s public sphere during the Empire

Exhibition, these words took on different meanings for each newspaper and community. The representations discussed here were discursive negotiations over the meaning of empire, nation, and city, responding to the images seen at the Empire Exhibition and the fair's hegemonic project.

Official Histories: The *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Times*

The opening ceremony of the Empire Exhibition began at 3 p.m. on Tuesday, September 16, 1936, with speeches by officials of the British Empire and the South African and Johannesburg governments. The ceremony took place in the main arena in Milner Park, the site of the Empire Exhibition.⁵ That day, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that 10,000 people were gathered in the arena. Between 5,000 and 6,000 people listened to the speeches on the loudspeakers on the grounds, and the speeches were broadcast by the BBC in London and throughout the British Commonwealth. Furthermore, sections of the speeches were reprinted in the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *London Times*; parts of the speech by the Governor of South Africa, Lord Clarendon, were reprinted in the *Bantu World*. Clearly, these speeches circulated quite widely.

Unity and peace became synonymous with trade and empire in the officials' speeches. The Empire Exhibition's purpose, according to these speeches, was to stimulate trade between the various parts of the British Empire, thereby promoting unity and peace throughout the world. By bringing together various officials and displays of technology, the Exhibition was an instrument for promoting mutual trade and common interests. Furthermore, cooperation was a mark of civilization in a world threatened by war, and the speechmakers portrayed the British Empire as a model for peace and unity. The officials placed the Exhibition within an international context in which Europe was of primary importance. According to the official speeches, through internal development and international trade, nations could work together for their mutual benefit—all under the umbrella of empire. As Carol Breckenridge has pointed out, international exhibitions promoted an imagined community that was global and transnational, while nurturing nation-states that were seen as highly culturally specific (1989). Within these speeches, likewise, nationalism and colonialism were linked together neatly. The event expressed unity,

cooperation, peace, and industry for both the Union of South Africa (the nation) and the Commonwealth (the Empire). This conflation of the good of the nation and the good of the empire was directed rhetorically by the English-speaking Empire supporters to Afrikaner nationalists.

Eight speeches were made in all, although not every one was represented in all the newspapers. The *Rand Daily Mail*, the *Sunday Times*, and the *Bantu World* quoted Lord Clarendon as saying, "The interests of all in South Africa are identical—peace, security, and freedom to develop our countries and our mutual trade." Mr. J. A. Lyons, Prime Minister of Australia, and Mr. G. M. Huggins, Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe)—both quoted in the *Rand Daily Mail*—also stressed "the bonds of trade and commerce" in keeping together the British Empire and in ensuring world peace ("Empire Pageantry," 16 Sept. 1936:12).⁶

Although "empire" was valued by these officials, so was "nation." Both the mayor of Johannesburg, Mr. Maldwyn Edmund, and the Chairman of the Exhibition, Major C. C. Frye, focused less on the Commonwealth than on the cooperation of all the towns in South Africa that had contributed displays, exhibits, and sponsorship. They also portrayed the Exhibition as a celebration of Johannesburg's Jubilee anniversary and its gold mining industry; these things knit together the nation and were an incentive for trade within the unity of empire.

Where did black South Africans fit into these visions of union? Many, after all, worked in the "peaceful pursuit" of mining; during the 1930s, they had migrated in large numbers to Johannesburg, increasing the city's population. Furthermore, the city's land was originally theirs. However, the black South Africans that the *Rand Daily Mail* and *Sunday Times* highlighted as Exhibition participants were "native war dancers" and seventy "Bushmen" who were housed in a "a properly designed Bushman camp" in the lower end of the grounds ("S. A. Scientists to Meet," 2 June 1936:15; "Empire Pageantry," 16 Sept. 1936:14). These two groups received a great deal of media attention in the English-speaking press and none at all in the black, middle-class *Bantu World*.

Assuming that these representations and histories by the white English-speaking press were primarily directed at whites, how did

images of the San “Bushmen” and war dancers justify whites’ moral right to benefit from the inequitable distribution of land, wealth, and political representation? After discussing the variety of “Bantu races,” a writer in the *Sunday Times* ended an article on the Empire Exhibition by saying that “Of these races, probably only the Bushmen could claim to be ‘aboriginal’ inhabitants of this country” (“200 Dance in Arena,” 27 Sept. 1936:11). According to this history, “Bushmen” were the most primitive of African peoples and the original inhabitants of the land. When contrasted with “the most primitive” blacks and representative urban blacks (male mine-workers and servants) engaging in “traditional” entertainment, the white audience could consider itself comparatively more civilized.

Thus, the newspaper writers constantly reminded readers that the San and the war dancers were “primitive.” The very wonder and lack of comprehension with which the newspaper reports reacted to black performances and actions emphasized the moral, cultural, and spiritual distance between whites and blacks and justified legislation that would promote the institutionalization of that distance.

Organizers of the Empire Exhibition expected the Bushman Camp to be of interest to scientists, especially anthropologists (“S. A. Scientists to Meet,” 1936:15). However, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that the Bushman camp was quite popular among ordinary visitors: “The chants of the dancing Bushmen at the lower end of the grounds drew many people there to marvel at these primitive people, and at the truly extraordinary configuration of their womenfolk” (“Medley of Hundreds,” 16 Sept. 1936:14). On October 5, 1936—a holiday—the Empire Exhibition was very crowded, and in an article the next day, the *Rand Daily Mail* noted that “a big queue outside the Bushman Camp made even slower progress than that outside the diamond exhibit” (“100,000 Holiday Crowd,” 6 Oct. 1936:10). The paper also commented on the visit of the San to the British pavilion. Members of this aboriginal group received a great deal of attention in the English-speaking white press, but only a certain kind of attention: that which emphasized their wonder and fear in the face of the British Empire’s technological prowess and their veneration for its authorities (such as Lord Clarendon and King Edward). Here, the San became tourists to the modern mechanical wonders elsewhere in the Exhibition:

Some of the British Empire's most primitive subjects saw a bust of The [illegible word] Sovereign yesterday when the party of Bushmen at the Empire Exhibition visited the British Pavilion. Their reaction to King Edward's bust was interesting to watch. The men all clicked in garrulous astonishment. Two of the women began to dance and beat their hands together in supplication. This was their idea of pleasing the "White King." Captain Barnes, who is in charge of the Pavilion, seemed a little surprised at the manner in which the Bushmen showed their emotions. They were frankly afraid when, on entering, they saw first what looked like a real sky above their heads. It was the model of the northern hemisphere's stars on the roof of the Pavilion. They were really terror-stricken when the shooting lights of the great map on the floor of the Pavilion began darting this way and that to indicate the routes followed by British aeroplanes. The parts of the Pavilion they understood really well were the model motor cars. ("Bushmen See British," 10 Nov. 1936:10)

When Lord Clarendon visited the Bushman Camp to watch them dance on November 9, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported, "The Bushmen crowded round Lord Clarendon in their most comical fashion, giving their clicking salute, while the women held up their babies for the 'Big Chief' to admire" (10).

This encounter between "a primitive people" and "civilized technology" fascinated the official press. Clearly, these newspaper reports do not permit access to San perspectives on the Exhibition, especially since the reporters did not understand their language. But the reporters' lack of awareness was more than linguistic; the extent of their ignorance is suggested by the fact that a baby was born to one of the women on December 10, 1936. The birth was a surprise to Exhibition organizers and the press, who had not been aware that the woman was pregnant.

While San were portrayed as primitive in their roles as spectators, the official newspapers also highlighted African performances as primitive. An article about "native war dances" in the *Rand Daily Mail* described the rehearsals and performances, highlighting features of exoticism and traditionality:

Hundreds of specially selected and trained natives—Zulus, Shangaans and Mchopis—dressed in traditional war-dance regalia, will shout and stamp their feet to the accompaniment of “timbaldas” (native pianos) in the Empire Exhibition arena to-night. Blazing camp-fires aided by search-lights, will heighten the effect. (“Great War Dance,” 26 Sept. 1936:16)

This article also reported that some of the dancers were mine workers while others were “ordinary house and municipal boys.” The *Sunday Times* described the performance:

Two hundred Zulus in goat skin warrior outfits [*sic*] danced in the camp firelight last night to an attendance of 10,000 at the Empire Exhibition arena. They cantered and stamped to the shrill blasts of their leaders’ whistles and the clamping together of pieces of wood by a section representing the tribes’ womenfolk until their bodies shone brightly in the searchlights on the savage scene. The sparks and dust rose high, and the crowd were loud in their applause. The thudding tomtoms and wailing buffalo horns of Tshangaans and emphasis to the dance. (“200 Dance in Arena,” 27 Sept. 1936:11)

The dancers thus revealed their own purported lack of civilization by re-enacting war—actions made even more barbarous given the context generated by the peace-promoting speeches that opened the exhibition. For both papers, it would seem, the war dances were an expression of a “savage,” “ancient,” and “wild” culture, performances in which the dancers—urban blacks—were showing their true heritage. (Ironically, the performers could very well have interpreted their dances differently: they could serve as indication and proof of a distinctive past, a heritage equal to that of white “civilization.”⁷) Directed by Belgian producer Andre Van Gyseghem, these “native war dances”—advertised as “The Real Africa”—were presented at least three times at the Empire Exhibition in 1936: on September 26, November 13, and November 28.⁸

This was not the first time the dances had been performed in a context that changed their meaning. Veit Erlmann discusses the domestication of war dancing (*ingoma*) in South Africa between 1929 and 1939, noting its transformation from “a militant, oppositional,

and suppressed form of popular culture to a tourist attraction” (1991:96). Although Durban’s Native Welfare Officer and mine owners organized *ingoma* dances during the 1930s, Erlmann argues that these officials still treated the dances as potentially subversive whenever they involved the display of allegiance to a traditional chief. (This allegiance probably was not performed in the *ingoma* dances at the Empire Exhibition, given their Belgian artistic director.) As these displays began to be officially organized throughout the 1930s, dancers changed their performance dress to more “traditional-looking” clothes, as we see in the Empire Exhibition performances: animal skins, spears, and shields.

One can interpret the media representation of “native war dancers” and “Bushmen” at the Exhibition by placing it within broader discourse about the place of blacks. Official narratives saw black expressions of culture as rural and primitive because they viewed urban blacks as temporary sojourners in the cities, with true homes in rural areas. The only black expressive culture represented by the white English-speaking press was that which fit most easily into the dichotomy of white civilization and black primitiveness. In this schema, education, urbanization, and “civilization” were viewed as threats to black “culture.” The very “primitiveness” of the cultural practices presented was also proof of and justification for the lower status of blacks within South African society. The representation of “primitiveness” for a white audience at the Empire Exhibition and in the press therefore justified segregation, at the same time that the presentation brought blacks and whites together within the same space.

Women’s Conference Accounts: The *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Times*

The Dominions Conference of the National Council of Women, which met in the conference hall on the Exhibition grounds, also offered an international interpretation of the Empire Exhibition. This interpretation, however, differed significantly from that espoused in the Exhibition’s opening ceremony. According to the women’s conference, the Dominions and Colonies of the British Commonwealth were united not by trade in goods, as the opening speeches of the

Empire Exhibition stressed, but by trade in ideas. The speeches and writings at the conference argued that women would unite the world through their universal interest in the care of the next generation. Here, peace was promoted by common concern, not commercial activity.

The Dominions Conference was held during the second week of November 1936. Visitors included delegates from Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Southern Rhodesia, and East Africa. The theme of the first day and the keynote of the entire week was “Woman: Her Position Nationally and Internationally.” Discussions were also held about “women’s issues”: “The Children of the Dominions,” “The Bantu People,” “Public Health,” “Social Service,” and “Education.”

The National Council of Women produced a brochure for the conference that argued that women promoted civilization’s ideals in the world. It bolstered this argument by comparing women to South Africa’s white settlers who had colonized the land, discovered gold, and displaced black people. Reprinted in the *Rand Daily Mail* (10 November 1936), the brochure depicted the “pioneers in spirit and deed” of the bygone days as “shackled”—not those blacks who were denied political franchise at the time. Using white (and primarily male) South African history as a model for emancipation, the brochure also overlooked the everyday conditions of black women. They were discursively elided in other ways as well.

While the National Council of Women, according to the brochure, was an organization for all women “irrespective of the shackles of race, creed and party,” the brochure and the speeches during the conference located the organization within an uneasy, contradictory space. Lady Clarendon opened the conference with a speech in which she stressed that the British Commonwealth of Nations and the International Council of Women both led “towards the blessed ideal of unity and humanity” (“N. C. W. Blazes New Trails,” 10 Nov. 1936:6). On the second day of the conference, the Dowager Lady Nunburnholme (leader of the British delegation), Mrs. Bertha Solomon (Member of Parliament), and Mrs. Tawse Jolly (first woman MP in Southern Rhodesia), traced the development of feminism. In her speech, Ms. Solomon reportedly observed that feminism was a “force for peace” and “a counterpoise to the military spirit, which, once set alight, might destroy civilisation” (“No Real Equality,” 11 Nov. 1936:18).

How were black South African women included in the idea that women's equality with men would lead to a more peaceful, civilized world or that global sisterhood among women was parallel to the sisterhood of dominions and colonies within the British Empire? The contradictions became more obvious during the course of the conference. In a letter to the *Rand Daily Mail*, a Mr. R. E. Evison heard that three "native" men were going to address the National Council of Women and that the Conference was going to be entertained by "the Native Club." He wrote: "May I ask if the National Council of Women advocates social contact with this mass of natives or whether it recognises that it has a grave responsibility to the white women of the city, who feel that it is necessary to keep all this native life as far away as possible from themselves, their daughters and their homes?" (Evison 1936:18). Clearly, for Mr. Evison, feminism had a responsibility to white women only. Ms. E. T. Mehliiss responded to Mr. Evison in a letter to the *Rand Daily Mail* the next day, defending the Council's plan by explaining that the proposed speakers were to be black women:

The meetings of the National Council of Women, of which I am a humble member, were carefully planned to give our overseas delegates a comprehensive view of South African life. Can it be contended that such a broad view should have left out our native people entirely? The three natives who are to address the Council are not men, as might be inferred from the letter in question, but women leaders of the Bantu folk, who are to give their points of view on questions of public interest as they affect their own people. If Mr. Evison cares to attend, I feel sure that he will be surprised at the standard of intellectual attainment reached by those few native women who have had education and opportunity. (Mehliiss 1936:14)

After discussing why she does not fear blacks, she closes the letter with a call to action: "Let us abolish some of the vexatious laws that make criminals out of well-meaning natives[,] give them better housing, more education, and recreation for their spare hours, and we should soon see a vast diminution of native lawlessness and crime." In spite of these sentiments, eventually three white women gave speeches about black life and the inequalities black women faced. It

is unclear whether Ms. Mehliiss was mistaken in her view that black women would address the conference, or whether there was a change of plan due to internal controversies or external pressures. It is also possible that three black women did address the conference at some point, but that their speeches and presences were not reported in the white English press. (This possibility is unlikely, however, since the black, middle-class press did not report any such presentations.)

On November 13, the *Rand Daily Mail* did quote extensively from the speeches given by the three white women. These women used this opportunity before an international white audience to denounce blacks' political and territorial disenfranchisement. Mrs. Kuper gave an address "on the position of native women in primitive society." She stressed the economic independence of women and the way they were valued on the reserves. Mrs. W. G. Ballinger's speech was entitled "The Problem of Race Contacts." She said that the fight for equal rights for black South Africans had been a losing battle, because "the essence of the native policy since 1913 had been one of separation. The Lands Act had provided for territorial segregation and the Franchise Act for political separation." The remainder of the talk's summary is illegible on the newsprint, although she appears to assert that the Cape government had previously recognized equal rights for blacks and whites. For her part, Mrs. J. D. Rheinallt Jones suggested that the outlawing of *lobola* (bride payment) by missionaries had hurt black women. The article features Reinallt Jones's discussion of discriminations facing Black women:

If they married by Christian or civil rites their position was exactly the opposite to that of European women. Without an ante-nuptial contract, they did not have community or property. [. . .] Other disabilities of native women were: Night pass regulations in many parts of South Africa; the restrictions to their freedom of movement which made it difficult for them to sell their labor in the best market; the lack of the vote even in the Cape. ("Position of Women in Primitive Society," 13 Nov. 1936:16)

Many of the laws the women mentioned—the pass laws, the lack of suffrage, the removal of townships—were obstacles for black South

African men as well as women. Surprisingly, the South African white English-speaking press was willing to reprint or summarize these speeches for the newspapers' readers.

However, these speeches were not unequivocally emancipatory. White women, considered to be experts on "the Native" due to their acts of charity, spoke for black women. While using the conference as a platform to stress the lack of political representation for blacks, the women also enumerated the benefits of black "traditional" culture. Mrs. Kuper, especially, concentrated on blacks living in the reserves, as if urban blacks were indeed a temporary phenomenon. By romanticizing black rural and "traditional" life, the speakers seemed to support the segregation of whites and blacks, since "civilization" imposed by white people only harmed blacks. Because they associated civilization with whites, the speakers were caught between the alternatives of glorifying black "primitive" cultural practices or glorifying "civilization," which, in other sources such as the conference brochure, were primarily associated with white women and white pioneers. According to the discourse and practices of the women's conference, then, black women were not part of the grand efforts of women around the world to establish peace, unity, and civilization.

Middle-class, Urban Black Versions: The *Bantu World*

From the *Bantu World*, a newspaper for urban black South Africans, one gets a very different sense of the Empire Exhibition. Writers to the *Bantu World* saw the Exhibition as a celebration of Johannesburg's history, rather than an event uniting the Commonwealth or women around the world. By stressing the city's history, they were able to assert their contribution to the rise of Johannesburg and their own identity as "city people"—cosmopolitan, cultured, and civilized. These histories were able to grow more assertive as each re-telling became part of the public transcript. As James Scott has suggested, the public display of one act of defiance (even masked defiance) can encourage others (1990). The first editorial in the *Bantu World* that narrated Johannesburg's history stressed the contributions of blacks to the growth and prosperity of the city. The portrayal of the mining industry and of Johannesburg's development was a romantic one:

In joining the chorus of the praises showered on the men who made the Rand possible, "The Bantu World" would like to draw the attention of its readers to the fact that the Africans played no mean part in the building of Johannesburg. It is certainly the creation of the white man's brains, but no sane man can deny that without the black man's brawn the city would not have grown so big and have become so wealthy and prosperous. "The city's marvelous growth and expansion," says Mr. Graham Ballenden, manager of Native Affairs, "has been almost entirely dependent on the prosperity and development of the Reef gold mining industry." When one remembers that this industry could not have been developed without African labour one realises the important part which the Africans have played not only in the romantic growth of the city but in the development of South Africa as a whole. ("The City We Have Helped to Build," 3 Oct. 1936:8)

Though the editor stressed the important role black South Africans played in Johannesburg's progress, that role was limited and particular: "It is the men behind the Jackhammers who have enabled the pioneers to create the glory and splendour which we see around us to-day." Further, within a spirit of cooperation and unity, there is also hierarchy of labor. The cooperative labor of whites and blacks in building Johannesburg

proves the fallacy of the policy of differentiation and show [*sic*] how black and white need each other in every sphere of human activity. The pyramidal dumps—the man[-]made hills of the Rand—are a living monument of the co-operative action of the white man's brain and the black man's brawn. ("The City We Have Helped to Build," 3 Oct. 1936:8; his capitalization)

Through the hierarchy of brain and brawn, creator and enabler, the editorial justified the unequal distribution of wealth while simultaneously drawing attention to the productive work blacks have done for the city. However, by inscribing blacks into Johannesburg's progress towards the sky, the writer did attack the segregationist policies of the white South African government.⁹

Two weeks later, a letter to the *Bantu World* was written by Walter M. B. Nhlapo, a regular writer for the newspaper. He focused on the

contributions of Africans to the growth of Johannesburg, and on that basis also attacked the segregationist policies that sought to drive blacks from the city (Nhlapo 1936:16). Perhaps as a result of the editorial and letter, the Mayor of Johannesburg, Maldwyn Edmund, sent his greetings to the black community in Johannesburg, thanking it for "playing its part in the building up of the city." While this message appeared in two different issues of *Bantu World* (first on the front page, then on the last page), it was neither printed nor mentioned in the *Rand Daily Mail* or *The Sunday Times* ("Mayor's Message to Africans," 31 Oct. 1936:1; "City No Longer University of Crime," 7 Nov. 1936:20).

An article accompanied the second printing of the Mayor's message in the *Bantu World* that told a different history of Johannesburg, one in which white people had progressed enough to recognize the contributions of blacks. The narrative's development warrants the reproduction of most of the article here:

There was a time when Johannesburg was described as "the University of Crime." . . . In those days Johannesburg, although it could not dispense with his labour, did not regard the African as a human being with the same feelings, desires and aspirations as Europeans. . . . Consequently [the African] could only live in Johannesburg as a servant and on condition that he obeyed the orders of every white man, woman and child. He was kicked about in the streets and not allowed to walk on the city's sidewalks. In the courts of law no magistrate would believe his story against that of the white man. He was hemmed in by repressive laws and regulations such as the pass laws and was therefore at the mercy of the Police. No one then troubled about him so long as he supplied his labour and enabled the white citizens to amass wealth, live in comfort and enjoy Africa's endless sunshine. People thought he had a home somewhere where he could enjoy life and develop along his own lines, forgetting that several cities and towns were built on the ruins of the black man's "Kraals." While Johannesburg's white citizens lived in comfort on the ridges in sumptuous palaces among their beautiful gardens that could not have been made sumptuous and beautiful without the labour of the black man, the Africans in their thousands were working underground, "hammering holes into the rock for

dynamite charges” in order to extract gold on which the very existence of Johannesburg depended. In spite of Johannesburg’s cruelty, the Africans went on hammering holes into the rock in the mines, digging the ground to lay the foundations of the city’s skyscrapers, making the roads and streets so as to enable the white man’s motor cars to run smoothly and working in the kitchens in order that the city’s white citizens could enjoy life. . . .

Johannesburg has since 1921 happily changed its attitude towards the Africans. As it grows towards the sky, it has become conscious of the fact that the African has made a notable contribution to its phenomenal growth and to its commercial and industrial development. It has also discovered that the black man forms an integral part of its civic life, that he has feelings, desires and aspirations as members of the other sections of its cosmopolitan population and that he has come here to stay. It is no exaggeration to say that there is no city in the Union which has become keenly interested in the welfare of its African citizens as Johannesburg. . . .

Now that Johannesburg has become the University of Interracial Goodwill one entertains the hope that the liberal spirit which permeates the life of the city will continue its function until the Africans feel that their contribution to the building up of the city was not made in vain. So far they are grateful for efforts that are being made to improve their living conditions but they are looking forward to the day when in recognition of their contribution they will be offered the freedom of the city. (“City No Longer University of Crime,” 7 Nov. 1936:20)

Thus, the writer inscribes a different story of progress on Johannesburg. Although the depiction of Johannesburg as “the University of Interracial Goodwill” is more than a bit overstated, such a move is rhetorically useful. By locating white exploitation of black labor in the past within a narrative of progress, the writer is able to criticize that exploitation.

Furthermore, this narrative allows the writer to make political demands. He or she clearly shows that blacks cannot return to rural areas; the author also claims that white people have become “progressive” enough to appreciate that blacks deserve greater material benefits—“freedom of the city”—as due compensation for the contributions blacks have made to white residents’ own prosperity.

However, by concentrating on miners—exclusively men—as contributors to Johannesburg’s progress, black women and their labor were left out of every history printed in the *Bantu World*.

The *Bantu World*’s representations of black performances at the Empire Exhibition also reinforced a self-image of blacks as contemporary urbanites. The black Exhibition performers (both men and women) mentioned in the *Bantu World* were already famous among blacks in urban areas, including Johannesburg. Mr. Griffiths Motsieloa and his Darktown Strutters had made several tours of South Africa and were the most famous minstrel troupe of the time.¹⁰ They performed comedy routines and dramatic sketches. The Merry Blackbirds Orchestra—formed in 1932 with Peter Rezzant as leader and modeled on Glenn Miller’s orchestra—was the elite big band orchestra in Johannesburg, playing American ragtime, swing, and jazz. The group often backed minstrel companies and played for a variety of middle-class social and organizational functions. Members of the Merry Blackbirds, including Emily Motsieloa (Griffiths Motsieloa’s wife), J. C. P. Mavimbela, Steve Monkoe, and Enoch Matunjwa, had daytime jobs as teachers, clerks and social workers in order to keep their passes to the city. David Coplan attributes their popularity to their “non-African” style: “Good music readers, they avoided African musical influences and achieved the highest social status of any black band” (1985:131).

The performances of these musicians were highlighted in the *Bantu World* and were not discussed in the white press at all. The former reported, “In the Amusement Park at the Exhibition a variety theatre known as Morris Wax’s Show Boat will have the following artists taking part for 17 weeks:—Mr. G. Motsieloa (stage manager), Darktown Strutters, Merry Black Birds Orchestra and other artists” (“Who’s Who in the News,” 12 Sept. 1936:4). At the exhibition the Darktown Strutters also performed *Up from Slavery*, a musical historical play that later toured the country. A 1937 article concluded,

Lovers of up to date dramatical and snappy items will have the pleasure of hearing and seeing that great historical musical play [that] was seen by thousands at the Empire Exhibition at the Show Boat Theatre amusement park by these artists:—“Up from Slavery.” It should be as educative as it is interesting and should

be seen by both young and old. (“Who’s Who in the News This Week,” 27 Mar. 1937:17)

This play probably treated the African-American experience rather than that of South Africans. *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington’s autobiography, “was one of the most popular books read by South African blacks and an edition had even been published within South Africa by a local publishing firm” in 1958 (Couzens 1985:84 fn7). The name of the Exhibition theater—“Show Boat”—also had meaningful social resonances. Paul Robeson—who performed the song “Old Man River” in the musical *Show Boat*—was an important role model and hero for black South Africans as a black musician who had achieved success (Ballantine 1993).

Yet, the *Bantu World* said nothing about the *ingoma* dancing and San village that fascinated the white press. Educated, urbanized middle-class blacks had contradictory feelings about *ingoma* dances. Coplan explains the ambivalent feelings of urbanized middle-class blacks about expressions of “traditional” culture:

Educators . . . were caught between pride in their cultural nationalism and their feelings of cultural inferiority. . . . In practice, though, when elements of African polyphony or performance practice crept in they treated it as a failure to assimilate “civilisation” and as an example of retarded cultural development. They also viewed miners’ traditional dancing [*ingoma*] as part of the government’s attempt to portray Africans as primitives unworthy of equal rights. (1985:118)

Writers for the *Bantu World* chose to highlight urban elite performances that they saw as “modern” rather than those that both they and the white press regarded as “primitive.”

Why, then, were representations of African-American experience and traditions valorized? A passage from Rob Nixon’s chapter on the connections between Harlem in New York and Sophiatown, a Johannesburg township of the 1950s, may help to lessen the sense of incongruity and to place “Show Boat” and “Up from Slavery” within historical context:

Above all, it was swing, the blues, and jazz—Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Bessie Smith, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington,

Satchmo—that took root and inspired, helping South Africa’s most scintillating performers—Miriam Makeba, Dolly Rathebe, Hugh Masekela, and Abdullah Ibrahim—grow cosmopolitan in Sophiá. As Todd Matshikiza testified, some of the mission-educated musicians had internalized a disdain for African forms. Yet ironically, it was the African undertones in Ellington and Count Basie that increased their appeal to South African performers. Peter Rezant, for instance, recalls how “I liked Duke Ellington; I liked his music because it always had that African sound, that sound of a fellow coming across the veld playing this concertina underneath his blanket, repeating this thing for a long time and also humming there: hmmmmm, ummmmmmm.” Thus certain local performers who felt ambivalent about African music found it more alluring and acceptable when it returned in a transmuted, transatlantic guise. (Nixon 1994:12–13)

Coplan confirms this connection: “Despite status competition, black American performance helped to unify urban African culture. Because it was Western but not white, it provided a model for culture change more closely related to the African heritage and better adapted to the reality of segregation” (1985:133). As Erlmann demonstrates, communication and mutual interest between black South Africans and African-Americans dated back to Orpheus McAdoo’s tour of South Africa during the 1890s (1991). Thus, middle-class black South Africans, by adopting and adapting the musical styles and cultural performances of African-Americans, were able to claim for themselves a civilized, urban and *international* identity that was nevertheless “black.” The *Bantu World*’s focus on black performances at the Empire Exhibition supported the paper’s histories, in which black people were part of city life because of their contributions. Precisely because of their civilized status—marked, in part, by performances that integrated African-American styles and stories—blacks deserved to partake of additional fruits of civilization that whites had exclusively enjoyed.

South African Communist Party Response:
Umsebenzi (The South African Worker)

Another narrative of progress emerged in *Umsebenzi (The South African Worker)*. This Communist Party newspaper consistently sought to undermine other histories of the Empire Exhibition and social

relations in South Africa. The writers to *Umsebenzi* regarded the Exhibition as a blatant manifestation of imperialism and militarism, and they often contrasted the vision that the Exhibition presented with “reality.” For instance, one article began by describing the Jubilee parade in which a float showed blacks in a wonderful house and ended with a description of “actual” living conditions in the black townships around Johannesburg (“Johannesburg’s ‘Golden Jubilee,’” 10 Oct. 1936:3).

The paper therefore used the Empire Exhibition to criticize precisely what the Exhibition explicitly aimed to promote: the British Empire. In a critique of Navy Week at the Exhibition, *Umsebenzi* printed the following: “The Navy Week, glorifying imperialist war[,] has been held in order to prepare the minds of the general public for the support of the acquisitive aims of S. Africa and to strengthen the feeling of Empire support among the nationalist people of S. Africa” (“Navy Week at the Exhibition,” 24 Oct. 1936:2). *Umsebenzi* argued that the Exhibition was not a force for peace and unity, but rather an instrument of war and imperialist propaganda.

However, its main criticism of the Empire was that it denied blacks “civilization.” For instance, in a September 1936 article titled “Of the Exhibition of Human Beings in Cages,” the paper condemned the Bushman Camp at the Empire Exhibition, in part because it demonstrated that the South African government had refused to give the San the benefits of civilization:

The Johannesburg City Council has sunk so low as to exhibit the last relic of Bushmen society in an arena into which are thrown sweets and oranges which are greedily scrambled for by these men and women. The S. African government has hounded these people out of their homes in the Kalahari desert where they eke out a difficult and miserable existence; it has refrained from taking the civilising influence of hospital, school and machinery to the lives of these primitive but delightful people, but can afford to bring them to Johannesburg to-day where men may make fun of their charm in order to make crude profit. (2)

This writer of *Umsebenzi*, like the writers of the white English-speaking newspapers, viewed the San as a primitive people. The only difference is that he or she would have liked the San to enjoy the benefits of civilization (schools, hospitals, and machinery), whereas

for the white English-language press, the maintenance of black people as “primitive” justified their exploitation.

The editors and writers of *Umsebenzi* criticized the British Empire for denying its subjects—both the San and factory workers—“a free, happy, and civilised life” (“The Empire and Its Subjects,” 31 Oct. 1936:4). Civilization and its fruits were ideals for the South African Communist Party as they were for the other newspapers; however, unlike the white English-language press, the writers for *Umsebenzi* considered those ideals to be attainable by all.

Conclusion: Histories of Progress and Representations of Black Popular Culture

The narratives of the Empire Exhibition presented here are only a fraction of the popular discourses of the time. They were, however, those that constituted the public transcript of various communities in Johannesburg; the hidden transcripts and alternative histories were discussed in more private locales, among trusted confederates (Scott 1990). It should be clear that these representations of progress and of black participation in the Empire Exhibition were part of larger discourses about the place of black South Africans in the world, within South Africa, and in Johannesburg. In fact, I would argue that it is impossible to understand these interpretations except in relation to one another: they spoke to and argued against each other, even though each inhabited its own space. At a time when blacks were being increasingly segregated and disenfranchised, the exhibition of black “primitive,” “traditional” culture at an international fair justified the argument that white and black communities should be separate and that blacks should be excluded from political and economic power—even as they suggested the possibility that “traditional” culture was equal to “civilization.”

The white women who spoke at the Conference of the National Council of Women compared the status of black women in “traditional” culture to that of “civilized” white women. Urbanization and “civilization” were seen as detrimental to black women’s status. However, the speakers did emphasize the impact of political disenfranchisement on blacks in the previous twenty years. For them, perhaps, the glorification of black “traditional” culture went hand in

hand with the struggle for black political rights. Their desire for political inclusion of blacks corresponded to their charitable organizations in which blacks and whites worked together, but in which, ultimately, whites spoke for and in place of blacks.

Middle-class urban blacks sought to build for themselves a civilized, cultured identity in order to justify their argument that they deserved political rights and a greater share in the rewards of their labor. By stressing their contributions to the building of Johannesburg, the editors of and writers to the *Bantu World* made an argument for their right to remain in the city. By adopting and transforming African-American cultural forms, they were able to create an urban, international identity through which they could also speak—obliquely or overtly—of their own experience of oppression. Furthermore, through African-American music and performance styles, they were able to synthesize “traditional” and “civilized” styles and create cosmopolitan self-presentations.

However, the black urban identity in these representations looks distinctly male. Although black women were living and working in and around Johannesburg, the writers stressed the contributions of black men, especially miners, to the growth and prosperity of the city. The *ingoma* dancers were also men, and they presented a view of “traditional” culture that focused on male performance skills. Only in the Bushman Camp did the women receive attention, but that attention was in the form of amusement at the shape of their bodies. The most striking oversight of black women occurred at the Women’s Conference. Although the Women’s Conference did draw the attention of foreign and South African delegates to the difficulties black South African women faced, those difficulties were publicly catalogued by white women. If black women spoke at all, their speeches were not reported in the white English-language or black presses. Furthermore, in order to glorify their cause, the brochure for the Women’s Conference compared feminists to white pioneers who built Johannesburg and South Africa. Although these publications placed black South African men differently within certain historical narratives, black women were placed consistently on the sidelines or ignored entirely.

All four narratives—those by white males, white females, middle class blacks, and black communists—made mention of the same

tropes: peace, unity, and civilization. These same words had different meanings within each narrative of progress: unity, for instance, could refer to the British Empire, cooperation between Afrikäners and white English-speakers, sisterhood, or the cooperative work of blacks and whites in building Johannesburg. *Umsebenzi* argued that peace, as the Exhibition represented it, was really war. Images of unity can express special interest rather than the inclusion of all, as Susan Davis has suggested (1988); however, expressions of unity can also be used by those in subordinate positions to claim their right to inclusion. The ability of words and symbols to have variable meanings within different contexts allowed different communities to make their desires and viewpoints known through the discourses of the dominant—within the public discourse of these newspapers.

Thus, although its organizers had hoped the Empire Exhibition would impress visitors with its vision of technological and “primitive” wonders, alternative narratives of history were generated through and against its public display. By means of historical narration, the newspapers for the different communities in South Africa fashioned competing representations of themselves and others out of the same material. Tropes were appropriated and given different meanings, thus allowing all these newspapers to participate in a common political discourse about progress even as they represented the Empire Exhibition, and history itself, very differently.

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Notes

¹Language for discussing people in South Africa (and other places too) involves political choices. Apartheid delineated categories for people with words such as

“Kaffir,” “Native,” “Bantu,” “Coloured,” “European,” and “Asian.” The terms changed over time, as proponents of Apartheid tried to present it as a positive entity to the international community. During the 1930s, before Apartheid, the terms “African” and “European” were the polite and respectful words to use, and “Native” was considered derogatory by blacks (Coplan 1985). “European” is the synonym for white in South African usage. All these terms appear in the documents I quote. I will use the terms “black” and “white,” however. “Black” refers to both “African” and “Coloured” people, according to the common usage among blacks in South Africa rather than the official white terminology. Furthermore, the term “black” hearkens back to the international Black Consciousness Movement. Lastly, the term “black” recognizes the felt solidarity between black South Africans and African-Americans.

²Specifically, Paver was helped by J.D. Rheinallt Jones, editor of *Bantu Studies* and part-time lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand; James Howard Pim, an accountant and one of Johannesburg’s city councilors; and Charles Maggs, a Pretoria businessman linked to the mining industry.

³In 1928, according to the *Communist International*, membership in the Communist Party of South Africa was 1,750, of whom 1,600 were “natives or coloured” (Kuper 1971, quoting *The Communist International* 6/2 (15 December 1928):58). However, Phillips (1977 [1938]) said that “Native membership in the Communist Party is negligible” (69). Official discourse treated Communist Party organizing as the result of white (especially foreign) agitators, thereby denying that black South Africans desired changes or had agency.

⁴Those who attended the Empire Exhibition no doubt formed their own interpretations and retained their own memories of the event, as ethnographic studies make clear. These memories might take the form of mementos or physical, bodily experience (Noyes 1992). One woman reported going to the Exhibition in new shoes and felt a great deal of pain after walking around so large a complex (“A Day at the Empire Exhibition,” 21 Nov. 1936:11). Schoolchildren who traveled to the Exhibition from elsewhere in southern Africa probably remembered the discomforts of train travel, the fatigue of walking around the Exhibition, and sleeping in a dusty and dark campground (*Sunday Times*, 4 Oct. 1936:30). We cannot assume that visitors came away with national or imperial sentiments (Bendix 1992), but the bodily recollections that were perhaps more vivid and real to participants did not become part of the written record nor were they articulated in such a fashion as to shape interpretations of the Empire Exhibition and its place within South African history.

⁵Milner Park was named after Lord Milner, Britain’s viceroy after the Boer War (1899-1902), who restructured the republic according to a British model.

⁶The emphasis on peace in the speeches was enhanced by certain symbolic images. As the Governor-General finished his speech, declaring the Empire Exhibition open, a flock of 1,200 doves was released from the 150 foot Tower of Light.

⁷It would be interesting to examine how *ingoma* (war dances) fit into larger trends of using historical military heroes (such as Shaka) to generate pride in African culture. The Inkatha Party, for instance, has employed these techniques in more recent times (Golan 1994).

⁸Andre Van Gyseghem was a Belgian socialist who came to South Africa to be pageant master for the pageant of South African history at the Empire Exhibition. When he saw the Bantu Dramatic Society rehearsing *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1936, he offered to produce either *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones*, or *Stevedore*, but these were by "rejected [by the Bantu Dramatic Society] on the grounds of not being sufficiently genteel." In 1938, he produced O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, translating the American slang into an African idiom of English. He encountered huge problems finding a suitable hall for the performance. Van Gyseghem stressed "the grave dangers of imitation" and urged black producers and writers "to preserve national culture" (Couzens 1985:176).

⁹Although the editorial is unsigned, it (and the second editorial) may have been written by R V. Selope Thema, who was the editor in 1935.

¹⁰Griffiths Motsieloa, born in 1896 in the Cape, had studied elocution in London and was a former Kimberley teacher. Twice he went to London to record with Singer Gramophone Company (Coplan 1985; Couzens 1985). Other well-known members of the Darktown Strutters were Johannes J. Masoleng, famous for his tenor voice, and Petrus Qwabe, famous for his comedy routines.

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