

**Literacy, social identity  
and difference  
in Newtown and Bellville South**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
in the Department of Afrikaans and Nederlands  
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN  
August 1997**

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UT 439.36 MALA

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ABSTRACT  
Literacy, social identity and difference  
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Liezl Malan

This dissertation uses ethnographic material to critique South African adult literacy policy. Recent policy documents, I show, identify people who lack six years of formal schooling, and particularly people in this position who are also classified as blacks, women and people in rural areas, as being in a deficit position. Not only are they regarded as illiterate and therefore having a technical deficit, but policy documents also describe their "illiteracy" as a marker of their social deficit as marginalised people. Policy makers argue that the deficit attributed to adult literacy target populations can be effectively redressed through formal literacy interventions.

I indicate that policy makers' arguments are based on interpretations of statistics that fail to reflect the complex forms of literacy and the multiple social identities of people in the "target population" and also on a theoretical approach to literacy and which dichotomizes the cognitive, social, cultural and linguistic attributes of "oral/illiterate" people and those of "literate" people.

I present my critique of policy arguments from a perspective which conceptualises literacy as practice by looking at the ideological and discursive contexts within which different literacies acquire meaning. My argument is based on my ethnographic research in two areas that have been targeted for literacy interventions. Between January 1993 and February 1994 I conducted depth interviews and documented my observation of social practice in Newtown, the coloured area of Fort Beaufort, a town in the Eastern Cape. Between February 1994 and May 1995 I conducted similar research in Bellville South, a coloured suburb of the city of Bellville in the Western Cape.

I have shown that people in the two areas who lacked formal literacy did not necessarily have a technical deficit, since they made extensive use of what I have called embedded literacies and used a variety of literacy strategies that enabled them to engage with literacy practices. I have also argued that people targeted for literacy interventions shift between deficit positions and authoritative roles and thus cannot be described simply as consistently marginal and suffering from permanent social deficits. Everyday contextual shifts in people's orientations to literacy, I have furthermore shown, are a result of structural changes in location and of discursive shifts. The effect of technical literacy interventions is a consequence of, rather than a precursor to shifts in people's social positions.

Liezl Malan  
Cape Town, South Africa  
August 1997

# Acknowledgements

This thesis is the product of the labour and commitment of many people besides the author, and I wish to express my gratitude to them. (The people and institutions named are not necessarily listed in order of priority).

## Academic

I wish to thank the people of Newtown and Bellville South who not only allowed me in their neighbourhoods and in their homes, but also generously shared with me insights into their lives. Kobus Bohnen of Fort Beaufort and Lizzie Erasmus of Bellville South played particularly important roles in shaping my understandings of these areas.

Dr Andrew Spiegel contributed greatly to my understanding of ethnography through his thorough and enlightening supervision of my thesis. The interpretation of my research was shaped through many hours of verbal and written discussions with him.

Prof. Henning Snyman supported and inspired me as supervisor through his literary reading of the narratives on which the thesis is based. I am also grateful to him for the bursary I secured through him.

Prof. Mike Prins of the Department of Afrikaans, University of Fort Hare used his personal research grants to enable me to conduct my research in Newtown.

The Department of Adult Education and Extra Mural Studies at the University of Cape Town gave me the opportunity to continue my research in Bellville South as part of the Social Uses of Literacy project initiated by Mastin Prinsloo.

The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development (HSRC, South Africa) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this work, or conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

## Personal

Roy de Vos has been my faithful companion on this demanding journey. In him I have seen what it means to "tame the tiger" of the mind.

My father, Charles Malan, has through the years cultivated my interest in social research with great care and commitment.

Finally I wish to thank all those family members (particularly my mother and brothers) and friends who have encouraged me to complete this task and who have kept love in their hearts for me.

## Note on language, names and characters

Afrikaans is the language spoken in both the areas where I did my research. I have translated all quotes used but include the Afrikaans quotes as footnotes. I recognise however that the translations often do not capture the full meaning of the Afrikaans texts.

My first language is Afrikaans. I am grateful to Dr Andrew Spiegel who has greatly assisted me in expressing myself in English in this thesis. However my language use may still differ at places from that of a first language speaker of English.

I have referred to all racial classifications in lower case (eg. "coloured" instead of "Coloured") for consistency and to indicate that I perceive these classifications as socially constructed.

I used pseudonyms for the people I interviewed.

In Appendix 1 I listed all the characters that I refer to in alphabetical order under headings. I supply brief biographical details of each person as well as page references.

## Chapter 1

# Introduction: Perspectives on adult literacy policy in South Africa

### 1. Summary and aims of the thesis

My aim in this thesis is to present a critical perspective on adult literacy policy in South Africa. I base my critique on an ethnography of two residential areas whose residents would form part of the target population for adult literacy intervention, as identified in South African policy documents. I started to question the assumptions of adult literacy policy in my encounter with the people of Newtown, my first area of ethnographic study. Newtown is the historically 'coloured'<sup>1</sup> area of Fort Beaufort, a small town in rural Eastern Cape. My fieldwork was continued in Bellville South, a historically 'coloured' suburb of greater Cape Town. My ethnography of these two areas is presented as a critique of adult literacy policy.

I focus my initial analysis on the relationship between three aspects of South African adult literacy policy. These are: firstly, the assumptions of policy makers about *development* through literacy intervention; the way in which policy makers identify the *target population* for adult literacy intervention; and the way in which policy makers conceptualise *literacy*. Through analysis of ethnographic material I aim to show that development, the identities of people targeted for adult literacy intervention, and what counts as literacy, are complex issues with no self-evident relationship between them.

I argue that people targeted for adult literacy interventions have multiple social identities and cannot simply be identified by means of singular social

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<sup>1</sup> Briefly, the term 'coloured' was used in the apartheid era in South Africa to identify as a population group those people who could neither be classified as european or african (I discuss the concept at length in chapter 4). Under apartheid law, 'coloureds' and africans had to live in separate areas from europeans/whites.

and urban or rural residence.

In chapter 2 I use a description of my personal history of coming to terms with the problems of literacy intervention in order to trace the academic and intervention discourses on literacy which have shaped my present understanding. I discuss in this chapter the approaches of development agencies and intellectuals who perceive literacy as the positive side of a social dichotomy. My own position in this study is situated against the backdrop of this paradigm. I develop my position with reference to the work of academics who have explored the socially embedded meanings of literacy as a means to counter the prevailing assumption that literacy is an unqualified social good.

I start chapter 3, *Windows on Newtown and Bellville South*, by describing to the reader the perspectives from which I first viewed the field of adult literacy intervention and research. I discuss how my research methodology developed. I show how my own acceptance of the standard notions of development, literacy and literacy target populations were challenged through doing on-the-ground literacy work, and how my research in Bellville South and Newtown changed my perceptions. In the rest of the chapter I discuss the various windows through which social scientists have gained perspectives on Newtown and Bellville South, and begin to set these against local understandings.

Chapter 4, *Uses of standard literacy for coloureds*, is where I start my ethnographic analysis. I begin by focusing on standard literacy - that is, the dominant understanding of literacy as it is used in policy documents. The argument I develop is that the people in my research areas share policy makers' high valorisation of standard literacy, but that the experiences they have had in dealing with standard literacy practices have led them to take the roles of passive recipients of state welfare and literacy training interventions. The values attached to standard literacy have contributed to their construction of "colouredness" as a position of passive subjection to state institutions, and to a struggle for respectability. This argument raises questions about policy assumptions that the provision of (standard) literacy could lead to the empowerment of people who are marginalised on grounds of their race or colour.

In chapter 5, *Embedded literacies and social identities*, I introduce those local literacies which are used by people in Newtown and Bellville South, but which differ from standard literacy as described in chapter 4. I show that being "coloured" is but one of many social identities assumed by people in these two areas, and that people draw on embedded literacies in the process of negotiation between different roles or identities. I specifically discuss the ways people use literacy in their roles as members of religious or street cultures. Together, chapter 4 and 5 thus present a critique of assumptions about the use of "population group" as a marker to define the target for adult literacy policy.

Chapter 6, *Rethinking urban/rural difference and literacy "deficit"*, comments on a further criterion used by policy makers, namely the identification of rural populations as targets for adult literacy intervention. Following a similar pattern to chapters 4 and 5, I begin by discussing differences in orientation to standard literacy amongst "urban" and "rural" people in Bellville South and Newtown. I indicate that the category "rural" has to be further disaggregated into small town and farm areas, and I develop an argument that standard literacy acquires significance for people in my research areas when they moved to cities rather than when they live on farms. This raises questions about policy assumptions that the "rural illiterate" should necessarily be targeted for literacy provision.

In the second part of chapter 6, I discuss local uses of literacy in Bellville South, part of a metropolitan urban area, and Newtown, an area of a small town surrounded by rural areas. I compare the ways in which people use literacy in dealing with burial societies, formal and informal business and state institutions. I argue that the degree to which people in these areas need standard literacy depends on the nature of local social practices and trust relationships. I show that, despite the policy assumption that rural areas have a major literacy "deficit", people in Bellville South have a greater need for personal mastery of standard literacy than people in Newtown.

Chapter 7, *Women's and men's orientations to literacy*, is where I focus on gender, a third social marker used in policy documents to identify target populations for adult literacy interventions. I challenge the assumption in policy documents that women should be targeted for literacy provision in an

attempt to redress their marginalisation. The argument I pursue is that existing gender roles have predetermined the uses and values which literacy has had for people in Newtown and Bellville South. I argue that the women in these areas tend to have marginal positions in dealing with the standard literacy practices of formal institutions - not because they lacked literacy, but because of the limitations of their gendered roles. I show that public space literacy practices are regarded as men's domain, and argue that, precisely for this reason, lacking standard literacy can be a greater dilemma for men than for women. I further argue that women's literacy practices are undervalued and disregarded because they differ from dominant understandings about what counts as literacy. These arguments raise questions about policy makers' assumptions that the provision of literacy will contribute to women's empowerment and that literacy intervention should be aimed at women rather than men.

I end the thesis with *Conclusions: From policy assumptions to understanding literacy in social context*. There I return to the assumptions made in policy documents and critically engage with these in the light of the findings of my research. I argue that the conceptualisation, in policy documents, of the relationship between development and standard literacy could lead to development strategies that reinforce the marginalised identities of people in adult literacy target populations. I also argue that the way in which policy makers identify adult literacy target populations could lead to the wrong people being targeted for literacy intervention, or the adoption of strategies that are too generalised to have the desired impact or quite inappropriate.

## 2. Outlining adult literacy policy assumptions

### 2.1 South African Adult Basic Education and Training policy and planning in context

The new political era which South Africa entered with the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the first democratic election of 1994, has been associated with the development of a substantial number of policy documents. These policy documents have aimed at the formulation of new government policy, and have often been directly related to the Reconstruction and Development Programme instituted by the new government with the aim of redressing past socio-economic inequalities (RSA 1994c:4).

Policy makers have given institutional definition to adult literacy in what has become known as ABET - Adult Basic Education and Training - policy documents. These have been aimed at the development of a national ABET delivery system. Since 1994 a number of such documents have, directly or indirectly, laid down guidelines for adult education policy.

Before presenting the assumptions of these policy documents and giving my critique, I briefly introduce the different policy documents I will be referring to.

In 1992 the National Educational Policy Investigation Adult Basic Education report (hereafter referred to as NEPI 1992) appeared. It was commissioned by the National Education Coordinating Committee as a contribution towards the planning of educational policy in the "New South Africa". The Centre for Education Policy Development, commissioned by the African National Congress (the now ruling party), presented their *Report of the Task Team for Adult Basic Education and Training as a force for social participation and economic development* (hereafter referred to as the CEPD 1994 document) in 1994. A White Paper outlining the government's Reconstruction and Development Plan also appeared in 1994 (RSA 1994b, hereafter referred to as RDP-WP 1994). Some guidelines for ABET were included in the document. In the same year Draft White Paper on Education and Training (hereafter referred to as DWE&T 1994) appeared in the Government Gazette of September 1994 (RSA 1994a). It was

followed in March 1995 by a White Paper on Education and Training (RSA 1995b which I refer to as WE&T 1995). The latter document stipulated government policy on Education and Training.

As I show later, the writers of these various policy documents appear to have had varying objectives in mind and have not necessarily spoken with one voice. Yet they do seem to have based their policy proposals on a shared set of understandings regarding literacy, some of which I attempt to unpack.

## 2.2 Assumptions of policy documents on Adult Basic Education and Training

In this thesis I will question three sets of assumptions reflected in policy documents. These are that

- a) "illiteracy" is a marker of *deficit*. Its redress requires formal literacy provision that will also lead to the *empowerment/development* of "illiterate" target populations;
- b) *literacy* can, for the largest part, be defined in terms of *years of schooling*.
- c) *target populations* for adult literacy provision can be statistically identified; and

These assumptions, I argue, are based on

- a) interpretations of statistics that fail to reflect the complex forms of literacy and the multiple social identities of people in the "target population" and
- b) a theoretical approach to literacy which has been coined "Great Divide" thinking (Gee 1990) and which dichotomizes the cognitive, social, cultural and linguistic attributes of "oral/illiterate" people and those of "literate" people. This approach is based on a critique of the work of Ong (1992) by Finnegan (1988) and Street (1984).

I begin this analysis with a critical look at policy makers' use of "illiteracy" as a marker of deficit, and their aims of redressing this deficit through development/empowerment in the shape of a national ABET system. Following that discussion, I engage with the understanding of *literacy* held by policy makers, and finally with their categorical definition of adult

literacy target populations.

### 2.2.1 The illiteracy deficit

The policy makers of the new South African government have stated that their central aim is to redress the deficit position in which they understand the majority of South Africans to be. The writers of the Reconstruction and Development Plan White Paper (RDP-WP) argue that the deficit position of the majority of South Africans originated from "bitter...domina[ti]on] by colonialism, racism, apartheid, sexism and repressive labour policies" (RSA 1994b:4). The results of this domination, they state, have been poverty and degradation. Three of the markers that are singled out as indicators of deficit are: *Racial* discrimination, which led to financial inequality; discrimination and bias against *women*; and the marginalisation of *rural people*. In section 2.2.3 I indicate how these same markers have been used to identify adult literacy target populations.

"Illiteracy" is used in education policy documents as a powerful indicator of the deficit position that is attributed to the majority of South Africans. The CEPD document (1994) describes the size and composition of this "illiterate" population as "a direct consequence of the inequalities in the provision of education and training". The writers further state that "(t)he lack of access to basic education, including literacy and numeracy, has consigned millions of our people to silence and marginalisation from effective and meaningful participation in social and economic development" (CEPD 1994:1). Illiterate people are thus defined as silenced and marginalised as a result of their lack of schooling. Their lack of schooling again is described as a result of the unequal distribution of resources under the apartheid state.

The notion that "the illiterate" are "silenced" and "marginalised" draws on a reading of the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationist and writer of books such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) and *Literacy: Reading the Word and Reading the World* (1987). Around 1960, most eligible voters in Brazil were excluded from the vote because they were classified as "illiterate". (This was in fact a clever strategy of the ruling class to exclude the poor from power). Freire consequently developed a method of literacy provision

aimed not only at making peasants literate but also at "empowering" them through developing their ability to "read the world" or develop a critical consciousness of their social situation. According to his theory, *silence* is characteristic of a society which has not developed a critical consciousness (Hammen-Poldermans 1975:17;36).

What the CEPD (1994) discourse ignores, in drawing concepts such as "silencing" from Freirean discourse, is criticism of the idea of literacy as a "cure-all" for social and economic development. Giroux, in an introduction to a book by Freire and Macedo (1987:10-11), addresses the South African situation specifically in this regard:

Just as illiteracy does not explain the causes of massive unemployment, bureaucracy, or the growing racism in major cities in the United States, South Africa and elsewhere, literacy neither reveals nor guarantees social, political and economic freedom.

It is, however, precisely the argument that there is a direct relationship between literacy and social, political and economic freedom which is drawn on in ABET policy documents. This pattern is clear in the NEPI report (1994), which creates an especially graphic picture of the marginalised position of "illiterate" adults than the CEPD (1994) report, making claims such as that

(t)hey are disadvantaged in job-seeking, they are sometimes unable to participate effectively in training or development programmes, they might be unable to provide the support for their own children's learning and they might be unable to respond to the critical medical and environmental issues which pose direct threats to their existence (NEPI 1994:1).

"Illiterate" adults are characterised here as being disadvantaged, disabled and vulnerable in various situations: in the job market, as parents and in looking after their medical and environmental needs. These claims are substantiated with reference to "a significant body of international research that links literacy with maternal and child health, infant mortality and fertility patterns" (1994:7).

The implications for South Africa of claims that illiteracy is a clear marker of deficit have been developed by Lyster (1992). While Lyster's analysis does not pose as a policy document, it merits careful investigation since it highlights many of the assumptions underlying policy documents regarding the deficit position of "illiterates".

Drawing on "world illiteracy figures" compiled at the UNESCO *World Conference on Education for All* (March 1990 Background document WCEFA, Jomtien, Thailand), Lyster (1992) summarises conclusions on the social and economic effects of "illiteracy":

The global picture which emerges out of these figures is that illiteracy rates mirror structural inequalities both nationally and internationally. The fact that women make up the majority of illiterate adults (about 35 per cent of all women in the world are illiterate compared with about 20 per cent of men) confirms this fact. Illiteracy is merely a reflection of marginalisation, exploitation and oppression. Illiterate people are therefore mostly poor people who live in rural areas and in third world countries.

The overwhelming majority of illiterate adults throughout the world are those who are most excluded from power, information and wealth. 'Hence in the typical case, the illiterate (sic) is not only unable to read and write but he - or more usually she - is poor, hungry, vulnerable to illness, and uncertain that even his or her present miserable circumstances will not decline to the point where life itself becomes the issue' (Gillette, 1983). In South Africa, the pattern is the same: the majority of illiterate adults are poor and black and the highest rates of illiteracy are found in rural areas.

Countries which have high illiteracy rates therefore also display other indicators of poverty: for example, lowered life expectancy, high infant mortality rates, high rates of malnutrition, poor health services, feeble educational provision and sparse communication systems (Lyster 1992:14-15).

In her analysis of UNESCO statistics, Lyster presents a grim picture of "the illiterate" by asserting a succession of assertions such as the following:

Illiterate people are mostly poor people who live in rural areas and in third world countries.

The overwhelming majority of illiterate adults throughout the world are those who are most excluded from power, information and wealth.

The illiterate (...) is poor, hungry, vulnerable to illness, and uncertain that even his or her present miserable circumstances will not decline to the point where life itself becomes the issue.

(t)he majority of illiterate adults (in South Africa) are poor and black and the highest rates of illiteracy are found in rural areas (1992:15).

Lyster presents these statements in descriptive phrases ("Illiterate people are..."), rather than overtly indicating a causal relationship between illiteracy and poverty, marginalisation, vulnerability and disempowerment. However, the cumulative effect of these various descriptions leaves the reader with a sense that illiteracy is irrevocably linked to socio-economic deficit, and may well be one of its causes and simultaneously one of its results.

The implication of a causal relationship between literacy and deficit is strengthened by the use of words such as *mirror*, as in "(t)he global picture which emerges out of these figures is that illiteracy rates *mirror* structural inequalities both nationally and internationally", and *reflection*, as in "(i)lliteracy is merely a reflection of marginalisation, exploitation and oppression". These terms, "mirror" and "reflect", imply that both illiteracy and the identified indicators of deficit are (perceived to be) objective realities rather than social constructs. Furthermore, these objective realities co-define each other in a two-way relationship.

In a manner similar to Lyster's analysis, the White Paper on Education and

Training (WE&T; RSA 1995b) refers to illiteracy as one of the indices of disadvantage in South African society:

The gradations between rich and poor, articulate and voiceless, housed and homeless, well-fed and malnourished, educated and illiterate, mirror South Africa's complex racial and ethnic hierarchies. By every index, African communities followed by Coloured communities, have the highest deficits in the provision of basic services, and lowest level of access to the means of providing a better quality of life (RSA 1995b:18).

The word "mirror", as used here, again suggests correlation that may imply cause between the distribution of "educated" and "illiterate" in South Africa. The set of dichotomies inherent in the above analyses can be tabulated as follows:

Table 1: Development Dichotomies

white	coloured <sup>3</sup>	african
educated	illiterate	
rich	poor	
articulate	voiceless	
well-fed	malnourished	
housed	homeless	

"Illiteracy" is thus correlated with other characteristics which are presented as reflecting the *deficit position* of African and Coloured people, themselves understood to comprise "communities". In the words of the CEPD document (1994:1), they are seen as "marginalised" from the mainstream position (i.e., from those characterised by the left hand column).

I argue that such categorisations have the potential to disempower further

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<sup>3</sup> The position of coloureds between blacks and whites is discussed in chapter 4. For present purposes it suffices to note that coloureds are seen as part of the marginalised category.

those identified as "marginal". Writing about "the myths of marginality" in Brazil, Perlman (1976) warns that,

"[i]nsofar as the myths reinforce the idea of the popular sectors as dependent, isolated and powerless, they also reinforce the idea that these sectors can be integrated by populist policies (...) [S]uch populist policies are attempts to gain support through palliative concessions while at the same time avoiding basic changes and avoiding giving any real power or autonomy to the popular groups themselves (1976:248).

Perlman (1976) concludes from her study of *favelados* (slum areas) in Rio de Janeiro that people there, while being called "marginals" by the state, are in fact fully integrated into mainstream society. However, the fact that they are defined as marginalised enables the ruling classes to exploit them.

While I do not wish to suggest that the new South African government has any intention of exploiting those identified in policy documents as marginal, I am concerned about the effect, in the South African context, of what Perlman (1976:248) calls "populist policies".

The populist policy which the new South African government decided on in order to address the defined "illiteracy deficit" of "millions of our people", is itself the creation of a national Adult Basic Education and Training system. The Freedom Charter, the declaration of human rights drawn on by liberation movements which was endorsed by the Congress of the People in 1955, had at that stage already proclaimed that "Adult illiteracy shall be ended in a mass state education plan" (Suttner and Cronin 1986). The concept of a "mass state education campaign" for South Africa was developed by the Government of National Unity with the announcement that a national literacy programme would be one of the Presidential lead projects<sup>4</sup> which would kick-start the RDP (RSA 1994c:3).

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<sup>4</sup> In his State of the Nation Address to Parliament on 24 May 1994, the President set out certain projects which would launch the delivery of the RDP within the first 100 days. These projects, of which a national literacy programme was one, are hence referred to as Presidential lead projects.

I will show in my ethnographic analysis in the chapters to follow that such a national ABET system, concerned with the provision of standard literacy, and built on the presupposition that the "illiterate" is "marginalised", is not based on a thorough understanding of the perceptions and practices of those targeted for this development action. As such, adult literacy intervention in South Africa may remain a modernist development enterprise - just as, I will now argue, it was under the apartheid government.

### 2.2.2 Literacy as development

In international policy discourse, literacy has been identified as a major development need (in the next chapter, I discuss the work of UNESCO in this regard). Presenting a critique of this position, Street (1994) argues that literacy projects have been framed by the assumptions of modernisation in post World War II Europe:

...if some societies appeared to be less advanced than others the way to get them advanced was to give them the things the so-called advanced had. So if "we" in the west had literacy, we should be able to give "them" in the developing world, the literacy we had, and they would then catch up (1994:13).

Street emphasises here the linear model of development underlying much literacy work. He argues that the modernising development campaigns of Western countries have been based on a distinction between "us" and "them", with the latter (the developing world) being "less advanced" (from the perspective of those who see themselves as more advanced). There was thus an implicit devaluation of the practices of "the other".

South Africa, counting amongst the "developing countries", has had a long history of modernist development thinking (Fischer 1988) which impacted on understandings of literacy. During the apartheid dispensation, the dominant paradigm explained "illiteracy" as a result of "traditionalism" and lack of development. In support of this position, afrikaner scholar Fourie (1980) quoted Nigerian Adult Educationist Okeem's<sup>5</sup> claim that

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<sup>5</sup> Okeem is professor in Adult Education at the University of Nigeria

nothing short of a concerted attack from all...subsystems of society (political, economic, social and cultural) on ignorance, illiteracy and superstition - the great pillars of traditionalism - will make much impact (Okeem 1977:6).

Fourie also states that "before the stage is reached where the primitive society, which is merely part of its world over which it has no control, has been turned into a civilized society which can make something of its own world and master and transform its own way of living", no real and lasting success in the eradication of illiteracy and underdevelopment can be achieved (Fourie 1980:86).

Quoting Okeem as his support, Fourie (1980) here clearly distinguishes between "primitive society" and "civilised society", associating "illiteracy" and stagnancy with the former. I interpret these statements as belonging to a development paradigm which Esteva (1996:9) describes as a combination of the Hegelian concept of history, the Darwinist concept of evolution and the scientific aura of Marx. Esteva argues that, with the industrial mode of production becoming the aim of evolutionary development, "the metaphor of development gave global hegemony to a purely Western genealogy of history, robbing peoples of different cultures of the opportunity to define the forms of their social life" (Esteva 1996:9).

Esteva states that this model of development reached its "most violent colonising power" when returned to the vernacular. I perceive this happening in the words of Okeem, the african scholar that Fourie quotes above, who describes "illiteracy" being a "great pillar of traditionalism" which should be eradicated. Okeem states elsewhere that development, which he sees as the aim of education (i.e. the eradication of "illiteracy"), "involves a progression from a state of non-development towards that of development" (1990:44). Development, for Okeem, essentially involves the adoption of modernist values (1990:40). Ellis, another afrikaner scholar who wrote during the apartheid era, also states that modernisation involves a shift from traditional to modern values, and argues that literacy plays an important role in this regard (Ellis 1984:54).

From their different positions as african and afrikaner intellectuals, Okeem,

Fourie and Ellis (to single them out merely as exemplars) share a set of assumptions about the differences between "traditionalism" and "a civilised society". Both subscribe to what Jean and John Comaroff (1993) refer to as the master narrative of modernisation theory, which defines *modernity* by opposing it to *tradition*. This myth, they state, is "a narrative that replaces uneven, protean relationships among "ourselves" and "others" in world history with a simple, epic story about the passage from savagery to civilisation, from the mystical to the mundane" (1993:xii). I will discuss the theoretical development of this paradigm in literacy theory in the next chapter.

A central aspect of the modernist enterprise, as expressed here by Okeem and Fourie, is the need for "the eradication of illiteracy and underdevelopment" (Fourie 1980:89). Considering the notion of underdevelopment (and that people can be defined as "underdeveloped" - that is, not developed enough), Esteva (1996) traces its origins to an American post-Second World War modernist discourse. Esteva argues that this "underdevelopment" discourse has had a profound effect on those identified as being in this "undignified condition" (1996:7):

Today, for two-thirds of the peoples of the world, underdevelopment is a threat that has already been carried out; a life experience of subordination and of being led astray, of discrimination and subjugation [...]; it converts participation into a manipulative trick to involve people in struggles for getting what the powerful want to impose on them[...] (Esteva 1996:7-8).

In the South African context, the principle of "separate development", enforced through apartheid laws, was precisely such an attempt to manipulate the bulk of South Africans into "getting what the powerful want to impose on them". Underlying the stated aim of "developing" african and coloured "population groups", was the aim to keep them separate and, as "underdeveloped" populations, in a distinctly inferior position to that of whites.

It is to be understood that, as soon as the restrictions of apartheid were

lifted, millions of South Africans who had previously become used to being seen as undignified, primitive and underdeveloped, would demonstrate aspirations towards, and demand, the transformation of their apartheid identities.

The Government of National Unity, led by President Nelson Mandela, acted on the popular demand for development and redress through the proposal of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which was aimed at "the final eradication of the results of apartheid" (RDP-WP; RSA 1994c:1). The RDP became the new development discourse of South Africa.

New South African development discourses rephrased the aim of development; instead of moving away from traditionalism and primitivism, development was now aimed at eradicating the results of apartheid. If one considers, as I have suggested earlier, that the apartheid regime developed the notion of "traditional" cultures for separate development purposes (Spiegel and Boonzaier 1988), then eradicating apartheid would imply moving away from traditionalism, at least in its particular manifestation under apartheid, but also more generally.

While the terms in which development aims are phrased have shifted, understandings of "development" have remained modernist in approach. "Meeting basic needs" has become one of the central concerns of new development strategies (RDP-WP;RSA 1994c:12). Historically, the Basic Human Needs strategy of development theorists and practitioners was aimed at the systematic mapping and structuring of development objectives regarding the "basic needs" of the Third World. Escobar (1996) argues that this strategy enabled the West to conceptualise "an artificially homogenous monochrome, the "Third World", an entity that was always deficient in relation to the West, and so always in need of imperialist projects to progress and development (Escobar 1996:138).

Echoes of this Basic Human Needs strategy can be heard in the RDP white paper, with the addition that apartheid is seen as having caused the denial of the basic needs of the majority of South Africans. A product of this concern expressed by the writers of the RDP White Paper is their assumption that development aims should be defined in relation to the objectively identifiable

"needs" or deficits of the majority of the population, particularly as created by apartheid. Furthermore they assume that some needs can be identified as "basic", and therefore of primary concern in development.

New policy discourses aim to change "basic needs" (basic education being identified as one such need) into "basic rights". "Basic rights" could, in the words of Sen (1988), also be described as "entitlements", which he describes as "the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces" (1988:47). The writers of the RDP White Paper have thus added the right to education to the "commodity bundles" which are the overall entitlements of each South African citizen.

In exploring the implications of the stated commitment to equality for education expressed in the 1993 South African Constitution, the Education and Training White Paper (WE&T) (RSA 1995b:40) quotes the Declaration of the World Conference on Education for All (1990) which stresses the right of each person to receive "educational opportunities to meet their basic learning needs" in order

to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning.

Within this framework, education is conceived of as essential for the fulfilment of basic needs and the exercise of fundamental rights and freedom. Ironically, the wording of this declaration presents a perspective similar to that of development discourses under the old regime. While not stated directly, it is implied that those who lack schooled education will struggle to survive, will not be able to realise their full capacities, and so on. Education is thus presented as the development technology which will lead to a transformation from a state of lack and deficit to one of fulfilment and improved quality of life.

The focus on "meeting basic needs" in new development discourses also claims, at least rhetorically, to honour diversity. But by predetermining "basic

needs", it homogenises those categories of people who would be defined as having these needs. Thus policy makers assume that people with less than six years of schooling will see the acquisition of formal schooling as a "basic need". The "neediness" of this category of people is signalled by referring to them as "illiterate". It clearly is a dilemma of policy that, however liberal it attempts to be, the "outsider" perspective from which it is written tends to create, as Esteva wrote, "an inverted mirror of others' reality; a mirror that belittles them and sends them off to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogenous and diverse majority, simply in the terms of a homogenizing and narrow minority" (Esteva 1996:7).

The association which policy makers make between literacy and development enhances their vision of the deficit position of "illiterates". The institutional definition of the deficit position of "illiterate" and "underdeveloped" people has led South African policy makers to the conclusion that a national Adult Basic Education programme is needed to address the "basic needs" of this deficit population. They strengthen the case for a development project of this scale by relating "illiteracy" to other markers of deficit in policy discourse, namely race, gender and rural residence.

### 2.2.3 Disaggregating the deficit: Literacy, race, gender and rural residence

The first task of policy makers working with this approach to literacy, was to indicate the scale of the "illiteracy" problem. They thus statistically identified that "(a)t least a third of the adult population of South Africa do not have effective reading and writing skills and do not have a basic schooled education" (NEPI 1992:1). The "illiterate" population was fixed at a considerable 15 million people (CEPD 1994:1).

As a next step, policy documents argued strongly for prioritising the "literacy needs" of those who were not classified as "white" by the previous government, as well as of women and citizens living in rural areas.

The *identities* of the target population are therefore defined negatively and in terms of *difference*; the fact that they are *not* "literate", *not* white, *not* male and *not* living in urban areas, and by implication not modern. I will now

critically discuss how policy makers conceptualise each of these categories targeted for literacy provision. This discussion is the background against which I have structured chapters 4 to 7, where I reconceptualise the relationship between literacy and population group, gender and rural residence by drawing on ethnographic material.

*a) Population group as deficit category in policy documents*

The apartheid system was based on the classification of people into different 'population groups' - african/black, coloured or white. In popular discourse, population group or category is often referred to as race or ethnic group, because of the strong associations made between these three concepts under apartheid (West 1988:7). Policy makers have clearly identified "illiteracy" (defined in terms of a lack of schooling) as a racial phenomenon in South Africa, and as the consequence of racial discrimination under apartheid. The draft White Paper on Education and Training (DWE&T) states that

...access to education and training in South Africa was severely rationed on a racial and ethnic basis. Compulsory education for White children has been enforced for decades, with the result that the White adult population has been completely literate for generations. By contrast, millions of Black adults and out-of-school youth still have little or no access to education and training. Most Black adults, especially women, are illiterate (RSA 1994a:9).

Although not explicitly stated as such, it can be assumed that "Black" is used in this document as a composite term for people who have been marginalised by the apartheid government on grounds of what was defined as their racial identity or population group. "Black" here therefore also includes those classified as "coloured", including "asian". The writers of the NEPI document quote literacy rates for the different racial categories in South Africa as "54% of Africans; 66% of Coloureds, 84% of Asians, 99% of Whites" (NEPI 1992:6).

By positioning the case of "Black adults" who "have had little or no access to education" against that of "the White adult population" which received

compulsory schooling, and as a result, is said to have been "completely literate for generations", the draft White Paper on Education and Training (RSA 1994a) capitalises on the *symbolic differences identified with Black and White, uneducated and educated*. Members of the former category - Black uneducated adults - are thus described as having been denied a basic education.

Against the background of South Africa's political history, the uneducatedness of Black adults has gained such emotional and political significance that to question the validity of defining this category of people as "illiterate" and "marginalised" (see 2.2.3) could seem like a reinforcement of racial discrimination. The reason for this is that the identification of deficit related to race is likely, in the new dispensation, to secure state resources in terms of an emergent and increasingly hegemonic "redress discourse" (Prinsloo 1995:449). The redress discourse demands strategies to ensure that the "marginalised" will be given back that which they have been deprived of under apartheid, such as educational opportunities.

*b) Gender as marker of deficit*

Gender is a second indicator used in policy documents to identify ABET target populations. The White Paper on Education and Training (1995b) prioritises "the *redress* of educational inequalities among those people who have suffered particular disadvantages", and then refers specifically to "illiterate women" (1995b:21), reflecting a similar statement in the Draft White Paper (DWE&T; RSA 1994a:9). The report of the Centre for Education Policy Development states that a lack of access to basic education "has had a particular impact on women who comprise a large proportion of the illiterate" (CEPD 1994:1).

The plight of "illiterate" women has been graphically presented by UNESCO (1994), which indicates that in Sub-Saharan Africa 164 women are "illiterate" for every 100 men. UNESCO gives no gender-related statistics for South Africa. This may be because the South African case contrasts strongly with the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa. As the NEPI report (1992) points out:

The South African data on gender distribution of literacy skills contradicts the international trend where illiterate women

considerably outnumber men, in UNESCO estimates, by two thirds. Using the same standards used above [six years of formal schooling], the overall levels of schooling completed by men are probably only slightly greater than for women [in South Africa] (1992:7).

Despite this clear lack of statistical support, however, gender is still regarded as an important indicator of literacy deficit in many ABET policy documents. Women are singled out in the Draft White paper on Education and Training (DWE&T) as a category especially affected by illiteracy (1994b:4-5). In the White Paper on Education and Training (WE&T), "illiterate women" are again identified as "among those sections of our people who have suffered particular disadvantages, or who are particularly vulnerable" (RSA 1995b:21). The writers of this White Paper used "illiteracy" as an indicator of what they understand to be the particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable position of women.

The writers of the CEPD document proposed a special Adult Basic Education programme for rural women to address the situation of women, whom they describe as having been "excluded from the political process, relegated to an inferior social status to that of men, and excluded from educational skills training" (1994:46). The programme aims to empower women to participate in social reconstruction and development (1994:46). The assumption thus is that literacy acquisition would empower women to assume positions and roles in South African society that traditionally have been occupied largely by men.

The symbolic value attributed to literacy in policy documents as a way to address women's perceived deficit positions, can be situated within international discourses on women and literacy. In the following summary of the literacy situation for women in the United States, Kerka (1989) situates women's literacy levels in relation to various deficits associated with woman's roles:

Seventy-five percent of female heads of households with less than a high school diploma are living in poverty. Young women with below average skills and below poverty incomes are five and one-half times more likely to become teen parents. Nearly 40 percent of female single parents and 35 percent of displaced homemakers have an eighth-grade education or less. Literacy levels of children are strongly linked to those of their parents. The greatest predictor of a child's future academic success is the literacy of the child's mother. As the numbers of families headed by low-literate women increase, the cycle of illiteracy is perpetuated (1989:1).

Kerka thus associates women's inadequate levels of literacy with poverty, single parenthood, child pregnancy and displacement as homemaker - all conditions typifying the vulnerability of women in society. In addition she states that these women's roles as mothers are hampered by their illiteracy, with the result that their children have less chance of academic success than the children of more literate women. While first identifying women as the victims of society, Kerka now resorts virtually to "blaming the victims", low-literate women, for perpetuating the cycle of illiteracy across generations.

South African policy documents are less specific than Kerka's report on the disadvantages to which women without adequate schooled literacy are claimed to be subjected. However, the argument remains, as has been seen in the above quotes, that illiterate women are vulnerable, disadvantaged and excluded from mainstream society. The White Paper on Education and Training (WE&T; RSA 1995b) also states that parents "have been handicapped by illiteracy from participating fully in the training of their children" (1995:21). While the writers of the White Paper are more cautious than Kerka (1989) about "blaming

the victim", they clearly suggest that illiterate parents have been disabled from playing a sufficient role in the education of their children.

A focus on the redress of women's "illiteracy" nonetheless appears to be in line, with some of the aims of the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP). The RDP White Paper Programme Challenges argues that "[w]omen are still being subject to innumerable forms of discrimination and bias" (RSA 1994b:4) and consequently states that "[a] key focus throughout the RDP is on ensuring a full and equal role for and recognition of women in every aspect of our economy and society" (1994:8). The White Paper on Education and Training (WE&T; RSA 1995b) implies that literacy training for women will help to achieve this.

While policy documents assume that the identification of women as a target population for ABET would contribute to their "recognition...in every aspect of our economy and society", this has yet to be proven. My critique of this argument uses Esteva's (1996) reasoning about the impact of modernist development on those to be developed. Development initiatives such as Adult Basic Education classes require that women to adopt the position of the marginalised, the excluded and oppressed who are in need of development, rather than recognising their existing strengths and abilities. I return to the issue ethnographically in chapter 7.

### *c) Rural residence as deficit position*

Rural people are the third category of people mentioned in definitions of ABET target populations. After referring to discrimination against women, the RDP White Paper (RSA 1994c:5) states that "[r]ural people are marginalised". The White Paper on Education and Training (WE&T)) also includes "rural communities" as comprising a sector of South African society that has suffered particular disadvantages due to educational inequalities (RSA 1995b:21).

The NEPI document states that "illiteracy rates are significantly higher in rural than urban areas" (1992:6), but fails to give sufficient statistical proof of this statement. Drawing on regional statistics from the Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA), the writers of the NEPI report indicate that two late apartheid era development regions - Region E (KwaZulu Natal), and Region

H (Transvaal, Orange Free State, Kwandebele) - have the highest numbers of "illiterate" adults. The statistics for the two regions can be compared as follows:

Table 2 : Literacy levels and urbanisation in two areas with highest "illiteracy" rates

	Urbanised	Population	Illiterate
Region E	50%	8 800 000	3 334 000
Region H	93%	8 800 000	3 116 000

(NEPI 1994:6)

The NEPI writers point to the fact that 93% of the population of region H is urbanised, and only about half of the population of region E; and then state that "illiteracy rates are significantly higher in rural than urban areas" (NEPI 1992:6). The statistics, however, indicate that the more urbanised region H has only 168 000 more "literate" inhabitants than region E; an insignificant difference of 0.11%.

Thus the NEPI writers claim that levels of "illiteracy" are significantly higher in rural than urban areas, but fail to present statistical validation for their statement<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, policy makers regard rural areas as targets for "strategic thrusts" in literacy intervention (CEPD 1994:21).

As is the case for the targeting of women, adult literacy policy makers seem to base their focus on rural areas on the *appearance* of evidence that this target population has low levels of literacy. My conclusion in interpreting statements about rural areas in the RDP White Paper (Rsa 1994c:5) and the White Paper on Education and Training (WE&T;1995b:21), is that policy makers have identified literacy provision as a tangible form of "redress" for rural populations, which they identify as some of the most marginalised sectors of South African society. The choice of rural areas for literacy intervention is in the first place, a broadly political one; whether this is in fact the

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<sup>6</sup> Earlier research based on 1980 statistics has indicated higher levels of "illiteracy" amongst rural than urban populations. Ellis (1986:11) for instance provides evidence that 77.11% of the urban coloured population is literate, and only 38.63% of the rural coloured population.

most useful form of "redress" to be launched in rural areas, is a question that they do not investigate.

In summary, ABET planning and policy documents in South Africa have identified their target populations through a range of dichotomies (with the second column indicating the target population):

*Table 3: Adult literacy target population dichotomies*

literate	illiterate
male	female
white	black
urban	rural

By focusing on blacks, women and rural dwellers as likely illiterates, ABET policy documents situate ABET within current "redress" discourses in South African politics, discourses that also appear to draw heavily on international development discourses. The cost, however, is an inevitable categorisation of people in a clear-cut way; a categorisation which fails to address the complexity of these people's social positions. In addition, as I have argued, the development paradigm in which policy makers have cast ABET in South Africa requires that those who are placed on the right hand side of the above table must see themselves as marginalised, oppressed and lacking, a point I provide evidence for in the chapters below. The perspective requires that people be complicit in understanding themselves to be in need of development initiatives such as the proposed national ABET system.

#### **2.2.4 Defining illiteracy**

International debates about what "literacy" means have caused Adult Education planning and policy documents in South Africa to express some caution in defining literacy. Ultimately, however, they resort to *years of schooling* as a measure for defining what is meant by "literacy". By equating "literacy" with schooled literacy (literacy as taught through graded schooling), they follow an international trend of presenting "literacy" as a set of "skills" acquired through schooling. (A discussion of the international debate around

the meaning(s) of literacy follows in chapter 3).

The NEPI Adult Basic Education report (1992) has been influential in ABET policy discourses because of its presentation of apparently definitive "literacy" levels in South Africa. In the final definition of target groups for adult basic education, the writers of the NEPI report used levels of schooled literacy - the attainment of Standard 4, or six years of formal primary schooling - as a measure. This was in accordance with the 1990 statistics of the Development Bank of South Africa. The NEPI document identifies a total of 14 447 000 adults between the ages of 16 and 64 as having a level of education less than Std 4, and therefore classifying as "illiterate" (NEPI 1992:6). The implication is that the ABET target population of South Africa is identified as more than one third of the then estimated total population of 38,8 million.

Based on NEPI and other statistical representations, policy documents refer in a definitive way to "the illiterate", a category comprising those sectors of South African society whose members are defined as "illiterate" by the above criteria. The report of the Centre for Educational Policy Development (CEPD 1994) is introduced with a statement that "[i]t is estimated that about 15 million Black adults (over one-third of the population) are illiterate and have had little or no education" (1994:1). Drawing on both the statistical figures presented in the NEPI (1992) report and its underlying definitional principles, the CEPD draws a direct link between being "illiterate" and "hav(ing) had little or no education" (CEPD 1994:1).

Similarly, the Draft White Paper on Education and Training (DWE&T; RSA 1994a:9) refers to "most black adults, especially rural women, [being] illiterate". The statement that "most black adults" are "illiterate" echoes that of the CEPD (1994) report which draws on the NEPI (1992) document in defining adults without a Std 4 qualification as "illiterate". NEPI (1992:9) indicates that 46% of the black population of South Africa is "illiterate" according to this definition. Moreover, the DWE&T attributes this situation to inequalities in access to educational facilities under apartheid, both between population categories and between urban and rural areas. Illiteracy, then, is seen merely as the result of lack of access to education and training facilities.

The result is that literacy is presented in all these policy documents as a homogenous social indicator which can be clearly defined in terms of years of schooling. Being "literate" is equated with having completed six years of formal schooling.

There are two interest groups who stand to benefit from this kind of definition of "illiteracy", vis. in terms of insufficient years of schooling. The first, comprising policy makers, demands to be presented with quantifications of the problem - "illiteracy" in this case -and tends to ignore complexity and heterogeneity. Statistics which policy documents consequently rely on, such as that produced by the Development Bank of South Africa, use measurable indicators such as years of schooling to define unambiguously such concepts as literacy which is inherently ambiguous in its practical definition - as I shall indicate later.

Various theories have been developed to explain the tendency of governing institutions to simplify and stratify the complexity of social life. The value of dichotomies for sustaining the power of governments has been commented on by Foucault (1973). He argued that modern institutions sustain what he describes as their panoptical position by defining "the order of things" through a grid of representations of their subjects' identities. Referring to what he calls "the analytics of finitude" (1973:315), Foucault demonstrates the need of modern institutions to limit the possibilities of being, and to classify those into oppositions. These oppositions, he argues, confirm the finitude of being: "From the one end of experience to the other, finitude answers itself; it is the identity and the difference of the positivities, and of their foundation, within the figure of the *Same*" (1973:315). In other words, modern institutions create homogeneity in society (the figure of the *Same*) by classifying heterogeneous people into positively identifiable categories of difference, such as "literate" versus "illiterate".

Giddens (1992) regards this phenomenon as an integral feature of modernity when he argues that "[w]ho[ever] says modernity says not just organisations, but organisation - the regularised control of social relations across indefinite time-space distances" (1992:16). In application to the problem addressed in this thesis, I would suggest that a national ABET system amounts to an organising of social relations around dichotomies of deficit (as

outlined above).

The second interest group concerned with large statistical results consists of those who are providers of ABET and other parties advocating the recognition of a need for ABET on a national and provincial government level. Figures indicating that more than a third of South Africa's adult population is "illiterate" and thus in need of ABET, would, from such a perspective, contribute greatly to the national ABET cause. The identification of a National Literacy Programme as a presidential project of the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) indicates the degree of urgency with which "the literacy and numeracy gap" (RSA 1994c:57) has been perceived at the national government level.

Whereas policy makers need statistics as a legitimisation for their decision making process, ABET providers need significantly large statistical representation of "the problem" to prove that ABET should be prioritised by policy makers. With policy makers' logic being that the statistically bigger the problem is, the more attention it deserves, it has been important for the second interest group to present "the illiteracy problem" as quantitatively considerable. By using the statistical indicators of the Development Bank of South Africa, which defines adults with Std 4 as literate, instead of the indicators of the Central Statistical Service (1993) which define as literate "persons who can read, write and speak their home language", the NEPI report constructs "the illiteracy problem" so as to make its size as large as possible. While the 1991 DBSA statistics present a third of the population as illiterate (NEPI 1992:5), statistics of the Central Statistical Services classified only 18% of the South African population as "illiterate" (CSS 1993:7).

### *3. Counter discourses in policy documents*

Thus far I have described my interpretation of the dominant discourses in South African policy documents and their modernist project for the acquisition of literacy, statistically defined in terms of years of schooling, which aims to redress the deficit of particular social categories. I mentioned at the outset, however, that policy makers do not always speak with one voice. As illustration I will now discuss a different discourse that was introduced in

the NEPI document, yet failed, in the final analysis, to be heard when it came to policy decisions.

The NEPI report (1992) includes a number of instances where the writers make statements or ask questions about the validity of a homogenising/standardising definition of "literacy" in terms of years of schooling. In defining what is meant by literacy in the report, its writer(s) express a need for caution regarding the use of literacy as a "free-ranging technology to be plugged in when it is needed" (NEPI 1992:2). This statement presents a criticism of the idea that "literacy" is a clearly definable "technology" or set of skills independent of the context of its use. The writers continue by stating that

[c]urrent thinking relates literacy use to its social context and suggests that it is not helpful to think in terms of a single literacy when multiple literacies may co-exist for the performance of widely varying personal, social and economic functions (1992:3).

This statement suggests a discursive tension within the NEPI document, between defining literacy as a neutral technology measured in terms of years of schooling, and conceptualising the possibility of "multiple literacies" defined in social context. The writers refer to "current thinking" in the reconceptualisation of what counts as literacy. Mastin Prinsloo, one of the main writers of the NEPI document (1992), afterwards initiated a research process (in which I participated) which was aimed specifically at developing a better understanding of the multiple literacies used by South Africans. In an introduction to the publication following from this research (Prinsloo and Breier 1996), Prinsloo refers to Street's alternative understanding. Prinsloo states that

[Street] calls this alternative orientation an 'ideological' view of literacy to emphasise, first, the social nature of literacy and, second, the multiple and sometimes contested nature of literacy practices (Prinsloo and Breier 1996:18).

Prinsloo and other writers of the NEPI document who valued Street's approach to literacy research, expressed caution about relying on the interpretation

of statistics they presented in their report as an authoritative presentation of the literacy situation in South Africa. However, within the NEPI document as a whole, this argument loses its analytical strength, as I will describe.

The challenge presented by this counter discourse within the NEPI document to move away from a single definition of literacy, is resolved by broadening the concern of the document from "merely basic literacy" to "different levels of provision of basic education" (1992:2-3). Whereas literacy had in the past been the main focus of adult education in South Africa, the move now was towards the acquisition of a range of different competencies through the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) system. A National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was drawn up which would allow for the formal accreditation of ABET courses.

With the emphasis being placed on the diversification and accreditation of ABET courses, policy makers were satisfied that ABET no longer focused exclusively on literacy. Thus they uncritically continued to accept that "literacy" referred to schooled literacy, and the notion of "multiple literacies" existing in social contexts was not developed further.

### **Conclusion**

I have shown in this chapter that South African policy documents generally conceive of "illiteracy" as a marker of deficit which has contributed to the marginalised position of blacks, rural people and women. I have also shown that the statistical evidence for this understanding is not always convincing, or even available. I have described policy makers' notion of the literacy "need" in South Africa, which is to be addressed through a national Adult Basic Education and Training, as a modernist development initiative. Within this paradigm, which Street (1984) calls the "autonomous model" of literacy (see chapter 2), people are classified in dichotomous categories of literates and illiterates. The modernist programme assumes that a sufficient application of the technology of literacy (that is, the attainment of six years of formal schooling) can and will transform "illiterates" into "literates", and that this transformation can and will lead to the empowerment of those who presently belong to the former category.

I have also attempted in this chapter to reveal some of the theoretical

paradigms which I see as underlying the approaches of policy makers to literacy, social identity and development in present day South Africa. And I have tried to show how problematic these are in terms of a more general literature that is thoroughly critical of much of modernity and its institutions. In the next chapter, I describe the development of my own understanding of literacy and social identity in order to present a theoretical backdrop for the ethnographic chapters that follow and to demonstrate the position I am taking in my thesis.

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## Chapter 2

### Perspectives on literacy

In chapter one I analyzed ways that South African policy documents have conceptualised literacy, the target populations for literacy intervention, and the relationship between literacy and development. I now present different approaches to literacy, some of which I see as underlying policy decisions in South Africa, and some of which have shaped my own understandings of literacy.

I have structured my presentation of the various understandings of literacy around the development of my own understanding, and as a dialogue with the assumptions of policy makers that I have outlined in chapter 1. I therefore introduce the chapter by describing the methodological and conceptual perspectives from which I approached my research. Thereafter I discuss various perspectives on literacy which have influenced my own understanding of the uses, and nature, of literacy. I have found the distinction which Street (1984) makes between "autonomous" and "ideological" models of literacy most useful in grouping the two main contrasting approaches to literacy in the research literature, and I structure my argument around it.

I critically discuss "autonomous model(s)" of literacy (Street 1984) which attribute autonomous meaning to literacy as technology while ignoring the ideological contexts of its use and definition. Under these I include UNESCO's mass and functional approaches to literacy and Goody's (1978), Ong's (1982) and others' "Great Divide theory" (Street 1984, Finnegan 1988) that literacy is the technology that separates oral/illiterate and literate people. I then interpret what Street (1984) means by "ideological models". I discuss Freire's (1987) notion of literacy as a vehicle for empowerment, and then introduce studies which conceptualise literacy as practice by looking at the ideological and discursive contexts within which different literacies acquire meaning. Finally, I discuss different ways of conceptualising the relationships between literacy(ies) and social identities.

## 1. The researcher's gaze: Methodological and conceptual windows

I first began to read about literacy when I initiated a literacy class for street children as part of an ecumenical project in Pretoria, South Africa's administrative capital. My belief that literacy would inevitably better the lives of these children was confirmed by literature I read - and which I will discuss in the first part of this chapter as the "autonomous model" of literacy.

Following the work in Pretoria, I conducted in depth interviews with farm workers in the Western Cape who were attending literacy classes for my MA dissertation (Malan 1991). My understanding of the literature I used in analyzing the farmworker material led me to ask some questions about the meanings of literacy. But it was only when I started a literacy project in Newtown in the Eastern Cape (about which I shall say more in the next chapter) that my understandings of literacy were significantly challenged by what became known as the New Literacy Studies (Steet 1994). I will discuss the assumptions of these studies in the second half of this chapter as the "ideological model" of literacy.

My first attempt at doing ethnographic research in Newtown was between January 1993 and February 1994. Employed as a researcher by the nearby University of Fort Hare, I conceptualised an "action research" project which would feed into the establishment of an adult literacy class in Newtown. The initial suggestion, that I initiate a community-based literacy project in Newtown, was made by a minister of one of the local churches. The concept was approved at a meeting of Newtown's school headmasters, chairpersons of various committees and sport clubs, ministers and other leaders.

The literacy committee which was consequently established consisted of a group of people who had personal interests in, and ideals for, the promotion of adult literacy in Newtown. They included a retrenched teacher, a social worker, the chairperson of a sport club in Newtown, two nurses and a school principal.

At the outset of the committee's work, I created a questionnaire that the members of the committee used in a door-to-door survey to identify potential

literacy learners. The questionnaire indicated a choice between basic and functional literacy classes, the idea being that those with no formal literacy would go to the "basic" classes, whereas those who wanted help with specific literacy tasks, such as filling in official forms, would join the functional literacy class.

After this information had been collected, I contacted as many as possible of the people whose names were collected during the survey, and arranged either personal or group interviews with them. What I had intended to be "open-ended" interviews turned out to be significantly structured by the interviewing situation. The interviewees saw me as a benevolent educated white person whose role in Newtown was to set up a literacy class of which they might become part. This, together with the fact that I questioned them about their literacy needs, caused the respondents to present themselves to me in roles they saw themselves occupying in relation to me, namely those of dependent and needy illiterates.

The responses I obtained during the interviews became so predictable after a while that I seriously started to doubt the purpose of the endeavour. The interviews certainly provided me with enough "evidence" to justify the creation of a literacy class. But as I came to know these "illiterate" adults that we had identified, I noticed that they were managing their daily lives with relative ease and confidence. I developed the suspicion that without my intervention these people would probably continue to live their lives with not much more difficulty or hardship than anybody else in Newtown.

My interest consequently shifted from a functional action-research approach to a desire to gain a perspective on how people in Newtown thought about literacy from the *inside*. This required a shift in my self perception from one of intervention for change to intervention for knowledge, in adopting researcher status. But I also realised that I could not think of myself as a neutral vehicle of research. This was because my rôle in research situations clearly impacted significantly on *which truths* about themselves people in Newtown presented to me. Having foregrounded literacy in talking to people, I realised that they presented themselves as "illiterates". This led me to recognise that, rather than collecting authentic data about literacy "needs", I was writing what Clifford (1984) would call an allegory (a story used for

teaching and explaining). I found strong sympathy for Clifford when he argued that by regarding our research as allegory, "we [have to] struggle to confront and take responsibility for our systematic constructions of others and of ourselves through others" (1984).

The research method I adopted as I shifted from intervention to research was to use largely unstructured discussions about general topical issues or about personal histories rather than literacy specifically. I also started taking systematic fieldnotes of what I saw happening in Newtown. My role in the literacy project had the fortunate spin-off of introducing me to several people with whom I developed friendships and whom I would frequently visit to talk about domestic affairs, family, activities in Newtown, politics and general "news". Occasionally I was asked to help with filling in a form or reading one. I had told people that I was writing a "book" about the people of Newtown and they knew from my involvement in the literacy project that I had a special interest in literacy. Some people appreciated having someone who listened to their stories, while others simply felt "honoured" to be seen with a white "friend".

To a limited degree, I became a participant in life in Newtown. I started to attend the services of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Newtown and also attended the meetings of the church women of the Congregational Church. I attended a few community meetings, ran a voters' education workshop and remained involved in the literacy committee.

There were clear limitations to what I could do as a researcher in Newtown. Long after people had become accustomed to my presence in Newtown, most still continued to present their most "respectable" sides to me. My position as a young woman restricted my interaction with men. Much of the street culture of Newtown I could only learn of second-hand. During one incident, a group of men who were hidden behind a shelter of black bags noticed that the person with me had a video camera and pulled off the shelter's front panel to expose themselves playing a card game with nude-girl cards. But it was only because of the video camera that I had the chance to see what was happening behind the black bags. In general, men's group activities such as these remained hidden from me.

As an outsider, my position was often suspect. The secretary of one of the sports clubs lost her position after allowing me to borrow the club's papers, the argument being that I might have been spying for the opposing club.

At night and over weekends my movements were restricted to times and places which were reasonably safe, considering the fact that police had their hands full with alcohol-and drug-related knifings and rapes over weekends in Newtown.

I left Newtown in February 1994, and returned for a brief period in May 1994, after the national general elections. I noticed that time and change in my own position had altered my perceptions of life in Newtown. I began to question assumptions that I had about Newtown, and the questions that I asked began to change. For one thing, I now noticed more sharply the differences between people there, but at the same time I realised how being "coloured" created a shared sense of marginality amongst them (as I will discuss in chapter 4). This was my last visit to Newtown.

In February 1994, upon arriving in Cape Town, I started fieldwork in Bellville South. This was as part of a research team at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape. The aim of the joint project was to determine what the Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) were in communities and workplaces targeted for adult literacy intervention in South Africa in terms of the policy guidelines outlined earlier.

The studies for the SoUL project were conducted in various neighbourhood contexts throughout the Western and Eastern Cape, as well as in a range of work sites. We followed the theoretical approach of the New Literacy Studies (Gee 1990), which presents the meanings and uses of literacy as socially and ideologically embedded and challenges "Great Divide" assumptions that literacy is an autonomous technology with universal significance. Studying the social and ideological meanings of literacy required of us to reflect on how people construct meaning in their words and in their actions. Instead of presenting the words of interviewees as objective statements (as I had done in my MA thesis on the meaning of literacy for farm workers in the Western Cape), these studies aimed rather to interrogate the words as well as the actions of subjects, as texts to be interpreted. In each case study, we sought to find

the meanings and valuations attached to literacy as they are embedded in the formations of social identity of the groups that were studied. It is from this perspective that I present this thesis.

We adopted an ethnographic approach to our work, "in the sense that it involve[d] close concentrated observation over periods of time, and [was] rooted in reflexive theoretical principles" (Prinsloo and Breier 1996:24). We based much of the research on detailed narratives told by people in depth interviews. In some cases (such as Mc Ewan and Mañan's study of a rural Eastern Cape village (1996) it was detailed fieldnotes of each visit to research sites which provided most insight into the uses of literacy. My own research in Bellville South was documented in the form of transcribed interviews, notes on informal visits and observations, and detailed accounts of events I had attended, such as funerals and pension pay-outs. The method we used was similar to situational analysis which involves the intensive analysis of a small set of social actions with the aim of making possible an understanding of the larger context (Alistair and Rogers 1995:6).

We aimed at developing an actor-oriented thick description of culture, as defined by Geertz (1973:15). Geertz perceives *culture* as "symbolic action - action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies" (1973:10). The task of the ethnographer is to undertake a *thick description* (describing webs of meaning, and not just surface phenomena) of the ways in which cultural acts, which may be as slight as a wink, *signify* within the context that they are interpreted.

Geertz is thus interested in the interpretation of the *actor* rather than the researcher. By calling the research subjects actors, he emphasises their active and creative role which they have in shaping meaning. Geertz explains what he understands as actor-oriented research:

What it means is that description of Berber, Jewish, or French culture must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through, the formulae they use to define what happens to them. (1973:15).

The research documentation was thus intended to reflect the understandings and

interpreting strategies which the actors use in making sense of what happens to them. This aim differs from that of a researcher who uses only her own (imposed) understandings and interpreting strategies in collecting and interpreting data. An example is the initial questionnaire research that I had undertaken in Newtown, which was based on my understanding that people there needed literacy and that all we needed to find out was who needed what level of literacy.

The aim of the study that I conducted in Bellville South thus cast literacy in terms of the interpretations to which, as I understand them, people in Bellville South subjected their experience. From my experience in Newtown I knew that any foregrounding of literacy would invoke the powerful image of standard, schooled literacy and could keep me from being shown literacy practice from a local perspective.

Despite this intention, and partly because of the project's concerns with literacy questions, I started my fieldwork by interviewing men and women who were attending literacy classes during the day and at night in Bellville South. Understandably, the context of the literacy classroom once more led people to present themselves to me as helpless illiterates.

After the interviews, however, I made a point of visiting a number of the interviewees with whom I developed friendly relationships. A few of the women in Bellville South felt concerned about my safety in the light of continuing violence in the streets. They thus took me under their wing, telling me where to go and where not to, and at what times of the day and week. My movements were thus again restricted in terms of interaction with men and street cultures. After a few months I became more daring and approached local gang members without my self appointed protectors' knowledge. But increased rates of gangster killings soon kept me from pursuing that enterprise.

The women that I had met introduced me to their friends and took me with them to church, to women's meetings and to pension pay-outs. A turning point in my position in Bellville South was when I was invited to a funeral of a young man in a family I had got to know. Subsequent to my participation in this event, some people in Bellville South came to treat me as part of their social world and not just as an intruding researcher.

People who had previously presented themselves to me as helpless illiterates were in due course showing me that they could, in fact, read the Bible, write letters and go about their daily activities which frequently involved reading and writing. In these situations, they were, in the first instance, mothers and fathers, home managers, workers, worshippers, pensioners, shoppers, etc. When they entered the literacy class, however, they became literacy learners, and their interpretations of literacy as symbolic act changed significantly. It is precisely with this ambivalence of role identity vis a vis literacy that I am primarily concerned. Having first come to literacy from a linguistic background, my approach had to change towards an ethnography of communication, as described by Saville-Troike (1983):

(T)he ethnography of communication extends understandings of cultural systems to language, at the same time relating it to social organisation, role-relationships, values and beliefs, and other shared patterns of knowledge and behaviour which are transmitted from generation to generation in the process of socialization/ enculturation. Further, it contributes to the study of cultural maintenance and change [...] (1983:9).

I then focused specifically on the ways in which the use of the written mode of language relates to peoples' changing social identities and role relationships. Once I had accepted that the people I had interviewed were taking on different roles in different situations, I focused my research on understanding the interpretative codes they used in giving meaning to their own actions. The research became, to some extent therefore, a study of performance. Realising this led me to experiment with the idea of literacy as performance, an idea I pursued in chapter 5.

A study of this nature is necessarily an intrusion into the space and lives of others. I found the people of Newtown and Bellville South extremely tolerant of my presence and occasional interrogations. Where I was not welcome, I was excluded. Often, however, I sensed that the people I interviewed saw my presence, the tape recorder, and the fact that their stories were going to be written down, as an acknowledgement of themselves. Indeed, in some cases I found I had no choice but to interview a neighbour who was jealous that she had been skipped out and demanded my interest.

It has been a constant struggle in my research to remain analytical rather than revert to writing a novel (I have, at one stage, been teased by fellow researchers for appearing to write a new version of Athol Fugard's *People are living there*). What I have finally attempted to do in this thesis is to present my ethnographies of Newtown and Bellville South as "telling tales" that comment (allegorically in this sense) on the master narratives of South African adult literacy policy.

Alongside having to develop new methods to literacy research, I also had to rework my understandings of literacy itself. I have been influenced significantly by empirical and theoretical research that I read, and which I will now discuss.

## 2. Literacy as autonomous technology

When I first became involved in literacy work, I pursued, with some missionary zeal, the task of "making literate" the street children with whom I was working. I saw literacy as a set of skills which these children could acquire with practice, and which would inevitably better their lives.

I began to read international literature on literacy. My certainty about the universal value of literacy was strengthened by two sources: the work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and the writings of Goody, Ong and other theoreticians who catalogued the consequences of literacy.

### 2.1 UNESCO and the mass approach to literacy

Like many other literacy practitioners, I regarded the work of UNESCO as an authoritative representation of the uses of literacy. As part of its post World War Two development initiatives, the United Nations entrusted UNESCO "with both a standard-setting responsibility and a technical-cooperation function concerning adult education generally and adult literacy more specifically" (Gillette 1987:197). UNESCO has had a major impact on the conceptualisation of literacy as a form of development internationally. This is evident from the number of national literacy campaigns that the organisation has been involved in (UNESCO 1972).

Through what Bataille (1976) has called the mass approach to literacy, UNESCO mobilised international attention to identify and manage adult "illiteracy" during the 1970s. The idea of a mass eradication of illiteracy was described as follows: "The illiteracy problem is approached on a massive scale, but its eradication is attempted in progressive operational targets, different for each state and union" (Bataille 1976:16). Bataille's report (1976), written for UNESCO, discusses mass campaigns that had been launched in eighteen countries worldwide. The UNESCO-driven campaigns operated with a series of assumptions that allowed literacy and illiteracy to be understood in terms of a single and simply definable set of criteria which could be statistically measured. Given this kind of definition, world illiteracy could, like diseases such as smallpox, be eradicated through mass "vaccination" campaigns that were recognised as necessary because illiteracy was treated as a dangerous social condition.

The first assumption was that literacy and illiteracy are unambiguous concepts which can be defined by means of simple statements. Thus UNESCO recommended in 1958 that an *illiterate person* be defined as one "who cannot with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life"(quoted in Kahler 1983:27). In 1976, UNESCO stated that "[i]n quantitative terms, a standard attainment in functional literacy may be equated with the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic achieved after a set number of years of primary or elementary schooling" (quoted in Kahler 1983:27).

With this statement, UNESCO reinforced the modernist assumption that people's literacy "levels" could be statistically determined in terms of the literacy "skills" they would have acquired after a set period of formal schooling. The concept of literacy was constructed as homogenous and removed from social and historical context.

The second assumption that followed from UNESCO's understanding of literacy was that a mass approach to literacy training had to be followed. This approach involved the large-scale provision of "literacy" to the "illiterate" masses which had been identified in terms of their schooling deficit. The concept of a massive campaign to eliminate illiteracy was a popular ideal of liberation in South Africa too. I have mentioned in the previous chapter that

the post-apartheid Government of National Unity answered this demand in 1994 by proposing a National Literacy Campaign as a presidential lead project (RSA 1994c).

The need expressed to "wipe out" or "eradicate" illiteracy highlights a third assumption which promoters of a mass literacy campaign for South Africa have in common with UNESCO. "Illiteracy" is seen as a social problem with such grave implications for development that its "eradication" requires mass campaigns. In the Udaipur Literacy Declaration of 1982, UNESCO's position regarding the enormity of the "struggle against illiteracy" was stated as follows:

Conscious of the need to arouse awareness, nationally and internationally, that the struggle against illiteracy can be won, to demonstrate solidarity with those working on behalf of the thousand million adult illiterates in the world, and to vigorously mobilize resources and will to eradicate illiteracy before the end of this century...[we] hereby adopt this Declaration (cited in Bhola 1984:201).

Wagner (1987:3) refers to this approach to illiteracy in terms of a medical model used by development agents intent on eradicating the "germs" of illiteracy:

In a manner similar to successful attempts to eliminate certain diseases, such as smallpox or malaria, the eradication of illiteracy is often seen as something that might be possible if only a big push could "inoculate" adults along with their children, so that they may be protected from "illiteracy" for years to come.

With "illiteracy" perceived as a single, statistically definable and unambiguously dangerous social condition of enormous scale, the need for "mass eradication" campaigns was thus quite evident. This top-down definition of deficit led to various UNESCO-led campaigns, the success of which was measured in terms of the rise and fall of literacy statistics (UNESCO 1976).

In the late 'seventies, however, the notion of *functional literacy* caused a conceptual shift in the focus of UNESCO's literacy campaigns.

## 2.2. UNESCO's "shift" to functional literacy

The term "functional literacy" was coined by the United States Army during World War II to indicate "the capacity to understand written instructions necessary for conducting basic military functions and tasks" (De Castell, Luke, Luke, Maclennan 1986:7-8). UNESCO adapted the concept to signify that literacy implied having the "skills" necessary both for work (UNESCO 1972:43) and to participate in development. "'Functional literacy work' should be taken", according to UNESCO, "to mean any literacy operation conceived as a component of economic and social development projects" (UNESCO 1970:9). UNESCO regarded the need to focus on "functional literacy" as arising from the necessity "for people to understand that there was a close link between illiteracy and underdevelopment" (UNESCO 1970:8).

In chapter 1 I have discussed how the concept of development has been used and abused in relation to literacy in South Africa. While presenting the notion of "functional literacy" as a shift in their definition of literacy, UNESCO was in fact merely reinforcing their existing notion that literacy consisted of a neutral set of "skills" or "functions" required for development. In De Castell's words, the neutral terms used displayed a "fundamental unwillingness to examine the covertly normative principles underlying any socially sanctioned conception of literacy" (1986:8).

My own early uncritical reading of the UNESCO work confirmed for me that, by teaching the youths in my literacy class the "skills" required to make them "literate", I would enable their "development" and rescue them from at least one of the threats ("illiteracy") to their lives as street children.

## 2.3. Literacy as technology of domestication and intellect

The work of a number of anthropologists who described literacy as an essential technology for development gave further support to my belief in the value of literacy. The writings of Goody (1978) and Ong (1982) were influential in shaping my initial understandings of literacy. Goody's *Domestication of the*

*Savage Mind* (1978) was written as a comment on Levi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* (1966). The work of Levi-Strauss, concerned with the way in which modes of thought have changed over time and space, challenged interpretations that regarded this process as an emergence of logical from pre-logical procedures (Levi-Bruhl 1923) or rationality from irrationality (Wilson 1970). Levi-Strauss then distinguishes between "two distinct modes of scientific thought", classifying them as follows (I summarise):

Table 4: Modes of scientific thought

'hot'	'cold'
modern	neolithic
science of the abstract	science of the concrete
scientific thought	mythical thought
using concepts	using signs

(Goody 1978:7)

Goody lists the "grand dichotomies" of society in a manner similar to Levi-Strauss, distinguishing between primitive/advanced, savage/domesticated, traditional/modern, developing/developed, pre-logical/logical (1978:147). He then goes further to state that the difference between "savage" and "domesticated" people was the result of the technology of writing. Goody describes his project as intending "to provide some kind of explanation, some kind of mechanism, for the changes that are assumed to occur" (1978:16) between savage and domesticated cultures:

I have tried to take certain of the characteristics that Lévi-Strauss and others have regarded as marking the distinction between primitive and advanced, between wild and domesticated thinking, and to suggest that many of the valid aspects of these somewhat vague dichotomies can be related to changes in the mode of communication, especially the introduction of various forms of writing (1978:16).

Goody's attempt to explain the dichotomies in terms of the technologies of literacy thus resulted in his foregrounding of an oral/literate dichotomy.

The development of logic, in the sense of an instrument of analytic procedures, was in Goody's understanding, a function of writing (1978:11).

Walter Ong's *Literacy, the technology of the intellect* (1982) followed on Goody's argument that writing is the technology which transformed human consciousness. Ong rephrased Levi-Strauss' statement that "the primitive mind totalises" to "the oral mind totalises" (1982:175). He argues that writing is a technology which restructures consciousness, substantiating this argument by listing ways in which literacy "divides and distances" (instead of totalises). Thus writing separates known from knower, and promotes objectivity, separates interpretation from data, enforces verbal precision of a sort unavailable in oral cultures, separates past from present (1982:36-40). Ong states that "human consciousness evolves", and argues that "this evolution (into modern consciousness) has depended on writing" (1982:178).

Based on abstract arguments about the kinds of reasoning procedures facilitated by writing, Goody and Ong made generalising claims about the differences between oral and literate cultures. It is for this reason that their approach was seen as a school of thought was described as the "Great Divide" literacy discourse (Gee 1990). Their dichotomous and generalising way of thinking about literacy corresponds with the clear definition of the difference between a literate and an illiterate person.

The orality-literacy divide idea was developed by Olson (1977) in a way that it used to identify orality and literacy as modes in one society. Realising that "oral" and "literate" cultures can only exist separately in theory, Olson focused on the differences between oral and written *modes* of communication, or, in linguistic terms, the difference between text and utterance. Olson described written language modes as having a bias "towards providing definitions, making all assumptions and premises explicit, and observing the formal rules of logic procedures" and being "a poor fit to daily, ordinary, practical and personally significant experience" (1977:278). Oral modes, on the other hand, are ideally suited for expressing and understanding practical and concrete situations while being "an instrument of limited power for exploring abstract ideas" (1977:278).

Equipped with theories such as these just described, I pursued the ideal of

developing street children through literacy which, I believed, would equip them with the ability to explore abstract ideas and to use analytical thinking. In working with these youngsters, however, I began to notice that literacy did not in fact have the universal consequences I had been led to believe it would. The learners responded in different ways to the learning environment I was creating for them, drawing in their own understanding of literacy and their own text interpretation strategies.

I attempted to gain more of an understanding of the problem through the work I did for my MA dissertation where I conducted depth interviews with "illiterate" farm workers in the Western Cape. I then focused my analysis solely on what the farm workers (who were attending literacy classes) had told me: that they regarded themselves as "blind" and dependent because of their "illiteracy", but that they had found strategies for dealing with written texts. In interacting with farm people, I began to suspect that what "illiteracy" meant to my interviewees was in fact determined by their subordinate positions as farm workers. Yet my existing theoretical framework did not enable me to interpret these informal observations. My dissertation was based on a thematic analysis of the data I gathered through the planned interviews during which people spoke about their positions as "illiterates" and not about their social positions on the farms where they worked and lived.

When I moved to the Eastern Cape and started a literacy project in Newtown, I became even more convinced that teaching people standard literacy was perhaps not as neutral and unquestionably beneficial to the learners as I had hoped. I began to explore the writings of researchers who were commenting critically on the assumptions of UNESCO and writers like Goody and Ong.

### **3. Ideological models of literacy**

Reactions to the totalising and generalising explanations of literacy made by Goody, Ong and others came from a number of disciplines. In general, the revisionist trend was towards an understanding that literacy is not a neutral technology that can be applied with equal consequence to all, but that "literacy" can only be described in social contexts, and as having ideological significance. Street (1984) referred to this trend in literacy studies as a move towards an "ideological model" of literacy.

My own theoretical shift towards an ideological understanding of literacy has been influenced mainly by the work of Paulo Freire, and by a variety of historical and ethnographic studies which have described as the New Literacy Studies (Street 1994). I situate my present work within that paradigm.

### 3.1 Freire and literacy as empowerment

I briefly referred to the ideas of Paulo Freire (1972, 1975, 1987) in chapter 1 since his literacy teaching method has been one of the major influences to shape non-governmental literacy organisations in South Africa, during the apartheid era particularly. Briefly, Freire developed his approach to literacy as a means of empowering Brazilian workers to be able to vote, but also to develop their critical consciousness. Freire protested against the idea that literacy was merely a neutral technology which enabled the development of literate cultures. Stating that "literacy cannot be reduced to the treatment of letters and words as purely mechanical domain", Freire and Macedo (1987) write:

In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, we call for a view of literacy as a form of cultural politics. In our analysis, literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people. In the larger sense, literacy is analyzed according to whether it serves to reproduce existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change (1987:xii).

While Freire was thus aware that literacy could be used to disempower people, he stressed that it could (and should) be used to empower them by introducing cultural practices that would promote democratic and emancipatory change. Through social consciousness raising (what Freire called "reading the world"), literacy was to be used for the personal and social empowerment of the workers. Ong (1982) regarded literacy as a neutral technology which could raise consciousness - in his terms, the ability to engage in abstract and analytical thought. Freire (1972) saw literacy training as an ideological method for social consciousness raising; that is, empowering people to critically "read" their world rather than complacently accept the silencing

of their voices by the political authorities of the day.

UNESCO adopted the notion that literacy could be a vehicle for empowerment in the Declaration of Persepolis (1975), which considers literacy

to be not just the process of learning the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, but a contribution to the liberation of man and his full development. Thus conceived, literacy creates the conditions for the acquisition of a critical consciousness for the contradictions in society in which man lives and of its aims... (quoted by Kahler 1983:32).

Freire thus brought recognition to the fact that literacy is not simply a neutral technology, and that it can be used both to liberate and to oppress people. Yet underlying the approach of Paulo Freire as adopted by UNESCO, was still the notion that "illiterate" people were by definition in an inferior position from which they had to be liberated. Freire designed a model whereby "underdeveloped societies" develop from accepting a "culture of silence" to embracing a critical consciousness (Hammen-Poldermans 1975:35-6). In Freire's hermeneutics, "illiteracy" signified this "culture of silence", and becoming literate meant acquiring a critical consciousness. This model does not, however, allow for the possibility that "illiterate" people may, in fact, have a highly critical consciousness and are not necessarily silenced by the fact that they are illiterate.

While Freire recognised the social embeddedness of literacy, his approach to literacy was generalising and based on modernist development assumptions that literacy interventions would lead people from disempowerment to empowerment. The New Literacy Studies, within which I situate my thesis, challenge these assumptions.

### **3.2 Arguments of the New Literacy Studies**

What Street (1994) refers to as the New Literacy Studies, consists, in fact, of the works of a diversity of social scientists. I now briefly summarise their various arguments and expand on each. New Literacy Studies have looked at the meanings and consequences of literacy in specific social and historical

contexts. The writers have argued that, in order to develop an understanding of the context-specific meanings of literacy, it is more useful to talk of literacy practices and literacy events than to isolate literacy as an autonomous technology. They have distinguished between different literacies and situated them in ideological and discursive contexts.

### 3.2.1 Practice accounts of literacy

One argument that has been raised against development paradigms that see literacy (meaning literacy as taught at school) as an unquestionable social good, is that they hardly take into account the socio-historical contexts in which literacy assumes meaning. In a series of historical studies, Graff has indicated the significantly different consequences which acquisition of schooled literacy and the use of writing has had on different societies at different times. Graff (1981) argues, for instance, that the industrialisation of Canada was furthered by the provision of schooled literacy, not in the first place because of its transmission of cognitive skills but because it served to regularize and discipline behaviour.

The provision of mass schooling; the working class' acceptance of it, though a questioning one and universal, public education all served in this direction: promoting discipline, morality and the 'training in being trained' that mattered most in the creation and preparation of a modern industrial and urban work force. These were the purposes of school - and one use of literacy (1981:259-260).

The implication of Graff's argument is that policy makers cannot assume that literacy is a neutral technology which has always been employed for the good of all people. In this example, the object of development - industrialisation - served the interest of capitalism by coercing the workforce into its culture. Similarly, Graff argues, we cannot accept unconditionally Enlightenment notions that a free, self-governing people must be educated. He uses historical case studies to indicate that "literacy *can* and *has* been employed for social control and political repression as well" (1987:19).

The conclusion to which Graff comes in his historical studies is that

"understandings of literacy require a *further, larger* step: into precise, historically specific material and cultural contexts". (Graff 1987:23). He continues by quoting psychologist M.M. Lewis saying that "the only literacy that matters is the literacy in use. Potential literacy is empty, void" (in Graff 1987:23).

A seminal study on the consequences of literacy in use in a specific context was Scribner and Cole's study of literacy amongst the Vai of Liberia (1981). Scribner and Cole wanted to find out how the Vai, an Islamic people with diverse cultural influences, were using literacy, and how the cognitive consequences of reading and writing varied between the contexts within which the Vai used literacy (1981:235). Their study presented a contemporary critique of the notion that literacy is a uniform technology which has universally predictable consequences for human development.

Scribner and Cole found that literacy had a number of forms amongst the Vai. Apart from literacy taught at school, the Vai were using two "nonschooled" literacies: reading and writing in the Vai script, a script developed by the Vai and used for local writing purposes, and Qu'ranic literacy, which involved the study and recitation of the Qu'ran (1981: 246). These literacies were specific, and varied according to the socially organised practices of which they formed part (local literacy practices involving the use of the Vai script, religious literacy practices involving the use of Qu'ranic literacy). Scribner and Cole argued that the specific uses of these literacies accounted for the fact that each form of literacy had markedly different cognitive consequences and social significance for its users.

Scribner and Cole's kind of focus on literacy as part of social practice called for research methods that would engage with the literacy practices of specific people rather than making generalised claims based on statistics. The usefulness of ethnography for this purpose was made evident in Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983), in which she uses a detailed description of the literacy practices of three neighbourhoods in the Piedmont Carolinas to account for the differences in school performance between children from the neighbourhoods. She also used the concept of *literacy events*: by studying the specific events during which people used literacy, she developed an understanding of literacy that was more dynamic and specific than

generalised theories about the consequences of literacy.

Heath found that children brought up in the middle class, "mainstream" neighbourhood were read bedtime stories, taught to respond in a structured way to questions related to books, and generally made aware of the authority of books and writing-related activities performed by their parents. In a white working class neighbourhood, children were taught that books were important, but parents seldom read. "Making up" stories was regarded as telling lies and children struggled at school with imaginative writing. In a black working class neighbourhood, storytelling was a highly imaginative and verbal performance related to the context. Children were not "taught" to read by their parents, nor to "decontextualise" knowledge - a skill which schooled literacy requires. Because of the different ways children from these three neighbourhoods had been brought up to relate to narratives and the representation of fact or imaginative tales, their responses to schooled literacy learning varied considerably. While the "mainstream" children who had been enculturated into the logic of schooled literacy performed well, the children from the white and black working class neighbourhoods encountered a variety of obstacles to learning (Heath 1981).

Street (1984) has since supported Scribner and Cole's (1981) and Heath's (1983) claims that literacy has different meanings for different people, and that people use various literacies in a diversity of practices and events. Street's study of Cheshmeh village in Iran indicated that, beside schooled literacy, there were other literacies, which he described as 'maktab' literacy (acquired in religious schools) and economic literacy which formed part of the social practices of these people.

Maktab literacy, which often required no more than learning certain passages by rote from the Qu'ran, did not necessarily require the "reader" to be literate, in the schooled sense. Nevertheless, the mastery of maktab literacy was an important sign of religious authority for the people (Street 1984:133). Moreover, the villagers, many of whom had not been to school, adapted their maktab literacy for trading purposes, thus designing a third kind of literacy. With his analysis of the different literacies used by the villagers, Street (1984) illustrated that standard, schooled literacy was not the only kind of literacy, but that people were using different literacies (such as the

variations of maktab literacy) for different purposes (such as religious and trading practices).

All these studies awoke my interest in finding out what the people in Newtown, where I was at that stage doing research, used literacy for. From interviewing people, watching them using literacy, and by collecting the texts they were reading and writing, it became clear to me that even those who had no schooled literacy were in fact using a variety of other kinds of literacy (which I will discuss in chapter 5).

When I joined the Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) project team in Cape Town, our project leader, Mastin Prinsloo, insisted that I move beyond a mere description of different kinds of literacies to an interpretation of the ideological meanings of literacy for the people in my sites of study.

### 3.2.2. Literacy according to the ideological model

While working on the SoUL project, my understanding of the ideological nature of literacy was influenced significantly by Street's writings. Street (1984, 1993) has distinguished between an "ideological" and an "autonomous" model of literacy. Street stated that the autonomous model, as presented by Goody and Ong (see 1.2 above) assumed that literacy is a universal, autonomous technical skill. He claimed that this model was based on the "essay text" form of literacy associated with Western schooling and the formal reading and writing of essay-texts (1984:2). This form of literacy - a system of decontextualised knowledge validated through test performance - is also referred to as "schooled literacy" (Gumpertz 1986:41-44).

Reiterating Graff's point (1987) about the use of literacy to control and oppress, Street said the following of the "ideological model":

The model stresses the significance of the socialisation process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for participants and is therefore concerned with general social institutions through which this process takes place and not just the explicit 'educational' ones. It treats sceptically claims by western liberal educators for the 'openness', 'rationality' and critical awareness of what they teach, and investigates the role of such

teaching in social control and the hegemony of the ruling class. It concentrates on the overlap and interaction of oral and literate modes rather than stressing a "great divide". (Street 1984:5)

The ideological model of literacy thus presented a critique of a definition of literacy in standard educational terms, as neutral sets of functional skills. The argument is that the meanings of literacy are, as Heath (1983) had indicated, linked to the socialisation processes by means of which literacy becomes part of social practice. Literacies have their roots in various social institutions, apart from educational ones. In relation to these institutions, the reader/writer acts as "a social agent, located in a network of social relations, in specific places in a social structure" (Kress 1990:5). The meanings of literacy should therefore be studied in the social contexts of their use, instead of in isolation as cognitive skill.

Finally, Street comments on the idea, argued by Olson (1977) of a "great divide" between oral and written modes of communication. Drawing on Finnegan's findings (1988) about the overlaps between cultures where orality on the one hand, or literacy on the other, is the dominant form of expression, Street (1993) elaborated on the point that oral and written modes are mixed together in social practice and that oral modes of communication are as capable as written modes of expressing deductive logic.

Street (1987) has also argued that UNESCO and other agencies concerned with literacy tend to base their policies on the dominant definition of literacy in terms of schooling, thereby negating the significance of literacy practices which fall outside of that definition. He continues:

This model assumes a single direction in which literacy development can be traced, and associates it with "progress", "civilization", individual liberty, and social mobility. It isolates literacy as an independent variable and then claims to be able to study its consequences. These consequences are classically represented in terms of economic "take-off" or in terms of cognitive skills. An "ideological" model, on the other hand, forces one to be more wary of grand generalisations and

cherished assumptions about literacy "in itself" (1987:49).

Taking understandings of literacy beyond these "grand generalisations", researchers such as Street (1987) have concerned themselves with the politics and meanings of literacy in specific sites of literacy use. Different literacies and their social meanings have again been related to different discourses. I have found the focus on the relationship between discourses and literacies particularly helpful in undertaking ethnographic analysis of my research material.

### 3.2.3 Discourses and literacies

Shifts away from thinking of literacy as a free-standing and neutral technology has led recent researchers to explore the discursive contexts within which different literacies are constructed and used. Kress (1990:7) defines discourses as "systematically-organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution", thus associating discourses with the ideologies of social institutions.

I would describe literacy practices as embodying the use of systematically organised sets of written statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. The literacies of dominant institutions can be used as an example. Gee (1990:138) argues that the school-oriented literacy practices, which are all that is recognised as literacy by adult literacy policy makers, belong to 'dominant' or mainstream discourses that embody social capital and lead to social good in society, and are controlled by dominant institutions (Gee 1990:145).

The discursive rules of dominant and standard literacies, like dominant dialects, "come to seem 'inevitably' and 'naturally' right in ways denied to those of less advantaged groups" (Montgomery 1989:74). Because of the high value given to standard literacies by dominant institutions, other forms of literacy which form part of non-dominant discourses (in Gee's terms) are often ignored. These literacies can again be compared with non-standard dialects which are governed by their own discursive principles.

In chapter 5 I develop the notion that non-standard literacies, as with non-

standard varieties of language, contribute to defining the group identities of their users. Sociolinguists have used the term "speech community" to describe a group of people who have common ways of using language, common reactions and attitudes to language, and common social bonds. Montgomery (1989) critiques the notion of "speech communities" by arguing that people using similar language varieties may in fact have a diversity of linguistic practice and attitudes to language. He also states that, on the other hand, a distinct variety of language can be used to affirm social solidarity between its users, and at the same time serve a boundary-maintaining role in relation to those who do not use the language of the group created thereby (Montgomery 1989:134-5). I will explore in chapter 5 the ways in which non-standard literacies serve similar functions for their users.

In studying the literacy practices of people who were supposedly "illiterate", I became interested in the social processes people became involved in when having to interpret written texts. Finnegan (1983) produced a seminal study in which she argued that literacy practices are seldom the individualised processes of text en- and de-coding they are assumed to be by "great divide" thinkers. Her research, based on depth interviews with "illiterate" adults, led to the conclusion that the roles which these adults had in their *social networks* determined whether they would experience their "illiteracy" as a lack at all.

The focus of my research developed from defining the impact of different kinds of literacies, to looking at the processes by which the meanings of such literacies are negotiated. I have been influenced in this regard by Baynham (1993) who conducted a study in which he analyzed ways in which Moroccan migrants in London make use of mediators in interpreting written texts. He refers to the process by which these mediators shift between languages (codes) and oral and written communication (modes) as code- and mode switching. I have found Baynham's ideas useful in describing the processes through which people in my research areas made sense of written texts.

In chapter 5 I describe how code- and modeswitching results from the different social identities that people assume. In doing my research I began to see that literacies, as they are constructed and used in discursive contexts, are related to the social identities of their users, and that "language is always

spoken (and written, for that matter) out of a particular *social identity* (or *social role*), an identity that is a composite of words, actions and (implied) beliefs, values and attitudes" (Gee 1990:140).

#### 3.2.4. *Literacy and social identity*

A growing body of international research is today engaging with the complex social identities of minimally schooled women, of people in rural areas (who would be regarded as "underdeveloped" by modernist policy makers) and of ethnic minorities (Fingeret 1980, Scollon and Scollon 1981, Bledsoe and Robey 1986, Barton and Ivanic 1991, Fishman 1991, Kulick and Stroud 1990, Puckett 1992, Rockhill 1993). Much of the work uses in-depth case studies to indicate how people's social identities shape the meanings and uses of the literacies they use.

For instance, in her study of Hispanic immigrant women in the United States, Rockhill (1993) found a popular association between English and education, which carried, for these women, "a symbolic dimension of movement into a better, more powerful class and culture - another world, another life, which is both desired and feared" (1993:169). Ironically, however, it was precisely that symbolic value of English literacy which kept Hispanic women from acquiring it, since their becoming literate was seen to pose a threat to the authority of men in their families (1993:170).

Studies such as Rockhill's made it evident to me, firstly, that I needed to find out what the specific meanings of literacy were for the people in my research areas, and, secondly, that I could not rely on grand generalisations about the consequences of literacy. My aim therefore became to develop a "grounded aesthetics" of literacy for my research areas. Willis (1990:129) defines grounded aesthetics as "the basic ordinary micro-mechanisms which are producing daily and in concrete contexts what we regard as general social and cultural change, 'periodised' shifts and reformations in human identities". The focus of the studies I have referred to, and of my thesis, is similarly on the specificities of literacy in use and its relationship to the shifts and reformations of people's social identities.

I have described in 2.2.1 what I mean by *the specificities of literacy in use*

when I discussed practice accounts of literacy, and the notions of literacy practices and literacy events. My understanding of *social identities* is set against the dichotomous categories which policy makers use to identify their target populations. I regard all forms of identification - including statistical classification - as "the rendering to someone of identity" (Friedman 1992:322). The categories which policy makers use to identify adult literacy target populations ("illiterate", female, rural, black) both privilege certain identities of the people they refer to, and create the impression that these identities are somehow *fixed*.

In a somewhat cynical statement, Friedman (1992:362) argues that people who have been targeted for development initiatives (he refers to the Third World) tend to adopt the identities attributed to them by the developers because it allows them access to the products of modernity. Thus a contestation of power occurs: the "underdeveloped" identify with the deficit identities they have been given, but only because it gives them access to desired material objects and to forms of power. However I argue that people who assume these deficit identities do so only temporarily and for specific purposes; the same people have authoritative social positions in other contexts not defined by the development discourses.

Rather than limiting my understanding of development target groups' identities to the categorisations used for development initiatives, I focus on what Marcus (1992:315) calls the "situated production of identity", which he explains as follows:

The identity of anyone or any group is produced simultaneously in many different locales of activity by many different agents for many different purposes. One's identity where one lives, amongst one's neighbours, friends, relatives, or co-strangers, is only one social context, and perhaps not the most important one in which it is shaped. From a modernist approach to identity in ethnography, it is this process of dispersed identity in many different places of differing character that must be grasped (Marcus 1992:315).

Following Marcus' reasoning, I argue in this thesis that people who have been

targeted for adult literacy interventions have dispersed identities that are situated in diverse social practice. Even if policy categorisations give a dominant position to race, gender and urban or rural residence, statistics cannot easily predict what the situated meanings of these seemingly fixed markers of identity would be for those identified through them, or what the outcomes would be of literacy interventions for those thus identified. I have thus chosen to use ethnography as a method, aiming to develop a "thick description" of the ways in which targeted people's identities are shaped by social practices, and how these in turn shape their valuing and use of literacy. My method is similar to situational analysis which aims "to isolate a small set of social actions for intense analysis, and to achieve this circumscription in a logically meaningful manner which makes possible an understanding of the larger context" (Rogers and Vertovec 1995:7). By focusing on specific events and case studies, I aim to develop an understanding of the larger context within which literacy obtains meaning for people that would typically be targeted for literacy interventions.

I have structured my ethnographic chapters around the categorical markers of identity which policy makers use (that is, population group, gender and rural or urban residence), but focused my analysis on *the situated production of identities in contexts where literacies are used*. By so doing, I have aimed to explore "the intertwining of diversity and homogeneity" (Marcus 1992:327) in people's understandings and uses of literacy in the two neighbourhoods where I conducted my research.

## Chapter 3

### Windows on Newtown and Bellville South

The critique of South African adult literacy policy that I present in this thesis is based on ethnographic work that I conducted in Newtown, an area of Fort Beaufort (a town in the Eastern Cape - see map 1) and in Bellville South, a suburb of greater Cape Town. People in both these areas qualified for inclusion in the adult literacy target population as defined in policy documents. Moreover, local development projects had already defined a need to provide literacy classes in Newtown and Bellville South. Both were declared coloured<sup>1</sup> areas under the Group Areas Act<sup>2</sup> and as such their residents are included in the population groups targeted for adult literacy intervention.

My aim in this chapter is to introduce Newtown and Bellville South in such a way as to demonstrate that standard maps fail to reflect the social diversity of life in Newtown and Bellville South as well as local references do. In doing this, I will introduce the style of argumentation that I will follow in the rest of the thesis: challenging the standard understandings of policy makers by foregrounding the perspectives of those people at whom policy makers' interventions are aimed. In this chapter I will therefore show that history books, standard maps and statistics representing Newtown and Bellville South create profiles of "need" which simplify, and to some degree contradict, the experiences of the inhabitants.

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<sup>1</sup>The concept "coloured" is discussed in chapter 4. In brief, it referred under apartheid law to people who could not be classified as either white or black (West 1988).

<sup>2</sup> The Group Areas Act of 1950 was proclaimed by the Nationalist government of South Africa with the purpose of geographically separating white, coloured and black population groups.

apartheid history. Newtown and Bellville South are both historically "coloured" areas and, as such, inhabited by part of the target population for literacy intervention. Formal histories which describe the processes leading up to the creation of Newtown and Bellville South as "coloured" areas, present specific narratives which reflect the experiences of only some of the inhabitants. I aim to show in this chapter that the inhabitants of these two areas have not simply been passive victims of a single historical process which led to the creation of Newtown and Bellville South as "coloured" areas, but that they have actively contributed to the shaping of their histories.

Statistically, Newtown should be given priority over Bellville South as target for development, since the former can be classified as "rural" and the latter as "urban". Newtown is part of the small town of Fort Beaufort with less than 23 000 residents in the whole district of which it forms part. Bellville South is part of an urban metropolis - the greater Cape Town - which has a few million inhabitants. As is typical of the difference between rural and urban areas in South Africa (Jacklin 1994), the people of Newtown had less access than those in Bellville South to resources such as educational facilities. Despite this, I here draw on local perceptions to challenge the assumption, based on socio-economic data, that Newtown has greater "need" than Bellville South and that it should be given preference for development intervention, particularly literacy. Next I demonstrate that Newtown and Bellville South have social structures not reflected in official data such as municipal and provincial maps of the areas. I will discuss ways in which inhabitants' renaming of their living areas reflect their perceptions of social differences between them. Finally, I argue in this chapter that policy makers should not assume that they can identify target populations for literacy intervention by using apparently "objective" data such as those represented in standardised statistics.

I begin this chapter then by discussing the formal histories of Newtown and Bellville South, and juxtaposing those with the diverse histories of people living in these two areas.

## 1. Historical windows on Newtown and Bellville South

The writers of the RDP document state that "(o)ur history has been a bitter one dominated by colonialism, apartheid, sexism and repressive labour policies" (RSA 1994c:4). As I have discussed in chapter 1, South African policy makers have defined development interventions as those that address the deficits created by this history of domination. They have aimed these interventions at those sections of the population whose members were victims of this history, thus including coloureds. I aim to show in the following pages that this single view of the history of people targeted for development intervention negates the diversity of people's histories and assumes that they were made into passive victims by the course of history.

Historians who have written about the histories of Newtown and Bellville South have written these as authors looking through specific windows, and presented coherent narratives about these places. I will discuss these histories in some detail first, and then show that these narratives do not adequately represent the histories of the present inhabitants of Newtown and Bellville South.

### 1.1 Histories of Newtown

#### 1.1.1 The Kat River settlement

Formal sources on "coloured" history in the Eastern Cape vary from politically conservative (Visagie 1978) to more liberal (Marais 1957) generalisations about the origins of the coloured population in the Eastern Cape. The view commonly held in these writings is that the Eastern Cape coloured population descended from the "Gonakwa-Hottentots", a branch of the Hottentot or Khoi (Visagie 1978:3), as well as the free slaves (*vryslawe*) who settled in the Eastern Cape. Those inhabitants of the Eastern Cape who had a lighter complexion than Africans are referred to in the historical sources which these writers draw on as "Bastards" (see Read in Visagie 1978:179). Some "Bastards" owned farms and were not easily distinguishable from "whites". They regarded themselves as superior to free-roaming Khoi and free slaves (Visagie 1978:7).

The historical annals have it that in 1828 Stockenstrom, the Commissioner-General of the Eastern Cape, gave a piece of land alongside the Kat River to Bastards, free slaves and Hottentots "of character, who possess stock" (Marais 1957:218). The Kat River Settlement, as this area was called, is said to have been established with the twofold aim of improving the condition of the Hottentots and of strengthening the Cape Colony's defences against the Xhosa, who were raiding and attacking the Colony from the eastern frontier (Marais 1957:217). The "coloureds" were thus used, in effect, to separate white settlers to the west from Xhosa 'tribes' to the east.

Along the banks of the Kat river there was fruitful irrigable land which was divided into allotments of 2 to 15 morgen. One of the regulations which Stockenstrom laid down for the inhabitants of the Kat River Settlement was compulsory commando duties in times of war (Marais 1957:219). Governor Stockenstrom neglected seriously the welfare of the settlement, and failed to provide the promised title-deeds (Marais 1957:222).

In addition to the poverty of the bulk of the settlement's people, exacerbated by stock theft on the part of the Xhosa, the position of the Kat River farmers was considerably retarded by the three frontier wars (1834-1847), fought between Settlers and Xhosa. By 1847, 900 of the 1000 male adults living in the Kat River Settlement were in active war service (Marais 1957:229). While Peires (1988) states that the inhabitants of the Kat River Settlement did not resent their military duties because "their material interests and cultural indications... led them to side with the white people" (1988:8), the frontier wars had the effect of ruining most of the agricultural work which had been built up in the Settlement.

Peires lists three incidents which finally disempowered the inhabitants of the Kat River Settlement. Firstly, the jealousy of the Eastern Cape (white) Settlers led to the appointment of harsh and unsympathetic magistrates in the area. This led to a rebellion by the inhabitants of the Kat River Settlement against the Colony in 1870. Next, the Boedel Erven Act of 1905 forced the Settlement's residents to lose much of their land because they could not pay the excessively high legal fees to register their properties. Finally, in 1981, the whole population of the Stockenstrom district was expropriated and handed over to the Ciskei "national state" (*Daily Dispatch*, 4 March 1982).

Peires states that the South African government at the time "refused to accept that they were dealing with a deeply rooted and coherent community, and they insisted on treating the Kat River people as a series of individuals" (Peires 1988:6,7).

Fort Beaufort had been established during the Frontier Wars as a British army base. In 1835, Fort Beaufort became the office of the justice of peace for the Kat River Settlement. In 1848 Fort Beaufort became a separate district, and at the same time the Kat River Settlement became a subdistrict of Fort Beaufort (Bergh 1985:42). From then on, the histories of the Settlement and Fort Beaufort were inextricably linked. With Fort Beaufort being the largest town in the vicinity, it was often there were of the Kat River Settlement settled when they left the land. Because Fort Beaufort was the closest town for many people who had lived in the Kat River Settlement, Newtown (the coloured area of Fort Beaufort) was a convenient place for them to resettle.

A significant amount of land in the Kat River Settlement belonged to churches. It was with money gained through the sale of their property in the settlement that the Congregational Church of Newtown built their church building, which is by far the most impressive building in Newtown.

The inhabitants of Newtown very rarely talked about the Kat River Settlement as such during my research, except in relation to the building of the Congregational Church, or in reference to monuments in the area. However, from references to where they come from, I established that some Newtown residents had grown up in the Kat River Settlement.

Mrs Maria Jacobs, one of the first residents of Newtown was in her late eighties when I interviewed her. She was born at the beginning of the century on a farm in Blinkwater, part of the Kat River Settlement (see map 10). She said that they left their farm when the "field marshall" told them to move out of "the Kaffirland" (Mrs Jacobs did not provide a date for this occasion, but I estimate from her age that this must have happened in the 1920s). Their family moved to an area of Fort Beaufort which she referred to as "the plain, where the whites are now living" (the properties in this area were subsequently bought by the University of Fort Hare). She explained to me that coloureds, white, englishmen, jews and afrikaners all lived together in Fort

Beaufort in her youth. Africans, however, lived in a separate "location". Mrs Jacobs' family moved to Newtown while she was still a young woman.

Social infrastructure started developing in Newtown in the 1920s. Newtown Congregational Primary School was established in 1929, in the face of growing prejudice against coloureds by whites in Fort Beaufort. Nicolas Cramford, a teacher at this school whose parents had taught there before him, told me that, at the time of the establishment of this school, "there was no coloured township, coloured area or whatever". He said that most coloured people lived in Fort Beaufort, and mentioned a few well known and influential families who were teachers and shop owners. His own grandfather was a famous builder. From an interview with Mr Cramford's parents I gathered that racial prejudices caused "coloured" families in Fort Beaufort to feel uneasy from around the late 1920s. Some moved to Newtown.

After the Group Areas Act of 1950, the coloured families who were left in Fort Beaufort were obliged to sell their land and to move to Newtown, on the other side of the river. The schoolmaster of the Catholic primary school in Newtown told me that this school, which was originally built on the eastern side of the road dividing Newtown and Fort Beaufort, was moved to Newtown itself only after the Group Areas Act of 1950. The original school building was being used as a warehouse at the time of my research.

Oral histories of this kind offer an image of Newtown's history, starting with the creation of the Kat River Settlement under colonial rule and continuing into the establishment of Newtown as the coloured township of Fort Beaufort under apartheid rule. This history presents the coloured population of Newtown as subjected to successive forms of oppression. In contrast, the narratives of other inhabitants of Newtown at the time of my research, reflected their diverse histories and the active role which they have taken in shaping their histories.

### **1.1.2 The many histories of Newtown residents**

I discovered in my search for an authoritative history of Newtown that the people living there had diverse narratives about their own histories. Only about half of my interviewees said that they were born in Newtown; the others

reported that they came from cities like East London, surrounding towns like Adelaide and Queenstown, and many from farms in the area, from whence they moved to Fort Beaufort and settled in Newtown. The following table represents the number of people in my sample who came from each area:

*Table 5: Birthplaces of Newtown residents interviewed*

AREA	NO OF PEOPLE
Newtown (second generation)	25
Farms Eastern Cape	15
Farms Orange Free State	2
Cape Town	2
Port Elizabeth	2
Graaff Rheinet	2

The narratives which people in Newtown offered about their origins varied considerably. On the one extreme, there were people like the Raads, who saw themselves as descendants from European nobility, and who had moved to Newtown to fulfil their calling in the church. On the other extreme, there were families like the Erasmusse who commuted between the farm where they were labourers and Fort Beaufort where their children went to school.

David Raad, the minister of the Congregational Church, and his wife, Eleanor, moved from Port Elizabeth to Newtown to serve in the church after David was confirmed as minister in 1969. Eleanor told me that her grandmother was a Wickham, whose father had come from England, and that her husband was descended from Sir Francis Drake. Both the Wickhams and the Drakes had, in her understanding, intermarried with slaves, with the result that they were coloured. The Raads had owned valuable property in Port Elizabeth which they were forced to sell for a negligible amount under the Group Areas Act.

The Erasmusse, who lived in a cardboard shack in Newtown, had moved there for the sake of their high school children, but were keeping one foot in the door on the farm whence they had come. On the morning that I interviewed Lena, the grandmother of the family, she had hiked in from the farm in the Grahamstown

area, where she was still living and working as a labourer. Her husband had retired from the same farm and was living with the rest of the family in Newtown. Lena identified the rest of the people in the shack to me as her son's child, her brother's son, his daughter's child and her husband's brother's child. She explained that they had set up a home in Newtown for the sake of being close to the children, who were going to a high school in one of the African townships of Fort Beaufort (Newtown did not have a high school, and the children could understand Xhosa). When I asked Lena why they chose to live in Newtown and not in the African township, she answered: "We are not Bantus. We can't go live there. Do the coloureds also live in the Bantu-locations?"<sup>3</sup>

These examples present two extremes of the assortment of stories which people presented in explaining why they have come to live in Newtown. They also demonstrate the active role which Newtown inhabitants had taken in shaping their histories. For the Raads, moving to Newtown was a career choice which offered them authority over the Congregational church in Newtown and all the neighbouring towns. For the Erasmusses, building a shack in Newtown was a convenient way of getting their children to school in town, while at the same time staying employed on the farm. Both the Raads and the Erasmusses had indeed been affected by various forms of oppression, but to present them only as victims of colonial and apartheid rule, would be to negate their active role in shaping their destinies.

Bellville South, my other research site, also has a formal history of oppression which can be juxtaposed with the diverse narratives of its inhabitants.

## 1.2 Histories of Bellville South

### 1.2.1 Residential resettlement in Bellville South

The formal histories of Bellville that I have found had distinctly political agendas. Strydom (1981) wrote his history from the perspective of the Afrikaner-Nationalist rulers of the day. According to him, Bellville owes its

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<sup>3</sup> "Ons is nie bantoes nie. Ons kan mos nie daar gaan bly nie. Bly die kleurlinge ook in die bantoe lokasies?"

modern history to the fact that it was "flooded as with a magic stroke by the Western industrial revolution"<sup>4</sup> (1981:1). The first inhabitants of the area, he wrote, were "apparently the Bushmen" whom the "white nation" got to know as "a people still in the hunting phase". He also refers to "the other coloured nation of the area" (the Khoi) saying about them that "their weapons are just their sticks and spears" (1981:1).

After a paternalistic defence of the "age-old cultures" of these "brown nations", Strydom continues to make explicit his argument that the Tygerberg, the northern area of greater Cape Town which later became to the city of Bellville, owed its development to "white enterprise":

That the story of the Tygerberg subsequently became the story of White enterprise is understandable in the light of world history. Three vital breakthroughs in technology had been put in place by Europeans five centuries earlier than Yellow and Black and Brown. First there was his victory over the open sea, which brought Bartholomeus Dias to the Cape and Columbus to the Americas; then there was the particular use of gunpowder by the European and his use of the printing press (1981:3)<sup>5</sup>

Thus Strydom honours three instruments of colonialism - conquest of the sea, and development of gunpowder and the printing press - as proof of the superior development of Europeans (read whites. The reverse argument, of course, is that these were the instruments used by whites to dominate and oppress "Yellow and Black and Brown"). The printing press represents the technology of writing or standardised literacy; it is significant for the argument that I will develop in chapter 4 that Strydom regards European ability to control standardised literacy as placing Europeans (whites) in a superior position to other people.

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<sup>4</sup> Quotes translated from Afrikaans

<sup>5</sup> "Dat die verhaal van die Tygerberg hierna grootliks die verhaal word van Blanke onderneming is verstaanbaar in die lig van die wêreldgeskiedenis. Drie lewensbelangrike deurbrake van die Europeër het hom op tegnologiese gebied vyf eeue voor Geel en Swart en Bruin geplaas. Eerstens was daar sy oorwinning oor die oop see, wat Bartolomeus Dias na die Kaap gebring het en Columbus na die Amerikas; dan was daar ook die Europeër se besondere aanwending van buskruit en sy gebruik van die boekdrukkuns".

The city of Bellville developed on one of the northern fringes of Cape Town. Its peri-urban character made it possible for the farm workers to settle here - in an area called Oakdale. But coloured settlement soon attracted the ire of white residents who, according to Strydom (1984:113) complained that Oakdale's convenience as a "target for squatting" was creating a health risk. Strydom, apparently quite proudly, records that the "problem" was solved after Dr Verwoerd, then Minister of Bantu Affairs (Natuurlikesake), visited Oakdale of his own accord. By 1957, he writes, the squatter area had been cleared and replaced by the fast-growing white suburb of Oakdale.

While "illegal [african] infiltrators" (Strydom 1981) were moved to Nyanga and Langa, the Bellville municipality proceeded to develop Bellville South as, in Strydom's description, "a model Coloured town" (1981:113). I interviewed Sofia Adams, who was a child at the time when africans were removed from Bellville South to Nyanga and Langa. She reflected on these events from a different perspective to Strydom's. Having grown up amongst african friends with whom she played and went to school, the removals made her aware of the difference between "us coloured girls", and "them", the africans who were moved to Nyanga. In the following quote she also reflects on the lingering ties between herself and her african friends:

The day when it [Nyanga] had to be built, when they went to live there, I went with those coloured girls to look at how they broke down those places where the houses had been. From there we separated, and we never saw them again. I also didn't really go there. But I know some of them, many of them who are there. If they ask me how I am, I say: I can see you are well. They were very fond of me.<sup>6</sup>

Sofia Adams' reminiscences about life in Bellville South opens perspectives similar to those in a study by Redlinghuis (1991) in which he presented the

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<sup>6</sup> "Die dag toe dit [Nyanga] moet gebou word, toe het hulle daar gaan bly, toe gaan ek en daai bruin meisies, het gaan kyk hoe het hulle nou die plekke so afgebreek waar hulle huise gestaan het. Daarvandaan het ons uitmekaar gegaan, en ons het nooit weer vir hulle gesien nie. Ek het ook nie eintlik gegaan na hulle toe nie. So ek ken van hulle, baie van wat daar is. As hulle vir my vra hoe dit gaan, dan sê ek: Ek kan sien dit gaan goed. Hulle is baie lief vir my".

narratives of the victims of forced removals in Bellville. He writes that a large portion of the "coloured" population to the north of Cape Town lived a self-supportive existence before 1936, after which Bellville started to develop as an industrial area. By 1948, plans were under way to develop residential areas for "lower-wage groups" (a euphemism for coloureds, according to Redlinghuis) next to the industrial area which formed part of the town planning scheme (1991:15). Though the Group Areas Act was only proclaimed in 1950, the ruling National Party had, by 1948 already, expressed its intentions to separate different "population groups" (Lewis 1987:245). The Bellville Municipality could thus continue the planning of residential segregation with the confidence that their plans would be approved.

At that stage, Redlinghuis (1991:37) states, 85% of the land in Bellville was covered by servitudes by means of which previous owners had prohibited black or coloured ownership of the land. Oakdale and Bellville South, two areas which were not covered by the servitudes, developed as the only "mixed" areas of Bellville. The town planning scheme of 1949 envisaged the development of Bellville South as the "coloured" area of Bellville, with Oakdale, situated higher up on the hill side, being developed as the (white) "pride" of Bellville. In 1950, the Bellville municipality requested central government to implement residential apartheid. In 1952, Bellville became one of the first areas in the then Cape Province in which residential apartheid was reinforced through the resettlement of about 3000 "coloured" residents from Oakdale to Bellville South, the "coloured" area.

The Oakdale Ratepayers' Association protested strongly in the media about the fact that they were referred to as "coloured squatters" and stated that "we, as the self-contained non-European area of 9 000 inhabitants, of nearly 50 years' occupation, have the legal right to stay; and we won't move an inch" (quoted in Redlinghuis 1991:64). Finally, however, those who were still living in what had become "white" Bellville had no choice but to move to Bellville South.

Redlinghuis uses oral histories to express the indignation and frustration of coloureds who were forced to move to Bellville South. His first interviewee, who had grown up in Oakdale, said that she started to feel the effect of racial prejudice as early as 1945:

My father's parents arrived there [in Oakdale] in 1902. My daughter, all my children and the third generation were all born there. And then she [my daughter] applied for her book of life, but they sent her back. She should write down the real address where she is born, because this area, so they said, was a white area. But at that stage, 1945, it had not yet become a white area (quoted in Redlinghuis 1991:85)<sup>7</sup>.

With her daughter's application for her "book of life", an official identity document which indicated her racial identity, this woman got the confirmation that her family would from then on be regarded as "coloured" and separate or different from whites living in the same area.

Strydom's (1981) report on the creation of Bellville as an industrial hive and Bellville South as a coloured working class suburb presents a single history of the origins of Bellville South. So, too, does Redlinghuis' (1991) report on residential resettlement in Bellville South during the time of the Group Areas Act. As in Newtown, however, people living in Bellville South at the time of my research reported on diverse personal histories.

### 1.2.2 The many histories of people in Bellville South

The people that I interviewed in Bellville South indicated that they had come from diverse places, as the following table represents:

Table 6: Birthplaces of Bellville South residents interviewed

AREAS	NUMBER OF PEOPLE
Bellville South (second generation)	12
Other parts of Cape Town	6
Farms Western Cape	17

<sup>7</sup> " My man se ouers het in 1902 daar [in Oakdale] aangekom. My dogter sy's daar, my kinders is ook daar, die derde geslag is daar gebore. En toe't sy [my dogter] nou aansoek gedoen vir haar *book of life* toe stuur hulle vir haar dit terug. Sy moet die regte adres opsit waar sy gebore is, want dit is mos nou kamtig blanke gebied nou. Maar dit was mos nie in daai tyd, 1945, blanke gebied nie".

Farms Northern Cape	5
Towns Western Cape	5
Eastern Cape	1

The 12 people who indicated that they came from Bellville South were from the younger generation, except for a few who were born around the time of the Group Areas Act (1950).

Six interviewees had been relocated from other parts of Cape Town. Apart from those who moved from the "white" areas of Bellville to Bellville South, the new "coloured" area was also populated by "coloureds" who were obliged to move from other areas. The result was the shattering of any sense of "community" which may have existed in the areas where they had grown up. The people that I interviewed expressed gratitude for the fact that they had managed to obtain a place to live, in one of the housing schemes after often long periods with their names on a waiting list and their families squatting on the properties of others. At the same time there was much resentment amongst the inhabitants of Bellville South about what they had had to give up in relocating there.

The most telling evidence of the fact that the people of Bellville South had no single history, was the fact that the largest number of people I interviewed (27) related their historical origins to the farms and rural towns where they had grown up. In recounting their histories, some interviewees from farms and rural towns talked about their semi-nomadic life as shepherds resettling in winter and summer. Others reflected nostalgically on their established family rituals of building and fixing their homes, working in the kitchen and on the farms of the farmers, going to church in donkey carts and to occasional church bazaars. Some recounted the hardships of their lives as badly treated and poorly paid labourers.

In explaining why they had left their rural homes to move to Bellville South, interviewees generally commented on the advantages of urban life and the hope they had of better wages and work opportunities. Some moved to Cape Town in their youth to work as domestic servants, some followed friends or family members to the city who gave them shelter or the promise of employment opportunities. A number of interviewees stated that they came to work in the

city to contribute to the income of their parents and siblings on farms.

As in Newtown, the personal histories of people in Bellville South reflected their diverse origins and their active roles in shaping the course of their lives. At the same time, the nostalgia with which many people, who had grown up on farms and rural towns, talked about their youth, suggested a longing for the attractive side of rural life.

In conclusion, the people of Newtown and Bellville South had diverse histories not captured in the formal histories of their creation as coloured areas. While their moves to these two areas could not be described as having been entirely to their advantage, the fact is that they had taken an active role in shaping their histories and can thus not be simply defined as "coloured" victims of colonial and apartheid rule.

While Newtown and Bellville South are both coloured areas, policy makers would regard Newtown, a small town area surrounded by farms, as a priority above urban Bellville South for development intervention, on the grounds that rural areas have less access to resources. I will now critically discuss the basis of this argument.

## **2. Socio-economic windows on rural Newtown and urban Bellville South**

I aim to show that quantitative/statistical windows on the socio-economic life of Newtown and Bellville South give a generalised, outsider perspective on the differences in "need" between these two areas. I challenge these statistical representations by drawing on local perspectives on socio-economic life in Newtown and Bellville South.

### **2.1 Indicators of deficit in Newtown**

Statistics on the socio-economic position of people in Newtown present an image of Newtown as a rural area with a dire lack of infrastructure and resources.

### 2.1.1 Size of population and area

In 1992, the population of Newtown totalled 3 015, with the "whites" of Fort Beaufort indicated as 2 402 and the two african areas, Bhofolo and Hillside, as having populations of 15 980 and 1 169. Newtown inhabitants thus comprised a relatively small (13.4%), largely "coloured" section of greater Fort Beaufort (Agricultural and Rural Development Institute 1992).

While the population of Newtown exceeded that of "white" Fort Beaufort, its residential area (58 ha) was much smaller than that of white Fort Beaufort (140 ha). 461 formal houses were registered for Newtown, as well as 38 backyard tenants (the majority of backyard tenants were not registered and thus not represented in the figures).

### 2.1.2 Educational facilities

The two primary schools in Newtown had a total enrolment of 700 (ARDRI 1992). There was no secondary school in Newtown. Two nearby tertiary institutions were available, namely Fort Hare University in the town of Alice and the Cape Teachers Training College just outside Fort Beaufort. During the apartheid years, admission to Fort Hare was for africans only: coloureds were meant to go to the University of the Western Cape if they wanted to follow a tertiary education.

The statistical window on education in Newtown excludes some sociopolitical considerations. With the opening of schools to all races in 1994, many students from the historically african areas enrolled in Newtown's primary schools, despite resistance from "coloured" parents. Secondly, the absence of a high school for students from Newtown had for decades been a major cause of concern for parents. Repeated attempts at obtaining a high school had been unsuccessful, and had led to much in-fighting in Newtown. The two high schools in Fort Beaufort were reserved for whites. When, in 1993, the schools were opened, entry requirements still excluded the bulk of Newtown students<sup>8</sup>. The result was that after Std 5 (grade 7), pupils from Newtown had to be sent

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<sup>8</sup> Parents in Newtown told me that the local school council required applicants to pass a test in Afrikaans proficiency. Even though Afrikaans was their mother tongue, most applicants from Newtown were told that they had failed the test.

out of town to schools in Queenstown, King Williams Town, East London and Port Elizabeth (see map 2). That was at the expense of their parents, and it resulted in few students completing high school, therefore preventing them from gaining access to tertiary educational institutions.

### 2.1.3 Employment and income

One of the main sources of employment for people from Newtown was the local citrus industry. 2 500 casual labour positions are available during the seven-month picking season (ARDRI 1992). Workers from Newtown had, however, to compete with residents of the african townships for the positions. People in Newtown told me that the competition added to the resentment which they felt towards africans. On the other hand, the shared pressures of wage labour has led to coloured workers participating in strikes organised mainly by african workers against unfair payment.

The market economy of Fort Beaufort, described as "fairsized" (ARDRI 1992), provided mainly semi- and unschooled labour opportunities for some others. Nicolas Cramford, a school teacher in Newtown, told me that Fort Beaufort had, in the time of his builder grandfather, offered good opportunities for craftsmen. He also mentioned that many coloureds found employment in the mental hospital in Fort Beaufort.

At the time of my research, regular full-time employment had become the exception rather than the rule for people in Newtown. Over the years many farm workers who had left the farms where they had worked, moved to Newtown and struggled to find work. Only the fortunate few in Newtown with the right contacts, qualifications and experience found positions in hospitals, banks and shops. Moreover, the tradition of independent craftsmen had all but died away. The few painters and builders who were left were dependent on employment by white contractors. Indeed, businessmen in Newtown remark that Group Areas Act property regulations made it virtually impossible for coloureds to run profitable businesses. The number of out-of-school youths and adults that could be found in Newtown during working hours were witness to the degree of unemployment in this area.

Due to poor working and living conditions, a considerable number of Newtown

residents suffered from tuberculosis (TB) and other diseases and injuries. For many receipt of disability grants from the Department of Welfare were crucial. Child welfare grants, old age pensions and other welfare grants also provided a valuable source of income.

The child welfare worker in Newtown said, of TB patients who were receiving grants, that "they don't want to work, that's the thing, they just want to sit and earn their money"<sup>9</sup>. Most professionals in Newtown and many whites in Fort Beaufort shared her sentiment. As I will discuss in the next chapter notions of the importance of income generating activity, together with the valorisation of "educatedness", contributed to cultural divisions between inhabitants of people in my research areas.

## 2.2 More infrastructure, less need? Windows on Bellville South

Socio-economic statistics of Bellville South present a picture of an urban area with far more infrastructure and opportunity than Newtown. Seen through the windows of residents of Bellville South, however, this does not imply that life there is any easier.

### 2.2.1 Size of population

At the time of the research, Bellville formed part of the urban metropolis of the Cape Peninsula<sup>10</sup> (see map 7) which had a total population of 2 350 157. Bellville had a total population of 854 616 residents, of whom 612 933 were identified as coloured in the 1991 census (Central Statistical Service 1993). While no reliable statistics are available for Bellville South, the fact that Bellville South is Bellville's main "coloured" residential area indicates evidence to the fact that it had a considerably larger population than Newtown, which had just over 3 000 inhabitants.

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<sup>9</sup> "Omdat hier nie werksgeleenthede is nie, of hulle is meestal TB-pasiënte wat nou net wil 'n grant hê. Hulle wil nie werk nie, dit is die ding, hulle wil sit en hulle geld verdien".

<sup>10</sup> The Cape Peninsula included Bellville, Goodwood, Cape Town, Simonstown, Wynberg, Kuilsriver, Paarl, Somerset West, Stellenbosch, Strand and Wellington.

### 2.2.2 Employment and income

Bellville South was created, as indicated earlier, for the purpose of supplying a workforce for the growing industrial sector of Bellville. The substantial number of factories and industries offered work opportunities for most of the workers in Bellville South. 1988 Statistics reported 537 industries for Bellville, with a largely coloured workforce (26 688 coloured, compared to 6 118 black workers) (CSS 1988).

However, during my research residents of Bellville South often expressed concern about the fact that more and more people were losing their jobs. Mr Fester, principal of Bellville High School, estimated that 35% - 40% of the parents of his students were unemployed. He attributed this situation to the closing down of factories, and referred to the closing of three factories which had been a major source of employment for people in Bellville South.

Moreover, after 1990, the workers of Bellville South often bitterly remarked on what they perceived as "reverse racialism": While the coloured labour preference policy<sup>11</sup> in the Western Cape had in the past ensured their chances of employment, this was no longer the case. Indeed, with calls for affirmative action, they stated, employers were replacing coloured workers with african workers. Whether this was the actual reason that people in Bellville South experienced growing unemployment in their area, remains to be proven, and is beyond the scope of this study. Representatives of industrial enterprises which are major sources of employment of people of Bellville South told me that there has been no intention of replacing coloured workers with african workers, although the personnel manager of one factory said that it had become policy to fill vacant posts with african workers.

As in Newtown, many inhabitants of Bellville South received old age, disability, child care and other grants. These grants often provided the sole income of a domestic unit.

At the other end of Bellville South's spectrum were the doctors, professors,

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<sup>11</sup> The coloured labour preference policy determined that employers had to give coloureds preference over africans for employment (Lewis 1987:262).

ministers and businessmen and -women, some of whom belonged to the highest income categories in South Africa. While these professionals had embarked on various attempts to improve the economic position of the rest of the Bellville South population, the discrepancy in living conditions between working class and upper middle class remained glaringly evident. Indeed, as I show below, the somewhat paternalistic manner in which professionals had entertained attempts at "developing" the poorer areas of Bellville South emphasised the attitudinal discrepancies between classes.

### 2.2.3 Educational facilities

Residing in part of an urban metropolis, the residents of Bellville South had the advantage (over residents of Newtown) of access to urban infrastructure and educational facilities. The area was well provided with primary and secondary schools and a variety of tertiary institutions, including the University of the Western Cape, Peninsula Technicon and the Cape Education College, all constructed for people classified "coloured". Attending these institutions was however financially beyond the reach of the vast majority of people in Bellville South.

Mrs Stella April, principal of a primary school in Bellville South, identified to me a number of factors which she regarded as overriding the advantages of accessible schooling. She referred to the effect of residential overcrowding on the concentration levels of the youth:

No, I can honestly tell you, you can call in any teacher, they will tell you: with 70% of our children you have to cram everything into their heads. Because their thoughts are not there. Right across from here 24 people are living in a three room house... and these are adults, you should see: If it starts getting light, they are all standing outside. I suppose if you wake up, you have to make way for people to have walking space. They stand outside for most of the day.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Nee, ek kan regtig vir u sê, ek kan nou enige onderwyser inroep, hulle sal vir u sê: 70% van ons kinders, jy moet vir hulle alles in hulle koppe inprop. Want hulle gedagtes is nie daar nie. Hier regoor my is hier 24 mense wat in een, 'n drievtrekhuis [bly]... en dis grootmense, u moet sien: As dit lig begin word, dan staan almal buitekant. As jy wakker geskrik het, dan

Though Bellville South was far better supplied with housing than Cape Town's african townships such as Nyanga and Langa, the overcrowding in existing housing had led to the construction of backyard shacks which often housed several households. Living conditions were not safe: during my research, one of these wooden huts caught fire and a resident was burnt to death.

Mrs April also referred to the disrupting effect of alcohol abuse and gangsterism on her students. She specifically associated alcohol abuse, and the ensuing violence, with unemployed men (although she also referred to women), stating that many of her students had fathers who spent their days drinking in the streets. These men, she argued, had lost their desire to improve their situation because of unemployment:

I will tell you, unemployment... You see, he thinks: why should he work? Why should he study? There is not even work for him at the municipality<sup>13</sup>.

As a result of their lack of stability at home, Mrs April said, many of her most talented students found social recognition in gangsterism. At the time of my research, Bellville South had become a web of gangsterism, and youngsters below 10 expressed the desire to join gangs, just as their older brothers and their fathers, had done. (I discuss gangsterism in more detail in chapter 5).

Mr Wouter Fester, the principal of Bellville South high school, had more to say regarding overcrowding than Mrs April. Mr Fester pointed out that schools in Bellville South were also overcrowded as well as understaffed. He said that teachers had to cope with classes of 40 students, and that this was exacerbated by the frequent intrusion of gangsters into their classrooms.

I have indicated that being part of the urban metropolis of the Cape Peninsula gave the inhabitants of Bellville South more access to infrastructure and

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moet jy seker maar padgee om loopplek te kry. Die mense staan so te sê die hele dag buite".

<sup>13</sup> "Ek sal vir u sê - werkloosheid... Kyk, hy dink mos: Waarvoor moet ek werk, waarvoor moet ek leer? Daar is nie eers vir hom werk by die munisipaliteit nie".

educational facilities than the population of Newtown in Fort Beaufort. At the same time, I have shown that Bellville South has its own complex of social conditions which are no less unpleasant than those of Newtown.

Standard data such as statistics thus tends to highlight certain aspects of places like Newtown and Bellville South, and seldom to reflect the complexity of needs and desires of people in these places. I will now show that standardised maps present images of the places which likewise fail to capture the social stratification of its inhabitants as well as their own local maps do.

### 3. Defining borders: spatial windows

In few areas do the differences between insider and outsider perspectives on Newtown and Bellville South appear as stark as in their spatial definitions. These different understandings, which I will now discuss, reflect to me Lefebvre's notion that spaces are socially produced rather than having an objective reality (1991:77). I wish to revise his statement by arguing that Newtown and Bellville South are *socially constructed* spaces. The historical perspectives present in 3.1 state that the borders which defined these areas and separated them geographically from those of 'black' and 'white', were instituted by the government of the day. These official constructions of space were entrenched through hegemonic processes to the degree that they came to be seen as an objective reality. However, the people living in these areas constructed and understood their social space in markedly different and more complex ways.

#### 3.1 New borders and a 'new town' for the coloureds

The municipal records of the town of Fort Beaufort have not provided me any information as to how and when Newtown came to be defined as the "coloured" township of that town. Oral histories taken from the descendants of earlier inhabitants of Fort Beaufort recall that people started to move to the newly established "coloured" township of Newtown during the 1920s (see section 4.1).

Fort Beaufort was, during the time of my research, situated on the border between the Ciskei and the Eastern Cape in South Africa, 100 km north of

Grahamstown, the nearest large town (see map 2)<sup>14</sup>. The Kat river flows through Fort Beaufort. The Kat river valley further north is known for its citrus farming. The town of Fort Beaufort was built to the east of the river, and Newtown was established on the western side, rising up to a hill (see map 3). Newtown and Fort Beaufort were also separated by a national road leading up north. The african townships of Fort Beaufort, which comprised the residential areas for the bulk of the population of the town-based Greater Fort Beaufort District, stretched out to the north and the east of the town.

When asked in Fort Beaufort where they lived, people who lived in the township on the western side of the river would say that they lived in Newtown. In a more general discussion of where they lived, the same people would say that they lived in Fort Beaufort, implying that they regarded Newtown as a suburb of Fort Beaufort.

When I first arrived at the place people referred to as "Newtown", there was no signpost indicating that this was the name of this area. A gangster group of the past had sprayed their name (MK22) on the stop sign at the beginning of the dirt road which led into Newtown.

Newtown's outward lack of official demarcation was deceptive. However, on the walls of the municipal clerk's office in the centre of Newtown there was a map which numerically indicated the different houses in Newtown (see map 4). Most of the houses in Newtown were built as part of successive government funded housing schemes. Each scheme consisted of row upon row of identical houses. Newtown's inhabitants had to apply to rent a house by adding their names to a waiting list next to the official map of the different schemes. The information they wrote down on the official forms determined whether their applications would be considered, and for which schemes they would qualify.

While this formal mapping of Newtown necessarily had to be acknowledged by the inhabitants, local terms used for various areas indicated that, for people living there, the space had been constructed through other principles (see map 5). The oldest part of Newtown, where the original residents had built their own houses, was simply referred to as "the old Newtown". These houses, with

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<sup>14</sup> After the South African national elections of 1994, the Ciskei was reincorporated into the Eastern Cape Province.

their thick walls and decorated verandas in front, were often painted sea green inside, and invariably smelt of paraffin. The area was in the lowest part of Newtown.

The area to the east, also consisting of some of the oldest houses, was called "Outyd" (Old Times); an old train station sign with OUTYD written on it suggested the origin of this name (the railway line was no longer used at the time of the research). The middle area of Newtown, which was on a slope and faced east, but was also the poorest area, was called "Sonskyn" (Sunshine).

The scheme which was built highest on the western side was referred to as "Hungry Valley". Inhabitants of other areas of Newtown joked that the inhabitants of the scheme, which had electricity and was more expensive, would have to go hungry after they had paid their accounts. Just below Hungry Valley was another scheme that people called "Look at me", insinuating that the people who occupied the newer houses there were "showing off" the fact that they were slightly more affluent than the people lower down. The area of the older stone houses one step down was called "Klippiesdaai" (Stone Corner).

Through giving local names to the different parts of Newtown, the inhabitants gave a different definition to the area than that presented by official maps. I asked Mrs Maria Jacobs, one of the oldest inhabitants of Newtown, where these names came from. She answered, (referring to her own people as *hottentots*): "The *hotnotse* named the place"<sup>15</sup>. My following question was: "Where does the name Newtown come from?"<sup>16</sup>. She thought a moment and said: "The whites, I suppose"<sup>17</sup>. "The whites" could refer here to the ruling class as well as to the understanding shared by many in Newtown that white officials had created Newtown as a "coloured" township under the Group Areas Act. Interpreted either way, Mrs Jacobs' comment implied that the official naming and demarcating of Newtown was an act of the official authorities, whereas the local names reflected the shaping of the area by Newtown's inhabitants.

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<sup>15</sup> "Die hotnotse het die plek so genoem".

<sup>16</sup> "Waar kom die naam Newtown vandaan?".

<sup>17</sup> "Die blankes seker".

The boundaries between Newtown, the town of Fort Beaufort and the black townships were also not as clear-cut as the Group Areas Act (since repealed), had intended to cast them. Many inhabitants of Newtown had family whom they would regularly visit in the african townships. Over the years, a substantial number of people from these townships also moved into Newtown. People I asked for reasons for these moves, mentioned the political violence in african townships at the time, their overcrowdedness and poor amenities, and the fact that church-subsidised schooling in Newtown worked out cheaper for their children.

There were many reservation in the minds of many older inhabitants of Newtown about the influx of people from the african townships because they feared that it would cause an overflow of political violence into Newtown. A clinic sister who lived in Newtown told me, with some disapproval, that the african population of Newtown was growing drastically because of intermarriage. Old Mrs Jacobs also expressed concern when she referred to the Xhosas living in Newtown as "scavengers" that one cannot not trust.

Many people who lived in Newtown spent most of their days in the business centre area of Fort Beaufort. In the mornings there would be a constant flow of people from Newtown crossing the main road separating the area from Fort Beaufort, and walking into the centre of town to work, shop or just "hang around". After the repeal of the Group Areas Act some teachers and other professional people moved from Newtown to Fort Beaufort where, in many cases, their ancestors had lived. However, their friends, families and social interests remained largely in Newtown.

### **3.2 Bellville South: The structuring of a working class coloured township**

In 1948, when "coloureds" were regarded as the working classes by the rulers of the day, their living area was established next to the growing industrial area of Bellville (see 4.2). Bellville South was bordered on most sides by factories and industrial sites.

The formal mapping of Bellville South, which had been a squatter area previously (and referred to as "Die Bos"/The Bush, similar to other squatter

areas in the Cape Province), was initiated by local government under apartheid. Bellville municipality initiated a series of building schemes to give shape to the new "coloured" area of Bellville. New residents applied for housing by adding their names to a waiting list in the municipal office, a large, official-looking brick building on Kasselsvlei road. The first "coloured" Management Committee of Bellville South (which was generally regarded as an instrument of the "white" local government) named the symmetrical streets of the first housing area alphabetically after its members, adding the names of people they regarded worthy of this honour (Almeida, Brand, Caledon, De Wet...).

The inhabitants of Bellville South created their own names for different areas of their suburb (see map 9). Since these local names are used in the thesis, I will describe which areas they refer to. The area to the north of Kasselsvlei road (the big road crossing Bellville South from east to west), which was inhabited mostly by middle class professionals, was called "Stiwiedorp"; literally, the town of those with a stiff upper lip. The homes were reasonably comfortable suburban houses with a few rooms and small gardens.

The "Old Bellville South" was that area just south of Kasselsvlei road and closest to Modderdam road; this is the site where the first houses were built. These houses were small, but they had backyards which allowed space for extra dwellings. Some of the oldest "shebeens" (informal taverns where liquor was sold illegally) were also in here. The area further south was referred to as "Sementdam" (cement dam) after a dam that used to be in the area. These houses there had been built on a low budget, with the result that they were not supplied with electricity, internal doors and ceilings. (The same applies to all the other areas I will refer to, with the exception of Glenhaven).

"Tupperware" was the name popularly used to refer to the area just east of Industrie Road. People say the name originated from the Tupperware parties which people held in this area to make some money (Tupperware is a durable form of kitchenware sold only from homes). One of the poorest housing areas in Bellville South, these tiny, run-down Tupperware houses were each inhabited by a number of adults and their children. To the east of Tupperware there was row upon row of yellow-painted three-storey flats. This area was commonly

called USA, after the name of the building company that had constructed the flats. Many of these flats, each of which consisted of a tiny lounge, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, also provided homes for a number of adults and their children.

To the south of USA were flats and sub-economic houses built for municipal workers. This area, locally referred to as Stilwanië, was the most dangerous area at the time of the research because of continuing gangster violence.

Pieter Barlow Drive, a big road to the east of the USA and Stilwanië, separated working class Bellville South from Glenhaven, which lay to the east of the road. This middle- to upper-middle class area, which had a number of double storey houses with big gardens and electronic gates, was the area where various professors, businessmen, doctors and school headmasters lived. The people of Glenhaven related to the rest of Bellville South with paternalistic goodwill in running soup kitchens and literacy classes and attempted to erase the class differences by for instance having one, instead of two, Dutch Reformed Churches. Yet a clear separation of interest was evident, for instance, in divisions within the Ratepayers' Association. At the time of the research, a number of Glenhaven residents were moving, or had moved, to other previously "white" suburbs. Bellville South itself remained largely "coloured".

I will now, in introduction to the rest of the thesis, critically discuss the ways in which Bellville South and Newtown are represented in statistics on literacy levels.

#### **4. Windows on "literacy": literacy levels amongst "coloureds".**

I have mentioned that both Newtown and Bellville South are historically "coloured" areas and that there were, at the time of the research, literacy projects running in both areas. Seen statistically, the people of these two areas would form part of the target population identified in post-apartheid South African policy documents.

The 1980 census statistics indicated much lower literacy levels amongst coloured people in 'rural' areas (such as Newtown) than amongst those in

'urban' areas (such as Bellville South). Respectively, these were indicated as 38,63% and 77,11% literacy rates (Ellis 1986:11). Regional statistics of persons classified "coloured" with less than 6 years of schooling (including persons under 15) provide a closer estimate of "literacy levels". For the region of Cape Town, Bellville and Simonstown, under which Bellville South resorts, the "illiteracy" level, as defined above, is indicated as having been 46.18%. The region of Cradock, Graaff-Reinet and Middelburg which is the region closest to Newtown (of those regions selected for this study), is indicated as having had an "illiteracy" level of 74.14% amongst persons classified coloured (Wederpohl 1984:20).

These statistics therefore suggest that the population of Bellville South is likely to have a literacy rate 30 to 40 percentage points higher than that of Newtown. From a statistical perspective, policy makers therefore argue that Newtown should be prioritised above Bellville South for literacy intervention. Nonetheless the statistics also suggest that 20% - 30% of the population of Bellville South is likely to be "illiterate" so that intervention is called for there too.

While statistics thus indicate a significant level of "illiteracy" in both Newtown and Bellville South, only a handful of people in the two areas attended the literacy classes which were available to them. One of the questions which this discrepancy raises, and which this thesis addresses, is why there should be such low attendance, and indeed interest, in literacy classes. We need to ask whether the official perspective that uses statistics to define literacy need matches people's on-the-ground understanding and expectations regarding literacy. The argument I pursue is that the literacy profile which statistics present may lead, if uncritically interpreted, to literacy interventions which do not reflect the interests of the people targeted for such interventions.

## **Conclusion**

I have used the chapter to present various images of Newtown and Bellville South in this chapter. In each case I have indicated that standard, formal representations fail to capture the diversity and complexity of the realities of people living in the areas. I have argued that formal histories present

uniform narratives of the creation of these places under colonial and apartheid rule, representing the inhabitants as victims of processes beyond their control, whereas the people living there had diverse origins and had actively contributed to the shaping of their histories. I have also demonstrated that standard maps fail to reflect the social diversity of life in Newtown and Bellville South as well as local references do. Finally I have raised a question about assumptions based on statistics that areas such as Bellville South, and more so Newtown, should be targeted for literacy intervention simply because of the number of their "illiterate" inhabitants.

In the next chapter, I begin my analysis of the meanings and uses of literacy in the two areas. This analysis, as I have stated in chapter 1, is meant as a critique of assumptions underlying South African adult literacy policy documents. I begin my critique by focusing on the meanings and uses of standard literacy, or literacy as understood in policy documents.

## Chapter 4

### Uses of standard literacy for coloureds

South African policy makers have identified african and coloured "communities" as having "the highest deficits in the provision of basic services" such as education (RSA 1995b:18). They have targeted these population categories for the formal provision of standard literacy.

In my experience, people in the historically coloured suburbs of Newtown and Bellville South share policy makers' high valorisation of standard literacy. Below I show that *applying for and receiving pensions* have become perhaps the most important practices where people engage with standard literacy. However, I argue that the experiences people in these areas have had in dealing with standard literacy practices have led them to take the roles of passive recipients of state welfare and literacy training interventions. This leads me to question what "empowerment" means for them in relation to standard literacy.

The institutionalising of racial *apartheid* reinforced "basic assumptions about the existence of racial groups and innate differences" (Boonzaier 1987:63-64). I argue that, for the coloured people in my research areas, the valorisation of standard literacy has reinforced racial "othering", since it has strong associations with their culturally marginalised status in relation to "whites" (and more recently in relation to africans). Rather than empowering them, their understanding of the importance of standard literacy has emphasised the difference between them and whites. It has further led to "othering" *between* coloureds because of the status division that has developed between educated and uneducated coloureds. I demonstrate that some people's hope that acquiring schooled literacy would lead to acceptance as part of "high society", the social status they aspire to, has repeatedly been disappointed.

In order to develop my argument about the ways in which coloureds' valorisation of standard literacy has reinforced social distinctions between coloureds, whites and africans, and between coloureds of higher and lower

social status. I will first discuss some sociohistorical origins of people's understandings of colouredness. I will discuss the concept of colouredness as it developed historically and as it was referred to by people in my research areas.

### 1. The meanings and conditions of colouredness

Since the term "coloured" first came to be used in the Cape Colony, people thus classified have been described in terms of their difference from other "race groups", that is in terms of their "otherness" and not their own unique qualities. According to historians of the "coloureds" (eg Goldin 1987), it was under British colonial administration that "coloureds" first came into existence in South Africa as an institutionalised population category. The Cape census of 1904 distinguished between "White, Bantu and Coloured" as "three clearly defined race groups", with coloured being defined as "all intermediate shades between the first two" (quoted by Goldin 1987:158). This started a political tradition in South Africa whereby coloureds would be defined as a distinct but residual category in terms of race and colour.

The idea that coloureds constitute a homogenous "race" is questioned (among others) by Marks and Trapido (1987) who state that "these Kleurlinge [Coloureds] represented many strands in South Africa's past: late Stone Age hunter-gatherers and herders, collectively known as the Khoisan; slaves from the heterogenous trading networks of the Dutch East India Company in the Indian Ocean: descendants of Indonesian Muslims sent to the Cape as political prisoners and enslaved artisans". They further state that these people entered into "a variety of sexual unions" including with white settlers (Marks and Trapido 1987:27).

People I worked with in Newtown and Bellville South described their colouredness in terms of their difference from some, and their association with other population categories. Recollections of their family histories had become part of their personal origin myths. There was no sense of common ancestry amongst them. For many, life remained a struggle. Makulu Pieterse, a widower in Bellville South who was in her seventies when I interviewed her, argued that her life as an orphaned farm worker in the 1920s kept her as much a slave as her grandmother had been in the time of Queen Victoria. Referring

to a farm in the Northern Cape where she had grown up, Makulu said:

I was seventeen when my parents rejected me. I worked for people all my life, near Lemoenkloof. And so life continued. In other words, I threw away nearly all my life [...]. I almost want to say I was like a slave child, because my grandmother was a slave child; they were freed in the time of Queen Victoria. I was a slave child, worked under my grandmother [...] To tell the truth, I am sorry to say this, but I always hated the white people. Why? Because the boers treated us so badly.<sup>1</sup>

Makulu here referred to whites as the "boers" whom she hated, because of the bad treatment that she had received as a farm labourer from their hands. Later in the same interview, she discussed how her opinion of whites had changed over the years, and how she was indeed grateful to white rulers for what they had done for the coloureds. Throughout this discussion her positioning of herself was in relation to whites; first as her enemies, and later as her allies. In the following quote she stated her gratefulness as coloured citizen to Mr de Klerk, the white afrikaner leader whom she regarded as having looked after her needs:

But I still think that the Lord will lead us out. We coloureds have the hardest time. What I want to say about Mr de Klerk is this: [...] He made it possible that, if one of our people dies and the house is not paid off, we only have to pay transfer. He saw to it that, our pensions were very little, and he saw to it that we got more, R370 <sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "[Ek was] 17 jaar, toe het my ouers my verstoot. Ek het maar al die jare by mense gewerk, daar naby Lemoenkloof. En so het die lewe maar aangekom. Met ander woorde ek het amper my hele lewe vergooi [...] Ek wil nou amper sê ek was soos 'n slaaf gewees, want my ouma was 'n slawekind gewees, hulle is vrygekoop in die tyd van Queen Victoria. Ek is 'n slawekind gewees, so gewerk onder my ouma. [...] Om die waarheid te sê, ek is nou jammer om dit te sê, maar ek het altyd die witmense gehaat. Hoekom? Want die boere het sleg met ons gewerk".

<sup>2</sup> "Maar ek dink nog altyd die Here sal ons uitlei. Want ek dink ons Kleurlinge kry die swaarste. Ons het nie geld nie, ons besit niks. Maar wat ek wil sê oor Mnr de Klerk is dit: [...] Hy het dit moontlik gemaak dat as ons mense afsterf en die huis is nie betaal nie, dat ons net oordra betaal het.

Makulu first stated her belief that "the Lord will lead us out" (by implication, out of the land of slavery, as the Israelites were led out of Egypt where they had been enslaved) and then went on to describe how Mr de Klerk looked after the coloureds ("our people"), thus putting de Klerk in the role of the saviour/benefactor.

Others that I interviewed wanted nothing more than to be associated with whites. Those who had white relatives in their past proudly recalled the connection to me and showed the evidence they had (white hands, photographs of white ancestors). Domestic workers, especially, tended to see themselves as part of the white families they were employed by. Daisy Fredriks, a domestic worker living in Bellville South, proudly told me that "the white people never called me anything else but a Lotze" (Lotze being the surname of the white family she was employed by). She emphasised her close association with white culture by stating that her son (who lived with her in the domestic worker's quarters at the house of her white employers) no longer knew whether he was coloured or white:

Later my child did not know, he asked me: Mommy, what are we? Are we white people or are we coloureds? He didn't know what we are.

Daisy added that her son in fact started to disassociate himself from coloured society:

For instance, if I took him to visit coloured friends, he never ate there. If it gets dark, he says to me: we don't sleep with the brown people [coloureds].<sup>3</sup>

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Hy het vir ons gesorg dat, onse pension was baie min, en hy het vir ons gesorg dat ons meer kry, R370.

<sup>3</sup> "So het die blanke mense my nooit anders genoem nie, hulle het my genoem as 'n Lotze. [...] So dat my kind later nie geweet het nie, hy het eendag vir my gevra: Mammie, wat is ek en jy? Is ons witmense of is ons kleurlinge? So dat hy nie geweet het wat ons is nie. Hy het ook byvoorbeeld nooit, as ek met hom gaan na kleurlingvriende toe, dan het hy nooit daar geëet nie. As dit begin donker word, dan sê hy vir my: Ons slaap nie by die bruinmense nie".

Daisy's comment about her son's disassociation from coloureds reflected the social stigma she attached to coloureds as those who had not, to quote Watson (1970), succeeded in "passing for white" under Apartheid legislation. The original Population Registration Act (1950) described *acceptance and appearance* as one of the yardsticks for being accepted as "white". Venter (1976:123) describes the implications of this measure:

An Indian by birth, for example, could have been classified White simply by proving he was accepted by others as being a White man and that his life-style was that of a White. It worked the other way, too. If you looked White but outside objectors to your gaining White classification could prove you were accepted as a Coloured, you were classified Coloured.

This way of thinking became embedded in the way many coloureds related to themselves and people of other population categories. Most of the people I had interviewed in Newtown and Bellville South expressed a strong desire to be associated with whites and dissociated from africans. I can recall numerous cases where coloureds referred to africans as barbarous or untrustworthy. Elderly Mrs Maria Jacobs of Newtown expressed her concern to me about the increasing number of africans who were living around her. She argued that they are all thieves and "scavengers", they run shebeens and they are noisy. Sofia Adams, whom I referred to earlier as having grown up in Bellville with african children as friends, told me that she stopped visiting them when she saw a mad woman being tied to a wire by her family in Langa, and fed as if she was a dog. She said that she never went back to the "native" area. At the same time, she was anxious to tell me that she herself had a white grandfather. She showed me her fingernails and commented that they were as white as mine. I frequently experienced such encounters in both Newtown and Bellville South.

This anti-african sentiment amongst coloureds and the stereotyping of africans as primitive or barbarious is the result of coloureds' attempts to distance themselves from stereotypes about colouredness. The African People's Organisation, an organisation established in the 1920s to defend the interests of coloureds, recognised that the status of coloureds would be jeopardised if they were too closely associated with africans. They established a position of privilege for coloureds above africans by arguing that coloureds were more

'civilised' and partly descendent from the white settler community (Adhikari 1993:99). However, negative perceptions of colouredness continued. In 1973 Dr. R.E. van der Ross, a noted coloured educationist, expressed his rejection (in a report he wrote on the political position of coloureds) of "the myth that coloured people included 'primitive' or 'bad' elements" (Venter 1974:4). By associating these qualities with africans, coloureds attempted to preserve the image of their own respectability.

The way that people in Newtown and Bellville South talked about colouredness revealed their understanding that theirs was a marginalised position. Being neither african nor white, they argued, coloureds were excluded from the political power of whites, who ruled South Africa before the 1994 elections, as well as the political power of africans, who were most likely to take over power after these elections. Just before the election of 1994 which would almost surely lead to victory for the African-dominated African National Congress, an out-of-school youth in Newtown said to me:

We coloureds, we are in the minority, we will probably die first. Because there is no one on the side of the coloureds, we are on a struggle side. So we will have to run away when the election comes.<sup>4</sup>

The sense of gradual political exclusion and isolation of coloureds contributed to the construction of colouredness. Concurrent with a growing marginalisation by white politicians, the position of relative privilege of coloureds compared to Africans in the 1920s led to their exclusion from African mass organisations. By 1926, the coloured leadership had been expelled from the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, one of the largest unions to which coloured workers belonged. By 1930, the leadership of the African National Congress reoriented their organisation away from forging a common alliance with coloured men and women (Goldin 1987:164-5).

When the National Party won the 1948 elections, it was committed to the development of colouredness as a position distinct from that of whites.

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<sup>4</sup> "Ons kleurlinge, ons is in die minderheid, ons sal seker eerste doodgaan. Nou daar is mos niemand aan die kleurling se kant nie, en ons is in 'n *struggle* kant, so ons moet weghardloop voor die verkiesing kom".

Coloureds posed a particular difficulty with regard to the desire of white Afrikaner nationalists to distinguish themselves from all other "racial or ethnic groups". This was because they shared a common language (Afrikaans) and common cultural, religious and historical roots (Goldin 1987:168-169).

After 1948, the full legal apparatus of the apartheid system was used to forge "the birth of a Coloured nation" (Goldin 1987:168). Coloureds were defined in terms of race, but as a residual category. The Population Registration Act of 1950 defined Coloureds in no other way than by stating that Coloureds were people who did not belong to any other of the races defined by the Act. Section 5 of this act reads:

The Cape Coloured Group shall consist of persons who in fact are, or who, except in the case of persons who, in fact, are members of [any other] race or class or tribe referred to in paragraph...are generally accepted as members of the race or class known as Cape Coloured". (Quoted by Venter 1976:1).

Next to this imposed definition to construct a category there is an understanding of colouredness as social identity which results from the lived experience of people thus classified. AbdouMaliq, quoting Ranciere, thus describes the ambiguous position of colouredness as "negotiating a state of 'inbetweenness' among identities, an identification with what one-is-not in order to undo the imposed definitions of what 'one is'" (1994:163).

People that I interviewed in Newtown and Bellville South seemed to share this notion. A minister of one of the churches in Newtown told me that, for the people of Newtown, whom he inclusively referred to as "our people", colouredness was in a sense an anti-identity, a political identity defined by means of its difference from that of other racial groups:

Apartheid has made of our people neither fish nor flesh. You distinguished between whites, coloureds and africans. But coloureds are usually 'not white'. In other words you were a non

person. Where do you fit?<sup>5</sup>

Historical records indicate how coloureds' attempts at gaining some political foothold shifted over the years. At times, coloured factions participated in white politics for the sake of protecting coloured privileges. These included the protection of coloured (as opposed to african) employment position in the Cape Province Coloured Labour Preference Act of 1957 (Lewis 1987:262). Although coloureds were removed from the common voters' roll in 1956, they were given some political representation on a separate voters' role and, in 1968, through the establishment of a Coloured Persons' Representatives Council (Lewis 1987:269,272). In 1986, three separate houses of parliament were created, for whites, indians and coloureds respectively, thus giving coloureds stewardship over their 'own' affairs. By contrast, africans had no representation except via existing "homeland" governments (Lewis 1987:280).

Coloureds thus held a position of relative political privilege in relation to africans. The price that coloureds had to pay, was to accept "the position of the Cape Coloured people as an appendage to whites" (Lewis 1987:247). By accepting this position, coloureds submitted to the white ruling class, in relation to whom they assumed a largely passive position.

There were those in Newtown who felt that coloureds' association with white rule had cost them their pride. David Wessel, an African National Congress supporter in Newtown, explained to me what being coloured meant to him:

I must explain (sighs). The coloured - to be honest, the coloured does not have a pride in himself. He doesn't want to go in a direction.<sup>6</sup>

David Wessel raised this argument in a discussion with me about the passive position which Newtown inhabitants assumed with regard to any political or

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<sup>5</sup> "Apartheid het van ons mense nog vis nog vlees gemaak. Jy het 'n onderskeid gemaak tussen witmens, kleurlinge en bantoes. Nou kleurlinge is gewoonlik nie blank. Met ander woorde jy is nou 'n non persoon gewees. Waar pas jy in?"

<sup>6</sup> "Ek moet nou verduidelik. Die kleurling - om eerlik te wees - die kleurling het nie 'n trots in hom nie. Hy wil ook nie in 'n rigting gaan nie.

communal activity. He reflected here on a commonly expressed experience that coloureds hesitate to make decisions of their own. He associated this with what he termed their lack of pride. During one of the few community meetings that did take place while I was in Newtown, an old man told a joke with the same implication. In the joke, a white man, a coloured man and a black man are asked where they are walking to. The white and the black man give their respective answers about the directions they are heading to, but the coloured man states that he is "just walking along" ("Ek loop maar net saam"). The joke thus depicts the coloured as a person who never leads and whose position is always determined by others, even if there are two leaders to follow. The audience laughed at the joke and discussed the passivity of people in Newtown regarding political participation. At the same time the joke also expressed the predicament of coloureds who find themselves between two political forces - whites on the one hand and africans on the other - in relation to whom their own status or authority will be determined.

It seems to me that the coloured struggle for social status, in the face of their gradual political and economic marginalisation, has contributed to what colouredness meant to the people I interviewed. I derive this interpretation partly from Adhikari (1993), who has argued that the sociohistoric position of coloureds has led to their social and political marginalisation:

Their marginality, moreover, prevented coloureds from asserting themselves politically or penetrating the institutions, associations and more prestigious professions of the dominant society to any meaningful extent. Thus no matter what degree of 'respectability' or personal accomplishment coloureds achieved, they were nevertheless automatically branded as social inferiors to whites and were forced to accept a second class citizenship (Adhikari 1993:98).

I wish to extend Adhikari's explanation of coloured marginality in this chapter by arguing that coloureds' sense of marginality and their striving for social status have been significantly impacted upon by the importance of standard literacy in their lives.

To introduce my discussion about the values standard literacy has had for the

people in my research areas, I look at one literacy class I attended. The case study presents some of my concerns regarding the valorisation of standard literacy by coloureds.

## 2. Uses of adult literacy classes

A literacy class that I attended in Bellville South was presented on a weekday morning in a room of the community hall in Dammert Street. Beyond the walls of the community hall, Dammert Street was as busy as usual, with children playing in the streets, unemployed men gathering outside the flats, and gangsters hanging around on street corners. I arrived at the class before the teacher, and joined in the conversation of the literacy learners who had haphazardly taken places on chairs lined against the wall. All the learners came from flats and shacks in USA or Stilwanië and were either unemployed or pensioned women. They were discussing local remedies for various ailments.

When the teacher entered with her briefcase and professional dress, the learners greeted her respectfully and immediately started arranging chairs in a horseshoe around the teacher's table. The table was positioned in front of a black board. During the class, the focus shifted between the written texts which the teacher had with her and the black-board (see diagram 1).

Having overheard their conversation about local remedies, the teacher started out by questioning them about whether they had been to the clinic to get brochures which would have the "correct" information on how to deal with ailments. When they answered with silence, the teacher reprimanded them. The conversational tone of the class died down, and the learners took their positions around the table.

The presence of the literacy teacher identified the rest of the people present as "illiterate" (excluding me of course). The teacher was a highly educated woman from Glenhaven, the middle class area of Bellville South. During a public speech which the learners had attended she had said that the feelings of inferiority amongst coloureds resulted from their oppression by the apartheid regime, which she also blamed for the fact that so many coloureds were illiterate. She also said that literacy was essential for the fulfilment of humankind's mission to exercise control over creation. The literacy

learners were thus aware that they were, in the eyes of their teacher, unable as yet to fulfil their Godsent mission on earth.

Each literacy learner spent the duration of the literacy class engaged in the literacy activities identified for them by the teacher. My most vivid experience of the class was that of Rietjie Jansen, an 80 year old literacy learner, who struggled for the duration of the class to write the date on the black-board. Her behaviour was that of an uncertain and fearful six year old who had just entered primary school.

I offered to take Rietjie home after the class and was struck by the fact that, in her own home space, she was able to write letters, read the Bible, and pay her own accounts. When I questioned Rietjie about the contrast in her literacy performance at home and in the literacy class, she made me promise that I would not tell the teacher that she could actually read and write. She wanted the teacher to "begin from the beginning" with learning to read and write: in other words, to gradually make her "literate" as it is done at school. For Rietjie, the point of attending literacy classes was not so much to learn to read and write, but to go through the linear, chronological steps, "beginning from the beginning", which students go through in formally acquiring standard literacy. It was going through this ritual, Rietjie understood, that would enable her to finally regard herself as "literate".

Schematically, I would present Rietjie's dealings with literacy as follows:

Table 7: Rietjie and the literacy class

OUTSIDE CLASSROOM	INSIDE CLASSROOM	
	BEFORE TEACHER ENTERS	AFTER TEACHER ENTERS
Rietjie as confident mother, grandmother, consumer, church woman	Rietjie as neighbour who shares knowledge about local remedies	Rietjie as helpless literacy learner
Dealing with local literacy practices	Dealing with local knowledge	Dealing with standard literacy
Personal organisation of space in home	Space organised around informal conversation	Space organised around table and blackboard
		LEARNERS uneducated
		TEACHER educated
		<u>from flats</u>
		<u>from Glenhaven</u>
		pensioners, unemployed
		professional

Rietjie assumed different roles inside and outside the literacy classroom; Outside, as I came to discover, she was a mother, grandmother, church sister and consumer who could confidently deal with the literacy practices these roles required of her. Rietjie wrote letters to her family, sorted out her children's post, paid the hospital accounts sent to her one son, applied at the municipality to rent a house, and paid her accounts on the due date. Inside the classroom, Rietjie assumed two different roles. Before the teacher arrived, she continued to be a confident neighbour who now shared her long acquired local knowledge of remedies with women from the neighbourhood. Once

the teacher arrived, however, she became the dependent literacy learner who lacked standard literacy. Spatial changes reflected the changing roles Rietjie assumed. In the shack where she lived, her literacy activities were arranged around her personal space. Before the teacher entered, the space of the classroom was organised around the informal neighbourly conversation that was taking place. Then the space became organised around the teacher, the blackboard, and the table on which the literacy books had been placed.

The entry and presence of the teacher thus played a significant role in redefining Rietjie's roles, her orientation to literacy and her spatial context. Rietjie and her co-learners referred with reverence to the teacher, and displayed a willingness to assume the roles of subservient, dependent literacy learners on the teacher's entry. I would explain this behavior by arguing that she embodied their desire to be a professional woman living in middle class Glenhaven: They were uneducated, and she was educated. This, they understood, was because she was part of "high society" - and they were the ordinary people who lived in the flats and shacks of USA and Stilwanië. Illiteracy thus represented one symbolic barrier between the ladies in the literacy class and the teacher, who stood in a desirable status of otherness from them.

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Coloured pensioners in my research areas realised that they were in a relatively good position regarding their pension pay-outs, and this affected their attitude towards government and its institutions. On page 89 I quoted Makulu, a pensioner living in the poverty-stricken area of Tupperware in Bellville South, strongly defended F.W.de Klerk, the leader of the previous National Party government, on the grounds that he had secured pensions and other benefits for "our people" (coloureds).

In addition to old-age pension grants, many people in Newtown and Bellville South were dependent on child welfare grants, foster parent grants, disability grants and military pensions. As a result, applying for and receiving pensions have become perhaps the most important practices where people engage with standard literacy. I argue in this chapter that coloured state subjects' participation in these standard literacy practices reinforced their submissive orientation to state institutions.

It is a commonly held understanding that the coloured vote was responsible for the victory of the Nationalist Party in the Western Cape local elections (following the election of the ANC as national government in 1994). Makulu Pieterse clearly expressed her sentiment in favour of the National Party in the earlier quote, and linked it to the pension support she has received from the Nationalist government. Throughout the country, african state subjects voted overwhelmingly against the reinstatement of the National Party in local

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Literacy practices are, of course, only one aspect of social practice which influences people's political positioning. I argue, nonetheless, that they play a significant role in reinforcing coloured state subjects' orientations to government. The following two case studies illustrate that the practices whereby people in Newtown and Bellville South dealt with standard literacy in applying for, and receiving, state assistance required them to take the position of passive recipients. As a result, it mattered little whether they could read or write themselves. This had consequences for the uses which standard literacy had for them. After presenting each case study, I discuss its implications.

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The first event I describe was a pension pay-out that I attended in Bellville South. Pensioners started queuing up at 7 am. The hall - a municipal brick building separated by a high wall from the flats and shops surrounding it - was filled with symmetrical rows of orange chairs. Pensioners were lining up behind two tables, one at the side and one in front of the hall, where officials were making the payments (see diagram 2).

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Even though the formal written documents were crucially important to the pensioners' mission to get their pension money, the procedures did not require them to be "literate" themselves (in the sense of being able to read the documents). Instead, what was required of them was passively to follow rows and queues and simply to present the relevant documents to the clerks. The

old lady I had spoken to (pensioner 2) did not even know what the pension card was called ("It's a kind of card, a watchamacallit kind of card"), but she had a clear and simple understanding of the linear procedures involved in using the card: "Row by row. Now you go to the money". She explained to me that she had gone to *Kleurlingsake* (Coloured Affairs) to get "the book" (her pension book), and that it had not been a problem that she could not sign: she simply made a cross on the application form, and the officials approved the application with a stamp. ("Just make a cross, then they stamp, they stamp it").

When discussing important official documents, people I interviewed often described the documents using generalised nouns such as "the letter", "the slip" and "the form". They identified documents more specifically by referring to their size and colour (Tillie: "a green letter", Ellis: "a big yellow card") or function (Elizabeth: "the [grant] revising paper"). Being able to identify the correct document through association with its size, colour or function, was perhaps the most common literacy technique these people and others like them engaged in directly when dealing with the paperwork of state institutions.

The old lady in the pension hall, to whom I referred earlier as pensioner 2, thus did not have to be able to read the documents that she needed to get her pension. What she required instead, was an understanding of her passive role in the linear procedures; standing in rows with your card, waiting for the repetitive stamping thereof. In fact, her role as pensioner required that she avoided being an active participant in the literacy practices; that was the task of the government officials to whom she knew to leave those activities.

As soon as the pensioners left the pension hall, however, they assumed other social identities, discussing the events inside with neighbours, taking charge of children and grandchildren who had been waiting outside, and negotiating with the various informal traders exhibiting their goods around the hall where the pensions were paid out.

By participating in the pension pay-out in Bellville South, the pensioners had temporarily assumed the roles of passive state subjects. Their engagement in standard literacy practices was limited to following prescribed procedures and

presenting relevant documents when required. During these procedures, the government officials had exclusive authority to interpret and evaluate the documents. The pension pay-out thus involved power-relations that determined the ways literacy was used by those involved. The standard literacy procedures confirmed the authority of the government officials. But for the pensioners it reinforced their understanding that access to state resources required them to take on subservient, passive roles as subjects.

The following case study from Newtown offers further insight into the powerful position of government clerks in dealing with standard literacy practices.

### 3.2 The magistrate's clerk doing the reading and writing

I visited the magistrate's court offices in Fort Beaufort to observe how people from Newtown participated there in standard literacy practices (such as filling in official forms). When I entered the magistrate's offices an elderly man was being assisted by his wife at the front of the queue. The man told the clerk behind the counter that he wished to apply to become a state patient (to receive support from the state for medical services). The clerk filled in the form while asking the client for his details (Where Afrikaans was spoken, I indicate this with an A, and Xhosa with an X):

Clerk: Name(A)?  
Client: Klaas.  
Clerk: Surname(A)?  
Client: Calie.  
Clerk: Where do you live(X)?  
Client's wife: 31 Marigold Street(A).

On the desk, the clerk (a white afrikaans woman) had the application form, typewritten in standard format, and requiring the use of written mode and formal bureaucratic codes of language for its completion. In front of her, she had an elderly man of colour. Rather than giving him the form to complete, she orally obtained the necessary information from him, asking him monosyllabic questions, receiving precise answers, and filling the information in the correct format onto the form. In asking him for his details, the clerk used both Afrikaans and Xhosa, the two linguistic codes most commonly used by

clients from the local townships. (The client's wife in this case anticipated that her elderly husband would not understand the Xhosa question, and answered on his behalf - in Afrikaans, but giving the street number first as is done in English).

The clerk indicated one section at the back which the client had to fill in, and explained that most of the elderly people got their children to do this for them. The only writing that the client thus had to do himself, was to sign the declaration at the end of the form. The signature implied that the client had read and comprehended the written declaration. In practice, the clerk explained to me, what usually happened was that she explained to clients what the declaration meant, upon which they signed:

I explain this last part. Some of them understand, they can read this last part, but they can't understand what it means. Then I just explain that you say that everything you have said is true. They say "yes".<sup>11</sup>

According to the clerk, even those who could read the forms preferred the clerks to fill them in. The passive position which people from Newtown assumed in dealing with events where standard literacy was used in the magistrate's court was not in the first instance an indicator of their inability to deal with forms. Rather, it was a sign of their acceptance that the clerk, as state agent, had more authority than they had in dealing with government forms. The clerk's authority was twofold: In the first place, she could do the code-switching (between local and bureaucratic Afrikaans) and mode-switching (between conversation and written document) that was necessary to fill in the form correctly. Secondly, she was the mediator between the clients from Newtown and the abstract state institution with whom the clients had very little contact. The clerk in fact represented the authority of the state. It was thus felt to be in the interest of the clients to let the clerks fill in forms *for* them, thereby adding legitimacy to their requests.

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<sup>11</sup> "Ek verduidelik daardie laaste gedeelte. Party van hulle verstaan, hulle kan hierdie gedeelte lees, maar hulle gaan nie verstaan wat daar aangaan nie. Dan verduidelik ek net dat jy sê alles wat jy sê, is waar, en dan sê hulle 'ja'".

I described the same phenomenon in relation to pension pay-outs in Bellville South. The chairman of the youth branch of the African National Congress in Bellville South commented critically on what he called the "psychosis in the coloured community" that they need the help of others to get things done:

I would say there is a psychosis in the coloured community that someone else will do it for us. The welfare mentality, that someone will come to fix the thing for you, personally I am not, communally we are not able to do it<sup>12</sup>.

I argue that the nature of institutional practices during which people used standard literacy reinforced the "welfare mentality" referred to here, partly because state subjects knew that they would only get their requests to government approved if you allowed "someone else [to] come and fix the thing [read: form] for you".

### 3.3 The consequences of engaging in standard literacy practices without institutional mediation

The above case studies raise the question whether coloured residents in Newtown and Bellville South would succeed in their dealings with state institutions if they engaged in the literacy practices required for this purpose without drawing on the assistance of the relevant state agents. I found this question difficult to answer, since during my research I never came across a state subject who did not in practice accept the mediation of state agents. Occasionally people expressed their resistance, as in the following case where Francis, a Newtown resident and an epileptic, complained about the procedure that she had to go through in order to get her state medical assistance:

Any time you might become ill, and then you may not have the R8 [the amount expected for state medical support]. Then you have to go to the pension to the magistrate's office, then you get

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<sup>12</sup> "Ek sou sê daar is die sigose in die kleurlinggemeenskap dat iemand anders sal dit vir ons doen. Die welfare-mentaliteit, dat iemand anders sal kom om die ding vir jou reg te maak, ek self is nie, of ons saam is nie in staat om dit te doen nie".

that paper for the R8, and possibly, especially since I am an epileptic, I could die there on the doorstep<sup>13</sup>.

However much Francis disliked having to submit herself to this procedure, in practice she had little choice as an individual about whether or not to participate in it. In chapter 6 I describe an alternative strategy that became available in Newtown for people like Francis: a white liberal lawyer started acting as mediator on behalf of Newtown residents in negotiating with state, and used legal discourse to legitimise her position as alternative mediator. Francis made use of the assistance of this lawyer. However the case remains that Francis needed an appropriate mediator to enable her to deal with state institutions' literacy practices.

The following incident demonstrated to me the degree to which state subjects in my research areas were dependent on the mediation and approval of state agents. During a visit to Newtown one weekday morning I was approached by Jan Mini, a tuberculosis sufferer who was desperately trying to secure a house to live in. He asked for my assistance, and took me to see the tiny shack in which he was living at the time. Jan waved a piece of paper at me, and asked if I could help him to get a house with it. When I enquired about the piece of paper, he gave a long explanation of how his attempts to buy land for a house were thwarted by the municipal clerk in Newtown who was responsible for housing, a Mr Swarts:

The paper, I am begging for a piece of land. The lawyer wrote down the price here. This is the price. They phoned down here. Mr Swarts, because I caught Mr Swarts' sister because the dogs bit me in the street... So I had to go to another white woman at the council and she asked me, she helped me: Isn't there land? And he sent me away, he [Mr Swarts] said there is no land. She got angry and said: No man, see to it that there is land. An advocate has gone to beg him thrice: Isn't there land that I can

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<sup>13</sup> "Want enige tyd dan raak 'n mens nou siek, dan het jy nou nie eintlik R8 nie. Dan moet jy na jou pensioen toe gaan na die landdroskantoor, dan kry jy daai papier van die R8, en moontlik, veral omdat ek 'n epileptikus is, kan ek moontlik doodgaan daar by die deur".

buy? He [Mr Swarts] said there is no land available<sup>14</sup>.

Jan Mini here described the various attempts he had made to get approval to buy land in Newtown. He stated that he had repeatedly been unsuccessful despite calling in the support of a municipal officer in Fort Beaufort (the "white woman") and of a lawyer who had given him the information in writing regarding the legal requirements for him to buy land (hence the piece of paper). Jan referred repeatedly to Mr Swarts' response to his request for land: "There is no land", he had said. He thus linked his lack of success with the unwillingness of Mr Swarts, the Newtown municipal clerk responsible for land purchases, to accept the requests regarding his purchase of land.

I visited Mr Swarts and discussed Jan Mini's situation with him. Mr Swarts's response was that Jan Mini's name was on the waiting list for land and that the purchase of land was determined by the flow of the waiting list. One of the reasons why Jan Mini's name had not reached the top of the waiting list was that the Management Committee, which Mr Swarts represented, graded applications according to their urgency. I requested to see Jan Mini's application form and Mr Swarts responded that my request would have to be approved in a Management Committee meeting. He did however indicate that the Management Committee did not regard Jan Mini as a priority for land ownership. "Jan Mini does not have children", he said. "What does he want to do with a house - slaughter farmers' cattle?". The last remark revealed Mr Swarts's attitude towards Jan Mini. He regarded him as untrustworthy to the degree that he would insinuate that Jan would steal and slaughter cattle in the house he would build. In the above quote, Jan referred to a personal incident where he had "caught" (presumably made a claim against) Mr Swarts' sister. While not stating so directly the implication is that Jan Mini suspected that soured relationships between him and Mr Swart were responsible for the latter's

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<sup>14</sup> "Die pampier, ek soebaat vir 'n grond, die *lawyer*, hy skryf dit die prys hierdie, dis die prys hierdie. Hulle bel hier onder, ek het die meneer Swarts, omdat ek Meneer Swarts se suster gevang het omdat die honde my in die straat gebyt het, toe moet ek dat 'n ander witvrou gaan daar by die *council* en sy het my gevra, sy het my gehelp: Is daar nie grond nie? En hy [Mnr Swarts] het my weggestuur en gesê daar is nie grond nie. En sy het kwaad geraak, sy het gesê; Nee man, kyk dat daar grond is, dat daar nou grond is. Nadat 'n prokureur al drie maal by hom gaan soebaat het daarso: Is daar nie 'n grond wat ek kan koop nie? Hy [Mnr Swarts] sê daar is geen grond beskikbaar nie".

perceived unwillingness to let him buy land.

Because Mr Swarts, the officer in direct control of the purchase of land, had not approved and arranged the sale of land to Jan, all Jan's attempts to use other agents (the lawyer, the municipal clerk) in order to secure land for himself, had failed. Though the application for land is a process that is monitored through formal written documents (application forms and the waiting list), it mattered little that Jan had completed the application form and that his name was added on the list. The reason was that the interpretation of the formal documents, which the Management Committee used to decide who could purchase land, was mediated by Mr Swarts, the responsible municipal clerk. By breaking trust relationships with Mr Swarts and by not submitting to Mr Swarts's role as mediator in negotiations with the Management Committee, Jan Mini had minimised his own chances of being allowed to purchase land.

I have argued in the present section that state subjects in Newtown and Bellville South assumed a passive role in dealing with standard literacy practices. In the foregoing paragraphs I have indicated that a few state subjects did not passively accept the literacy mediating role of state agents. Those who resisted could, however, maintain a resistance position only temporarily or otherwise resistance would doom their negotiations with state institutions to failure.

The case studies I have presented, of the pension pay-out in Bellville South and dealings with the magistrate's office in Newtown, suggest that "illiteracy" is not the main reason for the passive role that state subjects in Newtown and Bellville South assumed in relation to standard literacy practices. Rather, the position which the pensioners and the clients at the magistrate's court took reflected their understanding of the nature of these practices. They were most likely to achieve their aim (such as the acquisition of pension money) if they passively participated in the prescribed way, and allowed the clerks, for the purposes of the event, to keep charge of what happened to the written documents involved in their dealings with state. In an inverted way, their seemingly subservient and disempowered behaviour in dealing with standard literacy practices thus gave them access to state resources intended to "empower" them.

4. "If you do not pass as white, you get educated": Schooled literacy as a way to high society.

Thus far I have focused on the impact of the valorisation of standard literacy on coloureds in general, arguing that some of the standard literacy practices coloureds regularly engage in reinforced their positions of marginality and passive acceptance in relation to state institutions that have for decades been dominated by whites.

I now focus on the differentiation or 'othering' *between* coloureds in my research areas that partly resulted from the high value which coloureds placed on "educatedness" ("geleerdheid"). In discussing the case of Rietjie I have indicated that people in my research areas regarded attending literacy classes as a way to acquire "educatedness". It is thus of importance for my interpretation of the value of standard literacy for coloureds to consider the value they attached to "educatedness".

In my research areas, "educatedness" was a marker of social difference. People in Newtown and Bellville South drew a clear distinction between the educated "high society" or "high class people" amongst them and the "ordinary" people. In Bellville South, it was the people who came from Glenhaven who were regarded as having high social status. Glenhaven formed part of Bellville South but was distinctly separated from the rest of the area by a road with high walls on both sides. People commented on the differences. Once while I drove through Glenhaven with Suzie Erasmus, a community worker who lived and worked in the flats of Bellville South, she pointed to the fences around the decidedly middle class houses, and said that people living in these houses probably never talk to their neighbours (thereby implicitly distancing herself from the values which she associated with middle class living).

On the other side of the road, people lived in flats and shacks. Many who lived there had not completed high school or even primary school. The social interests of people on either side of the road differed, with the result that they operated two separate Ratepayers' Associations and two branches of the same political parties. When I asked Mrs Wilma Jeppe, who was involved in the branch of the Ratepayers' Association that operated in the flats of Bellville South, why there was this distinction between them and people from Glenhaven,

she said:

I think the thought which appears there is that Glenhaven's people are the high class [she used the English phrase "high class] people, you see, and the people of Bellville South are the dead ordinary people, dead ordinary people you see, who work hard daily for their piece of bread. Because Glenhaven's people are [in] the elite area and I suppose it must be there that the problem arose which made Glenhaven feel that they - I don't know - if they don't fit in here or what. And if they are better off than Bellville South<sup>15</sup>.

Level of education was one criterion by which people in Bellville South's flats and people in Glenhaven were regarded as distinctly different. The educated talked about people in the flats of Bellville South as largely uneducated. A guidance teacher at Bellville South high school told me that literacy levels were low amongst the parents at that school, and that most of the parents were unschooled or semi-schooled. The principal, Mr Fester, confirmed that the parents' levels of education varied from four to seven years of schooling (Std 2 - Std 5). Referring to the adults who were attending literacy classes in Bellville South, the principal said: "And one should not have something like this in the city, an adult should be able to write his name"<sup>16</sup>. While thus expressing his surprise at the low literacy levels of parents in Bellville South, he also confirmed his opinion that people in Bellville South had received limited schooling. Mrs April, the principal of the primary school in Tupperware, Bellville South, gave me a similar answer when I asked her about the level of literacy amongst the parents of her students:

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<sup>15</sup> "Ek dink dis die gedagte wat daar uitkom is dat Glenhaven se mense is mos nou die high class mense en Bellville Suid is mos nou doodgewone mense, doodgewone mense, wat daagliks natuurlik hard werk vir hulle stukkie kos. Omdat Glenhaven se mense, die elite gebied is ek dink dit is seker maar daar waar die probleem ingesleep het dat Glenhaven gevoel het dat hulle - ek weet nie - of hulle nie hier inpas of wat nie. En of hulle nou beter af is as wat Bellville Suid is nie".

<sup>16</sup> "En 'n mens behoort nie in die stad meer so iets aan te tref nie, 'n volwassene behoort sy naam te kan skryf".

this community who have a Std 8 certificate, that is a lot. Ten. See, for most of them, in the past, schooling only went up to Std 5, then they started working<sup>17</sup>.

Many of the adults I interviewed in Bellville South who had obtained only a few years of schooling had grown up on farms where schooling was not a priority, as I will discuss in chapter 7. Rietjie de Klerk, the elderly literacy learner whose case study I have discussed earlier, was in this position.

Rietjie's literacy teacher, to whom I also referred, lived in Glenhaven, had a doctoral degree and the title of professor at the nearby university. She thus represented the educatedness of people in Glenhaven, an educatedness that set them apart from people like Rietjie in Bellville South. The headmaster of the high school in Bellville South told me that his pupils who have managed to obtain tertiary education have invariably moved to Glenhaven, which was inhabited mostly by professionals with tertiary qualifications. People who moved to Bellville South from elsewhere also regarded Glenhaven as the right place for an educated person to live, as I realised when interviewing Mrs Ronel Dammert, an elderly woman who had moved to Glenhaven from the Eastern Cape when her husband retired from his position as minister. I gathered from the way in which Mrs Dammert spoke about the people living in the flats of Bellville South that she dissociated herself from them. She told me that her husband was elected as elder in the church and consequently had to visit people in Bellville South, whom she described as "rough people" (*rowwe mense*):

But the drinking continues here [in Bellville South's poorer areas]. Murders are committed. There are rough people<sup>18</sup>.

Mrs Dammert expressed her gratitude for being able to live in Glenhaven

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<sup>17</sup> "Juffrou, om vir u die waarheid te sê: As u uit hierdie gemeenskap tien ouers het wat St.8-sertifikate het, dan is dit baie. Tien. Kyk, die meeste - die skool het mos vroeër tot St.5 gegaan, dan gaan hulle werk".

<sup>18</sup> "Maar nou die drinkery gaan ook maar hier aan. Daar is moorde wat gepleeg word. Daar is rowwe mense:.

instead of the area of Bellville South where the "rough" people lived:

The neighbourhood is a very, very nice neighbourhood. Quieter than Bellville South, that area I referred to earlier. Then I just want to tell you this, Liezl: Many days I look out from here and I know that the Lord must have sent us here [...]<sup>19</sup>.

Having referred to the area where she lived as "a very, very nice neighbourhood", Mrs Dammert commented on the "messy" state of life in the flats of Bellville South, as she saw it:

Oh! Things are messy there. They still haven't recovered from last night. The eyes, they look, they see you but they also do not see you. And the woman is standing washing. The house is messy. That is how I saw it there<sup>20</sup>.

People like Mrs Dammert who lived in Glenhaven thus counted themselves fortunate for not having to live in Bellville South's poorer areas. Mrs Dammert distinguished herself from the "rough people" of the latter area by stating that she treated people with respect ("Talk respectably. Receive them well, then they will also know they can talk properly with you"<sup>21</sup>). She added that she had acquired this manner through being the wife of a minister who also acted as teacher, and who was often the only "educated" man in the small towns where they had lived. Mrs Dammert's husband's "educated" position contributed to the image she presented of the difference between life in the "very nice" neighbourhood of Glenhaven and the "messy" flats of Bellville South.

I noticed that people who belonged to or aspired to "high society" in Newtown

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<sup>19</sup> "Die buurt is 'n baie, baie lekker buurt. Stiller as wat die Bellville Suid is, daai deel wat ek nou van praat. Dan wil ek nou net vir jou sê Liezl: As ek baie dae so hier sit en kyk nou uit, dan sê dit vir my die Here het vir ons gestuur hierheen".

<sup>20</sup> "O! Dan's dit deurmekaar! Hulle is nog van gisteraand af nie reg nie. Die oë, hulle kyk, hulle sien en hulle sien ook nie vir jou nie. En die vrou staan en was. Die huis is deurmekaar. So het ek dit gesien daar".

<sup>21</sup> "Gesels ordentlik. Ontvang vir hulle mooi, dan weet hulle ook hulle kan met jou regpraat".

and Bellville South associated illiteracy with a range of social conditions such as poverty, "messiness" and unlawful behaviour. It was not uncommon for people in Bellville South to associate illiteracy with "rough people". Suzie Eendrag, the community worker in Bellville South, expressed her opinion as follows:

You see, the people are scared, because automatically, if someone is unemployed and illiterate, he is a *skollie* [thief, troublemaker], and he is cruel. Understand? And he will commit murder, rape girls, etcetera<sup>22</sup>.

With this statement, Suzie expressed her perception that people in Bellville South associated people who were illiterate with unemployment and criminal behaviour - they were in Mrs Dammerts' words "rough people". A child welfare worker in Newtown associated illiteracy with unemployment and illegal activity, explaining why she made this association:

Then you get the illiteracy. Because of their illiteracy, parents don't have that much knowledge - because they also did not get far in life. So if you are not capable or you don't want to [study], you just have to go work. But where are the job opportunities. Then you sit here year in year out, you fall into that groove. And because I don't have anything to do I may do things with my friends, maybe drink, if I am a young man perhaps marijuana - experiment with everything. And then that cruel cycle starts all over<sup>23</sup>.

Following this description of the "cruel cycle" that illiterate people may fall into, the Newtown child welfare worker distinguished between the "more

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<sup>22</sup> "Jy sien, die mense is bang, want outomaties, as iemand werkloos is en ongeletterd, dan is hy 'n skollie, en dan is hy wreed. Verstaan? En dan sal hy moord pleeg, meisies verkrag en al daai goete".

<sup>23</sup> "Dan kry jy nou die ongeletterdheid. Ouers het, as gevolg van hulle ongeletterdheid, het hulle nie soveel kennis - want hulle het ook nou nie ver in die lewe gegaan nie. So as jy dan nou nie in staat is of wil nie, dan moet jy gaan werk. En waar is die werkseleenthede? Dan sit jy weer hier jaar in en jaar uit, dan val jy in die groef in. As gevolg van ledigheid sal ek miskien dan dit saam met my vriende doen, miskien drink, as ek 'n seun is dagga, eksperimenteer met alles. En dan kom daardie wrede siklus weer".

well off person, the middle and the lower one". She expressed her opinion that it was the lower classes who most explicitly experienced this cycle.

It is no wonder, therefore, that people who were seen by themselves or others as illiterates were often very defensive about their position. A devoted church woman started crying when she told me how guilty she felt about hiding her "illiteracy" from the others at her church, because she could not face the shame of disclosure. Referring to his grandfather who was unschooled, Neville McDonald, a teacher in Newtown, assured me that, despite lacking standard literacy, his grandfather was a respectable man:

My grandfather was a respectable man. He was a builder, but he could not read or write at all. But he was a prominent builder. Churchgoer. A large number of the family from my father's side is illiterate, but they are not necessarily drunken people<sup>24</sup>.

Under the regulations of the Group Areas Act, the coloured residents of Fort Beaufort had little choice but to live together in Newtown. There was thus not such a distinct spatial separation between the well educated middle class and the rest of Newtown. However, those who regarded themselves as of higher social status had their ways of distinguishing themselves, as I now indicate.

I have stated that there were many people in Bellville South and Newtown who wished nothing more than to be associated with whites. The case of Marie Adriaans, which I will now discuss, demonstrates that those who wished to distinguish themselves from the rest of the coloured population of Newtown either aimed to "pass for white" or sought to acquire the cultural attributes of whites. They hoped that the formal acquisition of standard literacy through schooling would lead to this end.

Marie Adriaans was descended from a racially mixed, but highly educated family. Her maternal grandfather was coloured; her grandmother - Maria Magdalena - was white (She did not mention the background of her paternal

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<sup>24</sup> "My oupa was 'n gerespekteerde man gewees. Hy was 'n bouer, maar hy kon niks lees en skryf nie. Maar hy was 'n prominente bouer gewees. Kerkloper. 'n Groot gedeelte van die familie van my pa se kant af is ongeletterde mense, maar hulle is nie noodwendig dronk mense nie".

grandparents - the focus in her narrative was on her white ancestry). According to Mrs Adriaans, one half of their family managed to pass as white, and this made a crucial difference to their social status: the "white" family members moved to Johannesburg, found financial security and married into "high society". The term "high society" was often used by people in Newtown and Bellville South to refer to people of a superior class status. Mrs Adriaans said about their social advantage:

If you are white, you can easily get a job...And many did, they got married - I suppose for security, miss -to Jews and eye specialists and people like that.<sup>25</sup>

Her side of the family had, however, stayed in the Eastern Cape and devoted themselves to their own and their children's education. Comparing her side of the family to those who had passed as white, Mrs Adriaans said:

We are the team that studied, they didn't study that far, miss. We shall just say: "saved by the colour of their skin" [English phrase used]<sup>26</sup>.

For Mrs Adriaans and her family members who had been classified coloured, education became the grounds of their social status, a status she implied, that they had earned, in contrast to their relatives who had merely passed for white on the basis of physical appearance.

Mrs Adriaans told me that her mother had been in charge of establishing the first Congregational Church school in Newtown. While she built the school and earned a salary as a teacher, she sent her husband to finish his studies, and he became the headmaster when he returned. Mrs Adriaans described herself as the black sheep of the family because she was the only one of her siblings who, rather than following a teaching career, had become a business woman (she owned a cafe in Newtown). She was, however, married to a school headmaster

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<sup>25</sup> "As jy blank is, kan jy gou werk kry... En baie het, hulle het getrou, ook seker vir sekuriteit, juffrou, want dis Jode en oogkundiges en sulke mense.."

<sup>26</sup> "Ons is die span wat geleer het, en hulle het nie so ver geleer nie, juffrou. Ons sal maar sê: *saved by the colour of her skin*".

and, with the money she earned through her cafe, she sent all her children to university. She elaborated extensively on their qualifications and their teaching careers. Comparing herself to them, she told me: "I have level headed children; [they are] not like me"<sup>27</sup>. (Mrs Adriaans used the English phrase "level headed" and apologised to me for mixing her language; she argued that this was the sad consequence of the fact that she had to spend a large amount of her time in the presence of "the rabble", as she had referred to the ordinary people of Newtown, who by implication did not speak properly).

Being educated was clearly a definite marker of class superiority for Mrs Adriaans. While still living in Newtown, she distinguished herself from the rest of the people there by wearing black only (she explained to me that her black clothes showed that she was "eccentric"), by not "mixing" with other people in Newtown, and by attending a church in Fort Beaufort with mostly white middle class members. Repeating a widely held view amongst those who regarded themselves as somehow better than the rest, she commented about the people of Newtown as "spoilt" and passively dependent on welfare:

Miss, the people are very spoilt. That's all I want to say, miss. I feel that we...They pray to become ill, miss, so that they can get pensions. It's true, miss. Go into their homes and you will hear. It's true, miss, the people pray to become ill, miss. A lot of spoilt people<sup>28</sup>.

Mrs Adriaans started her second sentence by using the inclusive "we" when referring to the "spoilt" people of Newtown, but immediately changed "we" to "they". From the rest of her statement it is clear that Mrs Adriaans dissociated herself from "the people" of Newtown.

I have mentioned earlier that people associated illiteracy with unemployment, poverty, illegal activity and lower class status. As demonstrated by Mrs

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<sup>27</sup> Ek het levelheaded kinders; nie soos ek nie.."

<sup>28</sup> "Juffrou, die mense is baie bederf. Dis al wat ek wil sê juffrou. Ek voel ons, hulle bid om siek te wees, juffrou, dat hulle kan pensioen kry. Is waar, juffrou. Gaan maar by die huise in, dan gaan juffrou hoor. Dis mos waar, juffrou, die mense bid om siek te wees, juffrou. 'n Klomp bederfte mense".

Adriaans, illiteracy was also associated with passive dependence. The inverse argument needs to be stated. Those people described as illiterate are marginalised because they are passive and because they are dependent. The very fact that they accept state handouts denigrates them and signifies that they are of a lower class status. Mrs Adriaans and her household wished to distinguish themselves from such people.

Jeanne, Mrs Adriaans' daughter, had married a man from a wealthy and highly educated family which, according to her, could also have been classified as white: "He is white, but he is a coloured. He is educated, deep into educating"<sup>29</sup>. Mrs Adriaans was initially shocked and surprised that he wanted to marry into a "coloured" family, but proudly informed me that after their marriage, her daughter had moved away from people she referred to as "the rabble" of Newtown to live with "high society" in "white" Fort Beaufort, where she and her new husband had bought a house in 1994 (by which time the Group Areas Act had been scrapped).

Around the same time, many other educated people who had lived in Newtown moved over to white Fort Beaufort. This contributed to the 'othering' between the educated "high society" and the ordinary people of Newtown. David Raad, reverend at Newtown's largest church, and his wife Eleanor, were among the first people to move. They set themselves apart through a display of culture and education. When I visited Eleanor at their house in Fort Beaufort, we were served cucumber sandwiches and tea in fine china by Margaret Spogter, their domestic servant, who came from Newtown. Eleanor, who was the national women's chairperson of their church, told me that she had been entertained by the Countess of Beaufort on one of her numerous visits overseas. She told me that both her husband and she were teachers until David obtained a second degree in theology and became the reverend of their church in the district. Eleanor also elaborated about the tertiary qualifications her children had obtained. She told me that her husband was descended from a famous British missionary family, while her own family were Dutch in origin. Commenting on the "educatedness" of their family, she said:

In the Raad family there are so many ministers that they can

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<sup>29</sup> "Hy is wit, maar nou is hy seker kleurling. Hy is geleerd, diep in die onderwys in.."

conduct their own funerals. And they are in education, etcetera. And the Swiegelaar family - there are doctors and engineers, etcetera<sup>30</sup>.

From her position as part of an educated family, Eleanor talked with paternalistic sympathy about the uneducated women in their congregation in Newtown. Her description of how one of the women thanked her for the training she had given them in an aspect of religious worship reflects this position:

What was so wonderful to me was one day at a meeting of our region when a women rose - look, one doesn't look at clothes and things like that - but I have often in my life...When the women rose, a big woman, she rose and said: "I just want to say thank you this morning, because it is through her [Mrs Raad]...she didn't say we are illiterate, she gave us the help of the training. She didn't just leave us". And you know, that day when I came home, I said: "Thank you Lord, even if I did nothing, at least I achieved something". I always say you should never ... it's how you move, even how you dress - if we go to the little farms, you don't look formal and grand, you fit in with the people, what their conditions are, but at the same time you lift their standards. But you get to their level<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> "In die Raad familie is daar soveel predikante dat hulle eie begrafnisse hou. En hulle is in die onderwys, en dies meer. In the Swiegelaar familie, daar is dokters en ingenieurs en dies meer".

<sup>31</sup> "Wat vir my baie wonderlik was een oggend by so 'n byeenkoms van ons hele streek, het die een vrou opgestaan - kyk, 'n mens kyk nie vir klere en die tipe van ding nie - maar ek het baie keer in my lewe... toe die vrou opstaan, 'n groot vrou, sy staan op, sy sê: 'Ek wil net vanmore baie dankie sê, want dit is deur haar, want sy het nie gesê ons is ongeletterd nie, sy het vir ons die hulp van die opleiding gegee. Sy het nie vir ons laat uitstaan nie'. En weet u, daai dat het ek huis toe gekom, ek het gesê: 'Dankie, Here, al het ek niks gedoen nie, ek het darem daai bietjie behaal'. Ek sê altyd 'n mens moet nooit, dis hoe jy beweeg, selfs hoe jy aantrek ook - as ons nou na die klein plasies toe gaan, is jy nie deftig en spoggerig nie, jy pas in by die mense, hoe hulle omstandighede is, maar in dieselfde tyd lig jy hulle standarde. Maar jy kom op hulle vlak".

Eleanor indicated her willingness to show compassion for the ordinary people in her congregation by reflecting on her appreciation of the words that this uneducated woman had said of her, and by stating her desire to "get to their level" when visiting people on their farms. However the way in which she said this, clearly indicated that she distinguished herself from them; by "get[ting] to their level", she could "lift their standards". In her description of the woman who had thanked her, Eleanor said that "one doesn't notice clothes and things like that" - thereby paradoxically suggesting that she had noticed the woman's clothes; most likely because they signified their woman's workers' class status. Later she stated that, "if we go to the little farms, you don't look formal and grand, you fit in with the people", the implication being that there was a significant difference between her own appearance and that of "the people". Perhaps the most distinct marker of the differences between the people and Eleanor was expressed in the woman thanking her for not "saying that [they] are illiterate" and for giving them training. Eleanor was the teacher and they were the illiterates, thankful that she did not put them to shame because their educational status was below hers.

People like Mrs Adriaans and Eleanor Raad had claims to being part of "high society" because of the educatedness of their families (and to a lesser degree, since they themselves had not managed to pass for white, because of their white ancestry). Their educatedness distinguished them from the ordinary people in Newtown. People who, as Eleanor suggested with her reference to the woman's words about her, were deeply aware of their own lack of education in comparison to the "high society" coloureds, many of whom had by then moved to "white" Fort Beaufort. Thus the high valorisation of educatedness (with which literacy was equated) had led to an internal "othering" between members of the same coloured society; between the "illiterate" ordinary people ("the rabble", in Mrs Adriaans' words) and the educated "high society". But acquiring education or literacy was not likely to change people's social status in Newtown radically, as I will now discuss.

##### **5. Hoping against hope: Schooled literacy for social mobility**

Many people in Bellville South and Newtown hoped that schooled literacy would provide them with the prestige they needed to gain social mobility and status. Those who were part of educated families (like the Raad's children and Mrs

Adriaans' daughter) succeeded in acquiring tertiary degrees and moved into "white" society. But even though they were educated, they were kept aware that they were coloured and thus still in an inferior status to whites.

The case of Jeanne, Mrs Adriaans' daughter, illustrates this. After moving to Fort Beaufort, Jeanne gave extra maths classes to white students, and also looked after a white child. One day, friends of the child's family made a sneering comment about the fact that their child mixed with coloureds. Jeanne was so upset that she terminated all the maths classes. This incident reminded Mrs Adriaans that even her highly educated children could still not be sure that they would be accepted in white Fort Beaufort.

For those young people who were not so fortunate to be brought up in families with links to educational or government institutions, the chances were slim that education would even get them into coloured "high society". Olivia and Lena, two eighteen year old high school students in Newtown, told me with some irony that they thought "illiterate" people had a better chance of getting a job than they themselves would when completing school.

In Bellville South too workers' class people were disillusioned with formal education. Mr Jeppe, father of two unemployed matriculated children in Bellville South, told me that he had full understanding for the fact that his children's generation are participating in gang activities. Pointing to a young man selling marijuana on a street corner, he said to me:

This is a man who has been to school for twelve years. He has to sit on this corner every day. And he doesn't have an income. What will one do? There is just one thing going through your head: I have been to school for so long and I can't earn anything, what should I do? All I can do is smoke...<sup>32</sup>

Mr Joppe had one explanation for the fact that education did not lead to job security or upward mobility for his children: the fact that they were coloured

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<sup>32</sup> "Dis 'n man wat 12 jaar skoolgegaan het. En hy moet elke dag op die hoek sit. En hy het nie 'n inkomste nie. Wat gaan 'n mens maak? Daar is net een ding wat in jou gedagtes maal... Ek het vir so lank skool gegaan en ek het niks wat ek kan verdien nie, wat moet ek maak? Dan moet ek maar rook..."

was more important than the fact that they were educated. In the post-apartheid era, coloured workers were aware that their positions were no longer protected by the Coloured Labour Preference Policy. While most industries in Bellville South were not deliberately retrenching coloureds, the perception of coloured workers like Mr Jeppe was that they were being replaced by african workers. This left people like Mr Jeppe disillusioned about the double disability he and his children now had: Being coloured, they were not white enough to have accumulated the cultural capital of whites, and not black enough to have job security as workers. In this context, schooled literacy had lost its value as a form of cultural capital.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented some findings which have led me to question whether the way standard literacy is used in coloured areas, and the values people there attribute to it, have contributed to their empowerment. I have argued that the values attached to standard literacy practices and "educatedness" have confirmed the sociopolitical processes that led to the "othering" of coloureds. I have shown that the people of Newtown and Bellville South take on passive, subservient roles in dealing with situations where standard literacy is used, to the extent that doing so has become a marker of colouredness. The irony of the situation is that, for people dealing with state institutions where clerks play a powerful mediating role, clients maximise their chances of obtaining access to state resources by passively participating in bureaucratic procedures and keeping their own engagement with standard written texts to a minimum. In these contexts, I have argued, it is doubtful whether acquiring standard literacy would do much to "empower" them. Almost paradoxically, their access to state resources is easier if they retain the roles of illiterate, passive dependents.

I have also shown that the high valorisation of "educatedness", which people associate with literacy acquisition, has led to an internal "othering" between coloureds of different social status. People in Newtown and Bellville South who had not managed to "pass for white" on the basis of physical appearance tended to aspire towards "whiteness" by associating themselves with the culture and practices of whites. For such people, education became a sign of social superiority to the ordinary "rabble", of being closer to whites, of

being part of "high society".

The caution which I have voiced in this chapter is that policy focusing exclusively on the delivery of standard literacy, may in fact not necessarily lead to the empowerment of the people it is meant to empower. In the next chapter, I extend this argument by pointing to the consequences of focusing on standard literacy alone, and excluding other literacies which so-called "illiterate" people use in their lives. I thus show that people in Newtown and Bellville South who had not acquired literacy through formal schooling, used other literacies which were highly significant to them in their lives, and actually served as alternative signs of social status.

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## Chapter 5

### Embedded literacies and social identities

In his work on the shifting constructions of coloured identity, AbdouMalig (1994) describes processes of "negotiating a state of 'inbetweenness' among identities" (1994:164). My focus in this chapter will be on the embedded literacies which people in Newtown and Bellville South drew on in the process of negotiating their different roles or identities. I have coined the term *embedded literacies* to describe forms of literacy which are embedded in people's everyday lives and the use of which requires contextual interpretation skills rather than decontextualised standard literacy skills.

I focus specifically on the embedded literacies people used in their roles as members of religious groups and participants in street cultures. In these domains of social practice I found people in my research areas occupying positions of "inbetweenness" which were not simply expressions of coloured marginality. I will argue that religious and street practices created the possibility for people to assume what Turner (1978) calls *liminal* positions.

Turner states that the term liminality was first used to describe a state in rites of transition where the subject assumes an ambiguous position between different cultural states or social statuses. Turner argues that liminality is a state not limited to traditional rites of passage; rather it applies to any phase of cultural change where existing modes of ordering of thought or behaviour may be revised (Turner 1978:2).

I will indicate in this chapter that participation in religious and street practices resulted in people at times assuming social positions that were independent of their status in formal institutional domains, such as their statuses as state subjects or as "illiterates" in a society where formal education is highly valued. I regard as positions of liminality the roles which people assumed that, however temporarily, caused them to redefine their

roles outside of their dominant institutionally defined identities. I argue that people's liminal roles are manifested through the use of different modes of thought, ordering and behaviour, and through the use of embedded literacies rather than standard literacy.

My discussion will point out the relationship between standard literacy and embedded literacies, and the ways in which people negotiate "states of inbetweenness" between the use of these two kinds of literacies. In doing so, I will demonstrate that, in spite of the assumptions of South African policy makers, standard literacy (the focus of the previous chapter) is not the only significant form of literacy used by those people targeted for adult literacy interventions. This argument, I will indicate, contests policy makers' assumptions that not having standard literacy skills creates a fundamental "lack" or deficit in people's lives.

I begin by clarifying my distinction between standard literacy and embedded literacies. Empirically, I explain this distinction by comparing my research findings with those of Heath (1983). In her study of three towns in the Piedmont Carolinas, Heath distinguishes between the approaches to literacy held by the "mainstream community" which valued standard literacy, and that of the working class black community of Trackton which valued contextualised interpretation skills. In learning to read, and in responding to what was read to them, children from the school-oriented community were taught to give information in a sequential way, to decontextualise knowledge and to interpret it through analytical dissection (1983:236-262). Children from Trackton, on the other hand, asked analogical questions which called for non-specific comparisons. In interpreting, they contextualised heavily rather than decontextualising. Emphasis was on fictionalising and performance rather than information giving (1983:73-113,166).

In chapter 4 I described some standard literacy practices in Newtown and Bellville South that required processes of encoding and decoding similar to those of the school-oriented children in Heath's study. During pension payouts in Bellville South and visits to the magistrate's court in Newtown, state subjects went through a linear, sequential procedure in presenting to the clerks the information required of them. The emphasis was on the decontextualised information about the state subject represented on the form.

This information was analyzed by the clerk and processed in the bureaucratically preferred way, but without regard for the finer details of the individuals concerned and their social contexts. Embedded literacy practices, by contrast, involve *contextualising* knowledge rather than presenting decontextualised information, using *analogical* and associative rather than analytical skills for interpreting texts, and using *narrative and performative* techniques in encoding and decoding texts. I also discuss the significance which texts had *as objects* for people.

I see standard literacy and embedded literacies as requiring different processes of encoding (writing/producing signs) and decoding (interpreting signs), or different ways of using written codes. Hall (1980:133) distinguishes between the *connotative* and the *denotative* interpretation of codes, with the emphasis in the former on the associative meaning of codes and in the latter being on literal or factual meaning. I illustrate in this chapter that people tended to use connotative/associative strategies for interpreting embedded literacies, rather than the denotative, information-oriented strategies they used when participating in standard literacy practices.

I start by unpacking the ways in which people's use of embedded literacies contributed to the negotiation of their roles and identities. Next I discuss the meaning which *texts as objects* had in the embedded literacy practices I observed. I then focus on four ways in which encoding and decoding differed between embedded and standard literacy practices.

My analysis of these different aspects of embedded literacies are discussed through ethnographic considerations of two church services that I attended, and the details of which I draw on to develop my argument. I have chosen to focus on these church services because, as Heath observed church services in the American working class community where she worked (1983:201-212), I found them rich in the embedded use of written text. By focusing on these two case studies, I aim to keep a sense of the practical interrelatedness of the different elements of embedded literacies. The first service I refer to was a Sunday morning service that I attended in the Congregational Church of Newtown. The second was a Wednesday evening service I attended in the Full Gospel Church in Bellville South.

## 1. Inbetween identities/roles

### 1.1 Literacy and liminality in religious practice

I was conscious while attending these two services that, by participating in the service, the congregants were entering into roles that distinguished them from, but also related them to, the roles people played in the streets around them. Religious texts played some role in this process, as I will now discuss.

Religious practice in Newtown had a similar quality to what Turner (1978) describes as the liminal state of religious pilgrims in which they are separated from profane social structures and enter into a state of "communitas", which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity and comradeship (1978:10,38,250). During the week women indicated their religious devotion by covering their heads and solemnly walking to church with Bibles and songbooks. Preparing to attend the Sunday service at the Congregational Church in Newtown, families, dressed in their special Sunday morning clothes walked through the streets of Newtown where a few people were still lying around after the previous night's drinking and revelry. Congregants met at the door of the grandiose church (built, as I have mentioned in chapter 3, from the money earned through the sale of the church's Kat river property).

Inside, worshippers joined in the singing of charismatic songs. The singing created both a strong sense of shared purpose and a space for individual expression of faith. One woman in the audience introduced a song and then the rest of the congregation joined in. Songs consisted of one or two sentences sung to a simple melody; each verse was repeated so often that even as a stranger I felt drawn into the emotional singing. Songs were about the goodness of God ("The Lord is good. Admit that He prepared His own people for Himself"<sup>1</sup>) and the omnipotence and goodness of God ("For worthy is the Lord. His mercy never ends"<sup>2</sup>). With each repetition of the song, the

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<sup>1</sup>"Die Heer is goed/erken dat Hy 'n eie volk vir hom berei".

<sup>2</sup>"Want goedertierend is die Heer, sy goedheid eindig nimmer meer".

emotional intensity of the congregation was heightened. Individual members showed their devotion by clapping hands, dancing, singing a different harmony or praying - each in their own way and at their own pace, thus seemingly producing a cacophony of sounds and gestures.

In her analysis of literacy practices in the black working class area where she conducted research, Heath (1983:101-121) states that each part of a typical service - hymns, prayers and sermon - had a written source in its background. It will become clear that the same can be said of the church services I attended in Newtown and in Bellville South. It is important to note, however, that the use of written texts was embedded in a range of religious practices for which literacy was inconsequential, from singing, dancing, clapping hands and emotional praying to dramatic moments of silence and conviction during the service. Heath (1983:203) describes a similar range of practices in the Tracton church service:

Hymns, prayers, and sermon are intertwined in patterns which defy analytical description by their complication in overlapping and simultaneous pieces. Outsiders, unfamiliar with the routines of the service and the norms of participation by members of the congregation, cannot understand the service in many parts, and often report their feeling that "too much is going on at the same time" (Heath 1983:203).

As an outsider attending the service in Newtown, I had a similar experience to that which Heath describes. At the same time I was aware that being familiar with the intricate mix of oral, literate and performative activities would have given me a sense of belonging to the group.

Throughout the service, there were constant reminders of both the difference between, and the connectedness of, the "people of God" who were gathered in the church, and the "people in the world" outside of the church. At one stage a female deacon prayed for the larger "coloured community", and specifically for the families of the victims of the "station strangler" in distant Mitchells Plain. (At the time, the killing and disappearance of a number of children in the Western Cape was connected to a person referred to as the "station strangler"). Through this prayer, the deacon defined the congregation

both as distanced from the criminal elements in coloured neighbourhoods and as sympathetic to families in the same neighbourhoods who suffered under these acts of criminality.

In Bellville South I attended a weekday service of a cell group of the Full Gospel church in Stilwanië, an area that, at the time, was much troubled by gang fights. Even before the start of the service I was aware that the meeting revolved around the image of a family (cell group) coming together from their various places in the wild world they live in to the safe religious haven of the church. While I was waiting outside for the service to start, a woman who knew me asked me in a concerned manner whether I had parked my car in a safe place, since they had had much gangster violence in the street in the past week. As if by agreement, we did not discuss the violence in the streets any longer when "brothers" and "sisters" started approaching. Instead we greeted each other by shaking hands; the woman I knew introduced me to each person individually. "Good evening, brother. Good evening sister"<sup>3</sup> (the terms church brother and church sister were commonly used in Newtown and Bellville South to refer to people known for their devoted religious practice). These greetings signified, as in Newtown, our entry into a religious community set apart from the restless world outside.

Inside the hall, the chairs were set in a semi-circle, signifying both unity and the fact that the congregation members looked to God and not to each other. The leader sat on one end of the semi-circle. He opened the service with a formal welcome, using terms of familial devotion: "Dear loved ones, welcome tonight in the precious name of our Lord Jesus Christ"<sup>4</sup> An elderly man, referred to as brother, was asked to open the meeting with prayer. In a slow, passionate voice he thanked God for the gathering of "sisters and brothers around the Father". Throughout the service, phrases like "beloveds, precious name, beloved heavenly Father, precious name"<sup>5</sup> were used respectively by various participants. These phrases, which were not in use in their everyday language, contributed to a sacramental discourse emphasising

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<sup>3</sup> "Goeienaand broer, goeienaand suster".

<sup>4</sup> "Geagte dierbares, welkom vanaand in die kosbare naam van Jesus Christus".

<sup>5</sup> "dierbares, kosbare naam, dierbare hemelse Vader, kosbare naam"

the sacredness of the bond between worshippers, God and the church.

The discourse used in the service was an expression of liminal *communitas*, in Turner's terms (1978). Turner defines *communitas* as "[a] relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations and circumstances" (1978:25), particularly groups that can be described as liminal, marginal (on the edges of structure) or inferior (beneath structure). The church service was an experience of liminal *communitas* (Turner 1978:249-251) in that it created the space for people to assume positions of liminality between the sacred and their everyday realities in Bellville South. This position of liminality set them distinctly apart from everyday experience and social structure. At the same time they had the possibility of unmediated communication between the different identities that the participants carried within them: on the one hand they were church brothers and sisters with religious ideals and on the other hand they were residents of a gangster-ridden suburb in which crimes were part of daily reality.

The Bible played an important symbolic role as reference to the shared religious ideal held by the congregants. The leader often referred to the Bible in encouraging the congregation with statements such as the following:

The Bible says He knows the footsteps of his children...

The Bible says that one day when we all reach heaven, then we will be practiced in singing halleluia to the glory of God<sup>6</sup>.

These statements often did not, strictly speaking, come from Scripture, but their purpose was not to denote meaning in the sense that standard literacy does. Instead, these references to Scripture served to anchor the congregation around their belief in the Word of God.

Belief in the Word of God also served to distinguish them from those outside

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<sup>6</sup> "Die Bybel sê Hy ken die voetstappe van sy kinders..."  
"Die Bybel sê eendag as ons in die hemel kom, dan gaan ons ge oefen wees om haleluja te sing tot eer van God."

the congregation. During the part of the service where congregants presented their "witnesses" - personal confessions of their religious experiences - the oldest man present stood up and reminded the others to stay faithful to what the Word of God said and not to be misled by the happenings around them. He talked about the wildness of the world around them, expressing his sympathy with those parents who had lost their children in violence in the streets or whose children were in jail. He spoke with empathy as someone who personally knew both the victims and the guilty parties in the gang killings that had, during the previous weeks, taken place in the streets just outside the hall where the congregation was meeting. Turning to the image of "the world" as presented in the media, he said:

We live in a sick world. When we open the newspapers, we can see: it's just murder and robbery. But the Lord Jesus will change the world. But we don't have to wonder - there is a God. If we just stay down on our knees...<sup>7</sup>.

In his reflection on the state of the world, the old man presented the liminal space offered by religious practice as a refuge and a place of transformation ("the Lord Jesus will change the world") for those who do not find themselves at home in the world.

Next young woman rose and said that she has been inspired by the previous witness to share a passage from Scripture. She read Romans 8, "Who shall separate us from the love of God? [...]". The reading contributed to the theme of God's caring and protection in a world filled with violence and tribulation.

Through the use of Scripture references such as these, congregation members confirmed the sanctified position they saw themselves occupying during their religious practice, a sanctification that temporarily set them apart from the world outside. At the same time, people kept coming into the hall to give messages to the members of the congregation (friends, children in pyjamas), thereby (however unintentionally) indicating the interrelatedness of the world

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<sup>7</sup> "Ons leef in 'n siek wêreld - as ons die koerante oopmaak, kan ons sien: dit is net moord en roof. Maar die Here Jesus sal die wêreld verander. Ons hoef nie te wonder nie - daar is 'n God. As ons net op ons knieë bly...."

inside and outside the hall where the service was held.

From having spent time in Stilwanië, I knew that the same people who were members of this congregation were interacting on a daily basis as neighbours, and on equal terms, with others who were involved in illegal activities or who were alcoholics and drug addicts. I asked Wilma Jeppe, a church sister who lived in Stilwanië, how the church related to people who were "in the world". Her answer demonstrated to me that, while temporarily setting themselves apart during religious events, religious people in the neighbourhood related to people who were "in the world" in sympathetic and understanding ways:

Our church is very sympathetic towards the person who drinks. We know there is definitely a problem. He doesn't drink because he feels like it or for the fun of it [...] We know of cases, with me... Where I live... I specifically think of a family who are here where the woman drinks, the husband drinks, the children drink. There is no control. Everybody is drunk. But I can see there is a problem. That is why they drink. The man hits the woman any time. And the woman thinks she escapes the problem by drinking. When she is drunk, she feels that he won't hit her. And she doesn't see another solution. [...] And when you see him sober he is a completely different person. You won't think this is the man who governs the house like this<sup>8</sup>.

During both the Bellville South and Newtown services, members of the congregation used and referred to the Bible to confirm their religious commitment and to negotiate their "states of inbetweenness" or liminal position between the church and the world outside. The embeddedness of their literacy use in religious practices used literacy was a consequence of the

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<sup>8</sup> "Ons kerk is baie simpatiek teenoor die mense wat drink. Ons weet definitief daar is 'n probleem. Hy doen dit nie omdat hy lus het of vir die *fun* nie. [...] Ons weet van gevalle. By my... hier waar ek bly... dink ek spesifiek aan 'n gesinnetjie wat hier by my is wat nou drink, die man drink, die kinders drink. Daar is nie beheer nie. Almal is dronk. Maar ek sien daar is 'n probleem. Dit is hoekom hulle drink. Die man slaan die vrou sommer enige tyd. En die vrou dink sy *escape* die probleem deurdat sy drink. Soos sy dronk is voel sy nie hoe hy vir haar gaan slaan nie. En sy sien nie 'n ander oplossing nie [...] En as jy hom sien en hy is nugter, dan is hy 'n heel ander mens. Jy sal nie dink dis nie man wat hierdie huis so regeer nie".

roles they assumed. Their positions were similar to those of the pilgrim who sets him/herself apart from dominant society and at the same time implicitly comments on that society through his/her religious activity. Turner (1978:38) comments on the social status of the pilgrim in modern society:

[P]ilgrimage has become an implicit critique of the life-style characteristic of the encompassing social structure. Its emphasis on transcendental, rather than mundane, ends and means; its generation of *communitas*; its search for the roots of the ancient, almost vanishing virtues as the underpinning of social life, even in its structured expressions - have contributed to the dramatic resurgence of pilgrimage.

As a position of liminality, religious pilgrimage always stands in relation to mundane reality. In a similar way, the church services I attended created a temporary space for religious practitioners in which they could define themselves as distinct from, but eventually also part of, everyday reality that existed outside their sanctified space.

Of all the church brothers and sisters, it was the lay preachers whom people in Newtown and Bellville South regarded with most respect, and saw as having most authority. Because lay preachers had been called to deliver the Word of God while not being institutionally ordained ministers, their position was particularly liminal in Turner's terms (1978:249). By not being institutionally ordained, they lacked structural authority. However, Turner says of people in a liminal position that "their secular powerlessness may be compensated for by sacred power" (1978:249).

One way in which the nature of lay preachers' authority was expressed was in their interpretations of written texts. Instead of expressing structural authority through the forms of linear text analysis which institutionally ordained ministers would have acquired through years of study, lay preachers based their interpretation of Scriptures on their use of religious discourse and on the working of divine inspiration. In this context, it was therefore of little consequence whether or not lay preachers were "literate" in the standard, traditional sense.

A number of the most respected such lay preachers had never acquired standard literacy. But all were masters at preaching and could refer with authority to the Bible. In Newtown there was a famous lay preacher, known as Uncle Piet, who was not able to read the Bible himself. Yet he had, over a lifetime of religious practice, become a master of religious discourses. He would ask one of the youths to read a passage from Scripture on which his sermon would be based. But it was his interpretation of Scripture, rather than the youth's reading thereof, which carried authority. From having heard the Bible so often, Uncle Piet had memorised the words of many Biblical texts which he quoted during his sermon.

People such as Uncle Piet, who were masters of religious literacy but had not acquired standard literacy, often referred to their "illiteracy" as a blessing in disguise, since it made them particularly dependent on God, and therefore gave them access to superior understanding. Daisy Fredriks, a devoted church woman in Bellville South, argued that her dependency on God because of her lack of "book educatedness", enabled her to "know and understand everything":

Daisy: I just think that if a person does not have book education, the Lord helps you wonderfully. I believe in that.

Liezl: Is it like this in the church, too?

Daisy: He helps me, and I understand everything and I know everything. As the Lord leads the blind, so I believe that the Lord leads us who are not book educated in all regards.<sup>9</sup>

Religious teachers who could not "read" the Bible in the traditional sense, argued that it was the Spirit of God Himself which brought them the message. Their messages were, by implication, more directly inspired by God than those who relied on their "book learning". Rachel McKay, who could not read but had

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Daisy: Ek dink net: As 'n mens nie boekgeleerdheid het nie, dan help die Here jou wonderlik, ek glo daaraan.

Liezl: Is dit in die kerk ook so?

Daisy: Hy help my, en ek verstaan alles en ek weet alles. Soos die Here vir 'n blinde lei, so glo ek dat die Here vir ons wat nie boekgeleerdheid het nie, in alle opsigte lei.

a special teaching position as leader of a women's group in a Bellville South church, described her inspiration as a result of her close following of God's will:

Yes, you see, although I can't read, I would say the Spirit of the Lord says this and this to me, the Lord expects this and this, what we should do, etcetera. You just move on the lines of the Lord, you don't move on your own.<sup>10</sup>

Some lay preachers believed that divine inspiration had enabled them not only to preach without reading the Bible, but had made it possible for them to read without their having formally been taught to do so. Lay preacher Jaap Smal said about himself: "Look, I am not an educated man"<sup>11</sup> and added that he had hardly been to school at all. Nevertheless, he explained to me, he could preach with confidence both in Afrikaans and in African languages because, with his wife's encouragement, he had allowed the Spirit to enable him to read Scriptures:

And she always said to me: 'You can read, let the Spirit lead you to read'. And I take my Bible and then I read my Bible<sup>12</sup>.

Mr Smal's wife Anna knew that her husband could not read in the formal sense. Her call was for him to rely on divine inspiration to be able to read the Word of God. In a conversation I had with her later, Anna related Jaap's ability to read the Bible directly to a religious conversion he had undergone. This, she said, had in turn enabled him to receive religious literacy as a divinely inspired gift. She explained that after his conversion he could read the Bible, but not things like letters; his gift was specifically religious literacy, an instant gift he received after praying for it:

Nobody taught him. He will go onto his knees, he will ask the

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<sup>10</sup> "Ja, kyk, al lees ek nie, sal ek sê die Gees van die Here sê vir my dit en dit, die Here verlang dit en dit, wat ons moet doen en so aan. Jy beweeg net op die lyne van die Here, jy beweeg nie op jousef nie".

<sup>11</sup> "Kyk, ek is nie 'n geleerde man nie".

<sup>12</sup> "En sy het maar altyd gesê: U kan lees, laat die Gees u lei om te lees. En ek vat my Bybel en dan lees ek my Bybel.

Almighty, the Lord, and the Lord will open his mind to read. Because I said to him, I have to read to him every time, but there are many old people who are not educated, and the Lord has given them mercy to go and preach the Gospel, to go and preach to others. And they received mercy. Who are you and I [to doubt God's will?]. And one evening he went onto his knees, and I said to him: 'You are reading!' And he was reading. He opened his Bible at Mark 15 verse 16, and I said to him: Read it. And he read it. And when he was finished, I said to him: The Almighty will help us, He says in his Word that we will receive anything we ask in his name. And so he read those words<sup>13</sup>.

For the Smals, Jaap's ability to read the Bible was important because it was a sign of divine inspiration. Rather than being mediated by what Daisy called "book learning", Jaap's message was given to him directly as an act of God's mercy. Underlying Anna's words was the assumption that Jaap's literacy went hand in hand with his willingness "to go and preach the Gospel". The text to which she was referring was probably Mark 16 verse 15 (and not Mark 15 verse 16), in which the disciples were given the command to "go out into the world and preach the Gospel to all people".

A study of the use of literacy in the Riverside Seventh Day Adventist church in Australia (Kapitzke 1995) also indicates that the authoritative use of literacy in religious practice does not necessarily require the practitioner to be literate, in the standard, traditional sense. Adventists see prophets as spokespersons of God, and one of the most important manifestations of the Holy Spirit. One of their most esteemed prophets, Ellen Guild White, had only three years of schooling, but had published 54 books and literally thousands of other publications. "Sister White", as she referred to herself, said that

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<sup>13</sup> "Nee, niemand het hom geleer nie. Hy sal op sy knieë gaan, hy vra die Almagtige, die Here, en die Here maak sy verstand vir hom oop en hy lees. Want ek het vir hom gesê, want elke keer moet ek vir hom lees, toe sê ek vir hom dat al die outydse mense was nie geleerde mense nie, en die Here het vir hulle genade gegee om te gaan preek, om te gaan verkonding aan die andere, en hulle het die genade gekry, wie is ek en hy? En een aand, toe gaan hy op sy knieë, toe sê ek vir hom: Jy lees! Toe lees hy, toe slaan hy die Bybel oop by Markus 15 vers 16, toe sê ek vir hom: 'Lees dit!' Toe lees hy die Bybel. Toe sê ek vir hom toe hy klaar is, toe sê ek vir hom: 'Die Almagtige moet vir ons help, Hy sê dit in sy Woord, want alles wat ons vra in sy naam in, gaan Hy vir ons gee. So lees hy daai woorde'".

her writings were not her own work, but were written down on instructions of God over a lifetime (Kapitzke 1995:69). Thus in sister White's case, as in that of lay preachers in Newtown and Bellville South, it was the belief that their message came from God which gave them authority, and not whether they could "read" or "write" themselves.

## 1.2 Literacy and street cultures

Apart from religious practice, the social domain in which I most often observed another use of embedded literacies was in the practice of street cultures. I argue that street cultures, like religious groupings, also presented people in Newtown and Bellville South with the possibility of occupying liminal positions, that is, ambiguous positions between social states (Turner 1978:249). In doing so I follow Turner's argument that liminality is not a state limited to traditional rites of passage (such as religious rituals) but applies to any state of social change. In this case I show how people adopt different social identities in relation to street cultures when they, for shorter or longer periods, step out of their institutionally defined roles.

The liminal states of street cultures were particularly attractive to people who found themselves between institutional roles - youth who had dropped out of or left school and had not yet found employment and men who were unemployed for a period of time. Others, like the Rastafarians of Newtown, continuously switched between roles during the course of their day. (I met the two Rastafarians I interviewed in their role as municipal workers, dressed in overalls and cleaning the town hall. Sometime during the morning they took a "smoke break" outside and thus confirmed their Rastafarian identity by smoking marijuana).

I see the social practices - and specifically the literacy practices - of street cultures in Newtown and Bellville South - as creating the possibility for participants to position themselves between their idealised and their actual social positions. I have shown in chapter 4 that, within the actual social structure of Newtown and Bellville South, "educatedness" or the mastery of standard literacy signified social status. Yet, the social status of the educated "high society" was not within reach of the majority of people.

However, in everyday practice in Newtown and Bellville South, even those who had dropped out of school were able to assume positions of authority in relation to their idealised social structures - such as American culture, as I will show - and through expressing their alternative positions through the use of appropriate embedded literacies.

Youth in Bellville South expressed their mocking response to the promises of schooling through the writing of their own texts on the walls in their neighbourhood. The walls around the schools in Bellville South were prime sites for graffiti expressing the aspirations and frustrations of youth street cultures. On the wall in front of Bellville South High School were written the words "LIBERATION BEFORE EDUCATION" - a reminder of the 1985 schools boycott in Cape Town during which student mobilised to express their rejection of the apartheid government under which they were educated (see Bundy 1987). The chairperson of the youth branch of the African National Congress in Bellville South referred to the role that the youth assumed in the struggle for liberation from apartheid, stating that

[T]hose were militant days. Then you thought of doing things in the interest of everyone, to fight the battle...<sup>14</sup>

By writing the slogan "LIBERATION BEFORE EDUCATION" on the wall in front of the high school, the youth expressed their rejection both of the apartheid system as a whole and the educational system that had not served to liberate them. Their graffiti writing could be read as a critique of the value of the formal standard literacy they were at that time refusing to engage in on the school premises.

In Newtown, one of the many out-of-school youngsters in the street pointed out me to the place where he had written his name in white on a black surface, commenting that his name was written "as white as snow" - in his words a sign of his "snow white discipline". With this he mockingly commented on the similarities between his writing of graffiti on the walls of Newtown, and the teacher in a disciplined school setting writing with chalk on the black board. The contradictions are evident: this young man had left school and was

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<sup>14</sup> Dit was militante dae. Toe het jy gedink om dinge te doen in belang van almal, om die stryd te voer en so aan.

certainly not living a life of "snow white discipline" in the sense of submission to the authority of dominant institutions. His statement was both an acknowledgement and a mocking of the discourses of educatedness which were held in high esteem in Newtown (as in Bellville South).

Many of the young people in the streets of Newtown who had dropped out of school, and whose movements were limited to Fort Beaufort, idealised American culture. Being in a liminal position between schooling and formal employment, youth strived to express their identity in relation to American culture. One way in which the youth could signify their association with the interpretation of American culture, was by writing graffiti on the walls.

On one wall, in prominent black letters, were written the words: *Be americanwise. Gangster division do you no good.* A young man living in the area who referred to himself as Rot (Rat), explained to me that he had personally written these words after they had chased away a gangster group from East London who came to look for trouble. After that, he said, there had been no gangsterism in Newtown. When I asked Rot and his friends what the sign meant, they explained that it was a statement against gangsterism, and an encouragement to be "Americanwise". To be "Americanwise", they said, meant listening mostly to American music and "doing mostly American things".

Much of the graffiti on the walls had been written by "breakdance" groups whose members wrote the names of their groups on the wall in American terms such as Heavy B, Jazzy D and Turbo B, reflecting their understanding of what it meant to "do American things".

Elsewhere on a wall were written the words *New Jack City*. The men explained to me that this is what they would like Newtown to be called, because it sounds more modern. One claimed that his name was Jack. *New Jack City* is the title of a popular American movie. With this renaming, the small rural township of Newtown, where social space and identity is constrained by socio-economic need, becomes the broad and glamorous American city (similar sounding to New York City, particularly when the J is presented as English Y sound - as it is in Afrikaans).

The graffiti on the walls of Newtown was, with the names of the American style

breakdance groups, an expression of a common striving amongst the youth of this isolated township to be associated with American culture, the superculture of the Western world. The different names indicated diversity, but the fact that they were all written on the same walls, and drew on the semantic pool of American mass culture reinforced their shared imagined identities rather than the differences between them. Their shared semantics commented sharply on the discrepancy between their imagined identities and their present positions. They desired to be part of a universal mass culture. Yet most of these young people had dropped out of school and had little chance of moving beyond the boundaries of Newtown where their parents lived. In Fort Beaufort itself few of the youth would find employment. One of the youth described his dim prospects like this: "See, if you can't work any more, you have to steal, and then you land up in jail"<sup>15</sup>.

I gathered from the youths' comments that they saw the act of writing on the cafe's wall as a statement of rebellion in itself. One of them remarked that they could be taken to jail for writing on the wall. When I queried this, he answered, half mockingly:

But that is not nice. The wall hasn't been naughty. The poor man has built his wall. And now he doesn't want to paint his wall, so they help him to paint it<sup>16</sup>.

By "painting" the wall for the cafe owner on whose wall they had plastered their graffiti, they were commenting on the spaces within which they lived, and cautiously challenging institutional authorities.

Studies on youth culture have argued that such cultures "represent[...] the worst effects of the new 'mass culture'" (Hall 1977:19) and that, through their consumption of the symbols of mass culture, the youth are uncritically embracing the hegemony of capitalist society. In a more nuanced reflection on the effect of American mass culture on young coloureds in South Africa,

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<sup>15</sup> "Kyk, as jy nie werk het nie, dan moet jy steel. En as jy steel, nou beland jy in die tronk".

<sup>16</sup> "Maar dis nie mooi nie. Dis muur is mos nie stout gewees nie. Die arme man het nou net sy muur gebou. En nou wil hy ook nie sy muur paint nie, nou help hulle hom maar verf".

AbdouMaliq (1994:161) argues that their "infatuation with American fierceness" is part of a desperate struggle to define their own cultural authority between black and white in South Africa.

Following this argument, I interpret the "American" graffiti on the walls of Newtown as a sign of the negotiated position of the young people who associate with the meaning of these embedded texts. On the one hand, the writing of the graffiti is in itself an act of opposition and rebellion. On the other hand, the frequent references to American culture in the youths' explanations of the graffiti signified their striving towards a position of cultural authority and association with the hegemony of American popular culture. Pinnock (1984:17) refers somewhat less optimistically to the practices of gangs in the Cape Peninsula as "often being a strange mixture of messages of rebellion, resignation and reaction" against dominant institutionality. He argues that, despite their aspirations towards the symbols of dominant culture, the gangsters that he studied have "few dreams of absorption into the dominant culture - and little chance" (1984:17). I would argue that the youth in Newtown, who expressed some of their aspirations through graffiti on the walls, occupied a liminal position between the dominant social structure of their immediate environment and the hegemony of their idealised environment, namely American popular culture. Thus while being structurally powerless, they had authority in comradeship (the sharing of the ideal) and in the creation and use of semantic systems, such as those of their embedded literacies. Turner writes about these aspects of liminality:

Much of what has been bound by social structure is liberated, notably the sense of comradeship, communion, or *communitas*; while much of what has been dispersed over the domains of culture and social structure is now bound, or cathected, in the complex semantic systems of pivotal, multivocal symbols and myths [...]  
(1978:249-250).

It can be said both of religious groupings and street cultures in Newtown and Bellville South that the embedded literacies they used were semantic systems expressing people's particular liminal positions. As such, embedded literacies offered an alternative form of expression to that of standard literacy, and expressed alternative forms of authority to those offered by

dominant social structures (within which educatedness indicated social status).

## 2 The text as object

The next significant aspect of embedded literacies which I wish to discuss, is the way in which texts acquired meaning for people in Newtown and Bellville South, particularly as part of religious practice. The value which people in my research areas attached to written documents was not always the result of their ability or desire to read or analytically decode these texts. I return to the two church services described earlier in order to demonstrate this point.

When I first took my place in a chair in the Congregational service in Newtown, the congregation members around me enthusiastically passed me copies of the songsheets, in typed form. I was aware that by taking these sheets I accepted (as did all the other congregation members who received songsheets when they entered) a gesture of inclusion and an indication of my willingness to participate in the singing. Most members of the congregation seemed to be singing without needing to look at the written words. The written version of the song thus did not serve in the first place as a source which was given meaning through its reading. Instead, the distribution of the typed songs contributed to the sense that congregants were participating in a shared event in their roles as worshippers. The songsheets thus served a symbolical rather than a functional purpose. The sheets would not have had this symbolic value, were it not for the religious songs that were typed on them: as written texts, they confirmed the central importance of the Word in Christian service, and as religious songs they represented the communal religious activity of the congregants. The sheets did not lose this value because people did not read them - the important act on congregants' part was to take and handle them, thereby symbolically agreeing to participate in the service and to the centrality of the Word.

The Bible had a special place in the services both in Newtown and Bellville South. For the largest part, however, the importance of the Bible was signified through the handling of the book as object and through references to it, rather than through the actual reading thereof. The sermon in Newtown's

Congregational Church was introduced by a reading of the Bible. More than the reading itself, however, it was the act of opening the Book which caused the singing to stop and all eyes to focus on the pulpit. Members of the congregation followed the reader with their eyes as he walked from the side of the church to the centrally situated pulpit. Silence descended on the congregation as they watched the reader carefully and slowly opening the golden cover of the large, heavy Bible in its place on the pulpit. The reader solemnly read Luke 15; the parable of the lost son, in which a son returns to his father after having squandered his inheritance. The audience listened with attentive silence. The reader closed the reading by saying "This is the word of the Lord", confirming with this formal ritual phrase, the special significance of Scripture. The congregation answered with respectful gestures of confirmation.

All the congregants at the service in Bellville South walked in with Bibles under their arms which they kept close to them during the service, even though few of them were opened during the proceedings. The leader kept his Bible in one hand while he was talking. He randomly opened his Bible when referring to its authority, looking respectfully down at the text but never actually reading from it.

My interpretation of the special significance which the Bible had during these services is that as an object in itself it served as what Geertz calls a sacred symbol. In Geertz' terms (1973), sacred symbols are "concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings or beliefs" (1973:91). For the Christian worshippers of both Newtown and Bellville South, the Bible was a concrete embodiment of the religious beliefs and values which they honoured. The Bible was, in the first place, an object of symbolic value. While its interpretation did involve readings of the text, and therefore required someone in the congregation to have standard literacy skills, even those who could not read were able to interpret the symbolic value of the Bible as object provided they shared the contextual understanding of members of the congregation.

Such a valuing of religious texts as objects has been commented on in a number of local studies. In her study of literacy practices in a rural african village in the Eastern Cape, McEwan (in Mc Ewan and Malan 1996) describes the

inscriptions embroidered on the robes worn by members of the Apostolic Mission in Zion. She writes that "(t)he spelling and the spaces of the words varied greatly - spelling mistakes, also the words in many cases appear to be 'just letters', for example

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ioninzion". (1996:206)

McEwan and Malan (1996:206) argued that the spelling of the words in fact mattered little. What was of importance was the symbolic meaning of the inscriptions. McEwan described how services of the Apostolic Mission of Zion in the village took place around three large Bibles on the table which mainly served as artifacts of display. During the service the only person who read from the Bible was the minister's wife, who read only a short passage. As for the services in Newtown and Bellville South I have described above, the congregation was mainly concerned with the Bible as symbolic artefact. The reading of the Bible was a necessary but minor aspect of the service.

Another study that comments on the use of the Bible as object is that of Hofmeyr (1991). She described how the "textual view of the world" held by missionaries at the Berlin mission station in Valtyn (an area near Potgietersrus in the Northern Province) at the end of the nineteenth century was transformed or carnivalised in local religious practice. The Ndebele-Sotho chiefdom of Valtyn, whose people the missionaries aimed to evangelise, incorporated the traditions of the missionaries into their rituals, and the missionaries' text-based religion was "oralised". "In this climate the content of the written word often became irrelevant. Instead what mattered was the book as concrete object, and from a relatively early date many citizens of the chiefdom considered books to have ritual power which people often attempted to borrow by simply handling them" (Hofmeyr 1991:51).

Hofmeyr describes the Valtyn chiefdom as effectively having taken what Hall (1980) calls an oppositional position in relation to the missionaries' valuing of standard literacy. As a result, she argues, the Bible became for them an artefact of symbolic value and ritual power. By contrast, I would argue that the congregations I know in Newtown and Bellville South adopted a negotiated position (Hall 1980) in relation to traditional notions of text

interpretation. While there was space in their services for the actual reading of the Bible, the symbolic value of the Bible as object had the greater significance. Standard literacy thus had functional value, but, as in Hofmeyr's case study, the text as artefact was a symbolic embodiment of value.

In defining religious texts as embodiments of value, I draw on the work of Appadurai (1988), who criticizes the contemporary tendency "to regard the world of things as inert and mute, set in motion and animated, indeed knowable, only by persons and their words" (1988:4). He instead argues that "value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged" (1988:3). I similarly understand that the people I spoke to who valued religious texts as commodities were not seeing them simply as "inert and mute" vehicles of meaning activated only when the words in the text are "read". Instead, I found, people talked about religious texts as though they *embodied* value; that is, carried value in and of themselves. The exchange of value that took place between ministers and congregation was embodied through their handling of the Bible.

The case of Rosa Amore, an old lady in Bellville South, illustrates. Rosa presented herself to me as a very committed church sister. She opened a cupboard in her lounge (the place where people in Bellville South usually keep important documents) and carefully took out a collection of around fifteen Bibles, proudly presenting them to me. When I asked her whether she could read these Bibles, she replied in the negative. I expressed my surprise at the fact that she was keeping the Bibles despite her standard illiteracy. She confidently explained that she kept the Bibles because she is a religious woman and she loves the Bible. When I asked her whether she planned to do anything with the Bibles she said that she hoped one of her children would one day read one of them to her, but this was not likely since none of them was interested in religion. Rosa also indicated that she "can do everything" in church and by implication did not need anybody to read the Bible to her. However as artifacts in themselves, the Bibles carried great symbolic value to Rosa as embodiments of her faith in God. Rosa, who had grown up an orphan, talked about God as having taken the parental role in her life: "I know there is a God, He is my everything, He is my mother and father. He has taken me by

the hand and led me everywhere I have been in life"<sup>17</sup>. The Bibles in Rosa's cupboard somehow embodied her faith. While she said that she would like to be able to read the Bible, she did not regard it as essential to her understanding.

This example draws attention to the problem behind an assumption that written texts only acquire value if they are read (that is, decoded in an analytical, linear way). Rosa, who did not have the ability to "know" the Bible through reading the words, nevertheless knew them in a quite different, but equally authentic way. Nor did she regard the Bibles in her cupboard as "inert and mute". Indeed, they had great value to her as embodiments of her faith in God, whom she saw as her mother and father and guide in life.

Other people I spoke to referred to meaningful social interactions that had unlocked the symbolic value of the religious texts as artefact for them. I noticed this in a discussion with Ernie Phillis of Newtown who was paging through *the Watchtower*, the religious magazine of the Jehovah's Witnesses, when I visited her. As in the case of Rosa, Ernie did not attribute value to *The Watchtower* as a result of having "read" it. Questioning Ernie, I discovered that her interpretation of *The Watchtower* as an item of value was in the first place based on how she perceived her conversations with the woman who delivered the magazine to her. Ernie described the visits during which the Jehovah's Witness would give her the magazines as an incentive to live according to religious values (love, peace) rather than as an encouragement to actually "read" the magazines:

She has been sent by the Lord to show me what the Lord wants us to do. So she sends me this little book and said that I could read it if I feel good about it. When she comes on Sundays, she asks me how things have been here during the week. Has there been peace? Has there been love? Then I answer her: Yes or

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<sup>17</sup> "Ek weet daar is 'n Here. Hy is my alles, Hy is my ma en my pa. Hy het my aan die hand gevat en my gelei waar ek ookal gaan".

I asked Ernie why she read *The Watchtower*. In her reply she said little about reading, but emphasised, instead, the role of evangelists in turning the magazine into a valued commodity for "people in the world":

I read it [*The Watchtower*]. I mean, I take notice, because you should not disregard these books, because the Lord would not have allowed these books to be made [if it was not his will]. It's [for] people who were in the world, outside, who do not know the Lord yet. Now they should know, I have learnt that the Lord should be with them, and because the Lord died for us... we don't know the Lord, see, we don't know what He looks like. Now through the pictures we see how the Lord [died] for us, for the sins we do - having drunken parties, molesting people and things like that - it's things like that which count [negatively] with the Lord. Now I mean, I don't want to disregard the Word of the Lord, but I take it: It [*The Watchtower*] is the truth. Because the Lord would not have allowed such books to go out if He was not in these things. He was in these things, and it is for that reason that He lets His disciples who are with Him, do these things<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> "So is sy nou gestuur van die Here af om vir my te kom uitwys wat die Here wil hê ons moet doen. Nou toe stuur sy vir my die boekietjie, toe sê sy ek kan maar so nou en dan as ek lekker voel, dan gaan ek hom lees. Nou as sy nou kom Sondag, en dan vra sy vir my nou hoe het dit hier gegaan in die week. Was hier vrede gewees, was hier liefde gewees? Ek moet antwoord: Ja of nee".

<sup>19</sup> "Ek lees hom nou maar nog. Ek meen, ek vat notisie, want mens, van die boekies moet 'n mens nie van niks dink nie, mevrou, want ek sê die Here sou nie dat die mense wat die boekietjie uitgemaak het, is mense wat in die wêreld gewees het, buitekant gewees het, wat nog nie die Here ken nie. Nou hulle het nou geleer, ek het nou geleer van die ding van dat die Here met hulle moet wees, en omdat die Here vir ons gesterf het - ons ken mos nie die Here nie, verstaan - ons weet nie hoe lyk Hy nie. Nou deur die prente sien ons mos hoe het die Here vir ons, die sondes wat ons doen, hier op en af skel en dronknes hou en ander mense molesteer en so aan, dis pure goete daai wat tel by die Here. Nou ek, ek meen ek verag, ek wil nou die Woord van die Here verag nie, maar ek vat dit nou: dis die waarheid. Want die Here sal nie vir ons sulke boekies laat uitgaan nie as Hy nie in dié goete gewees het nie. Hy was in dié goete gewees, en dis daarvoor wat Hy sy dissipels wat hy saam met Hom het, ook dié werke laat doen".

In her comments, Ernie conveyed her "cultural biography" of *The Watchtower*. Kopytoff (1988) coined the concept of cultural biography by arguing that things, similar to humans, have a lifespan during which they take on different values. Ernie Phillis described the lifespan of *The Watchtower* as follows: People sinned, and God died for their sins. God allowed that *The Watchtower* be produced and distributed by "His disciples who are with Him". In these magazines people could "see" the "truth" that God died for their sins. *The Watchtower* thus became an embodiment of the truth which "people who were in the world, outside", did not know. Ernie described *The Watchtower* as initially having had neutral value; God simply "allowed" the magazine. Through the evangelists, however, the magazine became an embodiment of religious value for people in the world.

There are studies that describe other religious communities that regard religious texts as embodiments of meaning, and not simply as texts to be read. Thorold (1992) for instance states that people in Southern Malawi would physically consume pieces of Scripture in the faith that, as an act of embodiment, doing so would heal them of illnesses. Bledsoe and Robey (1986) describe how traditional ritual specialists in Sierra Leone evoked the special powers of the Qu'ran by writing texts from the Qu'ran on pieces of paper that they rolled up and tied with a string or put in an amulet pouch.

Admittedly, the people in Newtown and Bellville South did not go as far as such in pursuing the magical possibilities of religious texts as embodiments. Yet it is clear that the way they valued Scripture, as with the people of Southern Malawi, did not depend solely on whether they were able to "read" Scripture. Their contextual religious knowledge in itself enabled them to interpret the symbolic value of the Bible as object.

### **3      *Ways of interpreting written texts***

#### **3.1   *Narrative, association and performance in the use of religious texts***

The next aspect of embedded literacies I discuss is the strategies people in Newtown and Bellville South used to interpret written texts. To introduce my understanding of the interpretation strategies people used in dealing with

embedded literacies, I return to a description of the two church services that I have repeatedly referred to. The way in which lay preachers in both Newtown and Bellville South services interpret Scriptures illustrated the differences between standard literacy and embedded literacy. In contrast to standard literacy practices where the emphasis is on the logical, analytical deduction of "facts", their two sermons consisted of analogical, narrative and performative interpretation of events.

The lay preacher in Newtown used analogy and other narrative techniques in explicating the meaning of the Biblical text that had been read. The text was Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son. In the story, a farmer's son convinces his father to give him his inheritance, upon which he leaves the farm and wastes his money in the world. He returns when his money is finished and resolves to plead with his father to allow him to look after the pigs, being so hungry that he is even willing to eat the pigs' food. The father, however, welcomes the son back with a banquet feast, to the disgust of the other son who has stayed behind and worked on the farm.

Instead of analyzing the text that had been read, the lay preacher based his sermon on an analogical interpretation of the text. Analogical interpretation occurs when meaning is drawn not from a literal interpretation of the primary meaning of the text, but through symbolical or allegorical associations (Van Luxemburg, Bal and Weststeijn 1987:119). In this case, the preacher interpreted the parable of the lost son by relating a vignette to which most people in Newtown would be able to relate. The story also had two children as main characters, but was situated in a place like Newtown and reflecting familiar social conditions. By doing this, the preacher gave immediacy to the appeal of the Scripture narrative. His story was about a child who had parents who victimised an orphan. The child killed a chicken and smeared the blood onto the orphan, upon which the orphan was accused of having killed the chicken and was punished by the child's parents. In an act of desperate rebellion against the unfairness, the orphan called out to God to liberate him. The orphan was consequently not punished. The narrative concludes with the orphan stating that God would, from then on, be his mother and his father.

In Kapitizke's (1995) description of the Seventh Day Adventist's approach to interpreting text, she states that "Adventist literacy is driven by a cultural

narrative that comes replete with villain, hero, rebellion, and resolution" (1995:76). The lay preacher of the sermon I am discussing, used a similar narrative style, producing with his analogy both a villain (the guilty child), a hero (the orphan), a rebellion (the child crying out to God) and a resolution (the acceptance of God as protector).

The lay preacher's introductory story resonated with the experiences of many in Newtown, especially women who had been deserted and children who had been adopted. A number of women particularly have expressed their resentment to me about the abusive ways in which they had been treated by family members at whose mercy they were left when their parents died or disappeared. While the lay preacher's story offered empathy with their situation, it also presented a solution: return to God as the ultimate Father and to the church as the fundamental family which unites all Christians as brothers and sisters.

A commentary on the Biblical parable followed from the vignette. The preacher introduced it with a short sentence which confirmed the focus on Scripture ("Let us return to the message"). For the remainder of the sermon, however, the lay preacher's interpretation of Scripture was an act of performance, rather than an act of analysis.

The lay preacher, a small person, was an excellent performer. He was dressed colourfully in a yellow shirt with a green jacket. He made gestures and enacted parts of his narrative while he moved around between the congregation and the Bible. Doing this he dramatised the passage where the son left his father, entered the world and eventually longed to feed himself with the food of the pigs.

He raised his voice to a commanding and excited tone, used frequent repetition and mixed religious language with local expressions ("Then he began to call upon his mates who trampled the truth under their feet, trampled on it with their feet! Who did just what they wanted to")<sup>20</sup>. At the climax of his message he enacted the scene where the son sat down to eat the food of the pigs. The congregation, which had been following the sermon with intense interest, burst out laughing while also making sounds to voice their

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<sup>20</sup> "Toe begin hy maters kry wat die ja-woord trap met die voet, trap met die voet! Wat doen wat hulle wil doen".

confirmation of the message.

The laughter lightened the formality of the occasion, but at the same time confirmed the boundaries of the congregation's identity: in laughing about the young man who left his father, members of the congregation distanced themselves from worldliness and confirmed their shared valuing of the christian family.

The use of performance is a common strategy in much of religious practice. Turner (1986) had shown that performance often occurs in liminal states such as those assumed by religious worshippers because performances enable the participants to adopt meta-positions. "[T]he performances characteristic of liminal phases and states often are more about the doffing of masks, the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures, than their putting on and keeping on" (197). As an example, Hofmeyr (1991) describes how the Valtyn chiefdom used performance and festival as an integral part of their religious practice at the Berlin mission station. She states that the "carnavalesque cultural activities" which these people incorporated into their worship ran contrary to the "textual view of the world" held by the missionaries (Hofmeyr 1991:69-70).

The preacher in Bellville South, who was one of the elders of the congregation, also made use of narrative and dramatic techniques, rather than linear, logical analysis, in interpreting Scripture. He read Mark 9:14, the parable in which Jesus healed a child who was possessed by spirits that threw him into water and fire and caused him to foam around his mouth. His sermon was based on a development of this narrative through direct analogy with the lives of congregants. In the following quote he used the narrative to introduce an argument about God's protective presence in the fact of unyielding enemies:

The Bible says when he saw the spirit of the son, he got convulsions again. In other words the spirit did not care whether it was the Lord Jesus, he came again. But we thank the Lord for this Godly power that he said he would never leave or

desert us<sup>21</sup>.

The lay preacher expanded on dramatic moments in the text through exaggerated bodily gestures; he for instance enacted, with wild arm and eye movements, the situation where foam came out of the mouth of the possessed child. The preacher also used analogy with the present day situation of congregation members. His main theme was the contrast between people of the world and the children of God, which the preacher indicated by drawing an analogy between the Biblical narrative and the experience of members of the congregation who were living in a violent neighbourhood. In analogy to the possession of the young man in the parable, the minister talked about the spirit which possessed the world in their times. Believers were often mocked, but God came to the aid of the faithful. The preacher talked about problems parents had with their disobedient children, and said that God would help them as he had helped the father whose son had been healed from his possession. Rather than relying on a linear analysis of the text, the preacher in Bellville South used analogy, narrative and performative techniques to provide a contextually significant interpretation of the meaning of Scripture.

Research indicates that analogy is a common strategy of interpretation in religious services. In her interpretation of the meaning of the Bible in Seventh Day Adventist practices, Kapitzke concludes that "(a)ll Christians employ the same constitutive text, but read and use it differently, and therefore read and use text *per se* differently" (1995:277). Similarly, I have found that the lay preachers in Newtown and Bellville South employed their own interpretative strategies to come to a contextually specific and meaningful interpretation of Scripture.

I have indicated that preachers enhanced the impact of their interpretation of Scripture by using analogy, narrative and performative techniques, rather than linear analysis. The meaning of Scripture was thus embedded in their local religious practice and social context, and not solely dependent on the ability of individual members of the congregation to read the written text for

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<sup>21</sup> "Die Bybel sê toe die gees die seun sien, toe kom hy weer stuiptrekkings kry. Met ander woorde hierdie gees het nie omgee of dit die Here Jesus was nie, hy het weer gekom. Maar ons dank die Here vir sy goddelike krag dat hy het vir ons gebelowe dat Hy sal ons nooit begewe of verlaat nie. Want waar twee of meer in sy naam vergader is, daar is hy met hulle".

themselves.

The contextualisation involved in interpreting embedded literacy text is particularly evident when people use narrative interpretation strategies, as I now discuss. I have referred during my discussion of the church services to the narrative techniques that the lay preachers used to interpret the Bible. In doing oral historical research, I found that people who were much involved in Christian churches tended to make extensive use of Biblical narratives to interpret, and give meaning to, their own life stories. During one memorable interview Anna Smal, a member of a charismatic church in Bellville South, described to me her whole life story around a series of Christian conversions that she had experienced. She told her story in retrospect from her position as church sister who stated that she now only read the Bible. "I love reading my Bible; if a person has been converted, then he reads the Bible a lot, even if you did not want to read the Bible"<sup>22</sup>. Since Mrs Smal had introduced herself as a Bible reader, it was significant to me to note how she referred to the Bible in presenting her narrative to me. Rather than using the linear interpretation strategies that a reader would use in decoding standard literacy texts, Mrs Smal used narrative and analogical strategies - not because she could not read in the standard way, but because her interpretation of the Bible required different reading strategies.

Mrs Smal's personal narrative reached a climax when she described to me the analogy between her own conversion and that of Saul, as described in the Bible. The Biblical narrative describes how Saul, a devoted Jew, set out to destroy the Christians whom he regarded as the enemies of his faith. On the road to Damascus, the narrative goes, Saul was struck down and blinded, and the explanation is given that this event was one of divine intervention which led to Saul's conversion to Christianity. Mrs Smal described her own life story as analogous to that of Saul:

But you know, that Sunday morning that text had to come to me, it's John 26, you know, and the Lord spoke that morning; when the Lord spoke to Saul, the Lord asked: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' You know, Saul was on his way at that stage to

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<sup>22</sup> "Ek is baie lief vir Bybel lees; as 'n mens tot gekering gekom het, dan lees jy baie die Bybel, al wil jy nie die Bybel gelees het nie".

destroy the other Christians, to destroy the children of the Lord. And that morning the Lord had to strike him down on the road of Damascus, and the Lord had to tell him to rise up when a ray of light shone on him, on him and his men who were with him. And that morning when he rose, he said: 'Lord, I know that it is you who are talking'. And you know, that morning when the Lord gave me that Scripture on my bed, it seemed to me that the Lord pulled me up, I felt that morning that someone pulled me up from the bed and threw me down on the floor, and said: 'On this morning you will have to convert yourself. On this morning you will have to choose between God and the world. Your good works are like dirty rags before the Lord'. You know, miss, that morning I had to burst out in tears, and I had to witness my lost condition that morning. And I had to see that I was the person who stood against others who cannot get converted; seeing that I was someone who knew the truth. I had to realise that I am standing in the way of a sinner who has to come to the Lord. That morning I had to get converted to a living God. And you know, that morning when the Lord rescued my soul, he freed me from everything<sup>23</sup>.

In the description, Mrs Smal used the Biblical narrative of Saul's conversion as an intertext to her own life story. Kristeva coined the term intertext to

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<sup>23</sup> "Maar weet u, die Sondagoggend, toe moes daai skrif by my kom, dis Johannes 26, jy weet, en die Here praat daai oggend toe die Here met Saulus gepraat het, toe vra die Here: Saul, Saul, waarom vervolg jy my? Weet u, en toe was Saul op pad gewees om die ander Israeliete te gaan besweer, om die kinders van die Here tot niet te gaan maak. En daai more, toe moet die Here vir hom plat slaan op die pad van Damaskus, en toe moet die Here vir hom sê hy moet opstaan met 'n ligstraal het op hom gekom, hy en sy manne wat saam met hom was. En daai more moes hy opstaan, hy sê: Here, ek weet dis u wat praat. En weet u, daai more toe die Here vir my daai skrif gee op my bed, toe lyk dit vir my soos die Here my opruk, ek het gevoel daai more iemand ruk my op van my bed af en druk my plat op die grond, en sê: Vanmore sal jy jou moet bekeer. Vanmore sal jy jou keuse moet maak tussen God en die wêreld. Jou goeie werke is soos vuil lappe voor God se aangesig. Weet mevrou, daai oggend, toe moet ek uitbars in trane, en ek moes my verlore toestand daai oggend aanskou. En ek moes sien dat ek is die persoon wat teen andere staan wat nie kan tot bekering kom nie. Siende dat ek iemand wat die waarheid geken het. Toe moet ek beseef dat ek staan in die pad van 'n sondaar wat moet na die Here toe kom. Daai more moes ek my bekeer tot 'n lewende God. En weet u, daai more toe die Here my siel red, toe maak Hy my weer los van alles af".

indicate the phenomenon that each "text" (whether written, oral or performed) is influenced by, and partly dependent on, other "texts" (Van Luxemburg, Bal, Weststeijn 1987:78). Mrs Smal's narrative was intertextual in that she used and transformed the content and style of the Biblical narrative to tell her own story. John 26, which Mrs Smal claimed the text to have come from, does not exist; the passage is to be found in Acts 9. This made little difference to the strength of her argument, since Mrs Smal was not referring to Scripture as factual document or reference (as would be the case with official documents, school textbooks and other standard literacy texts). Instead, Mrs Smal used her understanding of a Scripture passage as a narrative to explain her own life events in an analogical way.

She paralleled her own story to that of Saul at Damascus, emphasising the similarity by saying: "And the Lord spoke to me as He spoke to Saul at Damascus". The parallel between Mrs Smal's rendering of her life story and the textual construction of Saul's experience was done with great skill, drawing on the authority of written Scripture, but extending its impact to that of her immediate reality. Mrs Smal described her conversion as a ritual enactment or materialisation of the Damascus experience. She referred to her sensory experiences during her meeting with the divine in verbs more graphic than that of the texts as written in Scriptures. Yet Mrs Smal described how "someone pulled [her] up from the bed and threw [her] down on the floor", Acts 9:4 simply states that Saul "fell to the earth" when meeting the Lord. Mrs Smal described Saul being "hit down" by the Lord and herself being violently pulled up from the bed and forced down on the ground.

Instead of having drawn on a linear analysis of Biblical text, Mrs Smal relived her own memories of descriptions of Saul's bodily experiences to relate to her own sense of change in herself. It is through such analogy of sensory embodiment that the religious text acquired its value for her. The sensory experiences which Mrs Smal recalls herself having had, were, in her recollection of the Biblical narrative, similar to the experiences which Saul had on the road to Damascus. This correspondence was to an unmistakable sign that God had come to speak to her, as clearly and physically as He had spoken to Saul. In defining the correspondence between her own narrative and that of Saul, Mrs Smal made use of narrative analogy.

Narrative analogy of texts was a method of interpretation used not only by individuals such as Mrs Smal, but also by various loosely defined cultural groupings. The next case study draws on an interview I had with a couple of Rastafarians in Newtown. The Rastafarian image - dreadlocks, Rastafarian colours and reggae music - was becoming increasingly popular in the streets of Newtown at the time of my research. This was in keeping with the popularity of American mass culture in Newtown. I asked two young women whom I had befriended and who were quite streetwise in the ways of Newtown to take me to 'real Rastas'. They took me to Reggie and Steve, two Rastafarians who looked strangely out of place in their municipal uniforms. In explaining to me what he saw Rastafarianism to be about, Reggie referred to Biblical intertexts:

Rastafarian - he is like a man who has been converted. In other words, never mind about his hair, if his hair is outrageous. But Rastafarian means he has got a good heart for other people, and he will... Like the people who grew up first, and now a Rastaman, he will still, the people were hungry in those days. The previous days. The times when we were born. And so he will, his food which he eats, is food which does not have leavened bread, and he only eats vegetables<sup>24</sup>.

Reggie gave alternative interpretations of two religious concepts in his explanation. He referred to Rastafarians as being "like a man who has been converted". In Newtown, the word "conversion" ("*bekering*") had a distinctly religious meaning drawn from understandings of the Bible - in order to become a "good man", a person would have to turn away from his bad ways towards God. The Bible is a primary source determining the outlook on life held by Rastafarians. Rastafarians regard themselves as the true descendants of the Israelites (Oosthuizen 1990:12, 10). In describing the practices of rastafarians, Reggie referred to the Old Testament practice of eating

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<sup>24</sup> "Rastafarians - hy is soos 'n man wat bekeer nou is. In ander woorde, dis *nevermind* nou van sy hare, of sy hare nou so uitspattig is. Maar rastafarians bedoel jy het 'n goeie hart nou teen enige ander mense, en hy sal vir die, soos die mense eerste grootgeraak het, het hulle met min kos grootgeraak, en nou het 'n rastaman, hy gaan nog steeds, dat die mense hongergely het daai dae. Die vorige jare. Die tye wat ons nou gebore is. En so gaan hy, sy voedsel wat hy eet is voedsel wat nie gerysde brood is nie, en hy eet net groente ...".

unleavened bread which, according to the Biblical narrative, occurred at the time when God led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt. Adding a Rastafarian interpretation to the Biblical story, Reggie stated that Rastafarians ate "only vegetables" and no leavened bread (whereas the Biblical ritual is that only unleavened bread is eaten at the time when the journey from Egypt is commemorated). The emphasis however is on the consumption of natural vegetable matter. Rastafarians refer to Genesis 1:11-20, where God said that the earth must bring forth fruit and it happened "and God saw that it was good". This argument is used to defend the use of Ganja (marijuana), which they see as part of this natural fruits of the earth (Oosthuizen 1990:16).

I asked Reggie where they had learnt about the culture of Rastafarianism. Reggie replied:

We didn't actually learn about Rastafarians. It actually came from out of our midst. As you also see explained in the Bible. Sampson was a strong man, and after he cut his hair, after that he became a weak man.<sup>25</sup>

Being confronted by me about the origins of his cultural practice, Reggie gave me two answers. He referred both to the fact that it was the Rastafarians themselves who circulated knowledge about their cultural identity, and to the Bible as intertext. His reference here was to the Biblical narrative of Sampson, an Israelite who was given special powers by God, with the understanding that, as symbol of his devotion to God, he would never cut his hair. When his enemies managed to get his hair cut off, he lost his power. The analogy between the Rastafarians and the Biblical character Sampson is that they, too, do not cut their hair. The Rastafarian practice of growing dreadlocks originates from their association with the Old Testament Nazarites who were not allowed to cut their hair as a sign of their sanctification (Oosthuizen 1990:17)

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<sup>25</sup> "Ons het nie eintlik geleer van rastafarians nie. Dit het eintlik uit die midde van ons uit gekom. As jy in die Bybel ook verklaar sien. Simon was 'n sterk man, en nadat sy man sy hare afgesny het wat agter gewees het, het hy 'n swak man geword".

While the Bible thus had significance for Newtown Rastafarians as intertext of their own cultural position, this did not mean that they were actually "reading" the Bible. When I asked whether the rastafarians had a book, Steve replied that he had a book, but that he had given it to another "rastaman". He explained that this book was a Bible, but a Bible of a different kind:

No, this is not like that churches' Bible. He almost goes like the Old Testament. That is how he goes, that Bible. He tells you about the things, the nice things, no, he is the truth. And what you also think yourself; No, that is a good road, I will walk that road. That is the road for me. He must never have an obstacle before him, he can't have enemies, then he is not a Rasta.<sup>26</sup>

By using the pronoun "he" to refer both to the Rastafarian and to the Bible, Steve suggested that the Rastafarian was a vessel of knowledge of the same kind as the Bible. This language use contributed to the Rastafarians' presentation of their own identity in analogy to the Bible and Biblical narratives, but emphasising that the rastafarian's life is as much of a "text" to be read and valued as the Bible.

Steve said that he had lent his book to another Rastaman with "heavy dreadlocks", but that he would try to find it for me to see. During the ensuing months the book did not appear, and people in Newtown told me that it was unlikely that it actually existed. Whether the book existed in a real or imaginary sense, the rastafarians drew on its narratives in explaining Rastafarianism to me. The Rastafarians' interpretation of the Bible as metanarrative framing the meaning of Rastafarianism did not necessarily require them to have read the Bible themselves. Indeed, Rastafarianism is based on a specific re-interpretation of the Bible in the light of Pan Africanist ideals (Oosthuizen 1990:4), and it is the spreading of this interpretation through Rastafarian practice, rather than the reading of the

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<sup>26</sup> "Nee, hy is nie soos die kerke se Bybel nie. Hy gaan amper soos die Ou Testament. So gaan hy, daai Bybel. Hy vertel jou van goeie dingetjies, mooi dingetjies, nee, dit is die waarheid. En wat jy ook self dink: Nee, daai pad is 'n goeie pad, ek gaan daai pad stap. Dan is dit die pad vir my. Hy moet nooit 'n struikelblok voor hom hê of so nie, hy kan nie vyande hê nie, dan is hy nie 'n Rasta nie".

Bible, that determined Steve and Reggie's understandings of Rastafarianism. The importance of individual reading for text interpretation is thus relativised. The case of the Rastafarians supports an argument that written texts like the Bible can have metanarrative significance even to those who may not have "read" these texts themselves.

The way in which Newtown's Rastafarians referred to Biblical narratives foregrounds the interplay between oral and written communication. In describing the possibilities of the interplay, Finnegan (1979:19) distinguishes between the ways in which oral or written texts are composed, transferred and performed or displayed. Whereas these Rastafarians regarded the Bible as an important source for the composition of their understanding of Rastafarianism, the transferral of that understanding happened orally (Reggie: "It came from out of our midst"). From the rest of my conversation with him and Steve, I gathered that they saw the playing of Rastafarian music as expressing the nature of Rastafarianism. The Bible as written text was thus one of many "texts" (including oral narratives and songs) which acted as intertexts in shaping the Newtown Rastafarians' understandings of their social identity.

I have shown that people like Anna Smal and Reggie used narrative interpretation strategies as an important part of their embedded literacies. As a result, the factual content, references and, in Reggie's case, the existence of the book itself became less important than the analogy between the narratives of the book and the narratives of their individual or group identities. The use of standard literacy, a functional task performed by those who had acquired standard literacy, thus became embedded in interpretation strategies which required the kind of contextual knowledge that even those without standard literacy could have access to.

### **3.2 Signifying through connotation: graffiti**

It was not only participants in religious (including Rastafarian) practice who interpreted certain kinds of texts through connotation and association rather than conventionally through deduction and analysis. As we have seen, street cultures in Newtown and Bellville South made extensive use of connotation for encoding and decoding graffiti. Graffiti was the type of street literacy which

appeared to be closest to standard literacy because it consisted of written words and letters. However, as an outsider in Newtown and Bellville South I discovered that "reading" this graffiti in the conventional sense was meaningless. What I needed was the contextual knowledge to interpret all the associations and inferences signified by the recorded words. I was fortunate to meet a few "insiders" who interpreted my request for some "decoding" as an amusing but harmless exercise.

In Bellville South a gangster who introduced himself to me as Achmat took me on a tour through the area. His descriptions demonstrated to me just how deeply the graffiti in the neighbourhood relied on connotation and association for interpretation. One of the best examples was Achmat's interpretation of the word *NAG* (night) that had been written on the wall of a liquor store in Stilwanie. He explained that this was the nickname of a renowned gangster, and then referred to a series of other connotations that this word called up for him:

That is Mister Night. Now they call him by the name Mister Night, the Numinos, the night devil, the red danger. The man is dangerous, he kills you. He has already been caught for four, five murders<sup>27</sup>.

On reading the word *NAG*, Achmat thus presented me with an elaborate interpretation of its meaning. Using synonyms from his gangster semantics, he first referred to the mythical figure Numinos, then gave its standard Afrikaans meaning (the night devil), followed by a more colloquial equivalent (the red danger). He then teased out the meaning of "the red danger", stating in the simplest language what the associations of this name was ("the man is dangerous, he kills you"). Finally he added his personal knowledge of the actual man to whom this name referred, stating that he had been convicted for several murders.

For Achmat, the single word *NAG* thus represented an extensive body of associations and connotations. While the writing and reading of these letters

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<sup>27</sup> "Daai is Mr Nag. Nou hulle noem hom die naam Mr Numinos, die nagduiwel, die rooi gevaar. Die man is gevaarlik, hy maak jou dood. Hy het seker al 4, 5 moorde waarvoor hy gevang is".

require some minimal standard literacy skills, it was Achmat's contextual knowledge of Bellville South's street life that enabled him to draw out the associations that gave meaning to the word as it appeared on the wall.

Writing gang names on the walls was a common way in which gangs identified their territory. On the walls of the shops where Achmat took me, were sprayed the letters *NTK*. I saw them too, on the walls of factories and schools in the vicinity. *NTK* was the popular abbreviation through which the Nice Time Kids gang referred to themselves. "This is all *NTK*. All these ghettos behind here are *NTK* [territory]", Achmat explained to me<sup>28</sup>.

In this specific example, the letters *NTK* acted as an authoritative reminder to other gangs, and to people moving through the area, that this territory was the preserve of the Nice Time Kids. In order to write "*NTK*" on the wall, the gang member required standard literacy in the sense of being able to identify and write down letters. Yet the meaning of the letters could not be deduced through traditional reading alone. They required that the reader have the contextual knowledge to interpret, once again, the associative meanings which the abbreviation had in the neighbourhood. Unlike abbreviations like "*UFO*" which are widely known and which one could look up in a dictionary, the abbreviation *NTK* would have no significance to a person who was not aware of gangster activity in Bellville South, South Africa.

I realised, during my research in Newtown that graffiti on local walls there had personal rather than the "community" significance it had in Bellville South. I attribute the difference between the forms of communication expressed through the use of graffiti in Newtown and in Bellville South to the different nature of street cultures in the two areas: in Newtown, the activities of street cultures were enacted by individuals or small groups, never by gangs, whereas in Bellville South gangster groups like the Nice Time Kids were known and feared by all. In asking people to explain to me what words written on walls in Newtown meant, I noticed that my respondents often made up an answer that they believed would seem intelligible to me. While explaining to me what the different names on the walls meant, one young man remarked that "the

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<sup>28</sup> "Dit is mos almal *NTK* die", Almal die ghetto's hier agter is *NTK*".

people give themselves these names" <sup>29</sup>. The implication of his statement, which was repeated with reference to a range of names, was that the associations which these names called up were not necessarily accepted by other than the the people who had given themselves these names. Referring to the name "Rilla" that was written on one wall, one young man explained to me that "no, it's not his name, it's his mock-name"<sup>30</sup>. The names on Newtown's walls, in other words, carried no fixed associations and did not necessarily have any deep symbolic significance subscribed to by the neighbourhood. But for the authors of the names, they were significant in that they related to their perception of American culture and created the imaginary possibility of membership of that culture. As I have argued earlier in this chapter, the act of writing on the wall was in itself one of resistance to the dominant discourses of their environment and alignment with the alternative discourse of American popular culture.

Cohen (1987:xv) comments that "the symbolic baggage kids are made to carry is just too heavy, that the interrogations are just a little forced". He warns against the fixing of symbolic meanings onto the acts (and the same applies to texts in this case) of street cultures. However fleeting and flexible these interpretations are, I would argue, contra Cohen, that the use of embedded literacies, such as the writing of graffiti, represent forms of what Willis (1990:147) calls "necessary symbolic work" - acts of cultural production. These acts signify, in their own right, aspects of the author's social identity that s/he wished to express. These symbolic act signified in the streets of these two neighbourhoods (whether just for the author for the neighbourhood at large) as much as standard literacy signifies in bureaucratic practice. Precisely because of their connotative rather than denotative ways of signifying, however, it is important to interpret these embedded literacies within time and space (Cohen 1987:xx).

### 3.3 Encoding and decoding through performance

Another strategy which people drew on in encoding and decoding embedded literacy texts was performance. Finnegan (1979) describes the differences and

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<sup>29</sup> "Dis mense wat vir hulleself die name gee"

<sup>30</sup> "Nee, dis nie hom naam nie...dis hom guylike naam daai".

forms of interplay between oral and written communication with reference to the performance or display thereof.

In my description of the two church services I alluded to how religious congregations use performance to interpret Scripture. Moreover, as I have shown, performance was part of the way in which people interpreted graffiti written on the walls outside in the streets.

A common practice amongst the two largest gangster groups in Bellville South - Nice Time Kids (NTKs) and the Americans - was to spray the name of the gang or a flag (the British flag signifying the NTKs and the American flag the Americans) on walls in their respective territories. Through these symbolical acts, gangster groups would demarcate their space. Attempts at removing the painted flags were seen as acts of symbolic violence which could lead to physical violence between gangs. Achmat, the gangster to whom I referred earlier, could not show me any of the flags and explained that they had all been eradicated in raids which had ended in bloody gun fights between rival gangs. (People in the neighbourhood later confirmed to me that these flags had actually been there). The names were still written on the walls, though, and members of rival gangs were being killed weekly when entering into the territories of different gangs, which had been marked in various ways. The violent reactions by gangs to the penetration of their space demarcated by their writing on the walls can be described, in Willis's words, as "a *drama* of presenting and reading appearance and intention" (1990:109). Gangs (re)presented their appearance (as powerful street cultures with the capacity to defend their authority through violence) and intention (to protect their domain) by demarcating their territories with graffiti that was "read", and of which the intention was understood, by people in the neighbourhood. If members of another gang failed to honour such acts of signification, the gang which authored the graffiti would respond with violent performance.

Feldman (1991) has interpreted the killing of people in Northern Ireland as the use of bodies as transcripts of the spatial units of power within which opposing factions are situated. In a more literal sense - through tattoos - the bodies of gangsters in Bellville South carried signs of their gang membership. The tattoos often included words or letters; the drawing of the tattoos would thus require the "artist" to be able to write or at least copy

letters. However "literacy" in this sense served a functional role only in the practice of this form of embedded literacy. Of more importance in defining the significance of the signs was that the making of these inscriptions was an act of performance which was integral to the interpretation of the written sign on the body.

Gangster identity in Bellville South was symbolically inscribed on a new member's body through tattoos. A reformed gang member explained to me that the process of etching the tattoo which symbolises membership of a specific gang, was called "letting blood". He further stated that, in order to legitimise this visual sign of their gang membership, new gang members had to perform symbolic acts of bravery. Such an act, he said, would be called "giving blood", and could be the stabbing of a rival gangster, participation in theft or some other crime, or taking over the penalty of another gangster who had committed a criminal offence.

The tattoos were referred to as "*tjaps*"; an onomatopaeic word otherwise used to refer to the rubber stamps, or official "marks" on documents. There is some irony in this phenomenon that street cultures should, through the use of the word "*tjaps*", create some connotation between tattoos, a symbol of resistance against dominant culture, and official rubber stamps, a powerful symbol of bureaucratic discourse. My interpretation is that the association with official stamps is used to signify the symbolic authority of these tattoos. Ironically, by borrowing the word "*tjaps*" from the very discourses that tattoos are meant to express resistance against, the users of the tattoos are confirming the power of bureaucratic discourse.

The use of performance to interpret written texts foregrounds Willis' (1990) principle that "'messages' are not now so much 'sent' and 'received' as *made* in reception, often as a result of, or at least appearing in the space made free and unstable by the operation of grounded aesthetics" (1990:135). He describes grounded aesthetics as "the basic ordinary micro-mechanisms which we are producing daily and in concrete contexts that we regard as 'general' social and cultural change, 'periodised' shifts and reformations of human identities" (139).

In his description of common culture, Willis verbalises a vital aspect of

embedded literacies, namely that its meaning is carried not so much by either the sender or the receiver as by the process of its production. In all these acts of performance that I have described, reading and writing in the standard sense played a role. However, the interpretation of embedded literacy texts required different strategies from those required of participants in standard literacy practices. Standard literacy functions with the principle that standard written texts are produced and then interpreted by the receiver by using standardised strategies of literacy decoding. Embedded literacies defy interpretation by means of standard tools of analysis. They are clear examples of grounded aesthetics - little semiotic acts or "basic ordinary micro-mechanisms" produced daily in the act of living on the streets, and interpreted in people's experiences of living them as performances.

### Conclusion

I have aimed in this chapter to describe and analyze some *embedded literacies* which people in Newtown and Bellville South used, and to indicate the ways in which these literacies differ from standard literacy. I have illustrated that, in using embedded literacies, people interpreted connotatively rather than deductively, drawing on associations and analogies rather than logical analysis. They made frequent use of narrative skills, mixing written and oral modes of text production, transmission and display, and also drawing on performance as a way of expressing their interpretation of the meaning of texts embedded in religious and street practices. The text as artefact was often as significant as the words written inside of it.

While using embedded literacies, I have argued, people were negotiating their positions in relation to dominant institutions that use standard literacy. I showed how the youth in the streets used embedded literacies, such as drawing graffiti on the one hand to express their disillusionment with dominant institutions that valued standard literacy, while they on the other hand used the embedded literacies as a way of expressing their affiliation to American popular culture.

I recognised that the use of embedded literacies requires some degree of standard literacy from some participants in such literacy practices. However, as I also indicated that contextual knowledge and interpretation strategies

are a prerequisite for even the most "literate" person not to be at a loss to interpret these embedded literacies.

In the contexts of everyday life in Bellville South and Newtown, lacking standard literacy was not necessarily as significant a deficit as policy makers assume it should be. Indeed, some religious people in the areas of my research described it as a blessing in disguise that they had not been to school, since this, they felt, had enabled them to receive their interpretation of Scriptures directly from God.

In the next chapter I proceed with my description and analyses of the forms of literacy used by people in Newtown and Bellville South, aiming this time to determine the implications of rural versus urban situatedness for people's orientation to literacy in my two research areas.

## Chapter 6

### Rethinking "urban/rural" difference and literacy "deficit"

Daisy Fredriks, who grew up on a farm: "When I came to the city, I suddenly realised that I had been deprived, not having received education. The city made my eyes open, and I suddenly realised that I was illiterate<sup>1</sup>".

The words of Daisy Fredriks, whom I interviewed in Bellville South, introduce my central concern in this chapter, which is to question policy makers' assumption that rural (as opposed to urban) areas should be targeted for literacy intervention. The argument I pursue, and which is suggested by Daisy Fredriks' words, is that it is in fact in moving to the city rather than in living on a farm that people are more likely to perceive themselves as "illiterate" and in need of literacy intervention.

I have stated in chapter 2 that I initially regarded my choice of Newtown and Bellville South as research areas presenting me with an opportunity to compare orientations to literacy in a rural area and an urban area (Newtown being part of a small town in rural Eastern Cape and Bellville South being part of the urban metropolis of Cape Town).

My research in these two areas led me to realise that I could not simply classify Newtown as "rural" and Bellville South as "urban" and make assumptions about literacy levels and needs from that categorisation. I begin this chapter by demonstrating (a) why the fact that people lived in Bellville South at the time of my research did not necessarily mean that their orientation was "urban" and (b) why I have needed to distinguish between farms and small towns rather than generalise about "rural" areas. I demonstrate

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<sup>1</sup> "Toe ek stad toe gekom het, het ek besef dat ek ingedoen is deurdat ek nie gelerentheid gehad het nie. Die stad het my oë kom oopmaak; ek het skielik besef ek is ongeletterd".

that the continuous flux of people between farms, small towns and city has complicated a distinction between "urban" and "rural" populations in my research areas, and brought into question assumptions about the different levels of literacy needs between these supposedly distinct populations.

I focus the first part of the chapter specifically on the way people's orientations to literacy changed as they moved from *farms* to the city. The data is mainly based on the reflections of people in Bellville South about their pasts on farms where they grew up, and about their present lives in the city. This has led me to the conclusion that, for reasons I will explain, it was in moving to the city rather than in living on a farm that these people had experienced their lack of standard literacy as a deficit in need of redress.

In the second part of the chapter I critically compare the ways in which people in Newtown and in Bellville South used standard and embedded literacies at the time of my research. The comparison here is thus between a small town and a city suburb. I aim to develop a more grounded understanding of the patterns of difference and similarity between the two areas than a simple urban/rural dichotomisation would suggest.

The argument I develop throughout the chapter is that differences in people's orientations to literacy are not merely the result of (in policy makers' terms) "rural" people having lower literacy levels than "urban" people. Rather I will argue that orientations to literacy resulted from the facts that (a) the trust relationships (particularly between farmer and farmworker) on farms where people had grown up differed from those they had to deal with in Bellville South (particularly in dealing with formal institutions); and that (b) trust relationships in Newtown differed from both farm and city orientations. Finally I will draw some conclusions about the appropriateness of policy makers' targeting of "rural populations" for literacy interventions.

## 1. Orientations to literacy - from farm to city

### 1.1 Beyond "urban" and "rural"

In conducting research in Newtown and Bellville South I discovered that I could not simply identify people as either "rural" or "urban" on the basis of their place of residence at the time. The reason is that most of the people that I interviewed in both the small town context of Newtown and the city context of Bellville South had moved between farms, cities and towns through their lives, and their orientations to literacy had been shaped in all these contexts. In both research areas, the majority of people I interviewed had grown up on farms and gave this as the reason why they had not been to school. Thirteen of the 21 potential literacy learners I interviewed in Newtown had grown up on farms, and had only later come to live in Newtown. Of the twenty people I spoke to in Bellville South who regarded themselves as illiterate, all but one had grown up on a farm. I briefly refer to three cases in order to flesh out the figures I have presented.

The first case study is that of Stone Oria, who was at the time of the interview living in Newtown. Both his wife and he were receiving old-age pensions. Stone had grown up in a family of travelling farm labourers who lived in various places in South Africa. He said the following in response to my question whether he had been to school:

Never went to school. On the farms those days, the old people didn't actually worry about school in those days. My late father was actually a farm worker in the Transvaal [Gauteng], and when he... then the work got us away from school. So we went to the Cape, far over the mountains, to Bloemhof, Klerksdorp. Never went to school<sup>2</sup>.

In his adult years Stone moved with his wife to Newtown. He worked as a

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<sup>2</sup> "Ek het nooit skoolgegaan nie. Op die plase daai tyd, die oumense het mos nou nie eintlik geworry oor skool daai tyd nie. My oorle pa was eintlik 'n plaaswerker gewees in Transvaal, en toe het hy nou die, toe kry die werk ons by die skool weg, toe gaan ons na die Kaap, daar ver oor die berge na Bloemhof, Klerksdorp. Nooit skoolgegaan nie".

gardener in Fort Beaufort until he retired.

The second case study is that of Julia Wentzel, a middle aged woman who was living in Newtown when I interviewed her. She had grown up on farms in the Free State. In response to my question whether she had been to school, Julia said:

Yes, I went to school, madam, but it was difficult to go to school. My father lived with farm people. In the middle of the year he would move, we would have to leave school and start Standard 1 all over again. [I went to school] until Standard 1, then I had to leave<sup>3</sup>.

The third case study is that of Japie Krisjan. Japie was 47 and living in Bellville South when I interviewed him. He told me that in his youth he had lived on various farms before moving to Cape Town:

I was born in Riebeeck West. Then we moved to Wellington and grew up there. I grew up there, I would say until I was eight, no, six years old. And there I went to school, then the boss of the farm said no, I have to look after the sheep, and so I lived there and I worked on the farm, and then my parents got divorced there, and then we just, we moved to my aunt, in Brackenfell [on the fringes of Cape Town], and since then we grew up there, and started working[...]. From Brackenfell we moved here to Bellville<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> "Ja, ek was skool toe gewees Mevrou, maar nou toe loop ons so swaar by die skool. My pa het by die plaasmense gebly, nou in die middel van die jaar, nou trek hy, nou moet ons weer uit die skool uit, toe moet ons weer begint van St.1 oordoen. Tot by St.1, toe moes ek nou los".

<sup>4</sup> "Ek het grootgeword in Wellington. Ek is gebore in Riebeeck Wes. Dan het ons vertrek na Wellington en daar grootgeraak. Laat ek - daar het ek grootgeraak - ek kan sê ons het daar gekom bly toe ek nou agt, nee ses jaar oud was, het ons daar kom bly. En toe ek nou moet skool toe gaan, toe sê my baas van die plaas nee, dat ek moet beeste oppas en die skape oppas daarso, en toe het ek daar gebly en toe daar grootgeword en gewerk daarso op die plaas en er, toe het my ma en my pa 'n huweliksontbreking daarso, en toe het ons nou maar - daarvandaan het ons nou na my antie toe getrek, hier in Brackenfell toe, en daarvandaan het ons nou maar grootgeword, en toe begin werk. [...] Van Brackenfell het ons nou hierso kom trek in Bellville toe"

After Japie had moved to Bellville, he started working for the municipality, got married, moved into his own municipal house and started a family.

In these examples Stone, Lena and Japie described how they grew up on farms and moved from place to place until they eventually came to live where they were at the time of the interview. All of them related their lack of schooling to the fact that they had grown up on a farm, and not to their lives in the places where they were living at the time.

In Newtown it was apparent to me that people's levels of standard literacy were determined by whether they had grown up on a farm or in Newtown itself. Stone and Lena were in a similar position to the majority of literacy class applicants in Newtown who had *grown up on farms*: Ten of the thirteen people had less than 3 years of schooling, and would thus in policy terms be classified as "illiterate". In contrast, the majority (6 out of 8) of the applicants who had grown up *in Newtown* and had expressed a desire to attend literacy classes, had in fact received between six and ten years of schooling. In policy terms, all but two of the eight would thus qualify as "literate". These figures brought me to question generalisations about literacy "needs" in "rural" areas. The case of Newtown suggest (1) the need to distinguish between people living on farms and in towns and (2) the need to consider where a person has grown up in analyzing levels of standard literacy in "rural" areas.

The parallel case of Bellville South furthermore suggests that an understanding of literacy patterns in "urban" populations also requires knowledge of the geographical history of people thus classified. Levels of standard literacy amongst literacy learners in Bellville South were influenced by the fact that all but one of the literacy learners I interviewed had grown up on farms. Of those 20 people, 16 had less than three years of schooling.

Two conclusions can be drawn. The first is that the flux of populations between farms, towns and cities raises questions about the ways in which "urban" and "rural" populations are defined and about the targeting of such rural populations for literacy intervention. Indeed, it may well be urban residents who started out life on farms are most in need of literacy training, and that farm residents themselves do not have so great a need for literacy

intervention unless they move to town: The second is that the case of Newtown demonstrates that it is necessary at the very least to distinguish between farms and towns when talking about rural areas. Following this conclusion, I divide this chapter in two parts. I focus the first part on people's reflections of how they related to literacy in their past on farms where they had grown up, and how their experience changed when they moved to the city. The second part will be a comparison of literacy practices in the urban suburb of Bellville South and in Newtown, which formed part of a small town.

## 1.2 Memories of farm life and orientations to literacy

The argument I develop in this part of the chapter is that it was in crossing the boundaries between their childhood on farms and their adulthood in cities that people in my research areas started seeing themselves as "illiterate" and discovering their "deficit" situation. In order to come to this conclusion I first demonstrate that people I interviewed regarded their lives on the farm and their lives in the city as two different realities.

Raymond Williams (1985) commented on the powerful and opposing associations people have, through the ages, had with rural areas ("the country") and urban areas ("the city"):

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue. On the city was gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance and limitation (1985:1).

Similar forms of dichotomous thinking were also paramount in my research areas. People recalled their youth on farms either as times of idyllic family living or as times of hardship. By contrast, they talked about the city as a place of seduction but also of opportunity.

During interview after interview in Bellville South I listened to people's nostalgic recollections of the ideal existence they remembered themselves to have had in their youth on farms. I particularly remember the descriptions of

Daisy Fredriks, with whose words I began this chapter. She told me how her mother, a "wonderful person", had taught her children to bake bread in their clay oven, how her father taught them to make their own dung floors and to make the cups shine by polishing them with grass. She talked about the family dressing up for church on Sundays, and of the children playing in the mud outside on summer evenings. Indeed she created an blissful image of farm life.

Ellis Bailey, a pensioner in Bellville South, presented her youth on the farm where their family lived, in equally nostalgic terms. She described to me in great detail how they harvested wheat and ground it until it was white. "We never ate brown bread"<sup>5</sup>, she told me proudly; the fact that they ate bread made of wheat that had been refined signified that they lived a good life on the farm. Like Daisy, she prided herself in her Christian upbringing and that she had grown up in an emotionally and physically well nurtured home (the latter symbolised by the travel bag filled with carefully prepared things to eat):

My father was good for us. I had Christian parents. And meat, oh, and dried fruit rolls, and roasted cakes, all those things we threw in the bag<sup>6</sup>.

There were others, of course, who reflected on severe hardships that they associated with farm life. Jan Bodie, a pensioner who had grown up on a farm in the Western Cape and later moved to Bellville South, told me how his brother and he had wandered between farms looking for odd jobs after his father had remarried and ceased to support them. He said that they often had to sleep under a bush without having had anything to eat. A number of people I interviewed remembered how they had to get up between 2am and 4am to light fires and prepare coffee for their fathers who were farm labourers. Makulu Pieterse, who grew up on a farm in the Western Cape and had had to start working when she was 10 years old, talked of herself as having grown up as a "slave child".

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<sup>5</sup> "Ons het nooit bruinbrood geëet nie".

<sup>6</sup> "My pa was goed vir ons. Christelike ouers gehad. En vleis, o, en droërolletjies, roosterkoekies, almal daai gooi ons in die sak!"

People I interviewed expressed their associations with urban living through contrasting urban life with their experiences of farm life. On the positive side, they associated the city with resources they had lacked on the farm. Petrus April explained his move from the farm where he had grown up to Bellville South by contrasting the "suffering" and poverty his family experienced on the farm to the "easy life" and wealth a family member from Cape Town presented to him:

We suffered there [on the farm]. Until one friend, my mother's cousin, came to tell us how easy life is in the Cape. And the man had means; if I ask for R1, he gives me R5. So my mother said: my child, you go with that man. Go work for your mother.<sup>7</sup>

Further on in the interview he commented on the fact that even coloureds like himself were driving cars in Cape Town; driving cars being a sign of wealth and comfortable living (an issue I return to below):

And when I arrived in the Cape, I saw: but here in the Cape life is more comfortable than down there [on the farm], the coloureds are driving around in cars. So I said to myself: Just wait, one day I will also buy myself a car<sup>8</sup>.

Petrus talked of the farm area where he had come from as "down there", thus adding to the image he presented of city life being, in some ways at least, superior to farm life.

On the other hand, people also talked about what they perceived as the negative consequences of moving from farm to city. A telling case was that of Rosa Amore, a retired widow in Bellville South, who presented to me her experience of the city as a place of temptation to be resisted. She told me that when she moved from the farm where she had grown up, she had to express

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<sup>7</sup> Petrus April: "Daar het ons so swaargekry. Tot een vriend, my ma se neef, toe kom vertel hy vir ons hoe lekker gaan dit hier in die Kaap. Die man het darem ook, as ek vir R1 vra, dan gee hy my sommer R5. Toe sê my ma: My kjeend, jy gaan ook saam met daai man. Gaan werk ook vir ma daar".

<sup>8</sup> "En toe ek in die Kaap kom, toe sien ek: Maar nee, hier is die lewe mos 'n bietjie meer geriefliker as daar onder, die bruinmense ry met karre. Toe sê ek: wag, maar ek gaan ook eendag vir my 'n kar koop".

her resistance to the happy-go-lucky lifestyle ("walking on your head") in Cape Town:

I had a stepsister in the Cape. And when I arrived in the Cape, she told me that I should remember that this is the Cape. In the Cape, you just walk on your head. So I told her, small and young as I was: I didn't come to the Cape to walk on my head, I came to find myself a job<sup>9</sup>.

By stating that she had come to Cape Town to work and not to "walk on her head" as others did in Cape Town, Rosa expressed her perception that people in Cape Town had different, however standard values and lifestyles than those she had grown up with on the farm.

In summary, people in Newtown and Bellville South talked about their lives on farms or small towns and cities as two different realities. Life on the farm was characterised by the reign of good family and Christian values, and life in the city by undisciplined and wild living. On the other hand, the farm was also a place of hardship and the city one of opportunity.

The people I interviewed also applied their dichotomous understandings of farm and city life to describe the different values which they perceived literacy to have had in these places.

People I interviewed who had not been to school stated that the farmers and their own families valued their ability to work on the farm more than whether they went to school. Tolla Tromp of Bellville South, who had grown up on a farm in the Western Cape, told me that her parents gave in to the farmer's demand that her siblings and she started working as soon as they could write their names:

But when you are old enough, the farmers will say that the children have to start working. You are not allowed to study

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<sup>9</sup> Rose Amore: "Ek het 'n stiefsuster in die Kaap gehad. En toe ek in die Kaap kom, toe sê sy vir my laat ek moet onthou did is die Kaap dié - hier loop jy sommer op jou kop in die Kaap in. Toe sê ek vir haar, ek is toe nog baie klein en jonk, maar toe sê ek vir haar: Ek het nie in die Kaap gekom om op my kop te loop nie, ek het hier gekom om te werk vir my".

much. If you can write your name, you have to leave the school. And my mother and my father accepted this: If you can read and write your name, you have to leave the school<sup>10</sup>.

Similarly Jan Bodie in Bellville South said, about his youth, that "there was also no time for schooling - we had to start working<sup>11</sup>". Jan and his brother had to start earning their own living as farm workers instead of going to school. Stone Oria, to whom I referred in the first case study of this chapter, also said about his youth that he was soon expected to start working; "the old people did not worry about school in those days"<sup>12</sup>, he said.

Mina Pieterse, a pensioner in Newtown who had grown up on a farm in the Eastern Cape, emphasised the fact that working took the place of schooling in her life in the following statement:

I have never been to school. I grew up with house work. My school was house work. I grew up on a farm<sup>13</sup>.

By stating that her "school was house work", Mina drew a direct comparison between formal schooling and the learning process she had undergone while working. Implicit in her statement is also an understanding that formal schooling is training and preparation for work. Mina's argument thus is that the experience she gained while working was all the training she needed for work. She had not needed schooling to prepare her for work. Gibson's study of workers on a Western Cape farm (1996) similarly indicates that farm workers, whether in domestic or farming occupations, saw work experience, and not schooling, as the learning process required for their work.

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<sup>10</sup> "Maar wanneer jy nou mooi groot is, dan sê die boere op die plaas mos dat die kinders moet kom werk. Jy man nie ver leer nie. As jy net jou naam kan skryf, dan moet jy uit die skool uitgaan. En dit het my pa en my ma nou so aanvaar: As jy kan lees en kan skryf, jou naam, dan moet jy uit die skool uitgaan".

<sup>11</sup> "Daar was nie nog tyd vir skool gewees nie, ons moes maar begin werk".

<sup>12</sup> "Die oumense het mos nie geworry oor skool in daai tyd nie".

<sup>13</sup> "Nog nooit het ek skoolgegaan nie. Ek word groot met die werk. My skool is huiswerk. Ek het grootgeword op 'n plaas".

People I interviewed argued that, on the farms, the roles of the educated belonged to the farmer's family. The understanding was that they would help the workers with literacy tasks. Ria Tromp stated:

In those days people were like this: I help the white woman for whom I work, but the white woman helps me in turn. And the white man helps that man [worker]. Maybe he has to be helped with a form that has to be filled in, or something else to fill in. So they were more or less friends; that is how close people lived to each other in those days<sup>14</sup>.

Ria reflected here, somewhat romantically, on the exchange relationships and role definitions with which she had grown up on the farm, implying an almost balanced reciprocity between equals. She and her family members fulfilled their role on the farm by working for the farmer and his wife. As part of the relationship of goodwill between farmer and farm worker, farm workers understood that the farmer and his family would do any literacy tasks their workers needed done.

Ria read this understanding of role division between farm workers and the farmer's family as a sign of the bond between them (which she described as a bond of personal friendship). In his study of farm workers in the Western Cape, Du Toit (1993) has argued that farmers and farm workers generally shared the perception that the relationship between them is determined by their sense of being "part of the farm" and therefore "part of one family" (1993:321). He further argues that the farmer takes a paternalistic role in this relationship. In applying this interpretation to the situation Ria described, it is possible to argue that the paternalistic role of the farmer (and his family) was confirmed by their willingness to help their workers with literacy tasks. At the same time, the glowing terms in which Ria described the relationship between the farmer's family and the workers confirms Du Toit's argument (1993:321) that workers who agreed with this familial role division were thus trapped by its legacy, precisely because it hid inequalities of

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<sup>14</sup> "Daai tyd se mense was so: Ek help die blanke vrou vir wie ek werk, maar die blanke vrou help weer vir jou verder. En die blanke man help weer daai man verder. Hy moet miskien 'n vorm kry, iets wat hy moet invul, verder gehelp word, so. So hulle was nou min-of-meer maats gewees, hulle was na aan mekaar, het die mense in daai tyd geleef".

status and power.

In summary, people who had grown up on farms expressed an understanding that doing literacy tasks and becoming formally educated had not been part of their role as young people on farms. They argued that it was more important for farm workers' children to work than to go to school and that what they learnt was learnt on the job. Moreover, they understood that it was the role and duty of the farmer and his family in turn to assist their workers with any literacy tasks they needed done.

Where the children of farm workers did acquire literacy, this was often not through formal schooling. People I interviewed reflected on the fact that they regarded themselves as having informally acquired the education and literacy they needed on farms.

A number of people told me that their parents or siblings had actually taught them to read and write. Victoria Toring, a pensioner in Bellville South who had grown up on a farm in the Western Cape, told me how she learnt "everything" about reading and writing from her mother:

When I still lived down there [on the farm] - in those days you still got those slates - then my mother would write down the ABC for my brother on the slate. And I was an inquisitive child, I studied just as hard as he did. They didn't say that I had to learn, but I did. And I asked my mother; she taught us everything. My mother also said: If you now make a mistake, it will be your own fault, because I taught you everything. And it's true. I asked my mother: Mother, what is this letter's name? Mother told me one after the other what their names were, and I remembered it<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> "Toe ek nog daar onder gebly het, toe het my ma - daai tyd kry jy nog daai leis - skryf my ma vir my broer die ABC daar, en ek was 'n baie nuuskierige kind, ek het net so hard soos hy daar geleer. Hulle het nie gesê ek moet leer nie, maar ek het ook. En vra: Ma - ma het vir ons alles geleer. Dan sê ma ook: as julle nou verkeerd gaan, dan sal dit julle eie saak wees, want ek het julle alles geleer. En dis waar. Toe sê ek: Ma, wat is dié letter se naam? Ma het hulle een-vir-een vir my gesê wat hulle name is, en ek het dit onthou".

A number of women in Newtown and in Bellville South who had grown up on farms told me that their parents had regarded it as a priority that their male siblings should receive formal schooling. In the above case, Victoria described how she benefited from her brother's home schooling by mimicking him and by questioning her mother, who had acted as teacher. While her mother's teaching was focused on her brother, she apparently did not resist Victoria's attempt at learning.

Victoria indicated that, as a female child, she was not even expected to acquire literacy (whereas, it seems, her mother felt that her brother should learn to read and write). However, she had the occasion to acquire literacy through following and memorising her mother's words as she systematically taught her brother the alphabet. Victoria presented this teaching as sufficient by referring to her mother's argument that she had taught them (directly in Victoria's brother's case, and indirectly in her own case) "everything" ("If you make a mistake, it will be your fault, because I taught you everything").

Ellis Vermaak of Bellville South also related to me how her parents - her father, in this case - had successfully taught her to read and write before she had been to school:

My father could read, so he read to us, and we would just write in the dust, count, learn to count. Then we made clay oxen. When we entered school, we were too clever for Sub A [first grade], so we went straight to Standard 1 [third grade]<sup>16</sup>.

Through her last statement - that her siblings and she were sent straight to Standard 1 when they entered school - Ellis emphasised the value of the informal literacy training they had received, in a playful way (along with learning to make clay oxen), from her father.

In the context of their youth on farms, people spoke of themselves as having acquired all the learning they needed, even though they had not been to

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<sup>16</sup> "My pa kon mos gelees het, dan lees hy vir ons, dan skrywe ons sommer so op die grond, tel, leer tel, en dan maak ons klei-ossies. Toe ons in die skool kom, toe is ons te slim vir Sub A, toe gaan ons sommer Standard 1 toe".

school. In the words of Rosa Amore, there was learning (*gelerentheid*) to be gained from the people around you on the farm:

My grandfather could read his Bible from back to front, even though he had never been to school. The one taught the other. But the problem is that I left. I came to the Cape too early in my life; if I hadn't I would have acquired the same learning<sup>17</sup>.

Rosa referred here to the informal learning which occurred on the farm where "[t]he one taught the other". The degree to which she valued the learning she received in that way became evident when she stated that had she not left the farm where she had grown up she "would have acquired the same learning". In the context, the "education" which she refers to is that informal learning which people who lived on farms acquired by teaching each other. By expressing her regret that she had left the farm and had not acquired "the same learning" as others on the farm, Rosa implied that the change from farm-based life to living in Bellville South had resulted for her in a break in her learning process.

I will now describe how, when people like Rosa moved from farms to the city, their understandings of what it meant to be educated changed.

## 2. Becoming "illiterate" in town

People who had grown up on a farm and later moved to Bellville South often talked to me about their entry into the city as having changed their understanding of what it meant to them not to have been to school. A telling case is that of Daisy Fredriks. I referred earlier in the chapter to Daisy's description of farm life as idyllic. With statements like the following she emphasised that her family's position and dignity on the farm was not affected by the fact that they did not have schooled education:

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<sup>17</sup> Rose Amore: "My oupa kon sy Bybel gelees het van voor tot agter, en hy het nie skool gehad nie. Die een het die ander geleer. Maar nou net, die ding is, ek het toe daarvandaan weggegaan. Ek het toe Kaap toe gekom. anders het ek dieselfde gelerentheid gehad".

My mother was uneducated, but she was a wonderful person and she brought us up with good values.

We were not educated people, but we were clean and decent [...]. We are not like today's children. They are not grateful. They expect everything and they don't know what it is to go without. We did not have an education, but we had something special for which I am grateful to my parents. Because a noble character nobody can take from you<sup>18</sup>.

In this last statement Daisy converted the maxim "nobody can take education from you" by replacing education with "a noble character" (representing the attributes she acquired through the tutorship of her parents). Later she implied that today's youth, who have opportunities such as schooling, are not grateful and lack aspects of this noble character she had acquired, at least in part through her having had to deal with hardships.

After having described how fulfilled and dignified her life on the farm had been, and how little her lack of education had affected her life there, Daisy reflected on her move to the city. In her words, with which I began this chapter, Daisy depicted the sudden shift that took place in her understanding of what it meant to be "illiterate" when she moved to Bellville South.

Her new "realisation", which contradicted her reflection of herself on the farm as a person with understanding and wisdom, was the result of her move to the city.

As Daisy talked about her life in the city, I was aware of the contrast between her depiction of its realities and her memories of farm life. She had described at length the respectful and nurturing relationships there were between members of her family on the farm. Her life in Bellville South seemed

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<sup>18</sup> "My ma was nie geleerd nie, maar sy was 'n wonderlike mens, en sy het ons grootgemaak met goeie waardes". "Ons was nie geleerde mense nie, maar ons was skoon en ordentlik". " Ons was nie soos vandag se kinders nie. Hulle is ondankbaar, hulle verwag alles en hulle weet nie wat dit is om tekort te skiet nie. Ons het nie geleerdheid gehad nie, maar ons het iets anders gehad waarvoor ek my ouers dankbaar is. Want 'n edel karakter kan niemand van jou af wegvat nie".

to stand in contrast. At the time of the interview she was married to an alcoholic who had been retrenched from work many years before. She asked me not to visit her at home, since he might behave violently. Commenting on why she had not left him, Daisy said: "I just bear my cross. On the seventh of August we will be married for 30 years. I don't believe in divorce<sup>19</sup>". I heard that Daisy also had two mature sons who were unemployed, dependent on her income as a domestic servant, and as abusive towards her as their father.

Though I do not have direct evidence, I suspect that Daisy's awareness of her lack of literacy in the city was in fact an embodiment of a deeper sense of deprivation, or perhaps even of loss - of a nurturing environment, of good relationships, of a satisfying life such as she remembered having had on the farm.

Rose Amore, who had received informal education on the farm where she grew up, argued in words I quoted earlier that she had lost out on her learning because she had moved to the city. One could read her statement as misinformed, since she would have had more opportunity to receive formal learning in the city. But the learning she was talking about, was of a different kind: it was informed by life and relationships on the farm. It was about a different way of living, the life she had had on the farm.

Both Daisy and Rose joined the literacy class in Bellville South in an attempt to gain what they experienced themselves as lacking after having moved from the farm to the city. From interviews, I gathered that this was the path that most of the people in the literacy class had followed.

Literacy class students who had grown up on farms talked about their attendance at the classes as though it might help them to undergo the change they needed in their lives in order to adapt to city living. Various people demonstrated to me how lost they had felt when they moved to the city, and how much attending the literacy classes had helped them. A telling case is that of Petrus April, to whom I referred earlier in the chapter. Petrus had grown up in a small town in the Western Cape and had moved to Cape Town to earn a higher salary. He described to me how he hid away on his first day in

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<sup>19</sup> "Ek dra maar my kruis. Op die sewende van Augustus is ons dertig jaar getroud. Ek glo nie aan skei nie".

Bellville South because he felt shy and threatened by the strangeness of the busy urban environment. He referred to his entry into the literacy class as an introduction to written communication, "something [he] was not used to" in coming from the farm:

One evening I came here [to the literacy class]. I looked at this story and saw that this was something I was not used to. I was used to everything being spoken. And here people write, they say to you on the board: This and that is written there. And it is just letters; I don't understand a thing<sup>20</sup>.

Petrus (who had never been to school) indicated his confusion about the use of writing instead of speaking as mode of communication by saying that "they" (his teacher and co-learners) "spoke" to him "on the board" on which they had written, and also by stating that he could not understand the letters they had written. He continued by describing to me how the literacy class had helped him to start understanding all the written signs around him in the city, to the degree that he had even been able to buy a car of his own.

Petrus told me that he initially hesitated to buy a car (when his child asked him to do so) because he could not read maps, and felt that he would get lost.

The child said to me: "Daddy must buy us a car". I said: "Yes, I will buy us a car". But then I would think by myself: Dear child, you are talking about a car, but if you have got a car, you have to know where you are going. Because you can't just go, you have to know where you are going<sup>21</sup>.

He explained that he could not even read the "For Sale" sign on cars.

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<sup>20</sup> "Toe kom ek op 'n aand hierso. Toe kyk ek die storie, toe sien ek: je, maar hier is die storie dan nou nie soos ek gewoon aan is nie. Ek ken mos alles word net gepraat. En hier skrywe die mense, dan sê hulle vir jou op die bord: daar staan so en so. Dis net letter, ek weet niks wat daar aangaan nie!"

<sup>21</sup> "Toe sê die kind: Pappa moet vir ons 'n kar koop. Toe sê ek: ja, ek sal vir ons 'n kar koop, maar dan dink ek: Ai my kind, jy praat nou van 'n kar, maar as jy 'n kar het, dan moet jy weet waar gaan jy. Want jy kan nie net ry nie, jy moet weet waar gaan jy".

Attending the literacy class had changed this for him, he said: "With attending night school I have now got my eyes to see more or less what is 'For Sale' and what is not"<sup>22</sup>.

Petrus described to me in detail how he dealt with each of the written documents he had to handle during his first purchase of a car; I describe this later in the chapter. He described how, after having organised all the paperwork involved in registering the car in his name, he had shown his seven year old son his "book" (the car's registration papers) as evidence that he now possessed the car:

Then I went home with the book. I went all the way home, and when I got there, the child said: "Daddy, Daddy, did Daddy buy the car?" So I said: "There you can see the book". When he looked through the book, he clapped his hands and said: "Everything that is written in here, is yours, Daddy". That is how it came that I am still continuing with him [the car]<sup>23</sup>.

I mentioned earlier that Petrus saw the phenomenon that coloureds owned cars in the city as a sign of the prosperous lives people were able to live there. The vehicle registration papers signified to Petrus that he had now become one of those coloured people in the city who was prosperous enough to own a car. Petrus signified the improvement of his quality of life in Cape Town by recalling how they used to have to travel by donkey cart, and how he would now be able to let his mother "sit softly" in his car:

I wanted my mother to sit softly, because she has never sat softly. We grew up with donkey carts. We moved from Carnarvon to Upington with a wagon and four donkeys, a whole week's 'load' [...] This is how it was on the farm. But life is much better

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<sup>22</sup> Petrus April: "Nou het ek al met dié aandskool my oë al so min-of-meer dat ek kan sien wat is For Sale en wat is nie".

<sup>23</sup> "Toe gaan ek met die boek huistoe. Toe gaan ek daarr, toe ek by die huis kom, toe gaan die kind: Pappa, pappa, het pappa die kar gekoop? Toe sê ek: dis dan die boek daardie. Toe hy die boek deurkyk, toe klap hy hande, toe sien hy: alles wat daar staan, is net sy pa se goeters. Nou so het dit gekom dat ek nou nog met hom staan en aangaan".

since we are in Cape Town<sup>24</sup>.

By describing how he dealt with all the documents involved in the purchase of the car, Petrus demonstrated that he had developed the ability to deal with the written communication which he earlier referred to as "something [he] was not used to", coming from the farm, but which he saw in abundance around him in the city. To complete his narrative, he told me that he could now confidently read maps and travel wherever he needed to.

No, I don't have any problem to find places, and why? I can read and write by now, very slowly, but I got myself this area map, it's lying there in the front of the car. Say I want to go to a street in Elsies River, then I will first see where I am in Bellville South at present. Then I will see how I have to drive to get from Bellville South to Elsies River [...]. I'm not afraid any more, I'm getting used to this business<sup>25</sup>.

Petrus' narrative presented his purchase of the car as proof of his successful transition from having been a farm labourer to a city slicker, from one unfamiliar with cars and unable to read maps to a confident car owner in the city who could drive around and was "not afraid any more". He identified his gradual acquisition of standard literacy through the literacy class as a catalyst in this process by saying: "No, I don't have any problem to find places, and why? I can read and write by now..."

When explaining to me why they were attending literacy classes, most of the students I interviewed in Bellville South referred, like Petrus April, to the differences in practice between the farms where they had grown up and the way

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<sup>24</sup> "Ek wil hê my ma moet ook sal sit, want my ma het nog nooit sag gesit nie. Ons het met donkiekarre grootgeword. Ons het daar uit Carnarvon toe gekom trek Upington to met 'n wa met vier donkies, 'n hele week se load. [...] So het dit op die plaas gewerk. Nou gaan dit mos heeltemal beter van ons in die Kaap is".

<sup>25</sup> "Nee, ek sukkel glad nie om plekke te kry nie, hoekom? Ek kan mos nou al lees en skryf, baie stadig, maar ek het vir my hierdie *area-map* gekry, hy lê daar voor in die kar. As ek nou miskien daar in Eersterivier daar in 'n straat wil wees, dan kyk ek nou waar is ek nou in Bellville Suid. Dan kyk ek nou hoe moet ek ry om van Bellville Suid te kom tot in Elsiesrivier [...] Ek is nie meer bang nie, ek raak nou al die besigheid gewoond".

things were done in the city. Tillie Dennis, who had in fact done five years of schooling on the farm where she had grown up, explained why she was at the literacy class by saying:

It's not like I was stupid at school, but calculations were different in those days from what they are now. In those days we started with a slate and chalk. The children of today don't know that. We were taught very differently from the way today's children are taught. Today's work is more difficult, our work was easier in those days. We didn't get that English those days<sup>26</sup>.

Tillie did not explain her attendance of literacy classes here by arguing that she lacked the skills to read and write. Instead she referred to changes in discourses of schooling - new writing technologies, new ways of doing mathematics, new ways of teaching, learning English - which she felt she should acquire. She drew a temporal distinction between practices in "those days" (her young days on the farm where she grew up) and those of "today" (in Bellville South where she was living at the time). When I asked her why she felt that she needed these things, she explained that her peers, who had grown up in the city and were working in the banks and the shops she visited, spoke English to their clients.

So I think: It is difficult for us Afrikaners if we can't understand English. Many people ... see, I can understand but I can't talk back, because I am afraid of saying the wrong thing. That's why it is important to me to [be able to speak] English. There are many things, for my age there are many things that I don't know<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> "Ek was nou nie eintlik op skool dom gewees nie, maar kyk, daai tyd het ons se somme was ook nie soos nou se kinders nie. Ons het daai tyd begin met 'n griffie en 'n lei. En nou se dae se kinders ken nie daai nie. Ons het baie different geleer as wat nou se kinders leer. Nou se werke is swaarder, ons se werke was makliker gewees daai tyd. Ons het nie daai tyd so Engels gekry nie".

<sup>27</sup> "Nou dink ek, dis moeilik vir ons Afrikaners as jy nou nie Engels verstaan nie. Maar nou baie mense wat nou, kyk hier, ek kan verstaan, maar nou kan ek nie terugpraat nie, want ek is bang ek sê iets verkeerd. Nou daarom, dit is vir my belangrik om Engels te kan... Daar is baie dinge, vir

Tillie referred to time differences in saying that "for my age there are any things that I don't know". The implication is that Tillie was attending literacy classes because she felt that as an adult living in the city "today", she could no longer do things the way they were done in "those days" when she was a child on the farm. In a wider sense, Tillie's desire to be able to talk English in the shops and banks signified her wish to become competent in the discourses used at the time in the city.

Both Petrus's and Tillie's cases demonstrate that attending literacy classes was not simply about acquiring standard literacy for people who came from farms. Rather they were motivated by a desire to acquire the discourses used in the city: in Tillie's case it is English, which she associated with modern urban life; in Petrus's case it is the discourse of car ownership and ability to travel independently.

Lacking the functional ability to read and write was clearly not a strong enough motivation to induce people who had grown up on farms to attend literacy classes. Ria Tromp introduced me to a number of her friends whom she had taken with her to the literacy class, because they had never been to school and she felt that they therefore needed literacy. All of them had dropped out of the literacy classes. When I interviewed them, each of these people made it clear to me that they did not intend to continue attending literacy classes. They all felt that, although they would appreciate acquiring standard literacy, attending literacy classes was not a priority. For a range of reasons they did not feel functionally constrained because they lacked standard literacy. Some, like Rose Amore to whom I referred to earlier, had informally acquired the ability to read letters and figures. Others indicated that they could rely on family to do all the literacy tasks they needed to get done. Ousus Toring explained her situation:

There are children with me. They have to do my business for me. I say: Do this, write that! And so I carry on. I don't have difficulties. I mean, one is an adult by now, you know what and how to do your business. Or I just call one of my friends and

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my oudgeid is daar baie dinge wat ek nie weet nie".

say: Come look for me!<sup>28</sup>

Ousus here stated that the (grand)children with her "have to do [her] business for [her]", implying that she regarded this as their duty. On the other hand, the children were dependent on her income as pensioner. Many other pensioners also played a vital part in their families as they took the responsibility of taking care of their grandchildren while their children worked.

Parents who had grown up on farms without schooling and had seen to it that their city children went to school saw it as the rightful state of affairs that those children should take on the literacy practices the parents would otherwise be required to do. Christian Jantjies, a pensioner from Bellville South who had grown up on a farm and only completed two years of schooling, saw to it that his daughter finished her high school and was content that she could manage the family's accounts and other literacy practices:

The daughter, she is our only child, she is everything to me, I could say. Because I can use her for absolutely everything, there is nothing I have to worry about. The house, everything - she does it. When we receive accounts, she does it, I send her to the bank, I send her everywhere, she is reliable. She wouldn't take something that belongs to us. And when she is in need, she will ask her mother and father<sup>29</sup>.

Mr Jantjies referred here to the trust relationships and forms of reciprocity which existed between his daughter and her parents. He stated that he could trust his daughter with "everything", including literacy practices involving his finances. At the same time, his daughter could turn to her parents when

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<sup>28</sup> "Maar hier is kinders by my. Hulle moet my besigheide doen. Ek sê: Maak so, skryf daar! So gaan ek maar aan. Ek kry nogal nie swaar nie. Ek meen, 'n mens is darem nou al 'n grootmens, jy weet net wat en hoe jy moet jou besigheide doen. Of ek roep sommer hier van my vrinde en sê: Kom kyk hier vir my!"

<sup>29</sup> "Die dogter, sy is ons enigste kind, sy is als vir my, kan ek sê. Want ek kan haar vir als gebruik, daar is niks wat ek my oor hoef te bekommer nie. Die huis, alles done sy, as ons rekeninge het, gaan doen sy dit, ek stuur haar bank toe, ek stuur haar oral heen, en sy is betroubaar. Sy sal nie goete vat wat aan ons behoort nie. En as sy in die nood is, dan vra sy vir pa en ma".

she was "in need". Mr Jantjies went as far as to decide that he would let his daughter obtain a driver's licence for the car he bought, instead of obtaining one himself:

Because the thing is, I said to her: You have got the education, you can study. I don't have the education to say all the things that will make you pass. But I always saw to it that I had something to drive with<sup>30</sup>.

After obtaining her driver's licence - with the assistance of her father - Mr Jantjies' daughter drove him where he needed to be, in his own car.

Despite only having obtained two years of formal schooling himself, Mr Jantjies felt content that, through his daughter, he could manage to get those practices done which required standard literacy. Mr Jantjies was confident that he did not want or need to attend literacy classes.

The argument I have developed thus far in this chapter is that policy makers are mistaken to rely on statistics about urban/rural literacy levels, that adults in "rural" areas have a far greater "need" for literacy intervention than those in "urban" areas. I put "urban" and "rural" in quotation marks since my research has shown that these terms are too general to be useful; I have consequently focused on the difference in orientation to literacy between people from farms, towns and cities.

The conclusion to which I have come is that acquiring standard literacy was not an important concern to people in their youth on farms. Instead, it was when they moved to the cities that they started seeing themselves as "illiterate". Being "illiterate", however, did not simply mean that they lacked functional reading and writing skills. If this lack of skill served as sufficient motivation to attend literacy classes, people like Rose Amore (who had learnt informally on the farm where she grew up) and Ousus Toring (whose grandchildren helped her with literacy practices) would have continued

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<sup>30</sup> "Want die ding is, ek sê vir haar: Jy het die geleerdheid, laat jy maar leer. Ek sal maar my leerdery laat los. Ek het nie die geleerdheid om alles die goete te sê daar wat jy gaan uitpass nie. Maar ek het altyd gesorg dat ek 'n ryding het".

to attend classes, and Christian Jantjies (whose daughter did all the literacy practices in the household) might have regarded it as an enterprise worth embarking on. Considering the position of adults who have moved from farms to urban contexts, policy makers' attempts to "empower" rural people may be more usefully directed at the schooling of rural youth who may potentially move to urban contexts in the future.

But why then did people like Petrus April and Tillie Dennis give such weight to the importance of being "literate" in the city? The first factor, I argue, is differences in age and role expectations. Petrus and Tillie were both in their forties, whereas Rose, Victoria and Christian were retired. Due to the role demands of their stage in life (such as having young children), Tillie and Petrus had to engage continuously with formal institutions and their literacy practices. Whereas for the elderly people it was acceptable to rely on the assistance of mediators, Tillie and Petrus were part of a generation that engaged with the literacy practices of urban based institutions. By not doing so themselves, Tillie and Petrus would single themselves out as "illiterates". Tillie said about herself: "For my age there is much that I do not know<sup>31</sup>", and compared her own lack of education to the education her child was receiving. In contrast, Ousus Toring stated that "There are children with me. They have to do my business for me"<sup>32</sup>. Whereas Tillie's role expectation was that she should be able to at least display the knowledge that her child at school does (as she would do by engaging with literacy practices herself), Ousus regarded it as proper in her position for her grandchildren to perform such tasks for her.

Secondly I argue that people who moved from farms to the city valued standard literacy because trust relationships in the city differed from those on the farm. I have discussed how people who grew up on farms described their nurturing family relationships, and how they came to see working relationships on the farm also in familial terms. These "family" trust relationships were made possible by the continuous physical presence of social connections such as one's family members, the farmer and his family. In Giddens' terms (1992), life on the farm is governed by conditions in which trust relationships are

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<sup>31</sup> "Vir my ouderdom is daar baie wat ek nie weet nie".

<sup>32</sup> "Maar hier is kinders by my. Hulle moet my besigheite doen".

sustained and expressed in situations of copresence. He refers to such relationships as *facework commitments* (1992:80).

To a limited degree some people managed to recreate these interpersonal trust relationships after having come to the city, thereby making it possible for them to continue their lives without being hampered too much by lacking literacy. Ousus Toring referred to her connections with children who lived with her, and with friends in her neighbourhood who could assist her with literacy tasks. Thus she explained why she did not need to attend literacy classes.

However in as much as urban living was dominated for these people by relationships with institutions of modernity, they have had to learn to deal with different trust mechanisms. Giddens (1992) argues that, in modern conditions where people often do not have the personal knowledge of each other which comes from close co-existence, people develop trust in the symbolic tokens of expert systems. He refers to such trust relationships as *faceless commitments* (1992:80). Thus Tillie Dennis, who did not know the women who served her in shops and banks, nevertheless dealt with them because she put her trust in the expert system which they represent, namely a modern institution of exchange and money.

The system is represented by symbolic tokens, and this is where literacy acquires its value. Written documents of various kinds act as symbolic tokens of modern institutions. The case of Petrus April demonstrated this. He interpreted his initial inability to read the "For Sale" sign on cars as indicating his "blindness" in this context. Because he could not appropriate the symbolic token, he was denied access to the expert system. In his narrative he described how he gradually found ways of dealing with each written document, until he could show his son his car's "book" as final proof that he now owned it. He had put his trust, in other words, in the symbolic token - the book - which represented the purchase of the car in the abstract system.

Thus far I have focused on changing orientations to literacy that followed people's moves from farm to city. In the rest of the chapter I analyze various transactions, and the literacy practices involved in them, as they occurred

in the town of Newtown and Bellville South. My focus will be on the kinds of trust relationships involved in each situation, and the impact these had on people's orientations to literacy. The argument I aim to develop is that it is the conditions defining the nature of trust relationships that determine differences in orientations to literacy between farm and urban areas. I do this by comparing the nature of, and orientations to a number of common literacy practices in Newtown and Bellville South.

### **3. Literacy and trust relationships in Newtown and Bellville South**

I understand trust relationships in Newtown and Bellville South to be based on a specific combinations of facework and faceless commitments (Giddens 1992). I now describe them by analyzing how people engaged with a range of institutional practices.

In Newtown I found that there was a significant degree of facework commitment or personalised literacy mediation. This was apparent in situations where people were participating in local institutional practices, such as that of the burial society, applying for food parcels or buying from the pharmacy. Such transactions took place in local discourse style and required a minimum of writing. By contrast I found that in Bellville South transactions were predominantly based on formal institutional agreements, with a minimum of personalised mediation and great reliance on the written word. This was partly the case because people in Bellville South engaged in buying practices such as the purchase of a car which requires of the buyer to perform formal literacy practices. Transactions took place in the discourse style of the institution and not of the client. Formal written communication was thus a more immediate demand made on clients in Bellville South than in Newtown.

#### **3.1 Burial societies and literacy practices**

Burial societies in the Fort Beaufort region were generally constructed around informal neighbourhood ties and local practices. The burial societies were usually managed by people in the neighbourhood, and the members were, in various ways, personally involved in their establishment. During my time in Newtown I often heard people speak about a local burial society which was apparently popular and had a large membership. Marilyn Toring, the society's

secretary, described to me how the society created neighbourhood events to gather money and establish a culture around itself. She told me that she and a friend had decided in the early 1980s to start a local burial society and had held a "curry and rice evening" to gather an initial sum for the fund. The burial society continued to gather money through "teas" which were regularly held at the houses of members.

"Teas" were a major social occasion in Newtown. Thus people were willing to pay for their tea and cake. If the member hosting the tea could not afford to provide cakes for the tea, Mrs May collected R2 from all the members and used the money to buy the ingredients and the members could bake the cakes.

The women who managed the burial society knew each of the society's members personally outside of the society function because they also lived in Newtown which was small enough for people to know each other. The burial society thus had a fair degree of facework commitment. Following Giddens' theory (1992), the personal contact between the women who managed the burial society and its members implied that it would have little need for symbolic tokens, such as formal documents, as basis for its trust relationships.

In contrast to Newtown, burial societies in Bellville South operated as abstract rather than local institutions. There were several burial societies to choose from, all apparently commercial institutions. I met the representative of one burial society at a pension pay out hall. His table, on which he kept official records and displayed the membership books, stood to the side of the hall. As pensioners received their pension money, they came to his desk to pay their monthly premium. The representative explained to me that his burial society had its head office in Athlone (a suburb of Cape Town) and branches as far as Saldanha, Paarl, the Overberg and Mossel Bay; this in contrast to Newtown's burial society which was founded by local women and operated only in that area.

The managers of the Newtown burial society saw little need for formal record keeping. Mrs May and her friend had calculated that each of the members would have to pay a R3 joining fee and a R8 monthly payment. These transactions did not require any reading or writing on the part of members. Mrs Toring, who knew all the members of the burial society, received the monthly payments when

it was brought to her in person at her home. She recorded the payment in what she described as the "multiplying book" (*woekerboek*), and wrote out a receipt for the member. Members would keep these as proof that they had contributed their payments and were eligible for the society's benefits; they needed no further documentation. In fact, members did not even need to be able to "read" the receipt themselves. The *woekerboek* was an A4 exercise book in which Mrs Toring had, by hand, alphabetically listed the names and surnames of members. Next to the names were columns for each month of the year. In these she wrote "8.00" once the payment had been made. Mrs Toring referred to the recordings in the book to determine what services the society would provide when a member died. During the transaction, Mrs Toring did all the writing; members of the burial society did not need to write at all.

Once a month the burial society committee gathered to discuss the incomes and expenditures of the month, after which Mrs May banked the money that had been received. Because of the personal and local nature of the burial society, Mrs Toring needed no more than her receipt book, a handwritten list of members' names and their monthly payments in order to give her oral reportback to the committee.

The literacy practices around the Bellville South burial society were more standardised and formally documented than those of Newtown's burial society. Instead of an exercise book with hand drawn columns next to the names of members, the representative had a printed form which had been standardised for use at all the branches. The form required more information to be filled in for each member than that of the *woekerboek* kept by the Newtown burial society. Its reading involved a more complex linear analysis, correlating the age of the member with the premium to be paid and the amount paid out for a funeral. The representative explained the content of the form to me:

This is of course the form you have. You write up in the table the cash value, what it [the member's burial society membership] is worth, if it is R3 000, and the premiums he has to pay every month. Of course also the surname, the age, the name and the date of birth. Of course his full address. If he has a telephone [number], that too. Then if it is the husband, his occupation - but in general we just write down "labourer". Here

you of course determine health. If this is someone with a problem, say he is a heart sufferer, he will have benefits, for six months or so. Of course [it gets] signed and that, then it goes to the office, it gets put down on computer, and the person waits for a week before he receives his new book [members would keep this book as proof of their membership]<sup>33</sup>.

The representative's description of the content of the form - the ease with which he described it, his repeated use of the words "of course", his interspersing of English words from the discourse in his Afrikaans (*die* table, *die* cash value) - was evidence of his familiarity with the discourse of his occupation and the literacy practices it involved.

At the same time, his description of the record keeping process was indicative that the burial society was an abstract institution. Because of the formal nature of the burial society, transactions between client and institution required formal documentation in order for them to be seen as trustworthy by both parties. Formally documented agreements served a similar function in Bellville South to the personal trust relationships between the burial society secretary and members in Newtown. The written agreements in Bellville South took the form of elaborate, standardised administrative protocols. Each member had a "book" as proof of his/her membership and contributions. The burial society in turn had a computerised databank with the detail of its clients. In contrast to the two secretaries of the burial society in Newtown who relied on their personal knowledge of each member, the Bellville South burial society used standardised information. The standardising tendency of the institution is signified in the agent's comment that men's occupation would generally just be indicated as "labourer".

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<sup>33</sup> "Dit is natuurlik die vorm wat jy het. Jy sit daar in soos die table, die cash value, wat die waarde is, of dit R3 000 is, en die premies wat jy maand vir maand gaan betaal. Natuurlik ook is dit die van, die ouderdom, die naam en die geboortedatum. Natuurlik sy volle adres. As hy 'n telefoon het, is dit. Dan as dit die man is, dan die beroep wat hy het, maar oor die algemeen sit ons maar sommer labourer in. Hierso bepaal natuurlik die gesondheid. Nou as dit een as wat iets makeer, sê hy is 'n hartleier of so, nou hy kry voordele, ses maande of so. Natuurlik geteken en daai, dan gaan dit kantoor toe, dit word op computer gesit, die persoon wag 'n week voordat hy sy nuwe boekie kry".

In contrast to the formal, impersonal agreements on which the Bellville South burial society was based, the burial society in Newtown included various practices that required personal trust relationships amongst members. When a member died, the burial society provided a predetermined amount of R500 for the funeral. In addition to this lump sum paid to the family of the deceased, there were various other incentives which encouraged members to pay their monthly fees. On the death of a member who had faithfully contributed to the *woekerboek*, a special collection, generally referred to as "soap money" (*seepgeld*), was held. Mrs Toring described the practice as follows:

See, when there is a death we will go and sing, "play money" as they say. We play cents, maybe ten cents, then we sing a hymn, and then we "play money" again. We call this soap money. Sometimes we play up to R70, R80. They [the players] just put it down on the table; those who are members, or people who are keen to sing along<sup>34</sup>.

While players were singing and walking in a circle, they added coins to a row on the table. Records of the money gathered were then kept by the secretary and the chairperson of the Burial Society, known as the Lady Pres[ident] and who as Mrs Toring explained, "is the superior woman who oversees us"<sup>35</sup>.

Mina Pieterse, an elderly member of the burial society who had never been to school herself, confidently described to me how the *seepgeld* was recorded:

There are women, those with the coloured bands, who sit together with the Lady Pres to write down every cent that they made. This

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<sup>34</sup> "Kyk, as ons 'n sterfgeval daar is, dan gaan sing ons, speel geld, soos hulle nou sê. Ons speel sente, miskien tien sente, dan sing ons 'n gesang, dan speel ons geld. Ons noem dit die seepgeld. Ons speel partykeers op na R70, R80 toe. Hulle sit sommer net so op die tafel neer. Die wat op die lede is, miskien nou mense wat belangstel om saam te sing".

<sup>35</sup> "Sy is nou die hoër vrou wat oversien is oor ons mense".

is all written in that big book<sup>36</sup>.

From Mina's way of describing the recording of "every cent" in "that big book", I gathered that she had full confidence in the way records were kept by the burial society, despite the fact that she could not read or write herself.

In Newtown's burial society, an important function of record keeping was the recognition of members' willingness to help those in need. Mrs Toring showed me an example of the record which Mina had referred to as "that big book". It had on it the names of several people, written in the left hand corner in no apparently systematic order. In the middle of the page was a winding row of figures, which ended with a calculation of the total amount. The nature of the event would have made it impossible to indicate what amount was contributed by whom. Nevertheless, the fact that names had been written into the record, and that each amount donated was recorded, did serve as a recognition for those involved in the practice. The listing of donations also served as an informal record of the financial gains of the event.

The only time during which the burial society's transactions took a more formal nature was when a payment was made. The payment that the burial society would make to the family of the deceased would be calculated by adding the *seepgeld* to the R500 payable for each member. The person who received the burial society money on behalf of the deceased's family would sign, together with a witness, to indicate receipt. The fact that only two people had to sign meant that members who could not "sign" could delegate the task to family members who could.

The Bellville South burial society was not devoid of any personal contact, but agreements were nevertheless based on written documentation. The following incident demonstrated this to me. While the burial society representative was talking to me at the pension pay out in Bellville South, an elderly man presented him with a R50 note from which his monthly R22 had to be deducted.

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<sup>36</sup> "Daar is mos nou vrouens, miskien so met die bont band aan, nou sit hulle daar, en die Lady Press, nou skryf hulle iedere sent op, hoeveel het hulle gemaak. Nou word dit in daai groot boek geskrywe".

The representative did not have the correct change, and suggested to the member that he was willing to collect his monthly payment at the member's home. The representative remembered where the member used to live, but the old man explained that he had moved, and that there were no street addresses where he was living at that stage. At the request of the representative, the old man called his grandson, and between them they explained to the representative where he was living, using buildings and trees as beacons. The grandson then also helped the old man to fill in the sections of his burial society book that he had to complete for his next subscription.

In this case the burial society representative indicated some personal involvement with his client by suggesting that he would collect the monthly payment from his home, and then by following instructions that required local knowledge about the area. At the same time the burial society member was obliged to fill in the information required of him in the burial society book as symbolic token that he had paid his monthly contribution.

The literacy practices of burial societies in Newtown and Bellville South differed in a number of ways. Firstly, the personal relationships between members and managers of Newtown's burial society required only oral communication and non-standard literacy practices whereas the formal, structured relationship between burial society and client in Bellville South necessitated standard literacy practices.

The purpose of record keeping also impacted on the nature of the literacy practices involved. In Newtown, informal record keeping served an important social function as recognition of people's contributions. This contrasted with the practice in Bellville South where the payment structure was calculated according to standardised criteria, and record keeping was solely meant for administrative purposes.

Finally the structural function of literacy practices in these two burial societies differed. It also impacted on their nature. Whereas the records of the secretary of Newtown's burial society were meant for oral discussion by committee members, the burial society representative of Bellville South had to send his records off to "the office" where they were checked and computerised, so that standard membership books could be handed out to

approved members.

In conclusion, participation in burial societies in Bellville South involved considerably more engagement with standard literacy practices than in Newtown. I have argued that this was the case because the Newtown burial society was a local institution with trust relationships based on personal relationships, whereas the Bellville South burial society was an abstract institution that made use of written documentation to secure trust relationships. In contrast to Newtown, where members knew each other and the burial society served a social function, the transaction that members engaged with in Bellville South was impersonal, formal and dependent on written documentation.

### 3.2 Literacy practices and dealing with state welfare

In the domain of state welfare, there were two different forms of trust relationships and types of literacy practices. Where Newtown residents had been entrusted with the distribution of welfare resources, literacy practices remained limited and informal, for reasons similar to those mentioned in the discussion of burial societies. Emergency funds, which were presented in the form of food parcels, were administered by local churches rather than government officials. Churches appointed trustworthy "sisters" (church women) in their congregations to evaluate which families were in greatest need of the food parcels, and to administer their distribution. The identified family would be given a list which they would present at a specific shop, upon which the shopkeeper would provide them with the food on the list. The church sisters usually had personal knowledge of the local inhabitants who approached them to request food parcels. Marilyn Toring, the secretary of the burial society, was also involved in the distribution of food parcels. I quote from the fieldnotes I made in discussing their distribution with her:

Marilyn is busy handing out slips for food parcels for those families who are on the list. They receive the slip from her that says what the family can get (this depends on the size and situation of the family) and then they take the slip to the shop which supplies the food on the list as arranged. I ask her how she decides which families to choose, and she says that she knows the people - she knows which families do not have any form of

income (she sounds rather surprised at my question). All they have to give her are their ID numbers and the number of children in the household. She would know whether the numbers [of dependents] were correct or not.

Marilyn here indicated that she based her decisions regarding which household should get emergency help on her personal knowledge of each applicant's position. The emphasis in this case was thus still largely on personal trust relationships with facework commitments and not on formal written agreements.

The writing involved was based on Mrs Toring's personal knowledge of applicants' conditions. Those forms of writing were informal and minimal. In order to administer the food parcels, the church sisters needed some basic information: the name of the applicant, address, identity number, number of children, economic position. Because of the personal knowledge which church sisters had of local inhabitants, there was no need for them to fill in official forms. Commonly, parents making application also sent some written information. This was in the form of scraps of paper with very limited information on them, information that was often elliptically presented. Take the following as examples:

540108 5175 011 2 Children
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Koppie Joubert 6601026326081
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Both these notes include the identity numbers of the applicants. Undoubtedly identity numbers are symbolic tokens representing state subjects in modern state institutions. In as far as the state practice of distributing emergency funds had been delegated to local agents, there was little need for formal writing. In as far as the state's department of welfare remained the central organising body, the need for recording identity numbers remained. The rest of the information which the church sister would need (in the first notice, the name of the person, in the second the number of the applicant's children) would be supplied orally. In fact, in most cases the applicant would not even

have to voice this "missing" information, since the church sisters were likely to know the applicant and be aware of the applicant's family conditions.

The power relationships between the church sisters and the applicants was reflected in their mode of communication: rather than insisting on a formal written report, the church sisters were willing to respond to applications which included only a few written words which they interpreted through dialogue and using their contextual knowledge. In summary, the informal, elliptical nature of these literacy practices offered little formal control over information and the dissemination of state resources and relied more on the informal local knowledge and trustworthiness of the church sisters as administrators of the welfare resources.

My argument that institutional relationships in Bellville South tend to require a greater use of formal writing than their counterparts in Newtown was also evidenced in the domain of welfare grants. When members of households wanted to apply for emergency funds in Bellville South, they had to follow official channels through written communication.

Tillie Dennis lived with her husband, her grandchild and her youngest child in a three roomed flat in the USA area. She told me that her husband had applied in writing to the Department of Welfare for emergency funds on the grounds that both her he and she were unemployed and physically unfit to work. In response, Tillie showed me, they received an official form from the Department. On this standard typed form, the option on the form indicating acceptance of the application had been scratched out. The next typed sentence, which had not been scratched out, stated that "Your application for above scheme has for the following reasons not been approved"<sup>37</sup>. This was followed by a handwritten reply: "You have lost your employment of your own accord"<sup>38</sup>.

Tillie interpreted this formal, impersonal reply as an allegation that her husband had lost his job and incurred a disability because of alcoholism. She

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<sup>37</sup> "U aansoek om bogenoemde skema kan vir die volgende redes nie goedgekeur word nie:"

<sup>38</sup> "U het u werk deur u eie toedien verloor".

strongly disputed the allegation, stating that her husband had developed his drinking problem only after an accident which had led him to stop working. She realised, however, that the Department of Welfare would only consider her argument if it was presented in formal writing and accompanied by substantiating documentation. Since she did not have such documentation, Tillie did not pursue the application for emergency funds any further.

In comparing the distribution of emergency funds in Newtown by church sisters and the procedures that state subjects in Bellville South had to engage with to apply for emergency funds, I recognise that people in Newtown were able to access such emergency funds while only minimally using literacy, while people in Bellville South had to engage in lengthy bureaucratic written communications. I argue that the reason for the difference in procedure is that the trustworthiness of the emergency fund distribution in Newtown was reliant on the church sisters' personal knowledge of applicants, whereas welfare fund disbursement in Bellville South was solely dependent on written communications between the state's subject (represented by an impersonal number) and government officials with no personal knowledge of the people they were writing to.

There was however another form of welfare distribution in Newtown which depended to a far greater extent on written documentation. Significantly, it was used with those state subjects who, in local communal understanding, were regarded as untrustworthy in the way they used their emergency funds. The local social workers of the Welfare Department had identified a number of pension recipients whom they regarded as unable to manage their money because of their drinking and marijuana smoking habits. The Department worked out strict forms of control over the members of what they called the "Sip 'n Drink group". Welfare clerks did not give such pensioners their pension money in cash. Instead, they expected Sip 'n Drink members to compile a list of groceries they would need for the month. I witnessed an occasion where people came to hand in their grocery lists at the clerk's office. They knocked at the clerk's door with expressions of apprehension, and entered timidly when asked to do so. The pensioners seated themselves in a far corner of a large room after handing over their lists to the clerk, who was positioned behind her computers. She went through the lists, scratched out items that she regarded as unnecessary, calculated the total, scratched out some more items, added

some others and finally handed back to the pensioners a copy of their list, now with an official stamp on it. Pensioners could take this form to an earlier identified shop where they would be provided with the items on the list.

Members of the "Sip 'n Drink group" experienced this form of writing as one of authoritarian control over their lives. Two of the members told me the following about the process:

Woman 1: See miss, say the papers are for R30. Now there is no money, and maybe you have a prescription, and now you have to pay that R30 with interest to the man.

Woman 2: [She shows me her book in which she records her grocery lists]. This is R100. And we are actually four [people in the household]. Now I just have to allow the things that I wrote up to be scratched out, then I have to pay in myself. I write the food in myself. When it is more than the amount, then it is scratched out, and if I don't want them to pay it out, I have to pay in<sup>39</sup>.

Both women were clearly disturbed about the degree to which their freedom of choice in buying habits had been restricted through the welfare department's practice of providing them with a "slip" (a reduced shopping list) rather than the cash. The first woman argued that this left her with no money to pay the rent or to buy medicines; if she needed money for either, she had to make use of the costly services of a money lender (and often the only way that they could obtain the cash to repay the money lender was to sell the food given to

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Vroul: Nee Mevrouw, papiertjies, miskien nou R30. En nou is daar nie geld nie, nou moet jy miskien weer voorskrif geskrywe, nou moet jy weer daai R30 met rente betaal vir die man.

Vrou2: (Wys haar boek): Dis nou mos R100. En ons is eintlik vier. Nou moet ek maar dat die goed wat ek ingeskryf het, uitgekrap word, dan moet ek maar self inbetaal. Ek skryf self die kos in. Nou as dit oor is by die pryse, dan word dit uitgekrap, en as ek nou nie wil hê hulle moet dit uitbetaal nie, dan moet ek inbetaal.

them). The written "slip" thus served as a symbolic token of institutional control in this case.

"Sip 'n Drink group" members had their own ways of resisting the authority of the bureaucratic practices imposed on them. What happened on a large scale in Newtown was that pensioners who received shopping list "slips" instead of cash, exchanged the food that they got via the slips for liquor.

Newtown residents had in fact generally become quite adept at subverting the local impact of institutional control exercised through written documents. A telling example is the following. During the rule of the National government, the white-governed town council of Fort Beaufort had appointed a coloured Management Committee in Newtown. The Management Committee was distrusted in Newtown because people regarded the body as an instrument of the town council rather than as representatives of the people of Newtown. Consequently, all written communications distributed by the Management Committee - whether they were invitations to meetings, notices regarding rental or electricity increases, or other city council plans - were left unread by residents. Residents would not arrive for meetings organised by the Management Committee, nor would they respond to any other notices from the Committee.

The degree of resistance which people showed to the Management Committee stands in contrast with the degree of local support which the burial society had in Newtown. I attribute this difference partly to the different ways in which the two bodies maintained trust relationships. In contrast to the Management Committee, which made use of formal written communication to establish institutional trust relationships, agreements amongst members of the burial society were based on personal relationships, oral communication and minimal written communication.

I have argued that the case of emergency fund administration in Newtown and Bellville South confirms the conclusion I came to in discussing burial societies. In Newtown, emergency funds in the form of food parcels were administered by church sisters who used elliptical local literacy practices. Literacy practices involved in the management of emergency funds in Bellville South involved a greater use of formal writing. I have further argued that these formal documents secured trust relationships in Bellville South between

abstract state institutions and the subjects who applied for emergency funds, and that in Newtown, where the church sisters and the applicants knew each other, trust relationships were based on personal knowledge rather than formal written documentation. I have discussed situations where, due to a breach of personal trust relationships, different parties had resorted to the use of formal written communication to secure contracts. In analyzing these situations, I have indicated that contracts in Newtown based on formal documentation instead of personal trust relationships were challenged and subverted in various ways. This confirms that personal trust relationships were more vital to social contracts in Newtown than formal documentation was. In Bellville South, the opposite was the case. My conclusion is that a significant difference between orientations to literacy in an urban area like Bellville South and a small town area like Newtown is that formal written documents play a central role in securing institutional relationships in the former and not in the latter.

### 3.3. Literacy practices in the commercial sector

People in Newtown and Bellville South also engaged in different kinds of literacy practices when dealing with the local commercial sector. A major reason for this difference, I indicate, is that people in urban Bellville South engaged in buying practices which people in small town areas like Newtown or on farms were not likely to engage in. Such purchasing practices in Bellville South involved literacy practices which differed significantly in level of complexity from those that people in Newtown were likely to engage in. This again was partly the result of the differences between the ways in which commercial institutions in Newtown and Bellville South secured contracts with their clients. Significantly, however, it also reflected the different contexts - small town Newtown versus metropolitan suburban Bellville South. To demonstrate I compare the process of buying at a pharmacy in Fort Beaufort to that of buying a car in Bellville South.

The commercial sector of Fort Beaufort displayed its understanding of the importance of personal relationships in the way trade was conducted. Newtown inhabitants did most of their shopping in the Fort Beaufort town centre where a variety of small shops catered mainly for people from the whole district. I describe here the transactions that occurred in a specific pharmacy in Fort

Beaufort which was patronised frequently by residents of the local coloured and african areas. My focus is on the ways in which the pharmacy managed to limit the need for formal written communication and maximised the use of facework commitment.

One of the major reasons for the pharmacy's popularity was that it had a simple system involving a minimum of formal documentation for clients to buy on credit. The nature of the transactions, and the independence of the pharmacy, made the meticulous completion of a written agreement unnecessary. Clients were given a one page application form to fill in to apply for a 30 days credit facility. The client had to fill in his/her personal and basic occupational details, address and some trade references. The form was signed by the applicant and two witnesses. On the forms I was shown, some applicants had scratched out and rewritten details, misspelt names and left out details (for instance, the blocks for the Identity Document number of the client had been left open on one form; in the column next to it the pharmacy assistant had written: "ID document lost to bring number when received").

When the application had been approved, the customer received a small card on which was written the name and address of the pharmacy, the name and address of the customer, the period of validity and the record number of the card. On the other side were three columns, headed "record of purchases", and indicating the date and amount of the purchase, followed by the initials of the customer. Buying at the pharmacy was as simple as presenting this small card and signing your initials as agreement to the purchase.

The second reason for the popularity of the pharmacy was that the sales lady, who had worked in the pharmacy for many years, understood the way her clients communicated. While I was interviewing her, a child from Newtown approached her and explained in a few, barely audible Afrikaans words that her mother had sent her to buy something on their account. She presented the sales lady with a buying card and a piece of scrap paper on which a few words had been written. The sales lady took these, read the note, fetched the required item and entered it on the buying card before handing it to the child.

When the transaction was completed, I looked through the sales lady's collection of notes sent by customers. One note, written in hesitant freehand

on a piece of paper torn out of an exercise book, read: "1 yellow strip for flies that lasts for three months"<sup>40</sup>. This request came from a customer in Newtown, and referred to the yellow fly-catching strips that people in Newtown hung from their ceilings. The writer of the note had used an extended description in order to specify what (s)he wanted, mentioning the colour, shape, purpose of the item as well as the length of time it could be used in his/her experience. In order to identify the item, the sales lady had to decode the information, using her knowledge of customers' forms of expression and their local practice. She reduced the information to the name of the item, the quantity required and the price when entering it onto the buying card.

The sales lady decoded some of the notes to me, using various strategies to do so. A note reading *Swart Harre Daaí* was a request for black hair dye, which combined Afrikaans (*swart hare*) and English (dye) had been written phonetically and consequently spelt in a semantically ambiguous way (*daai*, referring to "dye" in English, also means "that" in Afrikaans). A similar example was a note reading *1 blak shoo die*, again combining English and Afrikaans and using phonetic spelling to represent one can of shoe dye" (*1 blik shoe dye*). *Essence of life* had been spelt "Assensofly" on another note. A popular item was aphrodisiacs, which were referred to as *Jagspille* (literally "hunting pills"), "Special Confidence 6 pep me up" (with "6" signifying "sex"), "Special Confidence 6 pep me up sexually" or even with explicitly descriptive notes such as "Penus too weak please give help of pills if possible".

The sales lady explained to me that it was vital for her to be able to interpret the written messages sent to the pharmacy in order to deal with customers:

Then they write a letter and tell you in the language they speak, as they would call an item, they would write it like that. Now if you... like I have been here for eleven years, then you start to understand a lot about what they want. You know, it [their way of writing] is what I would call a bit illiterate, the way they

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<sup>40</sup> " 1 geel strokie vir vlieë wat 3 maande hou"

write. And then there are some who write what they want in Xhosa. And if you don't know what they want, you won't be able to give it to them.<sup>41</sup>

The sales lady referred to the ability she had developed, in eleven years of working in the pharmacy, to interpret the messages customers sent to indicate their choice of purchase. She mentioned several kinds of code switching that she needed to undertake in order to interpret their messages, stating that people "write [...] in the language they speak" (which referred to both phonetic spelling and to the use of local terms), in a way that is "a bit illiterate" (in other words, not in standard written code) and sometimes write in Xhosa. Her last statement - "(i)f you don't know what they want, you won't be able to give it to them" - indicated her incentive as sales lady to understand her clients' wishes. Consequently, despite the fact that they often did not use standard written communication in their notes to the pharmacist, clients were able to obtain what they wanted.

The case of the pharmacy illustrates that people in Newtown were able to engage successfully in buying practices without using standard literacy. Local institutional trust relationships were thus mainly based on personal relationships or those based on local knowledge. In this case the sales lady, who had worked in the pharmacy for 11 years and knew her customers well, provided that security. Because shops in Fort Beaufort were dependent on local business, their staff regarded it as important to develop an understanding of the local codes and modes of communication customers used in stating what they wished to buy.

In metropolitan Bellville South people had the opportunity to engage in buying practices which they did not have free access to on farms, but which also required of them to use formal literacy skills. Earlier in the chapter I referred to Petrus April's purchase of a car. I quoted Petrus saying that he

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<sup>41</sup> "Dan skryf hulle 'n briefie en sê nou in die taal soos wat hulle praat, soos wat hulle 'n item noem, nou skryf hulle dit so, nou as jy nou - soos ek is nou al elf jaar hierso - dan kom jy nou al heelwat agter wat hulle wil hê. Jy weet, dis wat ek nou sal noem dis nou 'n bietjie ongeletterd, die manier wat hulle skryf. En dan is daar ook party wat in Xhosa skryf wat hulle wil hê. As jy nie weet wat hulle wil hê nie, dan sal jy dit ook nie vir hulle kan gee nie".

discovered, in coming to Cape Town from the farm where he had lived before, that coloured people were driving around in cars. With this statement, I argued, he indicated his understanding that the city offered possibilities, including buying options, which he would not have had as a farm labourer. Because of the different position that he found himself in now that he was living in the city, Petrus could pursue the buying of a car, but recognised that he needed literacy to do so.

Petrus decided that he now had to engage with a range of abstract systems that required him to use formal documents - he mentioned banks, the vehicle registration office, the police and the vehicle testing unit. In Petrus' account of his purchase of a car, he emphasised the importance of the literacy practices that he engaged in when buying the car. Another aspect of Petrus' story is his reflection that he managed to deal with these formal literacy practices *by ensuring that specific people he had approached, would act as literacy mediators for him.*

First, Petrus said, he had written down the telephone number of the person whose car he was interested in. After reaching agreement on the price of the car, Petrus explained, he went to the bank and drew the full amount in cash. He then went back to the car's owner, counted the money with him, and insisted on being shown the car's (vehicle registration) "papers".

Petrus described the elaborate process he went through in getting the form authorising the transfer of vehicle ownership filled in and checked. First, he asked the owner of the car to fill in the form for him. Petrus refused to pay for the car before he had checked with someone who could read whether the form had in fact been completed correctly. When he was satisfied, he signed the form and paid the owner.

Upon receiving the car, Petrus said, he drove it straight to the traffic department and asked them to check these papers:

I drove straight to the traffic department and gave him the papers, saying: Sir, I have just bought this car with this number, I want you to investigate this car, to see if is not a stolen vehicle, if the car is all right, was this the man's car?

Then they went through the papers for me and said: Yes, it is the man's car, these are the correct engine numbers and all those things<sup>42</sup>.

Petrus described to me how he had the engine numbers checked and his registration number changed. Finally he saw the car being "cancelled on that man's book" (the previous owner) and "all those things" being written on his "book". He signed the document, he said, they printed it on the computer, gave it to him and checked whether he understood that he now owned the car. When Petrus arrived home with the car, he said, he showed his son "the book" as evidence that he owned the car.

Throughout his description of his car purchase, Petrus emphasised his need to deal with the standard literacy practices involved in the process. The car purchase, which Petrus associated with urban living, required far more engagement with standard written documents from Petrus than was required from clients at Newtown's pharmacy. Having grown up on a farm without going to school, Petrus was highly conscious of his inability to cope on his own with standard literacy practices. Petrus described two processes he followed to overcome the problem. He attended literacy classes, and he asked "clever people", in his terms, to read and write for him. Petrus thus secured literacy mediation from people he knew or could trust. Petrus's concern to establish personal mediation between himself and abstract institutions was evidenced in his accounts of how he communicated with the officials involved and secured the help of others in completing literacy tasks. Petrus had to make special arrangements to secure the literacy mediation he required to purchase the car; the clerks and officers involved in the transaction did not assume that he would need such mediation. The pharmacy in Fort Beaufort used literacy mediation as a strategic way of securing relationships with the majority of their customers. The pharmacy had established mechanisms (such as the mediation provided by the sales lady) that ensured that clients from Newtown would be understood, regardless of the codes or modes in which they

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<sup>42</sup> "Toe ry ek sommer reguit traffic department toe, toe gee ek vir hom die papier, toe sê ek: Meneer, ek het nou dié kar gekoop met dié nommer, en ek wil hê hulle moet nou die kar ondersoek, of dit nie 'n gesteelde kar is nie, of die kar reg is, was dit die man se kar. Toe gaan hulle die papiere vir my deur, toe sê hulle: Nee, dit is die man se kar, dit is die regte masjiennommers en al daai klas van goed".

communicated their intentions. Dealing with commercial institutions such as the Fort Beaufort pharmacy was thus not likely to motivate people in Newtown to acquire standard literacy.

Thus far I have focused on trust relationships and literacy practices of institutions based in Newtown or Fort Beaufort. However the fact that many Newtown residents were dependent on pensions (as I described in chapter 4) meant that they also had to deal with the state. Pension pay-outs are forms of transaction that differ significantly from the transactions mentioned thus far. The state is an abstract as opposed to a local institution. This meant that pensioners at times had to communicate with an abstract system through formal written communication. Pension officers played a significant role in code- and mode switching for pensioners.

Written communication of this kind was, however, significantly mediated. In chapter 4 I described how the clerk at the magistrate's office in Fort Beaufort used code switching (between local and formal Afrikaans) and mode-switching (between speech and writing) to elicit the information she needed from Newtown clients and to complete formal documentation on their behalf. Besides this process there was another strategy which was popular in Newtown. In observing people's responses to written communication sent to them by abstract institutions such as state agencies, I noticed that the exchange of written documents did not inspire trust in local residents. In order to communicate with abstract institutions, they devised their own form of personal mediation. This they did by identifying people living in Newtown whom they knew and trusted and who had links with state institutions (mostly by virtue of being teachers). They would ask these people to read and fill in formal documentation on their behalf. The people then acted both as personal mediators for local people, and as mediators between them and the abstract institution.

I briefly quote an example. During a visit I paid to Mrs Spogter one day, she told me that her son would be going to high school in East London the following year. With a concerned expression, she showed me a form that she had to complete to apply for a place in the school's residence. She then told me that she would take the form to Mr Teuns Adriaans who lived a few blocks from her and was headmaster of a farm school in the district. It happened that,

while I was interviewing him later, Mrs Spogter knocked on his door. She greeted him respectfully as Mr Adriaans, sat down with him at the lounge table, conversed for a while about news in the neighbourhood, and then asked Mr Adonis to complete the form for her. Mr Adriaans agreed and filled the form in while asking her for the relevant information. When the form was completed, she thanked, greeted him and indicated that she would see him at church on Sunday.

When I asked Mr Adriaans about the event later, he said: "Many people come to me with forms. Applications for identity documents. Applications for housing, there are many forms"<sup>43</sup>.

What happened in this incident is that Mrs Spogter, confronted with the need to complete a form as symbolic token for an abstract institution (a school she would probably never see), visited Mr Adriaans who had institutional links (being a headmaster of a school) and who gave her the facework commitment she needed (that is, the opportunity to make the transaction through the mediation of a person she personally knew).

People in Newtown secured a degree of personal mediation when dealing with abstract institutions by asking the help of local teachers, ministers and government officials who lived in Newtown. They also made use of the services offered by an advocate, to whom I will refer as Ms Potgieter. Ms Potgieter, a white woman who lived in Fort Beaufort and who had provided legal assistance to people in various african and coloured townships, initiated the formation of the Newtown Democratic Forum (NDF), which acted as opposition to the unpopular Management Committee. The oppositional position of the NDF, as well as the leadership offered by Ms Potgieter, secured the local validity and authority to the NDF. Ms Potgieter was highly respected in Newtown because of the fervour and success with which she communicated the plight of people in Newtown to government.

Under the auspices of the NDF, Ms Potgieter regularly negotiated with state institutions about the position of local state subjects. The procedure was as follows. A Newtown resident who needed to state his/her case to a state

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<sup>43</sup> "Baie kom na my met forms. Aansoek vir identiteitsdokument. Aansoek om 'n huis. Daar is baie vorms".

institution in formal writing, would make an appointment with Ms Potgieter. Ms Potgieter would listen to the oral statement of her client, make a copy of the documents the person had to respond to, and write a written response to the relevant state department on the client's behalf. She used the symbolic token which would be most authoritative, namely that of the formal written document. I translate the first part of a letter that she had directed to the Department of Welfare:

University of Cape Town

NEWTOWN DEMOCRATIC FORUM  
COMMUNITY ADVICE COMMISSION

Ref. Nr: K a/93  
Tel Nr 04634 - 31926  
P.O.Box 228  
FORT BEAUFORT  
5720  
Enquiries

WITHOUT PREJUDICE OF RIGHTS

Attention: Mrs Thatcher  
Officer in Charge  
Department of Health and Welfare  
Private Bag 9020  
EAST-LONDON  
5002

Dear Madam

The Forum, which has been elected democratically to represent the interests of the community, has after penetrating discussions decided to address this letter to you.

Over a long period of time various complaints have been received by various community leaders, which have not been solved to satisfaction, despite the fact that certain complaints have been referred to your office.

It has become necessary to refer the matter to your office:

The complaints are as follows viz:

1. Disability grants are revised on a daily basis especially with regard to people who are or were suffering or have been injured by Tuberculosis.

Various people have clear damage resulting from tuberculosis with the result that they are not able to work. Allegedly almost no investigations are being done by the doctors here, but they fill in the forms and certify that the people are fit for work. Naturally your department then receives the forms and withdraws the grants. This behaviour causes great dissatisfaction in the community.

In addition people are complaining that grants have been revised 3 to 4 times this year. Each time they have to pay money for the doctor's papers and in most cases they are not properly examined. [End of first of three pages].

-----CHAIRPERSON:  
S.L.POTGIETER, MEMBERS: J.KERNEELS, D.DU PLESSIS

The letter bears evidence of the very deliberate forms of code- and mode switching which Ms Potgieter undertook in writing to the Department of Welfare on behalf of people in Newtown. She listened to the complaints that people voiced to her in their local style, and wrote them up in a formal letter. Ms Potgieter ensured that the letter would be regarded as authoritative by typing it on a page with a letterhead, by using formal language, including legal phrases, and by listing the complaints in numbered form. In addition, she used linguistic strategies that create distance and express power (Kress 1990:53). The most noticeable of these techniques is the omission of the first person and the use of indirect voice in statements such as the following: "It has become necessary to refer the matter to your office", "*Disability grants are revised on a daily basis [...]*".

In addition she made use of various clauses and phrases which create syntactic complexity in sentences like the following (I mark the clauses in italics): "The Forum, *which has been elected democratically to represent the interests of the community*, has *after penetrating discussions* decided to address this letter to you".

Ms Potgieter established her legitimacy as mediator by writing in her position as chairperson on the Newtown Democratic Forum which, she stated, "has been elected democratically to represent the interests of the community". Evidence of the success of her approach followed in the form of an official response by the Officer in Charge at the Department of Welfare.

For the people of Newtown Ms Potgieter thus represented both facework commitment - a person whom they could speak to in their own style - and a mediator who knew how to express their case with the state as abstract institution. She did this by using formal letters as symbolic tokens of communicative authority.

I have argued in this section that people in Newtown had less need for the personal possession of standard literacy when engaging in economic practices than people in Bellville South needed. I demonstrated that the purchase of a car - the kind of buying practices which people in Bellville South encountered and which people in small towns or on farms were not likely to engage in -

required a large degree of formal written communication with abstract institutions, whereas any need for formal written communication for commercial purposes by Newtown residents was likely to be mediated. In first part of the chapter I have described how, in situations where people in Newtown were required to engage in formal written communication to obtain state grants, they secured appropriate forms of literacy mediation that would enable them to obtain the grants without having to do the formal writing themselves.

## **Conclusion**

I suggest that policy makers would be wise to investigate the desire for literacy training experienced by people who have moved from farms, and possibly small towns, to cities rather than to pursue the idea that rural people necessarily demand and require literacy training. At the same time, they need to consider realistically that people moving from farms to cities may not need literacy for purely functional purposes. I have indicated that reciprocal social relationships enabled some people who had moved to Bellville South from farms to undertake literacy practices without acquiring literacy themselves. I have thus challenged the policy assumption that literacy interventions should be focused on people living in "rural" areas, based on literacy statistics in areas thus defined, and have suggested that educational funds may be better spent on youth on farms that are likely to move to urban environments in the future.

I have presented two main reasons for challenging policy makers' assumptions about the literacy "deficit" in rural areas. In the first part of the chapter, I indicated that people who grew up on farms without acquiring formal schooling only started experiencing themselves as "illiterate" once they moved to cities. People stated that working had taken priority over studying when they were living on the farm, and that it had been the farmers' families' role to deal with literacy practices. Some people were acutely aware of their lack of standard literacy in the city. I have interpreted this as the result of the different trust relationships they had to deal with in the city. On the farm, there was a high degree of facework commitment (Giddens 1992) or personalised literacy mediation in institutional relationships; in the city, where people regularly had to deal with the abstract systems of formal institutions, personalised literacy mediation was replaced by the much more

commonly experienced use of formal documentation to secure contracts. People who had moved from farms to Bellville South were challenged not as much by the functional need for literacy in their new environment as by the importance of the urban discourses they associated with literacy (I mentioned the use of English and the commercial discourses involved in car purchases).

In the last part of the chapter I looked at the way that the types of trust relationships established by institutions in Newtown and Bellville South differed. In Newtown I found that many institutions operated from a local base with a significant degree of literacy mediation, and that even where relationships had to be maintained with abstract institutions like the state, residents found forms of literacy mediation that would enable them to deal with the formal written communication of these institutions. The degree of literacy mediation that took place in Newtown was possible because mediators and clients knew each other personally and thus had personal trust relationships to build on. Institutions in Bellville South, on the other hand, tended to be impersonal and abstract and to rely on formal written documentation. Thus people, like Petrus, who came from farm to city and had not acquired formal literacy, had to find mediators to deal on their behalf with literacy practices. This was a more tedious task than in Newtown where residents tended, almost as a matter of course, to secure forms of literacy mediation for formal communication processes.

Thus far in the thesis I have questioned two forms of social categorisation that policy makers have used to identify target groups for literacy interventions, namely population category and rural residence. I have demonstrated that statistical indications of literacy deficit populations are of limited use for the strategic identification of literacy interventions that would lead to people's "empowerment" and the recognition of their existing literacy practices and orientations to literacy. In the next chapter I will focus on the third form of social categorisation which policy makers use in identifying literacy target populations, namely gender.

## Chapter 7

### Women's and men's orientations to literacy

I now turn to a focus on gender, the third form of social categorisation which policy makers use in identifying literacy target populations. I indicated in chapter 1 that South African policy documents identify women as a priority category for literacy intervention, despite the statistical evidence that women have a marginally higher level of literacy than men in the country. My interpretation of the motive for this focus on women was that policy makers associate "illiteracy" with what they describe as the "disadvantaged", "vulnerable" (RSA 1995b:21), "excluded" and "inferior" (CEPD 1994:46) position of women. Policy makers, I have argued, work with the assumption that literacy acquisition would be a form of symbolic capital that would "empower" women to participate in the mainstream of South African society; in other words, to assume positions similar to those presently occupied by men.

In response to the reasoning in policy documents, I here pose the following question: How might the acquisition and use of literacy "empower" people to act in ways other than those determined by their gender defined identities? In attempting to provide an answer, I discuss whether acquiring literacy addresses the "marginalisation" and "oppression" of women which is commonly associated with women's "illiteracy" (Hutton 1992:15). I also question whether literacy classes address the needs of men who feel "disempowered" in certain aspects of their lives due to their lack of standard literacy.

The argument I develop is that existing gender roles have predetermined the uses and values which literacy has had for people in Newtown and Bellville South. Their level of literacy - whether they had acquired schooled literacy or not - was of secondary importance in determining how they would relate to literacy practices; their gender roles played an overdetermining role. In other words, unless understandings of gender relationships are changed, women's acquisition of literacy is not likely to make a significant impact on

the roles they assume and limit themselves to.

In her study of District Six, Woodstock and Walmer Estate in Cape Town, Rosemary Ridd (1981:187-203) comes to conclusions similar to mine about the position of women in "coloured" areas - that home is seen as women's domain while men occupy public territory. She argues that, particularly during the times of apartheid when the dignity of coloureds was severely tested by enforced laws, women in "coloured areas" saw their control of the home as their own physical space as the basis for their self respect. Ridd argues that apartheid, and women's desire to preserve their families' dignity, has led to the "forced domination" of women at home. "The forced exclusion of the 'Coloured' men from the White man's *social* and *geographical space* has produced a situation where, for the 'Coloured', the home is paramount as the physical space controlled by women" (1981:191).

Rather than use notions of domination and resistance to describe the men and women in my research areas in terms of relationships of domination and resistance resulting from apartheid, I prefer to follow AbdouMaliq (1994:173) when he says that "the twilight zones of inbetweenness [in which] coloureds have been located" have contributed to the creation of "a wide chasm between the everyday worlds of coloured men and women". In Newtown and Bellville South, I saw this chasm most clearly in the difference between men's and women's orientations to public and private space in their everyday worlds.

I describe gender roles in terms of understandings of private and public space, arguing that the former has been associated with women's roles and the latter with men's roles. I show how important it was for the men in these two areas to be seen *in public* as being educated, whereas *in private* women were using literacy far more than were men. This pattern had implications for both men's and women's valuing of literacy.

I understand public and private space not as distinct physical realities, but as socially produced concepts. Lefebvre (1991:81) argues that "any space implies, contains and dissimulates social relationships". My interest is in how gender relationships were contained and implied in people's understandings of public and private space, and how these understandings again affected men's and women's orientations to literacy.

What I have found in Newtown and Bellville South is that men are often the keepers of those forms of literacy which have most public authority whereas women engage regularly in literacy practices which are less valued in public. I will show in my analysis that formal institutional literacy practices are held in higher regard than personal or domestic literacy practices, and that public literacy practices are seen as more significant than private literacy practices in Newtown and Bellville South. I will demonstrate that women tend to engage largely in private domestic, personal or communal literacy practices (thus, those literacy practices of least significance). Men, on the other hand, often have exclusive claim over important public institutional literacy practices, such as financial and legal arrangements that affect the household's position. Yet many men lack the skills to engage in such practices.

A number of studies on literacy and gender roles comment on the way that spatial understandings of gender roles shape people's orientations to literacy. They indicate how, in diverse social contexts, women's roles have been limited to private space activities, and that the literacy practices which they perform do not give women public status or authority. Since they create a conceptual framework for my study, I will discuss these studies first, before entering into the analysis of my own research material.

In her study of the value of literacy in a village in eastern Kentucky, Puckett (1992:137 - 147) described women as having distinctly different perspectives from men on the value of literacy. Literacy was decisively linked to women's roles in domestic and communal spheres, whereas men, who spent most of their time farming and logging, regarded business and "common sense" as more important than literacy. Because men saw their work related activity as more significant than literacy practices, they preferred women to perform literacy tasks and did not feel that women's literacy placed them in a position of higher status or authority than their own.

Other studies indicate that women's frequent engagement with literacy practices was a result of their confinement to private space roles, whereas men carried authority in the public arena. Rockhill (1993) interviewed Hispanic immigrant women in Los Angeles, and found that women tended to use the written word much more than men, whereas men spoke English more readily than women. Rockhill interpreted this phenomenon as the result of the

confinement of women to domestic space (Rockhill 1993:1). She further argued that the differentiation between women's and men's orientations to speaking English is a sign of the division between public and private space in their gendered relationships:

The men we interviewed feel at ease in the public in a way that women do not. The public takes on a special meaning - it is either a male ethnic grouping, or a public world where English is spoken, a world that women venture into only if they must in order to go to church, to work or to attend to the family's needs (Rockhill 1993:166).

In the Hispanic immigrant community where Rockhill did her research, it was the women who did most of the literacy work in the household; literacy work that fitted into their roles in the private spaces of home or neighbourhood life (Rockhill 1993:167). As with Puckett's research, Rockhill's work leads to the conclusion that women's use of literacy is not an indication of their authority, but rather of their confinement to private space activities, while men occupy the public arena.

In the South African context, Gibson (1996) has written that women labourers living on a farm in the Western Cape had "literacy without power". While women had higher levels of literacy than men, and did most of the literacy tasks, they were not regarded as "real workers" and therefore not valued as much as men. Social status on the farm was determined by people's positions as workers. Since women were regarded as the lowest order of workers, their social status was low, even if they had higher literacy levels than men and engaged more regularly in literacy practices (1996:59).

Other South African studies argue that gendered understandings of space and literacy are socially constructed and dependent on the specificities of the social context. In contrast to the studies referred to in the previous paragraphs, research undertaken by Griesel (1986) and Mc Ewan and Malan (1996) indicates that literacy is not necessarily part of women's role definitions. These studies emphasise both the desires which women associate with acquiring schooled literacy, and the fact that acquiring standard literacy has only rarely led to the fulfilment of such desires. Women in the remote rural area

of Mboza in north-eastern Natal told Griesel (1986) that they wished to be educated, since they felt that education would enable them to find work in the cities. Within their own area however, those who were attending literacy classes were mocked for "playing" instead of getting on with their work; in Mboza, the critics argued, "there is no work [...] for those who can read and write" (Griesel 1986:6).

Women in rural Eastern Cape areas who were interviewed by McEwan (McEwan and Malan 1996), likewise expressed their feeling that education would better their lives. Paulina, an unschooled woman with six children, two of whom were living in Cape Town, said of those who remained behind in the rural village that "'we are suffering and if we had studied we would not be struggling'" (Malan and McEwan 1996:201). In the time that McEwan spent with Paulina and other women she found that, despite the fact that they made statements such as the above, none of them had any inclination to study or to move away; they were content that their children had been able to get a schooled education, had moved to the cities and were sending them money and goods. The younger generation, in turn, felt that becoming educated had its disadvantages. As one matriculant stated: "'It has, in this way, that if you are educated, you move away [from your traditions]'" (McEwan and Malan 1996:203). The students who moved to the cities sent their own children back to their grandmothers who stayed behind in the rural areas, and whom the parents regarded as being able to connect their children to their traditions. McEwan and Malan conclude that rural women played an important role in the moral economy of their families, and that there were advantages for them in remaining confined to their rural homesteads:

Reciprocity between youth and parents, urban and rural dwellers, those with and those without schooled education involves an exchange of economic and cultural resources. In these social networks women have central and powerful positions; although their authority may at times be challenged by the schooled youth, these same youth are dependent on the cultural resources of their unschooled parents (McEwan and Malan 1996:204).

Unschooled women's statements about the disadvantages of lacking schooled education in Griesel's (1986) and McEwan and Malan's (1996) studies showed

that it did not follow they would attend literacy classes if given the option. Being literate did not count for much within the private spaces of their lives in their rural home villages. Moving to the cities where education counted would mean leaving their place of authority within their kinship networks.

Research thus indicates that the value of literacy for women is relative to the social positions they assume or find themselves in. In general the studies that I have referred to indicate that being literate or using literacy does not enhance women's social status, particularly since literacy is associated with their private space roles as women.

Having analyzed the different private space roles that women in my research areas assumed, and the way they used literacy in each of these, I distinguish between three types of private space literacy practices: personal, domestic and communal. By personal literacy practices I refer to those involving the person alone, such as the reading of a novel. Domestic literacy practices are those practices which result from the role a person takes in the household activities. Communal literacy practices are those that are shared by people in the neighbourhood or people who generally operate in a horizontal relationship to one another. I describe as public space literacy practices those practices which require a person engaging in literacy practices to assume a public position (possibly on behalf of a household) in relation to formal institutions, such as workplaces, state, financial and legal institutions.

I will indicate that women in my research areas participated mostly in private (personal, domestic and communal) literacy practices, but left the management of public space literacy practices (which could impact on their own and their household's public position) under men's control. I thus argue that women's participation and use of literacy practices are determined by their gender roles and not by their literacy levels. It was only in situations where women's gender roles had changed (due to the absence of, or their separation from, a male head of the household) that women took on public space literacy practices.

Since policy makers have targeted women for literacy intervention, I focus my

analysis on women's positions in relation to literacy. However the broader question which inspires my focus on women - the relationship between gender roles and literacy - requires an analysis of men's positions as well. In the following paragraphs I discuss the value of standard literacy for men, and present reasons why men's valuing of standard literacy seldom leads them to attend literacy classes. I then return to the significance of literacy for women.

1. Being "blind" in public: men's public orientation to literacy and the lack thereof

My interview with Japie Krisjan, a municipal worker in Bellville South, helped me to develop an understanding of the value which standard literacy had for men in my research areas. Japie, who had grown up on a farm and had never been to school, was one of the few men I met who were attending literacy classes. Japie used the image of the "illiterate" as blind person to explain why he considered acquiring schooled literacy to be of such great importance:

See, you are almost... I would say a person who cannot read and write is like a blind person in the dark, he does not know what is happening around him. He just continues, he sees but he also does not see. He hears but he also does not hear<sup>1</sup>.

A metaphor of the "illiterate" as a blind (or deaf) person was often used by the men I interviewed who had not been to school. I interpret their use of the metaphor as an expression of their understanding that lacking literacy was a deficit as incisive as lacking the full use of one or more of their senses, or as living with only half an awareness of the world around them.

The value which standard literacy had for Japie resulted from the social understanding that, as head of the household, he was responsible for transactions with formal institutions (which required the use of standard literacy). Japie told me that when he met his wife, he had applied for a

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<sup>1</sup> "Kyk, jy's nou amper, sal ek nou sê, 'n mens wat nou nie kan lees en skrywe nie, hy's nou amper soos 'n blinde wat in die donker is, hy weet nie... wat rondom hom aangaan nie. Hy gaan nou maar net aan - dit lyk vir hom, hy sien en hy sien ook nie. Hy hoor en hy hoor ook nie".

municipal house and had to fill in a form:

When I got the house, I had to fill in a form, yes. And I had to look at what I had to sign. And I could not sign. So I said to them that I could not sign. So they said I should then just make a cross, and I made a cross. Later on they said to me that I would have to attend a night school to learn to write my name<sup>2</sup>.

Japie thus described himself as being confronted, in his role as husband and breadwinner, with his lack of standard literacy. The implication was that Japie's ability to exercise his authority as man of the household in the public institutional domains of work and financial arrangements was inhibited by his inability to read and write.

Japie continued to say that the incident had spurred him to attend literacy classes. He first attended classes after work hours, but soon dropped out. When the municipality started offering classes for their workers during work hours, Japie diligently attended. The classes now became part of his tasks as a municipal worker. Japie was overseer of a few municipal buildings across the street from where he lived, and he attended the classes in one of the buildings. His life had the regularity required for sustaining literacy learning, and he did not experience his attendance of literacy classes as stigmatising him in his role as worker.

Japie was aware of the fact that his position was exceptional. When I asked him whether many other municipal workers kept up their attendance of literacy classes, he said that many were not interested. He recalled an incident where a friend, who was attending another literacy class, told him that he was the only person left in the class. Japie told me how he had encouraged the man to continue despite the fact that other men had not persevered.

There are many, many [men] who are not interested. I know of a

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<sup>2</sup> "Toe ek die huis kry, ja - toe moet ek 'n vorm invul, ja. En kyk wat ek moet teken. Ek kan mos nie teken nie. Toe sê ek vir hulle maar ek kan nie teken nie. Toe sê hulle dan ek moet maar net 'n kruisie maak, maak ek toe maar net 'n kruisie. Toe sê hulle vir my maar later van tyd, er, sal ek moet by 'n aandskool of so, om net leer om my naam te kan skryf".

class that was held at the municipal offices. I met one of those men, and he asked me: "Listen, are you still attending the classes"? I said: "Yes, I am continuing". He said: "Man, we were five, but I am the only one who stayed on. Everybody has left". So I said to him: "Listen man, don't pay attention to the others who have left, you just continue<sup>3</sup>".

It was unusual in both Newtown and Bellville South for men to identify themselves publicly as "illiterate" by for instance going to a literacy class (and thus publicly admitting their need for literacy). In Newtown, only three of the men were among the 25 people who either expressed the desire to come to literacy classes or identified themselves as "illiterate", and in Bellville South only four of the men were among the 21 people who were attending literacy classes or desired to do so.

I explore three reasons for men's apparent lack of interest in literacy. The first is that men associate literacy classes with women's practice. The second is that dealing with public domain literacy practices does not necessarily require a man to be literate in a formal sense. The third is that attending literacy classes could be humiliating for men.

The degree to which men distinguish their roles from women in social practice, and their consequent attitude to literacy classes, was demonstrated to me by a group of pensioners in Bellville South who met daily in the hall in Stilwanië. Being pensioners these men and women were under some constraint to spend most of their day together in the hall (a private space, one could argue). I noticed that the men in the group kept themselves apart from the women. They did so by spatially positioning themselves apart (the men grouped together along the left side of the hall while the women formed a group on the

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<sup>3</sup> "Daar is baie, baie [mans] wat nie belangstel nie. Ek weet van 'n klas wat hulle besig gewees het hier bo by die munisipale kantore - daar was 'n klas - een van daardie manne het ek gekry, en hulle het gesê, man, luister, toe vra die persoon vir my: gaan jy nog voort met jou klas? Ek sê ja, nee, ek gaan nog voort. Hy sê man, ons was vyf gewees, en dit is net ek nou alleen in. Almal is so weg. Toe vra ek vir hom: nou wat is nou eintlik die probleem wat hulle nou so weggebly het van die klas? Toe sê hy nee, hy weet nou self nie. Toe sê ek vir hom: maar luister, man, moenie kyk op die ander wat weggebly het nie, gaan jy aan".

other side of the hall). The men dressed in a distinctly "male" way, with full suits and hats (while the women wore dresses). In addition the men commented scathingly on the women's interests and on the fact that they were required to work with the women. I realised what the effect of the male/female division was on men's attitudes to literacy classes when a literacy teacher arrived to present a class to the group. At her entry, the men moved out of the hall as if they had preplanned to do so. The reason they offered was that they had work to do in the garden; it was urgent, and they could not attend the class. Admittedly, the women also expressed their resistance to the class (which had been imposed on them by the social worker); they did so by picking up their knitting and continuing with that activity rather than participating in the literacy class. What I found significant though, was that the men's reaction was to move out to pursue a "men's" activity (gardening), whereas the women stayed in the hall to continue with a "women's" activity. The hall in which the literacy class was presented thus was the same space in which the women were pursuing their activities. I would argue that the hall acted as a private space which was firstly the domain of women. If the men had stayed in the hall, they would have implicitly agreed to participate in a private space activity - attending literacy classes - which they associated with women's roles and not their own.

The second reason, I would argue, that men were less committed than women to attend literacy classes is that the public space literacy practices which men generally had responsibility for did not necessarily require them to be literate themselves. In chapter 4 I have described how state subjects who had to participate in official literacy practices relied largely - and strategically - on the literacy mediation of state officials (who had more authority than they themselves with in dealing with state institutions). In chapter 7 I described how Petrus April made use of various literacy mediators in dealing with financial and legal institutions when he purchased his car. Where literacy was required, he reinforced his own newly acquired standard literacy skills by drawing on the help of a person skilled to perform that task.

A third reason I pose for men's lack of interest in literacy classes is that attending literacy classes can publicly expose them as "illiterate", and this can have further consequences for their roles as men. I came to this

realisation while interviewing Piet Blom, a municipal worker in Newtown. I had arranged the meeting with him after having been told by people in the neighbourhood that Piet could not read or write at all. When I arrived at Piet's house, there was nobody at home. I found Piet and his wife at some friends' house. When I explained to Piet that I had come to interview him to see how he coped without being able to read or write, he nodded in a submissive way and followed me. Piet's hands shook so much that he could not open the door of my car. When eventually I got to interviewing Piet at his house, he answered each question I asked, as well as the prompting of his wife and daughter, in monosyllabic sentences, never making eye contact with me. I quote an excerpt from the interview:

Liezl: Uncle, do you ever need to read or write anything at work?

Piet: (Silence, looks slightly bewildered) What was that? To write?

Daughter: Has Daddy never received forms?

Piet: What? No...<sup>4</sup>

I ended the interview after a few minutes, realising that it had created a hopelessly embarrassing situation. Piet seemed particularly concerned about questions like the one quoted in which I queried the link between his work performance and his literacy level. People in the neighbourhood told me that Piet was highly committed to his job. My interpretation of his response to my question suggested to me that he saw the foregrounding of literacy in relation to his work as raising potentially dangerous questions about his ability as a worker; precisely because of the powerful symbolic value which is attached to literacy, especially in men's work contexts.

Men usually responded defensively when I asked them how their low level of schooling affected their position as men. A number of men told me that they could do their jobs better than any schooled person. Henry Spogter, a painter in Newtown, told me that his employer would appoint him above those with

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Liezl: Het oom ooit nodig om iets te lees of te skryf by die werk?

Piet: Hoesê? Te skryf?

Daughter: Het Pa dan nog nooit vorms gehad nie?

Piet: Hoe? Nee...

education because he was such a responsible and neat worker. At the same time, Hennie expressed a sense of being in a vulnerable position when seeking employment. Jan Maarman, a pensioner in Newtown, made a similar statement when describing to me how he was appointed as a delivery boy because he was known as a diligent worker, even though he did not have an education. He added that literacy was in fact indispensable, and he told me how another young man who had come to apply for work after him was sent away because he had no qualifications.

Following from these examples, I would argue that adult literacy policy makers should not overlook the significance which standard literacy has for men since standard literacy is associated with men's roles in the public domain. At the same time, men's reluctance to attend adult literacy classes raises questions about the appropriateness of that form of intervention for addressing men's literacy requirements. I presented a case which suggests that men might see the types of spaces where literacy classes are held as private space and that they associated literacy class activities with women's role and not their own. I have also indicated that attending literacy classes may be an unattractive concept to men since this would expose them as 'illiterate' and might lead to the questioning of their public positions, particularly at work. A final reason I have posed for men's lack of interest in literacy classes is that, due to the role of literacy mediators, many men can manage the public literacy practices they are responsible for without being literate. If policy makers are to address men's position in relation to literacy, they would need to design forms of literacy intervention which are sensitive to the demands of men's gendered roles.

Having discussed men's orientations to literacy, I focus my attention in the rest of the chapter on a more extended discussion of women's position in relation to literacy.

## 2. Women, literacy and public versus private space

### 2.1 Private space literacy practices

In both Newtown and Bellville South, women read considerably more than men. Albeit primarily in the privacy of their homes. The most popular reading material amongst women were the *Keur* and the *Huisgenoot*, two Afrikaans magazines that catered for the whole "family" (in the language of the magazines) but included many sensationalist articles and soap story serials. Many women said they read these magazines from cover to cover, but they were especially interested in the serials. Photo-stories (stories consisting of photographs with subtitles), when available, were also very popular. Libraries in Newtown and Bellville South had a largely female membership. Women borrowed large quantities of large-print romance novels; some also enjoyed spy and mystery stories and "action love stories" (*aksieliefde*).

A central argument I pose here is that women's positions and practices were socially and culturally shaped by their gender roles, and that those roles determined how they used literacy. In other words, whether women were literate or not, they assume similar gender roles, and engage in similar social practices. Women who could not themselves read had access to the same narratives as those who did read. The reason for this was that there was a continuous flow of narratives in neighbourhood conversation between women. In listening to women exchanging stories, I often found it difficult to determine whether they were talking about a book or magazine story they had read, a serial story on the radio or on television, or whether they were in fact exchanging neighbourhood gossip. In my research I did not come across one woman who had no access to some circulating narratives. I discuss the phenomenon in more detail below (section 2.1.3). My focus here is on women's personal literacy practices.

#### 2.1.1 Women's personal literacy practices: reflections of gender roles

The private space of home was most often where women collected a variety of narratives. To illustrate, I refer to the case of Nova McDonald, a keen reader who lived in a tiny room at the back of her brother-in-law's house in

Tupperware, Bellville South. During the time that I visited her, Nova read a novel in off moments between doing washing, responding to the demands of children coming in and out of the house, conversing with a neighbour who came with a request, and watching a soap story on television. Most of the space in the room Nova lived in was taken up by a double bed, a television set and a cupboard. In her small room, Nova also gathered up all kinds of reading material. While we talked, Nova looked for a *Huisgenoot* magazine and found it under the mattress of her bed (between numerous other magazines). Later she opened the cupboard to look for something, and I noticed piles of soft-cover novels. While Nova was an enthusiastic reader, her personal reading activities were integrated with, rather than distinct from, both the other activities in which she engaged and the rest of her domestic practices.

A distinct quality of women's personal reading practices was that it was private in nature. Rather than expressing external hierarchical power relationships, women explore internal realities and self-perceptions. Referring to the nature of personal life in modern society, Giddens (1992) writes that the sphere of public life has become "overly institutionalised", with the result that "personal life becomes attenuated and bereft of firm reference points; there is a turning inward towards human subjectivity, and meaning and stability are sought in the inner self" (1992:155). In my research, women's reflections on their reading habits often pointed to their search for subjective meaning and reference points for interpreting their personal life experiences. But rather than purely seeking for meaning in the "inner self", the women sought out narratives that reflected their own realities, and temporarily added an element of glory and glamour to their own lives.

In listening to soap operas or reading novels women in Newtown and Bellville South enjoyed experiencing the qualities of their story heroes who are described as rich, beautiful, daring and educated. But women generally would not continue to read or listen to a story if they could not in some way relate the experiences of the main characters to their own.

I return to the case of Nova to demonstrate. At the time I interviewed Nova, her husband was unemployed and a drug addict. Nova told me how she had roamed about with her children, sleeping outside, until they were taken in by her

husband's brother." She related her own experience to a book that she had read:

But I read it like this, sometimes the book is very interesting, then the man [my husband] says: You read a lot. Then I say it gives me more experience. Sometimes the books become true in real life. Like, almost like it happened in a person's own life. And she wrote there - I can't remember the book's name now. She had a difficult time. And they had many relationships, one guy made her pregnant and then he left her just like that to raise her own child. I mean, there are many good people who will take you in without you having a man, who will help you with the child and the child's birth<sup>5</sup>.

Nova's description of the book that she had read related to her own experience as a destitute mother, thereby giving some universal relevance to her personal narrative. In chapter 5 I described a similar incident where Anna Smal compared her own life story to the narrative of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. As in the case of Anna Smal, Nova used association with her personal experience as a technique whereby she interpreted the book she had read. Another woman who related her love for reading to the "real" quality of stories was Tillie Dennis who lived with her husband in a tiny flat in the USA area of Bellville South. Though Tillie had less than five years of schooling, she read numerous romance novels every month. When I asked why she was such a keen reader, Tillie answered:

Many of the books are true to life. See, sometimes there are books of young girls who are still at university, then they meet a guy, then they become pregnant, then the child has to be given

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<sup>5</sup> "Maar ek lees dit so, somtyds is die boek baie interessant, dan sê my man: Jy lees baie. Dan sê ek dit gee 'n mens meer ondervinding, somtyds is daar boeke wat waar word in die werklike lewe. Kyk, soos, amper soos dit nou gebeur het in 'n mens se eie lewe. En sy het geskryf daar - ek kan nou nie die boek se naam onthou nie. Sy het baie swaar gekry, as juffrou die boek kry. En hulle het in die bonding gevry, en die een outjie het vir haar verwagkend gemaak, en toe het hy vir haar net so gelos dat sy maar haar kindjie self grootmaak. Ek meen, jy kry baie goeie mense wat vir jou invat sonder 'n man, en vir jou help met die kind en die kind se geboorte".

away, and the day that they are married, then they want the child back. Then they meet the child, then the child does not even know its parents. This is the way it happens in real life <sup>6</sup>.

I interpret Tillie's answer, as I do Nova's, as implying that the narratives she read reflected aspects of, and temporarily reframed, her own reality. They were "true to life" and depicted real-life dramas such as unwanted pregnancies; at the same time they were about characters who were young, attractive and educated. Tillie thus also interpreted the narratives she read through association with the narrative of her own life.

Tillie described to me the book she was reading at the time: The woman's fiance scarred his face in a motor car accident, she broke the engagement, he returned later with a girlfriend and she found that she was still in love with him. The romance novel Tillie described confirmed the stereotypes and practices of her world. Engagements and marriages were valued highly, but they were also broken easily. Love triangles, which were a popular feature of romance novels, were an exciting aspect of romantic life in Bellville South. To illustrate I return to Nova, who presented me with the following reflection on her romantic life:

I can't complain about my life. Okay, my husband had girlfriends in my time, but then we were not married yet, and then he always came to tell me: that woman phoned him, or wrote to him. Then I tell him: tell them you are not interested. Then he comes to show me the letters. We were very open with each other. I can't say we hid anything from each other. And we are happily married. There are ups and downs in one's life, but you just have to talk

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<sup>6</sup> "Baie van die boeke speel af soos dit werklik gaan (Trudy confirms: "In jou lewe is"). Kyk, daar is soms boeke van jong meisietjies wat nog op *varsity* is, dan het hulle 'n outjie ontmoet, dan raak hulle verwagtend, dan moet die kind weggegee word, nou as hulle die dag getroud is, dan soek hulle die kind terug. Dan ontmoet hulle die kind, dan weet die kind nie eers dit is hulle ouers nie. Nou in werklikheid gebeur dit so".

those through <sup>7</sup>.

After describing these love triangles in which her husband got involved, Nova referred to the same pattern as an appealing aspect of romance novels:

It is about human lives. The one, for instance, is in love with that doctor. And sometimes there are many quarrels in the books; the one fights about this man and the other one fights about that man. But they all get together again in the end. Is almost like a triangle. Two girls and one man<sup>8</sup>.

Nova here expressed her appreciation of romance novels by stating that they are "about human lives". The romance novels became meta-narratives in the light of which Nova could describe her own life experiences. Her own story about her marriage was structured similarly to the novel she had described: There was a conflict situation, a climax, a resolution and the good ending.

Some women expressed the personal relevance which romance novels had to them in almost literal terms. Miems Balie in Stilwanië, Bellville South, went as far as to describe them as a substitute for her relationship with her husband. In the following quote, she referred to the "photo-books" (specifically two series with male heroes) which she read in her husband's absence while she was pregnant:

When I expecting, I had Conrad Brand, the photo-books. And the

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<sup>7</sup> "Ek kan nou nie kla van my lewe nie. OK, my man het vriendinne gehad in my tyd in, maar toe was ons nog nie getroud gewees nie, en dan het hy altyd vir my kom sê: daai vrou het vir hom gebel, of vir hom geskrywe. Dan sê ek vir hom: Sê vir hulle jy stel nie belang nie. En dan kom wys hy vir my die briewe. Ons was baie openlik met mekaar. Ek kan nou nie sê ons het iets vir mekaar weggesteek nie. En ons is gelukkig getroud. Daar is *ups* en *downs* in 'n mens se lewe, maar jy moet dit net uitpraat".

<sup>8</sup> "Dit gaan oor menslike lewens. Die een is miskien verlief op daai dokter, en so. En somtyds is daar baie struwelinge in die boeke oor die een baklei oor die mannetjie en daai een baklei oor daai mannetjie. Maar op die ou einde kom hulle weer bymekaar. Is amper soos 'n driehoek. Twee meisies en een man".

Makonder. That was also like a little book. I was always on my own. The father [husband] was out. Evenings he went to the bioscope. Then I am so lonely. And I am pregnant. Then I long for a love relationship. Then I would buy those books, the Conrad Brand and Makonder books<sup>9</sup>.

When I asked Miems about Conrad Brand, she presented him as the stereotypical male hero: "He has an automatic rifle. He fights for his country"<sup>10</sup>. I directed her into a discussion about the relationships in the story. It went as follows:

Liezl: Was there also a love relationship?

Miems: Yes, he had a relationship. But he didn't really have a girlfriend in his book. When he goes away, he leaves her, she must see to herself. When he comes back, he returns to her. It is lovely to see how those two held each other. She was a nurse.

Liezl: Wasn't it bad for her to stay on her own?

Miems: No. She is used to it. I read all the books about them. I found it so lovely to see how their relationship with each other is, how they love each other, keep each other company<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> "Toe ek vir hulle verwag het, het ek Conrad Brand gehad, en die *photo*-boeke. En die Makonder. Dis ook so 'n klein boekie gewees. Ek was altyd maar alleen gewees. Die pa was uit. Saans na die bioskoop toe. Dan is ek so alleen. Dan is ek pregnant. Dan verlang ek so vir 'n liefdesverhouding. Dan koop ek nou weer daai boekies, die Conrad Brand en Makonder-boekies.

<sup>10</sup> "Hy het 'n masjiengeweer. Hy veg vir sy land.

<sup>11</sup>

Liezl: Was daar liefdesverhoudings ook in?

Miems: Ja. Hy het 'n verhouding gehad. Maar hy het nie eintlik 'n meisie gehad in sy boek nie. Wanneer hy nou weggaan, dan los hy vir haar, dat sy nou self kyk. Dan as hy terugkom, dan gaan hy weer na haar. Dis tog te mooi hoe daai twee mekaar gehad het. Sy was hom *nurse* gewees.

Liezl: Is dit nou nie sleg dat sy alleen moet bly nie?

Miems: Nee. Sy is gewoon al. Ek het al die boekies van hulle gelees. Dit was vir my so mooi om te sien hoe

Miems's evaluation of the main character was revealing: It was perfectly acceptable for him to live a travelling existence and to be available for the relationship only when it suited him. The female character had no problems with this because she was used to the pattern. Miems praised the unity and harmony in their relationship.

The women I have referred to expressed appreciation for what they saw as the superior qualities of the characters in the books they were reading. The qualities were often shaped by gender stereotypes - the young beautiful woman, the brave strong man. They accepted the fate of the female characters (bound to their gender roles) as though it was a necessary element of the story. Women's reading practices thus tended to confirm a perceived inevitability of gender stereotypes and restrictions.

In her study of female romance readers in Smithston, Midwest America, Radway (1997) found that romance novels temporarily create an alternative reality for women, an escape from the confines of their domestic roles that ultimately confirmed the restrictions of their gendered roles. In a comment on Radway's research, Thompson (1990) describes the reading of romance novels as having therapeutic value for women while at the same time confirming their structured gender roles:

The romance also enables its readers to experience vicariously a form of pleasure and to imagine themselves temporarily to be the focal point of a man's care and attention, experiences that are generally denied to them in the actual circumstances of their day-to-day life where they are largely preoccupied with caring for others. [...] The capacity of the romance to be reassuring and therapeutic co-exists with, and helps to reproduce, a structured set of social relations in which women are situated and in which they carry out certain tasks and roles, particularly tasks attending to the needs of others (Thompson 1990:311).

Thompson's interpretation (1990) of the value of romance novels for women

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hulle verhouding met mekaar is, hoe lief hulle vir mekaar is, om mekaar se geselskap te hê.

corresponds with the descriptions of many of the women I interviewed. Nova, Tillie and Miems, for example, described romance novels as creating an imaginative world of relationships which they would temporarily enter, enjoying the superior qualities of the characters. On the other hand the romances, being "true to life" acted as a reminder of the daily reality in which they themselves were the characters. Both in its purpose of creating imaginary worlds and in reminding the readers of their personal realities, women read the romance novel as a private space activity filled with resonant associations. As such their literacy had internal validity for the readers, but little effect on their marginal public positions as women.

In order not to disturb gender relationships, women's reading practices had therefore to conform to "discourses of appropriate female conduct" (Blumberg, Swartz, Roper 1996:175 - 179) which defined what behaviour was considered to be appropriate in women's roles. The authors used it to describe the patterns that led to the perpetuation of the abuse of women in a town in the Western Cape. They found that both men and women justified the abuse of women with reference to entrenched understandings of how women should behave and what women's roles were.

The reading patterns of the women I interviewed were affected by discourses of appropriate female conduct. In both Newtown and Bellville South, one aspect of the discourses was an understanding that women's dignity was determined by their private space roles. Most of the women I interviewed spent their days in domestic spaces. In between washing, seeing to the needs of children, cooking and performing other domestic tasks, many women did a large amount of reading. Reading thus formed part of their private space activities.

Men and women were outspoken about women who forsook their private space positions. The case of Miems Balie, to whom I referred earlier, demonstrates. I have quoted Miems expressing her dissatisfaction with the fact that her husband was never at home. She initially found consolation in reading photo-stories. However, Miems eventually decided to leave her husband and live with friends elsewhere. Her husband raised the children, and Miems occasionally returned to see them. I interviewed her during one of her visits. I had first heard about Miems when interviewing her daughter Onka, who attended literacy classes with some elderly women. When I asked Onka why she was

attending the literacy classes and she hesitated, one of the other women, Rietjie de Klerk, offered to talk on her behalf. She explained that Onka did not do well at school because "she did not have a mother" and grew up with her grandmother, since her father was working. She then stated that "that's why she [Onka] hardly knows what life is about, because she did not have a mother, the mother would be at home now and then go away again<sup>12</sup>". Rietjie viewed the fact that Miems Balie had left the private space of her household as an irreversible forsaking of her role as mother; she consequently stated that Onka "did not have a mother". Her case made me aware of the degree to which people judged women's conduct as appropriate by virtue of the fact that they remain faithful to their private space roles. As I have stated, it was mostly in the context of these roles that women engaged in reading activities.

Another discourse of appropriate female conduct that affected women's private reading practices was the discourse of religious commitment. In Newtown particularly, but in Bellville South, too, many women's religious activities continued morning, noon and night, every day of the week. In between their domestic working hours, women found time to sit on their own and read attentively from religious booklets such as *Our daily bread*, which contains Scripture verses and lessons for each day, offering comfort or reminding the reader of Biblical commandments.

A minister in one of Newtown's churches, was of the opinion that reading these religious booklets was similar to the reading of pulp novels: they required limited intellectual involvement and produced an immediate effect (sadness, guilt, pleasure, comfort). In the minds of the readers, however, the distinction between religious and fictional reading was clear. Amongst members of fundamentalist religious groupings (of which there are many) the opinion was held that the only material worth reading was religious material and that reading love stories or magazines was sinful and distracted people from their mission in life. In the following quote, two women from charismatic Christian churches in Newtown described to me why they no longer read fiction:

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<sup>12</sup> "Dis daarom, sy weet nie omtrent hoe die lewe met haar gegaan het nie, want sy was nou net sonder mammië gewees, dan was die mammië by die huis gewees, dan het die mammië weer weggegaan".

Liezl: Do you have any fiction at home?  
 Christa: I don't read anything but the Bible.  
 Liezl: Are you too busy during the day?  
 Christa: I don't like reading magazines and those kinds of things. Ever since I accepted the Lord, I read only the Bible.  
 Vernie: We are not interested in reading anything else. But before we had accepted the Lord into our lives, we read magazines and play books - the *Kyk* [another popular family magazine], etcetera, we liked those, but now no longer<sup>13</sup>.

Religious reading was a private practice that took place behind closed doors or in a silent corner of the house. It created for women an insulated but respected and respectable gendered space. On several occasions I found women pensively reading religious booklets in their homes after their children and husbands had left for the day. This was part of the women's regular practice, and men regarded it with respect. When I discussed reading practices with a group where both men and women were present, women would seldom expand on their fictional reading but they would be forthcoming in telling me about the religious reading they were doing. Men responded with gestures of approval. This may partly explain (apart from the religious argument) why some women stated categorically that they read no romances, only religious books. The space women were allowed for religious reading was the result of the fact that it was valued more than novel reading, and related to what was regarded as

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Liezl: Het julle enige leesstof in die huis?  
 Christien: Daar is niks wat ek lees nie, net die Bybel.  
 Liezl: Is julle te besig deur die dag?  
 Christien: Ek is nie lief vir tydskrifte of so aan om te lees nie. Vandat ek die Here aangeneem het, lees ek net Bybel.  
 Veronica: Ons stel nie belang om ander dinge te lees nie. Maar voorheen toe ons nie die Here in ons lewens ingeneem het nie, het ons die tydskrifte en playboekies - die *Kyk* en so aan, ons was lief vir dit, maar nou nie meer nie.

appropriate female conduct.

I see the difference between women's romance reading and their religious reading as follows. While both activities took place in the privacy of women's homes, romance reading had the aspect of temporarily creating an alternative reality beyond the female reader's domestic space. Even though the reading of romances eventually confirmed the limitations of women's positions, their temporary escape in to an alternative reality implied that the female reader transgressed the boundaries of gendered space. Religious reading, on the other hand, confirmed the female readers' position as church women and their compliance to discourses of appropriate female conduct - in the home - which were supported by the church.

Women's private reading practices were thus influenced by shared norms about women's roles and appropriate behaviour. Similar agendas shaped women's engagement in domestic literacy practices.

#### 2.1.2 Women's domestic literacy practices

In both Newtown and Bellville South, women engaged in domestic literacy practices far more than did men. As I describe in the following paragraphs, the kinds of literacy practices that women participated in were domestic in nature and tended to have the character of private space activities. This contrast with the practices of men who spent little time engaged in domestic activities of a private nature, and much time engaged in public space activities.

On a typical weekday morning in either Newtown or Bellville South, there were many men of all ages around the streets or yards around houses, but seldom inside the houses. I would see a few women hanging up washing or walking to the shops, but in general the streets and sidewalks were populated by men of all ages, sitting around an informal fruit stall or a game that they were playing, walking about in groups and often publicly drinking alcohol in the streets or in their yards.

The case of Blikkies McKensie, one of the few men in Bellville South who was a stable presence in his household, demonstrated to me that men regarded

domestic space as women's domain and not as the appropriate place for a man to be. Blikkies told me that he used to be a gangster, like most of his peers. After the death of a friend and an accident in which he lost his legs, he left the gang and turned his attention to coaching rugby (which he could do without playing himself). He soon became the chairperson of the local rugby club and started spending his days on the rugby field. During one interview in their home, Blikkies turned to his wife and made the following remark, which is indicative of his understanding of gender roles:

[To his wife, who looked at him in admiration and appreciation:]  
And you are the faithful woman who stands behind the man. My friends say they wonder to whom I am married, my wife or rugby. If I sat at home to be pampered, I surely would have been dead long ago<sup>14</sup>.

Blikkies here reflected on his perception of the proper position for a man and a woman to assume. By standing behind him (and in effect occupying domestic private space), his wife was showing that she was a "faithful woman". Blikkies indicated that it would not have been acceptable for him to stay in private domestic space. He did this by arguing that he would have been "pampered" in this space, which would have led to his death. In other words, it would have dealt a fatal blow to his dignity. It was therefore proper for Blikkies to spend his time on the rugby field. His friends' teasing remarks that he spent little time at home with his wife was an acknowledgement of his public role rather than an assertion that he did not fulfil his role as man.

The private space inside the house was seen as the woman's place. From the way she looked at him, I gathered that Blikkies's wife was proud of the fact that she could "stand behind the man". Like most women I engaged with, she spent large parts of her life in her home, cooking, looking after children, watching television or chatting with friends. My impression was that people saw the presence of the women at home as providing some domestic continuity for the household. Even if mothers were addicted to alcohol or abused their children,

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<sup>14</sup> En jy is die getroue vrou wat agter die man staan. My vriende sê hulle wonder met wie ek getroud is, met die vrou of met die rugby. As ek by die huis sit en oppiep, was ek seker al lankal dood".

it was to them that members of the household would always turn.

Whether women had formally acquired schooling or not, they were constantly engaging in domestic literacy practices: practices of a routine nature that generally did not require women to assume positions of authority in public space. The cases of Tillie Dennis and Trudie Verbeek illustrate. Tillie had dropped out in her fifth year of schooling and was attending literacy classes at the time I met her. Yet she continuously engaged with written texts in her domestic environment. During one of my visits, Tillie opened the cupboard in the tiny lounge of her house to look for a form she had referred to in discussion with me. I noticed that Tillie kept a whole collection of papers there, and asked her to explain to me what they all were. She explained:

I always keep the [rent] papers, because sometimes they will send you letters from the rent office to say you have not paid some rent, and then I have the proof. Here are our [literacy class] diplomas. Here are the [pension] books against which we are paid; see, they have now expired. There is no money on them any more. This [receipt] is from the time that I bought the child glasses; at that stage, I could pay. This is what I get for food parcels. They [the Department of Welfare] help people.

Just then Trudie Verbeek, Tillie's neighbour who was visiting her at the time and had been helping Tillie to look for the welfare allowance paper, found the form from the Department of Welfare that she had been looking for and presented it to me, saying: "I quickly recognise these papers". Tillie continued:

This is the funeral booklet of the husband of the old woman next door. These are letters that my daughter wrote to me. She lives down in Elandsbaai. This is what the wife of my deceased brother wrote to me. See, here is another one [funeral booklet] - for the young man across the street who was murdered. His funeral. It was on a Sunday<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Tillie: "Ek hou altyd so die papiere, want soms daar van die rent-office, dan stuur hulle vir jou briewe, jy het nie daai en daai tyd *rent* betaal nie, dan het jy die bewys. Hierdie is

In our discussion, Tillie referred to a range of literacy activities that she engaged in and kept a record of. She paid the rent and responded to letters enquiring about unpaid rent, kept their letters of authority for welfare grants, paid the family's accounts, kept slips for food parcels, went to literacy classes, corresponded with relatives and kept booklets of funerals in the neighbourhood. Tillie's domestic literacy practices were mostly focused on the routine needs and activities of the household. They were not public space practices that impacted on the household's relationship to formal institutions with their hierarchies of control and authority. Tillie's friend Trudie (who had Std 4 - grade 6) indicated her own easy familiarity with the kinds of literacy practices Tillie engaged in by commenting that she "quickly recognise[s] these papers".

Tillie engaged with all the literacy practices she had mentioned in her role as mother of the household. These literacy practices did require some engagement with formal institutions, but they differed from public space literacy practices in that they were mostly of a routine domestic kind (whereas public space literacy practices involved strategic positioning and decision making, often as a one-off act).

I stated earlier that women generally assumed the role of providing domestic continuity to the household. The literacy practices they performed were part of their enactment of this role. Both Tillie and Trudie spent most of their time either in their own homes, or in the homes of neighbours - doing domestic tasks that included the kinds of literacy practices Tillie referred to, as well as watching "soap operas" on television and discussing happenings in the neighbourhood, or what they had read in books, magazines or newspapers. Tillie

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ons diplomas. Hierdie is die boekies wat ons op gepay het. Kyk, daai boekies het nou verwal. Daar is nou nie meer geld op nie. Hierdie is die tyd wat ek die kind se bril laat maak het, toe kan ek nou betaal. Hierdie is die ding wat ek kry vir die kospakkies. Hulle help mos altyd die mense".

Trudie: "Hierso. Maatskaplike toelae. Ek herken gou sulke papiere".

Tillie: "Dis die begrafnisblaadjie van die ouvrou hier langsaan se man. Hier is briewe, van wat my dogter vir my geskryf het. Sy bly daar onder in Elandsbaai. Hierdie is wat my broer wat dood is se vrou vir my geskryf het. Kyk, hierso is nog ene. Van die oorkantse seun wat vermoor is. Die begrafnis van hom. Daai was op 'n Sondag".

had to stop working because of thromboses in her legs, and seldom moved out of her house. Her husband was an alcoholic. Yet Tillie's presence in the house however created a secure base for other household members. Trudie told me that she (Tillie) "was both mother and father at home". Both her parents had died under tragic circumstances. Trudie said that her brothers "drank, wandered about and bothered [her]" but it was to her (Trudie) that they turned for social security. Like Tillie (whose husband was an alcoholic), it was Trudie who created some domestic continuity for her household by spending most of her time at home. In her own domestic space, Trudie frequently engaged in literacy practices such as those described by Tillie.

I now indicate that women's private space literacy practices often were communal in nature and that women did not necessarily need individual literacy to participate in these practices.

### 2.1.3 Women's private communal literacy practices.

Visits to other women in the neighbourhood were an important part of the activities that women regularly engaged in. During the visits, women would often engage in a joint reading, listening, viewing and discussion of stories presented in books, articles, over the radio or on television.

The communal quality of women's reading practices limited their need for individual literacy. As an example, Onka Balie, one of the literacy learners who had told me that she "cannot read" surprised me with a detailed account of a newspaper article she had read. I discovered that Onka had not technically read the article herself, but had learnt its content by participating in group reading practices with other women. Onka told me that she often "read" the newspaper with other women when she visited her sister-in-law who lived in the neighbourhood. "I go there every now and again to go sit there if it gets too boring here. I go to my sister-in-law every now and again...Then we talk<sup>16</sup>".

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<sup>16</sup> "Ek gaan so elke tyd na hulle toe om daar te sit as dit hier te *boring* word. Ek gaan elke tyd na my skoonsuster toe. Dan praat ons".

The article that Onka had referred to was about the "Station Strangler", who was causing much upheaval in Cape Town at the time since he was associated with a number of murders, particularly around stations. The discussion about the Station Strangler arose when I asked Onka's mother Miems (to whom I referred to earlier) whether she had read about the station murderer. The conversation went as follows:

Liezl: Aunty, what do you know about the station murderer?

Miems: [No answer, looks uncertain]

Onka: It's big in the newspaper. Haven't you seen, mother?

Liezl: Where did you see it?

Onka: At my sister in law's house. [She elaborates on the discussion that followed after one of the women in the house had read the article to them]. She said that if a man calls them, they have to walk home. They should not turn around.

Liezl: Did you read that article?

Onka: When they talked about the children, I heard what they said. Then I asked her: Have they still not caught the man? I also heard it over the radio, about the man...where they got the body, and where it lay. The other one got away<sup>17</sup>.

From the conversation it is clear that Onka was more informed than her mother about the media's reportage on the station murderer, despite the fact that

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Liezl: Weet tannie van die stasiemoordenaar?

Miems: [No response, uncertain]

Onka: Dis groot in die koerante. Het Ma dan nie gesien nie?

Liezl: Waar het jy dit gesien?

Onka: By my skoonsuster se huis. [Talks about the discussion that followed on the reading of the article]. Sy het gesê as 'n man vir hulle roep, moet hulle loop huis toe. Hulle moet nie draai nie.

Liezl: Het jy daai artikel gelees?

Onka: Toe hulle so van die kinders praat, het ek gehoor. Toe het ek vir haar gevra: het hulle dan nog nie die man gevang nie? Oor die draadloos het ek dit ook gehoor, van die man - wat hulle die lyk gekry het, en waar hy gelê het.

Onka saw herself as illiterate whereas her mother had the ability to read through many photo stories. But Onka's knowledge of the topic was the result of her participation in communal literacy practices in her sister-in-law's house. During such occasions, someone would read the article, and they would all discuss their interpretation of it. Onka could also contribute through what she had heard over the radio. In chapter 5 I described how people use intertextual techniques to interpret written texts. Here Onka's familiarity with intertexts such as radio reports and the conversation in her sister-in-law's house made it possible for Onka to interpret the written newspaper article.

This last aspect of Onka's reading - her ability to participate in the discussion of a newspaper article by relating the written narrative to narratives she had gathered in other ways (for instance by listening to the radio) points to the intertextual quality of women's communal reading practices.

To illustrate that women's communal literacy practices had an intertextual character, and that women's participation in them was not inhibited if they could not themselves read, I describe an event where Ria Tromp, her friend Kay and I discussed some newspaper articles in Ria's flat in Stilwanië, Bellville South. Ria and I were talking about her son when her friend Kay walked into her bed-sitting room, greeted us and made herself at home on Ria's bed. Kay paged lazily through the newspaper while making small-talk. Ria received and read the newspaper daily, even though she attended a literacy class and regarded herself as "uneducated". The following events demonstrated to me that the intertextual quality of women's communal literacy practices allowed even "uneducated" women to take the lead in discussions of written texts.

From the outset Ria took the lead in discussing newspaper articles, this despite the fact that she was less "educated" than Kay (who had completed Std 8 or 10 years of formal schooling). Ria's eye caught a glimpse of an article about Patricia de Lille, a leading Pan Africanist Congress politician, who was at the time (shortly before the 1994 South African elections) being accused in the media of having rejected her daughter earlier in her life. Taking the lead in the discussion of the article did not require Ria to do the reading. She looked for the article in the newspaper, shifted it to my side, indicated

the picture of the woman she identified as Patricia de Lille's daughter and asked rhetorically: "Is this she?". Ria asked me to read the article; a gesture which I interpreted as a way of including me in the conversation, of showing recognition that I was the person with the highest literacy level, and of using my literacy skills, thereby turning me into mediator.

However my position as reader did not imply that I had more status during the event than the others did. Ria took the lead in the discussion, despite Kay and my being formally more educated than Ria. After I had read the article, Ria began to compare it with versions of the report as she had read it in various other newspapers and seen it on a number of television programmes. Kay listened to Ria with much interest, but offered little information herself. It was clear that she had read much less than Ria about the topic. Ria then introduced another story, drawing on the common theme of the forsaken child. The story was of a baby that was rescued by a garbage removal worker being thrown in a bin by her mother. Kay again listened with great attention, and it was evident that she had also not read about this incident either. Kay only took the lead in the conversation when she introduced a story which she had gathered through neighbourhood gossip (and which I will discuss shortly).

The event indicated to me that Ria, despite referring to herself as "uneducated", was as capable as a woman with a higher level of education of participating in women's private space communal literacy practices. The two women referred to narratives they had accumulated through various modes (reading, listening, watching) and in various genres (newspaper articles, television reports, neighbourhood gossip). The intertextual nature of their conversation meant that women could engage in communal literacy practices without necessarily having high levels of standard literacy as individuals.

Despite the fact that they were communal, the literacy practices in which Ria and Kay engaged had a private rather than a public character. Their reading and interpretation of the articles led them to an introspective reflection on their own lives, those of others close to them, in the neighbourhood, or those with whom they could associate in some way. In discussing the newspaper articles, Ria and Kay empathised with various characters and showed their concern as mothers.

Ria: Some parents...that woman who threw the child into the garbage bin the other day - did Liezl read about that? She has already wrapped the child in newspaper to throw it in the garbage bin. The child has just been born! So I said: If I wasn't this old, she could have given the child to me. The child is in a lot of newspaper. She just stands in the door. The garbage removal truck is standing there. They see the woman standing in the door to get to the bundle. She wants to throw it in. There the thing drives off again. Then of course they again throw in rubbish. Then they turn the garbage out.

Kay: The boy is standing there? [English word boy used].

Ria: The boy is standing there. The boy says she should give the child to them, then they will throw it in. Then she didn't want to, but the man persuaded her. The man says: Give, then I will throw it in! And in that way the child's life was saved. So he says that he will throw it in. Then he saw something moving, like a foot or something. In that way the child did not land in the garbage bin, otherwise he would have died the second time he rolled over.

Kay: Good Lord!

Ria: It's a beautiful child! It's a beautiful child, I saw it with my own eyes...not really with my own eyes, but...

Kay: The newspaper!<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ria: "Party ouers...Kyk, hierdie vrou wat nou die dag haar kind by die vullisdrom gegooi het - het Liezl daarvan gelees? Sy het al klaar die kind in die bondeltjie papiere gehad om die kind in die vullisdrom te gooi. Die kind is net gebore! Toe sê ek: As ek nou nie so oud was nie, sy kan maar die kind vir my gee. Die kind is in 'n klomp koerantpapiere. Sy staan net in die deur. Die vullisdrom staan daar. Die vullislorrie. Die *boy* is ook daar. Hulle sien hier kom staan die vrou in die deur om by die bondeltjie uit te kom. Sy wil dit nou loop ingooi. Dan ry die ding mos weer verder af. Dan gooi hulle mos weer vullis in. Dan keer hulle die vullis om".

Kay: "Die *boy* staan daar?"

Ria: "Die *boy* staan daar. Die *boy* sê sy moet maar die bondeltjie vir hulle gee, dan sal hulle dit ingooi. Toe wou sy nie, maar die man oorreed haar. Die man sê: 'Gee, dan sal ek dit ingooi!' En op daai manier is daai kind se lewe gespaar. Toe sê hy mos hy sal dit ingooi. Toe sien hy mos hier roer iets soos 'n voetjie of 'n dingetjie. So het die kindjie nie in die vullisdrom beland nie, anders het hy net so met die tweede rol omgekome".

Kay: "O Vader!"

Ria recounted the article about the woman who threw away her baby in the present tense, as if she was part of the event herself. She talked as if she was asking the mother to give the child to her ("So I said: If I wasn't this old, she could give me the child<sup>19</sup>"), and as if she could see the child with her own eyes ("It's a beautiful child, I saw it with my own eyes, not with my own eyes but...<sup>20</sup>"). Ria's personal narrative as mother whose life revolved around her children made it possible to relate to the reality of the mother she had read about. Ria realised that she had made it sound as if she had experienced this story firsthand and tried to correct the illusion. Kay confirmed that she had only read the story. However, the way in which Ria told the story signified the degree to which Ria's interpretation of written texts was interwoven with her interpretation of other "texts" based on personal experience.

After discussing the newspaper report on the child that had almost been thrown in a garbage bin, Ria and Kay turned their focus to a narrative from their own familiar reality. Ria said that one of her friends had said that she would never adopt a child whose father she did not know, and Kay commented that there are many children at the orphanage. Ria then asked Kay:

Ria: No, people can, Kay, you know, I keep on wanting to ask you what happened to the twins, and to the little one? Hans Klein and them's children? Hans and Ivy?

Kay: Oh, Hans and Ivy? Those two turned out to be good for nothing, they gave too many problems, they were adopted.

Ria: Yes?!

Kay: No, they have awful problems, the one drinks heavily and the other...

Ria: Do you still see them?

Kay: Yes, but not in the church. I do not know which church she

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Ria: "Dis 'n pragtige kindjie! Dis 'n pragtige kind, ek het dit met my eie oë gesien...nou nie met my eie oë nie, maar..."  
Kay: "Die koerant!".

<sup>19</sup> "Toe sê ek: As ek nou nie so oud was nie, sy kan maar daai kind vir my gee".

<sup>20</sup> "Dis 'n pragtige kind, ek het dit met my eie oë gesien, nou nie met my eie oë nie, maar..."

attends.<sup>21</sup>

This last narrative, in the style of neighbourhood gossip, added another genre to the range (including newspaper articles, radio and television reports) that Ria and Kay had already drawn on in their discussion, and added to the intertextual quality of their discussion. In this part of the discussion the private, "insider" character of women's communal literacy practices was also foregrounded. Their discussion (initiated by the earlier discussion of newspaper articles), was about household relationships, with questions being asked about specific people known to those involved but not to outsiders, statements being made about people's moral positions ("those two turned out to be good for nothing") and encouragement from the enquirer to disclose more (Ria: "Yes!?!"). The "insider" quality of the discussion implied that any disclosures would be of a private rather than public kind. It took place in the context of female friends sharing neighbourhood gossip, and as such was not intended for public disclosure.

Women's communal literacy practices thus had a private rather than a public character. In reading together and discussing what they had read, women reflected on their own lives and relationships, and those of people close to them. Women related in a personal way to media personalities and characters (such as Patricia de Lille's daughter, the woman who threw her baby away, the Station Strangler). They indicated this by associating with the characters' emotions (Ria reading about the woman who threw her child away) or by interspersing discussions of written texts with discussions of neighbourhood "gossip".

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Ria: Nee, 'n mense kan maar vir - kyk, weet jy Kay, ek wil aanhou vir jou vra wat het van die tweeling geword, en van die kleintjie? Hans Klein-hulle se kinders? Hans en Ivy? Hulle het mos twee pragtige kinders gehad?

Kay: O, Hans en Ivy? Daai twee kinders het niks uitgedraai nie, hulle het mos te veel probleme gegee, hulle is mos aangeneem.

Ria: Ja?!

Kay: Nee, hulle het vreeslik probleme, die een drink vreeslik en...

Ria: Sien jy hulle nog?

Kay: Ja, maar nie in die kerk nie. Ek weet nie watter kerk gaan sy nie.

I have shown earlier in this chapter that the communal and intertextual qualities of women's literacy practices meant that women as individuals did not need high levels of standard literacy to participate in these practices. Such factors contributed to the phenomenon that women in my research areas engaged freely and regularly in various private space literacy practices.

However, as I will discuss in the rest of this chapter, women did not seem to experience the same liberty to engage in public space literacy practices. I argue that public space literacy practices were regarded as men's domain and that women would only take on such literacy practices if there were no men in their households who could assume the role.

## *2.2 Conditions for women engaging in the public space literacy practices.*

While the women in my research areas engaged frequently in private space literacy practices of the various kinds discussed above, I found that they would only take responsibility for public space literacy practices if there was no man in the household who could assume his role. Marilyn Toring, the secretary of the burial society in Newtown, performed the literacy tasks required of her in that role, as well as those required of her as church sister and mother. However, when I asked her about literacy practices regarding the households's finances - bonds, loans, investments, life insurance - Marilyn could tell me no more than that they had such documents, but that her husband was the only person who dealt with these documents. I found the same pattern in other homes in Newtown and in Bellville South.

Such literacy role divisions are the result of people's understandings of gender roles: while it was acceptable for women to engage in private space literacy practices, whether of a personal, domestic or communal nature, public space literacy practices which involved communication with formal institutions and could affect the external position of the household or the neighbourhood were generally regarded as men's domain. Major financial and legal transactions, for instance, would be undertaken by men. If the men were unable to do so and their women were, they would assist their men, but they would never foreground their involvement.

For instance, Jan Maarman, a pensioner in Newtown, was dependent on his wife for most literacy tasks. When I questioned him about how he dealt with various tasks, he described how he himself dealt with financial literacy practices without mentioning his wife (even though I had already established that she handled their financial affairs). Jan only referred to his wife when stating that she helped him to read the instructions on his medicine bottles. The latter was a domestic task; Jan could refer to the fact that his wife helped him with it without undermining his own position as man of the household.

For women, the consequence of the common understanding that public space literacy practices were the domain of men resulted in their hardly engaging in the practices themselves. Women only came to see the gendered understanding of their role as problematic when some break occurred in their household relationships. I now discuss two cases to demonstrate and to indicate the degree to which women accepted men's authority in the domain of public literacy practice. Notice that in both cases, the women were highly educated, yet they had not engaged in public space literacy practices until circumstances forced them to redefine their roles as women.

Willemien Viljoen had recently been widowed when I met her in her house in Old Bellville South. Willemien and her husband were both teachers who had obtained tertiary qualifications. In the formal sense they were thus both highly educated. They lived comfortable lives until her husband who retired from his job after developing cancer. Willemien had left all financial decisions and literacy practices to her husband, and had no insight into the hire purchase agreements and other financial documents that he had signed. They had a joint bank account. When Mr Viljoen was retired, he negotiated with stores where he was committed to hire purchase agreements for an extension on his payback dates.

After her husband's death, Willemien told me, she was flooded with demands for the payment of goods bought on hire purchase. Because she and her husband had the same bank account, all payments were automatically deducted from her account, leaving her with inadequate money to pay the mortgage bond. Overwhelmed by claims of debts that she had to pay back, and ignorant about the documentation processes behind the claims, Willemien was overtaken by despair. The lawyer whom she then approached investigated the household's

financial documents and concluded that there was nothing he could do because the hire purchase agreements had been signed by her husband. Finally, Willemien found another lawyer who worked out strategies to make it possible for her to survive financially. Though the second lawyer spent a considerable amount of time explaining to her the nature and content of the new arrangements, she still could not explain to me how he had made it possible for her to survive financially.

By entrusting public literacy practices involving financial arrangements and documentation to her husband, Willemien had restricted her role to dealing with private domain literacy practices. It was only when her husband died and could no longer fulfil his role in dealing with public domain literacy practices that Willemien was forced to find ways of dealing with these practices herself. Yet even then Willemien dealt with public domain literacy practices through an appropriate mediator (a lawyer) and did not attempt to take control herself. The shift in Willemien's position in relation to public literacy practices thus was not dependent on her acquisition of standard literacy skills but rather on her redefined authority to negotiate with the relevant mediators (as, presumably, her husband would have done if he was still alive).

I now consider the case of Ella Strydom who lived in Glenhaven, the middle class area of Bellville South. Similar to Willemien, Ella was well educated (she had completed secondary education) and she too entrusted financial and legal matters to her husband, who was manager of a chain store. Ella discovered what the implications of her trust in her husband's dealing with public domain literacy practices were when she received a court order informing her that she was divorced from her husband. She realised afterwards that the divorce had gone through because she had not looked at the content of a letter that her husband had given her to sign before she consented to his request to do so.

In her interview with me, Mrs Strydom jumped from one incident to the other in telling me about her divorce three years earlier and the tug-of-war about benefits and gratuities afterwards. Scattered throughout her story were references to documents which she did not understand or did not feel that she had any control over.

Chronologically Mrs Strydom's story started with her signing the divorce order. She explained to me that her husband had presented her with an official document and asked her to sign promptly since he needed her signature to buy a second house. By that time Mrs. Strydom said, she was aware that her husband's affections for her had changed. He had said that he needed to have a second house for times when he wanted to be on his own. He did not, however, mention a divorce. Mrs Strydom said that she made some attempt at querying his strange request, but eventually signed because she wanted to show that she trusted him.

But I mean, we argued at that time: What is it that I have to sign? Why are you in such a hurry with the papers? No, but no. And then he is so loving. The whole time he was there... It was from September, October 1991 that he felt that he wanted to be on his own and... So I asked: Are you buying a house? No, but I have an investment, he says, because he is trying to stop me. He is very proud. He would not want to stay with other people, etcetera. Because we, because he managed all our financial affairs and those things, he managed everything and I was so dependent on him. And I just believed him and trusted him, everything he told me. I can't tell you how I thought or what I felt that morning when I signed those papers<sup>22</sup>.

The next official document with which Mrs Strydom was confronted was a summons brought by a messenger of the court. Mrs Strydom by this time suspected what the content of the letter was but kept it unopened for three days before telling her husband about it. To test his response she told him that she had

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<sup>22</sup> "Maar ek meen nou, ons het geredeneer in die tyd: Wat is dit wat ek moet teken? Hoekom is jy so haastig met die papiere? Nee, maar jy nee. En dan is hy so liefdevol. Die hele tyd was hy daar... Dit was nou van daai '91, September, Oktobermaand wat hy nou so voel hy wil alleen wees en wat en wat en... Ek vra toe: Koop jy dan toe 'n huis? Nee, maar ek het 'n belegging, sê hy, omdat ek hom so keer. Hy is baie trots. Hy sal nie wil by ander mense bly nie en so aan. Omdat ons, omdat hy ook onse finansiële sake en daai goete, alles hanteer het en ek was baie afhanklik aan hom gewees. En ek het hom maar net geglo en vertrou, alles wat hy vir my gesê het. Ek kan nie vir mens sê hoe ek gedink het of wat ek gevoel het daai oggend to ek die goed geteken het nie".

torn up the letter. She described how he tried to convince her a second time to sign forms without explaining what they were:

Liezl: Did you suspect that it was divorce papers?

Ella: I expected so. So I said to him, so he said to me how can I open this letter because it is important. So I said, I only looked afterwards so I gave it to him closed. So he did not open it. He just said: Oh, it's not important, he said. So he kept it closed. So one day, one morning, he came. I was busy in the kitchen. He came to tell me, bring me those documents at the table. I had to sign them. I asked: What is this? He told me: No, I just have to sign because he has to take it back today still. So I said that I don't sign something that I haven't read. I first want to see what it is. But in general we only talked about it, since I always defended him<sup>23</sup>.

Eventually, Ella said, "he convinced me because I trusted him too much"<sup>24</sup>. When Ella wanted to retain her own lawyer, her husband convinced her that to do so would be paramount to stating that she did not trust him. "He always warned me not to follow other people's advice - I should do as he says", she continued.<sup>25</sup> The lawyer that she eventually did go to said that he was

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Liezl: "Het jy vermoed dis egskeidingsbriewe?"

Ella: " Ek het maar so vermoed. En toe sê ek vir hom, toe sê hy vir my hoe kan ek die ding opskeur want dis belangrik. Toe sê ek, toe eers daar agterna toe sê ek, toe gee ek vir hom so toe. Toe het hy dit nie oopgemaak nie. Toe sê hy net: 'O, dis, ag dis nie belangrik nie', sê hy toe nou. En toe hou hy dit toe nou. En toe eendag, toe een oggend, toe kom hy. Toe is ek daar in die kombuis besig. Toe kom sê hy vir my, bring hy vir my daar dokumente op die tafel. Ek moet die goed teken. En ek vra toe: Wat se goed is dit? Toe sê hy vir my nee, ek moet net teken want hy moet dit nou weer vandag saamvat. Toe sê ek maar ek teken nie goed wat ek nie gelees het nie. Ek wil eers sien wat is dit. Maar eintlik oor die algemeen het ons nou gepraat daarvoor maar ek het mos nou maar vir hom gekeer".

<sup>24</sup> "En hy het vir my geoorreed omdat ek hom te veel vertrou het".

<sup>25</sup> "Hy het vir my altyd gewaarsku ek moet nie ander mense se raad (volg nie) - ek moet maak soos hy sê".

powerless to change the specifications of the divorce agreement since she had already signed it.

I have signed. So I should have read the documents. I have signed them, so there is nothing to be done. According to what [the law] says, I should have signed there. And the more I say that I was ignorant, I did not know... the fact is that I did sign. So I had to accept [the divorce order]<sup>26</sup>.

The case of Ella Strydom demonstrates that literacy per se does not "empower" women, especially if disempowering understandings of gender relations remain. On two occasions Mrs Strydom signed documents which would alter the state of her life without reading the contents of the documents. She did so because she was used to allowing her husband control over all public literacy practices. By signing the forms she first agreed to the divorce her husband wanted, and then to the financial terms of the divorce as drawn up by her husband. Ella presented a mixture of explanations for neglecting to read the documents, some in accusation of her husband - he misled her about the nature of the documents, he refused to discuss the content of the documents with her - and some hinting at her own attempts to win her husband back with desperate games - refusing to open the court order and pretending to have torn it up, continuing to 'trust' her husband with official business in the face of an impending divorce.

In Ella's narrative it was the changing of her established role through the divorce which forced her to take more of an assertive role and to consult experts who could advise her on how she might better her own position. The disempowered position in which Ella was finding herself in having signed her divorce contract was not due to a lack of literacy. She was perfectly able to read the forms. Instead, Ella both chose, and was placed in, a position where she had little control over the implications of signing the divorce documents because she had assumed the role of the dependent housewife in relation to her husband (the autocratic master of the house).

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<sup>26</sup> "Ek het geteken. So ek moes die dokumente gelees het. En ek het dit geteken en so daar kan niks aan gedoen word nie. Volgens wat die dinges sê moes ek daar geteken het. Nou hoe meer ek sê ek was onkundig, ek het nie geweet nie en... die feit is dat ek het geteken. Toe het ek maar daardie dingese aanvaar".

The case studies of Willemien Bosman and Ella Strydom illustrate that even highly educated women in my research areas left public space literacy practices to their husbands. These included financial and legal arrangements which impacted on the position of their households in relation to formal institutions. Women thus limited their own literacy practices to private space activities, such as personal reading, domestic practices with limited external authority and communal practices of a similar nature. It was only when their positions as women and their relationships with their husbands changed that they started engaging with public space literacy practices.

Thus far I have focused on the way two educated women dealt with public space literacy practices. This raises the question whether women with little or no education would also take on public space literacy practices if their relationships to men changed. I have found the answer to be positive, as I will demonstrate through the case of Mita Koopman from Newtown.

Mita was a pensioner and in her seventies when I interviewed her. Mita had grown up on a farm and had never been to school. However, her separation from her husband had led her to manage public space literacy practices. Mita told me that her husband had left her for another woman about twenty years before. At that stage she still had children of her own at home and one of her daughters had just had a child. All the children and grandchildren were then dependent on Mita for support and she assumed full responsibility. She commented: "When her father left me, madam, that child [Mita's grandchild] was not even a month old. I had to struggle on my own to raise the child. With all the children I struggled like that<sup>27</sup>". Mita raised some income through working as a domestic worker. In addition, Mita applied for child welfare grants for each of her children - this despite never having been to school herself. Mita explained that "the ladies at the office" had helped her to complete the documentation involved:

Mita: Yes, they [the ladies at the office] helped me a lot. This other son [grandchild] of mine finishes this year. Then he goes to high school. So those things I also have to fix, so that he can get

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<sup>27</sup> "Toe hom pa vir my laat staan Mevrou, toe is daai kind nog nie eers 'n maand oud nie, toe moes ek so self gesukkel het om daai kind groot te maak. Almal die kinders het ek so gesukkel".

an income, ma'm.

Liezl: What kind of income?

Mita: Also a pension, a help. A help such as what I receive, ma'm. For the children.

Liezl: Who gives them the money?

Mita: I don't know - see, the Children's Affairs [Welfare Department] in East London, they send the money here, so you just go and pay [are paid]. Now you take your card and you go and pay [are paid]<sup>28</sup>.

From Mita's description it appears that, because of the degree of literacy mediation involved in public literacy practices such as this, Mita did not need to perform the literacy practices herself or even comprehend the process. All she needed to do was to manage the process by following the right channels to ensure that her children would get grants. With the assistance of the relevant mediators, Mita arranged that the money she received for her children and grandchildren was invested for them as provision for their adult lives:

And now, when those children come of age, see, I was their grandmother, so I said: No, I don't want the money, they should write it on them, and each child's amount should be invested for them until they come of age<sup>29</sup>.

After her separation from her husband, Mita became head of the household with financial responsibility for her children and grandchildren. In this role she

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Mita: Ja, het hulle vir my baie gehelp. Die ander seuntjie van my, hy maak klaar so oor 'n jaar. Dan gaan hy ook hoërskool toe. Nou daai dingetjies moet ek nou ook laat regmaak, dat hy ook nou inkomste kry, mevrou.

Liezl: Wat se inkomste?

Mita: Ook nou pensioentjie, 'n help. So 'n help soos ek ook kry. Mevrou. Vir die kinders.

Liezl: Wie gee vir julle die geld?

Mita: Ek weet mos nou nie - kyk, die kinder *affairs* van *East London*, hulle stuur mos nou die geld hierna toe, nou loop *pay* jy maar net. Nou vat jy jou kaart en loop *pay* jy.

<sup>29</sup> "En nou, daai kinders, as hulle mondig is, ek was mos hulle ou ma gewees, toe sê ek: Nee, ek wil dit nie hê nie, hulle moet dit op die kinders skryf, en iedere kind se sommetjie vir hulle belê tot hulle al drie mondig is, maar hulle kry nog eers die hulp nog".

dealt with government and financial institutions and ensured that the literacy practices involved in the process were performed with the help of mediators. Mita's lack of standard literacy thus did not hinder her from managing the public space literacy practices involved in her changed role as head of the household.

## Conclusion

I started this chapter by indicating that adult literacy policy makers would be mistaken to target women and neglect the plight of unschooled men who see their lack of public literacy as threatening their gendered roles. I also suggested that traditional literacy classes may not be the most appropriate form of intervention to empower men.

I then went on to show that women's orientation to literacy was determined not so much by their level of literacy as by the fact that their spheres of authority were limited to private life. Women engaged more than men in private space literacy practices of a personal, domestic or communal nature. But they left public sphere literacy activities, such as those involved in financial matters, to men - at times with disastrous consequences. In this context, the empowerment of women would require not simply providing them with literacy through traditional literacy classes, but a fundamental change in understandings of gendered roles. I demonstrated that women's gender roles changed when their relationships with the men in their households changed, and that women (whether literate or not) assumed responsibility for public space literacy practices when there were no men to fulfil the role.

Finally I have indicated that women's literacy practices were often interwoven with their domestic activities, and were communal and intertextual in nature. The challenge for policy makers is to find ways to move beyond the notion that literacy is an individual and insulated activity taught in a literacy classroom, to the acknowledgement and utilisation of men's and women's existing interpretation strategies interwoven with their everyday lives.

## Chapter 8

### Windows on "the illiterate": shifting between deficit and authoritative roles and literacies

I have presented my dissertation as a critique of South African adult literacy policy. Recent policy documents, I have shown, identify blacks, women and people in rural areas who have not acquired six years of formal schooling as being in a deficit position. Not only are they regarded as illiterate and therefore having a technical deficit, but policy documents also describe their "illiteracy" as a marker of their social deficit as marginalised people. Policy makers argue that these various forms of deficit attributed to adult literacy target populations can be effectively redressed through formal literacy interventions.

My counter argument is based on my ethnographic research in Newtown and Bellville South, two areas that have been targeted for literacy interventions. I have shown that people in these areas who lacked formal literacy did not necessarily have a technical deficit, since they made extensive use of what I have called embedded literacies and used a variety of literacy strategies that enabled them to engage with literacy practices. I have also argued that people targeted for literacy interventions shift between deficit positions and authoritative roles and thus cannot be described simply as consistently marginal or having social deficits. Everyday contextual shifts in people's orientations to literacy, I have furthermore shown, are a result of changes in structural location and discursive shifts. The effect of technical literacy interventions is a consequence of, rather than a precursor to shifts in people's social positions.

In this final chapter I present my concluding arguments and show how they challenge existing policy understandings of people targeted for literacy interventions. I also indicate how my research findings set up a dialogue

with existing research on adult literacy interventions, and what my work's particular contribution is to the New Literacy Studies which is the theoretical framework in which it is placed.

1. Literacy without formal acquisition: the use of embedded literacies and literacy interpretation strategies.

Adult literacy policy in South Africa is based on an understanding that a person is only literate if he/she has completed six years of formal schooling. The definition allows for recognition of standard literacy only as obtained through formal schooling. Scholars have argued that the almost exclusive, and largely uncritical valorisation of standard literacy by dominant institutions (such as the state) has led to a disregard for other codes and forms of literacy, such as those used by people on the social margins of society (Gee 1990:138, Montgomery 1989:74). Yet the existence of forms of literacy which differ from standard, schooled literacy has been indicated in various studies (Scribner and Cole 1981, Street 1984, Prinsloo and Breier 1996). As described in chapter 2, non-standard forms of literacy are often embedded in social practices and not recognisable as standard literacy. Researchers who have explored non-standard literacies have focused on literacy practices and literacy events rather than on literacy as an autonomous technology.

My own contribution to the understanding of other (non-standard) literacies has been to develop the concept of "*embedded literacies*", which I define as *literacies which are embedded in local discourses and everyday practice, the use of which requires contextual interpretation skills rather than decontextualised literacy skills*. I have shown that people in my research areas who lacked standard literacy were often masters in the use of embedded literacies. Standard literacy requires the employment of encoding and decoding strategies that are based on an abstracted and decontextualised understanding of written texts. The encoding and decoding of embedded literacies is dependent on the reader's or writer's understanding of the social context within which literacy events take place. Embedded literacies are not based on linear, analytical reading and writing of texts, as standard literacies are. Instead they involve a number of other encoding and decoding techniques.

The first aspect of embedded literacies that I have discussed is the value of the text as object. I have shown that, particularly in religious contexts, people regarded texts as symbolic embodiments of value. The handling of the Bible or other religious texts had primary signifying value during religious events I attended; often the actual reading of the text was of secondary importance. Previous studies have described the use of written documents as objects for ritual purposes (Thorold 1992, Bledsoe and Robey 1986). Using examples such as the significance of Bibles in church services, I suggest that the valorisation of texts, as objects, is a significant element of embedded literacies that is not limited to ritual practices but occurs also in everyday life situations.

A second aspect of embedded literacies is that they commonly involve the use of analogical, rather than linear, interpretation techniques. The text is interpreted through symbolical or allegorical associations. Lay preachers, for example, come to contextually relevant interpretations of the Bible by drawing analogies between Biblical narratives and narratives that reflect the experiences of people in the congregation.

The use of narrative as a popular encoding-and decoding strategy is a third aspect of embedded literacies. Narrative association enables people to interpret written texts through intertextual reference to their own personal experiences and narratives. The reverse also holds. I have shown how Rastafarians draw on their interpretation of the Bible as intertext that legitimises their understanding of their personal social identities as Rastafarians.

A related aspect of embedded literacies is the use of connotation. Street cultures, in particular, establish the value of texts they write on walls (graffiti) or bodies (tattoos) through connotation. People in a neighbourhood will see gang names written on a wall in their territory and will thereby recall connotations with the activities of their specific gang. The (minimal) texts written on the walls as graffiti thus call up powerful unwritten texts, based on experience, which people use in interpreting the meaning of the written words.

Finally, embedded literacies are often expressions in acts of performance. Lay

preachers decode the Bible through their performance of the narrative described in the text. It is this performance, rather than the text itself, which conveys the message to their congregations. Similarly, gangsters give meaning to texts through performances such as the inscription of bodies and the marking or unmarking of territories through gang fights.

The existence and use of embedded literacies challenge policy makers' assumptions that lacking standard literacy renders people unable to deal with technical literacy tasks. I have shown that people in my research areas who had not formally acquired standard literacy not only dealt with literacy practices by using embedded literacies, but that they also had a range of strategies through which they engaged with standard literacy practices.

I have shown that people who have not obtained standard literacy formally may have acquired standard literacy through other strategies. I described a number of cases where people in my research areas acquired standard literacy informally, often through being taught by a parent. Since these people do not have formal schooled qualifications, the statistics used by policy makers identify them as "illiterate".

An important strategy which I found people use to deal with standard literacy practices was literacy mediation. I have described people's widespread use of literacy mediation in dealing with literacy practices of various institutions such as the Department of Welfare, shops and burial societies. I have also analyzed the forms of code- and mode switching which literacy mediators engaged in on behalf of others. Developing Baynham's (1993) description of code-and mode switching practices by literacy mediators, I have shown that mediators' code- and mode switching, between local spoken (or elliptically written) and dominant written discourses, was particularly common in Newtown. Policy makers state that people in "rural" areas (such as Newtown, at least in policy terms) have a greater literacy deficit than people in "urban" areas (such as Bellville South). I have shown that the prevalence of literacy mediation in Newtown enabled people there to deal with standard literacy practices more easily than did people in Bellville South where literacy mediation possibilities were more limited. My conclusion is that an understanding of literacy "need" in areas targeted for literacy intervention requires investigations into the social literacy strategies, such as literacy

mediation, which are used in the area, and not merely a statistical determination of individual literacy levels.

Another strategy which women in particular used was to engage in literacy practices *communally* rather than individually. In doing so I argued that this provided a strategy to enable even those with no standard literacy to participate in the decoding of the meaning of written texts. During such communal literacy practices, as also in those of individuals, people often made use of *intertextual referencing* as a literacy interpretation strategy. I have argued that, in interpreting a written text, people draw on their reading of other texts as well as narratives they have been exposed to through listening to the radio, television or neighbourhood gossip, or through personal experience. The use of intertextuality for the interpretation of written texts thus demonstrates "the overlap and interaction of oral and literate modes rather than stressing a "great divide" [between oral and written modes of communication]" (Street 1984:5). My description of people's use of intertextuality contributes to what Gee (1990) calls the New Literacy studies, offering an understanding of the ways in which people switch between modes and codes of communication in interpreting written texts.

In summary, people I interviewed who had not obtained six years of formal schooling did not suffer from a generalisable literacy deficit. They used embedded literacies and employed literacy interpretation strategies through which they engaged in the literacy practices which they encountered in their daily lives. Policy that builds on assumptions that people without six years of formal schooling are excluded from all literacy practices and events, and disempowered as a result, is therefore misplaced.

## **2. The deficit and authoritative roles of people in adult literacy target populations**

As I argue in chapter 1, policy attributes not only a technical deficit position to people who have not formally acquired standard literacy. It also implies that lacking standard literacy is an indicator of a more general social deficit.

The argument about the deficit position of illiterates has been supported in

South African policy discourse, and in international intervention approaches (such as that of UNESCO) by the drive to "Meet Basic Needs", with literacy seen as one such basic need. Policy makers/documents furthermore regard "illiteracy" as indicating a lack in a range of other basic needs amongst people targeted for literacy intervention. Three social categories in South Africa that have been seen as having been particularly marginalised comprise black people, women and people in rural areas. People who fall into any or all of these categories are thus particular targets for various development interventions, literacy being one. Indeed, policy makers in the literacy arena argue that providing literacy training is a tangible, and effective, way of redressing way of redressing the social deficit of people classified as belonging to these three categories. I have shown that policy statements imply that literacy provision will address the symbolic differences between black and white, will provide cultural capital to women and will produce a strategic thrust towards the empowerment of people in rural areas.

My research in Newtown and Bellville South has shown, however, that people classified as part of literacy target populations have complex social identities rather than generalisable deficit ones. I have argued that the deficit roles people assume in relation to literacy change as a result of discursive or social shifts, such as those shifts involved in moving from a farm to a metropolitan area, rather than through literacy interventions.

As indicated earlier, I found that people in Newtown and Bellville South who lacked standard literacy at times assumed deficit roles and at other times occupied authoritative roles that were not adversely affected by their "illiteracy". People in my research areas often assumed deficit roles when participating in dominant institutional practices such as those related to schooling or the state. I showed how the literacy classroom, representing an institution of formal schooling, created a space within which a learner became helpless and dependent. I described how people assumed the roles of passive recipients in dealing with state practices such as pension pay-outs and in making application for welfare grants. This passivity relative to state institutions reflects their perception of the power imbalances between themselves, as state subjects, and the state itself as represented by its agents and local institutional structures.

I have argued that people assumed deficit roles as a result of their structural marginality and not in the first place because they lack literacy. My findings thus confirm Friedman's (1992:362) argument that the "underdeveloped" (as development target populations are often described) adopt deficit identities because it allows them access to state resources. I have found that people in Newtown and Bellville South recognise the value of such a strategy. Pensioners, for instance, preferred to continue their dependence on clerks who performed state literacy practices for them, even if they are able to perform the practices for themselves. The reason is that they recognised the authority which these clerks have as representatives of the Department of Welfare in brokering their requests as state subjects. Particularly under the apartheid government, coloured state subjects had structurally marginal positions which made their chances of acquiring state resources without mediation by clerks even weaker than those of white state subjects. That this has continued in the post-apartheid era reflects a continuing sense of marginality and powerlessness vis a vis the state.

In adopting deficit roles people in Newtown and Bellville South were thus positioning themselves strategically in relation to dominant institutions. I argue that people will abandon the deficit roles they presently adopt in relation to adult literacy only when dominant patriarchal institutions change in ways that alter these people's *daily experience* of their structural marginality.

The same people who assumed such deficit positions in relation to the state had authoritative roles in other contexts in many of which they also dealt confidently with literacy practices. Outside of the literacy classroom, a literacy learner became a church sister, mother, grandmother and neighbour who dealt confidently with all the literacy practices she had to perform in these roles. The same people who presented themselves as "illiterate" in literacy classrooms and as dependent state subjects in relation to state clerks took the lead in neighbourhood discussions of books, newspaper articles, magazines and various other texts.

One of my contributions to the New Literacy Studies and to policy understandings is to point out that people targeted for literacy interventions have multiple social identities and that their orientations to literacy are

not fixed by the "community" to which they are ascribed as belonging. The deficit identities which literacy target populations assume are not their only social roles.

I have shown that, in local discursive contexts such as the practices of religious groups and street cultures, lacking standard literacy does not affect the locally authoritative positions which people occupy in roles such as that of the lay preacher or the gangster. In some cases, lacking standard literacy even reinforces people's authority: for instance an "illiterate" lay preacher is regarded as receiving his message directly from God, without the interference of his own interpretation through reading.

The local authoritative positions which people in literacy target populations occupied were often completely autonomous of their ability to read or write. Former farm labourers, for instance, argued that their local knowledge about farm practices was far more important than their levels of literacy on the farm.

This point leads me to my final argument, namely that people's orientations to literacy shift as their social and discursive positions change. I present this argument against the policy assumption that literacy interventions will lead to the "empowerment" and "development" of adult literacy target populations.

The case of farm workers moving to urban areas demonstrates the argument. I have shown how people who move from farms to urban areas come to see themselves as lacking literacy as a result of the shift. The reason, I have argued, is that farm workers' move to urban contexts such as that of Bellville South, introduces them to urban discourses which place high value on standard literacy practices. In assuming an urban identity, the ex-farm worker may enjoy the benefits of urban living (the example I used was the opportunity to buy a car in the city). People in the city operate however with different trust relationships and literacy mediation patterns from those of farms and small towns, with the result that the farm worker who moves to the city develops a need to acquire standard literacy. Such a structural change in his position motivates him to attend, and persist at, literacy class.

Another example of the relationship between structural change and changing orientations to literacy comes from situations in which women's gender roles shift. I have shown that women limited their engagement with literacy to performing domestic literacy practices and private space literacy practices such as reading novels in their homes or with friends in the neighbourhood. Women told me that they entrusted public space literacy practices, such as dealing with important financial and legal documents, to their husbands. This was so even where the women had higher education qualifications than their men. However, when these women separated from their husbands, their roles changed and they started to engage with these public space literacy practices themselves. The change in orientation to literacy was a result of the change in their social positions and not of literacy interventions. My point is that recognising how people's orientations to literacy shift as their social positions change provides an additional perspective to strengthen the New Literacy Studies.

Discursive shifts can occur when people's structural positions change due to personal events such as separation from a partner or moving from a farm to the city. The challenge to policy makers and development workers is to address the needs for institutional change which are manifested when people experience change in their structural positions. Instead of presenting literacy as a "cure-all" for social deficit, policy makers need to recognise and address the complexity of institutional power relationships which contribute to the structural marginality of people targeted for adult literacy interventions. The orientations to literacy of people who are coloured, live in rural areas and are women are likely to change, I suggest, as they experience change in their structural positions in relation to dominant patriarchal institutions. Until that occurs, offers of literacy training will be taken up by only a few of those targeted, and well-intended drives to empower through, rather than alongside, literacy training will continue to be misplaced.

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# Appendix 1

## Biographical details: interviewees

### Notes on columns

\* A star next to the number of the interviewee indicates that additional information is given at the end.

**Names:** Where confidentiality was required, or where interviewees presented them, pseudonyms were used.

**P:** This column indicates the pages in the thesis where the person is referred to.

**Std:** Standard of education. First two years of formal schooling: Sub A and B. Third to twelfth year of schooling: Standard (Std) 1 - 10. T = Tertiary education

**Lit:** Literacy level. Most of the interviewees in Newtown had indicated on a questionnaire that they either wanted to attend basic literacy classes (level 1) or functional literacy classes (level 2); the latter involving filling in forms. In Bellville South, the more advanced literacy learners are indicated as being on level 2. NI = Not interested, I = Interested

**Born:** Place where the interviewee was born.

\* Farm EC/OFS/WC = Born on a farm in the Eastern Cape (EC)/ Orange Free State (OFS)/Western Cape (WC)

\* PE = Port Elizabeth, BS = Bellville South

**Marital:** Marital status of the interviewee.

\* Div: "Divorced" - could mean separated from partner or formally divorced.

\* Mar: "Married" - could likewise refer to a formal or informal relationship between partners. Numbers indicated the person to whom the interviewee is married, eg. Margaret Oria Married 24 = Margaret Oria was married to Stone Oria (nr 24).

\* When there are still children or grandchildren in the home, this is indicated as "Chn"/"Gchn".

\* S: Single

\* Wid: Widowed

\* M: Mother - M: 23 = nr 23 is the mother of the interviewee. \* Similarly Ch (child) 9 = nr 9 is the child of the interviewee.

\* BiL: Brother in Law, Sil: Son in law

**Occupation:** Unempl. = Unemployed. Pension: Draws disability, old age, child welfare or any other kind of pension.

**Age:** e = estimate. It was often not possible to ascertain the exact age of the interviewee at the time of the interview.

## Newtown

Interviewees who presented themselves as "illiterate"  
or wished to attend literacy classes

	Name	P	Std	Lit	Born	Marital	Occup.	Are	Age
1	Angeline Wentzel		5	2	Newtown	Div. Chdn	Catco worker	S	e 35
2	Christina Toring	101	-	1	Farm EC	Mar. Chn	Pension	ON	e 47
3	Cathy Tromp		6	2	Newtown	Mar. Chd	Unempl	OT	30
4	Denise Blom	126	8	2	Newtown	S	Unempl	S	20
5	Elizabeth Kani	109	4	2	Newtown	Mar. Chn	Pension	LM	29
6	Ernie Plaatjie		-	1	Farm EC	Div.	Unempl	S	e 52
7	Ester Columny		-	1	Farm OFS	Mar. Chn	Cleaner	S	e 34
8	Florence Thlobo		3	2	Bedford	Div. Chn	Unempl	OT	e 35
9	Francis Strydom	171	1	2	Newtown	Div. Chn	Pension	ON	42
10	Henry Spogter	233	4	2	Newtown	S M:24	Builder	ON	31
11	Jan Maarman	234 257	-	1	Farm EC	Mar.	Pension	S	e 73
12	Julia Wentzel	175	B	1	Farm OFS	Wid.	Catco	ON	e 53
13	Katrien Arends		6	2	Newtown	Wid. GChd	Unempl	S	e 45
14	Lena Orai	176	-	1	Farm EC	Wid.	Pension	ON	42
15	Margaret Oria		5	2	Farm EC	Mar. 25	Pension	S	51
16	Margaret Spogter	123 217	5	2	Farm EC	Wid.	Domestic	OT	e 55
17	Margaret Swart		-	NI	Newtown	Wid.	Pension	OT	51
18	Marie Klein		5	2	PE	Mar. Chn	Catco	OT	43

	Name	P	Std	Lit	Born	Marital	Occup.	Are	Age
19	Mina Pieterse	181 201	-	1	Farm EC	Wid. Gcd	Pension	S	e 65
20	Mita Koopman	262	-	1	Graaff Rheinet	Div. Gcd	Pension	OT	e 75
21	Olivia Mapaling	126	10	2	Graaff Rheinet	S	Sewing	S	20
22	Piet Blom	233	-	NI	Farm EC	Mar. Chd	Municipal	S	e 55
23	Rita Swart		-	1	Farm EC	Mar.	Pension	OT	e 55
24	Rita Spogter	174 176 181	-	1	Farm EC	Wid. Chd1 0	Pension	OT	e 55
25	Stone Oria	174	-	1	Farm EC	Mar. 15	Pension	S	52

Other interviewees from Newtown

	Name	P	Std	Born	Marital	Are	Occup	Age
26	Crissie Cristiaans		3	Farm EC	Mar. Chn M.15	S	Pension	31
27	Cristien Francis		5	Newtown	Div. Chn	S	Unempl	e50
28 *	David Raad	66 123	T	PE	Mar.29 Chn	FB	Reverent	e61
29	David Wessel	95	10	Graaf Rheinet	Mar. Chd	ON	Nurse	e45
30 *	Eleanor Raad	66 123	T	PE	Mar.28 Chn	FB	Womens leader	e60
31	Ernie Phillis	151	e3	Newtown	Mar.35	S	Unempl	e45
32 *	Gert Groepe		T	Newtown	Wid. Chd	LM	Head master	e60
33	Hermanus Cramford		T	Fort Beaufort	Mar. Chd 45	ON	Under taker	e60
34	Jan Mini	112	3	Newtown	S	ON	Pension	e40
35	Jeanne Adriaans	123 126	T	Newtown	Mar. M:42	FB	Teacher	e35
36 *	Johannes Phillis		e6	Farm EC	Mar: 30	S	Pension	e60
37 *	Johnnie Scheepers		e8	Newtown	Mar. Chn	ON	Unempl	e45
38 *	Lorraine Bantom		T	Cape Town	Mar: 38 Chd	HV	Nurse	e38
39	Manie Bantom		T	Cape Town	Mar: 37 Chd	HV	Own shop	e45
40 *	Maria Jacobs	62 81 92	10	Farm	Wid. GChn	ON	Pension	e70
41	Maria Groepe		T	Newtown	Mar. Chd, F:31	LM	Bank Clerk	e28
42	Maria Spogter		9	Newtown	S, M:16	OT	Pre primary teacher	e35
43	Marie Adriaans	120	10	Newtown	Mar. Chd:34	ON	Owens cafe	e45

	Name	P	Std	Born	Marital	Are	Occup	Age
44 *	Marilyn Toring	197 256	5	Newtown	Mar. Chd	ON	Burial Society	e38
45	Nadine Bodie		8	Newtown	S	S	Unempl	20
46	Nicolas Cramford	65 76	T	Newtown	Mar. F:32	FB	Teacher	e40
47	Petrus Fredriks		T	Newtown	Mar. Chd	HV	Unempl. Land Sureyor	e50
48	Peet Williams		T	Newtown	Mar. Chd	ON	Cafe owner	e50
49 *	Pieter Wentzel		10	Newtown	Mar. Chn	ON	Nurse	e45
50	Teuns Adriaans	217	T	Newtown	Mar: 42 Chd: 34	ON	Head Master	e42
51	Veronica Arends		6	Newtown	Marr. Chd	S	Unempl	e45

## Bellville South

Interviewees in Bellville South who regarded themselves as "illiterate" or were attending literacy classes

	Name	P	Std	Lit	Born	Marital	Occup	Are	Age
52	Annie Albani		-	1	Farm WC	Wid. GChn	Domes ticwork	USA	e65
53	Christia n Jantjies	100 193	-	NI	Farm WC	Mar. Chd: 74	Pension	USA	e65
54	Daisy Fredriks	91 139 142 172 177 185	-	1	Farm Ceres	Mar. Chd:	Domes ticwork	USA	57
55	Jan Bodie	178 181	-	NI	Farm WC	Wid. Gchn	Pension	USA	e63
56	Japie Krisjan	175 229	-	1	Farm WC	Mar. Chn	Munisi palwork	SW	47
57	Katy Kruger		-	NI	Farm WC	Wid. Chd	Pension	TW	60
58	Koekie Jansen		A	1	Farm WC	Mar. Chn	Tea lady	SW	e35
59	Makulu Pieterse	89 104 179	2	NI	Farm WC	Wid. Chd	Pension	TW	68
60	Onka Balie	243 249	3	1	BS	S M:87	Unempl	SW	25
61	Ousie Visser		A	NI	Farm WC	Mar. Chd:83	Unempl	USA	e47
62	Ousus Toring	192 195	-	NI	Farm WC	Wid.	Pension	SW	e75
63	Petrus April	179 187 192 195 213 222 233	-	1	Farm WC	Wid. Chd	Mucipal worker	SW	e40
64	Peet Erasmus		-	NI	Farm WC	Mar.	Factory worker	TW	e40

	Name	P	Std	Lit	Born	Marital	Occup	Are	Age
65	Rachel McKay	140	1	I	Farm WC	Mar.	Unempl	SW	e40
66	Rietjie Jansen	98 115 243	-	1	Farm WC	Wid. Chd:84	Pension	SD	78
67	Ronel Balie		-	2	Farm WC	Div. chd	Factory worker	USA	e40
68	Ria - Tromp	169 182 192 251	3	2	Farm WC	Wid. Child	Pension	SW	80
69	Rosa Amore	150 185 188 193 195	-	NI	Farm WC	Wid.	Pension	SW	e55
70	Tillie Dennis	191 195 207 237 242 247	3	2	Farm WC	Mar. GChd	Pension	USA	e40
71	Tolla Tromp	180	-	1	Farm WC	S	Domes ticwork	USA	e36
72	Victoria Toring	183	-	NI	Farm WC	Widow Gchdn	Pension	SW	e70

Other interviewees from Bellville South

	Name	P	Std	Born	Marital	Are	Occup	Age
73	"Achmat"	165 168	e6	BS	S	ST	Gangster	e30
74*	Anna Bailey		e8	BS	Mar. Chdn	USA	Unempl	e40
75	Anna Smal	140 158 161 164	e8	PE	Mar: 82 Chn	TW	Unempl	e45
76	Antoinette Jantjies		10	BS	Div. Chdn F:52	USA	Own shop	e40
77	Anthony Daniels		10	BS	S	USA	Head: ANC BS	e23

	Name	P	Std	Born	Marital	Are	Occup	Age
78	Arthur Jacobs		T	Cape Flats	Mar. Chdn	G	Librarian BS	e45
79	Blikkies McKensie	245	6	BS	Mar. Chdn SiL: 90	TW	Head: Rugby club	e45
80*	Ella Strydom	258	10	BS	Div. Chdn	G	Unempl	e40
81	Ellis - Vermaak	109 178 184	5	Farm WC	Wid. GChn	TW	Pension	e60
82	Frederik Tromp		10	BS	Div. M:67	SW	Unempl	e35
83	Henrik Bester		10	Cape Flats	Mar: 93Chn	SW	Factory worker	e47
84	Jaap Smal	140	-	Cape Flats	Mar: 73 Chn	TW	Factory worker	e47
85	Jacobus Visser		T	BS	S. M:60	USA	Teacher	e28
86	Kelvyn Jansen		8	BS	S. M:65	SD	Unempl	e28
87	Magrieta Fourie		10	Calvinia	Mar. Chn	TW	Factory worker	e40
88	Maria Botha		10	George	Mar. Chn	ON	Unempl	e35
89*	Miems Balie	239 250	4	Genaden dal	Div. chd:59	SW	Unempl	e40
90*	Nina Jeppe		10	Cape Flats	Wid. chn	TW	Unempl	e50
91*	Nova McDonald	236	e6	Durban ville	Mar. chn BiL:77	TW	Unempl	e40
92	Ronel Dammert	117	10	PE	Wid. Gchn	G	Pension	e65
93*	Sofia Adams	69 92	e6	Durban ville	Div. Chn	USA	Unempl	e45
94	Susan Bester		10	Cape Flats	Mar: 81 Chn	SW	Unempl	e45
95	Stella April	79 107 116	T	Cape Flats	Mar. Chn	G	School principal	e55
96*	Suzie Eendrag	119	2	Caledon	S.	ON	Communit ywork	e35

	Name	P	Std	Born	Marital	Are	Occup	Age
97*	Trudie Verbeek	247	e4	BS	Div. Chn	USA	Unempl	e35
98*	Vernie van Schoor		e8	BS	Mar. Chn	ON	Unempl	e55
99*	Willemien Viljoen	257 262	T	Farm WC	Wid. Chn	ON	Teacher	e45
100*	Welma Brink		T	Carnarvon	Div. Chn	ST	Teacher	e45
101	Willem Jeppe	116	126	Cape Flats	Married Chn	TW	Unempl	e50
102	Wilma Jeppe	116 137	10	BS	Div. Chn	TW	Unempl	e35
103	Wouter Fester	78	T	BS	Married Chn	GH	Principa l	e50

## **Additional information**

### Newtown

- (28) David Raad: Reverend of the Congregational Church
- (30) Eleanor Raad: His wife, leader of the women's league of the Congregational Church
- (32) Gert Groepe: Chairperson of the Newtown Management Committee
- (36) Johannes Phillis: Leader in the Independent Order of True Templers, a religious organisation against alcoholism.
- (37) Johnnie Scheepers: Chairperson of a rugby club and the literacy project, vice chairperson of the Newtown Democratic Forum, opposition of the Management Committee.
- (38) Lorraine Bantom: Literacy teacher
- (40) Mrs Maria Jacobs: One of the oldest residents of Newtown.
- (44) Marilyn Toring: Literacy teacher, secretary of the burial society.
- (49) Pieter Wentzel: Chairperson of a rugby club, Vice Chairperson of the literacy committee.

### Bellville South

- (74) Anna Bailey: Her son was murdered in a gang attack.

(80) Ella Strydom: Her husband deceived her into getting a divorce.

(89) Nellie Balie: She is seen as a deviant mother since she often left home while her children were small.

(90) Nina Jeppe: Involved in Bellville Ratepayers Association.

(92) Nova McDonald: Her husband is a drug addict.

(91) Sofia Adams: Her son was murdered in a gang attack.

(96) Suzie Eendrag: She coordinates the Bellville Community Project which runs the literacy class.

(97) Trudie Verbeek: Her brother accidentally murdered her mother.

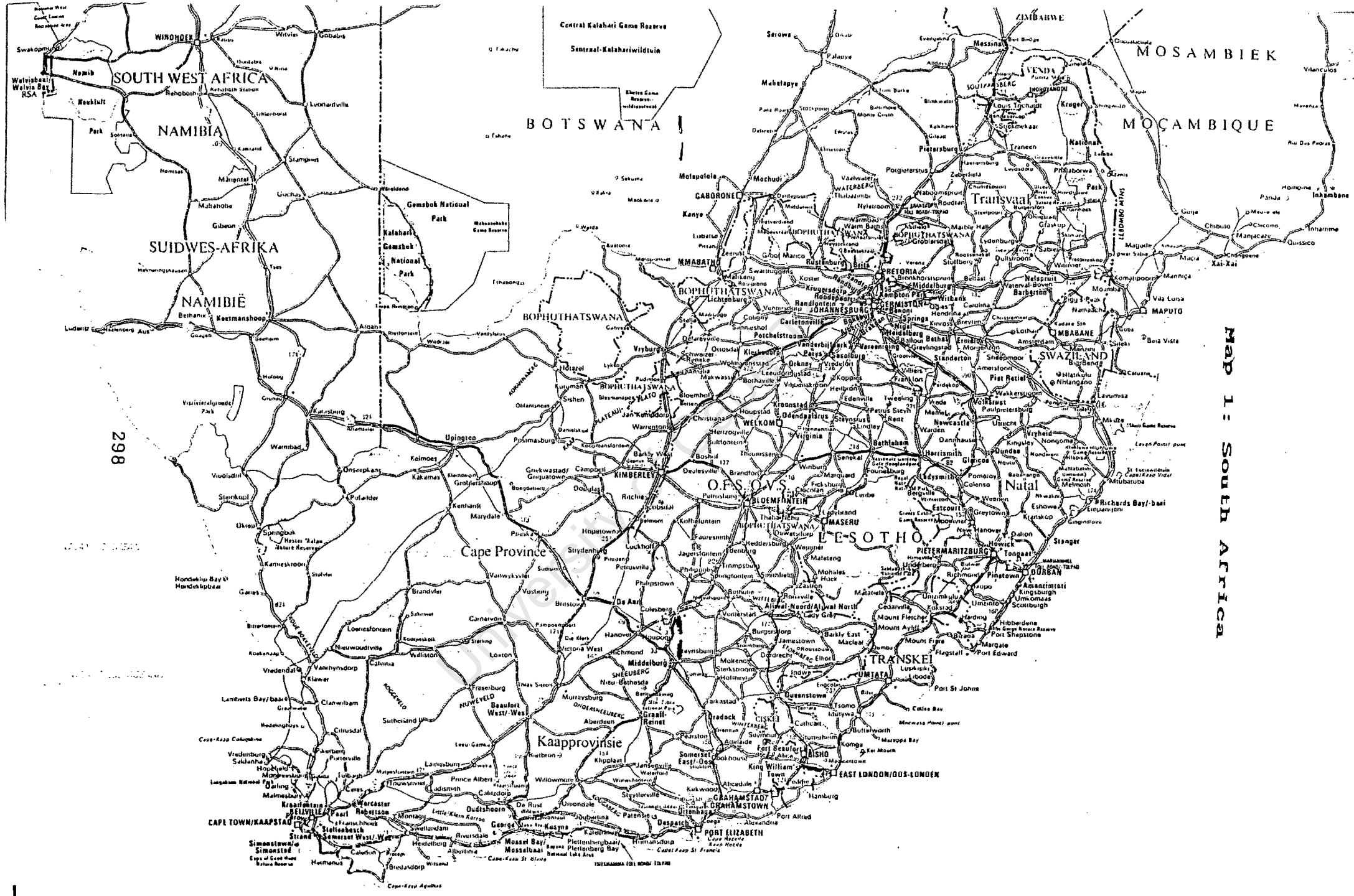
(99) Willemien Viljoen: She was left penniless at the death of her husband.

(100) Welma Brink: She is a fanatic reader.

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## **Appendix 2: Maps**

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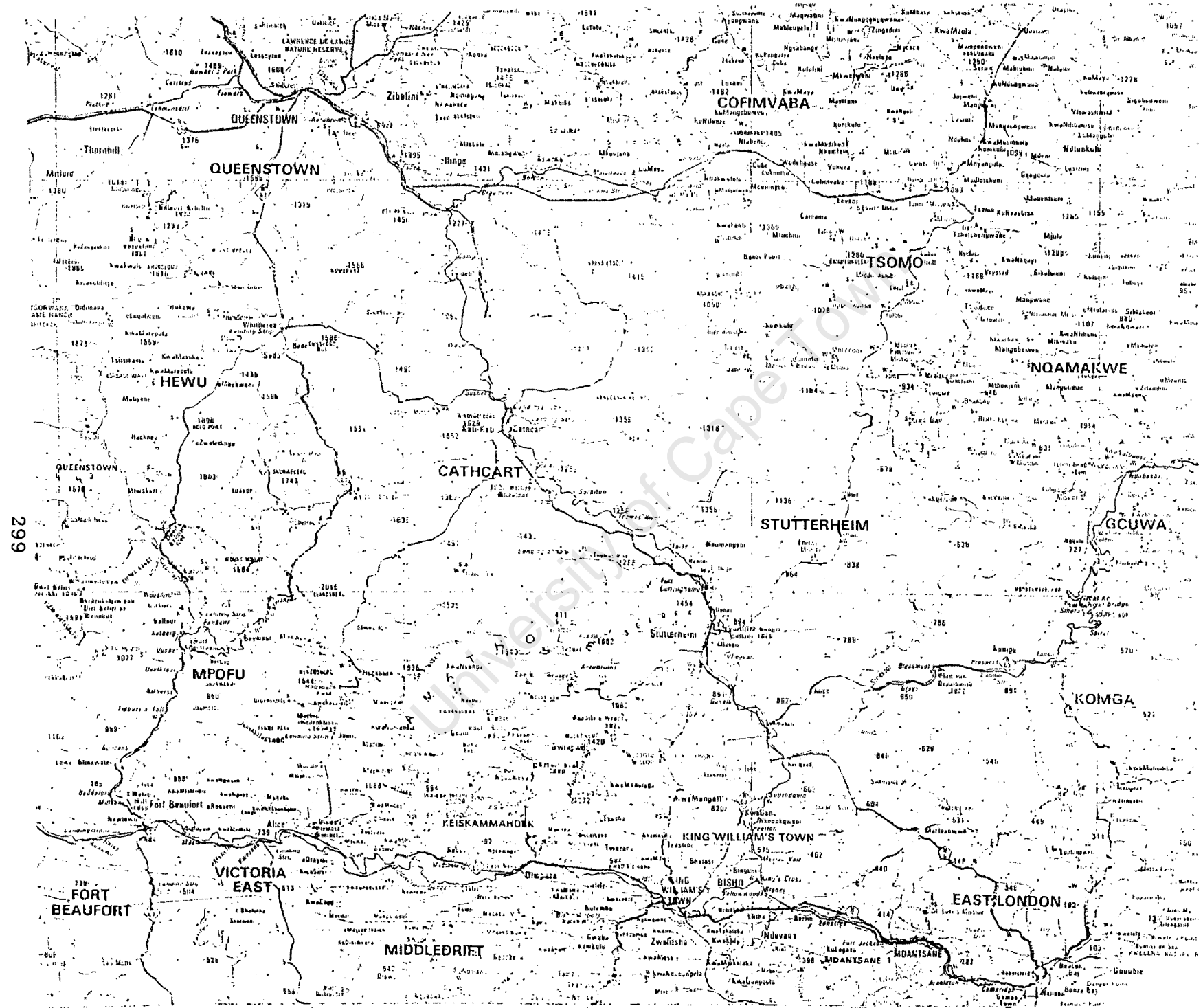


Map 1: SOUTH AFRICA

298

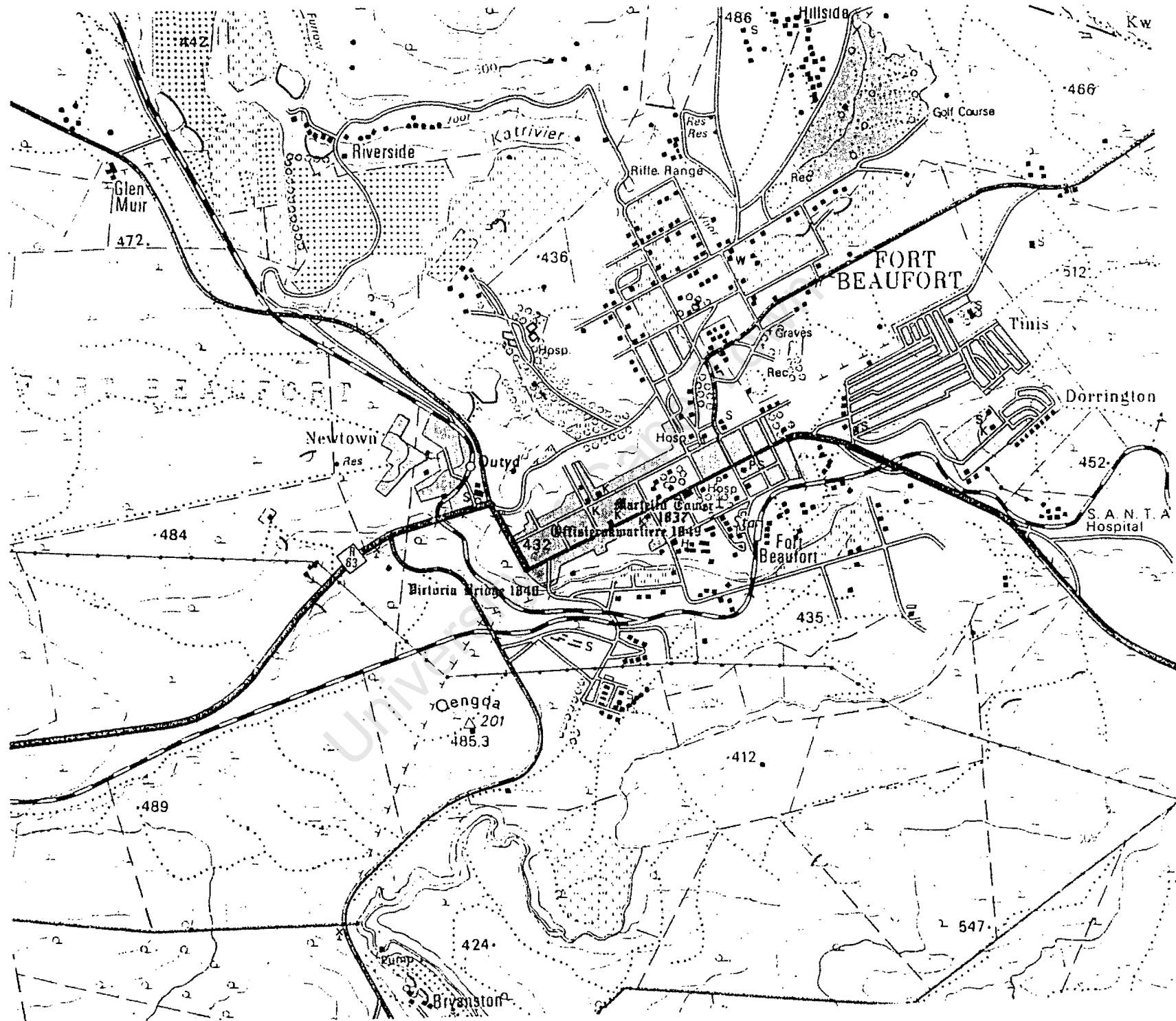
MAP 2: Eastern Cape  
(Fort Beaufort to East London)

3126 Queenstown 1994. Government Printer: Pretoria



299

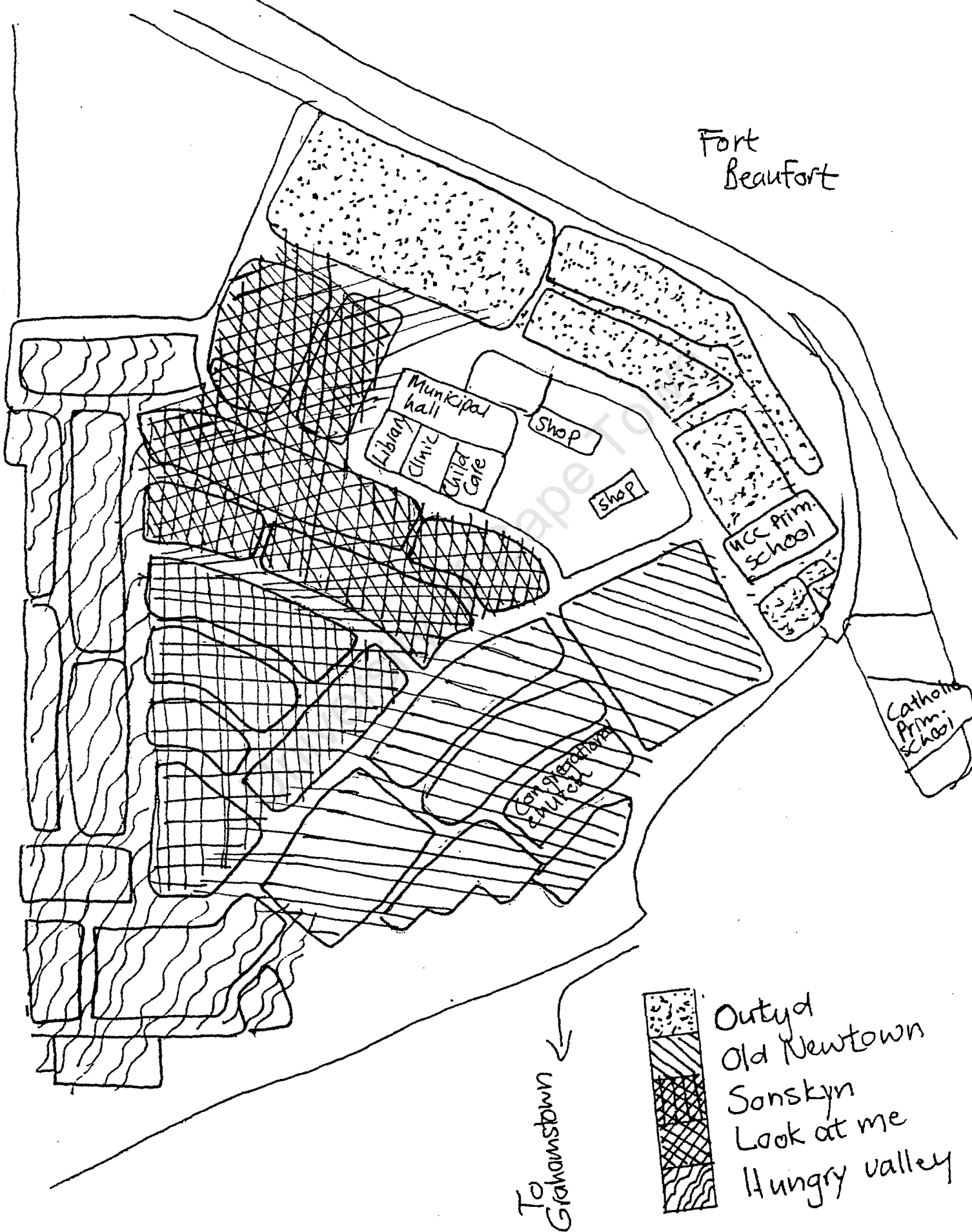
300



Map 3: Fort Beaufort  
322DC Fort Beaufort Second Edition 1979. Government Printer: Pretoria



Map 5: Local map of Newtown



Fort Beaufort

Municipal hall  
Library  
Clinic  
Child Care  
Shop  
Shop

MCC Prim. School

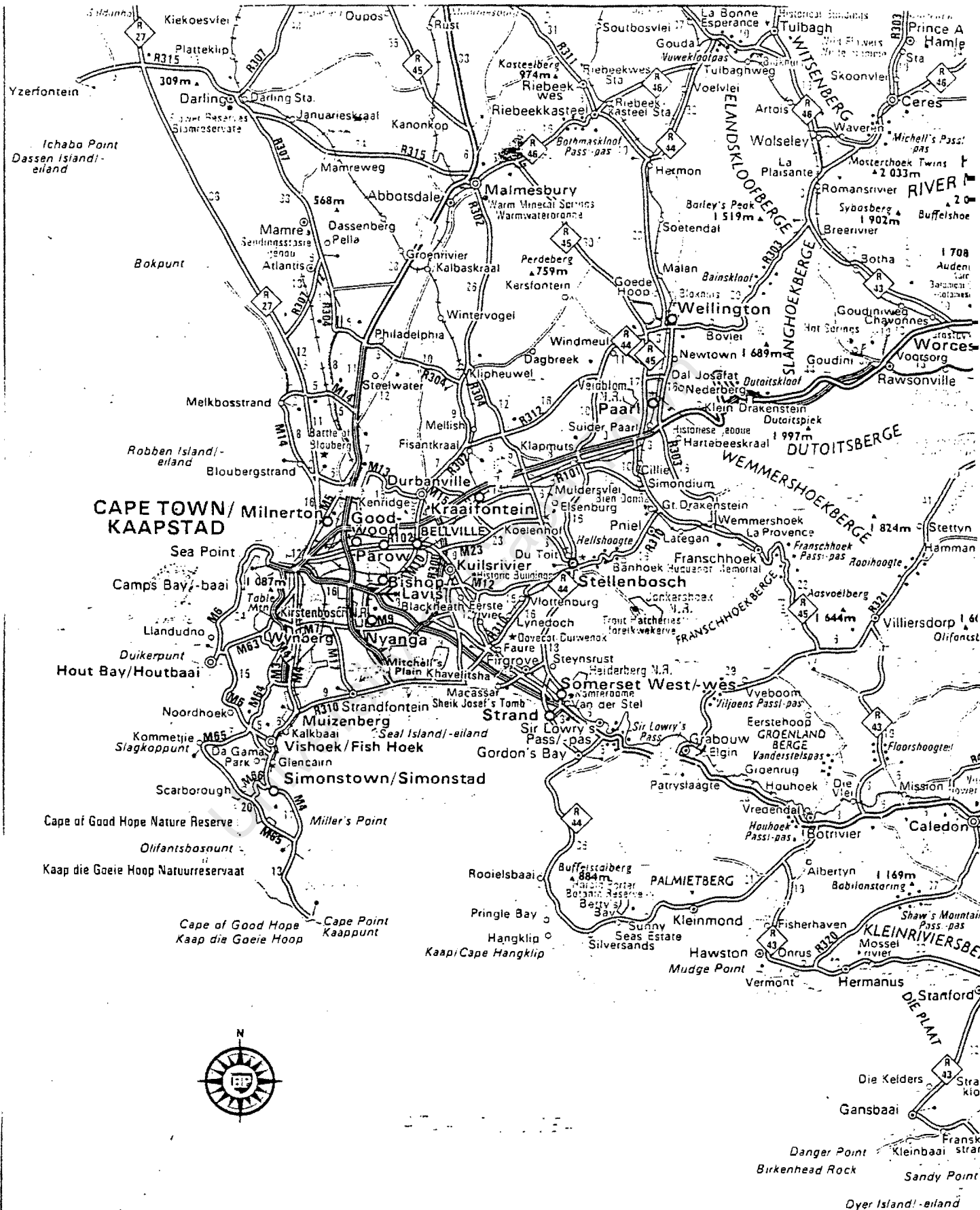
Catholic Prim. School

St. Ignace's Church

To Grahamstown

Outyd  
Old Newtown  
Sonskyn  
Look at me  
Hungry valley

**Map 6: Cape Peninsula and Western Cape Province**

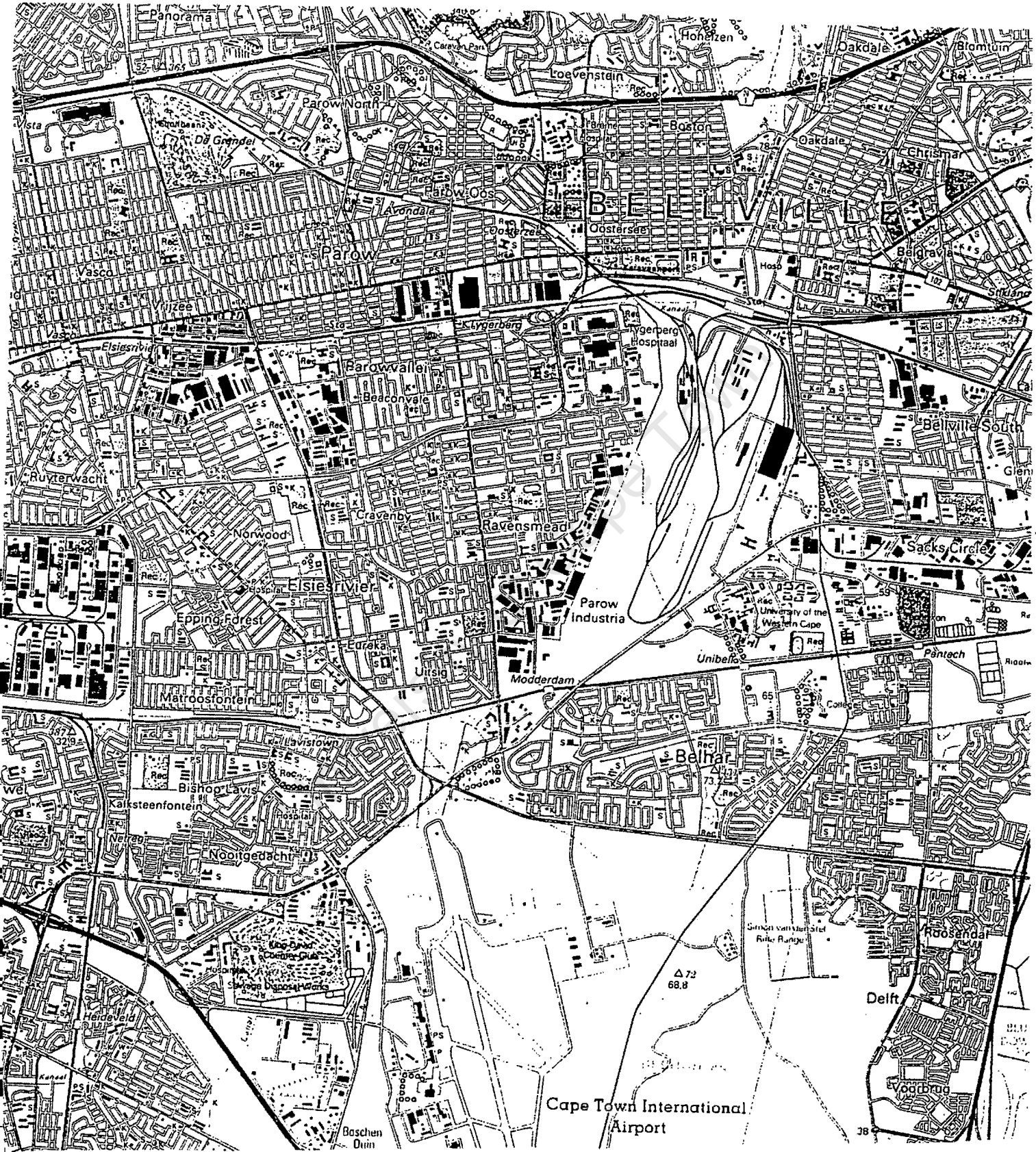


**CAPE PENINSULA AND WESTERN CAPE PROVINCE  
KAAPSE SKIEREILAND EN WESTELIKE KAAPPROVINSIE**

SCALE 1:700 000 SKAAL  
Kilometres 0 10 20 30 40 Kilometer

Map 7: Bellville

3318C Bellville Seventh edition 1993. Government Printer: Pretoria





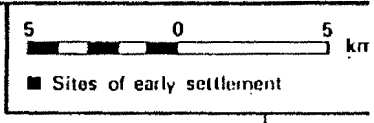


GT WINTERBERG

26° 30'

26° 45'

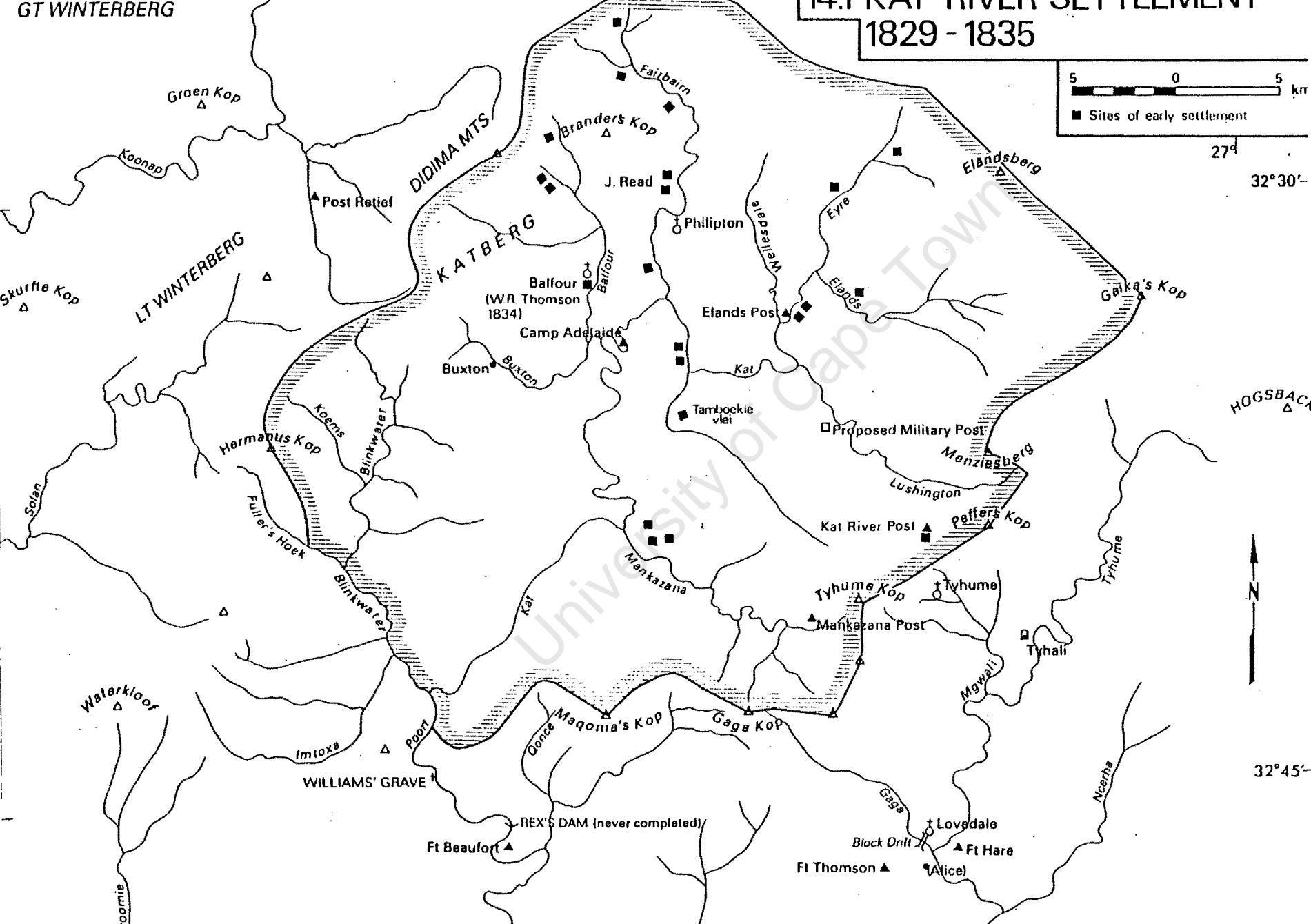
# 14.1 KAT RIVER SETTLEMENT 1829 - 1835



27°

32° 30'

MAP 10: KAT RIVER SETTLEMENT  
J.S. Bergh, J.C. Visagie, 1985. *The Eastern Cape Frontier Zone 1660 - 1880.*  
Butterworths: Durban: 44.



32° 45'

## Appendix 3: Diagrams

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Diagram 1: The literacy classroom

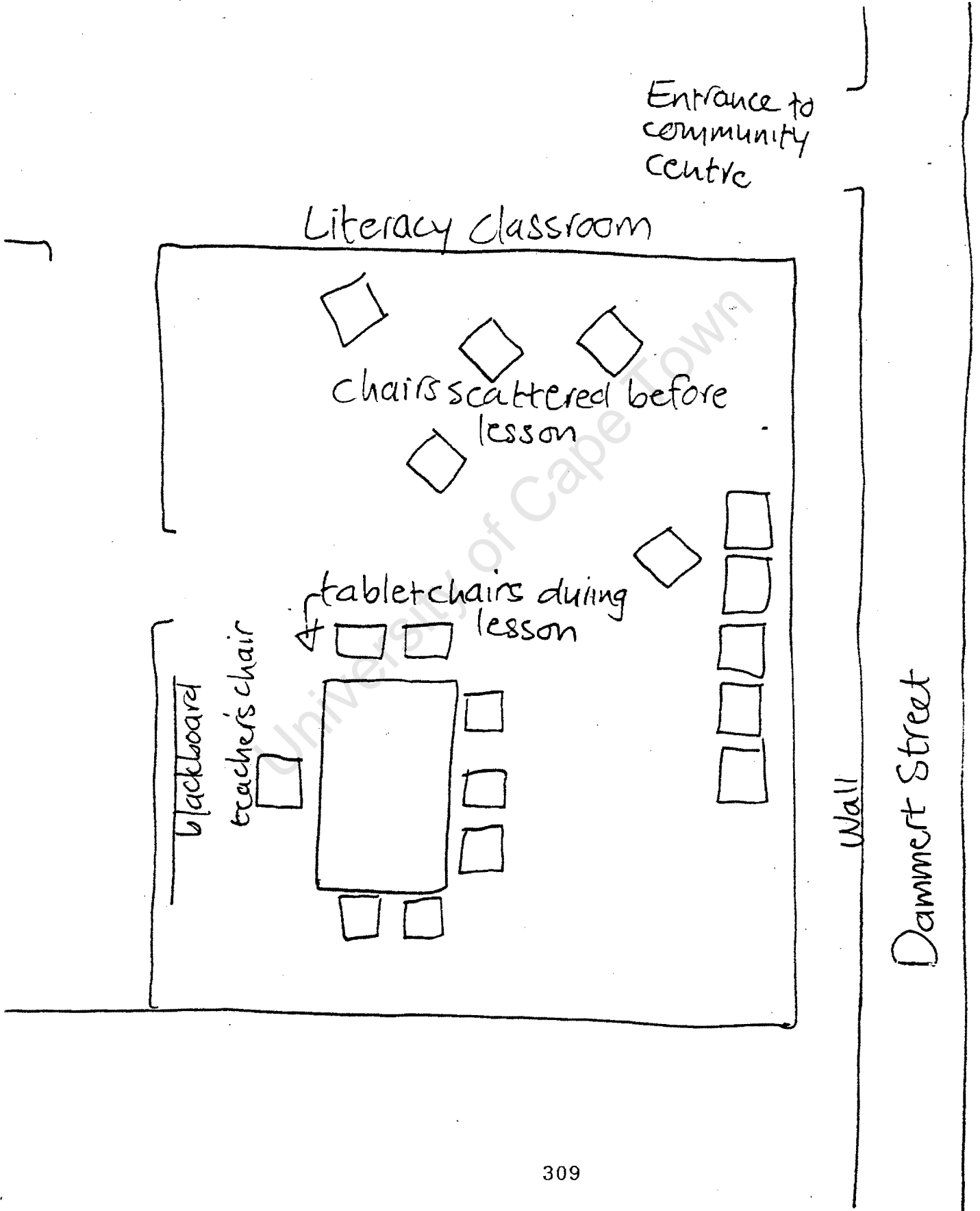


Diagram 2: The pension pay-out hall

