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“She Was Certainly Not A Rosa Luxemborg”: A Biography of Cissie Gool in Images and Words

By

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

Gairoonisa Paleker

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Abstract

This thesis, in both its written and filmed components explores the life of Cape politician and political activist Cissie Gool (1897-1963) against the backdrop of local, national and international politics as it impacted on her in both a direct and indirect way. Culled from oral and documentary sources, the historical Cissie is a representation based on memories, perceptions, biases and subjective agendas of not only the oral sources, but also the historian.

Both components thus reflect a critical awareness of the above factors and have engaged, in varying degrees, with not only the above issues, but also with debates around filmed presentations of history and the dialectic between history and memory. In addressing the criticisms around filmed presentations of history, this paper has argued that history on film functions as a supplement to written presentations of history. Both filmed and written presentations have conventions and limitations that are unique to each medium. Thus both this paper and the documentary film Cissie Gool have been conceived, structured and produced as component parts that together constitute the thesis in its entirety.

A biographical study of an individual has of necessity to take cognisance of the broader context of that individual's life. This is especially the case when an individual has led a public and private life as productive and controversial as Cissie Gool's has been.

The younger daughter of Dr Abdullah Abdurahman, a Cape coloured medical doctor, City and Provincial Councillor and President of the African Peoples' Organisation (APO), and Helen James a Scottish woman, Cissie was nurtured on Cape coloured politics from a very early age. The prejudices and disadvantages faced by people of colour and mixed backgrounds were thus felt immediately by Cissie.

As a member of the coloured young radicals, Cissie was at the forefront of Cape Coloured politics for over three decades. She was a founding member and president of the National Liberation League, president of the Non-European United Front and

chair of the Committee of Action, organisations which were focused on addressing and working towards the elimination of colour prejudice and injustices in Cape Town specifically, but also nationally. She also served on the Cape Town City Council as Councillor for Ward 7 (District Six).

Cissie was in many respects years ahead of her times. As City Councillor, she not only focused on the eradication of segregation at all levels of society, but also on issues of education, health and the general advancement of coloured people at the Cape. Her popularity with the masses was apparently undisputed and despite breaking many social conventions and taboos in her private life, she was re-elected to Council continually for nearly twenty five years with one notable expulsion in 1952 for failing to pay her rates by the due date. Her public profile was such that she became known as the 'Joan of Arc of District Six'.

The thesis in both its filmed and written components explores her life against the backdrop of local, national and international politics, as well as the life and politics of her father, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman.

Introduction

Cissie (Zainunnisa) Gool has for many years been a street name in Hatton Estate, an 'Indian' suburb on the Cape Flats. It was only in 1994, when Nelson Mandela, in a pre-election speech paid tribute to her, that she jumped off the street sign and assumed life. It has however, remained a shadowy life, sketched as it has been by scant research. The sum total of the completed research to date has been a 1978 Honours thesis, while the bulk of it has been paragraphs or brief mentions in works dealing with coloured and black resistance politics from the mid-thirties when she makes her public debut.¹

Thus a perceived need to add to this limited body of knowledge has been the primary objectives of this thesis. While the broader spectrum of coloured politics has received considerable attention from scholars, the contributions of certain individuals has remained seriously under-researched.² Cissie Gool is one such individual, her father, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman another.³

¹ A PhD thesis on Cissie's formative years by Patricia van der Spuy is currently in progress. Though the bulk of her research as been unavailable to this researcher, a special note of acknowledgement is due to Patricia for the sharing of ideas and some references.

² Gavin Lewis, Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African Coloured Politics, (Cape Town, 1987) and Ian Goldin, Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa, (Cape Town, 1987), are two examples of works which provide an encyclopaedic look at the history of coloured politics and political organisations.

³ Adhikari, M 'Protest and Accommodation: Ambiguities in the Racial Politics of the APO 1909-1923' in Kronos. Journal of Cape History, 20, (1993), Ajam, Mogamat, 'The Raison d'être of the Muslim Mission School in Cape Town and Environs from 1860-1980', PhD Thesis, UCT, (1986), and van der Ross, R.E. 'The Founding of the African Peoples' Organisation in Cape Town in 1903 and the Role of Dr Abdurahman' in Munger Africana Library Notes, 28, (1975) are some of the works that attempt to examine the social and political role of Dr Abdurahman. A full-length biography of this remarkable man who appears to have dominated coloured politics since his presidency of the APO in 1905 till the advent of the NLL and other political organisations in the 1930's, still remains to be written however.

A second objective has been the exploration of film as history. Conceived as a pilot project at this level of academic study (though films as historical theses have been produced for nearly a decade at the Honours level, this is the first time it has been attempted at the MA level), the challenge has been to address the numerous issues which inform the debate around film and history. These issues (which will be discussed in detail at a later point) range from criticisms of the medium of film as a viable alternative to written presentations of history, to sincere attempts by proponents of history on film to engage with the possibilities and limitations of the medium.

The principal thesis of the visual and written presentations of Cissie Gool's life is that film and written presentations of history have a symbiotic and supplementary relationship with each other. Neither the film Cissie Gool, nor this written paper makes any attempt to be entirely self-sufficient. Having said this though, the film has been conceived and produced with both an academic and mass audience in mind. As a film addressed to the mass audience it is self-contained. As an academic thesis, the film is but a component part, which constitutes a whole in conjunction with this written paper. This paper will therefore, in addition to addressing the theoretical issues pertaining to film and history, also discuss aspects of Cissie Gool's history, which are either neglected or glossed over in the film. This approach in both the film Cissie Gool and this written paper are primarily in acknowledgement of the supplementary role of written and filmed representations of history.⁴

⁴ White, Hayden, "Historiography and Historiophoty" in American Historical Review, 93, 5, 1988 argues that film is a discourse in its own right and should be treated as such and not as a complement or corrective to written representations of history.

Review of Sources

Elizabeth Everett's 1978 Honours Thesis on Cissie is an early attempt to address an absence in scholarly research.⁵ As a beginning point for this research, it is an invaluable source of information, especially in respect of oral and documentary sources. While Everett's scope has a broad range in that she traces Cissie's life from beginning to end with appropriate emphases on the highlights of her career and the significant moments of her private life, the thesis' limitation is its generality. As a biography it merely hints at the core psychology and motivations behind much of Cissie's public and private life or the issues of identity which seemed to have preoccupied Cissie from a young age. A notable omission is the lack of oral evidence from family members. It is likely, as she notes in her introduction, that they may not have wished to speak with her. This omission, whatever its cause, creates a lack of balance in the portrait she sketches of Cissie. Similarly lacking is any discussion of Cissie's and both the Abdurahman and Gool families' relationship with the immediate Muslim community. As members of a very specific community with a particular social and political worldview, their centrality or marginality within this community is a crucial indicator of their articulation of an identity.

Apart from Everett's thesis, this research has been based mainly on newspaper reports, oral interviews and primary source materials such as the Abdurahman Family Papers and the minutes of City Council meetings. The newspapers have been a particularly rich source for both reported accounts of Cissie's actions and speeches as well as for published letters which were specifically addressed to the press or to various government officials. The City Council minutes have provided useful information with

regard to her career and the focus of her interest as a City Councillor. While they provide information with regard to the various issues and motions she raised within Council meetings and the numerous committees she served on, they do not provide any information with regard to the debates that must have accompanied these motions.

The Abdurahman Family Papers comprises both microfilm and folders with newspaper clippings, pamphlets, meeting notices and letters Cissie received in her capacity as a City Councillor. The bulk of the contents however are focused on Dr Abdurahman, his papers and speeches. Apart from one personal letter, which Cissie wrote to her mother while awaiting imprisonment for her involvement in the Passive Resistance Movement in 1946, there is nothing else of a personal nature.

As a child Cissie made two literary contributions to the APO, the publication of the African Peoples' Organisation. Both the short story and poem provide some interesting insights into the preoccupations of the growing child. Her only other published work is an article on the 'Cape Malays' printed in 1928 in the Cape Times Annual. As with the short story and poem, the article provides insights into the young woman.

An informative guide to contextualising Cissie within the cultural, social and political milieu of the Cape Town of her times, has been Rêshard Gool's novel Cape Town Coolie.⁶ Loosely based on the life and politics of Cissie and the author's father Goolam Gool (also Cissie's brother-in-law), the novel provides an interesting account of the social and political preoccupations of Cape Town in the late 1940's. But more importantly for our purposes, the novel's value lies in its characterisation of the Cissie

⁵ Everett, Elizabeth Ann, 'Zainunnisa (Cissie) Gool 1897-1963: A Biography', Honours Thesis,

figure, Katherine Holmes. Katherine, like Cissie, is the daughter of a coloured City Councillor and politician. She is beautiful, intelligent and charming. And like Cissie she is also the subject of local gossip, as much for her beauty and charms, as for her numerous personal and political dalliances.

Katherine. Katherine Holmes. Well, I'm damned. He felt obtuse. That blend of self-assurance and intelligence ought to have distinguished her at once; while he had been at university, she had been a steady source of gossip. First she was that 'amazing Hewat girl – a peach!' the ambition of many to take out and some, merely to be seen with, a kind of Zuleika Dobson figure. Later she became counter-claiming dislike: she was 'that Hewat bitch – nothing but a gold-digger' and 'who the hell does she think she is?' These, and similar complaints of slighted concupiscence, and then, when the talk of her association with the Rycliffe crowd became public fact, sour grapes and gratified respectability released torrents of abuse: she was now every description of a slut; indeed she had been a slut all along.⁷

The novel raises two issues that are pertinent to this thesis. Firstly, it raises the issue of the historical figure as legend and myth. In casting Cissie as one of the protagonists of the novel, Gool is affirming the legendary status she seemed to have achieved in Cape Town. It will become evident in both the film and this paper, that Cissie, due both to her public and private life, generated a fair amount of comment and gossip in Cape Town society. Secondly, the book raises the issue of the relationship between fact and fiction both in respect of written and filmed history. This is at the level of narrative constructions in both filmed and written representations of history.

The oral sources broadly fell into two groupings, which reflect the political divisions of the leftist organisations with which Cissie was allied. These were the Communist Party members and those who were allied to Trotskyist factions such as the New Era Fellowship, the Anti-CAD and Non-European Unity Movement. They are living

(University of Cape Town, 1978)

⁶ Gool, Rêshard, *Cape Town Coolie*, (London, 1990)

⁷ Gool, Rêshard, p37

contemporaries of Cissie and two family members one of whom, Selim Gool has very little direct memory of Cissie.

Research for this film thesis has presented numerous challenges, ranging from a dearth of primary source materials, specifically personal effects and papers, to a degree of reticence bordering on self-imposed censorship on the part of interviewees.

Consequently, the historical Cissie that has emerged is as much a distillation of what has been said as that which has been filtered out. The motivations for this filtering process hinge around the need to “not speak ill of the dead”. While noble in its aim, it presents endless problems for the historical researcher tasked with the reconstruction of a historical personality. This is not to imply that oral sources have been deliberately deceptive, on the contrary, they have all been most co-operative and helpful and have striven to be as fair to Cissie as possible. But it is a fairness based on a reflection of the past coloured by many factors; age and its consequent hindsight, the unpredictability of memory subject to the vicissitudes of erosion, self-censorship, a framing of the past that is consonant with the individual’s relation to that past/person and with their present. As a result of this their oral testimonies lack spontaneity and immediacy. As such, it is the task of the historical researcher to interpret not only what has been said, but also that, which has been unspoken.

Consequently, the filmed interviews have been framed in cognisance of this fact, with pauses and corrections. A similar process of self-censorship and reconstruction is equally evident in some of the other, older interviewees. The most candid interview took place with Selim Gool, Cissie’s nephew through marriage. Perhaps this is a consequence of his younger age and therefore lack of direct memory of Cissie. Or

possibly it is a result of his relationship to her, which of necessity had to be mediated through the politically volatile relationship between Cissie and Selim Gool's father, Dr Goolam Gool.

From the outset, what was most apparent was the fact that memories of Cissie were intensely coloured by personal and political differences. By all accounts Cissie evoked extremes of emotion in people; either intense affection and admiration, or strong dislike based both on her politics and methods of achieving her aims. And since this reconstruction could not be a self-presentation where Cissie could tell her own story, but has of necessity to be a re-presentation, a further challenge has been the problem of framing the historical Cissie. This task has been made doubly difficult by the lack of personal source materials, namely, personal letters and/or journals and photographs. According to Jean Bernardt, Cissie is reported to have said that she was writing an autobiography.⁸ There is no corroborating evidence. If such sources do exist they are likely to be in the possession of either one or both of her surviving children living outside the country. Attempts to contact both elicited no responses.

Further challenges have been in the area of film and history. A contested subject in its own right, putting history on film, especially a historical biography, has presented challenges that have been peculiar to the subject itself. These have not only included availability of visual materials and lack of access to immediate family and the records in their possession, but also the challenges of working alone in an area (film) which ideally calls for teamwork and team effort. While some practical assistance (with filming interviews and cut-away material) was available from a colleague, the bulk of

⁸ Interview with Jean Bernardt not included in the film.

the film has been a solo effort. On the one hand this has been liberating at the level of creative control of the material, conception and final production and editing of the film. But on a purely practical level, it has been frustrating and physically challenging to haul camera, tripod and various paraphernalia from one interview to the next. Further challenges have been the lack of sufficient financial and material support, which, though not a problem for a conventional thesis, has presented numerous limitations for this project. All these challenges have shaped the content, form and presentation of the film as thesis.

Film as History

Robert Rosenstone, a keen advocate of filmed presentations of history, believes that history in film and on video “is not history in the sense that academics think of it. It is history with different rules of representations, analysis and modes of reading and comprehension that we do not yet fully understand.”⁹ This quote by Rosenstone addresses the fundamental problem of producing history in film. The debate around filmed history, specifically the documentary film, centres on the problem of “really putting history on film”.¹⁰ That is, creating the kind of history that is full of the complexities of the subject matter, displays the nuances of interpretation, discusses methodologies and sources and addresses concerns of historians in the field. In other words, filmed representations of history fail the charge of comprehensiveness. Critics of filmed presentations of history claim that film can at best only raise issues and questions or arouse an interest for further research. In and of itself, it cannot provide

⁹ Quoted in Dan Sipe “The Future of Oral History and Moving Images” in Perks & Thomson (ed) *The Oral History Reader*, (London, 1998)

¹⁰ Rosenstone, Robert, “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film”, in *American Historical Review*, 93, 5, 1988

all the answers, all the research, because it is a poor medium for the exploration of detail or presentation of balanced information.¹¹ It has a poor information load.

Firstly, these criticisms are addressed at film in general and are not in their entirety, specific to the documentary film. Secondly, implicit in this criticism is the idea of film as an alternative to written presentations of history. The “double tyranny” of documentary film according to Rosenstone is the unrelenting pace at which film has to move so as not to bore audiences and the need to match visual image to the spoken narration.¹² Evidence of the latter aspect of this tyranny in the documentary film Cissie Gool centres on the film’s neglect of Cissie’s mother. The almost exclusive focus on Dr Abdurahman and his impact on Cissie’s politics is the outcome of availability of information from both oral and documentary sources. Conversely the lack of focus on Mrs Abdurahman is due to the paucity of both visual and oral material. Apart from three pictures (of varying quality), no other visual materials were available. Similarly, oral sources could provide very little useful information with regard to the nature of the relationship between Cissie and her mother. The lack of any discussion of the relationship between Cissie and her sister is similarly due to the lack of sufficient visual and oral evidence. In respect of this, the criticism that film cannot address all the issues is true to the point where discussion is circumscribed by the availability of material.

Detailed discussion in film is also constrained by the audience factor. The selection of material and the general construction of the film Cissie Gool are a result of projected audience reception. This has been guided by what Rosenstone has identified as the second aspect of the ‘double tyranny’; namely the rapid pace at which film has to move

¹¹ Toplin, Robert Brent, “The Filmmaker as Historian” in American Historical Review, 93, 5,

so as not to bore audiences. In respect of this, screen time for the numerous interviewees has of necessity to be limited and selection of interview material is guided as much by what they have said, as by how quickly and succinctly they have said it. In instances where the oral testimony is interesting or important but will give excessive screen time to the interviewee, different visuals are normally superimposed over the continuing oral testimony. There are numerous instances in Cissie Gool where this has been used to good effect. For example, when Mr R.O. Dudley speaks about events in the USSR that impacted on the ideological alignments in Cape politics, the film cuts from his face to pictures of Trotsky, Lenin, Stalin and other associated posters and pictures. Or, when Mr Ali Fataar speaks about Cissie's focus as Councillor on the hawkers of District Six, archival footage of District Six in the 1960's is superimposed over his oral testimony.

The latter point raises another key criticism of film and history; namely, the manipulation of visual material by the filmmaker to effect a particular interpretation. This manipulation is both at the level of ordering shots and sequences as well as at the level of material selection. The archival footage of District Six was filmed in 1960, which creates a temporal dissonance in that there is a mere three-year overlap with Cissie's career as a City Councillor. It can be argued that on the basis of this, it is not an accurate reflection of District Six in the 1930's, 1940's or the 1950's. While this may be true, to some extent, about the topography of the area, a counter argument can be made for its reflection of the mood and ambience of the place; the manner in which produce vendors hawked their goods. In other words, "Movies aren't especially good at dealing with abstract ideas, for those you'd be better off turning to the written word;

1988, p1216

but they are superb for presenting moods and feelings, the look of a battle, the expression on a face, the mood of a country.”¹³

This underscores the point that film offers a glimpse of the lived realities of the past. It creates the potential for the historical past to be the personal experience of the individual audience. But this, according to Rosenstone, “also constitutes its chief danger”.¹⁴ By creating the illusion of a past as it really was, it creates the illusion of an unmediated reality. It renders invisible the human role of the filmmaker. This is at the level of selection of image, the ordering and juxtaposing of sequences which tell a particular story or offer a particular interpretation. In Cissie Gool, a reflexive element has been introduced to offset precisely this danger of an unmediated reality.

More importantly, the above example of use of particular archival footage appears to corroborate the criticism that film makes a trade-off of historical analysis for visual and/or emotive appeal. In this respect, Cissie’s career as a City Councillor has received little attention in the film. Bearing in mind both the ‘double tyranny’ and visual and emotive appeal factors, the audio soundtrack of the film’s narration could only mention her numerous interests as a Councillor and list some of the committees she served on. The film could not therefore offer a lengthy analysis on this aspect of her career. This is one instance where written presentations of history fulfil the need to provide the kind of detail that film is not able to.

¹² Rosenstone, Robert, “History in Images/History in Words”, p.1180

¹³ Ebert, Roger, Review of Apocalypse Now, <http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/>

¹⁴ Rosenstone, Robert, “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film”, American Historical Review, 93, 5, 1988, p.1180

This raises yet another critical aspect of the film versus written history debate. The charge, critics of film make, is that film is a constructed reality. The documentary filmmaker “makes endless choices. He selects topics, people, vistas, angles, lenses, juxtapositions, sounds, words. Each selection is an expression of his point of view, whether he is aware of it or not, whether he acknowledges it or not.”¹⁵ If film is a construction on the basis of this kind of mediation by the filmmaker, then the textual narrative is equally a construction by virtue of the same criteria. Historians using the written word make similar decisions with regard to topic, people to be interviewed, structure of the written text, which aspects of a historical event or historical biography will be problematised and given prominence.

Furthermore, and as Hayden White has argued in respect of forms of historical and fiction writing, the narrative form of both written and filmed representations is dependent on the principles of coherence and correspondence.¹⁶ There is an internal logic that guides the narrative construction of each form of presentation. It is a logic that insists on ordering the historical facts into a coherent whole, on ensuring continuity, on progression of action and on the appeal to aesthetics of either the written word or the moving image. With film there is the added responsibility of correspondence between the spoken word in the narration and the visual image on the screen. In both instances the human role of the historian and filmmaker is pivotal to this construction and neither forms of presentation are able to escape the charge of subjectivity.

¹⁵ Barnouw, Eric, Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film, (Oxford, 1983), p.313

¹⁶ White, Hayden, as quoted in Lynch, Michael & David Bogen, The Spectacle of History: Speech, Text and Memory at the Iran-Contra Hearings, (Durham, 1996), p.67

The key difference however lies in the transparency of each form. This paper would argue that film has the potential for greater reflexivity, or self-awareness on issues of subjectivity and mediation by the filmmaker than written narratives. A contradiction at first glance perhaps, in that this paper is an exercise in reflexive critique. But film as a visual/aural medium arguably has a greater and more immediate impact than the written word. Given this, the potential for the filmmaker to claim authorship, inscribe herself in the process of selection, ordering and final production can become more readily visible than in written forms. In Cissie Gool, this reflexive process is evident in the brief intrusions the filmmaker has made. Specific instances are shots of the filmmaker scrolling through the microfilm and sorting through newspaper clippings. Authorship is also made apparent in that the filmmaker is also the narrator. These instances have been included in the film to indicate the process of selection and mediation that has taken place in the process of production. Furthermore, the inclusion of these shots also attempts to address the criticism that film cannot footnote or provide a list of sources. These shots begin to hint at the historical sources and historical research methodology (as limited as this may be).

The criticism that film contains an impoverished information load, though directed primarily at the feature film, is based on the premise that an hour-long documentary cannot provide sufficient historical information. Firstly, there is no rule that stipulates that a historical documentary has to be limited to an hour. Claude Lanzman's film Shoah, (at almost nine hours) is one example of a historical documentary that breaks all conventions of length. The question, for Rosenstone, is not that film cannot provide enough information, but whether the information provided is acceptable as history.¹⁷ In

¹⁷ Rosenstone, Robert, "History in Images/History in Words" p1177

Cissie Gool, the use of archival footage of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 is introduced without any oral narration. The images are made to speak for themselves and in of themselves carry a vast amount of information about, for example, excessive police brutality, and the complicity of black policemen. The question as to whether the rapid pace of the moving images allow for the absorption of the information is a moot point, precisely because images are able to convey far more powerfully, the horror of that incident than written accounts.

The charge of subjectivity and questions around historical truth that are implicit in the criticism around construction in film is ironic given the very definition of documentary film. Defining documentary film is admittedly a problematic in its own, in that definitions are fluid and constantly evolving, but the basic premise is that documentary film is based on objective fact and verifiable truth. It is an objective historical fact that Cissie wrote numerous letters to the press. The film Cissie Gool has accessed this historical evidence by means of having a young woman reading excerpts from some of the letters. It is not Cissie speaking. Yet the creative treatment of this does not dilute the historical truth of Cissie having written the letters.

Cissie Gool can be defined as an expository film.¹⁸ Key characteristics of this form are the 'voice-of-God' narration by an invisible narrator, the use of newspaper headlines, reports and photographs or archival images to illustrate, describe and inform, and the use of 'talking head' interviews. This form argues most strongly for the documentary film as a document of objective historical truth. The invisible narrator is set up in a position of authority, as someone that knows all the facts and is therefore in a position

to make the necessary comments and judgements between oral testimonies. The narration is addressed directly to the viewer and serves either to comment on the image on screen or provide information that the visual image cannot carry. The use of newspaper reports, headlines and other documents confers a similar authority in that they are used to verify and support the oral narration. Interviewee testimonies have a comparable authority because of their knowledge based on experience.

But, and as discussed earlier, it also has elements of the reflexive form in which the filmmaker makes her presence known. This reflexivity signals the mediation of the historian filmmaker. It indicates that the historical facts as presented in the film are based on deliberate choices and that the film is a construction.

Film, Memory and Oral History

The debates around oral history as an acceptable methodology for gathering historical data are well documented.¹⁹ This paper will therefore not deal with those debates per se, but rather with certain aspects of these that impact on the use of oral interviews in film specifically. The biographical documentary Cissie Gool, is both a document of oral history and a consecration of individual memory into History as a discipline. As a document of oral history, the interviews in the film provide raw data for future researchers. As a History, it solicits the private, individual memories of the interviewees and offers them to public scrutiny.

¹⁸ See Nichols, Bill, Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary, (Bloomington, 1989) for a categorisation of the forms of documentary film. These are the expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive modes of documentary film.

The dialectic between history and memory is the distinction Nora makes between “sites of memory” and “real environments of memory”²⁰. That is, canonised and institutionalised memory in the form of official historical works, archives, museums and libraries versus communal and individual remembrances of the past, respectively. Nora’s central thesis in this distinction that he makes between sites and ‘real environments’ of memory is that sites of memory (archives, museums, memorials, etc.) exist because the ‘real environments’ of memory no longer do. History, for Nora, is the manner in which “our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past.”²¹ And in doing so, history is in fundamental opposition to memory. This opposition is based on history’s perceived call for criticism and analysis and its constant vigilance and suspicion of memory.

These suspicions are based on the fact that memory is fallible. It is fluid and constantly evolving. It is “open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.”²² Memory is particular, prone to exaggeration, erosion and censorship. In and of itself, memory cannot constitute history. It can provide the raw data for the construction of a history, but it is not history itself.

¹⁹ Thompson, Paul, The Voice of the Past: Oral History, (Oxford, 1988), Lummis, Trevor, Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence, (London, 1987), are two examples of works that deal extensively with the origins of and debates in oral history.

²⁰ Nora, Pierre, “Between Memory and History” in Fabre, G. & R. O’Meally (eds.), History and Memory in African-American Culture, (New York, 1996), p.283

²¹ Ibid. p.285

²² Ibid. p.285

The film Cissie Gool is cognisant of these risks attached to memory, risks that ultimately question the authenticity of the historical evidence. Included in the film are many instances where interviewees pause for reflection, correct themselves, rephrase their responses or come to deliberate and abrupt stops. Or as will be seen, they simply refuse to speak clearly but rather hedge around the issues. Specific instances are those of Cissie's sister-in-law, Amina Gool, whose interview reflects perhaps most clearly the issues in the debate around memory and history. There is an obvious process of self-censorship more apparent in her interview than in any of the others. This censorship, on the part of Gool at least, reflects the expressed desire to not "speak ill of the dead" especially in light of her close relationship with Cissie's surviving son. The implication is that Gool's revelations about Cissie would hurt her son. A further implication is that Gool has revelations, hitherto unexpressed, to make about Cissie.

But these revelations never surface clearly and the overwhelming sense one has after viewing her throughout the film is that there is a degree of personal antipathy towards Cissie. This impression has been further supported by innuendo, as well as clearly expressed views and actions such as, "she turned all our heads, but mine not for long", or "I was heckling Cissie".²³ The fact that Gool had not hidden this negative feeling towards Cissie, makes it easier to interrogate her evidence. This is made manifest right at the outset of the film where Gool is included as saying "so you see, there was a conflict in my mind about this woman."²⁴ This serves to alert the viewer to the fact that the oral evidence has to be heard critically, and that Gool specifically, but the other interviewees also, have personal agendas, they are subjective and what they remember of Cissie is coloured by their own personal and political relations with her.

²³ Interviews included in the film.

Furthermore, the interviews also provide evidence with regard to a re-working or re-framing of the past based on hindsight and maturity. While it may be most obvious in Gool, it nonetheless is subtly present in the testimonies of the other interviewees also.

The spectrum of the interviewees' personal feelings towards Cissie stretches from the antipathy expressed by Gool, to the admiration and affection expressed by Jean Bernardt or Ray Alexander, with all the others falling in between. The value of this wide ranging spectrum of views and feelings, is that Cissie (who unfortunately cannot make a self-presentation) is saved from a singular re-presentation and interpretation. The film offers a balance between the less critical attitude and views of, predominantly Communist Party members (Ray Alexander, Jean Bernadt, Pauline Podbrey and Amy Thornton) and the highly critical views of those who were allied with the Trotskyist factions such as the NEUM, Teachers League of South Africa, etc, (Ali Fataar, R.O. Dudley, and to a lesser extent Amina Gool).²⁵

The testimony of Mr R. O. Dudley (a former President of the NEUM) presents a distinct example of re-framed memory. Of all the interview testimonies, his provides the most balanced and considered view of Cissie and her politics. This could indicate, due perhaps to his profession as an educator, an awareness of multiple scholarly viewpoints and interpretations of the history he lived through. It is also possible that this awareness is as a result of hindsight and maturity and therefore his memory of Cissie has undergone a degree of transformation that lacks both immediacy and spontaneity.

²⁴ Amina Gool, included in the film.

²⁵ Amina Gool has continuously averred that she was not political and her involvement in politics was mostly accidental and sometimes due to her love for her brother Goolam Gool and

The above discussion around oral history and the oral interview based on memory underscores what has been said before with regard to the role of filmed presentations of history. As stated previously, history in documentary film, especially history based on oral sources, introduces a more reflexive element into the production of history. The use of oral interview in broadcasting generally (radio and television) and documentary film specifically, is crucial. Apart from practical advantages such as the fact that tracing and interviewing people who were associated with the subject of one's research allows the historian to unearth photographs and/or documents that may not be available through libraries and archives, the interview often provides the crucial link in the analysis of documentary evidence. Oral evidence may often provide crucial information or fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle that documentary evidence may not. For example, newspaper sources reported that Cissie's son Shaheen had committed suicide. What the reports did not disclose is the reason for the suicide or its impact on Cissie. In this respect, the testimony of the interviewees has provided valuable insights.

The nature of film is such that the conditions and the process of production of history are more readily accessible than it would be with written presentations of history.

“Oral communication is different in kind from written sources: it is richer in communicative power, containing as it does, inflections, hesitations, expressions and nuances not (as easily) reproducible in written form.”²⁶ It brings to the fore the context of the oral sources, their immediate environment, their body language, and facial

a desire to help him. This in itself makes one question her testimony, especially in view of the political dissension between Cissie and Goolam.

²⁶ Lummis, Trevor, Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence, (London, 1987), p.24

expressions, all of which adds to the layers of meaning.²⁷ More importantly, it can often expose to public scrutiny, the relationship between interviewer (historical researcher) and interviewee; the power balance between the two, how it manifests itself and how it impacts on the ultimate production of history.

An example reflecting this reflexive aspect and the dialogic encounter between the filmmaker and interviewee is the interview with Pauline Podbrey. At a point in the film where she is discussing Cissie's apparent political indecisiveness, she says, "... as you say, there were many groupings...".²⁸ This was in response to a question about Cissie's perceived political opportunism. The "as you say" clearly references the filmmaker as the author of the idea that there were many political groupings and that Cissie veered from one to the other. Importantly, it also reduces the objective role of the filmmaker by showing her to have framed questions in a particular way to elicit a very particular response.

Students of film have been taught and have discovered through experience, the power of the camera on the filmed subject; how it impacts on the actions and evidence of those being filmed. The balance of power has always been with the filmmaker who is behind the camera, a camera that confers vicarious authority to the filmmaker to invade the private sanctuaries of memory and living environment. In respect of this, the comment Cissie Gool makes is that this is not always the case and the filmed subject is not powerless. Most interviewees have been framed in very close-up shots, more in an attempt to indicate the process of mining their memories, than for any aesthetic purposes. Most of them, perhaps because the camera made them uncomfortable or

²⁷ Sipe, p.382

perhaps due to their age, were moving about constantly. The film has included footage where interviewees are slightly off-centre (Ali Fataar for example) or as in the case of Amina Gool where the frame-up is extremely tight, have only bits of their face showing in the shot. These have been included as a comment on the relative power of the filmmaker, which in this case has been rendered ineffective by the interviewees who have asserted their right not to be fixed in the gaze of the camera.

An important element of the oral history debate, which impacts on the film Cissie Gool, is the contention of feminist historians regarding the relationship between oral history and women's history. Gluck in her essay "What's So Special about Women's Oral History?" argues that oral history is best suited to recording women's history.²⁹ Leydesdorff makes a similar contention when she hints that oral history and women's history is interchangeable or more acceptably, that oral history has been shaped by women's history.³⁰

Oral history, it is argued, lends itself more readily to recording women's history because historically, women have tended not to leave a paper trail. This paper trail can be in the form of written accounts of their lives, official records, letters and/or personal memoirs, in short written documentation in either an official or unofficial capacity. Thus the only way women's historical lives and contributions can be recorded is by accessing memory via oral interviews. There is some merit in this contention, especially given the social, cultural and political organisation of society where only women in public office or with a public profile have left behind written documentation. For the rest, there is either no recognisable need to do so, or in many cases, especially

²⁸ Interview with Pauline Podbrey – included in the film.

²⁹ Gluck, Sherna, "What's So Special About Women's Oral History?" in Dunaway, David K. & Willa K. Baum (eds.) Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology, (Walnut Creek, 1996),

in what is the contemporary developing world, women have not had the means or the education to leave behind written accounts.

With Cissie Gool, the paper trail has been limited almost exclusively to her public career. As discussed earlier with regard to sources, newspaper reports, letters and Council minutes all provide evidence for the reconstruction and analysis of her public career. In terms of mapping her internal mindscape, there has been little in the form of documents and the research has relied largely on the oral testimony of interviewees. In this respect there has been nothing inherently feminist about the oral interviews, nor has gender been crucial to the analysis of the oral evidence.

Cissie Gool – the early years

Zainunissa Abdurahman was born on 6 November 1897. The younger of only two children (both girls) of Dr Abdullah and Helen Abdurahman, Cissie as she became known, grew up in a private and social milieu that was largely responsible for shaping her cultural, religious, social and political worldview.

Dr Abdullah Abdurahman belonged to one of the most respected Muslim families at the Cape.³¹ The grandson of former slaves and the son of an Al Azhar University³² graduate, Abdullah was to carve a distinguished niche for himself in Cape Coloured society. Given the numerous constraints to coloured advancement, Abdullah had the

³⁰ Leydesdorff, Selma, "Gender and the Categories of Experienced History" in Gender and History, 11, 3, 1999, p.598

³¹ R. E. van der Ross (ed.) Say it out Loud: The APO Presidential Addresses and Other Major Political Speeches of Dr Abdurahman, 1906-1940, (Cape Town, 1990) p.3

rare opportunity to acquire an education that was beyond the grasp of most coloureds. After matriculation from the South African College School (SACS), he studied medicine at the University of Glasgow, graduating with the MBChB in 1893. He returned to Cape Town in 1895 and set himself up in private practice.³³

While in Glasgow he met and married Helen (Nellie) James, the daughter of Mr John Cummings James, who is credited with having secured free and compulsory education for Scottish children.³⁴ This sense of social responsibility would later become evident in Mrs Abdurahman's own activities at the Cape where she served as either patron or on the boards of numerous aid, welfare and charity organisations. Apart from her involvement in charity organisations, Mrs Abdurahman also served on numerous musical and theatrical societies.³⁵ A special interest also appears to have been the welfare of women and children and despite the lack of detailed historical records, would appear to have been a vociferous champion of her daughter's politics. In 1938 both Cissie and her mother were actively involved in the establishment of a League for the Enfranchisement of Non-European Women.³⁶

Abdullah and Helen set up home at 7 Mount Street where both Cissie and her sister Waradia were born and raised. The marriage between Dr Abdurahman and Helen James did not last long and Dr Abdurahman later married a younger coloured woman

³² The Al Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, is one of the leading institutes of religious learning in the Muslim world.

³³ Van der Ross p.3

³⁴ Ibid. p.4

³⁵ Abdullah Abdurahman 1872-1940 Family Papers – 1906-1962, UCT Archives and Manuscripts

³⁶ Walker, Cheryl, Women and Resistance in South Africa, (Cape Town 1991) & Abdurahman Family Papers, pamphlet advertising a meeting to discuss the establishment of this league with Z Gool and Mrs Abdurahman as speakers, among others.

called Margaret May Stansfield.³⁷ There is also little clarity on whether Dr Abdurahman actually divorced Helen or, as a Muslim, merely took a second wife and moved in with her. African-American social scientist Ralph Bunche, during his visit to South Africa in 1937/8, records in his journal entry for November 1, 1937, a snippet of gossip in which Cape Town society was wondering which wife (the white or coloured) would be considered the widow if Dr Abdurahman were to die.³⁸ This would seem to indicate that there was no divorce and Nellie continued to live at Mount Street, while Dr Abdurahman moved to Loop Street.

While they were married though, the Abdurahmans appear to have been at the centre of Cape coloured society. They played regular hosts to numerous local and visiting dignitaries, and the house in Mount Street was a hub of cultural and intellectual activity.³⁹ Among those who counted as friends and visitors were Olive Schreiner, her brother, W. P. Schreiner and Mahatma Ghandi.⁴⁰ Cissie's early exposure to this eclectic group of people, their ideas and philosophies no doubt made an indelible impression on her sensitive and questing intellect.

Her own mixed background (foreign white mother and coloured father) seems likewise to have made some impact on her. In 1912, as a young girl of fifteen, she submitted a short story and poem to a literary competition run by the A. P. O. (the publication of the African People's Organisation). Writing as Toadie Jimison (probably to avoid unfair advantage resulting from her name – Dr Abdurahman was by this time the undisputed leader of the APO), the story she submitted was titled "Back to the Shores

³⁷ van der Ross, p.4

³⁸ Edgar, Robert A. (ed.) An African American in South Africa: The Travel Notes of Ralph J. Bunche 28 September 1937- 1 January 1938, (Johannesburg, 1992)

³⁹ Everett, p. 1

of England”⁴¹ It is the story of an Englishman, his “Native”⁴² wife and their two children who have left their rural home for better opportunities in Johannesburg. “Eric Raven was a tall, well-built man of about thirty-five. It was quite evident from his handsome face and well cut prominent features, his thick brown curly hair, and bright blue eyes, he was a typical, true and thorough Englishman. Bess Raven, was a half-Native girl, her father a Native and her mother an Englishwoman.”⁴³ As a simple story of a mixed-race family and its trials and tribulations, it is a meditation on colour prejudice and its consequent deprivations, the marginal status of mixed-marriage families and the nature of exile life. “Raven who could understand Dutch, was cruelly stung by the words of the farmer. Still what could he do when he had to deal with such heartless, ignorant people, smothered in their own prejudice.” Further in the story: “He soon learned of the bitter feelings and prejudice of the people against his children. His heart shrunk from the cold bitter world, and he clung and looked more and more to his children for comfort, happiness and love.”⁴⁴ As such it displays great maturity and remarkable insight into the conditions of her own life and family.

In that same year she also submitted a poem under her own name which won the first prize. Titled “His Mother’s Boy” it reflects a growing child’s preoccupation with issues of love and the folly of pride.

His eyes were bright, his hair was fair,
He was his mother’s boy,
He was her pride, her only child,
Her only loving Roy.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.2

⁴¹ Ibid. p.2

⁴² The use of the terms “Native” and “non-European” appear in double quotes to distinguish from my own preference for the use of coloured and black as categories that are less pejorative.

⁴³ Ibid., Appendix

⁴⁴ Ibid.

She loved her child as life and death,
No sweeter child could find.
Oft in the eve when all was still,
She would instruct his mind.

None saw the boy, he too was proud.
He was his mother's boy.
None but her proud and selfish self,
His presence could enjoy.

A sad day dawned, and the happy lad
Lay sick upon his bed;
His crimson cheeks, now turned white,
His curls tangled on his head.

She bowed her head before the Lord.
And yielded up her child;
Gone was her haughty, selfish spirit,
She was humbled, meek and mild.⁴⁵

Excepting this, there is very little material evidence on her early life and influences. Given the testimonies of those who knew her in her adult life, one can rightly or wrongly draw conclusions about events, people and factors that shaped her personality and character. Her parents were probably the biggest influence on her life and later politics. While the film explores in detail her relationship with her father, her initial radicalism vis a vis his politics and her eventual conformity to his philosophy and practice, it ignores the role of her mother in shaping her worldview. As discussed previously, the simple reason for this omission is not that her mother played no role, but rather, the conventions of a visual representation required materials that simply have not been available. Apart from one group picture in a school magazine which depicts Mrs Abdurahman and her two daughters in costume, one tiny photograph of Dr and Mrs Abdurahman and another one of Cissie, Mrs Abdurahman, AH Gool and a child (unidentifiable) there is nothing else that could be used in the film. Even those

⁴⁵ Selected verses, Everett, Appendix A. This poem would in later life have probably assumed a terrible poignancy when her own son committed suicide.

that have been available have been of a very poor quality. The oral sources could also not provide any detailed or informative testimony with regard to the question of the mother/daughter relationship.

But there are enough scraps of information scattered about that would suggest a more intimate bond between Cissie and her mother than that between Cissie and her father. Cissie is reported to have said that she admired women like her mother; women who had the courage to break with conventions, specifically with regard to marrying across the colour line.⁴⁶ While Cissie's political differences with her father (where Dr Abdurahman believed in effecting change through peaceful means such as petitions, Cissie and her generation believed in more forceful actions such as marches and mass meetings), are a matter of historical record, their personal differences hinged around his second marriage and what Cissie believed to be a betrayal of her mother.⁴⁷

A lack of similar visual materials also prohibited any filmed discussion on the nature of her relationship with her sister. While many of the interviewees knew Waradia or Rosie, as she was known, they could not confidently respond to questions regarding the relationship between the two sisters. There was possibly a degree of sibling rivalry, but it is difficult to say how strong this was or how it impacted on their actions. Cissie would appear to have been the more popular and glamorous of the two. Based on the photograph from the school magazine, Cissie appears to have been the fairer and prettier, and in a colour-conscious society such as Cape Town (then and now) every gradation of colour would've counted and won Cissie greater acknowledgement than her sister.

⁴⁶ Interview with Pauline Podbrey – not included in film.

As a man who had made the best of his opportunities, education was an important issue to Dr Abdurahman.⁴⁸ Though intellectually and financially eligible, both Cissie and Waradia were refused entrance to some of the best schools in the Cape. Consequently, the bulk of their education was received from governesses. Cissie received her matriculation from London University in 1918. In 1919 she registered at the University of Cape Town for a Bachelor of Arts Degree.⁴⁹ That same year she interrupted her studies to marry Dr Abdul Hamid (AH) Gool and it was only much later in life that she was able to complete them. Waradia also registered at UCT for the Bachelor of Science degree. But she was to follow in her father's footsteps and went on to study medicine in Scotland.

The Gool Family

The Gool family like the Abdurahmans belonged to the elites of Cape Coloured society. Hadji Yusuf Gool had come from India in search of his fortune and found it before long in the spice trade. Like Dr Abdurahman, Yusuf Gool appears to have placed a premium on education and all his children attended higher institutions of learning. His eldest son AH studied medicine at Guy's Hospital in London⁵⁰, as did his younger son Goolam, after a stint at religious seminaries in India and Egypt. Two of

⁴⁷ Interview with Ali Fataar & Jean Bernadt – not included in film

⁴⁸ Mogamat Ajam's PhD thesis 'The Raison d'être of the Muslim Mission Primary School in Cape Town and Environs from 1860-1980', (UCT, 1986) assigns a central role to Dr Abdurahman in the establishment of state-funded 'Mission' schools for primarily Muslim children. The eponymous Rahmanyah Primary School is one of the few remaining schools with a close connection to Dr Abdurahman.

⁴⁹ With special thanks to the UCT Records Department for supplying transcripts of Cissie's academic records.

⁵⁰ Guy's Hospital Records, Vol. 65, 1911. Special thanks to Selim Gool for supplying a copy of AH and Goolam Gool's university records.

Yusuf Gool's daughters attended Fort Hare⁵¹ at a time when higher education for young women was rare and even more rare was the fact that they should receive this away from home.

At the time of her marriage to AH, Cissie was 22 years old. AH was 33 years old at the time, and undoubtedly much more sophisticated and worldly. There seems to have been some opposition to the marriage from her father, though it is unclear on what grounds exactly.⁵² Given the similar social status of both families and based on the assumption that there would have been close social ties, it is unlikely that Dr Abdurahman's opposition would have been based on AH's unsuitability as a husband for his daughter.⁵³ It is more likely however that this opposition was focused on the fear of disruption to her studies, a fear that was completely justified when Cissie suspended her studies for a short while. In the years 1922, 1929, and 1930 she registered for one or two courses and thus finally managed to graduate with the BA in 1932.⁵⁴ In 1933 she obtained her MA in Psychology. Cissie was not only one of the first black women to obtain the BA from UCT, but the first to graduate with an MA in Psychology.⁵⁵

Everett quotes two contemporaries who remember Cissie as being "very reserved and proud" but friendly, "and her wit and sharp tongue are what people remember best".⁵⁶

While UCT had no official policy of segregation, the de facto segregation could not

⁵¹ Interview with Amina Gool – not included in film

⁵² Interview with Amina Gool – not included in film

⁵³ Ajam's thesis also notes both AH Gool and Dr Abdurahman serving on the board of the Moslem Educational League (p.189) and they would no doubt have had professional ties as a minority of coloured physicians.

⁵⁴ UCT Student Records

⁵⁵ Everett p.7

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.3

have made it easy for Cissie, or anyone else of colour, to integrate totally into university life.⁵⁷ According to one of her contemporaries, she is reported to have said that she found acceptance and friendship more readily among Jewish students.⁵⁸ It is highly probable that many of the friendships that she had with Jewish people were forged in this context of discrimination.

It is also more than likely that her political education and radicalisation began at university and was honed in the parlours where she and AH both gave and attended numerous parties, concerts and intellectual soirées. Her life with AH appeared to be a replica of that of her parents. Their home was similarly at the centre of Cape Town intellectual and cultural life. AH Gool was a literate and cultured man who surrounded himself with artists, writers and musicians as well as intellectuals like Lancelot Hogben, an eminent biologist and Head of the Department of Zoology at the University of Cape Town.⁵⁹ AH also served as patron of the Western Province Amateur Musical Society.⁶⁰ As the president of the Cape Indian Congress, AH Gool was at the centre of Indian politics at the Cape. Despite this however, he appears to have been a publicity shy and retiring man, not given to flamboyant public speeches like his wife and younger brother Goolam.

Cissie and AH Gool had three children. Their two sons Rustum and Shaheen were born in 1923 and 1926 respectively.⁶¹ Their youngest child, a daughter, Marcina, was

⁵⁷ See Phillips, Howard, *The University of Cape Town 1918-1948: The Formative Years*, (Cape Town 1993), for a detailed study of UCT's founding and early years.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p.3

⁵⁹ Hogben, Lancelot manuscript copy of chapter 11 & 13 of his autobiography, UCT Manuscripts and Archives

⁶⁰ Abdurahman Family Paper – microfilm, UCT Manuscripts and Archives

⁶¹ Everett, p.4

born in 1931 just before Cissie's final examinations for her bachelor degree.⁶² The marriage however was not to last long and in 1936 Cissie and AH separated.⁶³ She rented a house in Vredehoek and moved in with Sam Kahn, a young Jewish lawyer, while AH continued living in the family home at 48 Searle Street. Despite the dissolution of their marriage, Cissie and AH appear to have remained good friends. His name appears on the minutes of several organisational meetings and public gatherings, especially those where Cissie was a speaker. He also gave active support to her election campaigns.⁶⁴ During her imprisonment following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, AH is reported to have been one of Cissie's frequent visitors and the relationship between them remained warm and caring.⁶⁵ The reasons for the break-up of the marriage are not known though the intimation is that it was by her choice and because of her affair with Sam Kahn.⁶⁶

Her relationship with most of her husband's family appears to have been problematic throughout her life, especially with those who were politically active. Though she had a strong friendship with her brother-in-law, Goolam Gool (they were close in age, more radical in their politics and Cissie also tutored him in English after his return from seminaries in Pakistan and Egypt)⁶⁷, they were frequent political opponents. She also found herself in political opposition to her sisters-in-law Jane Gool (married to IB Tabata) and Hawa Ahmed (Goolam's wife). Her decision to leave AH and live with a

⁶² Ibid. p.7

⁶³ Ibid. p.11 & Interview with Amina Gool – included in the film

⁶⁴ Interview with Amina Gool – not included in the film

⁶⁵ Interview with Amy Thornton – not included in the film

⁶⁶ Interview with Amina Gool – not included in the film. This was one area of Cissie's life where Amina Gool spoke around the issue without in so many words saying that Cissie's affair with Sam Kahn led to the break-up of her marriage.

⁶⁷ Amina Gool

younger, non-Muslim man appears to have added to the antipathy the Gool family felt towards her.⁶⁸

Early Political Years

The political Cissie was very much a product of her times and life. She lived a privileged life both as a young girl and later as an adult woman. Her position of privilege however did not immure her to the plight of the poor and underprivileged. Both her parents had always striven to focus their professional and political energies on issues of health and welfare for the underprivileged. As a Councillor on the City Council, Dr Abdurahman was often the champion of issues such as better medical facilities and educational opportunities for the poor. In this respect Cissie emulated these concerns for social justice.

As a product of a mixed marriage, Cissie was in word if not in deed excluded from the circle of her white friends. If issues of identity were crucial to the growing child, they played a pivotal role in her politics as a mature woman. Her focus on the mobilisation and unity of coloured people, the issues she championed as a councillor all testifies to an awareness of the iniquities suffered by people of colour. In her life and politics she embodied the aspirations, expectations and disillusionment of the majority of coloured people at the Cape. As the daughter of a white woman, Cissie would naturally have expected entrance to public places that her mother was granted as a matter of course. That this did not happen is highlighted by an incident recalled by Amina Gool. Cissie and her mother were to have tea at the Stuttaford's Tea Room in Cape Town and while

⁶⁸ Amina Gool

her mother was allowed patronage she herself was not, due to her mixed parentage.⁶⁹

The Zoology lecturer Lancelot Hogben reports a somewhat similar incident in his autobiography. There was an alleged attraction between Waradia and a lecturer in Zoology at the University of Cape (neither is mentioned by name) and Waradia was to accompany him to the annual university dance. This had raised several eyebrows and the Hogbens had decided to include Waradia in their party so as not to give the appearance that she was in fact accompanying the Zoology lecturer. However even this precaution could not prevent the uproar resulting from a coloured woman attending the university dance.⁷⁰ What these incidents must have done is open to historical and psychological enquiry, but they do speak to the question of motivation.

A crucial concern of both the film and this paper has been with the motivations behind Cissie's actions and political allegiances. While a recurring criticism has been that of her vacillating political allegiances and the lack of a coherent political philosophy, consistent praise has been heaped on her passion and commitment to whatever task she undertook and whichever organisation she allied herself with. Her politics and passionate commitment to eradicating injustices based on colour has some basis in her own experiences as a child of mixed parentage. The question that none of the oral or documentary sources have been able to answer satisfactorily is to what extent her politics and actions were an emotional response to her own experiences and to what extent they were a considered and intellectual response to perceived injustices in society. Perhaps it is a superfluous question in the grand narrative of her life and work, but it is important if one is to understand the private personality behind the public speeches.

⁶⁹ Amina Gool

As the daughter of Dr Abdurahman, Cissie's exposure to politics, election campaigns and public speaking began at an early age. Cissie was eight years old in 1905 when Dr Abdurahman was first elected as president of the African People's Organisation (formerly, the African Political Organisation) or APO.⁷¹ Established in 1902, the APO attached 5 main aims to its establishment. These were to: "promote unity between the coloured races, obtain better and higher education for our children, defend the Coloured People's social, political and civil rights, get the names of all Coloured men who have the qualification to be registered as parliamentary voters on the voters' list at the registration of voters, the general advancement of Coloured people in South Africa."⁷²

Despite being called the African People's Organisation and having an express aim to promote unity between all non-white people, the APO remained a largely coloured organisation with a majority petty bourgeois support base and following. Like subsequent non-white organisations, the APO worked at achieving acceptance and accommodation for coloured people within the status quo, rather than a radical restructuring of the social and political order. It therefore advocated, agitated and petitioned not only for the maintenance of the privileges of coloured people at the Cape, but also for the extension of these beyond the borders of the province. In view of this Dr Abdurahman consistently supported those individuals and political parties whom he believed would support the cause of the coloured people. He came to be

⁷⁰ Hogben, L , manuscript copies of chapters 11 & 12 of his autobiography in UCT Manuscripts and Archives

⁷¹ Lewis, Gavin, Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of Coloured Politics, p.27

⁷² Ibid. p.20

known as a “Smuts man” for his committed support of the Unionists first and later the South African Party.⁷³

Given these expressed aims and methods of achieving them, Dr Abdurahman presented an ideal leader. He would serve as president of the APO from his election in 1905 till his death in 1940.⁷⁴ Under his leadership, the APO changed little in respect of its political aims. His profile as a respected member of the community, as a medical doctor and, since his election in 1904 to the Cape Town City Council, as Councillor for District Six all bestowed reflected glory on the APO. Furthermore, he was “an effective campaigner, a powerful orator and a skilled politician”.⁷⁵

Much respected for his leadership and oratory skills, Dr Abdurahman was also greatly admired for his role on the City Council as Councillor for District Six and later as Provincial Councillor for Woodstock.⁷⁶ As Councillor he served on various committees such as the Public Health Committee, Streets and Drainage, Public Works and the Health and Building Regulations Committees. His main focus however, was the poor, especially in terms of providing better amenities, health facilities, employment and educational opportunities and housing.⁷⁷ Similarly in the Provincial Council he concentrated much of his power and energies on obtaining better educational and health facilities for the poor. With his emphasis on education, it is perhaps not surprising that he would play a major role in the establishment of

⁷³ Simons, Ray and Jack, Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950, (IDAF, London, 1983), p.185

⁷⁴ Ibid. p.27

⁷⁵ Ibid. p.27

⁷⁶ van der Ross, p. 7

⁷⁷ Ibid. p.6

educational institutions such as Trafalgar High School and Rahmanyah Primary.⁷⁸

Cissie's humanist politics it seems were directly and immediately shaped by the politics of her father.

While Dr Abdurahman and his generation believed in politics of accommodation and petition, the younger generation, including his daughter, espoused a more radical approach to the issues at the forefront of Cape politics. It is more than likely that Cissie's radicalisation began at university and was further shaped by contact with the numerous intellectuals and political activists she and her husband associated and socialised with. Two significant events that occurred in 1930 undoubtedly impacted not only on her political philosophy, but also on her ability to confidently articulate this. These were firstly, her speech at an APO organised mass meeting to protest the Women's Enfranchisement Bill of 1930,⁷⁹ and secondly, her meeting with John Gomas who would prove to be a long-time friend and ally in the National Liberation League.⁸⁰

The Women's Enfranchisement Act of 1930 and the Franchise Amendment Bill of 1931 collectively sought to weaken the power of the coloured vote at the Cape by giving the franchise to white women only. The APO organised mass meetings in both 1930 and 1931 to protest these measures. Cissie addressed the meeting on both occasions, offering a vocal and articulate challenge and followed this with action that sought direct appeal and confrontation. Following her speech in 1931, she led a march to Parliament demanding to speak to Hertzog.⁸¹ Swaying the masses with her

⁷⁸ *ibid.* p.7

⁷⁹ Everett, p.7

⁸⁰ Interview with Ray Alexander – not included in the film

⁸¹ Everett p.8

eloquence and charm and then taking direct action would remain a favourite tactic throughout her political career.

The thirties were a period of great intellectual activity and ideological ferment. It was a time of debate and engagement with political ideas and philosophies not only on a domestic level, but more importantly on an international level. This internationalist perspective was most deeply felt in relation with the Soviet Union and the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany. The ideological alignments internationally found an echo in the establishment of numerous organisations ranging from debating clubs and study circles to the Anti-Fascist League and the Hands off Abyssinia Committee.⁸²

These latter two organisations drew parallels between events in Europe and those in the Cape. Cissie was an active participant and spoke on various occasions of the tyranny of fascism perpetrated by the South African government. "Since the passing of the Act of Union in 1910, non-Europeans have suffered from a European dictatorship, being systematically robbed of every political right. But even this will be intensified under a fascist regime... all individual and press freedom will be lost."⁸³

A more important outcome of international events was the polarisation of the coloured intelligentsia of Cissie's generation. Two important formations in this regard were the Stalinist October Club and the Trotskyist New Era Fellowship. Established as debating clubs and study circles, both were instrumental in shaping subsequent ideological alignments and loyalties among these young coloured radicals. Cissie, perhaps due to her close ties with Sam Kahn and others in the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), found herself allied to the October Club and thus in opposition to her brother-

⁸² Lewis, p.181-2

and sisters-in-law, Goolam, his wife Hawa Ahmed and Jane Gool who frequented the debates and study circles of the New Era Fellowship.⁸⁴ These two factions would later constitute the uneasy alliance of the National Liberation League.

The National Liberation League (NLL) was founded in December 1935.⁸⁵ Cissie, together with John Gomas, James La Guma and Goolam Gool, played a leading role in its establishment and she served as President until her resignation in 1937. There is no direct evidence as to why she resigned. A letter dated September 10, 1937 written by La Guma as General Secretary of the NLL to Cissie indicates that disciplinary action was to be taken against her. The letter advises her to make a written application to the General Council of the NLL in which she should pledge to “uphold discipline of the NLL and carry on constructive work”.⁸⁶ Cissie appears to have complied with this as indicated by another letter dated November, 30, 1937, informing her of her full reinstatement.⁸⁷ These would appear to indicate that Cissie often acted independently of organisational edicts and policy and reflects a spirit of rebellious independence despite organisational policies and politics. It is a characteristic that has been a hallmark of her political career.

In its draft programme, the NLL aimed at achieving unity among working classes across the colour line. “Neither the white workers nor the non-European masses can achieve real freedom unless they achieve complete solidarity in the fight against their common enemy, the white capitalist-imperialist.”⁸⁸ It was also emphatically anti-

⁸³ Everett, p.9

⁸⁴ Lewis, p.180

⁸⁵ Ibid. p.182

⁸⁶ Abdurahman Family Papers – NLL papers, BC506 A3.17

⁸⁷ Ibid. BC506 A3.18

⁸⁸ Everett, Appendix B, Draft Programme of the NLL of South Africa, p.3

imperialist.⁸⁹ In urging black and white workers to make common cause, the NLL identified capital interest with imperial interests. It also criticised British Imperialism for holding “down the white people of South Africa, denying them their national freedom and hampering their movement for liberation with the assistance of misleaders of the Nationalist and other political parties, such as Hertzog, Malan, Wiechart, etc.”⁹⁰ As its objectives, the NLL listed issues ranging from “equal suffrage for non-Europeans on the same basis and qualifications as Europeans”, abolition of discriminatory taxes (Poll tax, Hut tax) and abolition of pass laws, to “the right of non-European athletes to take part in all national and international sporting events on an equal footing with Europeans”.⁹¹ Although its policy aspirations were wide ranging, in practice the NLL remained a largely petty bourgeois organisation.

This failure to transcend petty bourgeois interests can be ascribed to two main factors. Firstly, the NLL was unable to overcome the ideological differences between the Stalinist and Trotskyist factions. Secondly, and as a consequence of the first, it could not find consensus with regard to tactics and methods of achieving the stated aims. With regard to this latter aspect and notwithstanding differences with the APO in tactics and strategy, the NLL (like the APO) worked within the framework of accommodationist and petition politics.

The ideological differences between the Stalinist and Trotskyist factions came to the fore at the annual conference in March 1937. Goolam Gool replaced Cissie as President. The Trotskyist faction advocated a more global struggle against imperialism

⁸⁹ Drew, Allison, South Africa's Radical Tradition: A Documentary History, Vol. 1 1907-1950, (Cape Town, 1996), p.32

⁹⁰ Everett, Appendix B

⁹¹ Ibid. Appendix B, xvii

and colonialism with a working class vanguard. The Stalinist faction (strongly allied to the CPSA) meanwhile advocated a more moderate approach that advocated working within existing structures such as municipal councils and parliament in order to effect changes there.⁹² The NLL however was not successful in drawing a large support base. This was in part due to the failure of the leadership to get beyond intellectualising issues and tactics and not doing enough “spade work”.⁹³ Cissie was re-elected as president at the annual conference in 1938.

Soon after, the Cape Standard, a weekly publication aimed at a coloured readership, published an anonymous letter, which made nasty allegations regarding Cissie’s political unreliability and her use of devious tactics to regain the presidency.⁹⁴ Cissie’s response was fiery and confident in its negation of all charges. She issued a challenge to the writer to not only prove the charges, but also to discard the anonymity and prove that he or she was a voter of Ward 7 as was claimed. In her letter she states:

*The statements contained in your correspondent’s letter are nothing but a pack of lies deliberately fabricated to discredit me and the National Liberation League in the eyes of your readers. His letter deliberately creates the impression that the career of its President has been opportunistic and chequered by expulsions and resignations from various organisations, that by underhand and disagreeable methods I drove Dr Gool from the presidency. I am prepared to give 100 pounds to any non-European charity if your correspondent can prove that he is a municipal voter in Ward 7. Secondly I offer a further 100 pounds if he or anyone can prove that I have ever been expelled or have resigned from any organisation or party.*⁹⁵

Whether the allegations were unfounded or not, this incident served to publicise the internal dissension within NLL ranks. It was a dissension that would subsequently lead not only to the expulsion of Dr Gool, La Guma and others, but inevitably to the demise

⁹² Lewis, p.185

⁹³ Lewis, p.187

⁹⁴ Cape Standard, August 23, 1938

⁹⁵ Excerpts from the letter in the Cape Standard August, 30, 1938

of the NLL itself. The official reason for the split and expulsion of La Guma, Goolam Gool and others centred on differences in opinion with regard to the membership of Europeans to the NLL. In a document written by La Guma, he ascribes direct responsibility to the fact that members of the NLL disagreed in respect of European members. "That whilst Europeans could be members of the organisation, they would not be allowed to hold any official positions."⁹⁶ Cissie, with her numerous CP friends would not have countenanced such a policy.

Another factor contribution to the NLL's lack of a substantial support base, was the popularity of the APO, and in particular that of its president, Dr Abdurahman. As one of the few coloured doctors in the Cape, Dr Abdurahman would have had access to a wide range of people that would have been denied many others. He would also have drawn many more people to the APO on the basis of relationships built with them as his patients. However, despite theoretical claims by both the APO and NLL to incorporate and unify all non-whites, in practice both were more or less confined to coloured sectarian interests.

As such there was bound to be rivalry in respect of attracting supporters. During her presidency of the NLL, this rivalry meant a rivalry between Cissie and her father as president of the APO. This political rivalry was no doubt fuelled by a more personal animosity Cissie is reported to have felt towards her father resulting from his second marriage. It assumed concrete form in their support for opposing candidates in the 1938 general elections. While the APO and Dr Abdurahman personally supported

⁹⁶ Abdurahman Family Papers, BC506, Document A3.30

Hertzog's United Party and all UP candidates, the NLL under Cissie's leadership gave vocal support to socialist candidate Harry Snitcher of the CPSA.⁹⁷

In early 1938 the NLL successfully launched the Non-European United Front, NEUF, under Cissie's leadership. A far more broadly based organisation; it was at the forefront of opposition to the Stuttaford Bills⁹⁸, which proposed what became known as the servitude scheme as an alternative to the enforced residential segregation, insisted on by Malan's National Party.⁹⁹ The issue of segregated amenities, in particular residential segregation, presented an opportunity for the NLL and NEUF to attract a greater support base than it had before.

Again under Cissie's leadership, a Committee of Action was established to supervise the protest campaign against residential segregation.¹⁰⁰ Organising mass meetings, petitioning and lobbying members of parliament and generally arousing public outcry against the proposed measures, both the NLL and NEUF attained unprecedented popularity. Ironically though, this served to entrench the view that both organisations were bourgeois in theory and practice. Though the issue of residential segregation would have affected land owning and tenant coloured and black families across class divisions, its impact was far greater for middle-class coloureds.

Cissie's leadership role in the NLL, NEUF and the Committee of Action contributed considerably to the success of the campaign against residential segregation. By all accounts she was an articulate, eloquent and powerful orator who combined grace and

⁹⁷ Lewis, p. 187

⁹⁸ Drew, p. 33

⁹⁹ Lewis, p. 191

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 191

charm to put her message across. Throughout the research and especially in discussions with the interviewees, as evident in the film, the overwhelming impression has been that individuals and organisations had recognised Cissie's drawing power and had used her to further their own particular agendas. This impression, based on interview testimonies about her independent-mindedness, militates against the portrait of Cissie as a strong, independent thinker and somewhat headstrong person. It is therefore doubtful that she would have allowed herself to be used in any manner without some form of complicity in order to further her own agenda or simply to gain "maximum returns for herself as a personality".¹⁰¹

However much the purist, Trotskyist factions within the NLL, NEUF and the later Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) may have decried her practical approach to the issues at hand, they could not deny her popularity or her success as a crowd-puller. In fact, despite accusations of political opportunism and her lack of political clarity or a philosophy many of these organisations were eager to have her on board, very often in a leadership capacity.

Perhaps the biggest testament to Cissie's ability to prioritise, to recognise what the most important issues on hand were and where best she could serve both her own and the public interest, is the fact that she seemed to transcend the petty ideological differences which characterised the left from the thirties onward. The Goolam Gool faction (Trotskyist NEF), which later formed the core of the NEUM, was highly critical of working within existing structures. This essentially meant that Cissie, and the Stalinist grouping which constituted the CPSA, was at the receiving end of vituperative

¹⁰¹ Interview with Pauline Podbrey – included in the film

criticism for their decision to participate in municipal and parliamentary elections.¹⁰²

However, despite this and despite her obvious association with the CPSA, Cissie managed to be accepted onto NEUM, Anti-CAD and numerous other platforms.

This acceptance is partly due, as stated above, to the recognition of her drawing power. In May 1939 the Cape Standard reported on Cissie's tour of the Western Cape to gather support for the NEUF. The report said: "Mrs Gool in an impassioned appeal for unity under the wing of the United Front movement held her audience spellbound for fully an hour."¹⁰³ One can also not discount an element of thinking which would have recognised this political 'unreliability' but accepted it as a necessary evil which had to be harnessed because it was potent and more importantly, it was "our own". This in view of the strong issues of colour and race which divided the left, in addition to socialist ideological differences.

A greater factor in her success however, was what today would be termed political savvy. Cissie was in every respect her father's daughter. Dr Abdurahman could not have retained his leadership within the APO and his position as both City and Provincial Councillor for nearly four decades, without political canniness. It is possible that Cissie learned some aspects his art of staying in power.

But her achievement is all the more remarkable given her times and her social and cultural context. At a time when there was no universal franchise for women, let alone women achieving political renown, Cissie Gool carved a name for herself in local and

¹⁰² Amina Gool in her interview made oblique references to Cissie as a quisling – a word with great currency in the NEUM circles, which essentially meant someone who had sold out – a traitor to the cause.

¹⁰³ Everett, p.43

national politics. She did this despite the fractious nature of leftist organisations and within highly patriarchal structures.

Patriarchy as understood in feminist theory, and indeed feminism, post-dates Cissie and there is a reluctance to attach reductive labels. But that she was a woman ahead of her times is undisputed. As a coloured woman with a religio-cultural connection to a community whose politics were non-existent at best and reactionary at worst, she broke with conformity in many ways.

How the community (Muslim, coloured) of Cape Town reacted to her, or viewed her, was a question put to all the interviewees. Alternatively, to what extent was she both a product and a symbol of this community? Both the oral and documentary sources give little in response to this question. Amina Gool in her interview shed perhaps the most light in her remark that the community viewed them all as 'Chris', (Christian) and thus outside the Muslim community. A 1982 Honours thesis by I. Taliep on the politics of the Cape Muslims, quotes an incident where Cissie was seen drinking water from a public tap during Ramadaan. This caused some uproar.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, her decision to live with a younger man, who was both white and non-Muslim and while she was still legally married, must surely also have been cause for comment. But none of this seems to have impacted on her popularity and appeal.

While the above would suggest a life somewhat outside Muslim cultural boundaries, marginality would perhaps be more accurate. Both the Gool and Abdurahman family, notwithstanding her Al-Azhar graduate grandfather, by virtue of their education and

politics appear to have been on the margins of the Muslim community.¹⁰⁵ In 1925 The Cape Malay Association (CMA) had heaped condemnation on Dr Abdurahman for leading a deputation to India to plead the case of non-Europeans. Mr H. S. Gamiet of the CMA criticised Dr Abdurahman for “blackguarding the white people of his country in a purely non-European country such as India.”¹⁰⁶

Cissie herself displayed an ambivalent attitude to what would be considered ‘proper Muslim conduct’. She did not conform in dress, manner or lifestyle to the conventional Muslim woman image. To paraphrase Selim Gool, she was the woman in the English suits and hats, without purdah, and with coiffured hair.¹⁰⁷ Though her private agonies remain a mystery, it is difficult to believe that she suffered any great sense of alienation. The 1928 edition of the Cape Times Annual published an article by Cissie titled; ‘The Cape Malays: A Picturesque People’. The article and accompanying pictures of an imam, a bride in her wedding finery and a “dignified dame” among others, reflects an ambivalent attitude on the part of the writer. It describes the physical and cultural characteristics of Malay people, their religious and social origins and affiliations and future prospects. Written from an insider perspective, it is pitched at an obvious European readership with a voracious appetite for the exotic: “The life of the Malays is never dull. Even among the humblest it is crowded with social events and ceremonies. Naming, marriage and burial are the most important milestones.”¹⁰⁸ Still

¹⁰⁴ Taliep, I. ‘Coloured or Muslim?: Aspects of the Political Dilemma of the Cape Muslims, 1925-1956’ Honours Thesis, (UCT, 1982), p.6

¹⁰⁵ Both Ajam and Taliep make convincing argument for a marginal status for both the Gool and Abdurahman families vis a vis the Muslim community. Taliep quotes oral sources saying the Gools were often referred to as examples of Muslims who had strayed from their cultural and religious heritage because of their education. Ajam similarly shows a distinction in the thoughts of people like Dr Abdurahman and other Muslims around issues of education, political organisation and most importantly, the articulation of coloured and Malay identities.

¹⁰⁶ Cape Times, November 14, 1925

¹⁰⁷ Interview included in film

¹⁰⁸ Cape Times Annual, 1928, p.81

further on: "Marriage is the most elaborate and picturesque of the surviving Malay customs.....Some time before marriage the future bride drives out in a carriage with a relative. She is always beautifully dressed and calls upon her friends and relations to inform them of the coming event and invites them personally to attend her wedding."¹⁰⁹ Though obviously written from an insider perspective, the writer's ambivalent attitude towards the Malays, their cultural and religious traditions is evident in the continual use of "they", "their" and similar distancing devices. Though there is an obvious attempt at sketching a balanced picture of "Malays", but Cissie is ultimately unable to escape some aspects of the negative stereotyping of "Malay" people. "Economic competition and colour bars are responsible for a large class of unemployed. Here we find poverty, ignorance and hooliganism and many of the Malays have a reputation for being adept thieves."¹¹⁰

In the December 1926 edition of the South African Women's Magazine, she is modelling a series of Muslim outerwear for women. These photographs (which are included in the film) depict a completely veiled Cissie (with only the eyes showing), Cissie wearing different kinds of headscarves and Cissie in a traditional milaya (historically worn by women who had performed the pilgrimage to Mecca).¹¹¹

The overwhelming impression of both the article and the photographs is that of a woman of privilege gratifying the curiosity of the educated elite (mostly European) for the exotic other. This implies co-option into the ruling elites and in the case of Cissie specifically, is at variance with her later politics of identification with the common

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p.81

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p.181. See also, Adhikari, M, 'Identity and Assimilation in the Malay Community of Nineteenth Century Cape Town', History of Cape Town: Work in Progress Workshop, (UCT, 1989) for a discussion of identity formation and the principal features of Malay identity.

masses. But more importantly, this seeming contradiction attests most profoundly to Cissie's personal ambivalence around issues of identity. By temperament, education, social standing, parentage on her mother's side, and cultural interests she must have felt that she was a part of the white circles she socialised in. However, by the unwritten rules of inclusion and exclusion and less significantly, by the rule of law, she was forced to be outside this charmed circle.

The Council Years

In September 1938 Cissie decided to stand for Council elections as candidate for Ward 7. There is little documentary evidence to even hint at motivations for her decision and any comment has to be based on conjecture. Everett's conclusion is that the impulse was a combination of reaction to increasing segregationist measures by the government, a perceived need to fight these on their own turf so to speak, and a personal need to diversify her political activity.¹¹² It's a sensible postulate, especially in view of her close association with the CPSA whose policy at this point was to work at effecting change within existing structures. In May of that year Cissie had worked tirelessly in support of Harry Snitcher's (also CPSA member) candidature for the Castle Constituency.¹¹³ His eventual defeat did not deter her from standing for elections.

Her nomination was equally supported by both the NLL and CPSA and members of both organisations were frequent speakers on her election platforms. Similarly, both

¹¹¹ The South African Women's Magazine, (December 1926)

¹¹² Everett, p.22

¹¹³ Ibid. p.22

her father and former husband Dr AH Gool, were equally supportive and also spoke at numerous election meetings. Dr Gool's appearance at Cissie's election meetings seems to have been a direct consequence of the opposition's exploitation of her involvement with Sam Kahn, both politically and personally.¹¹⁴

Despite aspersions about her private life as well as accusations of racism (that she was appealing to the coloured masses on the basis of her own coloured status), Cissie won the elections with a considerable majority.¹¹⁵ In a pamphlet, titled 'Honesty is the Best Policy', issued by the NLL and written by Cissie, she responds to criticisms of racism by stating that direct representation meant that where there was a coloured majority of voters, they should have a coloured representative provided the candidate was "as good or better than the European". She states furthermore, "I do not ask for support because I am a Coloured woman. I am opposing Mr McCallum because I feel I am better able to fight for the many needs of the neglected people of Ward 7."¹¹⁶ She was elected on Monday, September 5, 1938 and at the next meeting of the City Council on September 8, 1938, she was formally welcomed as the Councillor for Ward 7.¹¹⁷

Cissie, like her father, would serve on the City Council till her death in 1963. Also, like her father, her focus as a Councillor was on the poor; on issues of housing, education, health and welfare and the general advancement of the "non-European". In the 25 years she served as Councillor, Cissie seems to have made herself thoroughly unpopular in Council meetings. The minutes of these meetings indicate that wherever there was an opportunity to oppose any form of injustice aimed at lessening the "non-

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p.31

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p.33

¹¹⁶ Abdurahman Family Papers, BC506, Document A5.7

European” status Cissie would raise motions against it. Alternatively, she was always pushing forward motions for “non-European” advancement on a variety of issues ranging from increasing wages of “non-European” Council employees to getting better trading licenses for the street vendors of District Six.

For the nearly two years that both Cissie and her father were colleagues in the Council, they often supported and seconded motions put forward by the other. In November 1938, Dr Abdurahman raised a motion that wages of unskilled labourers be increased by one penny depending on skills and duration of service. While this was seconded by Cissie, the Council minutes do not indicate whether it was carried through or rejected.¹¹⁸

Many of her detractors, especially in the Trotskyist and NEUM groupings, have criticised her involvement in the City Council as a sell-out of the principle of non-collaboration with the ‘Herrenvolk’.¹¹⁹ A recurring question has been with regard to her achievements in the Council, that despite her constant badgering of the Council, unjust policies were effected nonetheless. For example, her constant badgering of Council to make representations to the Government to repeal group segregation produced no result and residential segregation, in the form of the Group Areas Act of 1953, eventually came into effect. Similarly, the Council minutes for the 1959/60 Mayoral year record motions for the dissolution of the Boulevard Rehousing

¹¹⁷ City of Cape Town Proceedings of Council for the Mayoral Year September 1938-August 1939, Vol. 97, N.S. 8

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Hirson, Baruch ‘A Short History of the Non-European Unity Movement: An Insider’s View’ at <http://www.revolutionary-history.co.uk>, provides a balanced and useful introduction to the history of the NEUM.

Committee – of which she was a member. Her motions were rejected and she eventually resigned from this committee.¹²⁰

It is the contention of this paper that her achievements as a City Councillor, however modest these may have been, have to be seen in the broader context of the posturing, policies and actions of the Cape Town left from the 1930's onwards. Other than her involvement with the short-lived NLL and NEUF, Cissie was never really an organisation person. This does not mean that she did not belong to, speak on platforms or support the general policies of the numerous organisations with which she was allied. What it does mean is that after the demise of the NLL and NEUF, she does not seem to have involved herself in organisational conflicts or power struggles.

Cissie took her role as City Councillor extremely seriously, to the point where it would be fairly accurate to say that in terms of a political identity, that of Councillor Mrs Z Gool overshadowed any previous political identity she may have expressed. As a City Councillor then she clearly saw her role transcending the confusions and wavering of the SACP, NEUM, and the Anti-CAD, leftist organisations in which she played a somewhat crucial role.

As a councillor, the issues she championed within the City Council were those that could be described as 'bread and butter' issues that affected her immediate and broader constituency. In May 1940 Cissie raised two motions in Council. First she moved that Council increase wages of "Natives" and equalise their terms and conditions of employment with those of other Council employees. A further motion she raised was

¹²⁰ City of Cape Town Proceedings of Council for the Mayoral Year September 1959-August

to remove segregation from the Claremont Library. While Council rejected her first motion on the grounds that increasing “Native” wages would disadvantage coloured workers, it conceded on the second motion to remove segregation from the Claremont Library.¹²¹

Undaunted by defeats or setbacks, the following year she raised the issue of ‘Natives’ once more, ostensibly to get them included in the “unskilled labour” category, and thus beneficiary to a 1s. p/h in a 48-hr week pay increase. In that same year she successfully got Council to appoint non-Europeans as Council Health Inspectors.¹²² In the 1946/47-year period, she was successful in carrying a motion that Council send a deputation to the Minister of Welfare regarding a petition to feed needy children during school holidays.¹²³ In the 1952/53-year period, she was successful in getting Council to review the situation of the pondokkie dwellers of Parden Eiland.¹²⁴ She and Sam Kahn (also serving as Councillor by this time) were also successful in getting Council to consider training “non-European” chemist apprentices, as professional chemists in the Union of South Africa.¹²⁵

As City Councillor, Cissie was appointed to the boards of numerous Council Committees and external organisations such as the Hyman Liberman Institute, the Eacon Group, the Nannie Huis, the South African National Council for Child Welfare and St. Monica’s Home, among others. Within Council, and like her father before her, she served for many years on the board of the Public Health Committee. She served as

1960, Vol. 118, No. 29

¹²¹ Council Minutes, Vol. 98 N.S. 9, September 1939-August 1940

¹²² Ibid. Vol. 100, N.S. 11, September 1941-August 1942

¹²³ Ibid. Vol. 105 N.S. 16, September 1946-August 1947

¹²⁴ Ibid. Vol. 111, N.S. 22, September 1952-August 1953

¹²⁵ Ibid. Vol. 106, N.S. 17, September 1947-August 1948

Chair of the Dental Clinics Special Committee and in August 1951 the Council noted a special recommendation of her exemplary performance as Chair of the Public Health Committee.¹²⁶ In October 1948 she attended the South African Health Congress as Council member of the Public Health Committee. In September of the following year she also attended a conference of the Nursery School Association of South Africa which met in Durban.¹²⁷

But she was not content to fight in Council only, and as President of both the NLL and NEUF, she very often galvanised both organisations to support her on these issues. As a Councillor she consistently raised objections to any measures that sought to introduce segregation; these varied from residential segregation to segregated amenities such as beaches and libraries. As the president of the NLL and NEUF she would motivate both organisations to arrange mass protest meetings, petition drives and write letters of protest and petition to various officials.

The war years brought acute food shortages in Cape Town. Both within Council and without, Cissie was at the forefront of the crisis. Within Council she raised the motion that Council make representations to the Prime Minister to alleviate the food crisis, especially among the poor. She further asked the Council to introduce a system of rationing food and clothes to ensure fair distribution.¹²⁸ Outside the Council and as President of the NLL she was at forefront of marches to merchants who were suspected of hoarding foodstuffs such as rice, flour, sugar and beans.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Ibid. Vol. 109, N.S. 20, September 1950-August 1951

¹²⁷ Ibid. Vol. 107, N.S. 18, September 1948-August 1949

¹²⁸ Ibid. Vol. 102, N.S. 13, September 1943-August 1944

¹²⁹ Amina Gool – interview not included in the film

In evaluating her contributions as City Councillor, one has to bear in mind that Council politics were defined by very narrow parameters. It was the nature of the racial hierarchy that coloureds inevitably got a better deal than blacks and coloured issues received far more and better attention than did issues affecting black people. Given this it is similarly inevitable that her political focus would have been sectarian and would have served sectarian interests. In this regard, Cissie was unable to sustain the earlier radicalism, which pitted her generation against that of her father. And ultimately, she ended up wearing the political mantle of her father, especially with regard to her work as a City Councillor.

In June 1952 Cissie, along with two other councillors, was briefly unseated from the City Council for failing to pay her rates by the due date. All were re-elected in July.¹³⁰ She would serve as Councillor until her sudden death in July 1963.

Conclusion

The writing and filming of any biography requires selection and choices. The relative lack of sufficient personal documentary sources and the refusal of some oral sources to clarify aspects of their testimonies, as discussed in this paper, have dictated some choices. Other choices have been based on ethical considerations. Cissie inspired extremes of emotion in people, either antipathy or respect and affection. This was based in no small measure on her outspoken manner, and her courage to break social and religious conventions as well as her politics. She was a legendary figure who was the subject of comment and gossip. While the subject of her relationship with Sam

¹³⁰ Everett, p.91

Kahn has been explored in detail in the film, both the film and this paper have chosen to ignore the reported gossip, which focused mainly on this aspect of her private life.

Cissie was by no accounts an overly domesticated woman. Her perceived human 'frailties' were manifest. By the social conventions of her times, she 'failed' as a wife (and by the same token AH Gool failed as a husband), as a mother she was a 'nag' and as a daughter, her early politics would probably have caused great dismay to her father. Her 'flaws' as a politician, according to oral testimonies, included political instability and the lack of a coherent political philosophy. Despite these shortcomings she managed to retain a popularity that was based in no small measure on her ability to identify and empathise with the very real bread and butter issues of her constituency. Her beauty, charm and family connections would also have lent lustre to her public profile.

A challenge of any biography is that of presentation of the 'subject'. Both the film and this paper have emphasised Cissie's political emulation of her father. While Cissie and her generation did advocate and adopt a more radical political philosophy and approach than that of her father's generation, she was not able to sustain that radicalism beyond differences in rhetoric and strategy. Where Dr Abdurahman sought to effect change through peaceful means (this took the form of petitions, bargaining the coloured vote and personal appeals), Cissie and her colleagues employed more forceful and confrontational methods. She was often at the forefront of marches on parliament, or during the war years, raids on merchants suspected of hoarding foodstuffs, or addressing mass meetings that incited people to greater action than that espoused by the APO.

It is as a Councillor though that Cissie emulates her father's politics most clearly. And notwithstanding their political and personal differences, Dr Abdurahman supported his daughter's election campaign. Likewise in Council meetings they displayed enough maturity to recognise that personal and professional differences had to be set aside in order to achieve common goals. In this respect, both supported each other's motions.

As discussed elsewhere in this paper, both the documentary film Cissie Gool and this paper fulfil a supplementary role. Both filmed and written presentations of history are circumscribed by the limits of each medium. With film, these limitations revolve around the 'double tyranny' of documentary film. This 'double tyranny' is in the form of the unrelenting pace at which film has to move so as not to bore audiences and the need to match visual image to the spoken word of the narration. The criticisms of filmed presentations of history (poor medium for discursive analysis, impoverished information load, a trade-off of historical analysis for visual and/or emotive appeal) are all interlinked with this 'double tyranny'. These criticisms are premised on filmed history as an alternative to written history, not as a supplement. As a supplement to written presentations of history, history on film can provide a crucial addition to both the production and dissemination of historical knowledge.

As previously discussed, the multiplicity of viewpoints that emerge from the oral sources, precludes a singular representation and interpretation of Cissie. For the members of the CPSA, Cissie was a respected comrade. The people who belonged to the Trotskyist faction that constituted the NLL, the NEUM and others, Cissie's was at best an erratic politics of self-aggrandisement. But there was another Cissie who

remained largely independent of political factionalism; who was able to transcend petty politics in order to make whatever contribution wherever she could. There was also the Cissie who probably thrived on the adoration, the acclaim and respect of people, a Cissie who derived validation for herself as a personality. Another Cissie possibly suffered private agonies as a rejected lover or a mother whose son had committed suicide.

Because Cissie is unable to make a self-presentation or offer her point of view, she has of necessity to be framed exclusively through the documentary records, oral sources and ultimately the viewpoint of the historical researcher and/or filmmaker.

As filmmaker, I have made deliberate choices and selections that accord with my understanding of the subject matter. It is no coincidence that the final words and images of the film are that there were many Cissie's. This is not to claim uniqueness on behalf of Cissie, but merely to illustrate that there were many claimants to knowing Cissie. But more importantly, and despite the testimony of the claimants, the historical Cissie remains an enigma in so far as much of her personal motivations remain shrouded in mystery and based on conjecture.

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