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THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S MONUMENT
BROCHURES:
A RHETORIC OF MALE SUPREMACY

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THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S MONUMENT BROCHURES: A RHETORIC OF MALE SUPREMACY

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Language as a medium of communication reveals a changing paradigm with regard to Afrikaner women when an analysis is made of the ways they are inscribed in writings on the National Women's Monument (*Nasionale Vrouemonument*) near Bloemfontein.

This paper argues that an examination of the language and contents found in the commemorative publications on the monument reveals the following:

- that before the Afrikaner's rise to power the rhetoric used was designed to confine the Afrikaner women ever more tightly into the mythology of Afrikanerdom as submissive, docile emissaries of the volks-ideal
- that once the Afrikaner had gained political and economic security and power, women were quietly discarded as progenitors and nurturers of the volk but remained subject to a patriarchy that had simply modernised itself.

The status of the Afrikaner woman in contemporary times thus, can be seen as the product of two culturally separate yet collusionary and often overlapping confinements. To wit - *volkskap* and the mass media.

By confinement is meant the way one allows a limitation to be placed upon oneself, either wittingly or unwittingly which produces a form of docility - where there is an act of manipulation on behaviour and gestures which is imposed. I am using the word "Afrikaner" as a general designation for white, Afrikaans speaking people although I am aware of the fact that the definition which the *volksvaders* of old would have us believe as having a certain immutability about it, is no longer secure and no longer designates a separate, identifiable group. Nowadays, there are Afrikaans speaking Africans, Boere, South Africans and plain Afrikaans speakers, as well as those who still regard themselves as members of the Boere volk. Coloured and black Afrikaans speakers were excluded from participation in the volks-process and do not form part of the first confinement. The first confinement (*volkskap*), despite historical evidence to the contrary, insisted on producing Boer women who were docile in the home, but fiery and spirited *moeders van die volk* when it

came to public declamations for Afrikaner nationalism.

In order to illustrate these confinements I propose to look at the way in which Afrikaner women are regarded, are gazed at, are treated by the writers of two commemorative brochures on the National Women's Monument. The first booklet, written by N.J. van der Merwe, was published during or soon after 1926 (1) - a time when the Afrikaner nationalist movement, despite considerable political dissension and economic and class differences, was gaining momentum. The second booklet, written by J.J. Oberholster, was published in 1961 - the year South Africa became a republic, a time when the National Party was at its strongest and most triumphant, when most of the apartheid laws had already been promulgated and when the definition of the Afrikaner of himself as a hegemonic group was firmly established and entrenched. It was a time when the poor white question had been "resolved" and most forms of knowledge production were firmly ensconced within the parameters of Christian National Education. A third brochure is a slightly updated translation into English of Van der Merwe's text (Britz, s.o.).

The earlier volkskap confinement took place above and beyond the norms pertaining to women in turn of the century society generally and entailed the complete sublimation of Afrikaner women to the upliftment and regeneration of the volk specifically. This gesture of volks-enclosure, had as its primary impetus, the erection of the Women's Monument or Vrouemonument with the express intention of honouring the more than 26 000 women and children who had died in the British concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Considering that just over 6000 Boer men had died either on the battlefield, or from illness or as prisoners of war or from accidents during the same period, the number of civilian deaths in a war that lacked the technologies of modern-day devastation, can be seen as disproportionately high. It must be added though that the texts fail to reveal the number of Coloured and Black women who also died in the camps. Coloured women, especially after the farms had been burnt down and the land rendered barren, were often incarcerated in the camps along with their employers. The National Women's Monument, however, was erected in memory of *only* the white, Boer women. Totius, one of the most fervent Afrikaner nationalist poets of that time, wrote a poem concerning the erection of the monument which acts as the preface to Van der Merwe's text. The first two lines of the poem are particularly revealing:

Hou sien ek rys uit jongs vertee
 'n Rachelbeeld, swertlik blank.

The free translation of this poem in the English language version (Britz) reads as:

From mists of recent past there rises
A Rachel vision shining white.

"Shining white" is actually more poetically ambiguous than "suiwerlik blank", and if one did not know the historical context, there would be little indication that it was actually referring to a particular ethnic group. A "Rachelbeeld" or vision of Rachel is a direct reference to the long-suffering Rachel of the Old Testament but in this context is particularly illuminating in that it becomes a metaphor for the Afrikaner woman and reflects the gender ideology of the fundamentalist Boer men of that period.

Both Van der Merwe's and Oberholster's publications, by way of background, inform us that in 1906, ex-Free State President, M.T. Steyn raised the idea of a monument to a group of prominent Free State men. It was immediately decided that such a memorial or monument was a matter of national concern and at the next meeting delegates from all the Dutch churches and the political organisations which represented the ideals of the Afrikaners in the four colonies were present. As a national monument it was felt that it had to transcend differences in terms of class, economic welfare, politics and religion. The question of colour-based ethnicity was not even considered.

President Steyn became one of the most eloquent and expressive forces behind the volks-enclosure and subordination of women to the ideal of building up a decimated, and in more ways than one, heterogeneous group of people. Despite considerable political dissension among the Afrikaner in 1926, the Afrikaner volks-movement was gaining momentum and there is to be seen in Van der Merwe's text the simultaneous convergence of the ideal of the volksmoeder and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. President Steyn's pleas for the monument which are extensively quoted from in the 1926 publication, reflect the popular sentiments pertaining to women generally and anticipate the enclosure of women in the service of the volk - and the volk here is most definitely a masculine phenomenon.

By the time the second brochure was published in 1961, the Afrikaners had gained power beyond their wildest expectations. It was a time when the definition of the Afrikaner as an hegemonous group was secure. The volksmoeder had become redundant and she no longer had such a significant role to play in the upliftment of the Afrikaner - she had done her bit as reproductive engine and the population had grown spectacularly.

The folk was strong, powerful and rich. The Afrikaner woman was ripe for a second confinement - this time by the mass media and western standards of femininity.

The first brochure (1926) is clearly intended as a kind of mobilisatory text where role models, it is to be expected, would be based on the male and female heroes of the past. But this is not so. The men, such as President Steyn, General De Wet and Dr Kestell (a theologian) are lionised while the women have been largely stripped of their nineteenth century past as women who fought alongside the men on the battlefield, and who helped push and pull loaded wagons through drifts and over mountains. Heroics and mythologies aside, there is enough documented evidence that the Boer women had the physical toughness and endurance to hold their own against the men. In fact in 1843, a delegation of Boer women confronted the British High Commissioner in Natal and demanded a say in the affairs of state in the colony. A Dr Okulis (pseudonym for Willem Postma), who wrote extensively about the exploits, moral fibre etc. of the Boer women tells us that "The wife of Rev. Erasmus Smit, sister of [Gerrit] Maritz" was the spokeswoman (1916: 65). Fortunately sufficient records exist for us to know that she was actually Susanna Smit. Anyway, Susanna Smit argued that as recompense for the battles in which they had fought with their husbands, they had been promised a vote in all the affairs of government. They were now demanding this right even though the *Volkersaad* had reneged on the promise. Failing that, they would walk barefoot back over the Drakensberg rather than become British subjects (in Okulis 1916: 86). The issue here is not so much the fact that a fledgling suffragette movement was squashed in its infancy, but the fact that the Boer men had promised them a say in the new Republic. Within a patriarchal society of that time - this was unprecedented and considering the fundamentalist religious opinions held by the Voortrekkers, doubly unprecedented. It is therefore not surprising that this vow was ignored by the Boer patriarchs - after all it was only a promise to women. As Isabel Hofmeyr has so succinctly shown, even the Boers' vow to God (Day of the Covenant) was only sporadically upheld until such time as it was resurrected by Afrikaner nationalists during the twentieth century (Hofmeyr, 1991: 69/71). The question of the Women's Monument takes on an even greater poignant irony when it is considered that the opening and unveiling ceremonies were planned to take place on the Day of the Covenant (Dingaan's Day) on 16 December 1915.

The question we have to ask is that whenever relative peace settles over an area and homes are being built or rebuilt and farms and towns

established, whether the societal norms generally pertaining elsewhere at that time are not simply reverted back to. We have to ask whether the women's sphere then becomes re-defined and maintained by the prevailing patriarchal structures, regardless of the immediate past. Contrary then to past evidence, in Van der Merwe's publication readers are presented with role models of women who are patient, suffering, afflicted, frail, defenceless, tender, delicate, refined and civilised.

Women are presented as that weak section of society who have given their lives on the altar of freedom for love of the fatherland. I quote directly from the 1926 text: "Hulle lye is met moed en geduld gedra" (p.5) (They suffered courageously and patiently (Britz, p.6)); "dit was veel skoner vir die swakke vrou om onder al daardie siele en liggaamlike lye haar las te dra" (p.6) (... a far nobler act of a frail woman to carry her burden under all the spiritual and physical suffering she had to endure ... (Britz, p.6)); "watter eerbied dwing die tere vrou nie af nie" (p.6) (how much more respect does not the frail woman command (Britz, p.6)) and so on.

Certainly the women of the camps are heroines, but heroines of suffering and affliction who provided an inspiration for their husbands in the veld and on the battlefield. Theirs was a death for the fatherland and in fact the words *vaderland* and *vaderlandsliefde* occur on almost every page of the publication. The women's physical and mental frailty reflects a particularly Victorian attitude by the patriarchy toward women - with the exception that they now have a political role to play which is vital to the volk as a healthy organism (cf. Brink, p. 273).

They become a muted group - muted by the internalisation of the language used to describe them and such a redefinition entails a space of muted subservience to the men and the volk. The feminine ideal was frailty, delicacy, a nurturing disposition and a fiery belief in the righteousness of God. We have the paradoxical situation that mostly male writers wrote books about the Afrikaner women of the previous century as if they were a truly exceptional breed - as if things which were considered everyday within the heroics normally ascribed to men - could be done by women as well. But nowhere is credence given to the fact that the roles and spheres overlapped so consistently and apart from obvious anatomical differences there was very little to distinguish between as far as activities on trek were concerned. But these texts were never a plea for the imposition of equal rights between men and women, but a plea that every Afrikaner woman of the early twentieth century to throw herself into that immutable thing called volks-consciousness. And it is this idea

of volk that engenders the greatest submissiveness - that becomes a concept so internalised that the fierce spirit of independence that other writers have imbued the women with, is not a personal independence but an independence for the men with the women in tow. It is a rhetoric designed to weave them into a confinement that suited Afrikaner patriarchy and the mythology of unity.

And, the women collaborated in their confinement. For example, the SAVF (Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue-federasie) of the Transvaal noted in their constitution that they were to "werk om onze voormanne te ondersteunen" (work to support our male leaders), while the Cape-based ACVV (Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue-vereniging) wrote into their constitution the following: "Wij verbonden ons, in de zaak van opvoeding, onze volksvoormannen, die van onze zienwijze zijn, te steunen op elke mogelijke wijze" (we are bound, in matters of education, to support in every way possible, those men who are leaders and of the same opinions as us) (in Stockenström, s.a.).

Van der Merwe's text is clearly, as noted above, intended as a mobilisatory text and the sentimental, emotionally charged language was not intended to add to the already impressive image of the Boer women's heroics of the past, but was especially intended to herd their legendary independence of spirit into the new laager of nationalism. The writer generously quotes from the public statements and opening address of President Steyn in a section entitled "The Monument's Message to the Volk of South Africa": "What was the strength of the weak women that could generate such heroines?" ... "Blessed is a volk that has such women; and a volk that has sprung forth from such women need not have to fear its future... May it [the Monument] stand as an inspiration to the volk... And if there is anyone from whom Volk and Vaderland demand great and heavy sacrifices, let this Monument teach him to what sacrifices true love of the Fatherland has led to" (1926: 12-13).

Emily Hobhouse's address, which was read on her behalf at the opening ceremony is also quoted from extensively. For Emily Hobhouse, the Fatherland of Steyn and other Afrikaner officials involved with the unveiling of the Monument, becomes instead female - a motherland:

Even so did Destiny, the mighty Sculptor, [in Van der Merwe's text this is simply translated as the Almighty] ... like clay in his hands take these simple women and children from their quiet homes, mould and chasten them through successive stages of their suffering, till at length, purified and perfected to the Master-mind by the fierce fire of their trial, they passed from human sight forever in the sacred memory of your land.

Their spirit which we feel so near to us today warns ever: 'Beware lest you forget

what caused that struggle in the past. We died without a murmur to bear our part in saving your country from those who loved her not but only desired her riches" (in Van Reenen 1984: 403)

But, Van der Merwe chooses to close this section in his own words: "The Monument calls with mighty voice for sacrifice [*selfopoffering!*] to God and Fatherland" (1926: 17). (In the translated version Britz prefers to use "devotion" in place of the more accurate "sacrifice".) Van der Merwe neglects to quote the following words which appear in the closing section of Hobhouse's opening address: "They [the Boer women] have shown *the world* that never again can it be said that woman deserves no rights as Citizen because she takes no part in war. This statue stands as a denial of that assertion. Women in equal numbers to the men earned the right..." (Van Reenen 1984: 407).

The last two thirds of Van der Merwe's text is devoted to biographical sketches of President Steyn (5 pages), General Christiaan de Wet (3 pages) and Emily Hobhouse (22 pages). The extensive number of pages devoted to Hobhouse are used primarily to give the reader more background to conditions in the camps and Hobhouse's difficulties in securing aid for the Boer women and children.

Apart from the names mentioned in the biographical sketches of the abovementioned three, the names of men involved in the erection of the Monument total 23 different male individuals. However the names of Emily Hobhouse and Mrs Steyn feature on a regular basis as well.

By contrast, Oberholster's 1961 text lists the names of 51 different men who either served on the various committees in some way or the other or were involved in the unveiling ceremonies. Mrs Steyn's and Emily Hobhouse's names are barely mentioned and no quotes from the latter's address are given. The tone and writing style of this later publication differ markedly from the one written more than 30 years earlier. Oberholster's reads like a brick-by-brick account of the erection and unveiling ceremonies of the monument. It is filled with trivial information such as the transportation of the sandstone blocks from Kroonstad and lists members of the working committees and the numerous sub-committees (all male). The tone is brisk and once the reasons for the erection of the monument have been dispensed with within the first page or so, the writer felt free to concentrate on the physical erection of the monument and the endless ceremonies of unveiling on 16 December 1913. Little appeal is made to the folk and even less to the women. Apart from the fact that many of the people who had fought in the war or who had

survived the camps were by this time dead, it must be remembered that extraneous political and economic circumstances at the beginning of the sixties had changed considerably from the period following immediately after the Anglo-Boer War, that major, emotionally-laden appeals to become a volksmoeder or and integral part of the volk were no longer necessary.

So secure was the Afrikaner of himself that Oberholster could relate instances of dissension and bad feeling among Afrikaner ranks regarding the erection of the monument: what form it should take (a monument, a hospital, an institution of some sort); counter-monument proposals by Gen. Louis Botha; and misgivings by members of the Bloemfontein City Council that it would engender "racial hatred". The myth of a hegemonic group of people was successfully established and with power and control over the dissemination of knowledge firmly in the hands of the ruling nationalist government, the idea of "confinement" of women for and on behalf of Afrikanerdom can be seen to have been quietly dropped and women assigned a role beyond the volk's public profile. The Vrouemonument had unwittingly become the symbol of unmitigated male success.

And indeed, descriptions of the Monument in both publications start off by concentrating on the centrepiece, the 120 foot high (35 metres) obelisk which Van der Merwe (1926) describes as follows: "impressive in its simplicity the commemorative needle looks out over the koppies and surrounding plains and eloquently brings *his* message to the volk and beckons [the volk] from everyday life to higher and purer spheres (1926: 19, my italics).⁽²⁾ Oberholster follows in the same line of thought: "Situated in the veld and sharply etched against the koppies which form a natural yet artistic backdrop, it commands the scene, while standing free and without pretension as much as those, whose memories it evokes. Slender and impressive in its simplicity the obelisk rises, symbol of ennobling aspirations and exalted ideals" (1961:19). And indeed, considering the aspirations and ideals of the statesmen, the obelisk, as male symbol becomes the transcendental signifier of a phallogocentric volks-metaphysic. Only after these eloquent calls to the volk do both Van der Merwe and Oberholster direct their attention to the lesser statuary at the base of the obelisk. As male signifier, the obelisk stands as metaphor for the Afrikaner establishment, a stark curator watching over all un-volklike transgressions. In short, the obelisk, to borrow from Foucault's elucidation of Bentham's panopticon design, becomes the panoptical volks-consciousness.

The bronzes, designed and cast by Anton van Wouw, take on the nature of passive signifiers. The descriptions of the main statue in both publications, is left to Dr J.D. Kestell who wrote in the *Kerkboord* of 25 December 1913 that there is a woman seated with an emaciated, dying child on her lap. "Bereft of spirit she stares over the Free State plains, overwhelmed with sorrow . . . Next to her is a standing woman, staring proudly to the east, seeing the Unseen [or Ineffable] - a new sunrise for the Afrikaner folk which will erupt through the dark sorrow" (in Oberholster 1961: 20).

The side panels depict women and children on their way to camp with the smouldering ruins of their homes and crops behind them, and women tending a dying child within a camp tent. Below the former panel is inscribed "For Freedom, Volk and Fatherland" while the latter has the words "I shall not Forsake Thee, I shall not Leave Thee".

As an aside it is particularly striking how similar in form Van Wouw's bronze centre statue is to the Pietàs of the Renaissance sculptors. This can possibly be ascribed to Emily Hobhouse's advice after she had seen the first maquette in Van Wouw's studio in Rome. She writes in a letter to Jan Smuts that "[B]etween you and me strictly - it required real artistic genius for this job, and the poor man is only an inferior though painstaking artist and quite devoid of genius" (Van Reenen 1964: 390).

From photos in both publications we see that partially enclosing the obelisk, main statue and side panels is a low encircling wall. Oberholster, writing when most of the protagonists mentioned in his publication were already dead, notes that "Upon completion of the Monument it was felt that it would only *really* be complete once a statesman, a warrior and a man of God lay buried there" (1961: 21, my italics). Consequently, President Steyn, General de Wet and Dr Kestell have been buried within the embrace of the encircling arms of the surrounding wall. Emily Hobhouse's ashes were placed in a wall niche and we are informed that upon the intervention of Louis Botha, Mrs Steyn was buried in her husband's grave.

The male constructed images of the Afrikaner woman during the so-called first "confinement" emphasised her role as servant to the folk as nurturer, keeper of moral standards, educator and promoter of the language. It served a specific political purpose and the Afrikaner woman's collaborative role in bringing this about, albeit not always from the public platform, should not be underestimated. (In this respect the minutes and records of the various women's organisations such as the ACVV and SAVF are particularly enlightening.)

The second "confinement" started in earnest once the Afrikaner had

gained political and economic supremacy. Oberholster's 1961 text has largely discarded the Afrikaner woman. She was no longer necessary as willing and willed concubine of the Fatherland. To my mind, the way he relishes giving precedence to the lists of male committee members and speakers, the way he foregrounds almost wholly all the male-dominated plans around the erection and unveiling of the Monument is telling evidence that the Afrikaner woman had been placed even further outside the modern historical process. The final paragraphs of Oberholster's text concentrate on renovations to the Monument and the fact that a War Museum has been erected on the Women's Monument terrain.

The Women's Monument had become symbol not only of a rhetoric of male supremacy but also the "doctie body" of a modernised patriarchy. The question to be asked is what has happened to the Afrikaner woman now that she is no longer needed by the volk, now that the definition of the Afrikaner is no longer as secure as volks-mythology would have us believe in the first six decades of this century. Today, with the possible exception of women involved with the far-right political sector or belonging to certain fundamentalist religious groupings, the Afrikaner woman's behaviour is less regulated by the church, the volk or the establishment than it ever was before this century. There are no longer public and vociferous admonishments for her to remain in the house and confine herself only to wifely, motherly duties or to busy herself with the upliftment of the Afrikaner via the women's organisations. Unfortunately the fact that she is no longer called upon and expected to be a *moeder van ons volk* does not imply that she has been released from all confinements. She is now part of a far more insidious confinement which, on the surface, it can be argued, is self-imposed and entails a consistent, relentless discipline against the body. Where, to quote Sandra Lee Bartky "there is a tyranny of slenderness" and women are "forbidden to become large or massive; [where] they must take up as little space as possible and be as hairless as new-born infants" (1980: 73). Where, simply in terms of the fact that a woman is supposed to be made-up, have her hair in place, follow an exercising regime, monitor everything she does, there always lurks the "presupposition of defect".

The Afrikaner woman's second confinement in the twentieth century and one which is likely to extend into the next, is a confinement which faces most women in the world today but especially the first-world woman. It is not a new confinement by any means, but the strictures of discipline it imposes via the mass media, is greater than it ever was. This bodily regime is particularly invasive and to quote Foucault entails "a

machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it" (Foucault, 1979:138).

The Afrikaner as metaphor for most white, Afrikaans-speaking women might have collapsed, but a new metaphor, that of the female image in the mass media, has emerged. The question to be asked generally of all women nowadays, regardless of class or linguistic grouping is whether a resistance to the second confinement is at all possible "since it is women themselves who practice this discipline on and against their own bodies" (Bartky 1988: 81). Both confinements, however, rely on forms of docility which render women as transformable objects. This paper, it is hoped, has illuminated such implied transformations and manipulations via the way women are inscribed (or not inscribed) within the two National Women's Monument brochures.

Notes

1. No publication date for Van der Merwe's text can be found. However, according to the evidence in the text it was published after Emily Hobhouse's death in 1925 and before 1941. Prof. M.E.C. van Schoor, who heads the Women's Monument Commission at the present time feels that it was written and published during or soon after 1926. A third Afrikaans language commemorative text is being prepared for publication by Prof Van Schoor. There is no publication date for Britz's publication either. However, judging from the updated information therein it was published in the period between 1955 and 1961 when Oberholster's text was released.
2. Although the rule is not strictly followed these days, Afrikaans grammatical rules stipulate that all non-organic things should be designated as male. Britz translates the "his" as "its".
3. All translations from texts written in Afrikaans are my own with the exception of those in Van Reenen and where indicated by Britz.
4. This paper is part of a longer article on the Afrikaner and gender which will appear in *Agenda* 13. Sections of the article were also presented at the 1992 SAVAL Conference.

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