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STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF APARTHEID

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The Class, Colour and Gender of Carnival: Aspects of a cultural form in inner Cape Town, c.1939 - c.1959

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By the start of the Second World War the inhabitants of Cape Town possessed a well-developed repertoire of public leisure and popular cultural ventures. But, with few exceptions, social divisions of class overlapped with cleavages based on colour in the experience of leisure and in the production of popular culture. While the mostly white middle-class citizens of Cape Town gravitated towards the Municipal Orchestra[1], plush city cinemas and theatres[2], and the often customarily segregated seasides, members of the predominantly `coloured' working class engaged themselves in private pleasures like household music-making[3] and the

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1 A reading of any of the meeting minutes of the Amenities Committee of the City Council reveals the priority the orchestra received. See for example **Cape Archives**, Minutes of the Amenities Committee of the City Council, January 1947, 1\4\5\5\1\6 for the attention given to the maintenace of the orchestra. See *The Sun* 8 March 1940 for complaints by the `coloured' petty bourgeoisie over the lack of financial support for the `coloured' Spes Bona Orchestra and the selection of music offered by the Municipal Orchestra (the discourse is revealing): `...don't feed us all on "Chopin", otherwise we shall renege and go to the bioscope instead'.

2 See Thelma Gusche's 1946 doctoral thesis published as, *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895 - 1940*, (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1972)

3 See for instance *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mrs Asa Jassiem for instance: `But we were very fond of singing these Afrikaans liedjies you know. And every Sunday my cousin, he's also dead now, but was much older than I am and they used to come there

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public leisure of choral clubs, cheap inner-city cinemas and an underworld of gambling such as `throwing dice' and `fah-fee'.[4] Legal betting at Kenilworth and Milnerton racing grounds and some of the seasides, were sites where class and colour was slightly blurred. About the former an observer noted at the time that,

> `the various stands (at Kenilworth) are open to all-comers according to their purse, with the exception of the enclosure reserved for members of the Turf Club. Race-going is a favourite Saturday afternoon pastime for the Cape Town Coloureds, and there are occasions when up to a quarter of the Grand Stand's patrons appear to be Coloured or Malay.'5

If the sounds of musical performance and the costs of gambling reflected the class and colour configuration of the city in the pre- and post-war years, then organised sport such as football, rugby and cricket compressed the same inequalities and tensions.[6] An event of singular significance on the calendar of working-class culture was the New Year's Carnival - and it expressed in real and symbolic terms the imbalances, aspirations and suspicions of the city and its underclasses. This paper explores the class, colour and gender character of Cape Town popular culture through an examination of the New Year's Carnival

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when we were making food and we used to sing and go on. I mean we had really enjoyment at home by doing that.'

4 `Fah-fee' was a `numbers game' controlled by a few inner-city Chinese who used `coloured' `runners' to collect bets and distribute `returns'. I thank Mr Vincent Kolbe for his assistance in defining `fah-fee'.

5 Sheila Patterson observed, *Colour and Culture in South Africa: A Study of the Status of the Cape Coloured people within the Social Structure of the Union of South Africa*, (London, RKP, 1953), p131,

6 See Sheila Patterson, Colour and Culture, p131; ` There are no colour-blind European sports associations, and the European associations show little if any interest in their Non-European opposite numbers'.

from the start of World War Two to the end of the nineteen fifties.

In human history and society carnival is both perennial and ubiquitous, and studies of the phenomenon have emerged from nearly all disciplines and perspectives in the social sciences.[7] One anthropologist has recently defined carnival as,

> `a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of co-ordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview.'[8]

The New Year's carnival, also generally known as the `coon carnival', displayed nearly all aspects of this definition - it recurred at set intervals, it mobilised a massive popular base, and ethnic and historical links bounded participants during the festival. While the carnival was borne out of a local social consensus of sorts, between the city bourgeoisie and the ruled, and among the poor themselves, it also possessed an ambiguity and played on meanings of space, time and position. Carnival was many things at the same

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7 A huge literature on carnival has emerged from within history and anthropology in recent years. Among the work I have used are: Natalie Zemon Davies, `The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth Century France'in *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies*, 50, February 1971; John Stewart, `Patronage and Control in the Trinidad Carnival'in V.W.Turner and E.M.Bruner (eds), *The Anthropology of Experience*, (University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1983); Alison Raphael, `Samba Schools in Brazil'in *International Journal of Oral History*, 10(3), 1989; and David Birmingham, `Carnival at Luanda' in *Journal of African History*, 29(1), 1988

8 A. Falassi (ed.), *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, (Albuquerque, University of Mexico Press, 1987),p2

time. On the one hand it perpetuated certain values of the inner-city community, on the other hand it criticised the prevailing order.[9] Thus, in studying the carnival, a social history narrative should attempt to grasp some of the rich symbolic structures and meanings underlying what was from the late nineteenth century a periodic recurrence - regarded by some of the 'coloured' petty bourgeoisie in the nascent left as working-class diversion and an expression of primeval coloured ethnicity.

The New Year's Carnival was an annual celebration incorporating the whole of the inner-city and appropriated variously by different class and social interests in the city. It is precisely because of the lack of fixity in the meaning of the carnival and its openness to diverse interpretations that it was invested with so much attention. Yet, at the same time that there was no control over its meaning the event was itself an interpretation of the community. Carnival, the occasion, was not only interpretable it was also a metaphor and an interpretation of the society in which it occurred since, in the words of Clifford Geertz, 'societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations.'[10] For carnival to have possessed the richness and complexity that it had it could definitely not have been a parade glorifying the status quo.

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9 See Natalie Zemon Davies, 'The Reasons of Misrule', p41 and p74

10 Clifford Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight' in his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York, Basic Books, 1973). I want to thank Patrick Harries for pointing me to this very useful study.

It was not an `official carnival' in the sense of being floated by and for the sake of dominant commercial and other ruling class interests, but neither was it completely a `non-official carnival', unfettered by the influence of members of the bourgeoisie. It stood somewhere between the `official' and the `non-official carnival' though leaning more to the `non-official' festival as described by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whereby,

> `carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order: it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions.'[11]

The occupation of public space by the dispossessed, the control of movement in this commercially hallowed space by the crowd, the shift of focus from the powerful onto the powerless, the motley garb and bright colours of troupers, the overt presence of the transvestite, known locally as the `moffie', at the head of nearly every `coon' troupe, the uncontrolled mixing of the sexes, generations and also colours, the near absence and powerlessness of the police, the throng of proletarian music, and the happy but cynical lyrics of carnival songs all bear testimony to the momentary anarchic character of the festival, to the symbolic inversion of the dominant social and moral order. But this was possible precisely because control and domination were central, though not unquestioned, elements in the experience of the Cape Town working-class. As Umberto Eco has observed,

> `In a world of absolute permissiveness and complete anomie no carnival is possible, because nobody would remember what is being called (parenthetically) into question. Carnival comic, the moment of transgression, can exist only if a background of unquestioned

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11 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (London, MIT, 1968), p10

> observance exists. Otherwise the comic would not be liberating at all."[12]

Yet, as will become clear in this paper, carnival was not a mere safety valve for passions and for `deflecting attention from social reality'.[13] Just what were the material conditions from which carnival was a temporary liberation, and also on which it was a commentary?

By 1936 the population of Cape Town was just under 350 000 of whom about 205 000 (sixty seven percent) were classified `non-white'.[14] The `non-white' residents of the city resided mainly in and around the city-centre - in District Six, Bo-Kaap and Woodstock - and the suburbs spread out along the electrified railway lines from the centre of Cape Town to Simonstown and to Bellville.[15] In addition there was the growing settlement of Africans at Langa. Most of the `coloureds' were engaged in the clothing and textile industries. Women outnumbered their male counterparts in the clothing industry by far (562 men compared with 2 267 women) while no women were represented in the official statistics for textiles, tailoring and building sectors of the local economy in the years immediately before the war.[16] At least

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12 Umberto Eco, `The Comic and the Rule', in *Travels in Hyperreality*, (London, Picador, 1987),p275

13 Natalie Zemon Davies, `The Reasons for Misrule', p74 and see Michael Holquist, `Bakhtin and Rabelais: Theory as Praxis' in *Boundary 2*, XI(1) and XI(2), 1982/3, p12

14 M. Marshall, *The Growth and Development of Cape Town*, (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1940), p81

15 M. Marshall, *The Growth and Development*, p84

16 M. Marshall, *The Growth and Development*, p107

until 1921 it was in the amorphous occupational category of `personal service' that most `non-whites' were employed. By the start of the war, however, `personal service' had become a declining employment category. The `non-white' working-class was increasingly located in clothing and textiles, the alimentary industries, the building and allied industries and, to a lesser extent, in `engineering works'.[17] In the pre-War years, and during the immediate post-War period, the centre of Cape Town was still the inner-core around which the major industries were located.[18] Working-class labour activities were in this way located close to their living quarters. Thus, the breadwinners of households in Hanover or Horstley streets in District Six would walk to the south east corner of the city (Barrack, Commercial, Buitenkant and Roeland streets) if they were employed in the clothing industry or Pontac street workers to nearby Sir Lowry Road if they were employed by leather, or food and drink concerns.[19] The proximity of factory to habitat meant relatively more `time-off' and `freedom' for leisure after the often excessively hard and alienating experiences of industrial work. Factory work was inflexible but most workers did not have the extra burden of travelling long,

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17 M. Marshall, *The Growth and Development*, p107

18 J. Whittingdale, *The Development and Location of Industries in Greater Cape Town, 1652 - 1972*, (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1973), p105

19 J. Whittingdale, *The Development and Location of Industries*, p105. A case study of a group of workers in 1949 found that of a group of just over 200 workers fifty percent had a total travelling time to work of less than seventeen minutes. See V. Pons, *A Social Investigation of Female Workers and a Related Study of their Absenteeism*, (MSocSc thesis, University of Cape Town, 1949)

tiring and time-consuming distances to work and back home.[20] Unlike later-nineteenth century industrialising Britain where the expansion of leisure experience depended on the growth of mass transport - in the form of the railways[21] - in Cape Town transport was to become a significant factor in working class leisure only well into the twentieth century - from the late nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties, with the development of the sprawling Cape Flats. Inner-city Cape Town was thus the place of work, residence and leisure for the overwhelming majority of the working-classes from the pre-War years through to the late fifties. And those resident in suburbs such as Athlone, Kensington and Wynberg would migrate the short distance to the inner-city for their public leisure.

What marked the public leisure and popular culture of the Cape Town working-classes was not only the profound continuities between past and present forms of entertainment but also the consistency with which 'seasonal' changes were followed. Choral and musical performance of all sorts and day trips to nearby seaside resorts dominated the bulk of the Cape Town summer. The annual worker and school vacations coincided during the heat of the summer months and were a short period during which an unusual variety of leisure

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20 Maximum hours for work in the clothing industry in Cape Town was 48 hours per week in 1939 and dropped to forty two and a half hours per week in 1945. See *Union Statistics for Fifty Years*, (Bureau for Census and Statistics, Pretoria, 1960), G-24. In the building industry the maximum hours per week in 1939 was 44 hours and dropped to 40 hours per week in 1949. See *Union Statistics for Fifty Years*, G-29.

21 See chapter one of James Walvin's, *Leisure and Society 1830 - 1950*, (London, Longman, 1978)

activities were pursued by adults, adolescents and children. New Year's Carnival was performed and celebrated during this period by a compound of old and young, men and women. As an ex-resident remembers:

> 'Oh, Oh, those were wonderful days. That days I never forget, because that was when we had a lot of pleasure, man. We were so happy. It was in Hanover Street from the start at Castle Bridge right up to the Catholic Church. Now tonight, its Old Year's Eve, then my Auntie would make all ready, food and everything, then she would say we must go down and keep our places.'[22]

This memory is characteristic of people who were raised in areas like District Six and Bo-Kaap. Mr Noor Ariefdien's experience corroborates the above testimony. He remembers,

> 'already two days before New Year's eve then the people place their benches in order. Then grandma makes cornbeef, bakes bread, tart. They make everything. Then you think the people are going to picnic. They just picnic there.[23]

Carnival and the range of musical events around Christmas vacation - from Christmas bands to malay choirs and coon troupes - was the mark of the season. But more than the imprint of the festive season, the Carnival was also the preeminent expression of working-class culture even though it was a seasonal event. From the perspective of dominant class whites and middle class blacks, the Carnival was indeed a sign of working-class, though 'coloured', culture.

Indeed, the Carnival was largely a 'coloured' affair. This was not because of any inherent love of song and dance by 'coloureds', but because local state attempts to

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22 *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mrs Gadija Jacobs.

23 *Western Cape Oral Histoy Project* transcript of interview with Mr Noor Ariefdien, p11 (my translation)

systematically exclude Africans from the city's labour supply and social amenities from long before the Coloured Labour Preference Policy was adopted in 1954.[24] Yet if the actual number of Africans active in the Western Cape economy increased steadily nevertheless from the Second World War to the mid-fifties,[25] they were mostly housed at Langa (established in 1927), and in the burgeoning squatter settlements on the Cape Flats (such as at Windermere).[26] Only a few were domiciled in inner-city areas like District Six.[27] A couple of Africans did participate in the Carnival, but the ethnic character of the festival was `coloured'.

The white citizens and the band of tourists to the mother-city appreciated the coons, choirs and Carnival from a distance, for their `otherness', for their quaintness and for their almost uncontrolled performance in an otherwise

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24 On African labour in Cape Town and the Coloured Labour Preference Policy see, Ian Goldin, *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa*, (London, Longman, 1987), pp65-73

25 By 1953 Africans formed 26.8 percent of employees in private industry, and were the second largest `racial' group employed in the Western Cape. See Noel B. Murray, *The Economic Position of the Cape Coloureds in the Secondary and Tertiary Activities of the Western Cape*, (MA thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1958), p11

26 On squatting see, M. Budow, *Urban Squatting in Greater Cape Town, 1939 - 1948*, (BA honours thesis, University of Cape Town, 1976)

27 On the cultural life of inner-city Africans see, R.Botto, *Some Aspects of the Leisure Occupations of the African Population of Cape Town*, (MSocSc thesis, University of Cape Town, 1954)

pedestrian Cape Town.[28] A `Visitor from England' is purported to have written home saying,

> `Thank goodness for the Coons. They are a real high-spot in the flatness of Cape Town life. With their dancing and songs and their drums and banjoes they are something to be remembered! They make it almost worth remaining in Cape Town for another year.'[29]

In 1956 a leading Cape Town newspaper editorialized in similar vein,

> `The annual festival, with fancy costumes and music and song, is not only something that belongs of right to the coloured people, and not only a valued part of the traditions of Cape Town, it also adds a vivid touch to the rather pedestrian holidays of South Africa. It is no more undignified than similar carnivals in which Southern Europeans give expression to the love of life and the joy of living.'[30]

Whites mainly patronised the `formal' events of the Carnival in the enclosed stadiums, such as at Green Point Track and Rosebank Showgrounds, occupying reserved seats for `Europeans'.[31] Yet to many aspirant and actual middle-class blacks hankering after `high culture', the coons were despicable representatives and representations of the `coloured people'. After a highly successful Carnival, one `coloured student' wrote to a `coloured' newspaper with an outburst of revulsion at the Carnival. The letter, which filled a page, stated among others that,

> `If you do not participate in the shows you probably patronise them - you encourage them, you laugh at and with them; you spur them on to "better" and more

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28 *The Sun*, 12 January 1940. See *Cape Standard*, 6 November 1945 for the reproduction of a perceptive article on the Carnival by a visitor to Cape Town. The piece first appeared in the *Palestine Post*!

29 *The Sun*, 12 January 1940

30 *Argus*, 1 March 1956

31 *Cape Standard*, 29 November 1939; 3 January 1940; 16 January 1940

> degrading forms of amusement. Not more degrading to the Coons, but to Coloured people - to You.'[32]

Such sentiment was the recurring refrain of some aspiring middle class `coloureds' since the inception of the choirs and coon troupes.[33] But the common people of the city filled the main streets of the inner-city to cheer on their favourite troupes in the long processions on New Year's eve and flocked to the venues where the troupes performed. At two venues in 1942, more than 15 000 people turned up to watch the coon troupes perform.[34] The hardship of the war years did not inhibit the spontaneous participation in and admiration of the troupes. However, the war was not simply a background noise against which the Carnival unfolded during the early forties, for it affected the troupes in various ways. Unlike antagonistic responses to public leisure such as cinema and football during the Great War, in countries at the cutting edge of battle (like Britain)[35] the local state and common people remained undeterred by the hardships imposed by a war economy and did not moralise against public leisure and Carnival during the Second World War. The first Carnival of the war years was praised by the *Cape Standard* as inaugurating 1940 with `a rousing reception with "all that is madly wild and oddly gay"'.[36] Twelve troupes

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32 *Cape Standard*, 9 January 1940

33 See for instance letter to editor, *Cape Argus*, 5 January 1897

34 *The Sun*, 9 February 1942

35 J. Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, pp128 - 144 on leisure in Britain during the First World War.

36 *Cape Standard*, 3 January 1940

participated in the Carnival and about 10 000 spectators enjoyed the `monster carnival' of the newly established Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board[37] whose intention it was to work for `the betterment of the coons, to improve its organisation, and to keep it under Coloured control'.[38]

By the end of 1939 the controlling Carnival boards arranged to donate part of the gate-takings to the Governor-General's National War Fund.[39] Before the war, the controlling boards supported Saint Monica's home in Bo-Kaap, Saint Francis' Home in District Six and the Athlone Blind School.[40] The then recently constituted Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board was determined not to lose control over the distribution of proceeds through ceding all monies to the War Fund; instead, it wanted to continue to disburse at least part of the proceeds independently. Though initially prepared to donate monies towards the war effort some of the troupes, perhaps influenced by the stand of the WPJCB, became less than excited at the prospect of losing control over the proceeds as the war continued. Thus, when the `Grand Monster New Year Carnival' was organized for January 1940 under the auspices of the City Council, only part of Cape Town's coon troupes participated[41] - some troupes dissented but did not rebel, a political strain that was to

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37 *Cape Standard*, 3 January 1940

38 *Cape Standard*, 12 December 1939

39 *Cape Standard*, 24 December 1940

40 *Cape Standard*, 17 December 1940

41 *Cape Standard*, 24 December 1940

recur in the early fifties.[42] The following year another `Combined Coon and Malay Carnival' was hosted in aid of `Charities and the Governor General's War Fund'.[43] But whatever the dissatisfaction from some troupes, until the end of the war a substantial portion of the calculable proceeds of the Carnival went to support the `war effort' such as the 900 pounds raised for `War Charities' in 1942.[44] Though appeals to support the `war effort' never went without underclass suspicion, the appeals were grounded in the fact that many Cape Town men had left the city to serve in the war. As a result of this departure many families and household economies were visibly affected. The departure of Cape Town males during the war also influenced the composition of the troupes since `many coons' joined the army to become soldiers.[45] Recruitment to serve in the war, by military officials in charge of `coloured' recruitment, made a mark on the major choral competitions, such as at Green Point Track, during the war years. Moreover, the military often brought its own music: in 1942 for instance, the band of the Indian and Malay Corps featured prominently at Green Point stadium.[46] And because of recruitment the number of participants decreased slightly and the age profile of troupes dropped. But the spirit of the Carnival

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42 In 1952 a number of `malay choirs' deserted from the Cape Malay Choir Board of I.D.du Plessis after they rejected participation in the Van Riebeeck festival. These choirs then formed a new board.

43 *The Sun*, 3 January 1941

44 *The Sun*, 9 January 1942

45 *Cape Standard*, 17 December 1940 and *The Sun*, 9 January 1942.

46 *The Sun*, 2 January 1942

was not markedly affected by these changes. At the start of every wartime Carnival, newspapers would report, with a mixture of surprise and expectation, `Coon Carnival as Usual' or `Coons Again'.[47] Thus, for their uninhibited performance during war-time, troupes and choirs compensated by `offering' some of their members to the army and through donating a substantial part of their proceeds to the `war effort', but they acted much more vividly when they actually composed patriotic songs[48] and sported Carnival garb in celebration of the allied forces.[49] Thus in January 1942 the Union Jack, Union Flag and the United States Stars and Stripes were `all worked into decorative motifs' on the satin outfits of some troupes, and cardboard figures of John Bull and Uncle Sam were paraded at Green Point Track.[50] This playful international solidarity of coon troupes was easily incorporated into `coon style' given the consciousness of a broader world, which troupe leaderships at least already possessed. For the better part of their history since the late 1880s', when singing troupes gathered informally, coon troupes preferred appellations drawn from North American minstrelsy[51], but by the late nineteen thirties and through

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47 *Cape Standard*, 29 December 1942 and *The Sun*, 2 January 1942

48 *Cape Standard*, 7 January 1941

49 *Cape Times*, 3 January 1942 and *The Sun*, 9 February 1942

50 *Cape Times*, 3 January 1942

51 A full history of Cape Town popular music is yet to be written. For data on the history of the coon troupes see, David B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight: South Africa's Black City Mucis and Theatre*, (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985), p39-40. See also *Cape Times*, 26 January 1955. An informative piece on the first North American minstrel group to tour South Africa is Veit Erlmann, `"A feeling of Prejudice":

the forties troupes were blessed with a variety of names from other contexts. In the late nineteen thirties and nineteen forties for instance, the `Warriors of Mahratta', the `London Hawker Jubilee Coons', the `Blue Danube Troubadors', the `Kikuyu Warriors' and the `Young Lousiana Coons' were among the leading troupes.[52] During the war, existing troupes did not invent novel names. While new troupes would certainly have been influenced by the war context, generally they composed songs and donned costumes in colours which reflected the changing context of their performance. `Malay Choirs' also contributed to the `war effort' through their participation in combined competitions with Coon troupes.[53] But these more `respectable' working class choirs drew their designation from a British range of names and were less inclined to easily parade spontaneously in `stars and stripes' or with effigies of John Bull. After the war and during the nineteen fifties new troupes did not deviate from the established pattern in their choice of names; the mixture of American south and, to a lesser extent, African images continued to dominate the identities of troupes.[54]

Insofar as choosing a label and colours, troupes and choirs enjoyed nearly unlimited freedom. But in their everyday experience troupers enjoyed very little space and

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Orpheus M. McAdoo and the Virginia Jubilee singers in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14(3), 1988

52 *Cape Times*, 4 January 1937

53 *The Sun*, 3 January 1941

54 *Cape Times*, 28 December 1957

entitlement to rights or choice. The working-class of Cape Town could be creative in certain matters but was constrained by its class position and colour. Paradoxically, it was precisely because of these constraints that the working class made Carnival. Press reports on the Carnival and the performers invariably referred to the poverty-stricken conditions in which troupes practised and performed.[55] But as if to compensate for their burdens inner-city dwellers gravitated not only towards the Carnival, but also to the shebeen[56] and the gang[57] - and for some, these together formed a triad of underclass social protection, while for others folk Islam or the Church integrated with the Carnival for convivial survival and refuge. From all sources, however, it seems that the Carnival was the preeminent `compensatory' activity for and by the working class.

The Cape Town economy was boosted by the war and the employment of `non-whites' increased (by 38 per cent) but the living conditions of the working classes were not

55 *Cape Times*, 29 December 1938; *Argus*, 30 December 1958 and *Argus*, 2 January 1958

56 Liquor consumption amongst `coloureds' was considered a major problem by the local state. In the Cape Town magisterial district `coloureds' on average constituted 69.56 percent of all convictions for drunkeness between 1940 and 1944. See, UG 33-45, *Report of the Cape Coloured Liquor Commisssion of Inquiry*, Table 3.; a central outlet for the sale of liquor were the `off-sale' bottlestores and the shebeens. For statistics on bottlestores and drunkeness in the nineteen fifties see UG 55-1960, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the General Distribution and Selling Prices of Intoxicating Liquor*

57 On gangs in nineteen forties and fifties inner-city Cape Town see, Don Pinnock, *The Brotherhoods: Street Gangs and State Control in Cape Town*, (Cape Town, David Phillip, 1984), pp18-42

thereby improved. This was especially due to soaring prices of consumer goods. By the end of 1940, production in the Western Cape had increased substantially, followed by short cycles of upsurge and decline by the end of the war.[58] For troupers, living conditions in the inner-city remained as decrepit during and after the war as before. A journalist captured the ambience of the situation in which Choirs and troupes were preparing for singing competitions in December 1938. Of the practising session he wrote,

> `Nowhere were there electric lights. One or two candles stuck in the neck of a bottle, flickering in a corner, illuminated the stuffy and smelly rooms. Every club must practice in relays, because of the lack of room.'[59]

In 1940 a letter to the Cape Times said `The Carnivals are serving...to give temporary relief from abysmal misery - to a lesser degree year after year.'[60] Indeed poverty and `abysmal misery' there was, but this never prevented the working-classes from rallying to the Carnival, nor did it deter performers from saving pennies and shillings towards the new outfits for each carnival every new year.[61] The costlier tailored suits of the `malay choirs' was an instant barrier to membership while the more accessible loosely styled satin costumes of coon troupes allowed wider membership. It is thus not odd that some coon troupes could

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58 See Whittingdale, *The Development and Location of Industries*, p70

59 *Cape Times*, 29 December 1938. See also *Cape Times*, 17 December 1936

60 *Cape Times*, 1 February 1940

61 In 1940 the five yards of satin which was needed for a coon outfit could be bought for 1s. 11d. See Don Pinnock, *The Brotherhoods*, p35

boast of having anything between 300 to 600 members.[62] The cotton suits of the `malay choirs' and the satin garments of the coon troupes were most often `laid bye' - members contributing small amounts weekly to troupe or choir captains. Elizabeth Weeder recalls,

> `...every week you would give a bit of money to the tailor, and when you need your suit for the Carnival it's paid for. The Carnival is how the tailors could live.'[63]

Very little changed in the production methods of carnival dress between the start of the war and the end of the nineteen fifties. In 1958 for instance it was reported that, `40 000 yards of satin...will clothe the thousands of coons.' And `for months the troupes have been collecting and saving money' for their costumes. Throughout the two decades discussed here only the tailors and troupe `executives' had knowledge of the colours and styles of their respective troupes.[64] Ordinary members had to repeat the ritual of setting money aside and fitting their loosely constructed satin suits often while blind-folded; in addition `The costumes, which are stitched by tailors behind closed doors, are collected at dead of night, just before they are due to be worn.'[65]

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62 *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mr Solly Levy, retired tailor and coon organiser.

63 Quoted in Don Pinnock, *The Brotherhoods*, p36

64 *Cape Argus*, 30 December 1958

65 *Cape Times*, 23 December 1959

In the harsh setting of inner-city subsistence the 'lay-bye' method was the only way, apart from theft,[66] in which the working class could afford the colourful Carnival apparel. These outfits were also worn after the street celebrations. Troupers often wore them afterwards, 'as pyjamas, while others are converted into blouses and dresses for the Coons little relatives.'[67] This ingenious use of what was considered scarce fabric by the white middle class, caused slight concern in 1942 when a Concert was planned for March in aid of war funds since,'the costumes will have lost their brightness. Already one sees hawkers and others wearing their coon regalia in the course of their work...'[68] It is difficult to quantify precisely the extent of the fabric shortage during the war but it certainly influenced the number of performers, especially in the 'malay choirs'. Yet during the competitions by the end of the war, there was still a mixture of curiosity, suspicion and condescension in ruling class observations about the ability of choirs and troupes to consume so much good fabric. A journalist wrote in January 1945:

> One of the mysteries of the carnival was the skill in procurement shown by participants. Many of those who watched and applauded must have wondered how the men secured the tweeds and flannel for their sports jackets and trousers...and must have longed to ask...'Where did you get that hat?'[69]

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66 A reading of the selected Magistrate's Court records (1/CT) in the Cape Archives for the period 1939 - 1959 reveals a very high rate of cases for buying stolen goods in inner-city Cape Town. But the available records contain no cases for stolen fabric, though it is possible that cloth, like instruments, were acquired in ingenious and illegal ways.

67 *Cape Standard*, 24 October 1944

68 *The Sun*, 23 February 1942

69 *Cape Times*, 4 January 1945

Between 1939 and 1945 a world war raged and a number of Cape Town men served, in non-combatant roles, in the segregated South African forces. But a war and a loss of men did not reduce the commitment with which the New Year's carnival was hosted by Choirs and troupes, nor did popular enthusiasm for the carnival suffer during these hard years.

During the nineteen fifties, and with the introduction of Apartheid legislation during those years, the phenomenon of carnival hardly changed in any respect. The restraints of war was no longer on the city administrators and commercial elite; consequently there was greater public involvement by certain members of the establishment in what they saw as a potentially lucrative `tourist attraction'. At the same time the uncontrolled presence of carnival in the main streets of Cape Town such as Adderley street was causing severe problems to the local authorities. On one occasion the `crowds mobbed them (the troupes) before they reached Adderley street....(and) The few traffic policemen who were on duty found it impossible to cope with the surging spectators.'[70] After that incident the local state disallowed the use of the city centre for the purposes of festival;[71] then arguments between carnival organisers and the municipal traffic department flared regarding

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70 *Cape Argus*, 3 January 1955

71 A Mr East resigned from the Traffic Committee of the City Council in protest against its decision to disallow the carnival parade in the city streets. Cape Argus, 1 December 1956

responsibility for the `chaos'.[72] One `Cape Town industrialist' subsequently offered the city council 100 pounds to re-admit the troupes onto the main streets. He `industrialist', a Mr Cecil Marks, saw the broader commercial viability of the carnival when he said, `The coon parade may cost the council 100 pounds, but it means infinitely more than that to the city in terms of a tourist and holiday attraction.'[73]

As before, the class composition remained predominantly working-class. As one report put it in late 1958, `On New Year's Day, butcher boys, garage hands, bricklayers, delivery boys, roadsweepers and many other workers suddenly become the gayest and liveliest people in the city.'[74] These proletarian participants were largely categorised in official terms as coming from the `non-European' population; but unlike the Latin American carnivals, no women participants featured prominently in the processions and performances of the New Year's carnival.

In the imagery of the carnival the only non-masculine performer was the effeminate `moffie' - a popular inner-city working class characterisation of the transvestite. In available documentary and oral evidence for the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties the voices of `moffies' are never heard; they are always spoken about (derisively), represented, judged, but never allowed the privilege of

72 *Cape Argus*, 1 May 1955

73 *Cape Argus*, 30 November 1956

74 *Cape Argus*, 30 December 1958

discourse. A description of one `moffie' in the mid-nineteen fifties is fairly representative of these performers between the nineteen thirties and nineteen fifties. `Doeltjie' was a leader of the Pennsylvanian Darkies who,

> `forsook his customary Carmen Miranda outfit for a Miss Universe get-up. An ill-fitting dress was bolstered with pillows and his head-dress was a flamboyant tea-cosy surmounted by an array of cutlery.'[75]

In 1940 the *Cape Standard* did a random survey of `European' views on the `coons'. A `European''Doctor' said,

> The Coons are a great source of entertainment for the people. As for the `Moffies', well there are as many `Pansies' among the Whites as `Moffies' among the Coloureds. Whilst we laugh and joke about our sexual misfits the Europeans are more secretive on such a delicate question. As for skolly boys, it is a matter of skin or condition, or both.'[76]

`Doctor's' white middle class sentiment about the homosexual and transvestite was shared by the `coloured student' quoted earlier in this paper. Notions of sexual normality were deeply entrenched; and any deviance from the norm was perceived in the worse psycho-pathological terms.[77] In correspondence to the press `coloured student' wrote with vitriolic bitterness about `sexual deviance'. He wrote,

> To think that people (that they are my people makes me more disgusted) could sink so low as to organise these people, who should be in a hospital or some similar place away from public, into a source of entertainment is terrible. They are sexually abnormal - hermaphroditic - in a pitiable condition, physically and mentally; the very thought of them should be

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75 *Cape Times*, 4 January 1955

76 *Cape Standard*, 6 January 1940

77 On the construction of gender and sexual identity see essays in Pat Caplan, (ed.), *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, (London, Tavistock, 1987) especially her introduction and `Questions of Identity' by Jeffrey Weeks. See also Ellen Ross and Rayna Rapp, `Sex and History: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology'in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23, 1981

> repulsive to all but the scientist. I ask you what type of mind has a person who organises these people - who uses this abnormality to furnish amusement for the public?...If these 'Moffies' are not really sexually abnormal, then they as imitators, are worse than the genuine hermaphrodites.[78]

The prancing transvestite - or to use the term employed at the time, hermaphrodite - reversed entrenched categories of sex and in the process upset established middle class and traditional working class sensibilities. During carnival the public performance of the transvestite was 'permissible' among the inner-city population, at the same time as it inverted the cultural code of the city.[79] Thus this aspect of the carnival was open to contrdictory readings - by the white middle class, the coloured petite bourgeoisie, the male working class, the underground community of inner-city homosexuals and transvestites, women and so on. But, like the carnival songs, it also said something about the community. It was an interpretation of inner-city gender relations. Men had all authority invested in them, they defined roles for women and children; there were appropriate roles for men, and set patterns for women; divergence from these inherited models occurred - during carnival in its boldest form, and the 'moffie' symbolised the most 'subversive' aspect of the carnival. The transvestite was neither man nor women, it inverted the standard gender and sex classifications. Similarly the carnival songs, especially the comic songs, the *moppies*, offered commentary

78 *Cape Standard*, 9 January 1940

79 See James L. Peacock, 'Symbolic Reversal and Social History: Transvestites and Clowns'in Barara Babcock (ed.), *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, (Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1978)

on social relations. Extant songs from the nineteen thirties to nineteen fifties all deal with men woeing women, with courting styles, with women rejecting men, or with men not satisfying the tastes and needs of women.[80] Songs were composed by men and the representation of dejected men and the portrayal of rebellious daughters in songs point to the often contested terrain of the world of gender relations, even if only in the area of courting.[81]

A lack of active participation by women in public music and song marked the entire period explored in this paper. Indeed, the role of women in the carnival remains relatively unchanged. Sources on popular leisure between the nineteen thirties and nineteen fifties are largely silent about the gender character of leisure activities. In the case of the musical tradition of Cape Town, the specifically male character of carnival singing may have been so ingrained in popular historical consciousness since the inception of choral singing among the working classes of Cape Town, that it was unquestionably accepted. Yet, women were part of the broader leisure experience, the carnival and the popular culture of the city. In this respect, they had their specific, separate and unequal share in the festival and local cultural resources.

80 I.D.du Plessis, *Kaapse Moppies*, (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1977) and I.D.du Plessis, *Masleise Sangbundel*, (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1939)

81 See for instance `Die Oxford', `Langs die waterkant', `Katotjie' and `Soesie'in I.D.du Plessis, *Kaapse Moppies*

Between 1939 and 1952 the number of `coloured' women in industry rose from approximately 11 200 to about 34 000. The percentage of `economically active' women among the `coloureds' stabilised in the thirty years between 1921 and 1951 at around 37 per cent of the `coloured' female population.[82] The overwhelming majority of women workers were employed in Cape Town's clothing industry, without significant changes during this period. But most women were engaged in unpaid reproductive labour in the domestic sphere. Working women joined this army of unpaid labour after the day's factory employment in the nearby secondary industries of Cape Town. In their available `time-off', outside the factory but also outside the home, women carved for themselves a place in public leisure but were also allocated `appropriate' roles in popular culture by the men and the dominant discourses of the time.

In this context cinema came to occupy a central place in the public and routine leisure experience of young Cape Town women from the late nineteen thirties. As Jeffrey Richards has shown in another context but for the same period, `Cinema-going was regular and habitual' in working-class leisure.[83] Gadija Jacobs describes her leisure experience in District Six:

> `We could only really go to the bioscope, not out onto the street, or to one another's houses. A girl had to stay in her place. Alright, you get now and again the

82 See Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, (London, Onyx Press, 1982), p116

83 Jeffrey Richards, `The Cinema and cinema-going in Birmingham in the 1930s.' in James Walvin and John K.Walton, *Leisure in Britain, 1780 - 1939* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1983)

> girl next door to come to you, or you go to her, but not further away.'[84]

Asa Jacobs remembers: `But on Saturdays we used to get our bioscope money you know, to go to bioscope, but no pocket money until we started working....' And she reveals a particular social discrimination :`but we liked to go to the National Bioscope. That was a society bioscope.'[85] About the Avalon in Hanover Street a former usher at the cinema recalls, `Well, socialites used to come there. That was the first posh bioscope that opened.'[86] Even in the generally overcrowded conditions of inner-city Cape Town working class women could still engage in what was seen as specifically feminine forms of private leisure. And the inner-city was crowded.

In 1939 *The Social Survey* of Cape Town undertaken by Prof Batson found that 36 percent of coloured households were overcrowded, 36 percent crowded and only 28 percent uncrowded.[87] By 1950 the situation had not changed. The housing supervisor of the Cape Town municipality said, `Almost every house in the districts where Coloured people live is packed tight.'[88] The upshot of crowded conditions

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84 *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mrs Gadija Jacobs.

85 *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mrs Asa Jassiem, p43 and p37

86 *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mrs Farieda Waghiet, p36

87 See *Social Survey no 24*, (University of Cape Town, Manuscripts Collection)

88 Quoted in John Western, *Outcast Cape Town*, (Cape Town, Human and Rossouw, 1981), p49

was similar to what occurred in Edwardian England where, as Brian Harrison has shown, `recreational segregation of husband from wife', and we may add of boy from girl, owed `something to crowded and squalid homes.'[89]

Cooking and baking were constituted as agreeable activities for women in the local press. Sewing was promoted as `rational recreation' by the Liberman Institute[90] in District Six through its sewing classes for women, and the proliferation of the Marconi and Pilot wirelesses from the late thirties kept many women (and men) indoors[91]. Often the transference of gender specific social skills - such as cooking and sewing - `coincided' with the private leisure practice of women. But it was precisely this convenient `coincidence' which in effect robbed women of their `time-off' to engage in what they considered pleasurable and enjoyable. To call on the memory of Gadija Jacobs again,

> `...on winter days (after school) she (my aunt) used to teach me, I sit and knit, and I made little doll dresses. She gave me needles, she gave me a scissor. This was to keep me in the house, instead of playing outside in the rain. Then I would invite my friends, and they would also bring their needles and we would sit and make little dresses for our dolls. Thats how we spent our afternoons.'[92]

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89 Brian Harrison, `Class and Gender in Modern British Labour History', *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies*, 124, August 1989, p141. I want to thank Linda Chisholm for referring me to this perceptive paper.

90 *The Sun*, 10 September, 1943; See also *Annual Reports* of the Liberman Institute

91 Licenses for radios increased steadily between 1930 and 1958. There is no racial breakdown of these statistics. See *Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa*, 1960, p373.

92 *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mrs Gadija Jacobs

While this evidence may appear specific to childhood it is important to note the extended length of `childhood' in the inner-city and the dominance of patriachal values. But even if women, and especially married women, did not find `leisure' in what was promoted as appropriate for them many were undoubtedly led to take,

> `a pride in household skills, refined them with the aid of women's magazines and social contacts, and acquired a form of self-realization - even, at the last, a sort of unpaid professional status - in adapting to the husbands timetable...'[93]

The allocation of appropriate leisure for women was not always passively accepted. The young also rebelled by breaking parental controls, like Farieda Waghiet who would, `delay with washing the dishes. Or my mommy send me to the shop to get something for my daddy's lunch....Now I would find a friend there now I'd delay in coming home. Now my mother would punish me by not giving me supper.' Furthermore, `Mommy was very cross because she reckoned that I had been disobedient and she warned me not to go to keep company with older girls who had boyfriends.' [94]

What was done for leisure by some women was hard work for others, while yet others used these skills to generate extra income. Dressmaking and baking were two common areas in which women were self-employed to increase the household income. Tailoring for the carnival and baking for the tastes of participants were often lucrative activities. Farieda Waghiet

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93 Brian Harrison, `Class and Gender', p127

94 *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mrs Farieda Waghiet, p14-15

> 'sewed for the coons. My husband and I. Now we give out pants and jackets. Now the morning they are being dressed at Muir street school.... Now I've done my work, the pants are all on hangers there. Now the lady must come. I was still living in Aspeling street. Now they knock on my door. Mrs Abrahams, my broek is te lank, Mrs Abrahams osse broek is te kort (our trousers are too short). Now I had to go with my machine to the klops kamer'(club room).[95]

Carnival was leisure time for all. Even though women were not the performers their endorsement and availability was essential to the success and vibrancy of the events making up the carnival. What is clear moreover, is that the rules governing the place of women were transgressed during carnival. Women, in large numbers, now occupied public space, contributed to the noise and danced. Farieda Waghiet recalls:

> 'Our benches were put there in front of the Star bioscope and the people used to sit and wait. We used to dance, guma in Cross street. The band was all round and we used to dance in the middle, guma, guma.'[96]

The role of women in the carnival, as supports, present but not equal, there but not leading, is emblematic of the broader leisure practice of women in the inner-city.

Leisure, for women and men, exists because of labour. The rigours of the workplace, essentially the factory and construction site but also the home, determine much of the character and experience of leisure. But the culture outside of the factory has a dynamic and rhythm of its own. Hegemony is not imposed by the capitalist employers and municipal

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95 *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mrs Farieda Waghiet, p54.

96 *Western Cape Oral History Project* transcript of interview with Mrs Farieda Waghiet, p53

administrators. It is a process and is fought over on the factory floor as well as in the cinema and during the Carnival.[97] A study of the leisure practice and popular culture of the Cape Town working-class reveals the nuances and silences of hegemony not captured in a study of the struggles and politics on the factory floor. Moreover, even the meanings of work and the struggles over production are invested with experiences and values cultivated outside of the workplace.[98] Carnival also allows us into central aspects of the experiences, consciousness and closed world of the Cape Town inner-city. As much as it was and is open to contending meanings it can also be seen as a commentary on the community. However, the primary purpose of this paper was not to examine the meanings of carnival nor consider it as a text or work of art, but to disentagle some of the class, colour and gender dimensions of the festival. The New Year's carnival played a pivotal role in the leisure and social experience of the Cape Town working-class; even though after carnival it was back to the discipline of labour as one report observed,

> 'as their songs grow fainter and fainter and only the stragglers remain to collect the last few tickies foe a solo performance, they will drift back to their work at the factories, in the ships...to begin the new year.[99]

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97 See Antonio Gramsci's definition of hegemony in David Frogacs, *The Gramsci Reader*,

98 See the introduction in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work*, (Cambridge, Cambrdge University Press, 1987)

99 *Argus*, 2 January 1958

`Back to their work' marked the `real' beginning to a new year for the inner-city working class - after the end of the oppressed's own festival.

Carnival came once a year but it made a deep impression on popular consciousness. [It is worth noting that at the 1989 May Day celebrations at Athlone stadium the Cosatu unions marched to the internationale - but the workers anthem was sung (by a Garment Workers Union choir) to guma beat (played by the Musical Action for Peoples Power band) and the unions marched in klops (coon) style.][100] Many interests attempted to appropriate and direct the carnival but it remained in popular control. Like in their subordinate place in other leisure and cultural activities, women were ancillary in the carnival. But carnival was a time to upset some of the discourses over the bodies of women. In the same way carnival subverted some of the dominant discourses of the bourgeoisie. But it also confirmed the status quo. After the Carnival, in the words of Robert Darnton, `the old order regains its hold on the revelers'.[101]

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100 The MayDay '89 performance of the *international* to *guma* beat and *klopse* style marching is an excellent example of the operation of George Rude's notions of inherent and derived ideology. See Rude's, *Ideology and Popular Protest*, (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), pp27-38

101 Robert Darnton, `Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose' in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984), p66