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Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity

Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie van die Onderveld as Fetished Symbol*

by

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Research Report submitted to the Department Curatorial, Public and Visual Cultures, Wits School of Arts, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the field of Contemporary Curatorial Practice.

Supervisor: Boitumelo Tlhoaele

30 March 2025

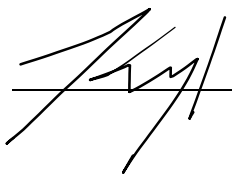
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie van die Onderveld* as a fetishised symbol within Afrikaner nationalist discourse, interrogating its function in shaping and sustaining an idealised political construction of womanhood that embodies both the ideological aspirations and anxieties of its time.

By situating the sculpture within its historical and cultural context, this research highlights the powerful influence of nationalism in shaping identities, as well as the inherent dangers of perpetuating rigid and idealised identity constructs. Drawing on material culture studies, entanglement theory, gender studies, and fetish theory, the study explores how the sculpture operates as a fetishised object within Afrikaner visual culture. It examines how the sculpture's reproduction and circulation reinforced its ideological significance, embedding its visual iconography deeply within Afrikaner memory and identity.

Through visual analysis, historical contextualisation, and curatorial inquiry, the research contributes to discussions on the intersections of art, nationalism, and gender. Foregrounding *Noitjie van die Onderveld's* entanglement with Afrikaner identity, this analysis offers insight into the broader mechanisms through which objects become central to self-definition. In doing so, it encourages reflection on the role of nationalist ideologies in both shaping and constraining gender identities.

CONTENTS

1 Introduction 6

1.1 Research Questions and Scope 10

1.2 The Role of the Exhibition 11

1.3 Chapter Summaries 11

2 Methodologies for Examining the Fetishised Object 13

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks 15

2.1.1 Material Culture Studies 15

2.1.2 Entanglement Theory 18

2.1.3 Mother of the Nation: Gender and Nationalism in Afrikaner Identity 19

2.1.4 *Noitjie* as Fetish: A Fetish Theory Approach to Nationalist Desire 21

3 Constructing *Noitjie*: Nationalism, Art and the Making of an Icon 24

3.1 The Making of *Noitjie*: Historical and Ideological Context 25

3.2 *Noitjie*: The Cover Girl of Afrikaner Nationalism 30

3.3 *Noitjie* and the Discursive Production of the *Volksmoeder* Ideal in *Die Boerevrou* 37

3.4 Fetishising *Noitjie*: The Portrait of Tini Vorster as a Site of Ideological Reinforcement 40

4 Curating *Noitjie*: The Exhibition as a Site of Inquiry 44

4.1 Theoretical Framework: Thinking With and Through the Object 45

4.2 Key Moments of Encounter 46

5 Conclusion 52

Bibliography 53

List of Figures 60

Appendices 63



Figure 1 – Installation view of the exhibition *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity – Art, Nationalism & Womanhood* (2025). The exhibition examines the entanglement of art, nationalism, and Afrikaner womanhood through a case study of Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie van die Onderveld* (1907) and its afterlives. The sculpture is historically contextualised through archival materials and then brought into dialogue with contemporary artworks. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.

1 INTRODUCTION

To unravel a torment, to determine the shape of a problem, you must begin somewhere – anything can be a thread[1]. In the tangled discourse of Afrikaner nationalism and identity, one such thread is *Noitjie van die Onderveld* (hereafter *Noitjie*), a bronze statuette of an Afrikaner girl by the South African sculptor

[1] "To unravel a torment, you must begin somewhere. Anything can be a thread." The phrase is drawn from Luisa A. Igloria's poem, which in turn is after Louise Bourgeois' series of works "What is the shape of this problem" (1999). In her series, Bourgeois interrogates the "shape" of internal struggles, revealing how personal histories and unresolved issues can take on palpable and tangible forms. Igloria's work often explores themes of memory, identity, and the passage of time, making this line particularly resonant in the context of unpacking historical and ideological tensions.

Anton van Wouw. At first glance, the sculpture appears straightforward: a naturalistic bronze study of a teenage girl in traditional *Voortrekker*[2] dress. Her hands are folded modestly in a *Venus Pudica* pose[3], with a demure, downcast expression beneath a starched bonnet. Yet, her biography is anything but ordinary. *Noitjie* was cast in Rome in 1907 and first exhibited in Johannesburg and Pretoria in 1908, then in London the following year. She charmed audiences, and her nostalgic appeal only intensified over time. As a result, she evolved into a widely recognised cultural icon, repeatedly invoked in nationalist discourse and visual culture. Her image became a reference for constructing Afrikaner femininity, reinforcing notions of service and subservience. While Van Wouw may not have intended to sculpt an icon representing Afrikaner womanhood, *Noitjie* eventually became the foundational visual embodiment of the *volksmoeder*.

The *volksmoeder* represents the ideal Afrikaner woman, personified by traditional values and nationalist fervour; she is the Afrikaner expression of the universal "mother of the nation" archetype. Over the past 30 years, this construct has been extensively examined in academic scholarship, with many arguing that this figure politicised Afrikaner womanhood by reinforcing prescribed gender roles that preserved and propagated a nationalist Afrikaner identity and its cultural ideals (Vincent 1999; Brink 1990; Kruger 1991; McClintock 1991; Van der Watt 1996, Du Toit 2003; Van der Watt 2009, Brink 2011; Van der Westhuizen 2018; Kruger 2020).

This layeredness of materiality and its meanings and histories forms what Ian Hodder (2012) calls an "entanglement" – a state of interwoven dependencies in which objects do not merely reflect human culture but actively shape and constrain it. Hodder's concept highlights the intricate, reciprocal dependencies between people and objects. It emphasises that objects are not merely passive but actively shape human culture, social structures, and ideologies. In this study, entanglement is visualised not as different yarns intertwining to form a single thread, but as a tangled morass, stubbornly complex, resistant

[2] The term "Voortrekker" refers to the Afrikaner pioneers, about 12 000, who between 1835 and 1846, embarked on a series of migrations known as the Great Trek. Seeking to escape British colonial rule in the Cape Colony, these predominantly Dutch-speaking settlers moved into the interior regions of Southern Africa, establishing independent Boer republics – the South African Republic (Transvaal), the Orange Free State, and Natalia. The journey was marked by hardship like hunger, illness, death, conflicts, and violent clashes with indigenous communities. Afrikaners regarded The Great Trek as the origin event of their nationhood. The Voortrekkers' legacy of resilience and self-determination played a significant role in shaping Afrikaner cultural history and ideology, including the development of the *volksmoeder* archetype (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007; Van der Westhuizen 2018).

[3] The *Venus Pudica* or "modest Venus" pose is a classical motif in Western art characterised by an idealised female nude who covers her pubis with her hand. The figure is defined by its modesty and is frequently positioned at a slight angle away from the viewer, suggesting self-consciousness and chastity. The pose symbolises female sexuality, framing it through passivity, vulnerability, and shame. It visually preserves the pubis as the defining aspect of womanhood (Salomon 1996).

to unravelling – enmeshed and ensnared. Entanglement serves here as an interpretative approach that embraces an object's resistance to reduction, acknowledging its complexity, multiplicity, and ambiguity. The aim of this study is to use a nuanced method that examines multiple layers, offering a comprehensive perspective rather than a definitive interpretation. Building upon this framework, the study positions *Noitjie* as an ideological node that links materiality and nationalist discourse, actively sustaining cultural memory and identity.

This study examines *Noitjie*'s ideological operations and traces her mobilisation within Afrikaner visual culture. Previous analyses situate her within Afrikaner iconography, with Lou-Marie Kruger describing her as "a significant and explicit example of how nationalist art and visual culture were deployed in the gendering of Afrikaner nationalism" (Kruger 2020: 221). *Noitjie* stands as one of the earliest and most influential visual embodiments of the *volksmoeder* construct (Brink 2011) and moving beyond artistic representation, she became a potent symbol of ideological fixation and cultural reproduction.

Since her debut in 1908, Van Wouw's figure has become a touchpoint in Afrikaner visual culture. Moving beyond the exhibition hall, it was reproduced in nationalist print media, institutional emblems and public commemorations. This widespread circulation amplified her ideological significance, embedding her within the fabric of Afrikaner identity. Continuously reinterpreted and re-inscribed with meaning, *Noitjie* evolved from a static depiction into an active site of ideological investment, demonstrating how material objects both reflect and shape cultural identities through repetition.

Fetishism provides a critical lens for understanding how ideological investment, cultural repetition, and irrational reverence, shape human relationships with material objects. In *Noitjie*'s case, her significance extends beyond artistic appreciation. As Tim Dant (1996: 498) explains, she functions "as something irrationally revered." She is an object whose significance transcends its material form, sustained by ideological devotion. Dant (1996: 495) argues that fetishism explains how objects gain cultural significance through social and discursive practices. These practices do more than assign meaning to objects; they amplify their significance, leading people to attribute special qualities to them, transforming them into sources of fascination, reverence and desire. Building on this perspective, this study examines how *Noitjie* is not simply a representation of Afrikaner womanhood but a fetishised nationalist construct. Nationalist discourse persistently reproduces, circulates, and reinforces her significance, securing her place within its ideological framework.

From this standpoint, key questions arise: What ideological work does *Noitjie* do? What desires does she sustain? Why her? Why does she remain central to this discourse? These questions guide an inquiry into how *Noitjie*'s continual reproduction and cultural entrenchment do more than reflect Afrikaner nationalist ideals – they actively sustain and intensify them, transforming her into an object of nationalist longing.

Conceptual Distinctions

The study describes *Noitjie* as both "it" and "she" to reflect her dual nature as a material artefact and a symbolic representation. "It" is used when discussing the sculpture's physical qualities and materiality, aligning with its role as an object in material culture studies. In contrast, "she" is applied when *Noitjie* is considered an anthropomorphised figure – an embodiment of the *volksmoeder* ideal and Afrikaner womanhood. This dual positioning, where *Noitjie* exists as both object and subject, reveals the entanglement of materiality and ideology. More than a sculpture, she became a site of inscription, repeatedly overlaid with nationalist and gendered ideals. But ideological constructions are never fixed; they shift, accumulate, and entangle themselves with the material world. Over time, *Noitjie* has carried multiple meanings: art, artefact, thing, commodity, fetishised symbol, a totem of objectification and materialisation of the female body, carrier of cultural and ideological knowledge, and a phantom of a haunted and unsettled past. More than a simple representation, she became an object of nationalist desire – fetishised, replicated, and absorbed into the ideological construction of Afrikaner womanhood.

The terms "womanhood" and "femininity" hold distinct meanings, shaping interpretations of *Noitjie*'s ideological construction. Womanhood typically refers to the lived experience of being a woman, encompassing biological, social, and cultural aspects. Femininity is more prescriptive, shaped by cultural and ideological expectations that define how women should behave, appear, and function in society. In this context, rigid forms of femininity impose a narrow definition of womanhood, reinforcing gendered power structures (McCann 2022). This study recognises this distinction between the two terms but leans more towards the concept of femininity in its analysis, particularly where prescriptive ideals and ideological expectations are foregrounded. However, at times the terms may be used interchangeably, when the boundaries between lived experience and cultural construction become entangled.

Afrikaner Nationalism

Afrikaner nationalism is an ethnocentric ideology that emerged among white Afrikaans-speakers, particularly from the Boer republics in Transvaal and the Orange Free State in the late nineteenth century. Rooted in strong anti-British sentiments following the South African War (1899–1902),[4] a conflict between the British Empire and the Boer republics over their quest for independence from Imperial British rule and control of the rich gold fields of the Witwatersrand (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 206), Afrikaner nationalism became a powerful cultural and political force. Often described as a civil religion, it drew upon Afrikaner history, defence of the Afrikaans language, and Afrikaner Calvinism. This ideology laid the groundwork for the National Party, which rose to power in 1948 and implemented apartheid.

Afrikaner Calvinism is a religious and ideological belief system that adapted aspects of traditional Calvinism to the Afrikaner cultural and historical context. Rooted in the Protestant Reformation teachings of John Calvin, this theology emphasises predestination, the sovereignty of God, and a belief in the moral and spiritual "chosenness" of the Afrikaner people. The theological foundation of Afrikaner Calvinism reinforced an ethnocentric worldview, framing Afrikaners as a "volk" (nation) under God's covenant and contributing to the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism. This belief system supported the National Party's policies and justified Apartheid by framing racial segregation and white rule as part of a divine mandate, portraying Afrikaner society as both morally superior and responsible for maintaining order (Du Toit 1983 & 1985).

1.1 Research Questions and Scope

This study is guided by three research questions, exploring *Noitjie*'s ideological function and her role as a fetishised object within Afrikaner nationalism.

1. How does *Noitjie*'s function as a fetishised object, not only represent but actively sustain a particular Afrikaner womanhood within nationalist discourse?

[4] The Second Anglo Boer War was renamed the South African War to recognise the involvement of black South Africans, whether through coercion or choice (Freschi, Schmahmann & Van Robbroeck 2020: 2). Historians describe this war as the most devastating and transformative armed conflict in South Africa's history, comparing its impact on the formation of modern South Africa to the impact the American Civil War had on the history of the United States (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 206).

2. How did the reproduction and circulation reinforced *Noitjie*'s fetishisation, embedding her more deeply within Afrikaner visual and textual culture?

3. How can curatorial practice unsettle *Noitjie*'s fetishisation, and interrogate her ideological legacy?

The study examines *Noitjie*'s role in shaping Afrikaner womanhood and identity, focusing on how reproduction, symbolism, and ideological attachment uphold nationalist ideals. It does not, however, extend into broader political analyses of Afrikaner nationalism beyond its gendered dimensions, even though these are indirectly informed by them. Other works by Anton van Wouw or sculptures unrelated to the *volksmoeder* ideal fall outside the scope of this research.

1.2. The Role of the Exhibition

This research combines literary and visual analysis to examine *Noitjie,* tracing its reproduction, circulation and ideological function in Afrikaner visual culture. Through textual and visual analysis, the study explores how *Noitjie* has been represented, idealised, and reinterpreted across different historical and cultural contexts.

Alongside this analysis, the exhibition *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity* provides a physical and spatial encounter with *Noitjie*, emphasising her deep entrenchment in nationalist ideology. Rather than framing her as a static historical artefact, the exhibition highlights her continued ideological role, showing how she has been fetishised, reproduced, and embedded within cultural memory. Through its curatorial approach, the exhibition not only presents *Noitjie*'s history but also critically challenges her ideological significance, prompting viewers to reflect on the role of visual culture and nationalism in shaping identity. As shown in Figure 1, the exhibition's layout invites a layered engagement with *Noitjie* as both object and symbol. By placing *Noitjie* alongside historical artefacts and contemporary artistic responses, the exhibition strengthens the study's argument, revealing how nationalism continually inscribes itself onto material objects and gendered identities.

1.3. Chapter Summaries

This research report first establishes the historical and ideological foundations of *Noitjie van die Onderveld,* then examines its nationalist and gendered inscriptions before concluding with contemporary artistic responses and curatorial considerations.

Chapter One introduces the research focus, key questions, and scope, situating *Noitjie* within Afrikaner nationalism, fetish theory, gender studies, and material culture. It argues that the sculpture is not a neutral artistic representation but a fetishised ideological construct, whose reproduction sustains a specific cultural identity. The chapter outlines the report's structure and clarifies the exhibition's role as both an extension of the research and a critical intervention.

Chapter Two details the methodological approach, integrating literature-driven and visual analysis to examine how materiality, ideology, and gender intersect in *Noitjie's* representation. It draws on primary sources such as newspaper articles, archival materials alongside secondary literature on Afrikaner nationalism, material culture, and fetish theory. Theoretical frameworks, including material culture studies, entanglement theory, gender studies and fetish theory provide the conceptual foundation for understanding how *Noitjie's* reproduction and repetition have sustained her ideological power.

Chapter Three examines the historical and ideological conditions that shaped *Noitjie's* emergence as a fetishised nationalist artefact. It examines the *volksmoeder* construct, Anton van Wouw's artistic intent, and *Die Boerevrou* magazine's role in reinforcing Afrikaner femininity through cultural repetition and circulation. The chapter examines how *Noitjie's* material and ideological integration within Afrikaner cultural production cemented her nationalist significance through ongoing reproduction and circulation.

Chapter Four examines the exhibition *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity – Art, Nationalism & Womanhood as* a site of inquiry into *Noitjie's* fetishisation and ideological entrenchment. It explores curatorial strategies that foreground her circulation, replication, and ideological entrenchment, integrating historical materials and contemporary feminist responses. The chapter considers how exhibitions can disrupt fixed meanings and challenge the fetishisation of contested artefacts.

Chapter Five synthesises the findings, emphasising *Noitjie's* role in sustaining Afrikaner femininity through material repetition, circulation, and fetishistic desire. It reflects on her continued ideological significance and the ways curatorial practice can unsettle fixed meanings.

By establishing the research focus, key questions, and broader ideological framework, the introduction has positioned *Noitjie* within Afrikaner nationalism, gender studies, and material culture. The next chapter sets out the methodological approach and theoretical frameworks guiding this research, providing critical tools needed to interrogate *Noitjie's* ideological function and cultural significance.



Figure 2 – A close-up view of *Noitjie van die Onderveld* by Anton van Wouw (1907) reveals finely wrought details – from the bonnet's intricate pattern to the delicate ruffling around the neckline. These elements not only showcase Van Wouw's craftmanship but also evoke a sense of intimacy. The viewer is drawn into close visual proximity, encouraged to linger on the private, tactile qualities of the sculpture. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.

2 METHODOLOGIES FOR EXAMINING THE FETISHISED OBJECT

This study follows an object-oriented approach with *Noitjie* as the central point of analysis. Thinking with and through the object[5], the sculpture is both the subject and the lens with which to examine and understand the cultural, social, and ideological processes that have shaped and been shaped by its material presence. Joseph Scarpaci (2016: 1) states that objects are portals to past behaviours and desires and therefore offer valuable insights into the cultures and societies from which they emerge. Ian

[5] Thinking with and through the object, is an approach to curatorial practice, as proposed by Alex Burchmore (2024:2), which regards objects as micro-worlds, that carries the dynamics of their context, production and use. An object-driven inquiry that "begins with the object and works outward," operates as a meta-methodology, fostering an ontological awareness of materiality.

Woodward (2007: 4) writes that objects have the "ability to establish social meanings" because they function as tools that both unify and differentiate social groups, classes, and tribes. He also notes that objects foster group bonds and shape self-identity. From this perspective, *Noitjie* is approached not only as a sculpture but also as a material entity that was mobilised to shape Afrikaner womanhood, and as a result influenced social structures and expectations of behaviour.

Objects are not neutral; their meanings can be layered, questioned, and evolve endlessly (Hodder 2014: 22). Acknowledging the agency of the object, this study does not impose fixed theoretical definitions onto *Noitjie* but is curious about the possibilities of allowing the sculpture to generate other theoretical offerings and engagement. Therefore, *Noitjie* is positioned as an active participant in meaning-making rather than a passive symbol. To ensure a holistic methodological approach – one that recognises objects as not merely reflecting power structures but actively shaping and sustaining them – this study applies its theoretical frameworks through a combination of analytical tools. These include material analysis, iconographic and semiotic interpretation, discourse analysis and archival study.

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

Scarpaci (2016: 1) argues that, to understand objects, it is necessary to engage with multiple theoretical frameworks. The value being that different frameworks contribute unique insights and epistemologies. Therefore, this study employs four distinct, yet interrelated frameworks to examine how materiality, gender and ideology intersect in shaping *Noitjie*'s meaning as a fetishised nationalist object.

Material culture studies highlight *Noitjie*'s materiality not as a passive characteristic but as a defining element in shaping Afrikaner identity. Entanglement theory builds on this idea by examining how *Noitjie* exists within shifting social, political, and cultural contexts to show how her ideological significance is not only reinforced but also reshaped over time. Gender studies further complicate this reading by positioning her as a gendered symbol within a specific nationalist narrative which aligns her with the *volksmoeder* ideal and its rigid expectations of Afrikaner womanhood. Fetish theory weaves these perspectives together by framing *Noitjie* as a site of nationalist fantasy where materiality, entanglement, and gendered symbolism intersect to create an object laden with ideological investment, desire and tension.

2.1.1. Material Culture Studies: How Objects Shape Identity

Material culture studies emerged as a distinct field in the 1970s and 1980s, drawing from anthropology, archaeology, art history, and cultural studies. The field inspects the dynamic relationship between people and objects. It challenges rigid subject-object binaries by arguing that objects, as carriers of meaning, are active participants in shaping social identities, ideologies, and power structures. Positioned within networks of cultural and historical entanglements, objects accumulate meaning through their materiality, use, and circulation (Woodward 2007: 4). Applying this perspective to *Noitjie* offers a framework for analysing how her physical form, scale and material presence shaped nationalist discourse over time.

Ian Woodward (2007: 134) asserts that "a fundamental principle of material culture studies is that objects have the ability to stand for other things – or establish social meanings – on behalf of, or more precisely along with people." This suggests that objects do more than reflect cultural values but actively co-construct human experience, mediate relationships, and shape collective identity (Woodward 2007: 2). This reciprocal relationship between people and objects blurs the boundary between subject and object, reinforcing the idea that human identity is inextricably linked to the material world (Woodward 2007: 4).

Noitjie exemplifies the entanglement between material objects and ideology, demonstrating how a sculptural object functions as a repository of nationalist discourse. Geneviève Zubrzycki (2017: 1) argues that during the nation-making process, materiality (whether mundane or monumental), makes the nation "appear real, close, and important" to individuals. As a sculptural medium, bronze is historically linked with power, permanence, and cultural legitimacy. By association *Noitjie*'s bronze form strengthens and amplifies her ideological significance. Unlike ephemeral materials such as wood or clay, its durability ensures that *Noitjie'*s symbolic function, which is to embed nationalist ideology within cultural consciousness, endures across generations.

Statuary commemorates and reinforce a specific socio-political view of the past (Fuller 2014: 119). Monumental structures, such as the Voortrekker Monument, assert dominance through their scale and imposing physical presence. *Noitjie,* on the other hand, engages ideology through a different mode. Rather than demanding reverence through grandeur, her *kappie* (bonnet), *velskoene* (handmade leather shoes), and handmade dress feminise nationalist iconography. She is not read through a display of heroism or conquest, but through intimacy, relatability, and cultural nostalgia. Instead of imposing ideology, she makes the nationalist message feel personal and familiar. The shift from monumentality to domestic familiarity is evident in the sculpture's surface detail, from the finely etched bonnet to the

delicate scarf drawn across her shoulders, which invite close inspection and tactile engagement (see Figure 2). The meticulous rendering of texture does more than showcase Van Wouw's technical mastery; it draws the viewer into a private, sensory engagement, inviting close looking that becomes an act of intimate inspection, a one-on-one encounter rather than a public spectacle. This intimacy mirrors the sculptor's own intentionality, he dwelled on the minutiae of clothing and gesture to craft a vision (and performance) of Afrikaner femininity. This sculptural intimacy serves multiple functions: it softens the ideological weight of the object by cloaking it in beauty and familiarity; it cultivates a sentimental attachment, particularly in viewers culturally conditioned to read modesty as moral virtue; and it invites a possessive regard – not only for the object, but for the ideals inscribed upon it.

These material features reinforce a vision of Afrikaner femininity that is deeply intertwined with nationalist identity and shaped by the *volksmoeder* ideal. Over time, the message embeds itself so thoroughly in daily life and cultural practices that it feels natural. The ideal is absorbed into everyday existence, taken for granted, and accepted without question. Eventually, it is internalised to the point where it is accepted as self-evident, and, ultimately regarded as the inevitable.

Material culture studies emphasise material agency, recognising that objects actively interact with people and environments to shape experiences, identities, social structures, and cultural meanings. Scholars argue that material culture is not static but embedded in networks of social relations and historical context, making objects integral to identity formation (Appadurai 2024; Brown 2001; Hodder 2014; Hoskins 2006; Miller 2006; Tilley 2006). Miller argues that objectification is central to all explorations of material culture: "Through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting and living with things people make themselves in the process" (2006: 61). Objects act as tangible expressions of human values and social identities. They shape how people perceive themselves and their world. Miller describes humans and objects as engaged in a continuous mutual process of co-creation – objects "make people" as much as people "make objects." Therefore, nationalist identity is not only reinforced and sustained through discourse but also through the objects that embody and circulate these ideals.

In *The Social Life of Things* Arjun Appadurai introduces the concept of biography to examine objects, to trace and unlock their social and cultural significance:

> We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories

> that we can interpret the human interactions and calculations that enliven things. […] it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context (2024: 5).

The object biography methodology applies biographic methods to narrate the "lives" of objects, tracing their evolving form, function, and significance from the moment of creation through periods of use, display, circulation, disposal or reinvention (Burchmore 2024: 3). While object biographies focus on the material artefacts themselves, they also consider a "supporting cast of human (and more-than-human) actors" who mediate an object's passage through different historical, ideological, and institutional contexts (Burchmore 2024: 3). These "moments of encounter" (Burchmore 2024: 3) are essential to the meaning-making process.

Although human actions shape an object's trajectory, the object itself also influences human practices by carrying cultural narratives, power dynamics, and social roles along its journey. Objects do not have fixed meanings; instead, their significance shift as they are re-contextualised and reinterpreted within evolving political, social, and ideological landscapes. This perspective highlights the role of temporality in shaping an object's life, as it accumulates, transforms, and transmits meaning over time. Initially, *Noitjie* functioned as both an artwork and a commodity but during the height of Afrikaner nationalism, it became an emblem to reinforce the *volksmoeder* ideal, found not only in several print media but also as decorative objects in people's homes. In the post-apartheid era, it has become a contested symbol – alternately viewed as nostalgic heritage, an obsolete relic, or a critical site for feminist engagement.

Understanding objectification together with object biographies lays the foundation for the latter discussion on fetishisation, where objects like *Noitjie* do more than shape identity – they become sites of intensified ideological and emotional investment that shape the way they are understood. Objects like *Noitjie* accumulate layers of meaning over time, which are often tied to specific historical and ideological contexts. *Noitjie* functions on two levels: as an object that represents Afrikaner womanhood and as an object that is actively invested with meaning. Paradoxically, while objectification strips women of agency, reducing them to mere objecthood, *Noitjie* is imbued with agency, gaining meaning beyond her form. When objects are embedded in dominant cultural narratives, such as Afrikaner nationalism and the *volksmoeder* ideal, their meanings can become rigid or predetermined, limiting alternative interpretations. Objects circulate or orbit within cultural and institutional systems that continuously reinforce and legitimise the meanings attached to them. Ultimately these meanings become dominant and self-sustaining, perpetuating their ideological significance. In this way, objects do not simply reflect history; they act as

agents within it, shaping identity through both material presence and the evolving meanings attributed to them. Micheal Yonan underscores the importance of material culture in art history:

> In a world in which goods of all kinds play an enormous role in our lives, understanding art as material culture positions the discipline [as the] site where … things can undergo close formal, constructional, and socio-semantic scrutiny (Burchmore 2024: 3).

Viewing art as material culture extends its analysis beyond aesthetics, situating it as a critical space for examining the ideological dimensions of objects, including how their production and circulation shape cultural memory.

2.1.2. Entanglement Theory

Entanglement theory, developed by Ian Hodder, expands the study of material culture by emphasising the mutual dependency between humans and things. This perspective challenges the notion that objects are passive; instead, it shows how objects actively shape human identities, social structures, and ideologies (Hodder 1986, 2014). Jane Bennett (2010: 5) reinforces this view by describing objects as "vivid entities" that carry their own histories and potentials while generating affective responses independent of human intervention. Hodder further argues that humans do not just use objects; they become entangled with them, co-creating meaning in ways that are often inescapable.

Material culture is more than a reflection of human intention; it simultaneously enables and constrains human action. This dynamic is useful in understanding *Noitjie*'s role, not merely as a representation of Afrikaner nationalism but as an object embedded in networks of historic, cultural and ideological dependency. Hodder observes that "human existence and social life depend on material things and are entangled with them; humans and things are relationally produced" (2014:19), which points to a mutual dependence in the human-object dynamic. Hodder captures this interdependency by categorising relationships into four types: humans depend on things (HT), things depend on other things (TT), things depend on humans (TH), and humans depend on other humans (HH). Expressed collectively as networks of interdependencies (HT) + (TT) + (TH) + (HH), he illustrates how identities, roles, and functions emerge through continuous human-object interactions.

Drawing on these theoretical insights, *Noitjie* is more than just a sculpture – her materiality and symbolic associations actively shape Afrikaner identity. While, on a practical level, humans rely on objects for survival, from the tools we use to the buildings we inhabit, on an existential level, objects carry cultural, historical and ideological meanings that influence our self-perception and social world (Hodder 2014: 20). However, as Hodder notes, there is a "darker side" to these entanglements. Relationships between humans and things are often asymmetrical and therefore can lead to dependencies that limit human agency (2014: 19–20).

Hodder distinguishes between two types of dependencies. The first type, general dependence, is enabling – humans rely on things to live, socialise, eat, and think. Hodder terms this "reliance on" material things to provide the support for humans to function, adapt, and build societies. The second type of dependency is a limiting force that introduces constraint – humans and things become mutually bound in ways that restrict individual or societal development. This dialectic between dependence and dependency reveals a tension within entanglement: while things empower human life, they also have the potential to confine and restrict it. As humans and things become increasingly intertwined, they shape and limit each other's capabilities, creating a complex interplay of freedom and constraint within human-material relationships (Hodder 2014: 20).

Fetishised objects can entrap people. When an object's symbolic and emotional weight prescribes cultural ideologies, it creates narratives which are difficult to escape. *Noitjie* manifests this entrapment in her dual role: she not only reflects an idealised identity but also fixes it within a rigid, singular narrative that resists and limits alternative interpretations.

Entanglement theory offers a critical lens for understanding why *Noitjie*'s ideological significance endures, even as cultural and political contexts evolve. Her form, materiality, and symbolic weight remain an active force in shaping Afrikaner identity, as she is embedded in self-perpetuating cycles of cultural memory and historical legitimacy.

2.1.3. Mother of the Nation: Gender and Nationalism in Afrikaner Identity

Feminist scholarship has established nationalism as a deeply gendered phenomenon. As Jennifer Thomson (2020: 3) observes, "gender, and its intersection with the body, race, sexuality, and religion, acts as a marker by which nations represent themselves, assign value, and provide symbols around

which to rally." These symbols typically reflect traditional notions of femininity and women's "proper place" as home-bound, supportive and nurturing, because national identities rely on clearly defined ideas of both "manhood" and "womanhood" (Yuval-Davis 1997: 1; Thomson 2020: 6). In nation-making, men are celebrated as "forward-thrusting, potent, and historic" (McClintock 1993: 66), whereas women are cast as the custodians of cultural continuity, responsible for nurturing the nation's identity and values (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989: 7). This gendering is intentional and central to the construction and maintenance of national identity. As Elke Boehmer (2018: 30) asserts, "gender always already gives nationalism its legitimising symbols, its self-validating show." Gender is not an afterthought in nationalism, it is ingrained from the beginning. Nationalism does not invent gender roles, rather, it relies on pre-existing gendered ideas to shape its symbols, narratives, and structures of power.

Across cultures, nationalist narratives often invoke maternal archetypes to embody a nation's ideals and values. Sometimes, the title (mother of the nation) is given to female leaders who played pivotal roles in their country's political development. For example, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (1936–2018), often called the "mother of the nation" in South Africa, was an important figure in the struggle against apartheid (1910's–1994) and remained politically active in the post-apartheid era. Similarly, Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949), known as the "Nightingale of India", was a prominent poet and freedom fighter who significantly contributed to India's independence movement (1857–1947). In contrast, roles such as the American "First Lady" are largely ceremonial, reinforcing traditional gender norms rather than positioning women as active political leaders. In authoritarian regimes, nationalist symbolism has been used to confine women to domestic roles. Nazi Germany, for instance, awarded the "Cross of Honour of the German Mother" (conferred from 1933–1945) to valorise women's reproductive roles while constricting their influence to the domestic sphere.

In South Africa, two distinct "mother of the nation" constructs emerged from divergent nationalist movements. On one side, women like Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Albertina Sisulu (1918–2011), Lilian Ngoyi (1911–1980), and Fatima Meer (1928–2010) represent activist leadership that challenged oppression and mobilised resistance. However, this narrative was also complicated, as women within the ANC faced various forms of oppression, and at times, were expected to take on submissive roles within the movement (Makana 2019). On the other, Afrikaner nationalism embraced the *volksmoeder* archetype, a conservative, domestic ideal that positioned women primarily as reproducers of the nation. These contrasting constructs – the liberation mothers and the *volksmoeders* – reflect the divergent trajectories of African and Afrikaner nationalism in the early 20th century. This illustrates how the same label can both empower and constrain, depending on the ideological framework in which it operates. In both cases, the

ideologies concerning women as mothers were central to the efforts of national mobilisation (Gaitskell & Unterhalter 1989).

Nationalism idealises women while regulating and restricting their sexuality. Thomson (2020: 6) notes that sexual identity and national identity are mutually dependent; the ways in which we understand and perform gender are entwined with how we construct nationhood. As nations form, defining or redefining their boundaries, women's bodies become central symbols – markers of a nation's integrity, purity and its future (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1989). In nationalist utopias, women are idealised as virginal maidens, loyal wives and moral mothers of the nation. Within Afrikaner nationalism, the *volksmoeder* epitomises this ideal, serving as both a cultural icon and a tool for delineating national identity and reinforcing social norms. However, this idealisation is not devoid of sexualisation. The control over women's bodies, whether through restrictions on intermarriage, enforced dress codes, or wartime sexual violence, is inextricably linked to the protection of the national body (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1989; McClintock 1993). This reflects a complex interplay between desire and discipline. Women's roles are not only idealised but also regulated to ensure nationalist purity and power structures.

So why *Noitjie* and nationalism? Nationalism not only sexualises women; it also aestheticises them within the nationalist ideal. In many ways *Noitjie* functions as a "pin-up," much like classic pin-up art, which offers a stylised, sexualised representation of the female form. *Noitjie* is crafted as a template of beauty and domestic virtue that resonates with nationalist imagery. As a "self-validating show" (Boehmer 2018: 30), nationalism is performative – it needs to be seen and enacted through visible symbols. In this role, the sculpture is not merely an aesthetic object; it becomes a symbolic blueprint through which the nation's gendered ideals are constructed and perpetuated. *Noitjie* simultaneously embodies the nurturing caretaker and the sexualised object of desire. Shaped by the male gaze, she is an ideal that is both alluring and prescriptive, enforcing a narrow and paradoxical set of expectations. This line between desire and control not only defines her role but also limits the scope of how gender is constructed within the Afrikaner nationalist narrative.

2.1.4. *Noitjie* as Fetish: Examining Nationalist Desire through Fetish Theory

Fetishism describes the ways in which people interact with material objects as if they possessed human-like qualities or agency. Dant (1996: 495) argues that fetishism provides a useful analytical tool for

understanding the process by which objects gain social and ideological significance. This perspective aligns with material culture studies, which suggest that objects actively participate in meaning-making as they evolve over time (Appadurai 2024: 6). According to Dant, objects are not valued solely for their physical properties but for the ideological weight they accumulate through discourse, fantasy, and desire. He defines fetishisation as the process by which an object's social significance becomes overdetermined. During this process, the object is extended beyond its material form and comes to encompass broader cultural and ideological meanings.

Drawing on Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, Dant acknowledges that fetishism has traditionally been understood as a misattribution, where human qualities are mistakenly assigned to objects. However, rather than viewing fetishism as a misattribution or misperception, he extends Jean Baudrillard's analysis, which sees fetishism as a sign of social value (Dant 1996: 496). This approach shifts the focus from misperception to the social and discursive practices that transform objects into fetishes.

For Marx, fetishism lies at the core of capitalist commodity production. In a capitalist system, commodities seem to possess inherent value and power, but this is an illusion. Their worth derives from human labour, yet this origin is obscured. Much like religious fetishism, commodity fetishism conceals the social relations that create and sustain value, making objects seem autonomous rather than products of economic structures (Dant 1996: 496). Freud, by contrast, describes fetishism as a psychological displacement of desire, where an object becomes erotised as though it possesses intrinsic sexual power. This process redirects psychological investment onto the object, masking deeper anxieties or repressed desires (Dant 1996: 496).

Baudrillard extends these ideas into the realms of consumer culture. He argues that in modern societies, fetishism operates within a system of sign-value. In these societies, objects are no longer valued solely for their practical function (their use-value) or economic worth (their exchange value) but for the meanings they generate within a symbolic order. As objects circulate as signs, they detach from their original context, producing a hyperreality – a space where the distinction between the real and the symbolic collapses (Dant 1996: 497).

In this way, *Noitjie,* becomes a hyperreal object, where her historical origins are secondary to the nationalist myths she sustains. In cultural memory, she functions as a simulation of an idealised past, reinforcing ideological fantasies rather than reflecting historical accuracy. According to Dant, fetishised objects accumulate multiple layers of social valuation, transforming them into powerful cultural symbols

(Dant 1996: 511). In this way, *Noitjie* functions as more than a sculpture – she is a fetishised site onto which nationalist desire and anxieties are projected and reinforced.

Objects become fetishes of social and discursive practises that operate across cultural, political, economic, and psychological levels. Ritual and repetition strengthen an object's significance by reinforcing its meaning through continuous reproduction in media, monuments, and public spaces. Institutional endorsement further legitimises the object by securing its status and continuity through official recognition and protection. At the same time, economic value ties it to systems of exchange and prestige, while emotional and psychological investment deepens its symbolic weight, as people project desires, nostalgia, and identity onto it. The narratives built around the object further solidify its place in cultural memory, weaving it into historical myths and traditions. Once fetishised, its meaning is not only reinforced but also defended often through social norms, censorship, and the suppression of alternative interpretations (Dant 1996: 511). Through these mechanisms, the object moves beyond its material form to function as an ideological tool that shapes collective memory, identity, and power structures.

This chapter examined the theoretical foundations that form the conceptual framework for understanding *Noitjie* as a fetishised object that functions beyond her material form. Drawing on theories of fetishism, gender, material culture and entanglement, the discussion demonstrated how the sculpture operates as a symbolic tool in constructing and sustaining Afrikaner identity. Chapter three shifts focus to *Noitjie*'s biography and traces her origins and transformation into a cultural icon.



Figure 3 – Three *Noitjies*: Copies of *Noitjie van die Onderveld* displayed together at the exhibition. From left to right: a posthumous cast (1976), a 3D-scanned reproduction (2025), and a Massa foundry copy (date unknown, estimated between 1936 and 1955). The grouping highlights the sculpture's replication and circulation across time, reinforcing its role as a reproducible ideological form. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.

3 CONSTRUCTING *NOITJIE*: ART, NATIONALISM, AND THE MAKING OF AN ICON

"Objects are animated by the stories we weave around them, the stories they can tell us about ourselves, and the parts they play in the stories of our lives" (Burchmore 2024: 23). This quote underscores the dynamic relationship between objects and human culture. Objects' significance is given life – constructed, reinforced, and transformed – through the narratives people create around them. As reflections of cultural identity, objects reveal the values, aspirations, and anxieties of those who create, circulate, reproduce, and protect them. How, then, has *Noitjie*'s identity been constructed, and what does this reveal about the ideological investments embedded in her creation? This chapter traces *Noitjie*'s biography and key

"moments of encounter" from 1907 to the 1970's, examining how her image has been constructed, circulated, and appropriated across generations. Through this, the chapter considers how her replication and continued visibility reinforced her fetishisation, thus sustaining her role as an icon of Afrikaner femininity within nationalist discourse.

3.1. The Making of *Noitjie*: Historical and Ideological Context

Anton van Wouw (1862–1945) was a Dutch-born sculptor who settled in Pretoria in 1890. Trained as a stucco artisan, he specialised in decorative plasterwork for walls and ceilings, before focusing exclusively on sculpture. Drawn by the opportunities created by Johannesburg's rapid development following the 1886 gold rush, he moved to South Africa to work as an architectural sculptor in the booming building industry. He quickly secured commissions and established long-standing relationships with prominent architects and developers. His first major sculptural commission came in 1896 when industrialist Sammy Marks hired him to create the Kruger Memorial in Pretoria. Working within a colonial context, Van Wouw's work was influenced by a European naturalist style that emphasised realism and emotional resonance (De Jager 2009). As sculptor, his artistic input increased significantly after the South African War (1899–1902). He became well-known for his public monuments and smaller sculptures, primarily depicting Boer and African figures. While often classified as a naturalist, his sculptures also contain "flashes of idealism, romanticism and even realism" (Coetzee 2009: 84).

Van Wouw's body of work includes ten large bronze monuments and over 100 other sculptures, establishing him as a pioneer of the Eurocentric sculptural tradition in South Africa. His sculptures remain valuable and sought after, fetching significant sums at auctions and continuing to hold prestige in both private and institutional collections. In 2019, the maquette of his Paul Kruger statue sold for R10 460 000 (Ho 2019), and his works are regularly displayed at institutions like the Rupert Museum.

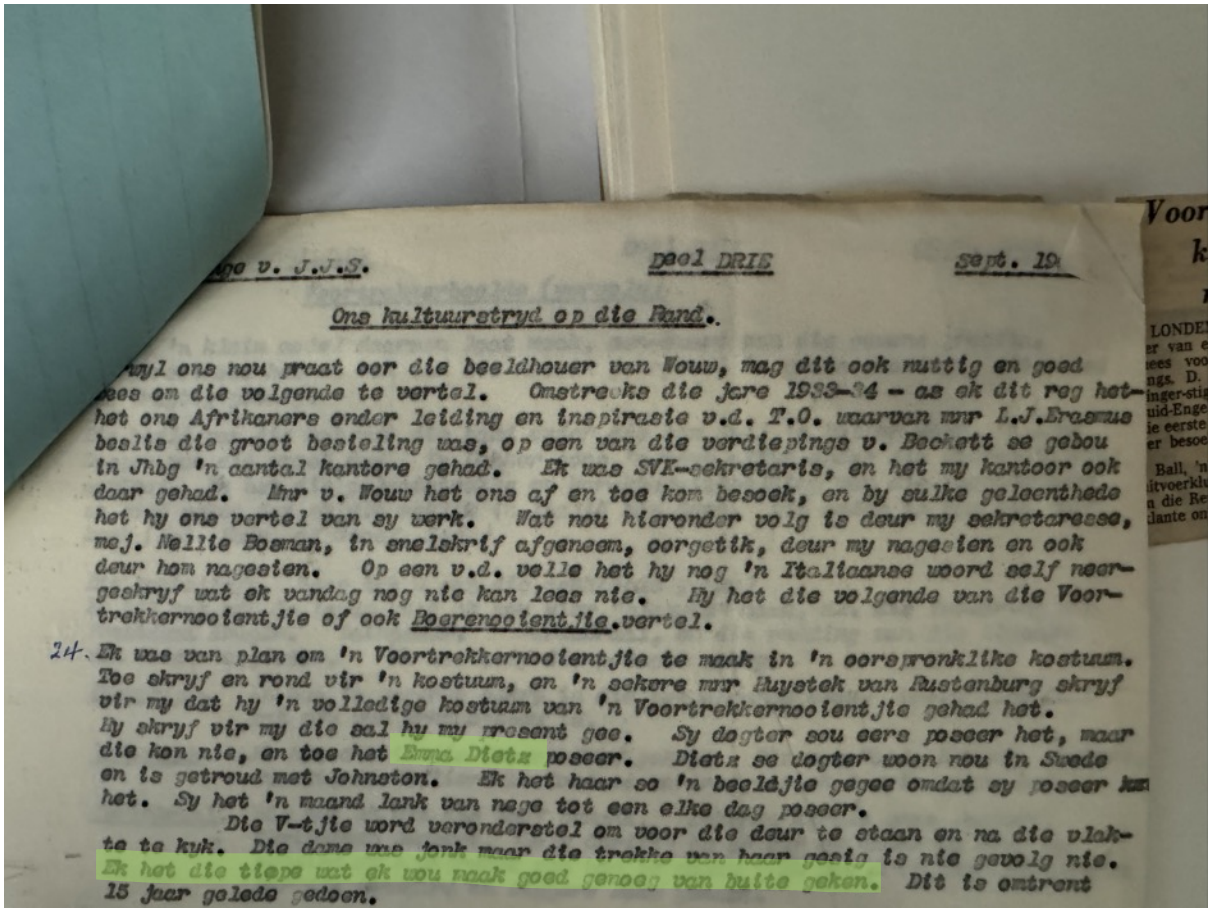
Van Wouw's work significantly shaped Afrikaner visual imagination. His sculptures reflected and reinforced ideological beliefs, often portraying Afrikaners through a paternalistic lens and a romanticised salt-of-the-earth ideal. Set against the backdrop of Dutch pro-Boer sympathy at the time (De Jong 2013: 36), his work mythologised Afrikaner identity, casting them in a heroic light and idealising their way of life. As Coetzee (2009: 84) notes, "as far as history is concerned, it is Van Wouw who more or less consciously set out to establish a veritable physiognomy of the Boer Afrikaner, male and female."

In 1906, Van Wouw secured financial backing from a syndicate that supported his artistic practice, enabling him to produce a series of smaller bronze sculptures depicting Afrikaner and African figures. Among these was *Noitjie*, first exhibited locally in 1908 and in London in 1909 under the title "Boer Girl." The initial edition of 15 *Noitjie* copies – one for each syndicate member – was produced at the Giovanni Nisini foundry in Rome. From the outset, *Noitjie* was marked for reproduction and intended for circulation. As shown in Figure 3, the exhibition brought together three versions of the sculpture – cast across different moments in her history – visually reinforcing how replication secures ideological continuity across generations. These early editions are valued at approximately R1 000 000 each (University of Pretoria Museum Archive, Van Wouw files). Between 1934–1955, additional casts were produced by the Massa foundry, also in Rome. After van Wouw's death the mould was returned to South Africa, where further posthumous copies were made (University of Pretoria Museum Archive, Van Wouw files). Beyond these authorised casts, a market for replicas emerged, ensuring *Noitjie's* continued circulation. Her desirability endures – one such replica sold at auction for R34 000 in February 2025 (Old Johannesburg Warehouse 2025).

As part of his commission for the syndicate *Noitjie* was the only female subject. Eager to sculpt an Afrikaner girl in authentic Voortrekker attire, Van Wouw was introduced to Mr. Huystek from Rustenburg who gave him an original Voortrekker outfit. The title *Noitjie van die Onderveld* translates to "girl from Rustenburg." However, in Afrikaans "noitjie" (also "noi" or "nooi") carries additional nuances that lend it a romantic undertone. Beyond simply meaning "girl," it can refer to a young, unmarried woman – a maiden or ingénue – connotating innocence, chastity, and little worldly experience. It can also imply a romantic interest, akin to "sweetheart". This romantic tone indicates the nostalgic gaze with which Afrikaner nationalism idealised a "golden age" of Afrikaner self-determination.

The identity of the model for the statuette has long remained unknown, with art historian A.E. Duffey (2008: 78), suggesting that it may have been one of Van Wouw's pupils at the Staatsmeisjesschool (State Girls' School)[6] in Pretoria. However, during my research, I found a document in the Van Wouw files, housed at the University of Pretoria Museums, which identifies the model as Emma Dietz (see Figure 4). In this note, transcribed by J.J. Scheepers – secretary of the SVK (Sentrale Volksmonumentekomitee/ Central People's Monuments Committee) – Van Wouw explains that he did not replicate Emma's facial features, but drew from a "type" he knew well enough from life: "*die trekke van haar gesig is nie gevolg*

[6] The Staatsmeisjesschool was established in Pretoria in 1880 and became Pretoria High School for Girls in 1902, the name it still bears today.



Deel DRIE

Ons kultuurstryd op die Rand.

...yl ons nou praat oor die beeldhouer van Wouw, mag dit ook nuttig en goed ...ees om die volgende te vertel. Omstreeks die jare 1933-34 - as ek dit reg het- het ons Afrikaners onder leiding en inspirasie v.d. T.O. waarvan mnr L.J.Erasmus beslis die groot bestelling was, op een van die verdiepinge v. Bockett se gebou in Jhbg 'n aantal kantore gehad. Ek was SVK-sekretaris, en het my kantoor ook daar gehad. Mnr v. Wouw het ons af en toe kom besoek, en by sulke geleenthede het hy ons vertel van sy werk. Wat nou hieronder volg is deur my sekretaresse, mej. Nellie Bosman, in snelskrif afgeneem, oorgetik, deur my nageslen en ook deur hom nageslen. Op een v.d. velle het hy nog 'n Italiaanse woord self neer- geskryf wat ek vandag nog nie kan lees nie. Hy het die volgende van die Voor- trekkermeisietjie of ook Boerenooientjie vertel.

24. Ek was van plan om 'n Voortrekkermeisietjie te maak in 'n oorspronklike kostuum. Toe skryf en rond vir 'n kostuum, en 'n sekere mnr Huystek van Rustenburg skryf vir my dat hy 'n volledige kostuum van 'n Voortrekkermeisietjie gehad het. Hy skryf vir my die sal hy my present gee. Sy dogter sou eers poseer het, maar die kon nie, en toe het Emma Dietz poseer. Dietz se dogter woon nou in Swede en is getroud met Johnston. Ek het haar so 'n beeldjie gegee omdat sy poseer het. Sy het 'n maand lank van nege tot een elke dag poseer.

Die V-tjie word veronderstel om voor die deur te staan en na die vlak- te te kyk. Die dame wie jank maar die trekke van haar gesig is nie gevolg nie. Ek het die tiepe wat ek wou maak goed genoeg van buite geken. Dit is omtrent 15 jaar gelede gedoen.

Figure 4 – Archival Notes by J.J. Scheepers. A document from the Van Wouw files from the University of Pretoria Museum Archive identifying Emma Dietz as the model for *Noitjie van die Onderveld*. Van Wouw explains that Dietz's facial features were not followed, as he already had a clear vision of the "type" he intended to sculpt. [Highlights added by the author]. Photograph by: Karolien van Zyl.

nie. Ek het die tiepe wat ek wou maak goed genoeg van buite geken" (University of Pretoria Museum Archive, Van Wouw files).

This is a revealing statement. *Noitjie* was not an individual portrait; but Van Wouw's idealisation of a "true" Afrikaner woman – an archetype shaped not by the sitter, but by the artist's internalised cultural ideals. *Noitjie*'s material beginnings are further entangled in an age-old narrative – the male impulse to craft the "ideal" woman. Throughout art history, male artists have sculpted idealised female figures, a theme dating back to Ovid's *Pygmalion* myth in *Metamorphoses* (c. 8CE). In the myth, Pygmalion sculpted Galatea, a statue embodying his vision of feminine perfection, only to fall in love with his creation and long for it to be brought to life. This myth reflects a broader historical pattern in which male artists project their fantasies onto female forms, often reducing women to objects of desire rather than acknowledging their complexity. When Van Wouw needed to demonstrate his artistic range, sculpting the female form expanded his oeuvre.

Geoffrey Miles calls the Pygmalion itch "one of the most potent male fantasies, the creation of a perfectly beautiful woman designed to the lover's specifications and utterly devoted to her creator" (1999: 332). German sociologist, Klaus Theweleit, in his study of fascism, expands this idea, stating: "Woman is an infinite, untrodden territory of desire which at every stage of historical deterritorialization, men in search of material for utopias have inundated with their desires" (1987: 294). His statement encapsulates the complex interplay between the male's desire to idealise and control womanhood, by positioning women as passive landscapes upon which male ideals, fantasies, and national myths are inscribed. Yuval Davis (1997) and McClintock (1993) point out, nations and their gender constructs are deliberately constructed, with these constructs typically defined and controlled by men. Joan Nagel further underscores this in her discussion of gender roles within the nation-state:

> The scripts in which these roles are embedded are written primarily by men, for men, and about men, and that women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of women's proper place (1998: 243).

Van Wouw's sculpture was well received and his take on the ultimate female form highly praised. A reviewer describes *Noitjie* as:

> …the most charming of the bronzes is a presentment of a dainty little Dopper maiden, kappie and bertha complete, a very demure, sweet little old-world picture, reminiscent of the austere Puritanism of the faith which led the old "voortrekkers" confident and undoubting in the van of South African civilization. There are no Dopper maidens nowadays, their descendants come to town regularly on week-ends and wear ready-made dresses and flower hats of a supposedly fashionable construction (Pretoria News 1908 July 29[7]).

The "Dopper" reference situates *Noitjie* within a strictly conservative Afrikaner tradition, linking her to a pioneer past that was increasingly idealised in the early twentieth century. "Dopper" was a moniker that referred to the members of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA), which is the most conservative[8] of the three Afrikaans Reformed churches. The other two are the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Reformed Church (RC). Known for their doctrinal purity and isolationist stance, the

[7] From: University of Pretoria Museum Archive, Van Wouw files.

[8] The RCSA's conservatism persists to this day. In 2018, during an extraordinary special synod, it was decided that while congregations could independently choose to appoint women as deacons, they would still be barred from official positions as elders or ministers (Eybers 2023).

Doppers often distanced themselves from secular influences and strongly opposed activities such as dancing, gambling, and other practices considered un-Christian. The reviewer's remark that "there are no Dopper maidens nowadays" reflects a concern over cultural change, suggesting that even at the time of its making, *Noitjie* was already a nostalgic image of a vanishing "pure" Afrikaner identity.

Noitjie's popularity and lasting influence must be understood within the politically charged climate of 1908, six years after the end of the South African War (1899–1902) and two years before the inauguration of the Union of South Africa in 1910. This was a period of intense nation-building, aimed at unifying the white population under a shared national identity. The National Convention of 1908 led to the adoption of the South African Act by the British Parliament, which laid the groundwork for the new state while strategically disenfranchising black South Africans from political participation. The formation of this fledgling state was shaped by the centralising and modernising forces of the mineral economy and solidified through eight years of "reconstruction" from 1902 to 1910. During this time, administrative structures were put in place, and partnerships between Afrikaner politicians and mining capitalists, reinforced white economic dominance.

However, the majority of Afrikaners – many of them farmers impoverished after the war – lacked the skills to participate in industrialisation, leaving them economically and socially marginalised within the nation-building project. Freschi & Schmahmann & Van Robbroeck (2020: 2) affirm that Afrikaner Nationalism is rooted in the "experience of a people who were denied social and economic power, and whose political and cultural agency was marginalised by the imperial agenda." They support this point by citing Mzukisi Qobo, who argues that:

> nationalism always thrives under the conditions of social marginalisation, [it] strikes a chord especially with those who are denied social and economic power, and whose voices are on the fringe, and whose experiences are not well understood (2018, cited in Freschi *et al* 2020: 2).

At the same time, reconstruction policies reinforced settler dominance over the black majority. Black communities faced intensified policing and taxation, while the new constitution formally excluded them from political participation. Racial segregation, introduced during this period, became further entrenched after 1910 and these tensions fuelled the parallel rise of Afrikaner nationalism and African nationalism at the start of the 20th century.



Figure 5 – Anton van Wouw, *Group sculpture of women and a dying child based on a scene described by Emily Hobhouse* (1913) Image source: Alamy.



Figure 6 – Anton van Wouw, *Voortrekker Woman and Children* (1948). Image source: Wikipedia.

It was in this context that *Noitjie* emerged – at a time when Afrikaners were grappling with the question of identity: Who are we? *Noitjie* therefore resonated because she was both a response to this uncertainty and an emblem of nostalgic longing for a lost past. This is the essence of restorative nationalism, which, as Iza Ding and Marek Hlavac (2017: 432) explain, "is triggered by cultural change that usually follows modernisation" and animated by cultural symbols. They further note that "those who experience greater psychological difficulty in adapting may become nostalgic for a past envisioned to be purer, simpler and, for all intents and purposes, better (Ding & Hlavac 2017: 432). *Noitjie*'s image evoked an imagined Afrikaner identity rooted in the simplicity, resilience, and moral fortitude of the Voortrekkers. When Afrikaners were seeking cultural and ideological anchors for their sense of self, *Noitjie* offered a reassuring vision of continuity and belonging. Van Wouw himself was sympathetic to the Afrikaner cause of nationhood and self-determination and his artistic vision aligned with these broader ideological currents. *Noitjie* became an image that encapsulated the anxieties and aspirations of a people navigating their place within the modernising Union.

3.2. *Noitjie*: The Cover Girl of Afrikaner Nationalism

Following her debut exhibition in 1908, *Noitjie* became a widely reproduced and recognisable image, serving as a visual symbol of Afrikaner femininity, cultural identity, and nationalist ideology. Her image

was continuously adapted and reinterpreted across various media and historical contexts, each iteration further embedding her in Afrikaner consciousness. *Noitjie* was the first of Van Wouw's *volksmoeder* sculptures – a theme he would return to and expand upon in two major commissions. At the National Women's Memorial (1913) in Bloemfontein, he sculpted a grieving Boer mother and child, situating the *volksmoeder* within a broader narrative of suffering and sacrifice (Figure 5). In this grouping the *volksmoeder* becomes a figure of national martyrdom – a woman whose grief is sanctified and whose loss is emblematic of Afrikaner endurance. Here the emotional register is one of trauma and remembrance.

Decades later, Van Wouw's "Voortrekker Woman and Children" (1949), created for the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, further codified the *volksmoeder* as central to Afrikaner nationalist mythology. This monumental sculpture – standing 4,1 metres tall and weighing 2,5 tonnes – is the visual and ideological descendant of *Noitjie*, embodying the mature form of Van Wouw's *volksmoeder.* No longer a girl, she becomes a stoic matriarch: upright, composed, and bearing the symbolic burden of cultural continuity (Figure 6). In both instances, the *volksmoeder* imagery reinforces the ideal of Afrikaner women as steadfast figures of resilience and cultural preservation.

Noitjie's transformation into a fetishised symbol occurred through sustained visual repetition, embedding her within the nationalist imagination. Her iconography was easily reproduced, due in part to her distinctive silhouette and stance, which translated easily across different mediums. From the outset, her value was tied to reproducibility. The initial edition of 15 bronzes ensured that multiple copies circulated early on, laying the groundwork for her visual and ideological entrenchment.

Between 1919 and 1931, *Noitjie* appeared on every cover of *Die Boerevrou*[9]*,* the first Afrikaans women's magazine, with an image of the actual sculpture featured on each edition (see Figure 7). Additionally, a smaller emblem depicting *Noitjie*'s head, face, *kappie,* and shoulders in a cameo design was used as a decorative motif throughout the magazine's pages (see Figure 8). *Die Boerevrou* played a crucial role in both mediating and fetishising *Noitjie*'s image, transforming her into a cultural icon. More than just a publication, *Die Boerevrou* functioned as an ideological platform, its discourses on domesticity, moral duty, and cultural continuity aligned with the ideals embodied by *Noitjie,* reinforcing and amplifying her symbolic significance through a continuous mutual inscription.

[9] The magazine's title *Die Boerevrou* can be translated as the "The Boer Woman", "The Country-Woman," or "The Farmer's Wife."



Figure 7 – Installation View: *Die Boerevrou* Magazine Covers (1919–1931). The installation displays all the known covers of *Die Boerevrou* magazine across its publication run, each featuring *Noitjie*. The linear presentation reinforces how visual repetition transformed her into a cultural archetype. The pair of *velskoene* placed on the floor in front of the covers, quietly evokes the material trace of lived Afrikaner girlhood – echoing the footwear worn by *Noitjie*, reminding us that behind the idealised figure once stood a real person. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.


DIE BOEREVROU

GEïLLUSTREERDE MAANDBLAD VIR AFRIKAANSE VROUENS.

INHOUD.

Bladsij.

Redaksie 2
witserse Onderwijsstelsel ... 4
alaria en Muskiete 5
e Klerekis en sij Voor-

Ik sien haar win,
want haar naam
is—Vrouw en Moeder.

INHOUD (*Vervolg*).

Bladsij.

Ons Ruilkolom 21
Die Wedstrijd van dinge wat
niks kos nie 23
Hoedemakerij... 24

Figure 8 – Cameo of *Noitjie* in *Die Boerevrou* Magazine. This cameo-like image of *Noitjie*, reduced to head and shoulders and framed in an oval, appeared repeatedly as a decorative emblem in *Die Boerevrou*. It later inspired the crest of Afrikaanse Hoër Meisieskool Pretoria and was also materialised as a pin worn on their school uniforms. Through this act of miniaturisation, *Noitjie* was absorbed into the intimate rituals of identity – a wearable token of nationalist femininity. Photograph by: Karolien van Zyl.

When the magazine ceased publication in 1931, Afrikaanse Hoër Meisieskool Pretoria requested permission to adopt the *Noitjie* emblem as its school crest, a legacy that endures to this day. The principal at the time, Evelyn Verster, declared that the school will "continue the work and ideals of *Die Boerevrou"* (Van Rensburg 2013). This further institutionalised her image, reinforcing ideals of Afrikaner femininity for generations to come.

In 2016, *Noitjie*'s emblematic significance was reaffirmed when an attempt to modernize the school crest ignited public outcry. The principal's announcement of the redesign sparked intense debate and a media maelstrom, as parents and alumni fiercely opposed the proposed update. Critics derided the new design as a "Barbie in a bonnet," arguing that it dishonoured the traditional, pious representation of the Afrikaner girl (see Figure 9). A significant point of contention was *Noitjie*'s eyeline and expression – should she gaze upward confidently to face the world, or look downward in quiet contemplation? The chair of the alumni association, Vera de Klerk, defended the original design, insisting that Van Wouw's figurine was a serious sculpture and that *Noitjie*'s downward gaze symbolised her contemplation of the Afrikaner's future (Versluis 2016).



Figure 9 – Left to right: the original school crest of Afrikaanse Hoër Meisieskool Pretoria (AHMP), the proposed (and ultimately) rejected redesign, and the "modernised" version the parties adopted after public backlash. Despite aesthetic updates, the ideological construct remains intact, with *Noitjie's* downward gaze preserved to signify modesty and contemplation. Image source: Netwerk24.

Despite overwhelming support from staff and learners, 97% of the learners voted in favour of the updated version (Meijer 2016; Lourens 2016), a compromise was ultimately reached. The final design retained a

modified rendering of *Noitjie* but preserved her original downcast expression. The alumni who petitioned against the initial redesign issued a statement reinforcing their ideological investment in her image: "The nooientjie on the school emblem is the moral asset of our people and is worn with pride by every Affie" (Blackburn 2016). This case illustrates how, once an object becomes fetishised, its meaning is not only amplified but also rigidly controlled and upheld through social norms, institutional authority, and cultural policing. Competing interpretations are often censored, dismissed, or actively suppressed to maintain the object's ideological function. This process reinforces its symbolic status, making it resistant to critique or reinterpretation.

AHMP is not the only Afrikaans girls' school with a bronze *Noitjie*. The C&N Sekondêre Meisieskool Oranje in Bloemfontein has its own representation of a Voortrekker girl. Inspired by Van Wouw's *Noitjie*, Laurika Postma sculpted *Boerenoointjie* in 1940, and her sculpture remains in front of the school to this day, as a cherished part of the school community. Postma's figure complicates the *volksmoeder* ideal by presenting a strikingly different vision of Afrikaner femininity which is confident, upright, and at ease in her body (see Figures 10 and 11). One wonders how Afrikaner women's self-perceptions might have differed had *Boerenoointjie* achieved the same cultural prominence as *Noitjie*? What impact might that have had on the gender structure of Afrikaner nationalism? Could *Boerenoointjie* ever have been an ideological fit?



Figures 10 and 11 – Laurika Postma, *Boerenoointjie*, 1940. Situated on the grounds of the C&N Sekondêre Meisieskool Oranje in Bloemfontein, this life-sized bronze sculpture was inspired by Van Wouw's *Noitjie* yet departs from it significantly in both tone and form. Postma's figure offers a more physically assertive vision of Afrikaner femininity. Her dynamic pose suggests movement and agency, while her forward gaze meets the world with confidence

rather than downward deference. A defining feature is the sculpture's embodied solidity: she is grounded and purposeful – not an object to be passively observed, but a subject who returns the gaze. Image sources: mydopperdagboek and Facebook.

The absence of references to *Boerenoointjie* as a counterpoint during the AHMP emblem debacle suggests that she was never considered as a viable alternative by those defending *Noitjie*'s symbolic status. This aligns with Dant's theory that once an object becomes fetishised, its meaning is not only reinforced but also actively defended through censorship and the suppression of alternative interpretations (Dant 1996: 511).

Unlike *Noitjie*, *Boerenoointjie*'s confident posture and expression acknowledges female physicality in a way that subtly disrupts the pious ideals of the *volksmoeder*. Her stance communicates agency rather than submission. This contrast suggests that for a symbol to gain widespread cultural traction, it must resonate with prevailing cultural anxieties and aspirations. The same mechanisms that fetishised *Noitjie* as a nationalist ideal have also worked, and continue to work, to suppress or neutralise alternative representations like *Boerenoointjie*, ensuring that only representations upholding the dominant order are legitimised and circulated.

While *Boerenoointjie* suggests a more embodied and confident rendering of Afrikaner femininity, one should be cautious of a reductive interpretation that attributes this departure solely to Postma's gender. Postma also co-sculpted several of the marble frieze panels at the Voortrekker Monument, including the original Bloukrans panel, which became the subject of public controversy for its depiction of "gruesome" violence (Rankin & Schneider: 2019: 252). Originally the panel included a scene of a Zulu warrior killing a white infant. Prime Minster Jan Smuts deemed the scene too graphic and ordered a revision (Rankin & Schneider: 2019: 254). While the attention focused on the violence, Postma's rendering of a reclining Voortrekker woman in the foreground warrants further scrutiny (see Figure 12). Her pose – dramatically arched, with an exposed neck and shoulder, and a limp, yielding body – evokes the visual rhetoric of sexualised vulnerability. Positioned within a composition that stages black male aggression, this figure participates in a racialised and patriarchal fantasy of white womanhood under threat.

The imagery complicates an assumption that Postma's *Boerenoointjie* represents a progressive or oppositional vision of Afrikaner femininity. Her authorship alone does not guarantee ideological divergence; rather, it illustrates the complex and often contradictory ways in which gender and power were negotiated within nationalist visual culture. While a fuller analysis of the frieze lies beyond the scope

of this study, its inclusion signals the importance of resisting easy conclusions about the political meaning of female authorship.



Figures 12 – Laurika Postma, *Bloukrans* 1945. Detail of the Bloukrans panel in the Hall of Heroes, Voortrekker Monument, showing a reclining Voortrekker woman in the foreground. Photograph by: Elana Barker.

Noitjie's influence extended beyond print media. Between 1933 and 1949, she appeared on a series of fundraising and commemorative stamps (see Figure 13). Gary Baines notes that these visual representations played a crucial role in cultivating Afrikaner national consciousness: a "distinctive Afrikaner culture and identity was shaped by the repetitive remediation of these images" (2023). *Noitjie's* iconography was also incorporated into state-sponsored nationalist projects. Between 1949 and 1952, her image was embedded in the marble panels and the woven tapestries of the Voortrekker Monument, where it remains a permanent fixture (see Figure 14).

The Voortrekker tapestries consist of fifteen panels, each depicting different aspects of the Great Trek – from historical events and scenes of daily life to symbolic renderings of Afrikaner history and identity. Nine women were selected to execute the project, which took eight years to complete. Liese van der Watt

(1996), argues that the tapestries reflect the gender ideologies embedded in Afrikaner nationalism. The panels visually reinforce the separation of gender roles, portraying men as pioneers and women as caregivers, thereby upholding the *volksmoeder* ideal. Van der Watt presents the project as a case study in how visual culture is mobilised to construct and sustain nationalist narratives and gender hierarchies.



Figure 13 – *Noitjie*, featured on a series of fundraising stamps – her image rallying support for the effort to build the Voortrekker Monument. Photograph by: Karolien van Zyl.



Figure 14 – The tapestry installation at the Voortrekker Monument. Image source: vistittothepark.wordpress.com

During the Great Trek centennial celebrations in 1938, *Noitjie*'s bonneted image and the broader *volksmoeder* aesthetic were enthusiastically embraced as visual markers within the sensational nationalist spectacle (see Figure 15). These celebrations were not merely a commemorative event but designed to advance the Afrikaner nationalist cause by fostering cultural unity. Nine ox wagons embarked on a symbolic trek from Cape Town to Pretoria, their route winding its way through small towns, igniting what Giliomee & Mbenga (2007: 290) describe as "mass enthusiasm" among Afrikaners. Spectators, dressed in Voortrekker attire, took part in solemn ceremonies – laying wreaths on the graves of Afrikaner heroes and renaming streets in their honour. Some couples even married alongside the ox wagons, while many girls born during the celebration were given names inspired by the commemorative trek, such as Ossewania and Eufesia – derivates of the Afrikaans words for ox-wagon (ossewa) and centenary festival (eeufees), respectively (Robbroeck 2011: 108). The trek concluded in Pretoria with the laying of the foundation stone for the Voortrekker Monument, an event attended by a crowd of over 100 000 people (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 290).

Through these appropriations, *Noitjie*'s symbolic significance was further reinforced, amplified, and cemented within the nationalist movement.



Figure 15 – Henry Murray, *Blanke Skoonheid* (White Beauty) 1938. Girls from the Voortrekker High School in Pietermaritzburg celebrate the arrival of the ox wagons during the centenary re-enactment celebrations of the Great Trek. The aim of this pageant was to further the Afrikaner cause and foster unity and solidary among Afrikaners.

3.3. *Noitjie* and the Discursive Production of the *Volksmoeder* Ideal in *Die Boerevrou*

The launch of *Die Boerevrou* magazine in 1919 marked a pivotal moment in the construction of Afrikaner femininity. As a subscription-based monthly publication, it primarily targeted a readership in the Transvaal but also reached Afrikaner women as far afield as Angola and Kenya. The editor, Mabel Malherbe (1879–1964), invited her readership to participate in the making of the magazine and what it means to be an Afrikaner woman. While *Die Boerevrou,* has been examined in various studies, Lou-Marie Kruger's feminist analyses position it as a key site where the *volksmoeder* ideal was actively constructed (1991; 2020). The magazine's first editorial goals set a clear nationalist agenda with an urgent call to action to Afrikaner women to embrace their roles as mothers, not only for the sake of their children, but for the survival and advancement of the Afrikaner nation (Kruger 2020: 219).

Hermann Giliomee (2004: 327) describes Malherbe as a "formidable" and sophisticated woman. She seldom spoke Afrikaans, preferring English, rarely attended church, her children anglicised – yet she still identified as an Afrikaner. She campaigned for women's suffrage and became the first woman elected as both a mayor and a member of parliament in South Africa. She helped establish the women's branch of the National Party in Transvaal in 1915. Malherbe's editorial influence reflected her political convictions and personal interests. The magazine's content reflected the lived experience of farmers' wives, covering tasks such as soap making, poultry slaughtering – and transporting it to market by railway – food preservation, natural remedies and home nursing (see Figure 16). It also featured inspirational content like Maria Montessori's child rearing methods, accounts of European travels, poetry, short stories, and lessons in botanical drawing. Grooming was emphasised through articles on fashion, sewing patterns, and beauty, alongside a recurring weight loss series that began in the July 1923 edition.



Figure 16 – Photos of rural Afrikaner women in *Die Boerevrou,* January 1922, exemplify how the magazine cultivated a particular vision of Afrikaner womanhood, carefully selecting images and text that validated its readers' experiences. Photograph by Karolien van Zyl.

Caption (translated by the author):

Portraits of a hard-working farmer's wife, who is dear to the heart of *Die Boerevrou*. The lovely, simple frock, practical for work, easy to make, requiring little fabric, and neatly fitted, the finely crafted *velskoene,* healthy and spacious on the feet, and the maize-leaf hat; all of these are homemade items that we find beautiful. And then, the *tannie* even makes boereseep. She has long since discovered that it is far more economical than store-bought soap.

The phrases "who is dear to heart of *Die Boerverou*" and "that we find beautiful" are forms of interpellation, directly addressing the audience and embedding them within the magazine's ideological framework. Readers are reassured that their way of life is not only acknowledged but valued.

The period from 1919 to 1931, when *Die Boerevrou* was in circulation, coincided with the crystallisation of Afrikaner nationalism. While nationalist sentiment had been emerging earlier, this era saw it consolidate into a structured and politically unified movement. During this formative period, key organisations like the National Party (founded 1914) and the Broederbond (Afrikaner Brotherhood, established in 1918, a secret society) intensified efforts to define a cohesive nationalist ideology. Their influence expanded significantly when the National Party, led by J.B.M. Hertzog, came to power in 1924 through an electoral alliance with the Labour Party – an agreement forged in response to white labour unrest. This partnership helped entrench Afrikaner political dominance (Giliomee 2004: 322).

Both Giliomee (2004) and Kruger (2020) highlight the magazine's Afrikaner nationalist bias. Kruger (2020: 220) argues that the magazine emerged alongside Afrikaner women's "deliberate retreat into the domestic sphere… in search of a new identity and new roles," reinforcing the *volksmoeder* discourse, which situates women within the domestic domain. Giliomee (2004: 328) states that the magazine reflects the evolving transformation of Afrikaner women during the early twentieth century. However, this framing risks implying that the magazine was merely a reflection of this retreat – an organic platform created by women to articulate their new domain. *Die Boerevrou* was a strategic social intervention and part of a broader upliftment movement, seeking to educate and refine rural Afrikaner women.

The poor white crisis, with about a third of the white population living in abject poverty, was the most urgent social crisis in white South African politics during the first forty years of the twentieth century (Giliomee 2004: 272). Cultural and political leaders viewed this widespread poverty as a threat to both national identity and social order. In response, numerous upliftment initiatives were launched to address Afrikaner poverty, not only economically but also socially and morally. Afrikaners who had fallen into poverty through urbanisation were encouraged to return to the countryside and to farming, as it was believed they would have a better chance of survival there (Giliomee 2004: 293). Farm life was held up as an idyllic ideal, with the mother positioned as the lynchpin of this upliftment effort.

Mary Elisabeth Rothmann (1875 – 1975), better known as M.E.R., was a writer, regular contributor to *Die Boerevrou*, close friend of Malherbe, and a member of the Carnegie Commission that investigated white poverty in the 1930's. In her reflections on Afrikaner impoverishment, she articulates her belief in the significance of the mother's role and influence in a nation's well-being [10]:

[10] My translation of *Hoe langer hoe meer lyk dit vir my die hele verarmingsproses was die natuurlikste en onvermydelikste ding in die wêreld: ons het as 'n handjievol witmense kans gesien om die hele tamaai Suid-Afrika te boer. Maar ons het nooit rekening gehou met die reaksie van die veld, die eensaamheid, die afgeslotenheid, op onsself nie. Veral het ons nooit rekening gegou met die uitwerking van daardie invloede op die huisgesin nie. Begryp jou, geen opvoedende invloede van*

> The longer I think about it, the more it seems to me that the entire process of impoverishment was the most natural and inevitable thing in the world: as a handful of white people, we believed we could farm the entirety of South Africa. But we never accounted for the reaction of the land, the isolation, the remoteness, on ourselves. Above all, we never considered the impact of these influences on the family. Understand this, no educational influences from travel, reading, social interaction with people, or knowledge of world events, very little from the Church. The only means of education for that farming community was the family, essentially the mother. And that mother also had to carry half of the farming responsibilities, endure eight to fifteen pregnancies, give birth with little or no help… Too much! Decline, except in rare cases, was inevitable (Giliomee 2004: 269).

This concern inspired Malherbe to launch a publication that would give rural Afrikaner women access to quality reading material. Her goal was to empower them, helping them fulfil their potential and improve their circumstances. Malherbe aimed to offer "content designed in a simple and appealing manner, in Afrikaans, to ensure that even the most unsophisticated woman will find it useful and enjoyable[11]" (Van Rensburg 2013). The magazine was a means of social intervention. The content was carefully selected to address a specific audience and to educate and assimilate them into the middle class. During the same period, large numbers of educated middle-class Afrikaner women, like Malherbe, fulfilled their role as *volksmoeders* by becoming involved in welfare initiatives aimed at alleviating the plight of impoverished whites (Giliomee 2004: 293).

Kruger notes that the reason behind Malherbe's choice to use *Noitjie* on the cover remains unclear (2020: 227). By that time, Van Wouw was already widely regarded as South Africa's preeminent sculptor, and his work appeared regularly in the magazine. Choosing *Noitjie* was likely a deliberate decision to present a figure with whom the average Boer woman could both identify and aspire to emulate.

The magazine was not a one-sided conversation; its readers, mostly women, engaged with the ideas presented, debating their roles and negotiating gender expectations through their contributions through

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verkeer, lees, omgang met mense, kennis van wêreldontwikkeling nie, baie min van die Kerk, al opvoedingsmiddel vir daardie boerevolk was die huisgesin, d.w.s. was die moeder. En daardie moeder moes ook die helfte van die boerdery drae, ag tot vyftien swangerskappe deurmaak, geboorte gee met min of geen hulp... Te veel! Agteruitgang, behalwe vir uitsonderings, was onvermydelik.

[11] My translation of *leesstof... eenvoudig en aantreklik saamgestel en in ons eie taal, sodat die eenvoudigste ou vroutjie daar op die platteland nut en pleisier daaruit kon kry.*

letters, submitting photographs, and opinion pieces. In her detailed historical study of the magazine, Jeanette van Rensburg (2013), describes the publication as a "polyphonic source, serving as a channel for thousands of women's voices that resonated within Afrikaner circles for nearly thirteen years." The magazine provided a space where Afrikaner femininity was shaped through readers' engagement with its content. This engagement was affectionate, with many calling the magazine "Vroutjie" (my dear woman), fostering a sense of kinship.

Die Boerevrou illustrates how fetishism operates as a discursive mechanism, transforming objects like *Noitjie* through repeated representation into symbols that carry ideological weight (Dant 1996: 495). Within this framework, *Die Boerevrou* played a key role in fetishising *Noitjie* as an icon of Afrikaner femininity. Van Rensburg (2013) notes that when AHMP proposed adopting *Die Boerevrou*'s logo as the school crest, *Noitjie* was already well known as a nationalist icon. This suggests that the magazine's sustained exposure of *Noitjie* had successfully ingrained her as an icon in the Afrikaner cultural imagination. As argued above, the magazine did more than document an archetype – it actively participated in constructing one.

3.4. Fetishising *Noitjie*: The Portrait of Tini Vorster as a Site of Ideological Reinforcement

Another significant moment of encounter between *Noitjie* and nationalist visual culture occurs in Rui Preto Pacheco's "Portrait of Mrs. Tini Vorster" (1976). Commissioned to mark the tenth anniversary of B.J. Vorster's premiership, the portrait was painted at Libertas, the official prime ministerial residence in Pretoria (Preto Pacheco Catalogue, University of Pretoria Museum Archive, Van Wouw files). Tini Vorster sits poised and composed, exuding elegance. Beside her, on the mantelpiece, stands *Noitjie*. This is no incidental ornament; the sculpture is prominently placed, drawing the viewer's eye to establish a visual relationship between the two figures. *Noitjie* becomes an extension of the sitter, a silent but deliberate presence in the scene. Her inclusion visually ties Vorster to a specific ideological lineage, reinforcing the Afrikaner nationalist ideal of womanhood (see Figure 17).

The sculpture depicted is one of the original 15 casts made in 1907. Its placement was no coincidence but a deliberate gesture, proposed by Vorster's secretary during the first sitting as "*a* symbol of her [Vorster's] service and modesty*"* (Preto Pacheco Catalogue, University of Pretoria Museum Archive, Van Wouw files). This illustrates how fetishised objects inscribe authority over identity. Vorster herself reinforced this narrative with the self-effacing statement to the painter, "I'm only an ordinary housewife."

The contradiction here is unmistakable – she claims ordinariness, yet she is anything but. Her carefully curated portrayal aligns her with a legacy of Afrikaner womanhood defined by service rather than direct power, reinforcing nationalist rhetoric that positioned women as the cultural and moral anchors of the nation rather than its political agents.



Figure 17 – Rui Preto Pacheco, *Portrait of Mrs. Tini Vorster*, 1976. Image source: University of Pretoria Museum Archives, Van Wouw files.

The portrait does not merely reflect Vorster's status; it embeds her within a broader nationalist framework. *Noitjie*'s presence amplifies her ideological significance, reinforcing her role within the boundaries of nationalist myth-making. This recurrence of *Noitjie* in elite spaces and political imagery cements its ideological weight, further integrating it into the iconography of Afrikaner political power. Pacheco's work not only coveys the status of its subject, but also the ideals she embodied. Vorster, dressed in an elegant gown within the prime ministerial residence, stands in stark contrast to the trauma of the Boer concentration camps. She represents the modern *volksmoeder* – a figure of refinement and political stature who remains tethered to the virtues of modesty, service, and resilience.

By the 1950's, the *volksmoeder* ideal had become so embedded in cultural discourse that it surfaced even in the foreword of a fundraising recipe book. Mabel Jansen (1889–1979), educator, writer, journalist, cultural leader, politician, and wife of the Governor-General of the Union of South Africa, E.G. Jansen, penned the foreword to a recipe book published by the South African Tuberculosis Association (see Figure 18). Sold as part of a fundraising initiative, the book appeared sometime between 1951 and 1959, during her husband's term in office. This example illustrates how deeply the ideals promoted in *Die Boerevrou* had become entrenched in broader cultural discourse. Jansen writes:

"The woman is not only the backbone of the nation, a wife, and a mother, she is also the heart of the family unit, which in turn plays a vital role in society and contributes to national unity. Her task is not only to nurture and create, but also to take care of the physical and moral of well-being of the South African citizen." Her statement reflects how thoroughly the *volksmoeder* ideal had become naturalised not only as a private aspiration but as a national expectation.

Despite her continuous reproduction and adaption, *Noitjie*'s meaning remains tightly controlled. Even as her image evolves, she remains bound to the *volksmoeder* ideal, upholding submission and cultural preservation. This was evident in the reaction to the proposed redesign of the AHMP crest, where *Noitjie*'s meaning was fiercely defended against redefinition. The resistance to altering her image illustrates how fetishised objects become sacred symbols, shielded from critique or reinterpretation.

Similarly, in Vorster's portrait *Noitjie* functions as a stabilising ideological force at a time of political crisis. The painting was unveiled in June 1976, just days before the Soweto Uprising, as the apartheid government faced mounting resistance and international scrutiny. In this moment, *Noitjie* serves as a nationalist anchor, reinforcing the *volksmoeder* myth at a time when the regime sought cultural continuity to legitimise itself. By positioning *Noitjie* alongside Vorster, the portrait suggests an unbroken lineage of Afrikaner womanhood, one that is timeless, pious, and committed to the cause of nationhood.

This chapter traced *Noitjie*'s journey from an artwork to a cultural icon embedded in the highest echelons of political prestige. Her ideological weight was realised through repetition, circulation, and controlled representation, securing her place within Afrikaner nationalist mythology. Chapter 4 shifts from historical construction to curatorial contestation, examining how curatorial practice unsettles *Noitjie*'s fetishisation through the exhibition *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity – Art, Nationalism & Womanhood.*



Voorwoord

deur Haar Eksellensie
Mev. Dr. E. G. Jansen

HIERDIE kookboek verdien die aanbeveling en ondersteuning van elke huisvrou in Suid-Afrika. Dit is nie alleen 'n gids om goed te kan kook en om smaaklike etes voor te berei wat waarborg om 'n sterk en gesonde volk op te bou nie, maar ook is die totale opbrings van die boek aan die Suid-Afrikaanse Nasionale Tuberkulosevereniging toegesê, seersekerlik een van die mees waardige en menslikewende verenigings wat daar bestaan.

Die boek is saamgestel uit resepte van individuele huisvrouens wat dit oor en weer op die proef gestel het en dit toe baie suksesvol gevind het. Dit is almal goeie en smaaklike resepte vir tuisgekookte kos en is almal gekies omdat hulle so eenvoudig en prakties is om voor te berei. Die bestanddele is almal maklik verkrygbaar en ekonomies en elke resep sal etlike liefhebbers hê as dit eers eenkeer probeer is.

Die vrou is die ruggraat van 'n nasie en 'n vrou en moeder is ook die middelpunt van die familie-eenheid wat op sy beurt weer 'n plek in die samelewing volstaan en uiteindelik die volkseenheid vorm. Daarom het die vrou 'n belangrike taak, nie net om te skep nie, maar om die goeie en gesonde gees van liggaam en siel van die Suid-Afrikaanse burger in stand te hou.

Mag u veel plesier en genot daarin skep om hierdie resepte voor te berei en ook die tevredenheid hê dat u hierdie goeie saak ondersteun het.

M. M. JANSEN.

Figure 18 – *Another formidable volksmoeder speaks*. Mabel Jansen, wife of the Governor-General of the Union of South Africa, penned the forward to a 1950's recipe book published by the South African Tuberculosis Association. Her statement reflects how the *volksmoeder* ideal had become entrenched in cultural discourse. [Highlights added by the author]. Photograph by Karolien van Zyl.



Figure 19 – Installation view: art in dialogue – Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie van die Onderveld 1907* (foreground) and Hannalie Taute's *Size Matters 2020* (background). This juxtaposition highlights the exhibition's central inquiry into the ideological entrenchment and disruption of Afrikaner femininity. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.

4 CURATING *NOITJIE*: THE EXHIBITION AS A SITE OF INQUIRY

The exhibition *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity – Art, Nationalism & Womanhood* explored how curatorial practice might unsettle *Noitjie's* fetishisation and interrogate her role within Afrikaner nationalist ideology. While *Noitjie* has been the subject of sustained academic interest, as explored in earlier chapters, these critiques often remain confined to scholarly discourse. With this exhibition I sought to shift that conversation into the public realm, asking what curating can do that writing alone cannot. By inviting a material, spatial, and affective engagement with *Noitjie,* my aim with the exhibition was to slow down looking, open space for ambiguity, and prompt viewers to think with and through the object. The exhibition

was designed to complicate *Noitjie*'s ideological status through spatial arrangement, material reinterpretation, and dialogic display (see Figure 19). The sculpture was placed in conversation with historical artefacts and contemporary feminist artworks. The spatial layout played on *Noitjie*'s repeated reproduction, allowing the viewer to experience the effects of that circulation, to feel how easily constant reiteration can embed itself in the mind.

The exhibition was informed by a materially focused curatorial methodology, drawing on object-led inquiry and recent thinking around curating as knowledge production. This chapter uses installation photographs and curatorial reflection to consider how exhibition-making can function as a mode of critical inquiry, revealing the entanglement of art, nationalism, and womanhood and the implications these forces hold for one's own sense of self.

4.1. Theoretical Framework: Thinking With and Through the Object

My curatorial strategy was guided by a methodology that privileges materiality and the object as a starting point for interpretation. Alex Burchmore (2024:2) encourages a curatorial approach that recognises objects as more than mere artefacts – "think with and through the object." Considering objects as "'micro-worlds" – dense repositories of social, historical and emotional entanglements – becomes a generative entry point for understanding their nuance within broader cultural narratives. Thinking *with* the object acknowledges its agency: that it shapes discourse, affects people, and exerts influence across time. Thinking *through* the object allows the curator to use it as a lens to explore contested histories and identities by allowing the object to speak for itself.

With this approach, the object becomes both subject and method, which expands the interpretive potential of curatorial work. It also deepens ethical curatorial engagement where meaning is not imposed from above, but emerges. It recognises the curator's subjectivity not as a liability, but as a layer within the interpretive process. Rather than something to avoid, subjectivity becomes a point of entry – one among many other valid points of entry. Hodder asks, "is there logic to where one begins or ends in examining a temporal slice of entanglement?" (Hodder 2016: 131). Where one enters is less important that the act of entering. Subjectivity offers a path into complexity and not a detour around it.

This then becomes a way to design exhibitions that foreground affective and embodied responses, drawing viewers into an intimate encounter with the object. Thus, the exhibition becomes not only a

critical engagement, but one that is experientially rich and a frame for interpretation that enables the curator to tell a story with care and complexity.

Edward S. Cooke Jr. describes this perspective as a "bottom-up understanding, driven by a material literacy informed by cultural curiosity rather than a desire to judge, classify, and rank" (Cooke, cited in Burchmore 2024:2). This emphasis on materiality itself resists imposing perspectives on the object. Instead, the object is engaged as a participant in the research process – asking in effect: "What can you tell us about yourself?" The object shapes both inquiry and analysis. This creates space for the curator to be surprised, to discover rather than confirm assumptions. This gives the research a texture of aliveness, it makes the object seem present and the exhibition becomes a site of inquiry and knowledge production.

Peter Bjerregaard argues that "making a display is not merely about making established knowledge tangible and accessible. Any kind of materialisation is in itself a way of knowing, a particular way of relating to the world (Bjerregaard 2020: 5). This way of relating to the world is what Adam Bencard describes as the "philosophical carpentry" of exhibition-making. Decisions about how objects are grouped, positioned, juxtaposed, or framed – how relationships are staged – constitute a philosophical process, in which meaning develops through material engagement, or thinking-through-making. In this way, the exhibition space fosters speculative engagement, encourages critical reflection, imaginative interpretation, and open-ended inquiry (Bencard 2020: 70).

4.2. Key Moments of Encounter

The first encounter, upon entering the exhibition, is with *Noitjie van die Onderveld*. I placed her on a plinth by the entrance, staging an unavoidable meeting where visitors had to engage with her presence before encountering anything else – quietly demanding them to look closely, to consider: who is this? Behind her the curatorial statement, was applied as a wall vinyl as a framing text. From there, visitors could choose their own route through the exhibition, though I used a narrative arc to structure its internal logic.



Figure 20 – Installation view: Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie van die Onderveld 1907* in the foreground, with the curatorial statement for *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity – Art, Nationalism & Womanhood* in the background. The placement introduced an immediate encounter, prompting viewers to confront the sculpture before engaging with the exhibition's narrative. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.

The copy pictured above (Figure 20) was not available for the duration of the exhibition, but I felt it was essential that visitors be able to engage with *Noitjie*'s presence – to get a sense of her scale, her stance, and demeanour. There is something endearing about her and I wanted visitors to feel that intimacy. To this end, I commissioned a 3D scan to be printed (see Figure 21). Although it was technically possible to replicate the bronze patina, I felt this would result in a superficial imitation, one that risked dulling critical engagement. Instead, I chose to foreground the act of replication itself. This decision introduced a subtle playfulness, gently disrupting the solemn authority of the original. I titled the print *Another Noitjie* (2025).

The scan was exhibited for the first two weeks of the exhibition and elicited an unexpected response. A visitor contacted me, wanting her own copy of the green *Noitjie* and which she subsequently acquired through the printing shop. Reflecting on this incidence raises surprising questions: has this version of *Noitjie* already entered a new phase of circulation? Could a reproduction, initially intended as a stand-in, take on a life of its own? As a re-contextualised object made of plastic and taking on a bold, unusual colour, what new meanings and what kind of desirability has *Noitjie* gained



Figure 21 – *Another Noitjie* (2025). A 3D-printed reproduction of *Noitjie van die Onderveld*, created for the exhibition. The bold green plastic disrupts the authority of the original bronze and draws attention to the act of replication itself. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.

However, it was important for viewers to have a sense of the original sculpture, in which a series of photographs were taken to demonstrate her gestures and to highlight the detail of *Noitjie* (see Figure 22). These images were intended to fully depersonalise the sculpture by isolating and enlarging specific characteristics of it, therefore presenting *Noitjie* like a curiosity or a specimen to be ogled and consumed. The aim was to implicate the viewer in the very process of fetishisation.

The University of Pretoria Museums' posthumous copy of *Noitjie*, part of their permanent Van Wouw display, was included in the exhibition during its final week. This inclusion pointed again to how the object continues to circulate and perpetuate meaning – and how the exhibition itself became part of an evolving conversation.

The historical displays were curated to highlight *Die Boerevrou* magazine's pivotal role in elevating the sculpture and to trace how *Noitjie*'s image proliferated across nationalist visual culture and ultimately becoming absorbed into the highest echelons of Afrikaner nationalism through her appearance in the official portrait of Tini Vorster (see Figure 23).



Figure 22 – Installation view: *Noitjie Series* (2025) by Louis van Zyl. A photographic study commissioned to isolate and enlarge specific features of *Noijtie van die Onderveld,* presenting the sculpture as a depersonalised object of scrutiny. The work aims to implicate the viewer in the very process of fetishisation. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.



Figure 23 – Installation view: Display of historical materials. This section traced the proliferation of *Noitjie*'s image across nationalist visual culture, including *Die Boerevrou* covers, commemoration stamps, and her placement in Rui Preto Pacheco's portrait of Tini Vorster. These displays contextualized How *Noitjie* was visually embedded in Afrikaner nationalist discourse from domestic to state-sanctioned platforms. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.

After tracing *Noitjie's* repeated circulation and amplification, I felt it was important to show that her image was never the whole story. As much as women participated in constructing the *volksmoeder*, and as deeply as *Noitjie* embedded herself in the Afrikaner imagination, the lived realities of women often stood in quiet contradiction to that ideal, as revealed through the ordinariness and divergence of their everyday lives. A photograph that captures this dissonance strikingly is David Goldblatt's *The Farmer's Wife* (1965), which I included in the exhibition as a counter-image to the idealised representations encountered up to this point (see Figure 24). Rather than display the photograph as a standalone print, I exhibited it as it appears in "Some Afrikaners Photographed" (1975), the volume that first brought the image to public attention.

This curatorial decision foregrounded the objecthood of the book – its materiality, historical context, and the cultural debates it provoked. Published at the height of apartheid, "Some Afrikaners Photographed" offered a radical departure from the triumphalist imagery favoured by the National party and its ideological apparatus. Goldblatt's portraits presented Afrikaners not as heroic nation-builders but as complex, flawed, and emotionally textured individuals. The Nationalist Party-controlled Afrikaans press reacted with hostility, viewing the work as a betrayal of the carefully constructed Afrikaner identity (Gobby & Van der Watt 2020: 210).

In *The Farmer's Wife*, a woman stands beside a cracked farmhouse wall, a trace of the rural poverty the apartheid regime sought to obscure. Her white dress lifts gently in the breeze. She smiles, not dutifully, but with unguarded ease. Her posture, relaxed and present, contrasts sharply with the downcast deference of *Noitjie,* and the polished restraint of Tini Voster's carefully composed public image. The photograph gestures toward the interior lives of Afrikaner women, lives too often flattened by symbolism For me, it points to the complexity that nationalist tropes obscure, reminding us that behind every idealised type lies an actual life.

By presenting the book, rather than isolating the photograph, the exhibition asks viewers to consider not only the image but the cultural world it inhabited and disrupted. This approach underscores the ontological charge of material objects. The book itself became a medium through which viewers could experience a disruption of narrative: a moment of affective recognition, or what Burchmore might call a "micro-world" of its own, that challenges the master narrative.

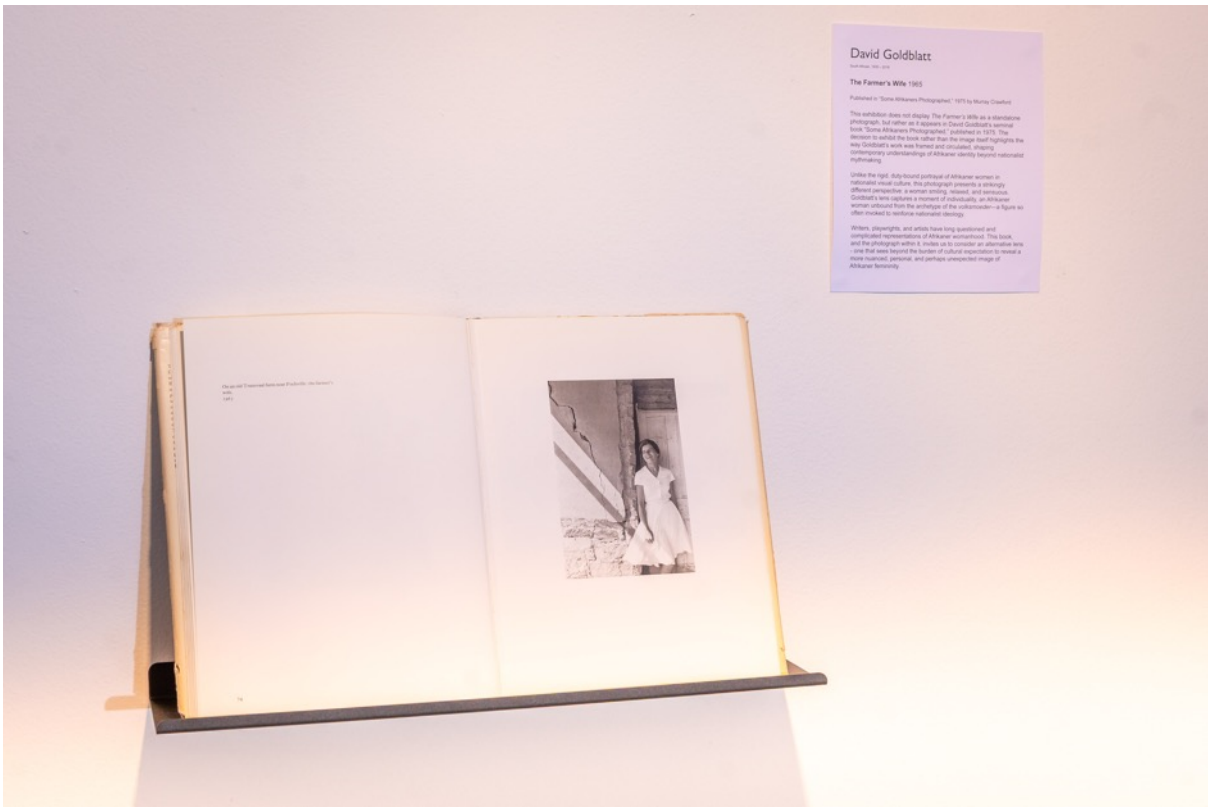


Figure 24 – Installation view: Display of David Goldblatt's *The Farmer's Wife* (1965). Shown within "Some Afrikaners Photographed (1975), this image disrupts the *volksmoeder* ideal. Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.



Figure 25 – Installation view: Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie van die Onderveld 1907* (foreground) and Barbora Maštrlová's *The Whip 2012* (background). Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.



Figure 26 – Hannalie Taute, *Monumental Moment* 2018, Cotton thread and rubber Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 27– Hannalie Taute, *Size Matters* 2020, Cotton thread and rubber. 2200mm x 1640mm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

The final displays introduced two contemporary artworks: Barbora Maštrlová's *The Whip* (2012) and Hannalie Taute's *Size Matters* (2020). Maštrlová is a conceptual sculptor from the Czech Republic. The work is a haunting object – platinum blonde hair braided into a leather bound handle. The braid, a symbol of care and tradition, becomes a weapon of control (see Figure 25). Maštrlová describes it as a "whip of womanhood," evoking how societal expectations simultaneously constrain and empower, and the ways power is inscribed on the female body. In *Mooi Nooi, The Whip* was placed in conversation with *Noijtie* to comment on the unsettling entanglement of subservience, purity, and resilience – stories that have shaped Afrikaner womanhood while masking the violence of their own making. Featuring an international artist also allowed the exhibition to connect this dialogue to broader themes of nationalism, gender, and control outside of South African borders.

Size Matters offered a fascinating study of one artist's sustained, five-year engagement with *Noitjie*'s mythology – reworking and transforming into its current form. While *Monumental moment* disrupts the purity of the ideal, *Size Matters* pushes further – dismantling it through ecstasy and emotion (see Figures 26 and 27). Taute wields female sexuality as a weapon, exposing the grotesque underbelly of the *volksmoeder* ideal. Her *volksmoeder* does not uphold propriety – she revels in her own transformation: exaggerated, excessive, and undone. This metamorphosis suggests transcendence – a way out of rigid identity constructs, which I considered a hopeful note to conclude the exhibition.

5 CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how *Noitjie van die Onderveld,* a small bronze figurine by Anton van Wouw, came to be a widely recognised and ideologically weighted symbol within Afrikaner nationalist discourse. It then asked, what happens when that weight is unsettled through curatorial practice? The research traced *Noitjie*'s origins, proliferation, and continued resonance within Afrikaner visual culture. It aimed to understand how objects become fetishised, by examining processes of reverence, repetition, circulation, and reproduction. The exhibition *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity – Art, Nationalism & Womanhood* was used as a site of inquiry. It posed the question: what can curating do that writing alone cannot? How can the exhibition space become a site that both unpacks and disrupts the ideological afterlife of a symbol like *Noitjie?*

What emerged through the research is that *Noitjie* is micro-world of meaning – holding within her the history of a culture and its desires, anxieties, and ideals. She is not a passive reflection of cultural history, but an object doing considerable ideological work. Her objectification imbued her with enduring significance; she remains deeply embedded in Afrikaner memory and identity and is continually reactivated.

Yet, as much as she was celebrated, *Noitjie* was also contested. The gap between the ideal and the lived experiences of women has always existed, and it is within this gap that critical engagement becomes possible. The exhibition's curatorial make up aimed to dislodge singular narratives and suggest that while nationalist myths may endure, often stubbornly so, they are not immune to rupture and reinterpretation.

Both the study and the exhibition sought to orientate viewers toward complex images, without flattening them, offering several entry points: reverence, discomfort, humour, and reflection. Curatorial practice cannot undo the histories that shaped *Noitjie*, but it can create opportunities to look again, to not simply remember, but to imagine otherwise. It asks: how do we navigate the boundaries of belonging, both inhabiting and resisting the identities imposed upon us?

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List of figures:

Figure 1 – Installation view of the exhibition *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity – Art, Nationalism & Womanhood*, curated by Karolien van Zyl, Origins Centre, 2025. Photograph: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 2 – Close-up view of Anton van Wouw, *Noitjie van die Onderveld*, 1907. Photograph: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 3 – *Three Noitjies*: Copies of *Noitjie van die Onderveld* displayed at the exhibition. From left to right: a posthumous cast (1976), a 3D-scanned reproduction (2025), and a Massa foundry copy (date unknown, estimated between 1936 and 1955). Photograph: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 4 – Notes by J.J. Scheepers documenting conversations with Van Wouw about his inspiration and model for *Noitjie van die Onderveld*. Van Wouw approved the notes. Highlights added by author. Photograph: Karolien van Zyl.

Figure 5 – Anton van Wouw, *Group sculpture of women and a dying child based on a scene described by Emily Hobhouse* 19193. Image: https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-detail-of-the-national-womens-memorial-bloemfontein-south-africa-59175080.html

Figure 6 – Anton van Wouw, *Voortrekker Woman and Children* 1948 at the *Voortrekker Monument.* Image: *https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:South_Africa-Voortrekker_Monument-Woman_and_Children01.jpg*.

Figure 7 – Installation view: *Die Boerevrou* Magazine Covers Display. Photograph: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 8 – Cameo of *Noitjie* in *Die Boerevrou* Magazine. Photograph: Karolien van Zyl.

Figure 9 – L to R. The original school emblem of Afrikaans Hoër Meisieskool Pretoria (AHMP), the rejected logo and the "modernised" logo the parties settled on. Image: https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/woede-oor-barbie-op-affies-se-nuwe-logo-20160308.

Figure 10 – Laurika Postma, *Boerenoointjie,* 1940. Image: https://morneweb.wordpress.com/2018/04/16/17-april-1903-laurika-postma-gebore.

Figure 11 – Laurika Postma, *Boerenoointjie*,1940. Image: https://www.facebook.com/Oranjevooruit/posts/n-waardevolle-stukkie-geskiedenis-oor-die-skepper-van-die-voortrekkermeisie-ofte/1607240282795712.

Figure 12 – Laurika Postma, Bloukrans 1945. Detail of the Bloukrans panel in the Hall of Heroes, Voortrekker Monument, showing a reclining Voortrekker woman in the foreground. Image: https://weet.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/39c84b14-49bb-45cd-996b-3bc856761a36.jpeg?x15283.

Figure 13 – *Noitjie*, featured on a series of fundraising stamps - her image rallying support for the effort to build the *Voortrekker Monument*. Photograph: Karolien van Zyl.

Figure 14 – The tapestry installation at the Voortrekker Monument. Photograph: https://visitstothepark.wordpress.com/2012/09/03/the-famous-tapestry-in-the-voortrekker-monument.

Figure 14 – Henry Murray, Blanke Skoonheid (White Beauty) 1938. Girls from the Voortrekker High School in Pietermaritzburg celebrate the arrival of the ox wagons during the centenary re-enactment celebrations of the Great Trek. The aim of this pageant was to further the Afrikaner cause and foster unity and solidary among Afrikaners. Image: https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-lives-and-deaths-of-memorials%3A-The-changing-of-Uys/fcda76a1a4b4f135c7468a65bda9e0ee002b3ac4.

Figure 16 – Photos of rural Afrikaner women in *Die Boerevrou*, January 1922, exemplify how the magazine cultivated a particular vision of Afrikaner womanhood, carefully selecting images and text that validated its readers' experiences. Photograph: Karolien van Zyl.

Figure 17 – Rui Preto Pacheco*, Portrait of Mrs. Tini Vorster,* 1976. Image: University of Pretoria Archives Van Wouw Archives.

Figure 18 – Another formidable *volksmoeder* speaks. Mabel Jansen, wife of the Governor-General of the Union of South Africa, E.G. Jansen, penned the forward to a recipe book published by the South

African Tuberculosis Association. Her statement reflects how the *volksmoeder* ideal had become entrenched in cultural discourse. [Highlights added by the author]. Photograph: Karolien van Zyl.

Figure 19 – Installation view: art in dialogue – Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie van die Onderveld* 1907 (foreground) and Hannalie Taute's *Size Matters* 2020 (background). Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 20 – Installation view: Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie van die Onderveld* 1907 (foreground) and curatorial statement (background). Photograph: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 21 – Another Noitjie (2025). Photograph by: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 22 – Installation view: Louis van Zyl Noitjie Series 2025. Photograph: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 23 – Installation view: Display of historical materials. Photograph: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 24 – Installation view: Display of David Goldblatt's *The Farmer's Wife*, 1965. Photograph: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 25 – Installation view: Anton van Wouw's *Noitjie van die Onderveld* 1907 (foreground) and Barbora Maštrlová's *The Whip* 2012 (background). Photograph: Louis van Zyl.

Figure 26 – Hannalie Taute, *Monumental Moment,* 2018. Cotton thread and rubber.
Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Figure 27 – Hannalie Taute, *Size Matters,* 2020. Cotton thread and rubber. 2200mm x 1640mm.
Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Appendices:

Appendix 1:

Exhibition Documentation

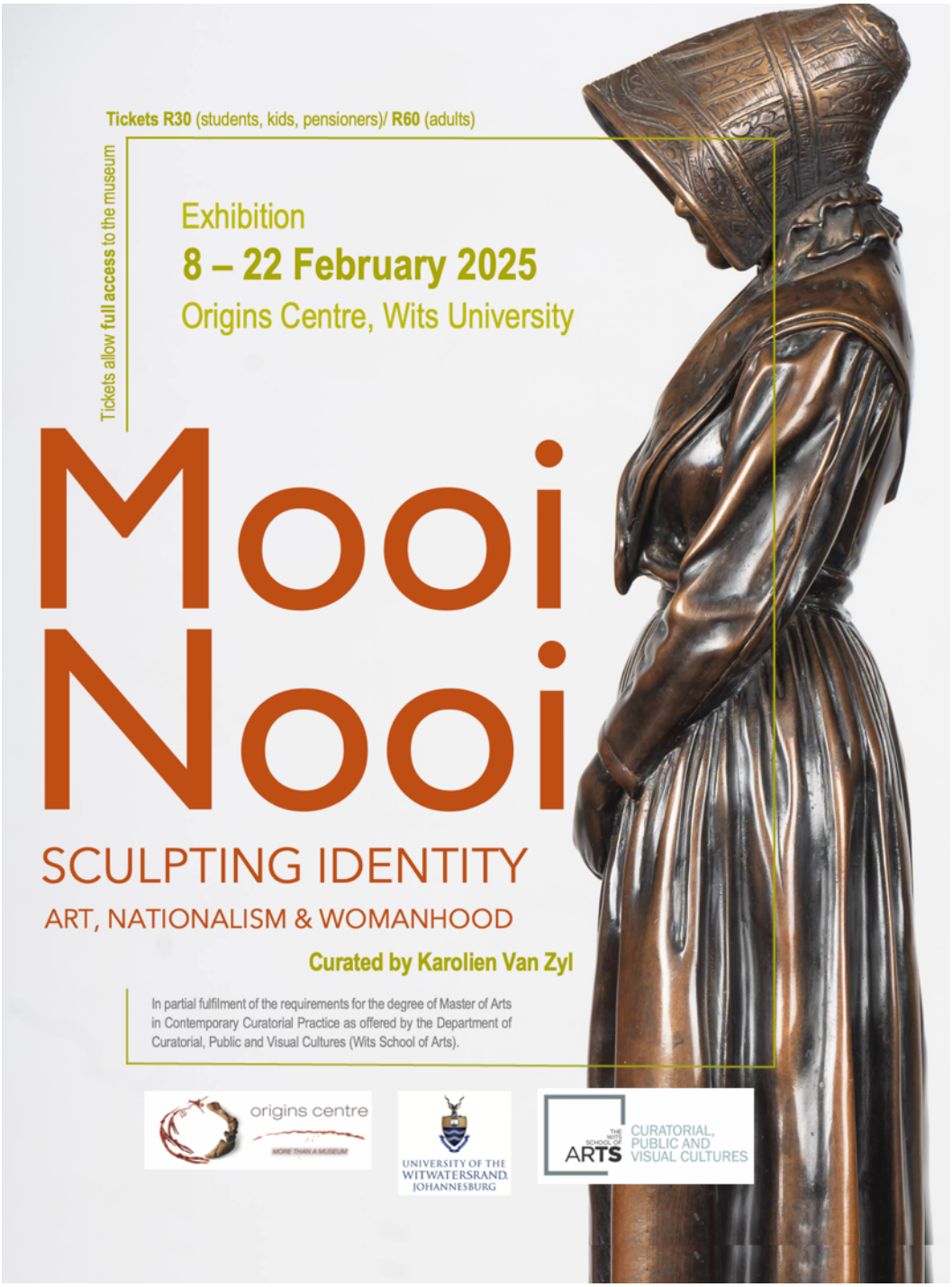
Installation photographs from the exhibition are available here:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1nDjflQPVDY2V2L_9Jmv1ZOMr8m3CN7QI?usp=sharing

Appendix 2:

Poster for the exhibition Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity – Art, Nationalism & Womanhood

Poster design by Karolien van Zyl for the exhibition held at the Origins Centre, University of the Witwatersrand.



Appendix 3:

Curatorial Statement (Full Text)

The curatorial statement as it appeared in the exhibition.

Mooi Nooi

Who am I?

SCULPTING IDENTITY

ART, NATIONALISM & WOMANHOOD

The answer is never entirely our own. Identity is an intricate negotiation between the personal and the collective, between self-perception and the expectations imposed upon us. We exist at the crossroads of history and ideology, shaped by the cultural images that surround us. The exhibition *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity – Art, Nationalism, and Womanhood* unravels one such image by Anton van Wouw titled *Noitjie van die Onderveld* in order to examine the entanglement of art, nationalism, and womanhood.

Nationalism is a powerful force, structuring not only how we see the world but also how we move through it. It prescribes ideals, assigns roles, and inscribes itself onto bodies. Created in 1907, *Noitjie van die Onderveld*, was not merely a sculpture – it became a touchstone of Afrikaner identity. Cast in bronze, *Noitjie* came to embody the *volksmoeder* ideal: "resilient, dutiful, and bound to the land." But the weight of this symbolism has not been neutral. The sculpture's shifting meaning over time reveals the ideological work performed by representations of women in constructing national identity.

This exhibition examines how nationalism appropriates cultural artefacts, reinforcing narratives of belonging while simultaneously constraining individual freedoms and agency. Emerging in the early 20th century, amid the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, *Noitjie* became a representation of the *volksmoeder* ideal – the Afrikaner "mother of the nation" – a gendered construct that positioned women as cultural and moral gatekeepers of the nation. To situate *Noitjie* within its historical and ideological context, the exhibition presents archival material and artworks that illuminate how Afrikaner womanhood was shaped and debated, particularly during the 1910's – 1970's, when nationalist discourse coalesced in print culture, politics, and visual representation. The contemporary artworks chosen challenge and reimagine inherited ideals, revealing the tensions between past and present and between representation and reality.

At its core, *Mooi Nooi: Sculpting Identity* asks: how do nationalist ideals shape our bodies, our roles, our sense of self? And how do we navigate the boundaries of belonging – both inhabiting and resisting the identities imposed upon us?