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The Women's naked protest, Dobsonville 1990: Gender Consciousness and the Body Politic[1]

(Draft - Not to be quoted)

by

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On 12 July 1990 the Soweto municipal police, with the South African Police, arrived with teargas, dogs, a Casspir and a bulldozer to raze to the ground some 60 'illegal' shacks erected in no-man's land between Dobsonville extension 1 and 2, both areas of 'spanking new high-cost residential area'[2]. The shacks had been erected some two weeks earlier by a group of homeless Sowetans, mainly women, who, for years, had lived precariously as highly exploited tenants in shack-dwellings in the backyards of those with houses. The eviction of the newly established squatter settlement on this empty land in the cold winter of the second week of July 1990 was witnessed by neighbouring Dobsonville inhabitants, the Dobsonville civic, a group of women and young activists from Mshenguville, a squatter settlement alongside White City, Jabavu, and members of the national and international press, and, later that evening, television viewers across South Africa and world-wide. The reason? The squatter settlement had been declared illegal and the Dobsonville Town Clerk, Mr Tony Roux, acquired a court order to remove the squatters. The squatters in turn had tried, through the Soweto Civic Association (SCA), to get a court interdict to prevent the removal of their shacks. The erection of shacks on this piece of land was part of a strategy to draw attention to the plight of the homeless in Dobsonville, Soweto. The strategy had been accompanied by squatter pickets outside the town council offices.[3] The press reported the details of the negotiations and the protest action, and were present upon the expiry of the deadline for squatters to remove their shacks. The process was a public spectacle.

When the police arrived on the morning of the 12th July, with dogs and bulldozer in tow, the shacks were still intact. As the police moved to dismantle the shacks, the younger

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[1]This paper is presented in loving memory of Belede Mazwai, who died in April 1992 whilst we were conducting our research. Working together, as women from widely divergent backgrounds, was a mutually enriching experience. We were exploring the dynamics of our own relationship as much as we were attempting to understand the dynamics of our relationship with our informants in the research context. We were hoping to offer this experience as part of our research findings. This aspect of our work was cut short by Belede's tragic and untimely death.

[2]City Press, 15 July 1990, p10, article by Nat Diseko

[3]The Sowetan 13 July 1990

women shack-dwellers stripped off their clothes, taunted the police, yullulated, shouted in anger about their plight and their pain, and sang and danced and held up printed placards demanding homes and security of tenure. That evening national and international television networks featured this action in news headlines. The next day, photographs of the women naked and semi-naked adorned the front page of The Star and appeared in other newspapers as well. What raised comment and was so unusual about this event and acquired such publicity was not simply the fact that squatters were being moved, an event common to South African urban life, but the particular form that the protest took. It was relatively peaceful, with only a few incidents of stone throwing by youths from the neighbouring shanty settlement of Mshenguville. At Phola Park and in Thokoza at the same time, squatters and police had used firearms, and people had died. Most notable, though, was that the action was dominated largely by women. But more than these factors, was the women's strategy of throwing off their clothes in an effort to fend off the police, hoping to chase them away and stop them from demolishing their shacks. Above all their strategy was to draw attention to themselves.

Unlike many of the protests around lack of shelter and urban rights at that time, this event is still remembered today, four years later, by ordinary people, television viewers and newpaper readers. It is remembered precisely because of the fact that the women protestors stripped and stood naked baring their most intimate, private selves in a public gesture of protest. The protest occurred in the context of a series of land invasions and housing actions which took place all over the Reef during 1990. The particular form that the Dobsonville protest took, however, raises a number of questions about the nature of women's particular perspective in the struggles over housing. Their action raises questions too about the way in which women engage in issues of popular protest. Is there any connection between the mode of women's protest and their place in civil society? What significance are analysts to give to the sexual symbolism expressed in the women's actions?

In this paper I attempt to strip off the layers presented in some of the narratives of different groups involved in the protest action to try and answer these questions.[4] I also attempt to present the narrative of my experience and that of my research assistants in conducting the research, in order to provide further insight into the reality of our informants everyday lives. The research process itself became a dimension of the complex interrelationships of power which form the texture of life for the women we interviewed. In presenting the story of the event in this way, I hope to show the diverse ways in which women's social needs and political responses are mediated and controlled.

In many parts of Africa at different historical moments women have expressed protest through nakedness, using their bodies to shame society into responding to their needs. The particular relationship between women's status and power seems to be a key variable in explaining the use of the body in this way. The Dobsonville protest presents a particularly stark moment in which gender, class and civil status come together and enable an analysis of the combination of conditions under which women are politicised and the processes which led to their participation.

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[4]This is a preliminary draft, and presents some of my ideas. It is part of a larger project on women and public policy.

Before turning to the incident itself, I would first like to contextualise the theoretical aspects of my interest in this particular protest action. The strategy and response of women to their homelessness in 1990 raised questions about the political and social conditions which were conducive to the mobilisation of these women and raised questions about the processes which brought them together in an effective protest movement. The history of the mobilisation of these women and the aftermath of their collective action seemed to encapsulate significant elements of the nature of black women's subordination under apartheid as well. Gender, race and class intersect to limit the choices and life chances of black women in ways different from black men as well as from other women. This has particular significance for the consciousness of women, and the manner of their participation or mobilization within broader popular movements. It was through the life-histories of the participants themselves, their everyday struggles that believed that I could come to understand the particular significance of using their bodies as a means of protest.[5]

The interpersonal aspects of the dynamics of the binding process in the protest strategy and action seemed also to tie in to larger questions about the gendered nature of civil status. It was hard to imagine men using their bodies in a similar act of protest, and I can think of no masculine example of this sort of action. The question seemed to be important in terms of the gendered construction of subjectivity and of citizenship; even in the construction of a second-class black citizen in South Africa, a dichotomy was established between the status of men and women. This had implications for women's independent access to state provided resources such as housing and welfare in the past. If the transition to a new democratic order is to embrace all citizens, it will be imperative that gender become an important signifier for redressing past exclusions. During the next five years of Constitution-making under a government of national unity South Africa will see the emergence of a new citizenship model. It is vital that this citizenship takes into account gender and class, as much as race, if a substantive equality is to be achieved.[6]

Afrikaner nationalism had triumphed after the second world war and apartheid emerged to construct an exclusive racial democracy and an exclusive 'white' citizenship, which basically built on the segregationism of the previous era. The Reserves were transformed into Bantustans to serve as areas for ethnic and cultural self government and development. The language of rights and citizenship in the Bantustans was used by the apartheid regime to legitimise the entrenchment of white privilege and exclusive democratic rights in the national heartland. The system was characterised by exploitation, control and repression. Urban black South Africans were accepted as secondary citizens

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[5]I have been particularly influenced in my approach by the suggestive article by Karen B Sachs 'What's a life story got to do with it?' in The Personal Narratives Group (eds) Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist theory and personal narratives Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989.

[6]Feeding into this debate are the results of a nation-wide participatory research project conducted by the Women's National Coalition during 1993 which addressed the problems and aspirations of women in all sectors of society in order to draw up a Women's Charter for Effective Equality. This Charter identifies those areas which need to be changed for women to enjoy full equality in South Africa.

without democratic rights, but with limited rights of access to jobs and security of tenure. The Urban Areas Act and its subsequent revisions entrenched the rights of certain categories of people whilst attempting to exclude the migrant labour population.[7] The attempts by the state to stem the tide of urbanisation, limit class and racial integration were met with intense and bitter popular resistance from the 1950s. There was fierce resistance in particular to the moves to control the urban migration and settlement of black women.

Women had not been included in initial regulations to control the migrant labour population and the urban settlements largely, it would seem, by an oversight caused by gender-blindness. The 1923 Native (Urban Areas) Act referred only to 'pass-bearing' natives. Women did not carry passes, so were excluded from the controls established by the Act.[8] During the 1940s the municipal authorities urged changes to the legislation and controls over single women's movement to towns. They argued that these women were responsible for crime, delinquency and moral decay because they escaped the moderating influence of traditional custom and the control of the patriarchal system. The issue was a politically explosive one in the black community, and for this reason had not been confronted head-on by the United Party Government. The National Party had no such qualms.[9] Once the new National Party government began its combined slum-clearance and urban development programme with the intent of tightening up in-migration and introducing more stringent labour controls, women's position came under the spotlight.[10] The Urban Areas Act was amended to deal with this loop-hole in 1952. At the same time, the convention of granting access to housing to families, defined as a household head (husband), his wife and dependents was entrenched in regulations. The combined effect of legislation and regulation on women's status and life chances and strategies was profound. The new legislative procedure drew women more fully into the control framework established by apartheid.

Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act defined those born within the limits of urban magistracies, or those who had worked for the same employer for ten years, or who had been residents for fifteen years as legitimate urban dwellers. These people had the right to live and work in urban areas and had privileged access to urban housing. However, for women and unmarried men this did not mean automatic access to housing. Housing was always a commodity in shorter supply than those in demand for it.

Housing was at first under the direct control of municipal authorities, but with the state's efforts to centralise control over urbanisation during the 1960s, the Department of Bantu

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[7]Deborah Posel, The Making of Apartheid 1948-1961: conflict and compromise, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, examines in detail the consequences of policies and legislation pertaining to influx control. She shows how migrants were still able to acquire urban rights in spite of the limits of legislation and the Urban Labour Preference Policy.

[8]See T.R.H.Davenport, 'African Townsmen? South African Natives (Urban Areas) Legislation through the Years', African Affairs 68/271 (1969)

[9]See Posel, The making of apartheid, 80

[10]See successive Surveys of Race Relations

Administration and Development took over. After 1971 the provision of housing and access to it was transferred to the authority of the Bantu Affairs Administration Boards, which were directly responsible to the Department of Bantu Administration and Development.[11] However, even before this development, there was a freeze on urban housing construction from 1968. Community Councils, introduced in 1977 in an effort to give a gloss of accountability for housing to black urban local government were in fact under the control of the Minister who was responsible for housing provision. Initially given some credibility through local elections, the Community Councils became a means of limited patronage for encumbants, who were soon accused of mismanagement and corruption and became the focus of popular discontent.

The 1970s saw a marked shift in the mobilization of opposition in South Africa: the 1973 strikes heralded the beginnings of a new phase in trade union organisation. The Soweto student riots in 1976 carved out a new terrain of opposition to apartheid. The nature of opposition is well captured by John Brewer when he suggested that what occurred after 1976 was the 'politicization of ordinary aspects of everyday life'.[12] At the same time a more strategic logic permeated political contest, which was derived from the approach of the trade union movement in the dictum 'when weak, organise; when strong, negotiate'.[13] This thinking only came to influence community organisation after violent confrontation in the mid-1980s persuaded participants from both the civics and the state that negotiation was the only way forward.

The consequence of the housing shortage which, as we have seen, derived from the policies of the 1950s and 1960s, was chronic overcrowding and the emergence of a highly exploitative leaseholder-tenant system. Legal residents on township waiting lists were forced to live in backyard shacks, some constructed by leaseholders especially for the purpose of renting out, but most often shacks were owned by the inhabitants who paid a kind of ground rent. Overcrowding became the norm. Waiting-lists for houses in black townships were long, and how those lists were administered was a process which became notoriously open to abuse, as evidence from the cohort of women who engaged in the Dobsonville protest reveal. Indeed, because it was men who had access to housing, it was largely women-headed families which were forced to become tenants, unable to acquire houses in their own right. Moreover, for migrants who did not fall within the rights established by Section 10, life came to be lived in the twilight zone of illegality and insecurity, informal or illegal employment, and subject to arbitrary police swoops, the law courts, fines they could ill-afford and finally endorsement out of the urban area.

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[11]See Jeremy Grest, 'The Crisis of Local Government in South Africa' in P.Frankel, N.Pines & M.Swilling (eds), State, Resistance and Change in South Africa, Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg, 1988

[12]John Brewer, 'Black Strategies for change in a constrained society', in Robert Schrire (ed) Critical Choices for South Africa: an agenda for the 1990s. Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1990. Ch 23, 430

[13]See Mark Swilling 'City politics comes of age: strategic responses to local government restructuring' in Robert Schrire, Critical Choices for South Africa: an agenda for the 1990s. Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1990, ch 22, 424

Following more than a decade of popular resistance to restrictions and urban conditions, the mid-1980s saw the removal of formal distinctions between 'urban' and migrant residents. It was then that the urban population literally burst its seams, as illegal squatter settlements burgeoned on the urban peripheries. Demand for housing became a key issue in popular struggles of this period. Civic Associations, which had begun to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s, acquired wide popular support as they challenged urban Community Councils, which since 1982 had local government powers, although housing and township development was still centrally controlled.[14] Pressure built up on government to release more land for urban settlement and improve urban conditions, especially in the development of housing policy. In the 1990s, part of the challenge to the Community Councils involved a strategy of squatter invasions of vacant lands adjacent to existing townships. The Dobsonville squatter action in July 1990 was one such movement.

The Soweto Civic Association (SCA) had fought for the recognition of its role in representing the interests of homeless people especially, but also of tenants in general since its inception in 1979.[15] The SCA organised against the Soweto Community Council, members of which came to be seen as surrogates of the apartheid state at the local level as rent and service charges were increased. Opposition to the Council and Councillors crystallised around their control over access to housing. In theory as housing became available, it was given to those at the top of the waiting list. In practice, councillors gave it to those who paid. More notorious were those councillors who provided housing to women in exchange for sex. Several of our informants deeply resented the sexual power asserted by one councillor in particular. They suggested that there were several women in Dobsonville who had acquired houses in this manner. Their choice of using their bodies in drawing attention to their homelessness was as much an ironic statement about the potential sexual contract involved in acquiring houses.

In response to growing problems of overcrowding, and the growth of shanty settlements on the periphery of urban townships, the SCA spearheaded the launch of Operation Masekane for the Homeless (OMHLE) in 1990. This initiative sought to confront the Soweto Council's unwillingness to address the issue of housing shortages and the plight of the homeless. The emergence of a widespread squatter crisis in 1990 was simply the outpouring of frustration which had been growing since influx control had been removed in 1985. Despite government recognition of the permanence of the urban African population, measures to limit and control informal urban settlement had continued. Indeed, as Ann Bernstein of the Urban Foundation has argued, the Guide Planning Process limited the release of land for black settlement.[16] Bernstein argues that

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[14]See Jeremy Seekings for a useful discussion of the conditions of political mobilisation 'Political Mobilisation in the Black Townships of the Transvaal', in Philip Frankel, Noam Pines & Mark Swilling (eds), State, resistance and change in South Africa, Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg,1988.

[15]Ibid, 203

[16]Ann Bernstein, 'South Africa's cities - crisis management or courageous leadership', in Robert Schrire (ed) Critical Choices... Ch 13. 235-236

government policy was still geared towards influx control and that the reality of the greater concentration of people in urban metropoles was not being addressed. In 1989 estimates put two million people living in informal settlements in the PWV. The unbanning of the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and the Pan African Congress heralded not a decrease in popular pressure, but rather intensified demands for the redress of longstanding grievances. Women in particular became the protagonists in actions involving demands for housing.

Our research into the women's protest action at Dobsonville began at the end of 1991. Two research assistants, Belede Mazwai and Letabo Malega went into Soweto with a few clues to find the women who had been involved in the protest during those cold days of July 1990. We followed up people who had been quoted in the press reports, members of the SCA and the chairman of the local ANC branch. The women themselves had not been interviewed by the press. Reporters simply recorded their actions. Even the television newsmen had not attempted to give voice to the women, except to visually record their naked protest for all the world to see. It proved quite easy to find some of the women. The squatter invasion of land in 1990 and successive protests by the same women had been successful in prompting the Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA) to secure sites for them on land released for controlled site and service schemes. Most of the women who had been involved in the Dobsonville action had been granted sites in the new site and service scheme known as 'Snake Park' or Doornkop established by the TPA. The TPA had been forced to provide sites or face illegal land invasions in response to the demands and threats of the SCA. In this sense the outcome of the land invasions and the protest of July 1990 and its sequence were singularly successful in providing women with access to land.

The month of December 1991 when we set out to find the women was one of the hottest months in years and South Africa was enduring one of the worst droughts in living history. Most of the participants were now living in Snake Park, in tin shacks nicknamed umkhukhu, chicken coops. The shacks were unbearably hot in summer, and in winter, as we found out later, were unbearably cold. The streets were neatly laid out. A single tap serviced each street, about ten sites. Each site was also provided with a long-drop, which, in the heat, created a pervasive sweet-sour stench throughout the area. Rubbish was collected once a week at first, and each site had been provided with a rubbish bin. Two years later, mobile tips had replaced the weekly service. Tips are now located at various points throughout the settlement and collected at intervals. This service is organised by members of the civic who are paid a retainer for this work by the TPA, according to our informants. The settlement of about five thousand stands lies close to where the squatters had orginally set up their shacks in 1990, between Dobsonville extension 1 and 2 and the uncovered mine-dumps of Rand mines. When the wind blows, which it did much of the time we spent in the settlement in 1991, 1992 and some of 1993, the place becomes a dust bowl. The fine, pale sand of the dumps creeps through every crevice to coat every surface, it covers ones skin and hair, and it gets into eyes and mouth.

When we found some of the women who had been involved, a few, especially the younger women, were pleased to have been sought out, and pleased that we wanted to record their experience and their histories. Our reception was not an unambiguous one, however. Some women thought we had come to provide them with houses. They

thought we were from the TPA, and had no idea what the University was. Others questioned our intentions, and mentioned the problem of researchers simply using them for their own ends, without any benefit to themselves. We explained as clearly as we could that we were researchers from the University, that we were concerned with the position of women. We hoped that through the work we did not only could their needs as women be made known more widely and addressed in public policy, but also that we wished to bring to wider attention the effects apartheid had had upon their lives. We also spoke about the opening of the negotiations and the constitutional process. We informed them, too, about the Women's National Coalition, a coalition which had been formed specifically to inform the new constitution-makers about the conditions, problems and needs of women like them.

Whilst we met with the women first, to ask whether they would allow us to do research amongst them, we were also careful to inform members of the local civic association of our research intentions. We received a mixed reception. Our initial contacts had been helpful in putting us in touch with members of the Doornkop Civic who knew the women we wanted to meet. Through them we had set up an initial meeting with as many women and men as were available and interested in meeting us. Our next step was to officially inform the Doornkop Civic of our work, and seek their cooperation, including willingness to be interviewed. Some members of the civic were agreeable and were helpful in arranging for us to meet other people who had been present during the protest. However, others were thoroughly suspicious of us, and of me especially. They were concerned about possible effects that my research might have on the community. Their antagonism was so great that although they could speak English, they initially refused to speak to me directly. One person actually said that when whites put their noses into black communities, they caused trouble of one sort or another.

We found ourselves in the midst of a fairly complicated power struggle, in which the Dobsonville Civic Association claimed that the Doornkop Civic was a branch of the organisation. We were summoned through one of our informants to report to the Dobsonville Civic. Doornkop Civic members whom we spoke to, although suspicious of us, argued that they alone needed to be informed. The Doornkop Civic, who were self-appointed, refused to accept a subordinate status, and argued that they were independent. They had played a key role in negotiating the establishment of the settlement and continued to liaise with the TPA in allocating sites to new applicants. Our approach to participants in the protest had been through members of both Civic bodies. It became clear from the beginning that the dynamics of the research process itself would need to be carefully monitored for its impact on on-going relationships. Present concerns also mediated the way in which people narrated the past to us.

Indeed, during the course of our interviews as many narratives of the event as we had informants were given to us. Each offered a somewhat different entry point into an understanding of the dynamics of the protest. The differing perspectives yielded a very complex set of dynamics at play which any one narrative account fails to provide.

The most public, and perhaps the most oversimplified of these narratives was that offered by the press. The Dobsonville squatter action can be traced most clearly through the columns of The Sowetan during the months of June and July 1990. In June, there

were articles on the whole issue of informal settlement and squatting in South Africa.[17] Accounts of the event and subsequent demolitions were merely descriptive. Interviews were limited to comments from members of the SCA and the local ANC chairperson. There was no probing of the whole squatter invasion strategy, which emerged only later from our research interviews, particularly from our detailed interviews of the women participants.

Although some journalistic accounts touched on the plight of the homeless, there was little clear analysis of the complexity either of the housing crisis facing South African urban government or of the particular plight of women participants. Moreover, there was little focus on the perspective of the leading protagonists in the event, the civic members, the Dobsonville Council and its representatives, including the police, nor was there attention given to the perspective of the people who actually built the shacks.

A case study of the negotiating parties in the affair, the Dobsonville civic, the squatters and the Council would have offered an insight into a much broader set of relations involved in on-going struggles in urban areas for a change in urban government and an improvement in urban life. In particular, the struggles around the authority of Community Councils was uppermost on the agenda of leaders in civic struggles.[18] An interview with Japhta Lekgetho, who was a member of the SCA and also director of NEAC, an environmental centre in Dobsonville, was particularly interesting in presenting a view of the protest as one orchestrated by the Civic, though conducted by OMHLE. There is no doubt that Lekgetho was a leading figure in the negotiations around squatter struggles in Soweto and elsewhere. It was very difficult to obtain a sustained meeting with him in 1991 or in the first quarter of 1992, as he was involved and preoccupied with negotiating with the TPA and other authorities about the future of the Zevenfontein squatters further to the north. However, we did manage to meet him for more than an hour in January 1992. During the course of our discussion, his view of the event was that the idea of setting up the shacks between Dobsonville 1 & 2 had been his, and that the women were conduits for a broad strategy of land invasion to draw attention to the plight of the homeless.[19] This view was confirmed by a member of the Doornkop Civic, who argued that the strategy was to get the women to take action because it was felt that 'women are more listened to than men in the "Commissioner's" office'.[20] This same informant also argued that the protest strategy of throwing their clothes off had utterly failed. He made no connection between this startling method of protest and the fact that most of the participants in the protest action, including the men who had set up shacks, were subsequently provided with sites in the adjacent lands released for

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[17] The Sowetan 7 June 1990; 8 June 1990; 7 July 1990; 13 July 1990; 17 July 1990; 18 July 1990; 26 July 1990.

[18] These aspects will not be analysed in this draft, but will form part of a further draft of this paper.

[19] Notes from an interview by Letabo Malega, Belede Mazwai, and Sheila Meintjes with Japhta Lekgetho, NEAC, Dobsonville, 21 January 1992.

[20] Interview by Belede Mazwai and Sheila Meintjes with Benson Banda, Doornkop, 23 January 1992.

settlement by the TPA.

Finally, the perspective of the homeless people themselves offers a very different set of priorities in relation to the problems and struggles which motivated the strategies and actions of people on the ground. The overriding concern of all the women involved in the action was to have a place of their own, where they would have security of tenure, and no longer have to face the tenuous and precarious existence as sub-tenants, subject to the will of tenant landlords. Without a secure and permanent abode, all the women spoke of the difficulties of sustaining jobs and of maintaining their families intact.

Maria Thiko, whose idea it was to build the shacks on the open veld in Dobsonville, had spent years moving from one place to another in Soweto. After years of being in an abusive and violent marriage, she obtained a divorce. In the process she lost her home and all her belongings. As a single parent with two children to bring up, her life was dominated by the needs of her family. Without education, her jobs were always in domestic service and poorly paid. She managed nevertheless to buy a tin shack, which was rather like a mobile home. But she was constantly on the look-out for a proper home, and had put her name down on the Dobsonville Council housing list from at least 1979. She haunted the Council offices whenever there were rumours of houses or hostel accommodation being made available. She made sure that the Councillors got to know her. She describes how the Mayor constantly made promises to her about houses, telling her to come to the offices on week-days, then he would not be available for meetings. She would wait for hours at the offices, then arrive late for work. Her employers became frustrated with her, accused her of holding down two jobs, and stopped believing that she was really looking for a home. After weeks of being late, waiting for hours for Councillors' promises to materialise, Maria Thiko was sacked. Without a job, with school-fees to pay and children to feed and clothe, and with only her shack to her name, she was in desperate straits. But her resourcefulness in the face of the need to survive seemed boundless. She found a job in a Portuguese shop which kept her financially afloat.

She joined the Sofasonke Party in Mshenguville, the party which dominated the Council, in the hope that this would provide access to shelter. After two meetings, Maria was elected an organisor. But when all they offered were places at distant Orange Farm, she turned her attention to Dobsonville, where it was rumoured land would be released for settlement. She explained: 'Sofasonke was launched in Dobsonville - I became active anticipating that a place to stay would come up soon'. The Councillors again made a whole series of promises about providing basic services on open land. Months went by with nothing happening. Considerable amounts of money had been given by homeless people to one councillor to secure places. Maria parted with all her savings of R564 for the deposit. She became suspicious when nothing came of the councillors promises, and demanded her money back. She had to wait for a month before the money was returned to her, during which time she was made redundant. She set off to find a job in Roodepoort, and there she met Charlie, a member of OMHLE and the Dobsonville civic. That same evening, her landlady gave her notice. 'I said to myself, if the civic does not take any action I will take my shack - even if I put it in front of the office - because in reality now I no longer had a place to stay'. That was how she found herself at 'Lekgeto's place' (NEAC) at the end of June 1990. In her view there was no longer an alternative to land invasion. Others at the meeting were in similar circumstances. All

were determined that they had come to the end of their life as sub-tenants.

> On Monday we had a meeting and we stressed that we should take our shacks to any opens space. They asked which open space did we want and we said "the one between extension two and old Dobsonville". We asked the executive to be at hand because the white language (isikungu) would be needed and we did not know it because the country belonged to the whites - they had taken it...[21]

The shacks went up on the 25th June. On the same day she went to collect her belongings, only to return to the area to find 'my shack flying in the air because they (the police) were removing them'. She rushed up to her shack, 'I was crying now saying "oh, my Lord, when will we ever get a place to stay'. Members of the Civic interceded at this point with the Town Council and the Town Clerk, Mr Tony Roux, to halt the demolition. Maria Thiko remembered that when they left she was standing on her zinc strips, and Mr Roux laughed derisorily at her. 'I said "you laugh because you're better off. You have the whole world at your feet. You make a laughing stock of me - who does not have any world"'. But she and the other women were determined to create their own world. This was but the first in a series of three actions. The women simply rebuilt their shacks each time. The final action occurred on the 12th July. This was when the women stripped off their clothes.

Of particular relevance in these events is the intersection of gender relations in these struggles. Our male informants, all members of the Civic, all claimed that they were the driving force behind the action. This does not mean that they did not admire the women. When prodded, they all acknowledged how brave and strong the women had been. But it was quite clear that they believed that without them, nothing would have transpired. It was they who entered into negotiations with the Councillors, with the Town Clerk and with the police. They also all believed that the desperate action of stripping naked had not achieved its objective - and the objective in their view was limited to chasing the police away. For the women, the objective was much greater than this. Their action was a last desperate act where they staked all they possessed on getting the authorities to notice them and their homeless plight.

It became clear in the course of several interviews with participants that they believed that it was one of the women, Maria Thiko, who had actually suggested and initiated the strategies adopted in this action. Individually, women had heard about the support which Lekgetho and the SCA were giving people through Operation Masekane. Often this arose from chance encounters with members of the Civic. Each person came with her own desperate history of homelessness, of living tenuously for years in backyard slums, subject to the exploitative conditions of landlords. In 1990, conditions were conducive to a more organised and strategic campaign around homelessness. Meetings of the homeless people were hosted by the Civic, and although Civic members were present, it certainly appears from our collective evidence that it was the homeless women themselves who decided upon the strategy of invading open land and putting up their shacks.

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[21]Interview with Maria Thiko by Belede Mazwai, translated by Nontabeko Luggola, 20 January 1992

The narratives presented by the participants themselves were particularly poignant, and bring into sharp focus the experience of women under apartheid's urban policies.[22] They also suggest that women establish networks on the basis of circumstantial need, which are easily formed, but equally easily demobilised. The collective protest action brought a group of women who had previously not known one another together. It grew out of a shared need for access to land on which to establish their own homes. Their vulnerability as women was expressed in the form of the protest. Nakedness was one way of expressing their anger.[23] Although men were involved behind the scenes, offering support and their negotiating skills, the women collectively asked the men to keep a low profile. In the past, individual efforts to acquire houses by relying on men had failed. For more than a month the women developed a close network as together they devised their squatting strategy, faced police harassment and arrest. For three months after the event, they continued to harass and demand houses from the council. Interestingly, during this period, Maria Thiko joined the ANC. She was looking ahead to those who seemed able to provide access to the newly released site and service scheme of Doornkop. This is where she and the others who had participated in the protest were at last allocated sites.

When we met the women in 1991/1992, they were settled on their plots. Without exception, the women felt they had won their place through their struggles, with the support of the Civic. In Doornkop, their network continued to operate through 1992 as they established themselves. But the pressing need for collective action had dissipated, and the women retreated into fending for their families. However, at moments when issues of collective significance arose, as in the arrest of members of the Civic when they set up an embryonic self-defence unit, it was the women's networks which were activated within an hour to protest the arrest. The mobilisation of women appears to be deeply embedded in their immediate social networks, and is the key to an understanding of the their politicization.

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[22]We interviewed about a third of the participants in the protest, and are still in the process of following people up. All the interviews were conducted in the vernacular, on a one to one basis. Although I was present at virtually all of the interviews, they were conducted by my research assistants. I followed the discussion with difficulty, but was able to interject questions. My main objective was to observe reactions and to note body language. Together with translated transcripts these form the basis of the women's narratives.

[23]I do not develop the argument sufficiently in this draft, but what came up again and again in the interviews was the connection between madness and nakedness. The women took off their clothes to demonstrate the extent of their desperation, which had driven them into madness. Their circumstances had driven them crazy. You resort to madness when all else fails.