

Flesh Made Words: Fingerprinting and the Fantasy of Documentary Panopticism, 1900-1930¹

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Introduction

The modern South African state, perhaps more than any other, has been defined by the effort to regulate the movement of international and domestic migrants. This is a study of this effort in the period between 1900 and 1940. It focuses on fingerprinting - a mechanism of discipline which became the core technology of influx control under Apartheid. Influx control, for those who are unfamiliar with the term, was the corner-stone of Apartheid: an enormous bureaucratically administered system of regulations and documents that determined where Africans could live and work. This paper follows the antecedents of influx control, focusing on the micropractices and effects of fingerprinting on and around the Witwatersrand.

Fingerprinting, as it turns out, was replete with paradoxes, and we will follow them here. Not the least of these the always-unrealised promise of complete discipline. Fingerprinting, in the language of the contemporary state, seemed to offer the state 'universal regulation' of African men. In practice the dream of panoptic fingerprinting was realised only in the control of small numbers of migrant workers,

¹ My thanks to Daniella Scrazzolo, Paul Rouillard and Vanessa Noble for invaluable assistance with the data processing for this project.

particularly the 70,000 Chinese migrants who worked on the Witwatersrand between 1904 and 1908. Everywhere else the archival reality of mass fingerprinting shattered the disciplinary capacities of the system.

In part, then, this paper is an effort to come to terms with one of the most perplexing features of the modern South African state: it is, at once, pervasive and impotent. 'After 1948,' as Ivan Evans has recently argued, 'virtually every aspect of their lives was subjected to the intrusive hands of clerks, bureaucrats, and administrators of one sort or another.' And yet, as anyone who has lived here will attest, South Africans have internalised very little of the force of modern rationalisation. We are a determinedly disobedient people, and there is very little the state seems to be able to do about it. The reasons for this lie less, I would suggest, with the illegitimacy of the modern State, or with the poor distribution of resources. In both respects these respects South Africa is not dramatically different from other societies. A major reason for the peculiar impotence and pervasiveness of the state lies, rather, in the effects of the failure of panopticism. And these effects remain.

In the wake of the bombing of the World Trade Center we have seen an outpouring of proposals for the use of computerised biometric technologies (iris scans, facial scans, digital fingerprinting) to establish boundaries between citizens and aliens. In South Africa the effort to use biometric technologies has been in place for a century, it has undergone technological renewal in each generation, and today sees its most advanced form in a number of systems (pension payments, the Home Affairs National Identification System, the Taxi Recapitalisation Scheme) all of which combine extremely sophisticated networking, digital processing and biometric registration. Some or all of these systems may yet succeed, but I think that there is very good evidence from the history of biometric government to suggest that they will fail.

Galton's Sign Manual

Fingerprinting made its way into the British Empire from the East. It is tempting argue that the indentured Chinese and Indian workers themselves brought the system to South Africa. There is good reason to believe that the experience of authenticating documents with fingerprints long pre-dated British colonial administration. Some statues of Buddha mark all ten fingers with the characteristic fingerprint 'whorl.' The early registers that officials used to collect information about the workers arriving in the Durban harbour after 1904 consist of meticulously laid out tables of Chinese script with a small fingerprint punctuating each line. The very elegance of these tables suggests that the clerks, and the workers, were well practiced in the bureaucratic use of fingerprints as personal identification. And there is lexical evidence to suggest that the patterns of fingerprints had long been read as symbols in

China, India and Japan.² Certainly the two key sources for the development of the system of fingerprinting were the observations of a missionary, Dr Henry Faulds, in Japan, and the experiences of a rent-collecting magistrate in the India.

While there is some reason to believe that the social practice of fingerprinting entered South Africa with the Indian and Chinese migrants, the key innovation of collecting and then indexing prints came from the imperial system itself. There is a long running and bitter dispute about the origins of the fingerprinting system in Britain, a dispute that pits the missionary, Faulds, against Sir Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin and the founder of modern eugenics. Whatever the merits of Fauld's claims, it was Galton's monographs and papers published between 1892 and 1895 that underwrote the widespread institutional enthusiasm for fingerprinting in the English-speaking world. Galton publicised a system for the collection, reading and indexing of fingerprints that was taken up by New Scotland Yard in 1894.³ From there it found its way to South Africa. Galton's scheme had many arresting features, but at its heart it was designed as a tool for strengthening the imperial bureaucracy.

Administrative fingerprinting, even Galton acknowledged, was a colonial invention: it had emerged from the difficulties of upholding contractual law in Bengal in the 1850s. Faced with the same kind of relentless subversion of the documentary order that would later confront administrators on the Witwatersrand, fingerprints came to serve as a 'written' substitute for the systemically unreliable 'signatures of the natives.' Sir William Herschel, the Chief Magistrate of Hooghly, resorted to taking the signature of the hand itself' in an effort to frighten 'the man who had made it from afterward denying his formal act.' After seventeen years of using handprints as a ritualised substitute for the signature in the enforcement of contracts, Herschel ordered the collecting of fingerprints as a common means of fixing and individualizing written identities.⁴

Francis Galton's particular cunning lay in generalising and popularising this tool. 'The need of some sound system is shown to be greatly felt in many of our dependencies', Galton observed dryly, 'where the features of the natives are distinguished with difficulty; where there is little variety of surnames; where there are strong motives for prevarication ... and a proverbial prevalence of unverity.' While he was generally attentive to the isolation and confusion of the imperial bureaucrats, he was careful to repeat throughout his study that the diagnostic skills required for a working fingerprinting system were widely and cheaply available, 'to

² Gertrud Hauser. 'Galton and the Study of Fingerprints.' *Sir Francis Galton, FRS. The Legacy of His Ideas*. Proceedings of the twenty-eighth annual symposium of the Galton Institute, London, 1991. Edited by Milo Keynes. (London: Macmillan, 1993) 155.

³ Hauser. 'Study of Fingerprints.' 153. and <http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/dcjs/html/nyidbur2.html>

⁴ Galton. *Finger prints*. (London: Macmillan, 1892) 27-8. See also Herschel in *Nature* xxiii, p23 (Nov 25, 1880) cited in Galton.

be found in abundance among ordinary clerks.’⁵

On the face of it this argument - that almost anyone could be taught how to take, interpret and classify fingerprints - seemed absurd. There is nothing particularly self-evident about fingerprints. To establish the viability of fingerprints as a mechanism for establishing and fixing the identity of very large numbers of people, and to supplant alternative systems, like Bertillon’s anthropometric photography, Galton needed to rid the identity of each fingerprint of all ambiguity and establish a mechanism for storing each fingerprint record that would allow for rapid and accurate recovery. He did this by focusing on the seam that cuts through the complex patterns on the finger, leaving in place a single dominant pattern. ‘After a pattern has been treated in this way’, Galton reassured his readers, ‘there is no further occasion to pore minutely into the finger print, in order to classify it correctly.’ The single remaining pattern, skewered by the intersection of the three corners of the seam, was then classified as one of three archetypes: Arch, Loop or Whorl. While Galton’s scheme allowed for an almost infinite elaboration of sub-classifications (for example, the Forked Arch, Eyeletted Loop, Ellipses Whorl) these three basic categories gave him a mechanism for converting each finger into a letter, A L or W. ‘The bold firm courses of the outline,’ he explained, ‘are even more distinct than the largest capital letters in the title page of a book.’ It was a simple matter, thereafter, to make each hand into a word that could be classified alphabetically.

Here lay the key to the extraordinary power of Galton’s system: his fingerprinting classification provided a simple mechanism for converting the obscure qualities of the body into a textual object, subject to the normal procedures of indexing used ubiquitously in the documentary bureaucracy. In theory, and in practice, Galton provided a means whereby ‘a fingerprint may be so described by a few letters that it can be easily searched for and found in any large collection, just as the name of a person is found in a directory.’ Fingerprints, unlike names, were physically bound to the person they denominated, and free of the ambiguity and manipulation that characterised naming. They provided, as Galton put it, ‘a sign manual that differentiates the person who made it, throughout the whole of his life from the rest of mankind’⁶

The Identification Branch of the Foreign Labour Department

Before almost any of the other elements of the new administration were in place the

⁵ Galton. *Finger prints*. 14, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Secretary for Native Affairs, requested that each of the mines on the Witwatersrand begin to collect the fingerprints of their African employees. Without suggesting specific procedures for either the recording or cataloguing of the prints, Wyndham asked that mine officials should write the passport numbers and names on the back of the fingerprint records in order, as he optimistically put it, 'to prevent desertion from the mines.'⁷ It was, in fact, to be many years before even the most well organised mines would begin the project of cataloguing fingerprints, nor were the collections or the practice of fingerprinting ever to have the effects that Wyndham imagined. But the turn to fingerprinting as the solution to the failure of the documentary order was to remain the characteristic and consistent feature of the rationalising order that emerged in the Transvaal after Reconstruction.

The first systematic effort to record, classify and catalogue the fingerprints of a large group of people using Sir Edward Henry's New Scotland Yard method began in November 1902 in Natal. By the end of the Reconstruction period, the Pietermaritzburg collection, larger than any of the others by several orders of magnitude, consisted of the fingerprints of 100,000 indentured Indian workers printed on arrival in Durban and a group of approximately 230,000 prints taken from prisoners awaiting trial and African applicants for posts in the Police and Gaols. This second group was further broken down into three racially defined sets: 12,742 European, 211,377 Natives, and 101 Chinese.⁸ This enormous fingerprinting effort formed part of the anaemic colony's effort to quash African protest. Indeed, early in 1908 a Sub-Inspector Pinto of the CID in Pietermaritzburg posted a set of fingerprints to his counterparts in Johannesburg and to the Identification Clerks of the Foreign Labour Department in search of the perennially elusive Cakijana kaGezindaka. Reminding the Identification Clerks of the £100 price on Cakijana's head, he asked that 'you will place these prints in your files and inform me should he fall into your hands.' While this unrealistic sense of the tentacular powers of fingerprints was common, now as much as then, the large number of African prints on record in Natal in this early period was an exception. The focus of the fingerprinting enterprise in South Africa before 1910 was on the effort to control indentured Asian workers, and particularly the very large numbers of Chinese men contracted to work on the Witwatersrand gold mines.

Chinese workers presented the officials of the Foreign Labour Department, and their counterparts on the individual gold mines, with formidable problems of identification and regulation: there was practically no linguistic proficiency on the Rand in any of

⁷ CMA Assaults on European Women by Natives, 1912 (1) Wilson, Edward. Acting Chief Pass Officer, Native Affairs Department, Johannesburg to Native Affairs Joint Committee 8 May 1912.

⁸ CAD JUS 0862, 1/138. Acting Chief Commissioner, South African Police to Acting Secretary for Justice. Finger Print System as applied to the detection of Criminals in South Africa. 13 May 1912. CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12 Establishment of a Central Finger Impression Office, 1912. Deputy Commissioner, CID to Secretary, Transvaal Police. 18 December 1912.

the languages spoken by the migrants; many of the workers had similar or identical names; the officials were completely incapable of distinguishing individual physical characteristics; and, simply put, workers had many good reasons to dissemble about their own identities.

The state initially sought to address the problem of establishing reliable personal identity by using a new system of numerically indexed photographs. The first group of workers arrived at the Receiving Compound built on the site of the old Boer Concentration Camp at the Jacobs Railway Depot in Durban, after a thirty-day journey from Hong Kong. Officials took photographs of each worker holding a slate with the number of the Government Passport issued to him immediately before the departure of the ship. The photographs travelled with the workers on the twenty-four hour train journey to the Transvaal where they were carefully filed in numerical order in the FLD's Identification Office in Johannesburg.⁹

But these images proved singularly incapable of the work required of them. The rapid processing demanded by the processing of the two thousand men aboard each ship meant that many of the photographs were in fact useless for the purposes of identifying individuals. And even when, by chance, the pictures were well taken, photography was of little help in presenting the officials with a set of easily distinguishable physical criteria. And, 'when they ran into thousands,' as the officials put it, they had little chance 'to survive the ordeal of constant handling.'¹⁰

To bolster the flimsy evidentiary qualities of the photographs the officials turned to the Parisian Police bureaucrat Alphonse Bertillon's cutting-edge identification system which 'combined photographic portraiture, anthropometric description, and highly standardized and abbreviated written notes on a single *fiche* ... within a comprehensive, statistically based filing system.'¹¹ This system, which must have seemed omniscient and elegant on display at the 1893 Chicago Exposition, simply added to the problems of identifying large numbers of workers on the Witwatersrand. Far from resolving the empirical inadequacies of the photographs, Bertillon's complex measuring instruments demanded more time and more skill than the FLD could muster. Nor did this effort 'to ground photographic evidence in more abstract *statistical* methods' do much to address the intrinsic unreliability of the body as a point of mathematical comparison. The measurements, as officials complained at the time, were simply 'not reliable owing to physical changes.'¹²

Fingerprints, as Galton had argued some twenty years earlier, proved significantly

⁹ Peter Richardson. *Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal*. (London: Macmillan, 1982) 146-9, 160-165.

¹⁰ CAD JUS 0862, 1/138. Burley, Henry to Registrar of Asiatics, Department of the Interior. 22 April 1912.

¹¹ Sekula 354.

¹² CAD JUS 0862, 1/138. Burley, Henry to Registrar of Asiatics, Department of the Interior. 22 April 1912

more efficient and dramatically cheaper than Bertillon's anthropometrics.¹³ Soon after the arrival of the first group of Chinese workers in June 1904, officials in the Foreign Labour Department began to collect, classify and file their fingerprints. Within a year they had collected some 13,000 sets, and were steadily increasing the catalogue at a rate of 4000 fingers a day. Building, classifying and filing this mountain of identifying data required the labour of just two registrars at the receiving compound and three cataloguers at the FLD's Identification Office in downtown Johannesburg.¹⁴

Fingerprinting the Chinese workers offered the state one particular advantage: the record set was limited and complete. Every single worker - indeed every Chinese or Indian adult male in the Transvaal - was fingerprinted. Similarly, while the total figure of 70,000 was large, it was small compared, for example, to the millions of potential African workers. The FLD was able to maintain the size of the record set by organising all aspects of the recruitment and control of the Chinese workers - including the fees and wages charged to the mines - around their fingerprints. From early in 1905 the Mines were required to dispatch a set of fingerprints along with the notification of death of Chinese workers. The integrity of the collection was nicely maintained by linking these records to each company's wage bill. 'Your company will be saved the sum of Ten Shillings per month on the allotment payments,' an FLD memo carefully reminded the Mines' secretaries, 'which cannot be stopped until the right coolie is reported as dead.'¹⁵

The effort to fingerprint the Chinese workers came to serve as a model of state-worker discipline. When, two years after the last of the Chinese workers had been repatriated the collection was completely destroyed, the officials of the FLD (who had now been transferred into a new 'Asiatics' unit within the Interior Ministry) looked back on the Chinese era as a period of faultless state control.

It will of course be understood that the Chinese resorted to all sorts of devices in order to make some attempt to lose their identity ... Passports were exchanged, false names given, the names of employers were wrongly given and in a number of cases even the mutilation of fingers that existed at the time they were originally taken... It is therefore a tribute to the excellence of the system that during the seven years these 70,000 labourers were employed in the Transvaal there is NO case on record of mistaken identity having occurred!

The Chinese episode seemed to offer disciplinary possibilities that would dissolve the most persistent barriers to the proper organisation of an enormous colonial labour

¹³ Galton. *Fingerprints*. 166-8.

¹⁴ TAD FLD 171, 35. Identification Branch, Foreign Labour Department. 'Report on the Work of the Identification Branch of the Foreign Labour Department.' 01 September 1905.

¹⁵ TAD FLD 173, 35/54. Foreign Labour Department. Circular Letter. No. 35/54. 11 March 1905

force. These obstacles, first cultural. 'the Chinese aptitude for prevarication' - and, second, linguistic - 'no one of the finger print experts spoke the Chinese language' - collapsed under a regime where officials confronted the migrant exclusively 'through his finger prints and the classification under which they fell.'¹⁶

This triumphalist vision of the Chinese era, drawing on the grandiose tones of Francis Galton's original study, came to underpin the notion, fondly held by compound managers, police commanders, and mine managers, that fingerprinting could solve the entrenched and ubiquitous failures of the documentary Pass system. In fact, of course, the system was never quite as faultless as its advocates, or Foucaultians, would have us believe. There were many problems.

In the first case, the identification system was only as reliable as the actual prints taken from workers. Here the scope for failure was as wide as the range of competence amongst officials and the variety of physical predicaments that workers faced on the Witwatersrand. Throughout the period of Chinese indenture the secretary of the FLD complained about the quality of prints individual mines despatched to identify deceased workers. 'Observe the manner in which the finger prints of deceased coolies are sent to this Department,' he complained to the Chamber of Mines in June 1906, 'notwithstanding the repeated requests, which have been made to the employers of Chinese coolies, that the utmost care should be exercised in obtaining clear and legible impressions for the purpose of identification.' The medical officer at the Durban Roodepoort Deep had allowed the deceased man's fingers to be 'daubed on to a thick coat of ink' and carelessly painted onto a sheet of paper. The prints, as the FLD secretary observed, were 'perfectly useless for the purpose for which they are intended.' Complaints like this, and others of the sort where the 'right hand has been marked as the left hand and vice versa and the fingers have been taken in the wrong place,' were frequently and repeatedly directed at individual mines, like Durban Deep and East Rand Proprietary Mines, the South African Constabulary, and even the special Inspectors of the Foreign Labour Department itself.¹⁷

For mine workers' fingers ended up in places that were little suited to fine printing. The man employed at the Durban Roodepoort Deep, whose sloppily taken fingers had so enraged the secretary of the FLD, had been dead for many hours by the time that the MO reached him. Turning two thumbs and eight fingers 'over with a rolling movement, so that the nail which faced to the left now faces to the right, and in such a manner that the whole front of the top joint is coated with the ink' and, then, rolling each finger 'lightly in the space marked ... care being taken to keep a firm and even

¹⁶ Burley, 22 April 1912, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ TAD FLD 173, 35/54. Secretary, Foreign Labour Department to Manager, East Rand Proprietary Mines Ltd. No.35/54. 20 March 1905.

pressure during the movement' proved impossible after the stiffening of rigor mortis. In the face of the persistent complaints from the Identification Office about the quality of impressions, the manager of ERPM offered the tart response that 'it is by no means easy to obtain good prints from the stiffened fingers of a dead man.'¹⁸

Officials were forced to confront the grim world of the early compounds by the requirement that every worker to leave the Witwatersrand, through repatriation or death, be fingerprinted. In the absence of anything resembling a medical infrastructure, the Chinese workers were usually repatriated for chronic diseases - the most common of which seem to have been the dietary disease *beriberi* and syphilis. It was the Identification Clerks of the FLD who had to do the bulk of the fingerprinting of these workers, whether diseased or deceased, evidently with little enthusiasm. In March 1906, less than a year after the first set of prints had been taken, the Identification Clerks - including Henry Burley who looked back in 1912 to this period with unqualified nostalgia - wrote to the Superintendent of the FLD, protesting 'the particularly distasteful duty' they were compelled to perform in identifying the bodies of workers who had died by accident or disease on the mines. To make the point unmistakably they explained their work 'entails a great risk of sickness, subject to the handling of the putrified [sic.] bodies of the deceased coolies, and the inhaling of nauseous gases' and requested that 'special remuneration be allowed the officer performing this duty over and above the ordinary subsistence allowance.' The Superintendent duly forwarded their protests, advising that each Clerk should receive a £1 bonus on the successful identification of an unmarked body.¹⁹

When these protests failed to elicit any official or financial acknowledgement of the difficulties of their work the ID Clerks sought a more conventional local solution to the problem: the employment of Africans to collect the fingerprints of the criminal and the deceased. This 'distasteful' work, they argued two weeks later, was 'recognised by other finger print departments (namely Native Affairs, and other branches in the Colonies) [as] 'infra digni-tatum' and therefore classified as native labour.' And, in absence of the £1 bounty per body, they requested that 'one or two natives ... be trained and worked on the same basis as the natives employed in the finger print branch of the Native Affairs.' The Superintendent tersely responded that he was 'averse to employing kaffirs for work of such a nature, and ... directs that the work should be carried out in the satisfactory manner it has hitherto been performed.'

¹⁸ TAD FLD 171, 35. Identification Office, Foreign Labour Department. Instructions for Taking Finger Prints. 01 March 1906. TAD FLD 173, 35/54. Manager, East Rand Proprietary Mines, Limited, to Secretary, Foreign Labour Department. 19 April 1905.

¹⁹ TAD FLD 173, 35/54. Lees, Cecil F., Haigh, J.M., Burley, Henry to Superintendent, Foreign Labour Department, Johannesburg. Identification Branch. 15 March 1906.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that errors of classification and identification were considerably more frequent than the FLD officials would later remember. This was especially true in the first year of operation of the system. But the penalties for failing to identify prints correctly were severe, and the errors cannot obscure the fact that the Foreign Labour Department's Finger Print system worked. The records of complaints in the archive are clearly rigorously policed exceptions to the general rule that the fingerprinting of the Chinese migrants was well done, carefully catalogued and very effective. There are many examples of systematic, panoptic, identification like this request: 'I enclose the finger impression of a strange coolie who was caught in the Angelo Compound yesterday with twenty-three packets of opium in his possession valued at £23-0-0, and shall be glad if you will inform me as to his registered number and employer.'²¹

And the statistics are unequivocal. In 1906 the FLD registered and classified in excess of 10,000 newly arrived migrants, they identified 12,000 Chinese workers released from prison, 15,000 appearing in court, 5,000 repatriations and a small number of criminal and miscellaneous identifications. By 1910, after the last of the workers had returned to mainland China via Singapore, the collection had been completely destroyed. But the legacy of a working example of Fingerprinting as an all-inclusive solution to the inadequacies of the documentary order would remain for years.

At the heart of this enterprise - and one of the reasons for its success - was a racialising project that isolated 'Asians' for particular state treatment. In 1907 the fingerprint system developed around the control of the Chinese workers was extended and applied to all adult men of Chinese or Indian origin in the Transvaal. 'After four years experience I had come to the conclusion,' the Registrar of Asiatics explained later, 'that it was absolutely impossible to identify through their signatures or photographs this class of Races who think nothing of changing their names and their history, the history of their Fathers and Mothers and everything else to further their own purpose.' The British officials' anxieties about 'inscrutable asiatics,' who were certainly linguistically and culturally unfamiliar, laced together powerful fears about class hierarchy, personal identity and the significance of a truthful biography. Fingerprinting, many officials believed, was a means of controlling these tendencies and served as a biological indicator of race itself.²²

²⁰ TAD FLD 171, 35. Identification Office, Foreign Labour Department. Superintendent, Foreign Labour Department. Foreign Labour Department, Johannesburg. 02 April 1906 and Secretary, Foreign Labour Department, to Lees. 03 April 1906.

²¹ TAD FLD 171, 35/1. Manager, East Rand Proprietary Mines, Limited, to Superintendent, Foreign Labour Department. East Rand Proprietary Mines, Limited. 28 May 1906.

²² CAD JUS 0862, 1/138, 1910. Registrar of Asiatics, Department of the Interior to Acting Secretary for Justice. 23 April 1912.

When Sir Edward Henry, the author of the New Scotland Yard method used so widely in the colonies, requested a summary of the classifications of the Transvaal workers' fingerprints he could not resist a summary observation of the racial features of the collection. 'The return is very interesting, shewing, as it does', he observed self-importantly, 'the decided difference in the character of the patterns, which exists between the finger prints of Mongolian, and those of the Western races. That Francis Galton, who publicly formulated the fingerprint system, the founding figure of modern eugenics and an intellectual with a singular desire for identifying 'racial indicators' had abandoned his exhaustive research into the statistical comparison of fingerprint classifications and racial groups when 'hard fact had made hope no longer justifiable' seems to have had little effect on those who took up the practical work of implementing it. The fact that Sir Edward Henry mistook the classifications he was sent as those of Indian workers suggests that he, unlike Galton, was determined to find 'racial' indicators regardless of the evidence.²³

The Native Affairs Identification Department

In the Transvaal, Chinese and Indian men, and their families, were subjected to the fingerprinting regime earlier, and more systematically, than other people, but it was the Native Affairs Department's interest in the system that would shape its long-term role in South Africa. In 1906, as soon as the viability of the Chinese system had been demonstrated, the Chamber of Mines began to pressure the Native Affairs Department for an 'extension of the system of recording finger prints' and the introduction of a 'universal system of registration.' Sir Godfrey Lagden, the Commissioner for Native Affairs, promised to take up the mines' suggestion 'at an early date.'²⁴

This idea of the universal system of fingerprinting, classification and identification was to become - and, indeed, still remains - the Holy Grail of the rationalising state's confrontation with its disobedient subjects in South Africa.²⁵ Implementing a universal system of registration - not to speak of the problems of classification and identification - for the millions of potential African workers in the subcontinent was simply beyond the capacity of the Reconstruction state, and so an alternative had to be developed. The solution that the Native Affairs Department began to implement in 1909 fed off the individual fingerprint programs that had been developed on each of the mines. Rather than establish a centralised, state controlled mechanism of fingerprinting, the Native Affairs Department altered the law to allow for the

²³ Galton. *Fingerprints*. 183.

²⁴ CMA Assaults on European Women by Natives, 1912 (1), Wilson, Edward. Acting Chief Pass Officer, Native Affairs Department, Johannesburg to Native Affairs Joint Committee, 'The Native Pass Laws Of The Transvaal', 08 May 1912.

²⁵ See <http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/pr/1996/pr1209a.html> 'Tender for Home Affairs ID System' 9 December 1996.

compulsory detention for 6 days of all African men applying for work permission on the Witwatersrand. During that period workers were to be housed in a special Identification Compound long enough to allow the mines to come up with their fingerprints, or for compound officials to attend identification parades. The Native Affairs Identification Department was constructed on the site of the old Wemmer Compound, immediately to the south of the city of Johannesburg, on the extension of Eloff Street and on the rail-line between the Faraday and Village Main stations.

The procedure that was supposed to sift out workers who had illegally deserted their mines in search of better work opportunities was framed in unmistakably Benthamite terms. Workers despatched from the Pass Offices on the Witwatersrand underwent an elaborate documentary and visual processing at the Wemmer Compound. The compound was laid out with a central processing area and six adjacent yards each containing a dormitory cell and a fenced exercise area. Immediately after their arrival workers would be registered, 'issued Compound Registration Tickets,' and their fingerprints taken on special forms marked with their Registration numbers. These records would be sent 'as soon as possible to the [Native Affairs Finger Impression Records Department] where they will be classified, looked up, and if not known, filed in a Special series of files, which could be called N.A.I.D. Compound Files.'

In order to detain each of the workers the six days that officials believed was required for the mines to become aware of deserters, identify them, find their finger prints and then despatch them to the Native Affairs Department, workers were 'drafted into the different detention yards, corresponding to the number of days of their detention.' Inside the yard each worker was required to wear a metal disk bearing the number of the yard in a conspicuous place. Every morning workers in the last yard, No 6, would be released 'making thus room for the occupants of yard No' 5 and so on till No' 1 will be emptied for the reception of the daily arrivals.'

The NAID compound was laid out in the unmistakable pattern of the panopticon. The detention yards were separated from each other by 12 foot walls made up of corrugated iron sheets but 'the wall facing the central yard of the Compound, to which visitors will be admitted, and where the N.A.I.D. Policeman will patrol, take the form of a 10 foot barb wire fence to allow for more sun, better ventilation, and also to afford to the ... visitors and Compound Guards, a full view of each detention yard.' The visitors who would be allowed into the centre of the Compound were not friends or relatives, but 'employers and native constables from the different Mines.' On their arrival the occupants of each yard would be forced to 'line up near the fence (barb wire) and will thus be afforded an opportunity of seeing every detained native

without entering in the different pens.²⁶ The NAID compound, more than any other institution on the Witwatersrand, represented a particularly nasty version of the prison that Jeremy Bentham made famous more than a century before.

Yet it never worked particularly well, and its failures had little to do with the design of the prison. (Although it is certainly easy enough to imagine how the disciplinary integrity of a corrugated iron prison would unravel on the Witwatersrand.) The failure of the NAID compound was related to a simpler problem: It generally took the mines well in excess of six days to discover a deserter and secure his fingerprints. 'It is a common occurrence,' Henry Wellbeloved, the Manager of the nearby Witwatersrand Native Labour Association compound reported over a decade later, 'that this same native is reported a few days later as a deserter from some mine but, owing to the lapse of time in reporting the desertion, the native has made good his escape.'²⁷ The numbers make this point clearly. Of the 17,000 men who deserted from work on the Witwatersrand in 1911, just 4,000 were recaptured by the NAID. The panopticon, at least on the Witwatersrand, had few of the disciplinary powers that have been inferred for it by Bentham and Foucault. It was more of a grotesque nuisance than a mechanism for internalising the normative apparatus of bourgeois subjectivity.

Centralized Police Fingerprint Bureau

The fingerprinting regime established by the Native Affairs Department after 1910 was a far cry from the omniscient identification system that Galton and Henry had intended, and which had functioned during the brief period of Chinese recruitment. The combination of the collection of deserters and other miscreants held by the Native Affairs Finger Impression Record Department and the elaborate procedures of the Wemmer Compound could do little more than randomly select individuals from the thousands of men who deserted from the mines in a given year (a figure that varied between 1 and 10 percent of the total workforce of 200,000 men between 1910 and 1930). The fingerprinting systems established by the individual mines were yet more haphazard, relying entirely on passport numbers or names to index their catalogues. The mines could produce prints for workers already registered on their books, but, quite unlike the system in place at the FLD, they could not identify workers from their prints. Once a worker had successfully thrown off his name or passport number (which was, as we've seen in the previous chapter, relatively easily

²⁶ TAD GNLB 004, 2337/09. Lautrés, E. I. Inspector, N.A.I.D. Compound. Memo of procedure that will obtain at the N.A.I.D. Compound as regards the treatment of natives to be detained there. 01 February 1909 and Supplementary Notes to the Memo of procedure which will obtain at the Native Affairs I.D. Compound. 08 February 1909.

²⁷ CMA Native Labour--Miscellaneous, 1924-5. Wellbeloved, H. Assistant Native Labour Advisor to Gemmill. 3 September 1924.

done) there was little that the officials could do to track him. The large recruiting bodes, the Native Recruiting Corporation and the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association made no attempt to collect fingerprints, and once a worker had managed to secure a pass from home, or passed through the Wemmer Compound, he was, so to speak, free.²⁸

It was the desire to be able to regulate all African workers through a carefully organised and complete collection of fingerprints that had motivated the mines' original enthusiasm for fingerprinting, and it remained a powerful imperative, within the mining industry and beyond. Unlike the mines and the NAD, the newly formed South African Police had maintained the separate provincial collections using the New Scotland Yard method. Most of the prints were taken from prisoners serving sentences of more than three months, with the exception of the very large collection in Pietermaritzburg where all convicted and awaiting trial prisoners were registered. In July 1912, Theo Truter, the Chief Commissioner of the SAP, proposed that the separate collections of the NAD and the Police be amalgamated. 'With the whole of the finger prints under the control of the Police,' he explained with hubris typical of the panoptic utopians, 'in a very short time not only will the finger impressions of every Native on the Rand be on record, but practically those of every Native within the four Provinces of the Union, which would be of the utmost assistance to the Police in the detection and prevention of crime.'²⁹

Major Mavrogordato, the Deputy Commissioner of the CID, was duly despatched by his boss to investigate the Native Affairs fingerprinting operation. The results were rather unsettling. At the CID operation, ten members of the South African Police worked on a collection of some 110,000 records growing at a rate of 20,000 records per year. At the NAD offices, 14 staff members controlled a similarly sized catalogue. The two different branches were conducting a similar number of searches, around 30,000, per year. But to the astonishment of the Police, the NAD collection was connected to a vast reservoir of 500,000 unclassified records held by the mines and indexed by serial pass number. When the implications of incorporating this enormous mass of records into a single collection began to emerge, Mavrogordato backed rapidly away from the idea of amalgamating the two collections. 'I do not think that it would desirable to swell the records of the CID which are purely criminal,' he explained in an effort to forswear his boss' panoptic enthusiasm, 'with hundreds of thousands of finger prints as this would lead to unavoidable congestion and increase the difficulty of searching.' He concluded his report by advising that, in

²⁸ TAD GNLB 055, 1464/1912 Finger Print System, 1912; Dix, C. W. Secretary, Witwatersrand Native Labour Association to Under Secretary for Native Affairs, 29 April 1912.

²⁹ CAD JUS 0862, 1/138 Acting Chief Commissioner, South African Police. Acting Secretary for Justice. Finger Print System as applied to the detection of Criminals in South Africa. 13 May 1912. CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12 Establishment of a Central Finger Impression Record Office. Truter, Theo. Chief Commissioner, SAP to Secretary for Justice. 27 July 1912.

the event of the amalgamation of the two offices, the two record sets should remain separate.

As the likely effects of absorbing the Pass Office collections began to filter in to the Police command structure, the Justice Department sought to neutralise the paradox of the massive data set of unclassified mine workers finger prints by pressuring the NAD to organise its collection properly. For a year a debate ensued between the two departments. The Secretary for Justice charged that 'the Police Finger Prints are classified scientifically and the Native Affairs Finger Prints are not.' And his counterpart in Native Affairs answered this extreme accusation by shedding blame on to the individual mines. 'Although there is a large number of finger impression records unclassified,' he responded, 'such records are not held by this Department but by the employers of Native labourers.'³⁰ While much of this bad tempered argument centred on the efficiency and reliability of the NAD collection, there were much more intractable, structural problems at work.

Some of these, as Mavrogordato had indicated, related to the very different functions of the two collections, but others were built into the system of fingerprint cataloguing itself. In the first instance, none of the officials involved with either of the two classified collections wanted anything to do with the completely unclassified and uncorrected records held by the mines. 'The desire of any officer in charge of a collection of records,' the Director of Native Labour explained to his boss, 'is to avoid as far as possible adding any unnecessary records, since the larger the collection the greater the labour of every search and the greater the possibility of identifications being missed.' Adding to the elastic demands of an increased collection was a much more sinister difficulty. The two classified collections (each of which amounted to some 100,000 records) had begun to use their own, unique, extended set of sub-classifications 'further than those laid down by Sir Edward Henry.'³¹

At its core the Native Affairs Department's position was a rejection of the utopian fantasies of a panoptic fingerprinting system. 'There is no practical possibility of securing that no native can enter or leave the Labour Districts without the knowledge of the Department', Edward Wilson, Chief Pass Officer on the Rand explained soon after the original suggestion from the Police emerged. For the system to 'secure the instant identification of any native found in the Labour Districts' it would require the registration of 'every native in South and South-Central Africa and to keeping every such record for some forty or fifty years.'

³⁰ CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12 Establishment of a Central Finger Impression Record Office. Secretary for Justice to Secretary for Native Affairs. 11 February 1913. and Secretary for Native Affairs to Secretary for Justice. 20 March 1913.

³¹ CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12. Director of Native Labour. Suggested Amalgamation of the Finger Impression Record Offices of the Criminal Investigation and Native Affairs Departments. 13 September 1912.

The resulting dataset of some twenty million records would have been physically enormous, immensely expensive to construct and maintain and quite unlike anything else in existence at the time. Edward Wilson had been involved with the FLD's fingerprinting system and he had an intimate understanding of the classification procedures and their implications. He knew that, notwithstanding the open-ended claims that Galton, and many others, had made for the accuracy and reliability of fingerprinting classifications, that the utility of any collection was proportional to its size. There were, he conceded, 'five thousand million possible classifications' from which it should follow that a collection of some 'twenty million records could be easily handled.' But the statistical probabilities and physical realities of fingerprinting were at odds.

In the largest classified collections of up to 100,000 records, Wilson explained, there would always be some classifications that contained several hundred fingerprint sets. Increasing the collection by 200-fold would have produced gridlock in the popular classifications. While it would, normally, be possible to conduct 'further sub-classification' as necessary to isolate individual patterns, one particular weakness in the Henry classification could not be overcome. The classification, 'in which all ten fingers are of the "arch" variety, a type of record rare among Asiatics but by no means uncommon among African natives, defies further subdivision and will always be troublesome and laborious to deal with in handling very large collections of African natives.'³² Faced with this tangible limit on the indexing of fingerprints, the amalgamation of the Police and Native Affairs records into a single, comprehensive bureau of fingerprints stopped dead in its tracks.

The Commissioner of the newly formed SA Police, Theo Truter, directed his organising zeal toward the coordination of the four separate provincial CID collections based in Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Pretoria and Pietermaritzburg. In 1920 the city chosen for the housing of the Identification Bureau was Pretoria, much to the irritation of magistrates and prosecutors in the other centres. Under the new judicial regime determined by the handing-down of the indeterminate sentence to individuals for 'quite trivial charges because of their previous record', the geographical centralisation of the fingerprint records precipitated a new set of practical obstacles. 'It is not possible to adjourn every criminal case for a weak while enquiries are instituted into the previous record of the accused,' the Johannesburg Magistrate complained, 'This course would ... throw the work of the Courts, into a state of hopeless confusion.'³³

³² CAD JUS 0862, 1/138. Wilson, Edward. Acting Chief Pass Officer, Johannesburg, NAD. 'The Employment in the Union of South Africa of the System of Identification by Finger Impressions.' 5 August 1912.

³³ CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12. Johannesburg Magistrate to Secretary for Justice, 22 October 1920.

Defending the movement of the records to Pretoria that began in 1920, Truter dismissed the idea of local fingerprint criminal records, and stressed the panoptic benefits of the new centralisation under which it was 'possible to supply the WHOLE UNION RECORD OF PREVIOUS CONVICTIONS' of any individual to any of the branches of the state in any centre. 'The records are of inestimable value to the State, are irreplaceable if destroyed,' he argued from bitter experience and with some foresight, 'and it seemed to me unwise to keep them in a totally unprotected building right in the heart of the industrial storm centre of the Union.' His solution to the problem of delays was not the dispersal or duplication of the records (both of which were impossible), but the introduction of 'better telephone and postal facilities.'³⁴

Resurrecting Universal Registration

The early 1920s were certainly tumultuous times, as Truter had pointed out. In the wake of the anti-pass protests, store-boycotts and massive strikes by both black and white workers, the newly organised Mine Compound Managers' Association reintroduced the project of the 'universal' registration of African workers in the Transvaal. The specific reason for the implementation of universal registration to stop the remaining trickle of men (one out of every thousand workers) deserting from their work on the mines, but the desire to fingerprint stemmed from a more general appreciation of the limits of mine and state controls over African workers. Henry Wellbeloved, the manager of the WNLA Compound that lay two blocks south of the old Native Affairs Identification Depot, immediately rejected the proposal, which would 'would cost the Government far more than the Industry is losing through desertions.

But the idea of universal registration would not die. Four years later, the mine doctors, battling to limit the incidence of pulmonary tuberculosis exacerbated by the devastating effects of the increasingly lengthy periods of underground work in the 1920s, sought to use fingerprints as a substitute for oral histories. The Mine Medical Officers' Association appealed to the Gold Producers' Committee 'that a permanent finger print record card be kept for each boy' and that 'his working record would be endorsed on the card as long as he continued in service on the mines.' The organised doctors were highly placed in the elaborate hierarchies on the Witwatersrand mines; so on this occasion Wellbeloved's rebuttal required more careful elaboration. 'I have gone carefully into this matter,' he explained, 'and to give effect to the suggestion would necessitate the employment of from twenty-five to thirty European and about ten native clerks at an approximate annual cost of from six to seven thousand pounds,

³⁴ CAD JUS 0163, 1/279/12. Commissioner of South African Police to Secretary for Justice, 4 November 1920. Emphasis in the original.

and even then the former labour history of the natives could not be supplied.' This elaborate fingerprinting system would initially do little to overcome the mine doctors' chief difficulty: their refusal or reluctance to rely on oral patient histories. 'We would at the commencement have to accept the word of each native as to his previous mine service,' Wellbeloved explained. He did not make the obvious corollary point: why bother with the enormous expense of setting up such a system if its putative medical benefits would only accrue after a decade. The Gold Producers' Committee certainly understood the cost implications of the system.³⁵

For the remainder of the 1920s the gold mining industry resorted to fingerprinting niche groups of workers who found themselves close to particular stores of value. All 'reduction' workers employed on the final stages of producing refined gold from the broken-ore had their fingerprints compared against the CID collections in Pretoria. Those workers who received payouts from the Miners' Phtisis Fund had their prints taken and indexed in order to prevent them making repeated claims of financial compensation for their destroyed lungs. And the Native Affairs Department continued to operate its corrugated panopticon. In general the most important feature of the 1920s was its deflationary character, and the particular emphasis that both mining officials and the state placed on cost management. These constraints disappeared in the 1930s. In the wake of the gold standard crisis, and the spectacular increases in profit that followed from the devaluation of the South African currency, mining officials and the state began to look with increased enthusiasm at a very elaborate, panoptic solution to the problems of control. Some of these plans were formulated in reaction to the disorder prompted by the Izitshozi gangs of Mpondo migrants. And all of them were framed by the developing hubris of officials in both the mine and state bureaucracies after 1933.

In the meantime, and little noticed amidst the gathering enthusiasm for 'Universal Registration,' the fingerprinting systems that were already in place were plagued by Kafkaesque difficulties. In 1924 the Chamber of Mines had agreed to employ a fingerprint expert, Mr Claude, to work in the offices of the centralised police collection, checking the prints of a fraction of the African workers who applied to work in the mines. Written a decade later his desperate appeal for assistance speaks volumes about the confounding effects of archives. In the twelve years that had elapsed since the introduction of the Fingerprinting regime for African 'Reduction' and security workers, Claude had been working alone at the Police offices in Pretoria, with 'no proper facilities for leave, either sick or vacation.' And, as the industry began to expand rapidly in the wake of the Gold Standard crisis, the tempo of searches accelerated. 'In the year 1924 the number of Mines searches was 6889,' Finger Print Expert Claude explained, 'A gradual increase has been reflected year by

³⁵ CMA Native Labour. Miscellaneous, 1928. Wellbeloved to General Manager, WNLA. 19 October 1927.

year until in 1935 the figure of 10, 068 was reached, and this is likely to increase still further in future.'

Caught between an avalanche of new surface workers and the expanding national collection of criminal fingerprints, Claude found himself falling remorselessly behind. The centralisation of the police records from the different provinces meant that the number of 'Finger Prints in the South African Criminal Bureau is about three times as great as it was in 1924.' The movement of the records from the old Palace of Justice into the much larger offices at the Police Headquarters required much more physical movement to search the collection. Each individual search was taking Claude twice as much time than had been the case a decade earlier. Added to these difficulties of scale, the offices were off-limits after hours, which prevented the conscientious Finger Print Expert from working Saturday afternoons, Sundays and public holidays. By the end of January 1936, Claude estimated that he behind by 600 searches, and he begged for assistance to help him cope with the work.³⁶

Claude's appeal for assistance was endorsed by the mine and state police officials, and, despite the mining industry's interest in funding an additional post, he was allocated an experienced assistant at the expense of the Department of Justice.³⁷ But this much augmented search capacity was rapidly overtaken by the exponentially increasing submissions of fingerprints. As enthusiasm for fingerprinting - especially amongst compound officials on the mines - increased in the late 1930s, so the requests for identification became a flood. A year after Claude had received his assistant the officer commanding the Criminal Bureau wrote to the Gold Producers' Committee. 'When Mr. Claude wrote to you in January, 1936,' he explained, '10,068 finger print searches had been made on behalf of the mines during the 1935.' In the first nine months of 1937 the figure had already reached 14,194. The mines were evidently sending forward the prints of 'practically all surface workers,' even those working on mines that had not begun to produce gold. The police, in the time-honoured ethos of those responsible for making finger print archives work, implored the mines to limit the submission of fingerprints to 'natives employed in reduction works and native police'. 'You will appreciate the fact the unless searches can be made as soon as the finger prints are received and results returned promptly', he concluded his letter, 'the whole object of the work is defeated.'³⁸

³⁶ CMA Native Labour - Miscellaneous (1), 1936. Claude, P. Finger Print Expert, Chamber of Mines, South African Criminal Bureau, Pretoria. Gemmill, W. Esq., General Manager, Transvaal Chamber of Mines. Finger Print Searches of Native Applicants for employment in the Mines Police and on Reduction Works, etc., etc., etc. 29 January 1936.

³⁷ CMA Native Labour - Miscellaneous (1), 1936. Chief Deputy Commissioner for the Commissioner of the South African Police. The General Manager, Gold Producers' Committee, Johannesburg. Comparison of Finger Prints - Natives in Reduction Works, Native Police, etc. 13 March 1936.

³⁸ CMA Native Labour - Miscellaneous (1), 1937. Major, Commanding Officer, South African Criminal Bureau - South African Police. General Manager, Gold Producers' Committee, Johannesburg. Comparison of Finger Prints - Natives in Reduction Works, Native Police. 15 October 1937.

It was precisely this point - that the disciplinary function of fingerprinting depended entirely upon the feasibility of the processes of retrieval - that was lost on the enthusiast for 'Universal Registration.' It was the enthusiasm for grand panoptic solutions - in this case the registration and indexing of the fingerprints of the entire African population - that would completely blind advocates to the constraints of the archive. And this blindness has been repeated with different emphases in every generation since the turn of the century. It sees its most ambitious form yet in two schemes currently under elaboration - the Home Affairs National Identification System and the Taxi Recapitalisation scheme. These repeated efforts to extend the grasp of the state far beyond its analytical reach, account for many of the peculiar features of the modern South African state - invasiveness, pervasiveness and impotence - and the relentless disregard of our citizens.

Qwebubuthu Danisa, one of the old men who helped me frame this study, worked on the mines during the period of both the printed passes and the Dompas--the laminated book that was introduced as a permanent 'book of life' in 1952. After recounting the ease with which he could obtain 'those paper passes', he explained to us:

'Yes, but the problematic thing is the fingers. When you arrive at home here, you burn the lid of a three-legged pot, I put my fingers here so that the upper layer could peel. After that the stamped fingers can't be the same as before. So I changed my fingers. I was working in Pretoria that time - When you want your fingers to change - because you'd be caught by your fingers.'

While Danisa was mistaken about his changed fingers, he had successfully removed the only real hold that fingerprinting held over the migrant workers.

FLESH MADE WORDS: FINGERPRINTING AND THE FANTASY OF DOCUMENTARY
PANOPTICISM, 1900-1930
