

**“Marching Forward”:  
Rethinking African Nationalist Public Culture from the Women’s Pages of the *Bantu World***

**Meghan Healy-Clancy  
Committee on Degrees in History and Literature, Harvard University  
mehealy@fas.harvard.edu**

Scholars have bemoaned the difficulty of reconstructing women’s engagements in African nationalist politics in segregationist South Africa: that is, in politics that invoked a sense of “African” kinship as the basis for collective action to advance “the race.” As Peter Limb summarized in his recent history of the early African National Congress, “One of the great unknowns of South African historiography remains the intersection of women with early ANC politics, largely due to the paucity of sources.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars have noted the presence of women “in actions *around* Congress, often through the medium of bodies established as women’s self-help groups,” as Limb points out.<sup>2</sup> But, as I have argued elsewhere, women’s engagements “*around* Congress” do not seem to have been as peripheral to the making of African nationalist public culture as scholars have generally assumed.<sup>3</sup> My ongoing research demonstrates that in this period, women and men theorized, contested, and enacted nationalism in a broader range of fora than scholars have recognized: in their homes and communities, as well as congresses and conventions. Particularly during the nadir of male-led political organizations in the 1930s, women’s engagements in their homes and communities became critical to the survival and reinvention of nationalist ideas and networks. African nationalism was a gendered project in which women were integral—not in spite, but because of, their expanding claims to familial authority. Nationalism, after all, relied in this period upon a sense of racial *kinship*.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Limb, *The ANC’s Early Years: Nation, Class and Place in South Africa before 1940* (Pretoria: Unisa, 2010), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Limb, *The ANC’s Early Years*, 30. See also André Odendaal, *The Founders: The Origins of the ANC and the Struggle for Democracy in South Africa* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2012), 213-224; Thozama April, “Charlotte Maxeke: A Celebrated and Neglected Figure in History,” in Arianna Lissoni, Jon Soske, Natasha Erlank, Noor Nieftagodien, and Omar Badsha, eds., *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today* (Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2012), 97-110; and Heather Hughes, “Lives and Wives: Understanding African Nationalism in South Africa through a Biographical Approach,” *History Compass* 10, no. 8 (2012): 562-573.

<sup>3</sup> See Meghan Healy-Clancy, “Women and the Problem of Family in Early African Nationalist History and Historiography,” *South African Historical Journal* 64, no. 3 (September 2012): 450-471. I presented earlier versions of this paper as “The New African Family: Women in the Making of an African Nationalist Body Politic,” North Eastern Workshop on Southern Africa, October 2011; and “‘Exceptional’ Women in Early African Nationalist Politics,” Southern African Historical Society Conference, University of KwaZulu-Natal, June 2011.

This argument, which I am developing in a new book project, builds upon earlier moments of scholarly insistence that “women were there” in African nationalist politics before the 1943 formation of the ANC Women’s League.<sup>4</sup> But while previous work has focused on women’s engagements in isolated moments of protest (overwhelmingly anti-pass protest), my research explores how women’s influences on nationalist politics transcended moments of protest to shape popular consciousness and everyday practices of racial belonging. My revisionist argument is possible because of my work with a range of sources: archival, oral, and press sources. Official archives are, of course, partial to depicting protests. Nonetheless, both official and organizational archives challenge simplistic assertions such as Anne McClintock’s claim that “women’s potential militancy was muted and their political agency domesticated by the language of familial service and subordination” prior to 1943.<sup>5</sup> To the contrary, it is striking how women invoked familial idioms to think about race and nation in provocative new ways in public settings. Oral sources, such as interviews collected in the 1970s with activists like Bertha Mkhize and Josie Mpama, further reveal the scope of women’s political engagements in the segregationist period.<sup>6</sup> I am also planning interviews with descendents of influential women and families. Yet most of my research thus far has focused on journalistic writing by and about women. This essay reflects my engagement with the women’s pages of the *Bantu World*, a Johannesburg newspaper with a predominantly African readership across the country. By the 1930s, these writers and readers were known as “New Africans,” proud of their education and sense of national consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

From its 1932 advent, the *Bantu World* had published pieces on ideals and practices of family; this content found a home in a “women’s supplement” called “Marching Forward” in November 1935. This essay is a preliminary thought piece on the value of engaging with these

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<sup>4</sup> See Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1982; 1991); Frene Ginwala, “Women and the African National Congress, 1912-1943,” *Agenda* 8 (1990): 77-93; Julia Wells, *We Now Demand! The History of Women’s Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits UP, 1993); and Nomboniso Gasa, ““Let Them Build More Gaols,”” in Gasa, ed., *Women in South African History* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2007), 129-152.

<sup>5</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 380.

<sup>6</sup> Both became prominent in launching the Federation of South African Women in the 1950s. Mkhize (1889-1981) was a teacher, tailor, and activist in the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union and the African National Congress Women’s League; Mpama (a.k.a. Josie Palmer; 1903-1979) was a Communist Party stalwart. Their interviews have been archived in the Campbell Collections, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

<sup>7</sup> See “A Wayfarer” (likely Selope Thema), “The New African,” *Umteteli wa Bantu* (21 July 1928): 3; Couzens, *The New African*; and Ntongela Masilela, *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 2007).

rich but challenging sources. I argue that the women's pages deserve closer scholarly consideration than they have received in studies of African nationalism, because they emblemize the inscription of "private" family life as a key site in the making of African nationalist public culture in the 1930s.

### **The Bantu World and Its Public**

The *Bantu World* and its women's section emerged in a nadir of male-led African political organizations. After the political vibrancy of the 1920s, during which the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union was one of many movements to cultivate popular solidarity, the 1930s were defined by multiple economic and political crises. Phil Bonner has recently summarized scholarly appraisals of this decade: "If African politics spoke with many voices in the 1920s, at a national level at least, it fell totally mute in the 1930s."<sup>8</sup> This was a time in which ANC President Pixley ka Isaka Seme was famously condemned for "culpable inertia," and his party was one of "impotence."<sup>9</sup> This was a time in which the limited spaces of black men's enfranchisement in South Africa were shrinking: in 1930, white women gained the franchise to dilute the influence of the black male vote in the Cape; in 1936, the non-racial, propertied Cape franchise was abolished altogether.

Yet as Bonner points out, this decade was only "superficially 'dormant.'" Amidst crises at national and provincial levels, he argued, "overwhelmingly, politics in this period was conducted at and confined to the level of the local"; he contended that women played key roles in local struggles, especially in cities.<sup>10</sup> Only eleven percent of African women across South Africa were urban in 1936, with average male to female ratios of about two to one.<sup>11</sup> But, as contemporary anthropologists noticed, women were shaping urban life, in their families as well as in their employment in a flourishing economy that we would today call "informal."<sup>12</sup> While

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Bonner, "South African Society and Culture, 1910-1948," in Robert Ross, Anne Mager, and Bill Nasson, eds., *The Cambridge History of South Africa: Volume 2, 1885-1994* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2011), 254-318: 303.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rive, "The Early Years," in Rive and Tim Couzens, eds., *Seme: The Founder of the ANC* (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1991), 9-35: 12; and Peter Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress, 1912-1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 249.

<sup>10</sup> Bonner, "South African Society and Culture," 305.

<sup>11</sup> See Walker, 41 and 128. By 1951, 21 percent of all African women were urban, and gender ratios were stabilizing.

<sup>12</sup> See Leslie J. Bank, *Home Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South African City* (Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2011), 17; Marijke du Toit, "The General View and Beyond: From Slum-Yard to Township in Ellen Hellman's Photographs of Women and the African Familial in the 1930s," *Gender and History*

scholars have too often focused on “streets and public squares” as sites of politics and “homes as spaces where traditional roles are entrenched and re-enacted without innovation and change,” African homes were spaces of change and contestation in the 1930s.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Limb points to the women’s club movement called the Daughters of Africa as a space through which “activists found ways around the torpor induced by Seme.”<sup>14</sup> As has been the case in other racialized contexts, then, it is clear that women used gendered political spaces to keep popular struggles alive amidst crises in male leadership.<sup>15</sup> My research suggests, moreover, that women’s engagements were not *confined* to local projects.

This nadir of male-led politics also saw the birth of what Les Switzer has termed a “captive African commercial press.”<sup>16</sup> As Switzer has described, the *Bantu World’s* founding heralded white advertisers’ rising interest in African consumers. By 1945, the white-controlled Argus group operated ten African-oriented newspapers under its Bantu Press division, enabling them to sell advertising to a growing urban market. Newspapers acquired by the Bantu Press included pioneering publications such as *Ilanga Lase Natal* (The Natal Sun) and *Imvo Zabantsundu* (Native Opinion), founded by mission-educated African men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the transition to apartheid in 1948, *Inkundla ya Bantu* (The Bantu Forum, 1938-1952) was the only African-owned newspaper with a national audience.<sup>17</sup> But the editorship of the other newspapers remained black, and their content remained multilingual.<sup>18</sup>

These “captive” newspapers also remained sites of rich debates over race and nation—and these debates increasingly occurred in seemingly “non-political” sections. In part, this was

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17, no. 3 (November 2005): 593-626; Monica Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest* (London: Oxford UP, 1936); and Ellen Hellman, *Rooiyard: A Sociological Study of an Urban Slum Yard* (Cape Town: Oxford UP, 1948).

<sup>13</sup> I borrow Bank’s critique of African studies more generally. See Bank, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Limb, 367-368. I discuss this group further in Healy-Clancy, “Women and the Problem of Family,” and below.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Les Switzer, “*Bantu World* and the Origins of a Captive African Commercial Press,” in Switzer, ed., *South Africa’s Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880s-1960s* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997), 189-212.

<sup>17</sup> See Ime Ukpanah, *The Long Road to Freedom: Inkundla ya Bantu (Bantu Forum) and the African Nationalist Movement in South Africa, 1938-1951* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> The nationalist politics of editors like the *Bantu World’s* R.V. Selope Thema were generally moderate and mediating. The *Bantu World* characteristically published most of its content in the mission-school *lingua franca* of English, but it also included translated and original content in Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, Venda, Tsonga, and Afrikaans.

an ironic consequence of the commercial ownership structure: to attract readers and thus advertisements, these newspapers became more mass-oriented publications, including more images and reportage on social life from the 1930s.<sup>19</sup> The *Bantu World's* women's pages reflect this push; letters from readers suggest that it provoked popular interest and attracted advertisers hawking a new range of gendered goods.<sup>20</sup> While newspapers were not a truly mass phenomenon in this period, they did tap into a population that was aware of the power of texts. The African literacy rate increased from 12 to 20 percent between the mid-1930s and mid-1940s: by the mid-1940s, some 24,000 copies of the *Bantu World* sold each week, and staff claimed that at least five people read each issue and that they shared its contents with illiterate neighbors and kin.<sup>21</sup> The *Bantu World* represented a growing and increasingly diverse public forum, but within a racially circumscribed context.

These newspapers are thus challenging sources. Their difficulty is enhanced by writers' common use of pseudonyms, a technique that seemed to appeal less to their desires for anonymity than to their stylistic play with different voices. Brothers Herbert and Rolfes Dhlomo, the most prolific journalists of this era, mastered the art of multiple monikers.<sup>22</sup> One of Rolfes Dhlomo's most prolific *noms de plume* was female: when he came to the *Bantu World* in his early thirties, he took on the role as "Editress" of the women's pages. This publication was therefore predicated on fictions of racial and gendered autonomy: black-run but white-owned, even its women's section was under male control.<sup>23</sup>

The *Bantu World's* women's pages reveal the challenges of unearthing women's "voices" from under layers of representation. These challenges suggest why they have seldom been mined. Scholars have generally not looked deeply to press sources to understand gendered relations.<sup>24</sup> Rather, they have privileged oral and archival sources. This has had

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<sup>19</sup> See Ukpanah, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Lynn M. Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa," in Alys Eve Weinbaum, Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tani E. Barlow, eds., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), 96-119.

<sup>21</sup> See Ukpanah, 6, and Thomas, 97.

<sup>22</sup> See Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> I discuss this further in Healy-Clancy, "Women and the Problem of Family," 463.

<sup>24</sup> Exceptions are Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability"; Thomas, "Love, Sex, and the Modern Girl in 1930s South Africa," in Jennifer Cole and Thomas, eds., *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); M.J. Daymond, Dorothy Driver, Sheila Meintjes, Leloba Molema, Chiedza Musengezi, Margie Orford and Nobantu Rasebotsa, eds., *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (New York: Feminist Press, 2003); Jon Soske, "Navigating Difference: Gender, Miscegenation and Indian Domestic Space in Twentieth-

benefits: gender historians have refined historians' capacity to read official and missionary archives against the grain, and feminist scholars have been at the forefront of methodological innovations in oral history. But this relative neglect of press sources also reflects certain problematic theoretical assumptions of gender history in South Africa, and of the social history tradition out of which it developed in the late 1970s and 1980s. While it did allow for some attention to (male) political leaders, the social history tradition prioritized the stories of "ordinary" people. The world of "elites" that press sources reflected seldom received sustained attention, and very rarely from historians attentive to gender and sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these challenges, careful analysis of press sources can reveal how gendered dynamics shaped the complicated class of writers and readers who were key figures in African nationalist politics in this period. Historians' conception of this "elite" has been inadequate, and often misleading. I echo Peter Limb's caution against the "willy-nilly use—without regard for place, period or person—of terms like 'elite' and *petit bourgeois*," which remains common.<sup>26</sup> In segregationist South Africa, this African "elite" was one that lacked significant economic, political, or cultural power—as the very ownership structure of the press in this period reflects. In a context in which factory workers could command higher incomes than teachers, the class histories of families and individuals were often highly varied. Many black women in this period went from school to at least a spell in domestic service.<sup>27</sup> Some of these schoolgirls, like Lucy Twala, wrote for the *Bantu World*.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, as Karin Barber has

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Century Durban," in Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Michael Person, eds., *Eyes Across the Water* (Pretoria: Unisa, 2010), 197-219.

<sup>25</sup> Phil Bonner has similarly critiqued the "near-exclusive preoccupation with the urban masses" that shaped social history as feminist scholarship emerged in the 1970s and 1980s: see Bonner, "Fragmentation and Cohesion in the ANC," in *One Hundred Years of the ANC*, 1-12: 5.

<sup>26</sup> Limb, 12. For earlier debates about "elites," see Kristin Mann, *Marrying Well: Marriage, Status, and Social Change among the Educated Elite in Colonial Lagos* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 1-7 and 133-134; Alan Cobby, *Class and Consciousness: The Black Petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950* (New York: Greenwood); and Jeremy Seekings, "The Rise and Fall of Weberian Analysis of Class in South Africa between 1949 and the Early 1970s," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 4 (2009): 865-881. As Limb mentions, Helen Bradford and Paul la Hausse have aptly emphasized changes in social and economic status over (short periods of) time. See Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987); La Hausse, *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula and Lymon Maling* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> See Meghan Healy-Clancy, *A World of Their Own: A History of South African Women's Education* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013), 111-112.

<sup>28</sup> See Lucy Twala, "Inanda Seminary News," *Bantu World* (13 June 1936): 12; and W.M.B. Ntlopo, "Mrs. Lucy Mvulelo (née) Twala," *Bantu World* (19 August 1939): 12. Twala's career—which included work as an actress in Herbert Dhlomo's plays and, later, as an activist in domestic and garment workers' unions and in the Federation of South African women—typified the complex position of mission-educated Africans.

pointed out in her discussion of the politics of literacy across Anglophone Africa, few in this “educated elite” were as educated as they would have liked: “Literacy embodied aspiration, and aspiration was founded upon lack—a sense of personal inadequacy associated with an education perceived as incomplete.”<sup>29</sup> Education beyond the primary level remained rare for African men in this period, and rarer still for African women, in South Africa as throughout the continent.<sup>30</sup>

The “elite” status of *Bantu World* writers and readers was defined less by occupation or income than by a shared culture, defined by these formative if incomplete experiences of mission education. They were rooted in what one 1940 editorial termed “The Book World”: a world in which texts and ideas mattered as indicators and engines of racial progress. “Before Africans can take their place in the league of progressive nations, our people must be taught to read,” the editorial contended. “Reading makes a people rediscover themselves and the world round them, impels them not only to progress, but to expression—to live more abundantly.”<sup>31</sup> This text assumed an existing “our people,” who must “be taught to read” (by educated Africans and white allies). Literacy would enable them to “rediscover” an innate identity as “a people” and join “the league of progressive nations.” The act of reading emerged plainly as a public, political act—a route to national consciousness and recognition.

Above all, New Africans saw themselves as part of an *uplifting* class. This self-conception reflected as well as reinforced the politics of proximity accompanying segregationist policies in the urban areas from which most writers and readers came. Although the *Bantu World* writers routinely evinced a sense that they were morally or culturally superior to uneducated neighbors, they were less an exclusive elite than an evangelizing one. The scope of their ambition and limits of their success—in the face of challenges from both a racialized state and those in their communities who rejected their visions of racial progress—emerge acutely in the women’s pages.

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<sup>29</sup> Karin Barber, “Introduction: Hidden Innovators in Africa,” in Barber, ed., *Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2006), 1-24: 5.

<sup>30</sup> While African girls outnumbered boys in primary school in this period, boys predominated in high school. See Healy-Clancy, *A World of Their Own*.

<sup>31</sup> “The Book World,” *Bantu World* (7 December 1940): 4. See Bhekizizwe Peterson, “The *Bantu World* and the World of the Book: Reading, Writing, and Enlightenment,” in Barber, ed., *Africa’s Hidden Histories*, 236-257.

## Writing about “Private” Family Life in the Making of Nationalist Public Culture

The *Bantu World*'s women's pages most richly reveal the gendered dimensions of African nationalist public culture when they discuss “private” family life. I use quotation marks advisedly, as the family life that its writers encouraged reflected their roots as an evangelizing elite. The mission communities from which New African families emerged were premised on *spectacles* of domesticity. Missionary couples modeled monogamous family life—ensconced in homes apart from extended kin, and cultivating inner lives shaped by reading and prayer. Ironically, they modeled this idealized mode of private Christian family life by inviting Africans into their homes, where some of the earliest schools and clinics emerged. Thus missionary families compromised their own privacy in the interest of encouraging Africans to cultivate isolated family lives. Missionary women, often in cooperation with African Christian women, also routinely invaded the homesteads of traditionalist Africans to preach the gospel of God, hygiene, and modern childcare. As Christianity grew deeply rooted over the first half of the twentieth century, Africans selectively contested, took up, and reinvented missionary ideals and practices of home. This was a defensive response to the constraints of racialized land policies and restrictions on urban residence, to be sure, but it was also a creative effort to maintain some of the core relations of precolonial home life. That had been structured around polygynous homesteads, which combined productive and reproductive activities; these were spaces where the modern binary of “public” and “private” did not apply. Patriarchs, at the apex of the domestic hierarchy, had generally mediated between the family and political authorities.<sup>32</sup>

For New Africans, my ongoing research shows, the ideal home was both private and public—broadcasting its status as a model of family life, which would be the basis of a stronger “race.” New African families sought new forms of privacy, particularly against an overreaching state; but they also opened their homes to their communities, embracing new ideals of public service. African families still incorporated extended kin, often defining that term loosely. Many ran businesses, schools, and clinics out of their homes. Importantly in this shift, women claimed new authority over the connections between their “public-private” homes and their communities.

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<sup>32</sup> On the foregoing, see Meghan Healy-Clancy and Jason Hickel, eds., *Ekhaya: The Politics of Home in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, in press), especially the introduction and epilogue.



The New African marital ideal could well be described as “companionate,” but the definition of companionate marriage remained unsettled. This changing terrain of domestic authority shaped a 1933 contribution from Maria C.T. Piliso, “Husbands Should Encourage Their Wives to Take Interest in Life.” She first railed against men who subordinated their wives’ career interests to their domestic responsibilities, befitting their desires to control their wives’ labor in the mode of a traditional homestead head: “As lovers, they were full of generous impulses [and] talked of the equality of the sexes, and a wife’s right to lead as free an existence as her husband, but the marriage ceremony is hardly over before tradition asserts itself, and out comes the old, old catch phrase—sometimes disguised by modern slang—‘A woman’s place is in her home.’” Behind modern marriages predicated on choice, she suggested, lurked patriarchy. She argued that such restrictions were a vestige of tradition that should be cast off, in the march of modern progress: “A good many of husbands in their hearts would agree with me that, in this modern world and judged by modern standards, it is utterly fallacious.” Men persisted in trying to control their wives, she suggested, because they feared that if they do not, “they themselves may very well wake up one day to find that they have been dislodged from their position—a courtesy position, assigned to them by custom, seldom won in fair fight—as head of the household.”<sup>33</sup>

Yet as soon as Piliso suggested the possibility of a new domestic order in which authority would be premised on merit rather than gender, she acknowledged that this order would emerge only through the agency of men, in their current roles as heads of household. “My husband must insist on me continuing my career. Because if I do, I will be so much more sympathetic about his work,” she contended. “Moreover, my being a worker myself, my own mind will be so attuned, my brain so organised to understand and cope with modern problems, that in moments of crisis he shall be able to ask my advice.” In closing, she avowed, “I hope my husband will do everything in his power to help me in the pursuit of my career, broadening of my experience, the development of personality. Whatever other accusations I may be in a position to lure at my husband’s head, I shall not be able to accuse him of being a tyrant, chaining me all day long to our home’s front door. I shall belong to myself, not him, nor to my home, nor again my children, but entirely and absolutely to myself. I shall be free.” While at first glance her claim to freedom was startlingly redolent of liberal individualism, it was imbricated within an assumption that women still must convince their husbands of their right

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<sup>33</sup> Maria C.T. Piliso, “Husbands Should Encourage Their Wives to Take Interest in Life,” *Bantu World* (20 May 1933): 10. I mistakenly attributed this article to R.W. Msimang in “Women and the Problem of Family.”

to work, as men still mediated between women and the world of wage labor. The type of labor ideal for New African families was implied in the accompanying photograph of “Mrs. R.W. Msimang, Orlando district nurse.”<sup>34</sup> Whether these narrative strategies most fully reflected Piliso’s own views or were limited by the vision of the “Editress,” their effect was to underscore the ambiguous process of change in domestic ideals.

The endurance and reinvention of patriarchy within companionate marriage manifested more plainly in contributions from men. In a typical 1937 letter to the editor, one Eccles B. Mathabane warned that youth were entering into marriage too lightly—a common complaint amongst male and female writers. He affirmed that modern marriage should be “a business run by two partners—wife and husband.” But he emphasized women’s contributions to this partnership most heavily: “Less time than before marriage should be spent in amusements and more time devoted to the improvement of her home. She should attend to or supervise household affairs, stitch her hubby’s torn shirts and trousers, mend his socks and then and only then will she find that she has little or no time for gossip and amusements.”<sup>35</sup> As Mathabane’s pedantic tone suggested, New African men could still regard themselves as the ultimate authorities atop a domestic hierarchy. This was so despite the fact that New African women, like their counterparts in traditionalist homesteads, possessed significant authority within their families, particularly around issues of childrearing, and their contributions to family sustenance were acknowledged as essential.

Yet this regime of domestic authority was in flux. New African women increasingly regarded themselves, and were respected by men, as “managers of the house”<sup>36</sup>: experts in domestic matters, who could parlay their expertise into public representation of familial interests. While historically it had been patriarchs who mediated between the family and political authorities, New African women claimed expanding roles as intermediaries between their families, their communities, and the state.<sup>37</sup> They did so through all-female nationalist

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<sup>34</sup> Piliso, “Husbands Should Encourage.” Nursing, the most elite profession open to African women, was commonly depicted as “honourable and for the upliftment of our Bantu race”: for that quote, see A.M. Xaba, “Married Nurses Should Work,” *Bantu World* (3 June 1933): 8.

<sup>35</sup> Eccles B. Mathabane, “Marriage—A Partnership,” *Bantu World* (4 September 1937): 12.

<sup>36</sup> I borrow this term from Afsaneh Najmabadi, who has described a similar process in Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> This was a mode of politics with broad global purchase in the 1920s and 1930s: this local manifestation bears much in common with “maternalism” (the “domestication of politics” or “social housekeeping”), an assumption that women’s domestic authority should shape their engagement in public struggles. For a brief South African discussion, see Susanne M. Klausen, *Race, Maternity, and The Politics of Birth Control in South Africa, 1910-*

organizations predicated on idioms of kinship. These “social welfare” groups paralleled the essentially male homosocial spaces of the ANC and the All African Convention during this period, which were also grounded in ideas of kinship. Natasha Erlank has pointed out that while African politics had historically been rooted in patriarchal relations, the liberal tradition on which early African nationalist politics drew was predicated on a “fraternal contract” between men. While the first tradition subordinated women, the latter had historically excluded them.<sup>38</sup>

The *Bantu World*'s regular coverage of the Daughters of Africa reveals how such activism deployed racial kinship as an organizing strategy. A teacher from rural Natal named Lillian Tshabalala founded the group in 1932, on the model of the African American women's clubs she had encountered in her travels through the United States (Hampton, Chicago, Hartford, Brooklyn) and the Gold Coast (teaching at an African Methodist Episcopal Church girls' school in Kwitta) between 1912 and 1930.<sup>39</sup> As an unsigned origins story of the group narrated:

Siqonde nati ukuba sinyakaze njengezinye izizwe, okungazane ukuhlala zipumule nje... Kuze le ntombi yodumo u Miss C.L. Tshabalala evela pesheya. Wati ufika esipehle ngokuti: “Awu, yini nina bakiti eniyenzayo nenaziwa ngalo kuleli lakiti?”

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1939 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 66-67. Najmabadi's work on Iran and Lisa Pollard's work on Egypt valuably suggest the distinct significance of maternalist strategies for activists outside of the United States and Europe. See Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805-1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). African women in South Africa were acutely aware of the broad appeal of maternalist language, internationally and in their work with South African women of other backgrounds. It certainly enabled them to serve as “racial ambassadors,” to borrow Glenda Gilmore's term describing black women in the Jim Crow South. But a distinct historical process had shaped African women's maternalism, and women were cognizant of that particular history—to an extent that I am not sure whether the global term obscures more than it illuminates. Clearly I am preoccupied with this question and would appreciate suggestions on the histories of maternalist politics in this region or in the world.

<sup>38</sup> Natasha Erlank, “Gender and Masculinity in South African Nationalist Discourse, 1912-1950,” *Feminist Studies* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 653-671. Erlank focuses on how men's patriarchal and fraternal ideals legitimated women's exclusion from male-led politics. But she neglects to explore the political consequences of the space that New African men ceded to New African women in engaging domestic issues in public culture. Precisely because these men saw women's roles as “managers of the household” as a key sign of racial modernity, they had to support women's expanded authority over homes and the community institutions emanating from them.

<sup>39</sup> Tshabalala studied at the Hampton Institute, the New Britain State Normal School, and the Moody Bible Institute between 1912 and 1919; she taught at Kwitta from 1919 through 1922; she returned to teach at Congregationalist churches in Hartford in 1922, and then became the director of religious education at the Greater Nazarene Congregational Church in Brooklyn in 1927. See “Izindatshana Ngezinto Nabantu [Tidbits about People],” *Ilanga Lase Natal* (1 June 1917): 2; “Izindatshana Ngezinto Nabantu,” *Ilanga Lase Natal* (24 October 1919): 2; “General News,” *The Gold Coast Leader* (29 January 1920): 2; “Native African to Teach Here,” *New York Amsterdam News* (12 October 1927): 1.

We aimed to move like other nations, they do not sit and just rest... There was this famous young lady, Miss C.L. Tshabalala, who came from overseas. When she came she said: "Oh, what are you my kin [bakiti] doing over here?"<sup>40</sup>

By the early 1940s, the Daughters of Africa had expanded from its Natal base to Johannesburg, and its activities had extended from community educational initiatives and small enterprises to leadership in consumer boycotts. While its name referenced its members' self-image as heirs to a common cultural tradition, it operated in a sororal register: Tshabalala described her group as "fraternally walking hand in hand" with the male-led All-African Convention; her group was a "sisterhood household of the African race."<sup>41</sup> Tshabalala was a regular contributor to the women's pages, where she broadcast members' achievements in their homes and communities to encourage women around the country to emulate their work. She urged women to "make your race one hundred percent African" by linking their most local projects to national ambitions. In the didactic 1936 "What is a Clubwoman?" she characteristically argued, "The typical clubwoman is a home woman who has found that she cannot isolate her home from her community, government and social [life], and that health conditions also invade its sanctuary, and that in order to protect her brood she must go out from its walls for part of her time and do her best to make government and social order and physical conditions as fine as possible, that they may upbuild and not destroy."<sup>42</sup> By organizing around local issues like gardening cooperatives and savings schemes, the group promoted "communications that are extensive of the home," which would enable women to think broadly about the links between self, nation, and world.<sup>43</sup>

Writing about marriage suggested that romantic partnerships would ideally deepen this gendered public work. For all of their emphasis on love, narratives about marriage also stressed its role in constituting a national and racial community. Solomon J.S. Lehana's 1937

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<sup>40</sup> "Amadodakazi: Isiqalo Sawo [The Daughters: Their Beginning]" *Bantu World* (26 March 1938): 3.

<sup>41</sup> "Address Given by Miss C.L. Tshabalala to 'Daughters of Africa' in Conference at Inanda M.S.," *Bantu World* (22 January 1938): 11; "Daughters of Africa Litany," *Bantu World* (25 May 1940): 9.

<sup>42</sup> C.L. Tshabalala, "What is the Club Woman?" *Bantu World* (4 April 1936): 12.

<sup>43</sup> Tshabalala, "What is the Club Woman?" Tshabalala's prose often moved rapidly between the self and the race: in a 1938 address at the group's convention, reprinted in full in the *Bantu World*, she juxtaposed discussion of women's struggles with racial oppression in the United States and South Africa with recommendations about how women should comport themselves: "Are you prepared? How must you equip yourself for the march? Do like other women. Learn as much as you can about it. Avoid all the foods that will stunt your growth physically, mentally, morally, intellectually and spiritually. If you feed your body on stale food you stunt it. If you feed your mind on cheap, trashy conversation and what not you develop low ideals and standards. If you nurse your eye on degraded people or pictures you have the decayed and vile life." See "Miss C.L. Tshabalala's Address: Other Women," *Bantu World* (15 January 1938): 11.

letter to the “Editress,” entitled “Can Marriage be Successful without Love?” characteristically began, “Actually the question of happy marriage is of supreme importance to a civilised nation, because peace and prosperity of nations depends on happy homes.”<sup>44</sup>

In 1942, journalist and later ANC Youth League member<sup>45</sup> Rahab S. Petje presented the clearest exposition of marriage as a ground of nationalist politics that I have encountered, in her “Segregation and Unsociable Mothers and Fathers.” The piece addressed a theme common in the unmarried Petje’s *oeuvre*: “Why we modern girls find it so difficult to get married.”<sup>46</sup> While other contributors—male and female—often accused young women of being too independent to keep a man, she argued that the problem was not with youth, but that “the parent is the cause of irresponsible daughters.” To explain, she led readers into a complicated domestic space: “Let us now enter the home of an educated Mosotho lady, who has uneducated parents; and let’s imagine she is wooed by a very prominent and outstanding Zulu B.A. They are both educated and therefore have no mind of segregation.” Her exemplary couple were New Africans, who have transcended not only the educational limitations of their parents’ generation but also their elders’ more limited sense of racial identification: “The Zulu B.A., unsuspecting, proposes marriage. The first thing the parents will say is that they do not want the Zulu B.A. to marry their daughter for the simple reason that he is Zulu.” Petje assumed that her audience finds this response maddening: “You could gasp in amazement to find that in this civilised age, there is still that barbarism and backwardness in our parents, and worse still, segregation. They actually have no pride in their daughters and they even have no thought that the Zulu ogre, may in other ways raise them to the standard they could never have reached had she married a Mosotho drunkard.” This prejudice was not only troubling because it limited the young lovers’ expectation to pursue modern marriages of choice, thereby restricting the marriage market for “educated” and “prominent” youth. It also narrowed the scope of African political solidarity: “That is why we hear so much of elopements because we Basuthos are

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<sup>44</sup> Solomon J.S. Lehana, “Can Marriage be Successful without Love?” *Bantu World* (21 August 1937): 12. The answer to the question posed in the title was “no.”

<sup>45</sup> For her ANCYL link, see “Minutes and List of Those Present,” 2 March 1944, File La2.3, Records of the African National Congress, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

<sup>46</sup> See also, for instance, Rahab S. Petje, “Civilisation and Matrimony,” *Bantu World* (7 March 1942): 8. In this piece, she warned “African women who are single like me” that “marriage is a job. It requires brains and stamina for both parties. It does not mean a soft place for the woman, and a fools paradise for a man.” She stressed that young women should particularly take this to heart, as “women are the integrity of home, while men are just big babies that still have to be nursed and petted; not only in the sentimental point of view, but also in the economical point of view, as well as tastes.” She concluded that her “great-great-grandparents,” members of an “uneducated and uncivilised nation,” recognized the gravity of matrimony; she urged “modern youth” to take marriage with similar seriousness, as they forged a new “civilisation.”

afraid of introducing Zulu B.A.'s to our parents, and because Zulu B.A.'s, Xosa B.A.'s, etc. are afraid of introducing Basutho aliens to their much more advanced nation. *How can we build Africa when we regard each other as aliens?*<sup>47</sup> To foster the sense of African kinship foundational to racial advancement, Petje suggested, families must subordinate their other “national” allegiances—often dismissed as “tribalism” in nationalist discourse.

At first glance, it seemed that marriage was but one ground on which New Africans should counter “tribalism,” similar to other spaces where “non-political” connections could cultivate political solidarity. It resonated with headlines like “Tribalism Dying on Playgrounds,” which accompanied an article suggesting that soccer clubs were critical to “bring about unity among the various tribes of the Bantu race.”<sup>48</sup> An editorial had appeared shortly before Petje’s piece, emphasizing the multiple dimensions through which “tribalism” threatened racial progress:

No sane man can deny that tribalism is responsible for divisions, disputes and quarrels in our churches, political organizations, Trade Unions, business associations and sports associations. *It is a cancer that corrodes the vitals of our national life*; it is a brake that clogs the wheels of our progress in any sphere of human activity. Through it, we are unable to pool our resources for the economic emancipation of our race; through it we are unable to win the respect of other people—who know that as long as we remain tribally divided there is no need for them to take any notice of our claim to human rights and privileges.<sup>49</sup>

Critically, this editorial stressed that racial identity was in a state of ongoing political construction. African nationalism emerged clearly as a strategic front against white supremacy. But the piece also assumed that a healthy national body predated the “cancer” of tribalism. It went on to locate national identity both as primordial and forward-looking; it was at once a product of a double-consciousness and an original historical force:

... We can make every African forget his tribal identity and think in terms of race. We can make him have pride in the fact that he belongs to an African race. We can make him realise that to do anything that would be a blot on the good name of the African race was a sin against our great ancestors and against God Himself. We can teach him that hooliganism and lawlessness were things unknown to our forefathers and that, therefore, it is his bounden duty to uphold law and order as his ancestors did in the

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<sup>47</sup> Rahab S. Petje, “Segregation and Unsociable Mothers and Fathers,” *Bantu World* (21 March 1942): 8. My italics. Petje’s discussion contrasts markedly with contemporary negative depictions of romance *across* “racial” lines in the press, as Jon Soske discusses in “Navigating Difference,” 205.

<sup>48</sup> S.G. Senaoane, Sports Organiser of the Johannesburg City Council, quoted in “Tribalism Dying on Playgrounds,” *Bantu World* (29 May 1937): 1.

<sup>49</sup> “The Menace of Tribalism,” *Bantu World* (3 January 1942): 4. My italics.

days gone by. It must be remembered that as a race, and not as tribes, we are being weighed in the scale and civilisation, and it should be our resolute determination that we shall not be found wanting.<sup>50</sup>

In light of this broader struggle to naturalize racial consciousness in the *Bantu World*, the failed courtship that Petje described seems particularly ominous. Girls who fail to marry, Petje suggested, were mostly “fallen girls,” who were “heading for degeneration.” These “intelligent girls who would one day be mothers of Africa,” she warned, instead become “burglars and manchasers.” While “we have many fallen girls, I am sure, who would like to pick themselves up in the world,” she regretted that their “discouraging and backward” parents held them down.<sup>51</sup> This stunting of New African marriage suggested inexorable racial decline. Petje stressed the political costs of this decline—by avoiding interethnic marriages, Africans missed out on potential political allegiances that could enable them to deepen transethnic and national consciousness. But she also suggested that unmarried women would miss out on being “mothers of Africa”—a warning that resonated with concerns about maternal “degeneration” elsewhere in the press.

Concerns about failed motherhood were often rendered in biological and cultural terms, as “Editress” Rolfes Dhlomo’s writings typify. Under the alias “X.Y.Z.” in 1939, for instance, Dhlomo argued, “A woman must be chaste, for by her chastity she insures well for the future of her progeny, and hence for the social and moral uplift and advance of her nation. If a woman fails to do this, then she spells ruination for her people, and hence she’s a murderer and a traitor.” He was warning not only that women’s reproductive health would shape the biological fitness of her children (and thus “her nation”), but also that women’s conduct would shape the cultural strength of her children (and thus “her nation”). He claimed that “a woman who indulges in foul talk” is “slaying her race, and has no business to be alive”; she “is sure to produce an offspring of swearing reprobates and brigands.” Women’s smoking and acting “too modern” should also be “stamped out ruthlessly,” for such a mother would “ruin her race.” He emphasized that women’s “natural responsibility over their offspring and race” gave them an “unalterable influence” in shaping model youth, or in “sowing the seeds of savagery in the poor innocent offspring.”<sup>52</sup> In Petje’s warning about stunted courtship leading to women’s “degeneration,” we see the slippage between political, cultural, and biological constructions of racial kinship characteristic of the women’s pages.

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<sup>50</sup> “The Menace of Tribalism.”

<sup>51</sup> Petje, “Segregation.”

<sup>52</sup> X.Y.Z., “Failure of Responsibility,” *The Bantu World* (14 October 1939): 9.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has highlighted the politicization of kinship in the *Bantu World* and its women's pages. I contend that the women's pages deserve closer analysis as a site where we can see that the meanings of racial belonging were not taken-for-granted, reactionary products of segregation. Rather, these pages suggest how New Africans complexly drew upon political, cultural, and biological conceptions of race to define racial kinship in a difficult era for male-led political groups. During this period, women and men organized in basically homosocial nationalist organizations, predicated on fictive bonds of kinship. Writing about marriage in the *Bantu World* suggested that well-chosen romantic partnerships could deepen this gendered political work. Both writing about the "public" work of organizing and the "private" work of marriage thus naturalized racial solidarity, while also emphasizing that racial consciousness was an ongoing project, in which women played integral roles.