

Lives “on hold”: the *Daily Sun* and the South African identity document

ABSTRACT

The relationship between a personal identity and the state-issued Identity Document (ID) is the focus of this article, which examines stories published in the “Horror Affairs” column of the popular South African tabloid, the *Daily Sun*. These highly emotional stories tell of the despair and desperation felt by individuals at the lack of an ID book, which is blamed on the inefficiency of the state Department of Home Affairs. In order to explicate this relationship I make use of Agamben’s notion of “bare life” and the camp in conjunction with Lacan’s idea of the Symbolic Order to argue that if the Identity Document provides the means by which the individual is made to signify, the lack of an Identity Document threatens to reduce the individual to “bare life”. By publishing the stories of those deprived of the visibility that the ID provides, the *Daily Sun*, I show, directly engages in this exchange, and, in contrast to Home Affairs, bestows its own even stronger gift of identity by the fact of appearance in its pages.

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INTRODUCTION

[T]here is no autonomous space in the political order of the nation state for something like the pure human (Agamben, 2000:20).

Identity and the creation of the self have become a prominent feature of contemporary mediated life and hence a subject of critical attention. While much of the interest in the "participatory turn" has concentrated on the opportunities offered by new media platforms for the creation of identity, it is interesting to examine ways in which old media, like the daily newspaper, have been re-imagined recently to attain the same effect. In particular, the enormously popular South African tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Sun*, can be shown to collaborate with its readers to produce an interactive space. In this collaborative arena, community and individual identities are discursively produced and offered for public validation, a testing ground in which new modes of identification are placed before a public seeking affirmation of its image and status.

Twenty years post-apartheid with its infamous pass laws and identity documents, the question of identity has lost none of its relevance for all who live within South Africa: identity remains for many literally a matter of life and death. Reading the *Daily Sun* reveals how urgent the question of identity is to so many South Africans living on the margins of society. The particular forms of identity I examine here are those which are connected to and built around the technologies of the state in the form of the present South African Identity Document, or ID. That is, I look at the connection between what we would term a personal identity and the formal recognition that the state gives to its citizens.

However, rather than purporting to engage this question directly, the enquiry is symptomatic: that is, it examines this nexus through its mundane manifestations within the stories of the *Daily Sun*'s Horror Affairs column. This is an irregular inclusion in the *Daily Sun*'s pages in which the tabloid sets out for public scrutiny the alleged failings of the state Department of Home Affairs, which issues IDs. The paper recounts for its readers the intense and personal sufferings of those who, at the receiving end of such inefficiency, lack IDs and seek to obtain them. Significantly, it is members of the public who bring their ID stories to the paper's attention: this is in keeping with the whole approach of the tabloid, which, as through its extensive letters page, invites its vast readership to air their concerns. This participatory approach extends also to the gathering of news stories. Readers are encouraged to bring their stories to share with the *Daily Sun*, which customarily identifies with their point of view. This is clearly a successful commercial ploy, but it nonetheless fulfils an urgent public need, especially so in the contemporary South African situation where it is still comparatively new for such voices to be widely heard. In this case, we concentrate on the *Daily Sun*'s presentation of Home Affairs and show how, through such voluntary participation, readers publically demonstrate their distress and thereby hold the Department of Home Affairs to account.

These stories of individual tribulation bring into focus the (dis)junctures between personal and citizen identities and the mediating role that the state-issued ID document plays in this formation.

It is clear that this is a more crucial and urgent matter than its sheer inconvenience, considerable though this is, seems to merit on its own. What emerges, I argue, is a double mediation, in which the ID, as a representation of the citizen as such, is itself re-mediated within the pages of the *Daily Sun*, which, in collaboration with its readers, represents and reworks for its readers the meaning of such an identity.

In doing so, I shall enlist the help of two thinkers, Jaques Lacan and Giorgio Agamben, as each show the issues here in a distinctive light. For Lacan, it is the psychological meaning of identity which stands uppermost; Agamben, by contrast, shows the way in which any modern search for identity can only make sense when understood against the background of global capitalism.

1. "BARE LIFE" AND THE CAMP

First, I make use of Agamben's (2000) notion of "bare life" to argue that the state effectualises its sovereignty by providing identity through its documentation, but also defining what identity means for those who do and don't possess this vital (in both senses of the word) document. If sovereignty is the "limitless right of everybody over everything" (Agamben, 2000:5) then, in Agamben's formulation, the power of the state is constructed upon the underlying reality of "bare life," the life common to all humans whom it protects to the extent they submit to it. In a sense, then, the state provides – to some, at any rate – what are effectually clothes of its own choosing. This "bare life," which he terms elsewhere "sacred life" (Agamben, 1998), is central to Agamben's reflections on the concentration camps, which he terms spaces of "exception." The concentration camp is an exception because it stands outside the law of the state and the protection it affords, and is now subject to raw power which rules it utterly: stripped of every political status, its inhabitants have been "reduced completely to naked life." Here, "power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation" (Agamben, 2000:41).

Interestingly, Agamben extrapolates his analysis of the concentration camp to encompass modern political and economic realities. In his view, far from being a thing of the past, "the camp" has come to define the politics of the contemporary era, an extended state of exception which creates a "stable spatial arrangement inhabited by that naked life that increasingly cannot be inscribed into the order" of the state (Agamben, 2000:43). This in turn "requires that there be increasingly numerous sections of residents deprived of political rights" (Agamben, 2000:133), be it at the level of the individual, the group or even whole areas of the globe.

He has in mind modern global capitalism which thrives at the expense of a large impoverished sector whose members are in effect deprived of recognition and indeed reality in terms of this paradigm. They are effectually forgotten where money is the prime criterion of existential significance. This seems strikingly to apply to present circumstances in South Africa under neo-liberalism. What we find is a massive underclass who not only lack resources, but whose personal status is primarily defined by the logic of capitalism. Hence the importance of the ID: as a sign of citizen identity, the ID becomes an assurance that one's status exceeds that of bare life. In effect, it is a passport between the state of exception and acceptance as a functional unit within a state-

defined reality where consumption and upward mobility provide the real principles for inclusion (Posel, 2010).

Some confirmation comes from the sense that the *Daily Sun* sees it as part of its brief to minister to a constituency whose beliefs, outlook, patterns of life, fears and troubles are not precisely aligned with those of the prosperous "normative" centre. Its former and present front-page slogans, "Forward with the People!" and "Our Paper. Our Lives", respectively, speak to this. I shall argue that the *Daily Sun* quite consciously sees as one of its functions, in the tradition of *Drum* and other such apartheid-era publications, to provide a voice and an identity for this constituency in the new economic circumstances. Its alternative to the picture and information on the ID is to provide its own even stronger gift of identity by the fact of appearance in its pages.

2. IDENTITIES AND DOCUMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

How forms of documentation produce identity is not a new concern for South Africans. Prior to liberation, black South Africans, who were not citizens, were required to carry the *dompas*, an official document which enabled the control of the movement of black people in and out of white-only locales. The *dompas* was essentially a passport that stated where and when the black bearer was allowed to enter restricted areas; to be caught without it was a criminal offence (Breckenridge, 2005a; Rizzo, 2014; Sher, 1985). The current green Identity Document, which is currently held by all South African citizens and permanent residents, is now being slowly replaced by a smartcard that digitally records and stores individual biometrics (Breckenridge, 2005b). These forms of state administration (and hence control) are intimately tied into the production of identity: in the case of the *dompas*, the document was central to the production, surveillance and control of race in the interests of white rule (Posel, 1987; Wells, 1994); the biometric smartcard on the other hand, is described as a state "normalising project" which effectively "[removes]... all other kinds of subject determined identity" (Breckenridge, 2005b:45). Thus although carrying a similar identification document or card is part and parcel of the administration of the modern state globally, in South Africa it is coloured by an ignominious history and weighted as a special-seeming key, a point of admission to social personhood and participation.

This connection between a personal identity, and a state-produced identity signified by a state-issued document, is the subject of a rare theatre review in the *Daily Sun*¹ of a revival of "Sizwe Banzi is dead" (Fugard, 2000). The play, written at the height of apartheid, is a critique of the *dompas*, and the story tells of how the main character, Sizwe Banzi, has difficulty "finding employment because he does not have the right papers" and may have to "go back to his homeland." A different solution arises when, on his way home from a shebeen one night, he comes across the body of a murdered man. A friend tries to persuade him that "if he wanted to survive, he would have to steal and use the murdered man's passbook and change his name." However, "killing" his name, even to "live a normal life," proves impossible for him: it is "just too much for the conservative Sizwe." The review is appropriately titled "Killing one's identity hurts."

¹ "Killing one's identity hurts." *Daily Sun*, 2011, July 5, p. 1.

If it “hurts” to “kill” one’s own identity, and if the loss of one’s personal identity even for the sake of survival can prove impossible, how much more painful is the death of identity at the hands of an impersonal state bureaucracy?

Until recently, the ID was printed as a small, soft-cover booklet with a green cover². Its banal appearance belies its enormous importance, for this little book is a vital document. Without it one cannot register the birth of children, receive a grant, apply for an RDP house, buy a bus ticket or a burial scheme, get a job, go to school, open a bank account, get a passport, get married or be buried. In short, it is needed for every kind of public transaction imaginable.

However, more than its practical necessity in the conduct of everyday business, the ID is primarily a symbol of belonging and of citizenship; of *rights* (Wasserman, 2010). It enables the owner not only to participate in society as a citizen (to vote, for example) but to claim that portion of state services to which he or she is entitled on the basis of this citizen status. For those born during the apartheid years to whom citizenship was forbidden, this citizen identity and the rights it guarantees is charged with particular significance as it signals the legitimacy of the aforementioned claims.

But the ID has a second noteworthy function which derives from the first. In short, it signifies that its owner matters – not only that he or she exists, but is recognisable and recognised as a *person*. This personhood of the holder of the ID is, importantly, a mediated one. It is signified through the assemblage of signifiers the Identity Document presents: the names, dates of birth, finger prints, and photograph, and specifically the identity number attached to these, are signifiers of the “reality” of the person holding it. It stands in place of, or for, the person who is its owner, who is its signified. Together, the person and the ID are a sign of the citizen. Because of its uniqueness, the coherent document says not only that “this is a person” but that this is a *recognisable* person. If any of the identifiers do not cohere – if, for example, the photograph is of another person, or the photograph is correct but the name is wrong – then the whole is called into question; and not just the details of the document but the person to whom it refers *who is no longer signified*. He or she is no longer, indeed, a person, *because he has nothing to identify him*. Identity then is not the property of the individual but of the document that ascribes that identity and makes it real by attesting to the personhood of its bearer. In a significant way, then, post-apartheid identity is entirely mediated.

3. IDS AND THE “DESIRE OF THE OTHER”

Lacan’s ideas concerning the relationship between identity and signification provide a model for understanding the psychological connection between the ID provided by the state and personal identity, and go some way to explain the extreme emotionality that issues surrounding this

² As of 2015, IDs are being issued as smart cards with digitised biometric information. The smart card is only issued to those born in South Africa, and thus is a further division within the idea of a viable South African identity. See Breckenridge, K. (2005). The Biometric State: the promise and peril of digital government in the new South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31(2):267–282.

document can provoke. Lacan (1979) draws on ideas of Saussurean linguistics to construct his model of the human unconscious which he argues is "structured like a language" (Lacan, 1979:20). Language from this perspective is a system of meaning-making centred on the sign, in which a distinction is made between signifier and signified: language is a symbolic system. Lacan stresses the power of the symbolic, by which he referred to the social, cultural and linguistic systems into which we are all born – these precede us and act upon us throughout the course of our lives. It is through language that the child acquires an identity; but this identity is essentially a misrecognition.

How does this happen? In the first stage of identity construction, the human child becomes aware of herself through seeing her reflection. This is the "mirror stage," in which the incomplete child comes to see herself as a whole person, the person she wishes to be. In effect, this image of the physical self replaces a sense of disunity and incoherence and provides a sense of wholeness; but like Narcissus, she sees herself from the outside, as seen in the gaze of the "Other" (Lacan, 1977). The second stage occurs when the child begins to use language to enter society. Because language belongs to society, the child must surrender something of the self in order to make her needs understood. She learns to speak from the position of the Other, the symbolic system that is outside herself. This has the paradoxical effect of strengthening her sense of self, for by entering language the child speaks in terms of "I," "me." Thus the sense of self derives not from some inner reality, but from the outside, from the Other.

While the child might enter language in order to satisfy needs, its acquisition changes the nature of what is desired. Because she enters language and sees herself from the perspective of the Other the consequence is that the mere gratification of need will never suffice. Instead the nature of what is desired changes: what is desired is the "desire" of the other, and hence the Other, i.e., what her culture presents as desirable.

So, one useful idea that Lacan provides in helping us to understand how important the ID can become, for those who suffer its absence, is this notion that "desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan, 1977:235). Since by "Other," Lacan means the entire cultural-linguistic-symbolic system within which the individual lives and thinks, he therefore implies that Desire is not personal so much as imposed upon us by what we believe the Other requires from us. Just as in his "mirror stage" when we are divided between our sense of self and the image in the mirror as if a signified contemplates its signifier, our own sense of signification can seem in the power of what we take to be the determinants of our symbolic culture. Our identity is thus not simply our own but formed from outside, under "the gaze" of the Other. This can mean that when Home Affairs is allowed to stand in the apparent place of this Other it can even decree whether or not we are within the signifier/signified relation. An Identity Document can therefore seem to determine whether or not we can permit ourselves a personal identity, for those for whom this power relation has force. In simple terms, this means that there are occasions when the absence of the Identity Document can in fact shape our whole sense of selfhood, affecting our being at a profound level, since it seems to deprive us of all right to signification in the world.

This prompts the idea that the photograph in the ID book might be considered a manifestation of the Lacanian mirror in the mirror stage, but this time reflecting back to its owner her standing in the symbolic itself. The picture is further amplified by those unquestionable marks of the symbolic, the words and numbers that the state further uses to define her. In this case, these are the state symbols, not her private self-meaning, but they take precedence even in her own mind. This sets up a particular dichotomy on occasions where the relation is called into question by instances where its efficacy appears to fail.

4. THE PEOPLE'S PAPER: "DAILY SUN" VS HOME AFFAIRS

The enormous popularity of the *Daily Sun*, founded post-apartheid in 2002, has to be understood within the context of the relationship the paper establishes with its readers. Its daily circulation of over 5 million (SAARF AMPS, 2014) makes its popularity a justifiable focus of research interest. Integral to its presentational strategy is its championing of the upwardly-mobile working class reader, the "man in the blue overalls" (Wasserman, 2010). Its success is attributed in part to the role it plays in providing this disadvantaged group with new modes of identification as its members create spaces for themselves within the new political and economic post-apartheid dispensation (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010; Wasserman, 2010).

The tabloid sets itself up as a hero that acts on behalf of the people, and to this end it delights in informing readers of its successes in solving the ID problems that readers bring to it. Although fairly rare, successful interventions are news: "SunPower has shone its bright light into the dark corners of Horror Affairs and given a young woman her life back!"³ exclaims the opening paragraph of a typical report. As part of the presentation of itself as hero, the *Daily Sun* recounts how victims apply to it for help and show their faith in its ability to intervene with the Department. Mpho Matela for example says "I am pleading with the *Daily Sun* to help me sort this out as I am traumatised by it."⁴ Another reader directly attributes positive changes in Home Affairs to the *Daily Sun*'s interventions: because of the paper's "bash[ing] reluctant and corrupt ministries,"⁵ things have begun to change and "slowly but surely, Horror Affairs is becoming Home Affairs." Indeed, the entire country is better for the tabloid: while "our country is a mess", it would be "much worse... if we didn't have the People's Paper."

While the paper benefits from this self-generating content, the benefits are reciprocal. Its presentational strategy is to take the readers' stories of suffering at face value and to bring their distress to the foreground. The report is usually accompanied by a photograph of the victim, mostly close up portrait images, in some of which the victim holds up an ID as evidence. Crucially, the reports record what efforts the paper makes on behalf of the reader with the Department and the results of this intervention.

³ "Lorna gets her life back!" *Daily Sun*, 2011, October 5, p. 8.

⁴ "No ID, no job for Mpho." *Daily Sun*, 2011, August 11, p.12.

⁵ Facebook comment. *Daily Sun*, 2011, October 14, p. 39.

This may simply take the form of a telephone call to a Home Affairs spokesperson and a record of his or her response. The spokesperson's response to the *Daily Sun*'s inquiry is often included as it allows readers to gauge the probable success of the intervention. It also enables the reader to assess the degree to which Home Affairs may be at fault. At times a sense of hope is communicated, as when, in Mpho's case, the spokesman "referred the matter to another official"⁶ when contacted by the *Daily Sun*. The response may even take the form of officials making personal visits to the distressed person. In Lorna's case above, the *Daily Sun* describes how the "people's paper took up the matter with the Eastern Cape Home Affairs spokeswoman Sonto Lusu."⁷ The result of the intervention was that the spokeswoman "sent delegates to Lorna's house to sort things out." And now, eight months later, Lorna "has an ID book!" The intervention may be less successful however, as when a spokesperson tells the *Daily Sun* reporter "He was not feeling well and couldn't comment;"⁸ or he or she might not even answer at all, as is most frequently the case.

5. SAMPLE AND METHOD

My research approach is a qualitative one concerned with meaning. To this end I began by collecting together all Horror Affairs articles published in the *Daily Sun* from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011. A total of 61 articles and 11 letters relating to Home Affairs were identified. I then conducted a brief thematic content analysis. The thematic analysis reveals the following themes. Twenty-seven of the articles are concerned with the material consequences of the lack of an ID. In 19 articles the emotional and existential impact of the lack of an ID is highlighted. Waiting is foregrounded in 11 reports; 10 are concerned with the negative experience of Home Affairs service; and 4 articles report success stories. However, none of these themes are exclusive, and several themes can appear in any one article. I also have drawn selectively on two further articles published more recently in 2015, as they so aptly illustrate my argument. The following analysis offers a close reading of the texts which highlights the meanings made by the *Daily Sun* of the victim's experiences of suffering caused by the lack of the ID.

6. ID BLUNDERS: NAMES AND NUMBERS

As one example of problems which may arise, a notable common cause for complaint are the clerical errors such as misspelt names, wrong dates of birth, incorrect photographs or duplicate numbers being given to people who share names. While this may have material consequences for the applicant, the problem goes beyond mere practicalities, as in the case of one young man who declares: "My surname is Mazizi, not Masizi."⁹ The stress caused by the misspelled name "is giving me sleepless nights," he complains. But it is not merely because the mistake "will give me problems because I am going to write matric this year." Rather, the problem is one of "belonging,"

⁶ "No ID, no job for Mpho." *Daily Sun*, 2011, August 11, p. 12.

⁷ "Lorna gets her life back!" *Daily Sun*, 2011, October 5, p. 8.

⁸ "Amanda needs an ID to study." *Daily Sun*, 2011, July 22, p. 9.

⁹ "Home Affairs office gave me HELL!" *Daily Sun*, 2011, January 11, p. 8.

related to customary formulations of identity through kinship: “I am always worried and think that my ancestors will turn against me for using the wrong surname.”

Testimony of the alleged obtuseness and unreasonableness of Home Affairs officials in the face of clerical errors provides the *Daily Sun* with abundant ammunition, particularly in stories of elderly subjects. Maria Makinta, “who says she is 66,” is pictured outside her rural home as she bends over a wood fire stirring a pot of porridge with a wooden spoon. She wears conservative traditional attire and is the image of rural respectability: her head is bound in a doek, or scarf, and she wears a blanket as an apron or extra skirt. The date of birth in her ID is wrong: if true, it would mean that she “had a child when she was only nine years old!”¹⁰ Employing the woman’s own words, *Daily Sun* condemns the reported perverseness of the officials: “Any person with half a brain can tell you this is impossible,” the “angry gogo” snaps. Derisively, the paper dramatises the equally unreasonable instructions given her to rectify the error: “Bring your parents to verify that you are old as you claim to be’ they told her!”

Data capture errors can have serious consequences for the person whose ID details are incorrect, for these errors can cause interminable delays before a correct ID is issued. Athenkosi Mancoba has been waiting since 2006 for an ID with his correct birth date, but Home Affairs “can’t give him one.”¹¹ The bank refuses to give him money invested for his education by his mother, because his birth date on his birth certificate and ID are at odds. Sometimes ID information is duplicated. Ronald Sibanda comes to the *Daily Sun* for help: “I used to read stories like this in the *Daily Sun* and saw how people got helped. So please help me to get an ID,”¹² he is represented as pleading. His story is that he lost his ID and that when he applied for a replacement, Home Affairs simply refused. They “told him he couldn’t have one.” The reason is that he “share[s] his ID numbers and names with someone else.” Thobeka Nayo’s ID is similarly “redundant” because another woman shares a name and ID number with her (she only finds this out when she collects her child’s birth certificate). She cannot open a bank account as “an account existed under the same ID number.” She cannot use her ID to claim her baby’s child grant. The *Daily Sun* reports how it contacts the “other Thobeka,” who says that her children too “are not getting their grant money.” The error has affected the lives of two families.

One young man applies for his ID in 2006 but when he goes to collect it he finds to his amazement that “someone with the same name and surname as him had already fetched it.”¹³ With calm logic he argues that while he understand that it is possible for two people to have the same names he does not understand “how two people can have the same fingerprints and ID numbers.” The distinctiveness of the individual and his ID are elided here – in the same way that the individual fingerprint is naturally unique so (naturally) must the ID book be exclusive. The fact that another

¹⁰ “Gogo ‘gave birth at nine’.” *Daily Sun*, 2011, May 26, p. 6.

¹¹ “No ID, no study! *Daily Sun*, 2011, October 11, p. 11.

¹² “No Id, so there’s no work!” *Daily Sun*, 2011, August 18, p. 14.

¹³ “ID puzzle puts Themba’s life on hold.” *Daily Sun*, 2011, April 7, p. 10.

person can claim his ID is therefore “very strange.” Six years have passed and the problem is not resolved. He is now anxious that “the person using his ID might get him into real trouble one day.”

7. WAITING: LIVES “ON HOLD”

The length of time that it takes Home Affairs to issue an ID is a serious cause of complaint. These “waits” are measured in years, not weeks or months, and unsurprisingly the burden of (im)patience becomes unendurable. In “No ID after 10 long years”¹⁴ Nthathi Phakwa complains that “Horror Affairs in Market Street just keep telling me a story... come tomorrow.” Amazingly, it is now “almost 10 years later and she is still trying” to get her ID. She cannot get grants for her children, and “she’s worried she might be a petrol attendant for the rest of her life.” Sarcastically, *Daily Sun* castigates Home Affairs: “The government always encourages young people to study... That’s the way an educated society develops. But Horror Affairs seems to be against the idea!”

In “Four years and still waiting”,¹⁵ the report compares the young woman who is the subject of the article to her classmates: unlike her fellow pupils, who “All applied and were issued with their IDs,” Portia was “given the runaround by the department.” Over the years she has re-applied four times “without success.” This “nightmare” is compounded by the fact that her six year old son is also undocumented and “has no birth certificate.” The consequence is that “the boy does not get his child support grant.” The sense of unjustified deprivation adds a further burden. As the *Daily Sun* remarks, for Portia “the future is uncertain.”

The long waits for IDs are thus a key reason why readers approach the *Daily Sun* for help. Temba, the young man whose ID was falsely collected by another, explains that when this fraud was discovered the “people at Home Affairs.... told him to be patient”¹⁶ while they investigated. Angrily, Temba exclaims “they have been investigating... since 2006. A person cannot be patient for so long.” This excruciating hiatus is contrasted with the kinds of things that he ought to be doing as a young man: “I am supposed to be studying or working by now,” he explains. In the meantime, Themba tells the readers, “[M]y life has been put on hold.” “I need help,” he ends, somberly.

8. EXISTENTIAL MATTERS

Themba’s story is similar to that of other young people who are made to wait. The constructions of their stories are designed to emphasise the predicament of young lives left unfulfilled because of bureaucratic incompetence. The story headlined “I want my life back”¹⁷ opens with an ironic rhetorical question that presents Home Affairs as callous and capricious: “He is not a happy man – and why should he be when Home Affairs has him at their mercy?” The report explains how the victim of this caprice, Ricardo Sithole (33), has been “in and out” of Home Affairs “more than six

¹⁴ “No ID after 10 long years!” *Daily Sun*, 2011, March 17, p. 11.

¹⁵ “Four years and still waiting...” *Daily Sun*, 2011, January 12, p. 8.

¹⁶ “ID puzzle puts Themba’s life on hold.” *Daily Sun*, 2011, April 7, p. 10.

¹⁷ “I want my life back.” *Daily Sun*, 2011, January 27, p. 8.

times.” He has persevered thus far “trying to get an ID so that he can get a life.” Has he, despite this effort, “been at all successful?” dryly asks the report. “No,” is the blunt retort. Ricardo goes back to his natal town to apply, thinking it might be easier to succeed there, “but he was wrong. It was even worse!” the report exclaims. He cannot produce his dead mother or his long-absent father. Now, he tells the readers, “I can’t get any work, I can’t have a bank account or open a clothing account.” Angrily he continues: “In fact I can’t do anything.” The seriousness of his existential quandary is emphasised by contrast with the remote and frivolous attitude displayed by Home Affairs: his “life is being wasted” while “Home Affairs plays games.” Like Mmathabo Motsoeneng who can’t get married because she is told by Home Affairs that she has “two IDs,” he wants “to live a normal life like any other person in South Africa.”¹⁸

The anger, frustration and sense of entrapment communicated in this story stands in stark contrast to the official rejoinder. The Home Affairs spokesperson contacted by the *Daily Sun* is represented as responding with the formal and distancing language of bureaucracy. He “advised” Ricardo that “he should submit an application for a late registration of birth.” Then, together with this document, he is instructed to “produce a person with a South African identity document.” The role of this person is to “confirm the status of the history documents.” A further list of necessary documentation from other State institutions follows: “his mother’s death certificate, and proof of birth from hospital records, as well as school records.”

The infuriation and despondency resulting from having one’s life “on hold” while Home Affairs “plays games” are not the worst consequences of departmental malfunction. What if “They say I don’t exist”¹⁹ at all? The *Daily Sun*, referring to the close-up three-quarter profile photograph of a young man above the headline, describes how “This 23-year old guy looks in the mirror every day and he knows that he’s alive and well.” In contrast to this evidence (and that of our own eyes as we look into his serious face) “Horror Affairs insist that this is not true.” In contradiction to the evidence before us, they “say Thabo Tshabalala (23) was never born and therefore doesn’t exist!” His record of birth was destroyed “when the Chiawelo Clinic in Soweto burnt to the ground.” Thabo too is told to “produce” a person with a South African ID who can attest his bona fides.

Elderly people without IDs are particularly disadvantaged as they may have no documentation at all (some young people might also lack birth certificates, but they may have clinic and school records which can be useful). Augustine Moeketsi for example “is 69 years old but has never had an ID!”²⁰ This larger headline is anchored by the close-up portrait of Augustine’s face which depicts her wearing the “doek” of a respectable middle-aged township woman. She looks away from the viewer to her left, not making eye-contact. Her eyes are anxious and watery, and her mouth is pursed in an act of speaking that is also a grimace of worry. The feeling of the portrait is one of anxiety and concern which acts to confirm the truth of her story. Raised in rural Orange Free State, the lack of a birth certificate means that she “doesn’t even know when she was

¹⁸ “I want to be happy! Two IDs – and a third.” *Daily Sun*, 2011, June 3, p. 10.

¹⁹ “They say I don’t exist.” *Daily Sun*, 2011, January 27, p. 8.

²⁰ “I’M SO HELPLESS WITHOUT AN ID!” *Daily Sun*, 2011, January 27, p. 8.

born," and the best estimation of her age comes from her memory of moving to Johannesburg in 1957 as a teenager. Her story is that Home Affairs officials express disbelief when she visits the Department and instead of helping "just ask me why I don't have an ID at my age." The report notes that, as she tells her story, Augustine "cried" over the fact that, as a consequence of her own undocumented life, her "four sons are suffering because they don't have IDs." What is particularly painful is the anxiety that she might die before she can help them get their own IDs. "I want to know they will have a bright future after I die!" she exclaims. Her life and the lives of her children are thus inextricably entangled, the result of a failure of bureaucracy whose reach goes beyond the single life to ensnare those who have the misfortune to be related to her.

9. A STRANGER IN MY OWN LAND

A sense of belonging to a wider community is part of the identity created by the ID: a coherence and alignment with others who are "like us." Thus when Kgomotso Mokgothu ends her story with the words "I am a foreigner in my own land",²¹ she is referring to more than simply not being able to get her bank to recognise her new ID number. The lack of an ID being equated with a feeling of being excluded – "foreign" – is a recurrent theme. For example, when Andrew Muamba tells the *Daily Sun*: "All my friends have IDs and they are criticising me, saying that I am from another country"²² he is not merely speaking about fear of being thought an foreigner, though this teasing has its serious side (national belonging is literally a matter of life and death, as the recent xenophobic attacks attest). Andrew's complaint is also about not truly belonging to, not being an equal member within, his group of friends: he is *not like them* and "that really hurts me," he says. The sense of being singled out for especial misfortune is a prevalent theme – like Portia, the young woman in "Four years and still waiting"²³ whose classmates were all issued with IDs unproblematically, while years later she is still waiting for hers to arrive. Set apart from their more fortunate peers, these young people are represented as being unjustly singled out and excluded from a "normal" life.

Not belonging has material consequences too. Sicelo Nayo needs "treatment for a mental problem."²⁴ But because his "ID says he's foreign," he "can't get treatment." In addition, because of Home Affairs' "mistake," he "won't be able to get a disability grant." He remains in limbo, an unrecognisable person, for his ID "says he is not a South African citizen even though he is not a foreigner." Neither truly belonging nor not-belonging, he is cared for by his sister. The photo shows the siblings sitting on a carpet or bedspread. He reclines on one arm and looks down with a closed or sad expression, while the sister looks directly at the camera and holds up for the reader's gaze the brother's ID book.

²¹ "Two IDs are a problem!" *Daily Sun*, 2011, April 28, p. 13.

²² "ID puts brakes on Andrew's life." *Daily Sun*, 2011, February 25, p. 15.

²³ "Four years and still waiting..." *Daily Sun*, 2011, January 12, p. 8.

²⁴ "His ID says he's foreign." *Daily Sun*, 2011, March 30, p. 10.

10. REDUCED TO BARE LIFE: “AS GOOD AS DEAD WITHOUT AN ID”²⁵

“Living without an ID feels like I am dead,”²⁶ says Reuben Mathebula, whose ID cannot be issued because he is told that “officials are busy investigating a duplicate case” – since 1999 (i.e., the investigation at time of publication was in its twelfth year)! This death-in-life is echoed by a young woman who, unable to apply to university, describes her agony as being inhuman, removed from life: “I feel like I’m not a human being.”²⁷ The excruciating – and unfinished – wait of “3000 days”²⁸ has made Emmanuel Takalane deeply depressed. He has “given up on life” and helplessly “depends on his parents to support him.”

It is not surprising that we find amongst these tales of living death ideas of suicide. Nkosinathi Dladla for example has applied for an ID since 1997. Despite receiving letters saying it will arrive, it never has and “Horror Affairs has done nothing about it.”²⁹ Because of the interminable frustration “Sometimes I feel like committing suicide,” he is reported to say. Nlosinathi resiliently “keep[s] on hoping that [his problem will be sorted out,” and his suicide wish might be taken as a figure of speech. However other reports, such as “Lorna has lost all hope!”³⁰ represent the victims of Home Affairs as probable suicide risks. The story begins: “She has no life because she has no identity.” Here the report signals how the ID is not just a formal, bureaucratic necessity but *is identity itself*: her problem is not simply that she has no ID but that “she has no identity” *at all*. Turned away from schools and jobs, Lorna now “stays at home.” She no longer thinks of herself as “real”: she “can only dream of life as a real person.”

It is logical then that that she feels “useless.” In fact she feels “so useless” that she “sadly” tells the *Daily Sun* reporter: “it might be better to kill myself than to stay this way.” The story then switches to her mother, Mzwentombi Faniso, who recounts how she “found a suicide note that Lorna wrote a few weeks ago.” Fearing for her daughter’s life, and unable to gauge “if she listened to [her] advice,” Mzwentombi now has become her grown child’s caretaker, and stays “at home most of the time” to look after her. In the photograph attached to the story the two women stand in a stark and open field before what appears to be a fenced RDP house, presumably in the Vonqo Village named in the article. The story has a happy outcome: in October the *Daily Sun* reports the delivery of Lorna’s ID after officials visit her home in response to the paper’s enquiry³¹.

Rachel Mudau is similarly suicidal – in fact, the first line of the report tells us that “[t]houghts of suicide constantly linger in this young woman’s mind...”³² The torture of a seven year’s wait means

²⁵ “I’m as good as dead without an ID!” *Daily Sun*, 2015, March 13, p. 1.

²⁶ “Spelling error in his ID makes his life a nightmare!” *Daily Sun*, 2011, June 17, p. 12.

²⁷ “Amanda needs an ID to study.” *Daily Sun*, 2011, July 22, p. 9.

²⁸ “I’ve given up on life” *Daily Sun*, 2011, May 20, p. 11.

²⁹ “He can’t take it any more!” *Daily Sun*, 2011, August 11, p. 12.

³⁰ “LORNA HAS LOST ALL HOPE!” *Daily Sun*, 2011, February 11, p. 2.

³¹ “Lorna gets her life back!” *Daily Sun*, 2011, October 5, p. 8.

³² “She’s lost all hope.” *Daily Sun*, 2011, May 25, p. 12.

that "at night she can hardly sleep." Instead, "all she can think of is taking a rope and going to the nearest bushes to end it all." The seriousness of her agony is reiterated: she is described as "constantly in pain" and we are told that "tears run down her sad face." She is depicted as feeling trapped: that the "only solution" to her unremitting predicament is "to end her life!" Once more she restates her anguish: "My whole world has come to an end and I have nothing more to live for." The second part of the story outlines the reason for her misery: in 2003 an investigation by SASSA³³ revealed that she "shares her ID book with a stranger" who has the same name and number: "the only thing that separated us was the ID photos." This duplication of identity resulted in the loss of her son's child support grant. Nor do her troubles end there: "without the green book" she cannot even get a decent job to support her poor family – her father is dead and her mother terminally ill. Her appeal to the *Daily Sun* to help her is a last resort "before I do something stupid."

That the ID is a signifier of something more than the material advantages it affords, that it is imbued with a powerful existential significance, is attested to by the story of Stephen Makhanya³⁴. The article, emphasised by a pale yellow background and a red border, stands out from the rest of the page. Stephen, one of those living on the very margins of society, is now dead: the story is told from the perspective of Stephen's neighbour, Thulisile Hlatshwayo, who had helped Stephen when he "was ill and hungry." She would "give him food and take him to the clinic when he was sick." He eventually dies, "a horrible death when rats attacked him."

Nevertheless, Stephen's concern about his ID, which he had left with his kind neighbour "for safekeeping," extends beyond the grave, as we learn from the title: "Dead Stephen wants his ID." She tells the *Daily Sun* that she has been haunted by Stephen's ghost, who comes to her home "as an angry person," "[S]hout[ing] and crying" he "bangs on the door," or sits next to her bed, asking "for his green book to take it to his grave." She, however, doesn't have it, for it was taken by his family, "whom I never saw when he was suffering." Copies don't suffice: "I made copies of it, but when I tell him this he gets angry and doesn't want to hear." Her life has become a "living hell," and she appeals for advice, "begging for help to handle the ghost of the man she once shared bread with."

The fact that Stephen entrusts his ID to the only person who recognised him as a person when alive is not insignificant. This story – however farfetched and melodramatic to Western ears – has its place within a broader context in which IDs stand proxy for the identity of the individual. Stephen returns for his ID, not because it can serve any material purpose, but because his death without it lacks significance: in his grave, it can attest that this forgotten person is indeed Stephen Makhanya! Both this story and its participants implicitly recognise that the identity and that which testifies to it are all but one: signifier and signified are bound together.

³³ South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) is the state agency responsible for the disbursement of the child support grant.

³⁴ "Dead Stephen wants his ID!" *Daily Sun*, 2015, July 8, p. 5.

11. THE SECRET OF HEAVEN: A LIFE WITHOUT ID

The identity-producing effects of the ID and the centrality of this identity to the lives of those who struggle to obtain it becomes visible when someone negates its significance through prioritising other forms of identification. In “I don’t want any evil ID,”³⁵ the *Daily Sun* tells readers about an elderly man named Solomon who refuses to have any form of documentation. The article begins by setting up the key conundrum of contemporary identity as presented in the findings so far. While he might be able to tell us his name – “His name is Solomon,” opens the first sentence – the rejoinder, “but he can’t prove it...” indicates the potential for his claim to be nullified. His claim is not substantiated by an ID and is therefore not trustworthy. His assertions about himself, the indicators of his identity and personhood, are not attestable: he “says” he is eighty four, “but he cannot prove that either!” The material consequences of his refusal to have an ID are spelled out: he has “never voted, doesn’t get a government pension and can’t apply for an RDP house.” These consequences derive from being undetectable by the state administration: “according to records, Solomon is an invisible man.” In fact, more than simply being invisible to the scrutiny of the state, he “doesn’t exist” at all.

This non-existence however does not trouble him, and Solomon explains his seemingly illogical refusal. He once had an old *dompas* – but he burnt that many years ago. Readers are left to infer from what they know of apartheid history and the suffering that the *dompas* system caused in order to make sense of his next statement: “I don’t want my name on any records. These are evil things!” His experiences have taught him that documents can be destructive – and indeed for him they are necessarily harmful, or “evil.” His rejoinder is that IDs do not provide answers to the question of existence: “Have the people with IDs stopped suffering?” he asks rhetorically.

The rest of the article sets up for the reader a contrast between the benefits of the identity-producing effects of the administrative machinery and Solomon’s own statements about his identity which is structured around a personal relationship with God. Unwilling to accede to the persuasions of officials who “have tried to convince him”, he “won’t listen,” much to the distress of his 83-year old wife, who is described as “not convinced.” Instead, he tells us that “I trust my red Sesotho bible and nothing else.” In place of the state pension he forfeits through this stubbornness, he repairs shoes and this income “is enough.” If he lacks and is “out of money”, he interprets this as a sign that God is “telling me to be patient.” Indeed, when presented with a list of the benefits that he sacrifices, he replies that “I need none of these things.” In this way he represents himself as free of care and “lives a stress-free life.”

His radical assertion of independence is projected up until his death. When confronted by the complaint that his family “won’t be able to get a death certificate,” he declares that “I will be buried like Moses... in the Lord’s care.” Reassured by the protection and comfort of this divine relationship, he confidently asserts the absurdity of the modern document as a necessity for personhood: “Why do I need a piece of paper?” he asks.

³⁵ “I don’t want any evil ID” *Daily Sun*, 2011, September 7, p. 3.

In the photograph accompanying the story, Solomon and his wife Matheresa are pictured standing in the living room of their home. He is seated at left, facing towards the right of the picture, with his right side in profile. He wears a blue tracksuit over a white and blue T-shirt and on his head is a white, knitted, close-fitting cap. He is caught in the act of speaking earnestly, and his right hand gestures to emphasise some point. With his left hand he holds his red Sesotho bible in his lap. Matheresa stands to the right of the image facing the viewer whom she looks at with a solemn expression. She is respectably dressed in a long sleeved white gown and her head is bound by a brown and orange patterned scarf. With both hands she holds her ID book up at chest height for the reader to see. Behind the couple is a partial view of the contents of the sitting room. It has a zinc roof resting on black beams and a long narrow table holds a bowl of orange flowers. On the white wall behind this table hang two pictures. The one behind Solomon depicts a pride of lions that stands peaceably together with an elephant before a rocky mountainous landscape. The other, of which we can see just a small fraction, shows what appears to be a fantasy image of a unicorn.

Pictured within their neat and comfortable home, the dignified elderly couple pronounce their affiliations through their self-presentation, each holding for the viewer's notice their signifiers of identification: Matheresa with her ID and Solomon with his bible. The signified in Matheresa's case is that of the citizen asserting her (public) relationship with the state and claiming due rights. In Solomon's case the signified is that of an identity born from the mystic and individual (private) relationship with a divine other.

This simple story of a lifelong struggle to assert an identity that is personally meaningful lays bare the *conunDrum* at the heart of the identity which has been the subject of this research. That it should even be a story is an indication of the symbolic importance of the ID. Solomon's desire is to make a distinction between "his" identity and the identity provided by the state: for him they are incommensurate. The "evil" of the state-issued document derives from its power to ascribe an unwanted identity which can be used against the person whose other forms of identification it eviscerates and nullifies: the possibility for it to reduce him to "bare life." But this repudiation creates a disruption and by excising himself from the norm his actions are deemed remarkable, if not mad.

They are certainly newsworthy. One reader writes in a few days later to comment on the report. "I was truly impressed by his faith,"³⁶ he remarks, and now "Uncle Solomon is my new role model." Solomon's example has awakened a sense that other forms of identity are possible. Removed from care about worldly matters, "things like bank accounts, RDP houses and pension grants," Solomon has been "given the secret of heaven."

12. CONCLUSION

Identity matters, as we see. For some, it is the heart of the *conunDrum* of belonging in post apartheid South Africa: in this instance, identity and belonging are bound together in the form of

³⁶ "Solomon is a role model." *Daily Sun*, 2011, September 12, p. 31.

a sign, the Identity Document. The matter of identity is not new in a country that has specialised over decades in the creation of multifarious identities, each with its place in an ever-shifting scale of values and access to resources; and not just in relation to race alone, but determining who belongs and who does not, cannot; creating citizens and subjects (to borrow a phrase from Mamdani (1996)); creating who matters. That identity is made matter, given physical form, in the ID's formal representation of the person. This opens up possibilities of thinking about identity as a relationship between State and individual that goes beyond the judicial person to the heart of personhood.

People without IDs represent themselves as feeling set apart from their peer groups and indeed singled out by misfortune, as the victims of a seemingly unpredictable and irresponsible State. Acquisition of a modern consumer identity is posed as a significant attainment by those who tell their stories here: the repeated appeal to the injustice of not being able to open banking and clothing accounts or pursue higher education and work opportunities reflects a desire to participate in a modern and consumer identity which the lack of the ID denies. Those on the margins start off with many obstacles, and the lack of an ID and the struggle to attain the visibility – or the possibility of visibility – that is the prize of its possession is one burden too many in a life already characterised by intense struggle for work and other resources. Living without an ID, the spectre of the ideal life – a life un-lived – haunts the imagination of these people.

Whether receiving an ID would enable them to get the jobs that the lack of an ID has heretofore denied them, is beside the point: what matters are the possibilities of inclusion and redemption it promises. What Lacan's model helps to bring to the foreground is how the ID not only makes the individual visible (and therefore valuable) to the state, but how this visibility is bound up with the individual's self-value and sense of identity, of personhood. What hurts is the State's indifference to suffering at the obliteration of the person whose corporeal presence does not signify personhood, but may only serve as an object of suspicion because it is outside of the signifier/ signified relationship, the only reality recognised by the State bureaucracy.

The constructed nature of this relationship is made obvious by the rare case – such as that of Solomon above – in which the ID is rejected as a source of identity. By representing the trauma that the lack of the ID causes to its unrequited recipients the *Daily Sun* stands in the place of the indifferent State and acknowledges the personhood of the sufferer: the articles attest to their individual afflictions and thereby confirm their individuality. By seeing their representations in the *Daily Sun* readers see that they matter and that their desire for an ID is, symbolically at least, requited.

The spectre of Agamben's (2000) bare life is ostensibly laid to rest; for these lives, the transition between "the camp" and society is enabled by the acknowledgment given to them by the tabloid. The *Daily Sun* plays a double role here: on the one hand, by recognising the vicissitudes of township readers, it testifies the experiences of those who seek validation through public participation in its pages and authenticates their identities as such. In this way the life of the township, outside of and operating in parallel to, mainstream society, is given its own legitimacy.

On the other hand, it champions those who seek inclusion in urban-led society but who lack the IDs which it demands as signifiers of belonging.

Through such alternative stories as that of Solomon, and its insistence on its material creation by a bureaucratic administration, the *Daily Sun* seems aware that the identity offered by the state is illusory (as Lacan posits of such Other-derived identities generally). Nonetheless, it highlights sympathetically the plight of those who are caught between spaces – between the space of exception and that of the wider society.

The two theorists who have informed this article can be reconciled for the purpose of this analysis. For Agamben, the modern capitalist version of culture creates its own subculture of the invisible, those to whom identity is effectively denied. For Lacan, it is the Other of culture which offers an illusory identity to the subject, who has no choice but to accept or to forego discourse. Between them, they demonstrate how it is possible for something to be at once illusory and yet compelling, moulding the actions and outcomes of our lives.

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