PICTURING THE ROAD: AUTOMOBILITY IN SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN POSTCARDS

Jeanne van Eeden

Department of Visual Arts

University of Pretoria

ABSTRACT

This article considers two cultural products that appeared almost simultaneously at the end of the nineteenth century in South Africa – the motor car and the picture postcard – in terms of their joint avowal of technological progress and modernity. Both postcards and the motor car promoted new modes of communication and sociality and became effective vehicles of mythic discourse. In order to explore this notion, this article takes as point of departure a purposive sample of nine South African postcards between about the 1920s and the 1940s wherein the roadscape in the primary topic. It is shown that from the earliest years, cars were associated with leisure and pleasure in South Africa and were consequently channels through which propositions about entitlement, conspicuous leisure, class, nationhood, gender roles, capitalism, technology, modernity, tourism, and mobility were expressed. In the discussion of the postcards, attention is given to the trope of the empty land, the romance of the open road, cars as symbols of freedom, and the lure of mobility, both social and geographical. The article concludes that the myths of mobility and freedom were embodied by white consumers and that black people's experience of automobility was severely constrained by the political realities of South Africa.

KEYWORDS

Automobility; car culture; postcards; tourism; South Africa; leisure

INTRODUCTION

Motorcars and postcards share a similar history in terms of reflecting technological progress and mass production at the end of the nineteenth century; both have accordingly come to signify forms of social modernity. Motorcars and postcards afforded the latest modes of communication and mobility and enabled ways of visualising and interacting with the world and other people in a new manner. So, for example, Mike Featherstone (2004: 2) reasons that cars made possible news forms of sociality and irrevocably severed home from workplace – but they also created the potential for novel forms of leisure. Moreover, both cultural products swiftly moved beyond use value to assume symbolic and metaphoric uses and meanings that embedded them in complex circuits of representation, such as automobility. Automobility, as defined by Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2000) comprises 'humans, machines, roads and other spaces, representations, regulatory institutions and a host of related businesses and infrastructural features' (Edensor 2004: 102).

This article examines a number of South African postcards wherein automobility and the road leisurescape take on visual and ideological prominence. The article considers a purposive sample of

photographs/postcards from around the 1920s to 1940s published by the South African Railways Publicity and Travel Department (SARPTD) that depict features of automobility. By 1921, the SARPTD had produced 20,000 black and white topographical photographs that were used in promotional publications, posters and brochures (Foster 2008: 211-212) and frequently as postcards. Corporations such as the SARPTD, which marketed South Africa aggressively as a tourism destination, had vested interests in propagating specific perceptions of automobility and modernity. In contrast with other contemporary tourism postcards that focused on the landscape as a site into which to escape, automobility postcards foreground the means by which to effect this escape. Given the contentious issue of ownership of land in South Africa and access to basic things such as transport, it is not surprising that roads and cars came to convey mythic messages about things such as entitlement, conspicuous leisure, class, nationhood, masculinity, capitalism, technology, modernity, tourism, and mobility.

The research for this article derived from a sample of about 900 South African topographical postcards collected during 2010 and 2011 in Pretoria, Johannesburg, the Western Cape and London by means of what Steven Dubin (1987: 129) calls 'residual methodology,' which looks at objects that have been discarded and surface at auctions, street markets, antique shops and specialist collectors. This means that only a portion of the entire population, whose size is not known, can be used. Although postcards have hitherto been considered as transient cultural products or valueless rubbish that 'lie on the margins of systems of value,' as residual culture they can signify a great deal semiotically (Culler 1985: 4). From this collection, the following themes were identified: leisure activities; beach scenes; cities, modernity and technology; modes of transport and automobility; industry; monuments and historic buildings; flora and fauna; indigenous cultures; and landscapes. Thereafter, a purposive horizontal sample of about 40 photographs and postcards dating from roughly the 1920s to the 1940s that depict aspects of automobility were selected. The sample was further delimited to nine images published by the SARPTD. Although the sample size is small, authors such as Annette Pritchard and Nigel Morgan (2003: 120) have pointed out that even a relatively small representative sample can contribute to a better understanding of a topic.

Because the study of postcards is still relatively new, there are divergent opinions regarding the best way to study them. So, for example, some scholars hold that the production and reception of postcards is just as important as an analysis of their visual imagery (Prochaska 2001; Albers & James 1988: 138). The majority of studies seem to focus on the visual communication aspect of postcards and generally combine quantitative with qualitative analysis (e.g., Pritchard & Morgan 2003; Markwick 2001; Marsh 1987; Dubin 1987). Quantitative content analysis is useful for determining the frequency of images (e.g., how many or what kinds of cars are shown) whereas semiotic analysis can be used to expose coded ideological meanings (e.g., what or who is absent in the representation) (Albers & James 1988: 145-149; Marsh 1985: 266-267). Content analysis is mainly concerned with revealing the manifest level of meaning whereas semiotic analysis focuses on the latent codes that are used to structure meaning; it is here that metaphorical intentions come to the fore (Albers & James 1988: 141-142), as suggested in this article.

The article starts with a brief overview of postcards before considering some of the issues associated with car culture. Thereafter, the selected examples are explored in order to establish their mythic content.

POSTCARDS AS VISUAL CULTURE

Postcards are multimodal texts that are accessible, portable, cheap, and widely circulating products of everyday culture. The first postcards were introduced by the Austrian post office official, Dr. Emanuel Hermann in 1869 and for almost twenty years, they existed as plain correspondence cards, with no pictures. They were immediately embraced by the public as a cheap, easily available and efficient form of communication. The picture postcard was born in 1889 with lithographic images, engravings and line drawings produced for the Paris Exhibition. Cheaper camera technology made it possible to mass-produce photo-postcards by the end of the nineteenth century. People's messages were generally written on the same side as the picture as the reverse was reserved for the address. With the introduction of the divided back format in 1902, the picture side (recto) became more important than the verso on which the message was written (Schor 1992: 212). The earliest postcards in South Africa were Transvaal Republican stationery cards from 1896, with pictures on the verso, and by the beginning of the twentieth century Sallo Epstein and Company in Johannesburg was the largest postcard publisher in southern Africa (Atkinson 1983: 227-228; Geary 1998: 148). Jeremy Foster (2003-671) points out that the use of collotype and photolithography between 1900 and 1914 represented the golden age of South Africa postcards when they were the primary form of everyday communication and the 'main source of cheap, readily-available images of South Africa.'

The critical study of postcards does not have a long history; indeed, as Jeffrey Meikle (2000: 268) points out, most postcards probably still remain 'submerged, hidden away in neglected albums and shoe boxes.' Social scientists and art historians in particular have lagged behind fields such as geography and visual anthropology that quickly realised the documentary value of postcards in research (Tanner 2004: 216; Geary 1991: 36). The academic study of postcards only began in the late twentieth century and examined them as forms of communication, as records of everyday life, and as aesthetic objects. Orvar Löfgren's (1985: 90) pioneering article on postcards pointed out that many forms of popular mass-produced imagery have been considered too inconsequential to study, but 'it is precisely their triviality and everyday nature which makes them attractive objects of cultural analysis.' A number of influential studies have been written from the trajectories of tourism studies, cultural geography and cultural studies (e.g., Schor 1992; Pritchard & Morgan 2003; Markwick 2001; Mellinger 1992; Marsh 1985) and Jeffrey Meikle (2000: 268) notes in his discussion of American postcards from the 1930s that there has been an 'awakening of interest in the ephemera of mass culture.' Visual culture studies responded to the increasing visuality of contemporary culture by studying visual artifacts such as postcards and started to ask questions regarding the production and reception of visual culture; this signified an important shift from asking *what* something means to *how* it works (Prochaska 2001: 383).

To sum up, postcards (and photographs) are never just a neutral reflection of the world but are 'socially constructed and meaningful representations' (Albers & James 1988: 140) that are indicative of what a culture values. It goes almost without saying, that they are not dissimilar to the numerous colonial paintings

that depicted the ideal South African landscape in an ideologically loaded manner. Postcards are always selective and almost invariably present a gendered, classed or raced view of a culture (Schor 1992: 216). In particular, they have been effective indices of triumphant modernity and progress, and representing automobility was one of the ways in which this was expressed metaphorically.

AUTOMOBILITY

In this section, only the most salient issues of automobility that are important for this article are discussed. Mike Featherstone (2004: 1) points out that automobility is still a relatively neglected topic, which is curious in light of the fact that '[m]ore than any other manufactured product, the car enshrines and projects the values of the culture which created it' (Bayley 1986: 101). Thus although the car has become an established component of the trope of modernity, there are still many gaps in the discourse around it (Miller 2001: 12). Taking into account Paul Gilroy's (2001: 82) assertion that cars originated as toys for rich men, the critical interrogation of the significations of motor cars remains surprisingly undertheorised, and the mythic cluster of man-machine-modernity-mobility-power-progress-speed-freedom was easily naturalised. One of the myths that has been questioned, however, is the simplistic equation between masculinity/male sexual power and automobile technology.[1] Although it is doubtless true that the car was for many years gendered as a product for the male, its symbolic value as an exclusively male means of escape from domesticity 'into a realm of private fantasy, autonomy and control' (Wajcman 1991: 134) is simply no longer tenable. Indeed, there were many female car drivers from the early years of automobile culture in South Africa, and the motor trade actively began to target 'Madame Motorist' during World War I (Johnston and Stuart-Findlay 2005, 73). This underscores Gilroy's (2001: 93) contention that cars were always implicitly embedded in the politics of segregation, racial hierarchy and inequality. The car as a symbol of the so-called 'south africanisation' [sic] of social life (Andre Gorz cited by Gilroy 2001: 93) reveals the classed and raced nature of automobility more pertinently than its gendered character in the examples discussed in this article.

Because cars are the product of nineteenth-century technology, they have become efficient metonyms for modernity, speed and progress and the impact thereof on people's perception of landscape. In this regard, landscape is associated with the process by which identities are formed or as a way of seeing the world and one's relationship to it by means of the experience of territory. Accordingly, trains and cars transformed people's ability to experience national landscape and changed popular middle-class ideas about nature, wilderness, technology and mobility (Cosgrove 2008: 20, 31; Meikle 2000: 267). It is here that the alignment between postcards, cars and national road narratives becomes clear: many postcards featured 'not only the scenery but what brings the viewers to it: first trains, then automobiles' (Gross 2005: 84, 93). Meikle (2000: 267) investigated a range of postcards produced by Curt Teich in Chicago from the 1930s to the 1950s that illustrate the 'roadside attraction of an optimistic, even utopian, American scene' and points out the intimate connection between postcards and automobiles during this period. Meikle (2000: 272, 275, 277) argues that the Teich postcards of highways, roads, bridges, cars, cities, dams, factories, paved highways and motels celebrate modernity and pride in technological progress, but also attempt to make people feel comfortable in the their possession of the landscape. This notion clearly resonates with the

contemporary role of white people in South Africa who were starting to bind themselves to the land by means of embodied immersion in and contemplation of the so-called empty landscape (see Foster 2003; 2005). The dual depiction of South Africa as both modern and enticingly 'exotic' and 'primitive' in tourism material from the beginning of the twentieth century is well known (Wolf 1991: 102-103; Rassool & Witz 1996; Grundlingh 2006: 111), and the depiction of automobility became an important signifier of South Africa's entry into modernity.

Automobility has personal, familial, regional and national patterns (Sheller 2003: 2), and as varying signifiers of 'desire and sexuality, mobility, status, family-related activity, independence, sport, adventure, freedom and rebellion [cars] play across films, advertisements and fiction' (Edensor 2002: 118). One of the most abiding associations is between the car and freedom. Accordingly, cars have been associated metaphorically in consumer culture with mobility, freedom, and the promise of new experiences – encapsulated in the American dream and the lure of the open road as symbolised by Route 66 (Edensor 2002: 131; Featherstone 2004: 13). As will be suggested later, this sense of freedom of movement has been decidedly exclusive and illusory in South Africa, where negative connotations of violence and suppression were frequently attached to cars (Addison 2002: 219-220).

It has already been mentioned that cars function as indicators of class position and as markers of personal status and identity. Like many other products of industrial capitalism, cars also came to signify conspicuous leisure and consumption. By the mid-1920s in America, cars denoted mass affluence, reflected in the fact that by 1930, there was 1 car for every 1.3 households, compared to only 104,510 cars in total in South Africa in 1928 (Wernick 1994: 3; Miller 2001: 6; Floor 1985: 4). The popularity of cars in the twentieth century cannot be ascribed to one factor alone, but the ideals of speed, progress and the fantasy of flight were deeply embedded in the mythology associated with cars (Wernick 1994: 7). For the post-World War II generation, the flamboyant aerodynamic styling of American cars signified the new romance with technology, the post-war economic boom and the end of the Depression (Wernick 1994: 6, 9).

Cars have also had an indelible effect on national identity, nationalism and national belonging, and all manner of imagined communities, invented traditions and myths have been linked to car cultures. This constitution of national identities manifests in popular culture such as road movies and popular songs, creating emotional geographies (Sheller 2003: 18, 20; Edensor 2002). An example of this is the popular Springbok Radio advertising jingle from 1974, 'Braaivleis, rugby, sunny skies and Chevrolet' that harked back nostalgically to the 'Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet' one used in America in the 1950s. This specific emotional geography is ironic since during the boycott against South Africa in the 1970s, British, Italian, French and American cars were not exported to South Africa (Addison 2002: 222).

But other kinds of links between cars and nations were also forged. Gross (2005: 89, 93) points out, in relation to the USA, that connections were established early in the twentieth century between touring a country by car and loving it; tourism became a patriotic duty to see one's *own* country first. This idea is replicated in a touring guide to the Cape Province that bears the following slogan on the cover: 'See your

own country first!' (*In and around the Cape Province …* 1925). The development of automobility, comprising not just cars but networks of roads, specialised car publications, maps, and all manner of constructed roadside leisurescapes, made nations accessible to modes of individual travel not previously possible. Thus, automobilisation extended human habitats, linked spaces, allowed people to explore previously inaccessible places, created new perceptions of national space, and also valorised certain sites as having touristic value (Edensor 2002: 127-128). One of the earliest uses of the car was for 'Sunday drives' and family holidays in the countryside and to wilderness areas such as national parks (Sheller 2003: 15). Also in South Africa, people used cars to travel to the country's beauty spots from the 1920s onwards (Johnston 1975: 156). In a stroke of marketing genius, roads to and in the Kruger National Park (KNP) were improved during the 1920s to give people 'the unique experience of viewing wild game from a car' (Johnston 1975: 154). The KNP and cars are brought together in an iconic SARPTD photograph from 1949 that shows two stationary cars and lions walking across the road in the Park (Rassool & Witz 1996: 351).[2] This indicates the typical alignment between cars, leisure and class that informs the discussion of the manner in which the South African road has been pictured in the next section.

PICTURING THE SOUTH AFRICAN ROAD

The entire history of automobility in South Africa cannot be sketched here, and for the purposes of this article, the emphasis falls on the years up to 1950. The first car in South Africa, a Benz, was owned by Mr. J. P. Hess in Pretoria in 1897 (Johnston & Stuart-Findlay 2005: 11) and is therefore almost totally contemporaneous with the first postcard. Early in the twentieth century, despite the fact that people were recovering from the recent South African War (1899-1902), 'every town of importance boasted at least one motor-car – [which was] frequently cited as an example of the district's progressive outlook' (Johnston 1975: 21). Yet even by 1907, the poor economic conditions made the car a luxury item owned almost exclusively by the professional classes and politicians; the connotations attached to the car were leisure and pleasure, leading to the founding of a multitude of motoring clubs and competitions (Johnston 1975: 50, 98). The first Automobile Club was founded in Cape Town in 1901, and by 1907, there were around 170 cars in that city (Johnston & Stuart-Findlay 2005: 29, 32, 33). In 1910, the improved economic climate of the Union led to a three-fold increase in car imports from Britain, France, and Germany. After 1914, when imports from Europe ceased, American Fords, Buicks and Dodges were imported; they were generally cheaper and better adapted to the poor road conditions in South Africa (Johnston 1975: 84; Johnston & Stuart-Findlay 2005: 73). Only after 1923, when the Ford Motor Company of South Africa was established in Port Elizabeth, followed by General Motors in 1926, did cars become more affordable for the middle classes (Johnston 1975: 185-186). By 1935, there were 198,661 cars in the Union and by 1959, this had escalated to more than a million (Floor 1985: 4; *Our history in South Africa* [sa]: 1).

One of the basic requirements for automobility is a system of navigable roads and in this respect, South Africa was severely challenged for many years. In 1910, the Union Government had invested in the South African Railways (SAR) as an efficient mode of long distance transport; roads were considered to be only for short distances and were the sole responsibility of the then four individual provinces (Floor 1985: 1). Even in the 1920s, all-weather roads extended only 60 to 70 kilometres beyond Johannesburg and Pretoria

(Foster 2003: 665), and by the early 1930s, asphalt roads only linked towns that were not more than 80 kilometres apart, such as Cape Town and Somerset West and Durban and Pietermaritzburg (Johnston 1975: 204). The 'We want good roads' campaign resulted in the formation of the parliamentary Roads and Bridges Committee in 1925 and the National Roads Act followed in 1935 (Floor 1985: 2, 4). Fourteen national roads were proposed by the National Road Board in 1936 and these linked the main urban centres in the Union and, equally important, accommodated the needs of overseas tourists and 'seasonal traffic to coastal holiday resorts and national centres of scenic interest such as the Kruger National Park' (Floor 1985: 11). In 1938, the Government decided that all national roads should be bituminised (Floor 1985: 16) but provincial authorities took far longer to embrace and realise this ideal.

Figure 1. Chapman's Peak Drive, Cape Town, ca. 1920s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

The growth of automobility was also supported by a number of bodies that had vested interests in promoting tourism and leisure activities associated with car culture, particularly in Cape Town where there was a clearly established link between cars and leisure. Since 1908, the Cape Peninsula Publicity Association (CPPA) and the Cape Automobile Club had lobbied for better roads to enable tourism around the Cape Peninsula. Work consequently started on the All Round the Cape Peninsula Road in 1913 and was completed in 1923; 750 convicts worked on key roads such as the Chapman's Peak Drive, which was partially opened in 1919 and officially opened in 1922 (Johnston & Stuart-Findlay 2005: 50-52). The CPPA issued a free motoring guidebook, *The motorist's paradise,* in 1913 that included a map of Cape roads. This first tourist handbook for motorists extolled the coastal road as 'the finest drive in the Union, if not in the world' (Johnston 1975: 62; Johnston & Stuart-Findlay 2005: ii, iii). This coastal road became one of the most recognisable iconic scenes from the Cape and was the subject of innumerable SARPTD photographs and postcards. One such early postcard, entitled 'Chapmans Peak Road showing Slangkop' features a Buick from 1918 on the road (Figure 1) (Duffey,personal interview, Pretoria, 13 June 2011). It is clear that it is not just the picturesque natural scene that is important here, but also the road and the car in equal measure as signifiers of modernity, (white) ingenuity and white possession of the land. By the 1920s, white South Africans[3] and overseas visitors were starting to explore the country more (Foster 2003: 666), and

even rudimentary roads made it possible to visit areas that were inaccessible by train. The *In and around the Cape Province* guide (ca. 1925: 22) noted that there is 'only one way to see everything there is to be seen, and that is by motor car.'

The Automobile Association of South Africa was founded in 1930 (*A bit of AA history*: 1) and was a key body in promoting automobility. So, for example, it not only printed maps of the roads of the Union, but also provided detailed guides to day motoring trips around the Cape Peninsula in magazines such as *Lantern* (*Dagtoere in en om die Kaapse Skiereiland* May 1952: 508-510; August 1952: 74-77). *Lantern* also carried educational articles about the mountain passes of the Cape (*Die bergpasse van Kaapland* 1957: 90-99) and fostered an appreciation for both the scenery and the engineering ingenuity that was manifest.[4] The Shell Company, which had been in South Africa since 1902, published road maps of the Union as well as providing 'Shell Motor Spirit' petrol (*Our history in South Africa* [sa]: 1). Similarly, if somewhat later, Mobil Service Station published a series of postcards of iconic scenes from South Africa and Caltex provided complimentary postcards to its patrons. Gross (2005: 93) indicates that these type of 'patriographic' postcards combined patriotism with brand name recognition in the act of consumption. This underscores the fact that automobility was not only entrenched by car manufacturers but also by peripheral interested bodies and corporations such as the SARPTD, Mobil, Caltex, Shell, the CPPA and the AA.

The selected representative images that feature roads and cars between the 1920s and 1940s are similar in that they show just the road and empty landscape, or a solitary car on the road, or one figure with a car. The exception is a postcard from the late 1940s of 'Camp life' in the KNP that shows a family relaxing with their car (see below, Figure 9). Although overt forms of leisure are not necessarily shown in these examples, it is clear that the postcards are meant to appeal to the relatively affluent tourism and recreation market by foregrounding the scenic beauty of South Africa and its technological modernity, in the form of

Figure 2. Swartberg Pass, ca. 1930s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

cars and roads. So, for example, Foster (2003: 670) notes that a SARPTD photograph that shows the Cape-to-Rand train running parallel to a road is indicative of South Africa as the 'frontier of civilisation.' Since cars have symbolic places in national car cultures, it is certainly important not only to ask *how* they are represented (Edensor 2002: 119-120), but also *why* they are represented. Roads can be seen as concrete symbols of the politics of white expansionism, and the kind of cars depicted is significant in terms of symbolic weight. Wernick (1994: 4-5) outlines the connotations associated with the roadster or sports cars; luxury cars; and the family sedan; the cars depicted in these postcards fall mainly into the last category, with its associations of leisure purposes, respectability, and functionality.

Two examples that show just the open road are of the Swartberg Pass[5] (Figure 2) and the Marine Drive, Hout Bay (Figure 3), two iconic SARPTD photographs that were used for countless postcards. Both examples are similar in that they focus on a twisting mountain road that attests to engineering ingenuity and the control of nature by modern technology.[6] The Swartberg Pass, Thomas Bain's last engineering masterpiece that was completed in 1888, is still untarred, and as previously mentioned, the Hout Bay road was part of the All Round the Cape Peninsula Road that was started in 1913. Both roadscapes are empty
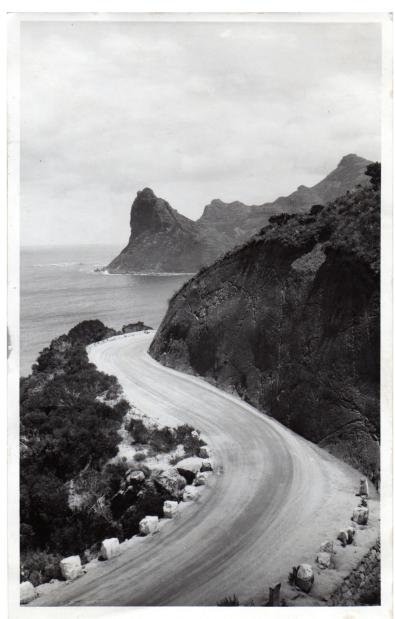

Figure 3. Marine Drive, Hout Bay, Cape Town, ca. 1920s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

yet inviting, luring the viewer with the romance of the open road, the freedom to explore, and the promise of spectacular scenery that was still relatively unexplored by or unknown to leisure-seeking travellers.

Figure 4. Chapman's Peak Drive, Cape Town, ca. 1930s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

Figure 5. View of False Bay, ca. 1930s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

The next two examples are also from the Cape Peninsula. The first shows Chapman's Peak Marine Drive (Figure 4) and the second depicts a view of False Bay (Figure 5). The Chapman's Peak Drive postcard shows a solitary male figure standing next to the road and looking back across the road. On the left hand side of the image, three stationary cars can be seen. The manner in which this lone figure is positioned, with his back to the viewer, is typical of images that invite spectators to identify with the anonymous figure,

and has antecedents in the *Rückenfigur* found in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich early in the nineteenth century. The photograph of False Bay, possibly taken from Boyes Drive, also shows the railway track and the road next to it. The car, with its Cape Town number plates, is a 1935-1936 Willy's Knight (Duffey, personal interview, Pretoria, 13 June 2011), which was advertised in the *In and around the Cape Province 1924-1925* guide as 'A cradle of comfort a symphony of motion' and the best way to 'see the beautiful Cape scenery.' In both these examples, the attention of the solitary male viewer is focussed on the natural scenery, to which he has been brought by a car, and which implicitly allows him the freedom to stay and enjoy the view for as long as he wants.

Figure 6. Northern Transvaal, ca. 1930s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)
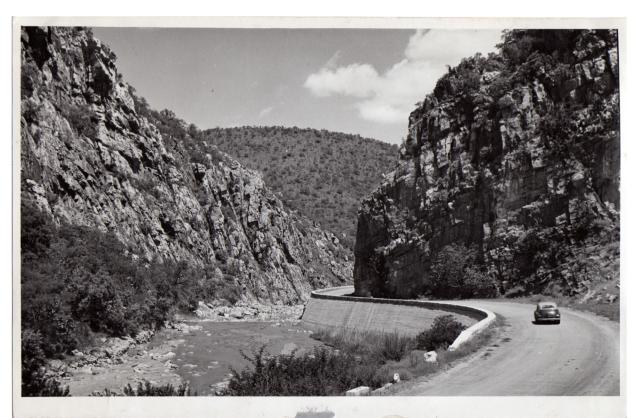

Figure 7. Chuneispoort, Northern Transvaal, ca. 1940s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

The next three examples depict three scenes from the then Northern Transvaal. Figure 6 shows a 1934/36 Ford (Duffey, personal interview, Pretoria, 13 June. 2011) on a long stretch of road leading into the African landscape. The image is framed on the left hand side by a barren tree and this adds to the feeling of desolation or mystery attendant upon this sublime landscape that stretches as far as the eye can see. Figure 7 shows the Chuniespoort Pass, the site of a couple of skirmishes during the South Africa War; the car shown is a Chevrolet Fleetline from 1948 (Duffey, personal interview, Pretoria, 13 June 2011). As in Figure 4, viewers are probably meant to identify with the driver of the cars in these two figures and to imagine themselves travelling along the same road. These two figures are reminiscent of Teich postcards from the 1930s to 1950s such as the Pikes Peak Auto Highway (see Gross 2005: 83) wherein the impulse to see and get to know one's country by means of road travel is foregrounded. Figure 8 shows another iconic scene from the Northern Transvaal documented by the SARPTD, the Magoebas Kloof. The panoramic scene is depicted from a height in terms of the picturesque trope, with a framing tree on the left hand side, and the road disappears into the luminous distance in the background. The winding road is again offered as a testament to human ingenuity and the small buildings domesticate the landscape and show white presence in the landscape.

Figure 8. Magoebas Kloof, Northern Transvaal, ca. 1940s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

The last image, a postcard derived from a Dick Wolff photograph, depicts 'Camp life' in the KNP (Figure 9) and features a Dodge from 1948 in the foreground (Duffey, personal interview, Pretoria, 13 June 2011). The car is clearly indicative of the family's solid middle-class status, alluding to both their geographical and social mobility as white people in the economic boom after World War II. There is an explicit connection between leisure and the mobility afforded by the car, which allows the typical nuclear family to be transported from the suburbs to the game park; it is therefore portable security and a tangible signifier of independence. This image forms an interesting transition to postcards from the 1950s onwards that more frequently tend to show cars and people in conjunction with collective forms of leisure activities, such as at

Figure 9. Camp life, Kruger National Park, content analysis. 1940s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

seaside scenes, or at popular tourist destinations such as Kirstenbosch Gardens. This is indicative of the improvement of the roads at that time, as well as the fact that the white middle-class (Afrikaans-speaking) population was participating in the expanding domestic tourism market. This is emphasised in a SARPTD postcard from the late 1940s or early 1950s that shows two women standing next to their car at 'Blaawberg Strand' (Figure 10). The Johannesburg number plate is almost certainly indicative of the women's status as tourists.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The sketch of South African automobility given above is one-sided as for the majority of the black population who lived under segregationist and, later, apartheid governments, freedom, leisure, consumption and the mobility of modernity were mainly the privilege of white people. Indeed, when black people were shown on postcards of roads,[7] they were invariably depicted as manual labourers, with wagons drawn by animals, never as the owners or drivers of motor cars. Their road is thus associated with work and livelihood, not leisure, and distance is shown as an impediment rather than something to be conquered by empowering automotive technology in the pursuit of leisure. South African roads were built by cheap black labour and under apartheid, came to symbolise white power, control, inclusion and exclusion, and systems of surveillance (Fox 2000: 443); this disparity is already presaged in the images referred to above.

Figure 10. Blaawberg Strand - Cape Town, ca. late 1940s or early 1950s. (Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

Figure 11. Near Beaufort West, Cape Province, ca. 1960s. Copyright: Transnet Heritage Library)

The images discussed in this article reflect an automobility that was still in its infancy. They revel in the newfound freedom and possibilities afforded by car culture but continue to rely on colonialist myths of the supposedly empty land for their mythic weight. The trope of the empty landscape had many ideological functions – not only did it represent South Africa as invitingly spacious, it also linked this to the notion of

white people belonging in Africa and their consequent entitlement to commune with 'the panoramic view of the empty landscape seen from the window of a moving [car]' (Foster 2003: 680). A colour SARPTD postcard from about the 1960s illustrates this notion (Figure 11). It depicts the national road near Beaufort West, a car parked haphazardly alongside it, and two women, possibly a mother and daughter, admiring the roadside wild flowers. The idea that is conveyed is that the car was stopped on impulse in order to commune with the beauty of nature, a freedom that would have been impossible when travelling by train. Automobility made the leisured exploration (and implicit possession) of the land possible, betokening a geographical and social mobility that was probably more imperative than speed as such. Foster (2008) maintains that the idea of South African territory as a shared white space was promoted by the experience of train travel, and the images produced by the SARPTD added to the conceptual discourse by suggesting that travelling by car could produce the same sense of belonging and ownership. Indeed, the act of driving through the rugged landscape could possibly have provided an individualised embodied experience of the land more direct than travel by train.

The roadscapes referred to in this article depict South Africa as reassuringly modern and civilised, with the signs of human intervention evident in the feats of road engineering that signify the conquest of the landscape by modern technology. According to Fox (2002: 444), 'Afrikaner trekker myths and imperial dreams' were echoed in the road narratives of the twentieth century wherein white people came to see the road as a 'symbol of escape, a place of travel fantasies … and … excitement.' This article has suggested that postcards are an efficient marker of this social history of South Africa and deserve to be further researched.

Notes

[1] For instance, Penny Sparke (in Coward 1999: 2) notes that both women and men use cars for complex reasons that include 'desire, narcissism, envy and a quest for self-identification – social, psychological and cultural needs which are deeply rooted'.

[2] The photograph is by Dick Wolff for the SAR and the National Parks Board. See also Figure 9.

[3] At this stage in South African history, it is safe to speculate that these travellers would have been predominantly Englishspeaking as Afrikaans-speaking citizens were not wealthy enough, owing to myriad political and economic factors (see Foster 2008). The rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and the new political dispensation in 1948 empowered the Afrikaans-speaking constituency. This article does not suggest that 'white' people were all the same in the period under discussion, and the complex shifts in identity and prosperity between the 1920s and the 1950s need to be borne in mind.

[4] In the photographs that accompany these articles, a Ford Mercury from 1948 and 1950 is shown on the roads and mountain passes. During the early 1950s when these articles were written, the Mercury was quite an expensive car and was associated with the upper-middle class consumer (Duffey, personal interview, Pretoria, 13 June 2011).

[5] This pass was the topic for one of J. H. Pierneef's Station Panels painted between 1929 and 1932 for the SAR.

[6] There are many examples of postcards depicting spectacular road- and railway bridges, heavy SAR haulage systems and SARPTD motor busses but they are not discussed in this article.

[7] Sallo Epstein produced a number of satiric postcards early in the twentieth century that showed black people's ostensible backwardness in relation to western technology, including cars (see example in Johnston 1975: 40).

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