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Insecurity in South African Social Security: An Examination of Social Grant Deductions, Cancellations, and Waiting

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In 2012, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) contracted a private company, Cash Paymaster Services (CPS), to design a standardised national social assistance payment and registration system. The national card-based biometric enrolment and payment system was advanced as a way to make social grant payment more secure – for claimants, the state, and the national fiscus. In practice, however, it translated into forms of insecurity, which served to promote and reproduce precarity. This article considers some of these insecurities, with a focus on the three most pervasive: the cancellation of grants, the expansive, unauthorised monetary deductions from claimants' accounts, and the new kinds of waiting that the system introduced.

Introduction

In 2012, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) contracted a private company, Cash Paymaster Services (CPS), to design a standardised national social assistance payment and registration system. The contract was for a five-year period, but, before 2017 arrived, the service agreement would be called into question and would exist in limbo pending an alternative administration and payment arrangement. Social assistance in South Africa primarily takes the form of an income transfer in the form of grants provided by government.[1] The efficiency that this outsourcing was supposed to ensure was fragile, and '[d]espite the privatisation of services, problems still persisted'.[2] Efficiency gave way to insecurity and ambiguity, and the changes that were introduced (or the ideas that failed to materialise) exposed, and sometimes created, breaks and cracks in the social grant system. This article considers expectations and insecurity in South African social assistance, especially after 2012. The 2012 system, in practice, rendered grant money vulnerable to cancellation or deductions, but also threatened the security of grant claimants' personal information and put pressure on claimants' time.

Partha Chatterjee argues that, in postcolonial contexts, many people encounter the political world in and through bureaucracy, administration, and the delivery of services.[3] People on the margins (poor, precarious and landless people) occupy what has been considered the margins of the political, namely the level of administration and service delivery. It is the contestability of administration and bureaucracy, where 'rules may be bent and stretched',[4] that also makes

1 South African Social Security Agency, 'You and Your Grants 2011/2', available at www.sassa.gov.za, retrieved 12 July 2012.
2 SAHRC, 'The Right to Social Security', in *Economic and Social Rights Report Series* (Pretoria, South African Human Rights Commission, 2003), p. 30.
3 P. Chatterjee, 'Two Poets and Death: On Civil and Political Society in the Non-Christian World', in T. Mitchell (ed.), *Questions of Modernity*, vol. 11, Contradictions of Modernity (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000); P. Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004).
4 Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, p. 60.

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them fertile ground for insecurity. This article considers some of these insecurities in relation to South African grants, with a focus on the three most pervasive: the cancellation of grants, the expansive, unauthorised monetary deductions from claimants'[5] accounts, and the new kinds of waiting that the system has introduced. I argue that a key feature of insecurity is arbitrariness: grant money is not only under threat of cancellations and deductions, but when this happens and to whom seems largely random. The apparently arbitrary loss of grant money exacerbates broader unpredictability surrounding grants, resulting in a lack of control over time and personal information. All of this underlines the persistent insecurity of life and livelihoods among grant recipients.

The uncertainty I describe is especially acute because grants occupy a vital place in the social, economic and political landscape of South Africa; their importance is underlined by the huge scale and scope of payments in an environment where there is a vacuum of waged labour. Social grants are directly paid to more than 30 per cent of the population, with the cash transfers an important indirect income for a much larger part of the population. In the context of high unemployment and large-scale non-contributory grant programmes, it is assistance rather than workplace social insurance that occupies the terrain of the 'social' in South Africa.

Infrastructure interacts with all of the social, economic, and political resonances of grants. Assistance, and the national privatised technical grant system that accompanied it after 2012, have profoundly social effects. Moreover, inseparable from the machines and technologies of grant payment that became central since 2012, the infrastructure of assistance constitutes part of a plural terrain of politics. As von Schnitzler has written, in her work on pre-paid water and electricity meters in South Africa, it comprises a 'politics of non-publics taking shape at the register and in the language of technology'.[6] Grants are the most significant income in many households, and, in a majority of these cases, they may be the only source of money. The value of grants, then, is not only monetary or bound up in consumption; they also affect kinship relations, mould relationships to the state, and shift interactions with wage labour.

The research that informs this article pauses at moments of bureaucracy in the life of the grant and uses ethnography to consider technological privatised social grant operation. By doing this, it aims to offer more nuanced understandings of insecurity. The method foregrounds daily conversations, informal interactions, and observations over extended periods. An ethnographic and historical approach to the places and ways in which people interact with grant infrastructure provides insights into the interconnections and contradictions between various scales of the grant infrastructure.

Specifically, the article draws on ethnographic research in the Bushbuckridge municipality[7] since 2012, along with media reports and extensive engagements with the human rights organisation the Black Sash. The various sites where I conducted fieldwork take into account a fundamental principle of the 2012 payment system: that grants could be collected in multiple locations. The study is anchored in four main locations to trace a payment system in practice:

5 I refer to those receiving state social assistance in the form of non-contributory grants as 'claimants'. In the scholarship and popular media, the words 'recipient' or 'beneficiaries' are more commonly used. I have taken the decision to use 'claimants' instead (except in instances of direct quotation or where the context requires a different term) as it implies action on the part of those getting grants, and connects my analysis of action around application and administration to the politics of the many actors involved in negotiation, administration and delivery. 'Recipients' tends to suggest passive inaction on the part of claimants, a position that I seek to challenge. In addition, and of great significance, 'beneficiaries' has the potential implication that grants are a privilege rather than an income from the state.

6 A. von Schnitzler, 'Traveling Technologies: Infrastructure, Ethical Regimes and the Materiality of Politics in South Africa', *Cultural Anthropology*, 28, 4 (2013), p. 673.

7 The Bushbuckridge municipality is made up of several small towns: Acornhoek, Thulamahashe, Bushbuckridge, Marite, Dwarsloop, and Mkhuhlu. Only 9 per cent of the population live in these centres; the remainder reside in small rural villages. See E. Mavungu, 'Frontiers of Prosperity and Power: Explaining Provincial Boundary Disputes In Post-Apartheid South Africa', PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2011, p. 41.

a well-known retail merchant that pays out a large number of grants in the area every month, a local SASSA grant office, a mobile pension paypoint, and the moving site of a pick-up truck driven by Andrew, a local official employed by CPS. Moving between these places aims to foreground the relationships between the 'formalisation' of social assistance – the documents, policies and national guidelines, and the 'informal' – the daily practices, negotiations of bureaucracy, meaning making and unravelling that play out in applying for and claiming grants.

Social Grants in South Africa: Social (In)Security

South African social assistance grants are paid to just under 11 million people monthly.[8] The government-to-citizen non-contributory cash grants have been promoted as an anti-poverty measure – in its 20-year review, the African National Congress (ANC) government called social grants South Africa's most effective intervention of this kind.[9] This pronouncement fails to account for the fact that the government both acknowledges the grants' importance in garnering electoral support and insists that people should seek work instead of receiving 'handouts'.[10] They have also been considered as one of the most important forms of redistribution in post-apartheid South Africa.[11] The South African government allocates the third-largest portion of its budget (after health and education) to social protection (the combined social grants and social welfare services programme). Claimants qualify to get a grant through an income- and asset-based means test.[12] The post-apartheid state delivers something tangible and valuable through cash transfers, a visible and tactile form of state-to-citizen support. These grants are labelled non-contributory because they do not require any previous labour-related monetary 'input' in the way that work insurance or retirement schemes would. In 2015, SASSA transferred a total of 16.9 million social grants, which included more than half a million foster care grants, 1 million disability grants, 3.1 million old-age pensions, and 11.9 million child support grants.[13]

Biometrics – the measurement of physical and behavioural characteristics to confirm the identity of individuals – have been used for social grant payments in South Africa for more than two decades.[14] Moreover, long before its mobilisation in social assistance, biometric fingerprinting was implemented on a large scale by colonial and apartheid states, along with employers, for population registration,

8 This is the number of claimants. Because one claimant may receive multiple grants, the total number of claimants (almost 11 million) is lower than the total number of grants paid (almost 17 million). As an example, if someone were to receive an old-age grant (OAG) and serve as the primary caregiver of a child, they would then also claim the child support grant (CSG).

9 The Republic of South Africa, 'Twenty Year Review South Africa, 1994–2014', *The Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation* (2014), pp. 44–5, available at http://www.thepresidency-dpme.gov.za/news/Documents/20%20Year%20Review.pdf, retrieved 15 November 2015. V. Taylor, 'The Social Security Journey', conference presentation at the Social Security Seminar, hosted by the Black Sash and ActionAid South Africa, The Birchwood Hotel, Johannesburg, 11 August 2015).

10 F. Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa* (Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011), p. 98.

11 E. Bähre, 'Liberation and Redistribution: Social Grants, Commercial Insurance, and Religious Riches in South Africa',*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 53, 2 (2011), pp. 371–92.

12 They should not be accommodated in a state institution. In addition, a single person's assets should be below the ceiling of R831,600, and R1.7 million if married, and each grant has further particular requirements. For example, there are age specifications for the OAG. For an OAG a single person should not have an annual income above R49,920 and a married couple's combined income should fall below R99,840. Caregivers of children under 18 are eligible for a CSG if they earn an annual income of less than R34,800 and R69,600 if single or a married couple respectively.

13 South African Social Security Agency, 'A Statistical Summary of Social Grants in South Africa: Fact Sheet 6 of 2015', SASSA, 21 July 2015, available at http://www.sassa.gov.za/index.php/statistical-reports, retrieved 5 August 2015.

14 K. Breckenridge, 'The Biometric State: The Promise and Peril of Digital Government in the New South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31, 2 (2005), pp. 267–82; K. Breckenridge, 'No Will To Know: The Rise and Fall Of African Civil Registration in 20th Century South Africa', in Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter (eds), *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012).

surveillance, and labour control.[15] In the 1950s, the formation of a centralised fingerprint database became an obsession of Hendrik Verwoerd's government, but the formation of the Bantustans in 1960 diminished the capabilities of such a repository.[16] As the Bantustan project unravelled after 1990, there was renewed commitment to centralisation. In 2012, a system was implemented that was imagined by the government, the media, and CPS as a break from past social assistance design. CPS was to use biometric identification technology to register, administer, and pay grant claimants. Just over a year after the initiation of the large-scale registration drive, 19 million people (40 per cent of the total population) had their fingerprints documented, their voices recorded, their photographs captured, and their signatures digitised.[17] The number of biometric markers introduced in 2012 – along with the expansion of implementation – is novel. The CPS national payment system's most obvious difference from previous payment programmes was not the use of biometrics, but the organisation and scale of enrolment. Many heralded the 2012 social assistance infrastructure as the epitome of technological progress because it facilitated connections between advances in banking and biometric machinery. The discourse of progress – of moving towards efficiency – was prominent, but it is exactly the deviation from this teleology and stability that rendered grant life insecure.

As with biometrics, the outsourcing of grant administration was not new in South Africa; CPS was one of several companies operational at a provincial level prior to this new phase. CPS is a subsidiary of Net1 Universal Electronic Payment System (UEPS), which is listed on both the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and the US stock exchange NASDAQ. The five-year agreement that began in 2012 was worth more than R10 billion. As the first nationally applicable contract that SASSA signed, it represented what they described as the 'first opportunity to standardise things'.[18] The standardisation and centralisation was a key concern in post-apartheid South Africa, and this impetus led to the formation of Sassa itself. In addition, the idea of accelerating novelty is important to convincing people of a potentially different and better future.[19] So while many of the systems around privatising grants were already in place, they were taken in 2012 and projected into a future. When awarded the contract, Net1 went on to harness UEPS to supply state grant claimants with a MasterCard debit card that would be linked to a Net1 partner, Grindrod Bank. The bank had only a marginal presence in South Africa prior to this; its client base was composed of high-net-worth individuals and some institutions. For almost a decade after 1994, financial service providers targeted an employed, middle-class clientele, particularly white middle-class South Africans. Elizabeth Hull and Deborah James explain that financial service providers realised the saturation of this market after 2004 and, in their search for new markets and greater profit, began to target 'riskier' 'gap markets' composed of poor people (often previously without bank accounts).[20] However, Grindrod Bank, in its new role as partner in establishing bank accounts for grant claimants, gained access to 10 million new clients with a relatively low risk.

The 10 million Grindrod Bank accounts were managed under the terms of the contract between SASSA and CPS. The system had the mobility of cash transfers as one of its bedrocks, providing more ways and sites where grants could be accessed through the MasterCard debit card. Claimants could now access their money from shops, automated teller machines (ATM),

15 Breckenridge, 'The Biometric State'; Breckenridge, 'No Will To Know'.

16 K. Breckenridge, 'The Elusive Panopticon: The HANIS Project and the Politics of Standards in South Africa', in C. Bennett and D. Lyon (eds), *Playing the Identity Card: Surveillance, Security and Identity in Global Perspective* (New York, Routledge, 2008), p. 41.

17 SASSA, 'Annual Report 2012/2013' (Pretoria, SASSA, 2013).

18 J. Sikhakhane, 'R10bn Tender to Streamline Social Grant Payments for Recipients', *Sunday Independent*, Johannesburg, 22 January 2012.

19 S. G. Collins, All Tomorrow's Cultures: Anthropological Engagements with the Future (New York, Berghahn, 2008), p. 25.

20 E. Hull and D. James, 'Introduction: Popular Economies in South Africa', *Africa*, 82, 1 (2012), p. 4.

and mobile cash payment points. South African media celebrated CPS's systems as the cutting edge of technological innovation,[21] and SASSA concurred that the country was to become a leader in innovation by using 'state of the art technology' to operate its grant system.[22] Yet the persistence and proliferation of insecurity that this article charts indicates that the machinery of the technologies of social assistance sometimes fails. What is more, the very idea of such infrastructure – replete with utopian goals – is itself fragile.[23]

Literature on social assistance in South Africa either focuses on making theoretical arguments about the nature of welfare,[24] or tends toward a macro-economic analysis.[25] This literature generally omits to capture the empirical experience or to animate the lived reality of those on the sharp end of receiving (or not receiving) grants. Much of the statistical data around the effects of cash transfers speak to 'developmental' metrics such as mortality and infant health, but do not probe frustrations about waiting, access to recourse, and fears of deductions from monthly payments.[26] The micro-level research that does exist takes the form of sociological analyses of social assistance, with an interest in viewing the grant as an income and in detailing household expenditure with a focus on gender relations.[27] This literature can be deepened through an ethnographic emphasis on the financial circuits that shape grant life beyond the household.

In a recent theoretical discussion of the growing number of social welfare programmes in the global south, James Ferguson considers cash transfers as a new kind of distribution in contemporary societies – not a supplement for waged labour, but a livelihood beyond it.[28] South Africa is presented as the key example. Yet the ways that cash transfers actually operate go largely unexamined. Important claims about broader political economic arrangements – including about the shortcomings of the label 'neoliberalism' – are limited by their lack of attention to what it is about the machines, officials, offices, privatisation, and claimants' experiences that follow or fall outside a market logic. Understanding the daily realities of cash transfers is crucial, not least in order to appreciate the terms on which recipients live with the grant

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21 A. James, 'Providing Tighter Security and Greater Convenience', *The Star*, Johannesburg, 28 October 2011; A. James, 'Access Control with Biometric Precision', *The Star*, 28 October 2011; A. James, 'Ensuring Safety and Security',*The Star*, 28 October 2011; P. Letsatsi, 'Social Grant Makeover Betters Lives', *Mail and Guardian*, Johannesburg, 10 October 2013.

22 P. Letsatsi, 'State of the Art Technology Behind SA's Social Grants',*The New Age*, Johannesburg, 29 April 2013. Public pronouncements that technologies of social assistance were being used to streamline the system were not isolated to this period. See for example G. Heckl, 'Province's Pension Payouts Made Easy', *The Star*, 26 July 2001.

23 B. Pfaffenberger, 'The Harsh Facts of Hydraulics: Technology and Society in Sri Lanka's Colonization Schemes', *Technology and Culture*, 31, 3 (1990), pp. 361–97.

24 For example, J. Ferguson, 'Formalities of Poverty: Thinking about Social Assistance in Neoliberal South Africa', *African Studies Review*, 50, 2 (2007), pp. 71–86; J. Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Redistribution* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2015).

25 For example, J. Seekings, 'The Broader Importance of Welfare Reform in South Africa', *Social Dynamics*, 28, 2 (2002), pp. 1–38; J. Seekings and N. Nattrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005); A. Makhulu, 'A Brief History of the Social Wage: Welfare before and after Racial Fordism', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115, 1 (2016), pp. 113–24.

26 A. Case, V. Hosegood, and F. Lund, 'The Reach and Impact of Child Support Grants: Evidence from KwaZulu-Natal', *Development Southern Africa*, 22, 4 (2005); A. Case and A. Menendez, 'Does Money Empower The Elderly? Evidence From The Agincourt Demographic Surveillance Site, South Africa', *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 35, 69 (2007), pp. 157–64; R. Twine *et al.*, 'Evaluating Access to a Child-Oriented Poverty Alleviation Intervention in Rural South Africa', *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 35, 69 (2007), pp. 118–27; Progressus Research Development Consultancy and R. Gordon, 'The Payment Experiences of Social Grant Beneficiaries', FinMark Trust, Johannesburg, April 2012.

27 G. Khunou, 'Fathers Don't Stand a Chance: Experiences of Custody, Access, and Maintenance', *Baba. Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2006), pp. 265–77; T. Hochfeld, 'Cash Transfers and Social Transformation: How Do Women Receiving the Child Support Grant in Sophiatown, Johannesburg, Experience Intra-Household Gender Relations?', proposal, University of the Witwatersrand, 2010; S. Mosoetsa, *Eating from One Pot: The Dynamics of Survival in Poor South African Households* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2011).

28 Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish*.

infrastructure. Cash transfers are heralded by influential scholars,[29] multinational agencies,[30] and governments as the most effective available method for poverty alleviation – and perhaps even redistribution. Yet, while the grants provide a limited amount of financial support, there are insecurities in the mechanisms used to administer and pay them. These insecurities have taken on unexpected forms since the introduction of a national payment system.

Social assistance literature has also paid little attention to the expanding field of the anthropology of infrastructure, which posits that machines do not only move across locations or serve as a bridge to send information between different points; the technologies themselves create politics, subjectivities, and sentience.[31] Machines have long played a role in social grant delivery and administration, but they became protagonists in 2012. My account considers machines in social assistance in Bushbuckridge as they operated at multiple sites along the path of grant administration and payment. In my research, machines involved in the enrolment and payment of state social assistance were (literal and figurative) vehicles from which to view the landscape of social grants in post-apartheid South Africa.

It was not only in the use of large-scale biometric data that South Africa was an international forerunner. Amid neoliberal reforms after 1994, technologies promising 'cost recovery' found fertile ground. These 'cost recovery' technologies were most notable in the ubiquitous presence of pre-paid water and electricity meters, which South Africa implemented on a large scale, and in which the country became an 'industry leader' as an innovator and exporter.[32] The arbitrariness visible in grant life as well as the deflection of responsibility on to individuals also appeared through the technologies of meters, and resulted in the insecurity that von Schnitzler calls 'living prepaid'.[33] Social security and welfare in South Africa has always been coloured by inequality, with regard to both race and resource allocation. Overwhelming levels of inequality stretched into post-apartheid South Africa; in addition, several social-protection-related factors, which increased precarity, remained after 1994: strong private sector influence in healthcare and retirement, means tests, and no universal state-funded programmes.[34] For example, the state does not contribute to the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), there is no national retirement programme, and there is no (current) national health insurance. Along with high unemployment, there is also increasing desperation of those in low-wage and precarious work (with no benefits or job security) who do not qualify for state grants and are not provided with social insurance at their places of work.[35]

The everyday complexities of social grant machinery must be understood in relation to the system's larger promises. Mundane operations are sustained partly through the ways that the social grant system is imagined. Crucial here is a particular faith in the benefits of technological innovation. In what follows, I explore the underside of this faith, and describe the tensions wrought by the changes in 2012. These include the way the state and private companies

29 J. Hanlon, A. Barrientos, and D. Hulme, *Just Give Money to the Poor: The Development Revolution from the Global South* (Sterling, Kumarian Press, 2010); Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish*.

30 World Bank, *Conditional Cash Transfers: Reducing Present and Future Poverty* (Washington DC, World Bank, 2009).

31 See, for example, B. Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure,and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2008); B. Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42, 1 (2013), pp. 327–43; A. von Schnitzler, 'Citizenship Prepaid: Water, Calculability, and Techno-Politics in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34, 4 (December 2008), pp. 899–917; von Schnitzler, 'Traveling Technologies'.

32 Von Schnitzler, 'Traveling Technologies', p. 671.

33 *Ibid.*

34 E.S. van Eeden, E.H. Ryke, and I.C. De Necker, 'The Welfare Function of the South African Government Before and After Apartheid', *Social Work – Stellenbosch*, 36, 1 (2000), pp. 1–24.

35 F. Barchiesi, 'Classes, Multitudes and the Politics of Community Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa', Centre for Civil Society Research Report (Durban, UKZN, 2004); Lund, *Changing Social Policy*, p. 6.

view claimants, instabilities in the technologies themselves, how access to money becomes precarious, the scarcity and casualisation of labour, and the ultimate precarity of the lives of grant claimants. Foregrounding these instances challenges the perspective that privatisation and new technologies necessarily improve systems and experiences. I turn first to the everyday insecurity experienced in the course of waiting for grant payments, in a system lauded for its apparent efficiency.

Waiting for Social Grants After 2012

The extent to which grants 'work' is most commonly measured using indices of poverty reduction, benefits to childhood development, and access to education.[36] These are vital metrics of security. Social security, in the form of state-funded social grants, is intended precisely to target those seen as 'vulnerable' in society. Fully understanding vulnerability requires taking into account a complex set of factors that extend beyond monetary analysis.

But the question of whether cash transfers 'work' needs also to be thought of outside the realm of strict public policy concerns, and in terms of the different sorts of security or insecurity that grant technologies may engender on the ground. In South Africa, where access to waged employment is scarce, Jonny Steinberg and James Ferguson argue that grants are not a stop-gap measure until work is found, but are likely to be the only foreseeable source of income for many people. Steinberg argues that grants extend dignity to claimants and support 'life, not idleness'.[37] The centrality of social assistance also means that waiting for grants becomes an important dimension of everyday insecurity.

Thinking of 'the poor'[38] as affected only, or perhaps primarily, by a decrease in material hardships ignores a multiplicity of other insecurities. An important way to look at the grant system is by focusing on the impact that actually making claims has on people's time. In South Africa, many grant recipients welcomed the convenience promised by the centralised CPS system and the large card-linked cash distribution network. The system was promoted as an overhaul of social grant payouts, as a way to increase order and so decrease the long amounts of time spent in queues.[39] But this goal needs to be submitted to on-the-ground assessment. I turn now to an ethnographic snapshot, which reveals a more complex reality.

Early one day, Andrew, a CPS employee, was dispatched to a large retailer in one of the main towns of Bushbuckridge to assist with faulty biometric grant payment machines. There were two long queues that originated from the retailer. The first squirmed into the parking lot, through the market, and stretched into the street. In the same month, the retailer had moved the tables for the first step of the process (loading the money on to the card) to just outside the entrance of the shop. Previously, money was loaded on to the card just inside the glass doors. The new way, Johan (the shop's manager) explained, makes congestion less likely. The first step was attended by a young woman, Nthabiseng. I had been standing there for about five minutes, and she had not yet been able to serve a woman at the head of the queue. Nthabiseng explained that the battery was low and, even though the unit was plugged in to a wall socket, the rate at which it charged was slower than the battery power that was being used to load the money on to the cards.

36 Case, Hosegood, and Lund, 'The Reach and Impact of Child Support Grants'; Case and Menendez, 'Does Money Empower The Elderly?'; Twine *et al.*, 'Evaluating Access'; L. Patel and J. Triegaardt, 'South Africa: Social Security, Poverty Alleviation and Development', in *Social Security, the Economy and Development* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 85–109; Progressus and Gordon, 'The Payment Experiences of Social Grant Beneficiaries'.

37 J. Steinberg, 'Idea of Jobs for All Blinds Us to Need for Welfare', *Business Day*, Johannesburg, 26 July 2013.

38 A complex understanding of the construction of 'the poor' as a category, as well as a placeholder for the discourse of 'responsibilisation' in post-apartheid South Africa, can be found in P. Naidoo, 'The Making of "The Poor" in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Case Study of the City of Johannesburg and Orange Farm', PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010.

39 L. Steyn, 'Stores Score on Pension Payday', *Mail and Guardian*, 3 February 2012, available at http://mg.co.za/article/2012-02-03-stores-score-on-pension-payday/, retrieved 9 April 2014.

The queue on the other side of the shop ran more smoothly, and the light of the machine glowed red when it was ready to scan a fingerprint. Most claimants held their fingers on the pad for too long and with too little pressure to register the print, although there is no clear sense of a standard time or pressure. The retail employee operating the machine was perched on the table. She didn't make eye contact while the production line cranked along – receiving the card, jiggling it, red light, pressing a finger down, tearing a receipt off, returning the card and receipt – or was stalled at one of these stages.

A man at the front of the queue stood off to the side. He was vigorously wiping his hands on his trousers. As he waited, there was a second elderly man with his card inserted into the machine that would not recognise his print. He went on to try several different fingers, wiped them on his trousers and tried again. That did not work, so he moved patiently to the side while other claimants shuffled through the procession. Both men went on to be directed by the store official to wipe their hands in an attempt to get the fingerprint pad to recognise their prints. This crude solution in fact often worked: dust, or products applied to the hands, can make fingerprint ridges difficult to recognise. The two men were old and their hands looked rough and heavily worked. The reason that elderly people, men in particular, were most likely to have their fingerprints go unrecognised was that manual labour and wear over time could affect or prevent readings. After about five minutes, an employee came out with a cloth, a normal dishtowel collected from inside the store. The men wiped their hands again and this time the machine registered their fingerprints.

These queues were the first of two stops a claimant had to make at the shop. At the lines outside, after claimants gave the employees their SASSA card and put their finger on to the pad, they were provided with a receipt along with the returned card. This receipt served to establish that there were funds allocated for the claimant in the linked account. At the second stage, the card and the receipt from the first stop were handed to the teller. The cost of any purchased goods was calculated and deducted from the grant, and then the claimant chose how much of the money that remained in the account they wished to receive in cash. At the till, the cashier put the card into a second unit and the fingerprint was read again.

Johan told me that, in the first three days this month, this particular shop paid out R6 million in social grants – an indication of the scale of the service. Despite large monthly grant payouts, Johan complained that the shop made no profit from paying grant money. He relayed that, since many of the stores find that they are not profiting from the payment of social grants, a meeting of the shop's management decided that only one till would be devoted solely to paying out grant money. The other tills would be 'made available' should any claimant wish to purchase something while retrieving their grant payment. As I walked around inside, I noticed that there was a sign above every till but one that read, '[t]his till if you're buying grosery [*sic*]'; the last till's sign said, '[u]se this till if you only want pension'. The last queue was much longer than the others and, in addition to its length, it also shuffled along more slowly than the other lines. People were made to choose between the immediacy of purchasing something at this shop or waiting. Johan explained this decision: 'so we are not forcing people to buy something, but they may say "I'm rather going to buy something than wait in a queue of 400 people"'.

Johan's insistence that paying out grants was not profitable did not mirror national reports. The South African media, in the first months that grant payments were available from stores, called the system a 'bonanza' for retailers.[40] While claimants are not obliged to spend money at the store, people are 'encouraged' to spend 10 per cent of the money that has been loaded on to their cards and only then withdraw the remaining amount from the cashiers at the tills.[41]

40 'Grants: Short-Changed in Long Queues', *Mail and Guardian*, 3 February 2012, available at http://mg.co.za/multimedia/2012-02-02-grants-shortchanged-in-long-queues, retrieved 8 July 2016.
41 *Ibid.*

The amount of money that people spend at retailers after claiming grants is variable, but the director of Boxer Superstores said that, across the 95 stores nationwide, more money was spent on grant payment days than on payday.[42] In areas where there are few retail stores accessible, it is more convenient to spend grant money at the payout point in order to mitigate transport costs.

Even though SASSA encouraged a system that would allow claimants greater numbers of places to collect grants, the arrangement with retailers was initiated, and is co-ordinated, by Net1. Retail outlets thus have no formalised communication with any governmental body and co-ordinated their logistics and recovered their money from the contracted company. Stores have been required to give an amount equal to approximately 0.25 per cent of the figure that they paid out back to Net1 for what the contractor calls ‘equipment hiring costs’. At a national level, stores have been able to recoup these Net1 ‘rental’ fees safely, due to the fact, as detailed above, that claimants are simultaneously direct consumers who increase the stores’ profits. The arrangement for payment from retailers provoked three concerns from the Department of Social Development (DSD).[43] The first was that grant claimants may not be paid the full amount; the second, that people were obliged to buy products at these stores in order to claim money; the last, that the stores were not accountable to anyone regarding the quality of food and other products being sold to claimants.

A concern that government did not raise in their challenge to the relationship between retailers and Net1 was that the efficiency promised by supermarkets has often not been realised. Claimants at supermarkets often still go on to wait in long queues despite the payment at supermarkets having been touted as a service that would diminish waiting times. The vignette of a payment day above is indicative of this tedious process. Another factor that has contributed to long waits is that cashiers, primarily for safety but also because of the physical limitations of cash registers, are permitted to hold only a limited amount of money in their registers. During the period of fieldwork, the average amount in a till was R20,000, which meant that only 14 old-age grants (with a monthly transfer amount of R1,350 per person) could be paid before the cashier needed to replenish the money in the register. In order to refill the register at the retailer in Bushbuckridge, a cashier was required to go to the management’s offices in the rear of the large shop. Once there, the cashier completed a form and then used their fingerprint to access a safe, and afterwards another document was signed confirming retrieval of the money. This process – which connected the biometric requirements of the cashier and those of the claimant – took time. Since a cashier was assigned a specific machine for the day, no one was able to relieve them from their position while they were away and, as a result, all those waiting in the queue were further delayed. At the one till that was allocated exclusively to retrieving a grant, the need to replenish the money in the till was frequent and the waiting persistent.

A further anxiety of large retailers in the early days of the month was the concern of having large amounts of money on the premises. The director of Boxer Superstores, Andrew Mills, argued that retailers offered a safer point of withdrawal than mobile cash paypoints, which had attracted armed robbery in the past.[44] However, Johan said that fears of armed robbery at the stores were acute and justified. For this reason, only when the store had almost exhausted its cache of money did it go on to request a dispatch of armoured vehicles from CPS headquarters. The armoured vehicles travelled 100 kilometres from the CPS headquarters in Hoedspruit along a regional road that is an artery for large coal trucks transporting goods. Once the money had arrived, armed guards escorted the cash to the safe, and the necessary documentation of receipt was filed. Throughout, claimants would continue to wait in queues to retrieve their money.

The presumption that technologies of grant delivery through the access point of supermarkets would ameliorate crime – or the fear thereof – is unfounded. Furthermore, an earlier form of

42 Steyn, ‘Stores Score on Pension Payday’.
43 *Ibid.*
44 *Ibid.*

insecurity, which came from needing money and time to travel substantial distances to access grants, has been replaced by static waiting, where bodies are shuffled along in unpredictable stops and starts. One of the punitive aspects of waiting is precisely the uncertainty – the lack of clarity about the length of time and the processes involved at each stage. Javier Auyero, who engaged in ethnographic work in a welfare office (at the Ministerio de Desarrollo Social in Buenos Aires), argues that being forced to wait for welfare services persuades poor people to be patient clients of the state or 'Patients of the State'.[45] The client citizen in South Africa is forced into 'stuckedness'[46] by a collaboration of the state and private contractors, and by the latter's profit-based negotiations with further private entities. Ironically, most of the examples of stuckedness above were motivated by the promise of efficiency, of slicker and faster grant administration and delivery. Yet the attempts to increase efficiency and derive profits had still further-reaching effects on recipients' insecurity. I explore these by focusing on the apparent arbitrariness of cancelled grants, and the unpredictability of unannounced deductions for services and debts.

Cancelled Grants, Deductions, and the Vagaries of a National Payment System

SASSA explained the efficacy of grant delivery under the new system in two broad ways. The first was in terms of it being more efficient for claimants. The second was that the system would be more streamlined with regards to cost and delivery. According to SASSA, a national system under CPS would be cheaper (a ceiling would be placed on administrative costs for five years) and the biometric registration programme would diminish fraudulent access to grants.

The emphasis on efficiency was the basis of a crucial source of claimant insecurity, right from the outset in 2012; this was the real fear of the loss of access to a grant through cancellation. The preoccupation with cancelling fraudulent grants predated the single contractor; it had been a persistent concern of post-apartheid social welfare. Fraud was described in 1996, by the then Department of Welfare, as when 'money is paid to people who should not be in the system in the first place'.[47] Streamlining social assistance became inexorably associated with eliminating unauthorised grant claims. These concerns would go on to shape the four committees set up in as many years between 1996 and 2000.[48] The committees generally advanced the view that the disjointedness of apartheid's organisational forms was the primary obstacle preventing efficiency and the curbing of profligacy.[49]

While committees emphasised the necessity to identify claimants 'correctly', the Department of Welfare began to freeze out recipients who it thought were defrauding the system. In February of 1997, the *Mail and Guardian* newspaper announced that R1 billion of the R14.3-billion social security budget was being 'lost' to pension fraud per annum.[50] Compared to a report by the newspaper nine years later, this was a sizeable amount: in 2006, a comparatively lower proportion – R1.4 billion – was considered to be defrauded from the state from a total budget of R57 billion.[51] These figures, although clearly still high, dispute claims that fraud – defined

45 J. Auyero, *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2012).

46 G. Hage, 'Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality', in G. Hage (ed.),*Waiting* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Publishing, 2009), pp. 97–107.

47 Department of Welfare, *Report of the Committee for the Restructuring of Social Security (Chikane Committee)* (Pretoria, Department of Welfare and Population Development, 1996).

48 The 1996 Committee for Restructuring of Social Security or 'Chikane Committee', the 1997 *White Paper for Social Welfare*, the 1998 Lund Committee for Child and Family Support, and the 2000 Taylor Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa.

49 Donovan, 'The Biometric Imaginary'.

50 'South Africa Loses R1bn a Year to Pension Fraud', *Mail and Guardian*, 14 February 1997.

51 *Ibid.*; see also T. Reddy and A. Sokomani, 'Corruption and Social Grants in South Africa', *ISS Monograph* (November 2008), p. 19.

broadly as grants being accessed by those who do not qualify – was growing. While individual fraudulent activities were cited as a significant barrier to the provision of a streamlined grant system, and therefore posited by the government as a reason for the necessity of new social assistance infrastructure, the evidence rather seems to suggest that, on a practical level, the new infrastructure did not eradicate individual fraudulent activities. But, as I outline next, neither do these cases merit the concern that had been ascribed to them.

Both before and since 2012, there have been cases where people who do not qualify for assistance through the means tests nevertheless receive grants. Old-age grants, which are the second most common transfer, are not means tested in practice, and treasury has asserted that testing will no longer be required by policy. Furthermore, fraud occurs at an individual level in cases of disability grants, where someone designated procurator – who collects money on behalf of the claimant – doesn't do care work or make the money available to the intended claimant. Disability grants account for only 6 per cent of all grants paid, and the cases of procurator fraud represent a small percentage of these. People may also continue to receive grant money for claimants who are deceased. This is, practically, a very difficult undertaking; fingerprint identification can be forged (pre-2012 and beyond) and the systems may not work, but they do act as a hindrance. In areas like Bushbuckridge, people acknowledged recent deaths through networks, and notices in local newspapers made it difficult to conceal death. At paypoints, family members could provide a death certificate and the deceased person's identity document, upon which the SASSA official present would stamp 'deceased' in large red block letters and record the claimant's details in order to remove the person from the system. A large incentive for doing this was that the family member would then be able to collect a once-off grant payment due to be paid to the deceased person; this money was invaluable to the family for arranging funeral and burial proceedings. In sum, claiming grant money on behalf of a deceased person was complicated and prevented an injection of much needed money in the immediate aftermath of a death. Generally, it is questionable whether fraud in individual grant claimants' activities has been a driving factor in the inefficiencies of the social assistance program.

It will always be impossible to ascertain the exact numbers of individual fraud cases, but it is unlikely that they are growing. The important issue here is not whether these cases have occurred, but rather what the existence and inflation of these instances did – in other words, what the discourse of cheating claimants facilitated. In the run-up to 2012, it provided DSD, SASSA, and hopeful private contractors a platform upon which to base the need for a new system and to privatise and centralise grant infrastructure. Yet setting up a new system had real effects for recipients, regardless of whether they might lose their grants. Not only was the bureaucracy involved in re-registration burdensome, but claimants had to organise transport money and time to be present for re-registration. All of this could result in security and efficiency in the long term, despite the short-term insecurity it produced. But, as this article argues, in many ways it has failed to do so.

The implementation of national systems of biometric registration, coupled with a renewed official focus on perceived fraud by individuals, escalated grant cancellation. SASSA celebrated their finding that, '[b]etween April 2012 and June 2013, over 150,000 grants were cancelled, which has led to a savings of R150 million per annum'.[52] In 2013/2014, the number of grants being paid decreased, after having grown exponentially every year from 1994; this drop was attributed to a large number of cancelled grants.[53] Minister of DSD Bathabile Dlamini's review

52 Morokolo, 'SASSA Debit MasterCard Reaches Milestone', SA IT News, 21 August 2013, retrieved 6 December 2013 from http://saitnews.co.za/e-government/sassa-debit-mastercard-reaches-2/ (no longer available).

53 L. Moloi, 'South Africa Survey Online 2014/2015: Social Security', *South Africa Survey* (Johannesburg, Institute of Race Relations, 2014).

of the year during her 2013/14 budget speech applauded the work being undertaken to curb fraud. She announced that, '[w]e cancelled 850,000 grants and we saved R2 billion that was returned to the fiscus in September 2013, plus an additional saving of R1 billion (unspent funds) as at the end of the financial year'.[54]

The logic was that targeting and shutting out unauthorised individuals would facilitate a sleek grant delivery infrastructure. However, equating cancelled grants with fraudulent claims is, while temptingly simple, a dubious form of accounting.[55] Official reasons for exclusion are often left unexplained or attributed to claimants' failure to register in time. Claimants were made to fill in a form that declared their income (for the means test) prior to being registered on the grant payment software, but SASSA officials processing grant applications told me that they did not have the capacity to ensure 'that people are not lying'.[56] It remains the case that claimants declare their own income, which can result in fraudulent claims could going undetected, but this in turn manufactures doubt about all claimants. Responses to perceived (and real) 'lies' garner support from local officials for the advancement of biometric technologies, including those facilitated by Net1 and its subsidiaries, particularly after 2012. However, while 2012 biometric technology certainly introduced a form of identification security, it still did not have the ability to discern and detect fraudulent claims.

Claimants in Bushbuckridge, particularly over the period of re-registration, in 2012–13, felt that the loss of their grants in the huge push to cancel 'fraudulent' claims was an imminent possibility. The introduction of the new technologies, and the mass cancellation that followed, rendered claimants' grant money insecure. The blurry reasoning behind cancelled grants exacerbated the sense of insecurity, even for those who continued to receive money from the state, because retaining a grant in the future was never guaranteed. Insecurity in this case was not necessarily about an immediate effect but about an unknown and arbitrarily decided future.

Access to money became precarious in yet another way with the proliferation of grant deductions after 2012. Deductions covered a range of account debits, including loan repayments, prescribed debt, multiple funeral schemes, advance electricity and airtime, and even water payments.[57] Accusations had been levelled at private financial service providers, some of which are financially associated with Net1, for using grant claimants' information for direct advertising as well as to deduct loan repayments directly from claimants' accounts. CPS is paid R2 billion a year by the state for grant distribution, but it also earns an unspecified additional amount from profits generated through the sale of airtime, electricity and loan services through Net1 subsidiary companies.

After the national contracting of CPS, the Black Sash was inundated with an 'avalanche'[58] of complaints about debit deductions from social grant accounts, reported through their local advice offices.[59] Deductions were observed from an estimated 2.3 million out of the 10 million

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54 'Money Lenders in Court Over SASSA Fraud',*The Weekly*, Bloemfontein, 18 July 2014.

55 Interview with Elroy Paulus, National Advocacy Manager, Black Sash Trust, 27 March 2014; discussion with Sarah Sephton, Regional Director, Legal Resource Centre, Skype, 24 June 2014. All interviews for this article were conducted by the author.

56 Interview with Arthur Direto, Initial Grant Reregistration, New Forrest, Amashongane Tribal Authority Offices, 23 February 2013.

57 While the state is compelled to provide a fixed amount of free water per month, this often does not reach people or is not sufficient. Some work has shown that households can spend one-third of their income on water payments. See von Schnitzler, 'Traveling Technologies'; von Schnitzler's work references a study by M. Nefale, *A Survey on Attitudes Towards Prepaid Meters in Soweto* (Johannesburg, Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, 2004).

58 Black Sash, 'Unlawful, Immoral Deductions from Social Grants Should Stop, Says Black Sash', *Black Sash*, 29 May 2013, available at http://www.blacksash.org.za/index.php/media-and-publications/media-statements/1397-unlawful-immoral-deductions-from-social-grants-should-stop-says-black-sash-29-may-2013, retrieved 11 August 2013.

59 Black Sash is a partner of the Association for Community Advice Offices in South Africa.

bank accounts into which grants had been paid.[60] As the cases of deductions began to swell, and technologies applied in 2012 were shown not to ameliorate many of the insecurities faced by claimants, the Black Sash formed the *Hands Off Our Grants* campaign in November 2013. At first, it compiled a list of grant claimants who had filed complaints about unauthorised deductions, many of whom had kept their receipts and recorded the money leaking from their grants. In total, the *Hands Off Our Grants* campaign resulted in a log of hundreds of deductions for airtime, water, electricity, and loans from their grant accounts.[61]

The law has not been able to keep pace with the changing uses of technology, the centralised outsourcing of grants, questions of privacy and personal information, and the murky realm of information swapping and sharing that subsidiary companies allow. Furthermore, there are several laws that govern social assistance, including committee recommendations, service level agreements, and other legislation not explicitly targeted at social assistance.[62] Engaging with this plurality, and the confusion it generated, media, press statements, lawyers, and spokespeople have used various adjectives to refer to these deductions, including 'immoral', 'illegal', 'unlawful', and 'unauthorised'. The Black Sash was confident that the deductions were 'immoral', but the organisation was reluctant to term them illegal.[63] A further example of this equivocation could be found in a statement by the Minister of the DSD, '[w]hile some of these deductions may be technically legal, they remain immoral as they serve to rob the poor from the resources [*sic*] that we as South Africans provide for them, to meet their basic needs'.[64]

Deductions were particularly contested in relation to broader questions of debt. Money would be borrowed against social grants, and reimbursement would be subtracted from future grant pay-outs with the addition of exorbitant interest fees. A cycle of paying off debt from one lender to another often ensued, a practice explored by Deborah James.[65] The assistant manager of a CPS office, Nara Nkanyana, countered the argument that high interest fees were charged by Net1 subsidiaries. She explained these charges as 'service fees'.[66] Despite the word-play that replaced 'interest' with 'service fees', the single-page price list provided to borrowers in Bushbuckridge confirmed that the additional amount paid on top of a loan is 34.1 per cent.[67]

CPS officials and moneylenders working for Moneyline – a Net1 subsidiary offering short-term loans – emphasised a different aspect of these loans. They praised the service on account of the company being 'legal' and therefore running credit checks, unlike loan sharks. This was itself dubious. In my experience, the Moneyline officials who would set up outside paypoints in the first few days of every month never checked anyone's credit record and asked only for a SASSA card, a fingerprint, and a signature. Moreover, credit checks would be impossible in the time it took a claimant to walk the 100 metres to the payment point, where the loan that they took would already be available and paid out at the same time as their grant. The speed at which the loan was provided was something that Moneyline employees claimed made

60 M. Banderker, 'Grant Deductions Are Immoral: Black Sash',*Voice of the Cape*, Cape Town, 11 September 2014.

61 In the media, these bank accounts are often referred to as 'Sassa accounts'. However, while the card is branded with SASSA's name and logo, it is a Grindrod bank account and it is CPS that has a partnership with the bank.

62 This includes the Constitution, particularly the following sections: S27(1) the right to social security, S27(2) that these are rights subject to progressive realisation, and S(36) that the right can be limited to the extent that it is 'reasonable and justifiable in an open democratic society'. Furthermore, there are newer recommendations in the National Development Plan (NDP) that call for a social floor, or basic minimum standards, to be implemented by 2030.

63 M. Banderker, 'Black Sash Welcomes Legal Action Against CPS',*Voice of the Cape*, 17 September 2014.

64 'Minister Sets Sights on Loan Sharks', *Eastern Cape Today*, East London, 17 September 2014.

65 D. James, *Money From Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2014).

66 N. Ntuli, 'Grants Mixed Up In Microlending', *The Mercury*, Durban, 5 September 2014.

67 *Ibid.* Under the National Credit Act, passed in 2006, the maximum permissible interest rate on loans is 44 per cent.

them superior to banks. Immediacy trumped credit checks and, in reality, many of the people borrowing money would not be able to receive loans if checks were instituted.[68] The letter of the law might be conspicuously followed: at monthly paypoints, it often seemed that Moneyline officials had carefully measured 100 metres from the entrance, the minimum legal proximity for micro-lenders.[69] But uncertainty about what actually distinguishes registered and unregistered moneylenders continues, magnifying claimants' insecurity.

Net1 subsidiaries providing loans established themselves as an alternative, both to the vagaries of *mashonisas*[70] (neighbourhood moneylenders or loan sharks) and to the formal regulation of banks. However, they inhabit a world reminiscent of each. During my fieldwork, the difficulty of categorising Moneyline mirrored the ways in which formality and informality intertwined more generally.[71] Moneyline operates through portals of non-regulation or partial regulation, enabled by the absence of an office, eschewing credit checks, and ignoring detailed questions. Such a grey approach is detailed further below. Yet it also mobilises the formality of fingerprinting machines, paperwork, and an electronic system that was built to recoup loans through regular deductions from future grants.

1Life has been a particularly stark example of the deductions and coercion that provoked accusations of fraud against companies. The company is not a Net1 subsidiary, but is indicative of the kind of manipulation that can occur when private companies are connected to the delivery of state services. Agents for the company targeted old-age grant recipients and garnered confidence by assuring people that 1Life was approved by SASSA. Because grant claimants already associated private companies with SASSA, it was plausible that a 1Life official could have authorisation. The life policies taken through 1Life were often in addition to another policy or policies held by claimants. This should not have been possible. The Social Assistance Act specifies that the only deduction that is permitted from a grant is for a funeral policy, and this cannot exceed 10 per cent of the grant amount.

Pressure from advocacy groups contributed to 1Life's announcement that it had stopped deductions and refunded all beneficiaries. However, the company insisted that it could not cancel policies that were older than three months. The desires and efforts to hold 1Life accountable were also complicated by the reality that old-age grant claimants did not receive any paperwork from the agents selling the policies and were therefore left with no contractual documentation. Claimants' only paper trail was the monthly line item indicating a deduction from their state pensions. Once again, insecurity in relation to these deductions extended beyond the loss of money. It also resulted from uncertainties as to whether third-party providers were officially connected to SASSA or the grant system, and how exactly they were regulated.

Selling airtime involved advertising that was more clearly classified as 'illegal', as it involved direct marketing. The advertisements for airtime appeared on the receipt provided to grant claimants when they retrieved their transfers. I was told that it should be 'wrong for them to sell us something on our slips', an objection frequently articulated during my research. The advertisement enticed potential customers, through a marketing campaign called Umoya Manje ('air now'), to dial '*130*444# for amazing cardholder benefits'. Advertising was a particularly glaring source of resentment, but claimants' objections were not restricted to this frustration.

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68 Social grants cannot be used as surety for a loan.

69 According to the Social Assistance Acts.

70 As Deborah James notes, '*mashonisa*' is sometimes used by borrowers to refer to registered or unregistered lenders. However, for the purposes of drawing distinctions, I use the term to refer solely to the latter. James, *Money From Nothing*, p. 7.

71 See the following economic anthropological analyses, with varying degrees of focus on South Africa: J.I. Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004); K. Hart, J.L. Laville, and A.D. Cattani, 'Informal Economy', in *The Human Economy: A Citizen's Guide* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010); M. Bolt, 'Waged Entrepreneurs, Policed Informality: Work, the Regulation of Space and the Economy of the Zimbabwean–South African Border', *Africa*, 82, 1 (2012), pp. 111–30.

A document that was scribbled by a local official in a SASSA vehicle recorded unlawful deduction complaints made at a paypoint.[72] Claimants who noticed unauthorised deductions on their receipts were sent to this roving, cramped office. The SASSA official, on his maiden voyage as a monitor at the paypoints, told me that he was overwhelmed and feared that he would exhaust his supply of graph paper to record the grievances. The protocols that grant claimants were required to follow to query debt deductions were opaque and unstandardised. Two factors particularly underpinned the lack of recourse: the shifting of responsibility between institutions, and the shifting of responsibility to machines/computers. Both of these factors, I argue below – despite being filtered through murky institutional connections and apparently omniscient technologies – articulated responsibility and risk at the site of the individual claimant.

First, whichever body the claimant contacted to query their grant cancellation or deduction would pass them on to another – resulting in a back-and-forth between SASSA and CPS, with the claimant lost in the administrative shifting. Even claimants who had permitted debits from their SASSA accounts were lost in the shuffling when they discovered that the amounts being debited were not uniform amounts each month.[73] This was, paradoxically, a by-product of centralisation – something that follows the roll-out of a single biometric infrastructure because of the need for institutions of identification.[74] Centralisation enabled these inconsistent deductions against people's codified identification and led to limited access to effective mechanisms to address queries and complaints. Along with the privatisation of grant services, centralisation prevented local SASSA offices from providing recourse to claimants who queried aspects of grant administration and delivery. This was not only because the sheer number of complaints was paralysing, but also because local bureaucratic ability had been subsumed under a nebulous nationalised authority. The advertisement for the 'social grants fraud and corruption hotline', which appears at the bottom of every page of SASSA's website, displays a toll-free number and shows a hand holding an eraser that is in the process of deleting the word 'corruption' in the phrase 'stamp out corruption'.[75] An affected claimant, Diena Twala, who noticed deductions from her account in November 2013, said: 'I went to complain at the SASSA office. I told them I haven't made any loans and I don't buy electricity using this card'. Despite the hotlines directing her to consult her local SASSA office, Twala's attempts were fruitless.

> They shouted at me and told me they couldn't help me because it had nothing to do with them. It continued with different amounts [being deducted] in 2014, but in December [2014] I got nothing, they took everything … I spent so much money calling helplines and travelling into town and still nothing helped.[76]

SASSA officials' obtuse responses are partly indicative of their own frustration. Computerised technology had relocated and removed direct participation: leaving officials on the receiving end of angry complaints from claimants, but paralysing them with no technical ability to override or immediately correct the system. This leads into my next point, related to the envisioning of technology itself.

Secondly, in many instances, SASSA offices and CPS individuals told grant claimants that deductions appeared on the computer system and therefore must, by definition, be authorised. While technologies are often made enticing by emphasising how cutting-edge they are, large

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72 N. Vally, 'A List of Deductions Recorded by a Sassa Official at a Paypoint in Bushbuckridge',unpublished photograph, Bushbuckridge, 12 August 2014.

73 S. Guduka, 'Pensioner Exploited?', *News24*, South Africa, 21 July 2015, available at http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Local/Express-News/Pensioner-exploited-20150721, retrieved 26 July 2015.

74 K. Breckenridge, *Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 19–20.

75 South African Social Security Agency, 'South African Social Security Agency', *SASSA Home*, available at http://www.sassa.gov.za/, retrieved 1 December 2013.

76 B. Maregele, 'South Africa: SASSA Beneficiaries Still Struggling with Illegal Deductions', *GroundUp*, Cape Town, 22 July 2015, available athttp://allafrica.com/stories/201507221226.html, retrieved 5 December 2015.

technological systems for administration have rarely translated into the stability imagined. Instead, they have long been the objects of blame, deflection, and strategic deferral as ultimate decision makers. Biometric technologies in general have been focused, from their earlier development to their current incarnation, on the 'solving' and 'ordering' of 'the limits of the old paper state – of slow, susceptible or unreliable bureaucratic processing, of forgery, deception and translation in the preparation of documents'.[77] In South Africa, the machines created to read biometric information were tangled into the fabric of the new social assistance system. This 'smart future', as Breckenridge shows, was depicted as fast, predictable, organised and reliable,[78] and as rendering paper (often blamed for the sluggishness and vicissitudes of bureaucracy) obsolete. The reality was much more complicated. Privatising the operation and technologies of administration in fact produced an unwieldy accommodation with the state and its bureaucracy. Also, paper did not disappear and, in some instances, additional paper was generated as supplementary to the systems, or in response to unexpected failures of machinery.

Company Entanglements

The technologies extended in 2012 intensified precarity through waiting, cancellations, and deductions. Many of these insecurities were attributable to the privatisation of grant services. But more troubling was the web of company entanglements that ensued. Net1 maintained that their actions were 'ethically defensible'. They insisted that: '[p]eople are free of mind, and you still have to allow them to do what they want with their grant money. If they want to spend it on airtime, they're going to'.[79] Net1 claimed that the company was merely responding to demands and promoting financial inclusion.[80]

Yet my ongoing conversations with the Black Sash indicated that there *was* something particular about a privatised system operating at a national scale that had resulted in unexpected insecurities. The DSD echoed this sentiment by claiming a marked spike in deductions since the contract was awarded to CPS in 2012.[81] The Black Sash had consistently drawn attention to deductions and high-interest loans, but was clear that the linkages between the various Net1 subsidiaries were responsible for the dramatic scale of the problem. The organisation warned claimants to be aware about protecting their personal information, as '[t]hat private information is now being traded and stolen. Your identity is being stolen'.[82]

The insistence that these companies were independent was belied by the entanglements amongst them. First, they are 'sister companies' of the same parent company, Net1, and are therefore bound by similar management and administrative frameworks. The share price of Net1 and the group chief executive officer are common to all companies. As grants are paid out monthly, CPS and Moneyline were tightly knotted in numerous ways. In my fieldwork I observed that, during the first weeks of the month, Moneyline employees would meet early at the CPS offices to receive the necessary forms and a portable payment machine each. All of these short-term casual employees were hired by a handful of CPS officials, all on longer-term contracts.

Following one such CPS employee is instructive. From early 2012, every second day, Andrew would be on the road by 5 a.m., embarking on the hour-long journey through the Bushbuckridge municipality. Andrew was tasked with travelling through Bushbuckridge to repair devices used to register or pay grant claimants. He also fixed payment-related problems, and facilitated the

77 Breckenridge, *Biometric State*, p. 16.
78 *Ibid.*
79 S. Belamant, quoted in A. Crotty, 'Millions of Grant Recipients Ripped Off'', *Business Day Live*, 7 September 2014.
80 E. Pickworth, 'Net1 Denies Subsidiary Has Behaved Illegally', *Business Day Live*, 12 September 2014.
81 L. Twani, 'Minister Sets Sights on Loan Sharks', *Eastern Cape Today*, 12–19 September 2014.
82 E. Paulus, quoted in Banderker, 'Grant Deductions Are Immoral'.

installation of new machines. The expansive municipality is made up of several small towns, including Andrew's home, Thulamahashe, where he would begin his journey towards the town of Hoedspruit at the beginning of his shift. Andrew was one of two people with office space at Bushbuckridge's headquarters of CPS. Even though his role was as official co-ordinator of CPS's operations, he would organise and negotiate the work of other Net1 subsidiaries in the area as well, by planning their daily schedules and employing new recruits. After collecting their machines, Moneyline employees would then climb into the back of Andrew's pick-up truck, and get a lift from Hoedspruit to the villages and small towns of Bushbuckridge, ready to offer credit. As the employees climbed out of the back, they would arrange a time and place to meet, late that afternoon, to be driven back to Hoedspruit to 'cash up'. The machines, people, and final accounting all came from, and returned to, one place – the CPS headquarters.

Moving Forward: Forming a Ministerial Task Team

Although they continued to gather information, the Black Sash realised that SASSA's growing dissatisfaction with the CPS system offered further possibilities for action – they could harness government's concerns to push for more concrete changes. The Black Sash's management team met with the DSD in March 2014 to begin to draft a terms-of-reference document for the formation of a joint task team. The recommendations that came out of the task team were that CPS should restrict third-party access to information or grant money, immediately stop any new Umoya Manje deductions and reverse any that had already been set up, and be accountable for any party lending money 'recklessly', including the reimbursement of any debt incurred. All the recommendations were accepted by the minister. The terms of reference also proposed a reassessment of the Service Level Agreement (SLA) between SASSA and the grant service provider. The push to revise the SLA was well timed. In April 2014, the Constitutional Court ruled that, since the current tender was invalid,[83] SASSA would be required to revise its specifications and run another tender process. In the meantime, in order to ensure that there was no halt to the delivery of grant services, CPS would continue as the service provider until a new contractor was appointed.

SASSA drafted a revised request for proposals (RFP) in early April 2014, and bidders were expected to have submitted their applications by the 17th of the month. In the new specifications, the winning contractor would distribute grants at a flat rate of R14.50 per claimant, and extend free banking services to all claimants. The Constitutional Court ruling did make the provision that, if none of the new bidders were able to execute the administration and payment of grants according to the new tender specifications, the contract would revert back to CPS on the current terms. CPS unexpectedly announced to its shareholders on 18 May 2015 that it would withdraw from the tender process. Net1 reiterated that it would persist in providing products and services for South Africans, but independently and without SASSA's limitations and constraints: Net1

> will no longer be limited by a five year contract … [not being contractually bound] provides the company with the ability to freely determine pricing that is both competitive and profitable and removes any unknown or contingent liabilities associated with government contracts.[84]

Were Net1 to have bid, they would be liable to provide services according to the RFP.[85] Net1's withdrawal from the tendering process was not unexpected among officials in Bushbuckridge,

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83 As per the November 2013 Constitutional Court ruling.

84 G. van Zyl, 'Net1 Walks Away from New Sassa Tender',*Tech Central*, Johannesburg, 18 May 2015, available at http://www.techcentral.co.za/net1-walks-away-from-new-sassa-tender/56704/, retrieved 15 November 2015.

85 Interview with Black Sash about the Ministerial Task Team and the Sassa request for proposals, Johannesburg, 6 July 2015.

who foresaw that the company's interest in secondary financial services was more important than that of the payment of grants. In the periods that I spent in Bushbuckridge over two years, officials would spend more time involved in the business of Moneyline and other Net1 subsidiaries than in the work of CPS and the payment of grants. Ultimately, Net1 had acquired the machinery and other hardware, the knowledge of how to put them into practice in South Africa, the employ of people with the required skills and local knowledge to implement their infrastructure, and the information and databases that it needed in order to maintain a thriving business without direct connections to the state. These priorities are important to understand for an analysis of South Africa's grant infrastructure. The distributive potential that cash transfers may provide are being forestalled by money being re-routed into private pockets.

Insecurities in the life of social grants have taken on unexpected forms since the introduction of a national payment system. In the push to standardise social assistance, tensions arise as to which parties control information and ultimately acquire the benefits.[86] Fraud, in which the central villains were 'cheating individuals', became the predominant problem to be solved by the new infrastructure. However, this preoccupation had the effect of creating substantial uncertainty in the lives of recipients, who were unsure whether their grants would be cancelled. Moreover, the privatisation of grant administration and payment have lead to insecurities in the privacy of grant claimants' personal information. This, in turn, has resulted in the precarity of grant money itself, largely in the form of fraudulent deductions. Unwieldy on-the-ground arrangements have produced a third form of insecurity, as people with fragile livelihoods are left waiting for unpredictable periods for grant payments. In conclusion, the national card-based biometric enrolment and payment system was advanced as a way to make social grant payment more secure – for claimants, the state, the national fiscus, and the welfare of the population presumed by the concept of social security. But it has rather translated into forms of insecurity, which reinforce and reproduce precarity. This is made all the more capricious when private companies are connected to the delivery of state services. In such an environment, confusion abounds regarding the degree to which arrangements are officially sanctioned. The line between registered and unregistered, between legal and illegal, becomes increasingly malleable. And recourse becomes ever more difficult, as grant claimants are led hither and thither in a manner that only underlines everyday insecurity.

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86 G.C. Bowker and S.L. Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification And Its Consequences* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2000), p. 140.