

**The London School of Economics and Political  
Science**

**ROOTING PRODUCTION:**

**LIFE AND LABOUR ON THE SETTLER FARMS OF THE  
ZIMBABWEAN-SOUTH AFRICAN BORDER**

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology  
of the London School of Economics  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
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*For my grandparents, Fred, Pat and Audrey,  
who saw this begun but not finished.*

## **DECLARATION**

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is about a workforce in the midst of regional economic fragmentation. It is an ethnographic study of a commercial farm on South Africa's border with Zimbabwe, where farmer-landowners are white Afrikaners, and workers black and overwhelmingly Zimbabwean. Fleeing the hyperinflation and violent state oppression of the 'Zimbabwean crisis', farm workers encounter South Africa's neoliberal restructuring, contraction of labour-intensive industry, and land reform. Economic informalisation in both countries – a shift to short-term strategies of 'making do' – seems to hail the disappearance of southern Africa's longer-term patterns of racialised migrant labour systems. This thesis, however, argues for a labour relations or 'productivist' perspective on current trends. Agricultural workforces on the Zimbabwean-South African border, with their established forms of everyday organisation and on-site residence, profoundly shape the local setting. Their highly structured arrangements bear the mark of the region's labour history, yet also reflect the forms of fragmentation currently characterising southern Africa.

The thesis begins by exploring white border farmers' self-understandings through their notions of success. It then offers a wider historical account of the border's settler capitalists, their struggles for control of land and labour, and the role played by their enterprises as hubs of settlement. Focusing on one border farm today, the study turns to the black workforce itself. It investigates how permanent workers consolidate their powerful positions in diverse areas of life, blurring spheres of work and non-work; how seasonal workers, many displaced from Zimbabwe, with diverse socio-economic backgrounds, engage with the hierarchies built around their permanent counterparts; and how, in the midst of all this, senior black workers struggle over status by means of contrasting models of authority, pitting established paternalism against idioms of corporate management. Together, these perspectives reveal how a workforce's internal arrangements both reflect and refract the wider dynamics of the border and of Zimbabwean displacement. The thesis finally develops this central theme by addressing the position of farm work in a wider economy of trade and services on the farms and across the border.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork on one border farm, and in the border area more generally (November 2006-April 2008), and supported by archival research, this thesis contributes to the anthropology of work. It shows how workplace dynamics act as a prism, refracting the meanings of work, movement and upheaval in an era of informalisation, and embed displaced migrant workers in dense webs of dependence and obligation.

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## LIST OF KEY CHARACTERS

### *The Grootplaas farming family*

**Koos:** founder of Grootplaas, now retired

**Willem:** Koos' son-in-law, who now runs Grootplaas

**Jacques:** Willem's son, who manages an estate up the road

**Paul:** Koos' son, who helps Willem run Grootplaas

### *The white border farmers and managers*

**Jan:** Koos' neighbour, and farming partner in the 1980s

**Thinus:** one of three brothers on the border. Producer of tomatoes for AllGold ketchup

**Jim:** Thinus' partner in one of his land portions

**Dirk:** formerly a border farmer, who went bankrupt. Now Jan's manager

**Andre:** the Grootplaas production manager

### *The Grootplaas workforce and compound residents*

**Michael:** personnel manager

**Holly:** Michael's partner

**Marula:** foreman

**Benjamin:** storeman

**Hardship, Ezekiel:** members of Marula's Lands Team and harvest-time supervisors

**Norman:** senior driver

**Sarah:** Norman's wife

**Joyce:** Norman's partner at the farm

**Margaret:** former teacher, and the wife of a security guard

**Alex, Vusa, Simon, Tendai:** young, educated Zimbabwean men working as pickers

**George:** educated Rastafarian, whose shop was destroyed in *Murambatsvina*, now a picker

**Chipo:** cigarette salesman and picker

**Jameson:** former teacher, with university education, now a picker

**Jenny:** Jameson's wife

**Daniel:** tractor driver

**MaiJimmy:** Daniel's sister, a semi-permanent worker who runs a *shebeen*

**Josiah:** owner of a rival *shebeen*

**Cornelius:** taxi driver

## PROLOGUE



Michael and his neighbour tightened the straps on the *bakkie's*<sup>1</sup> canopy, while a small crowd looked on. The *bakkie* – a tiny 1400-capacity Nissan I had bought for the period of fieldwork – sat low on its wheels under the weight of several sheets of corrugated metal, door and window frames, and a range of other building materials. Under the canopy, the back of the truck was packed full of provisions, including petrol for our trip and goods for remittance. It still had to accommodate Michael, his neighbour, their partners and me – three in the front and two in the back. After packing, we would drive out of the labour compound, onto the tar road that runs along the South African border fence, and then cross over into Zimbabwe at Beitbridge.

It was Easter 2007, and Michael and his neighbour were making a trip to their rural homes in Zimbabwe. After months saving his wages, Michael, personnel manager of Grootplaas Estates, had invested in housing materials. These he was gradually stockpiling at home, with a view eventually to building a house for his retirement. Like many members of Grootplaas' black workforce, who live in the

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<sup>1</sup> Pick-up truck.

<sup>2</sup> <http://doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/article.cfm?id=3408&cat=special-report>.

farm's labour compound and visit rural homes in Zimbabwe on holidays, Michael was saving up for his old age. Since Grootplaas is located right on the banks of the Limpopo River, its workers and their dependents often just climb through the border fence. But for such a trip, laden with investments and remittances, Michael and his neighbour had to go by road.

As one of the most senior black workers in the racially and class-divided world of a white-owned agricultural estate, he was paid well and was unusually well placed to make such long-term investments. Others, positioned lower in the hierarchy, made similarly strenuous efforts. Gerald, who lived next to me in the labour compound, put some of his monthly earnings towards buying cattle to expand his herd, in a manner common to male labour migrants across the region. Others returned home to show their success and to maintain prestige and connections: Elton, another permanent employee, did so by spending lavishly on beer for his friends and relatives, despite serious debts to Grootplaas residents. His sharp leather cowboy hat and jacket augmented his reputation of conspicuous consumer.

This scene is an indicator of Zimbabwe's recent political and economic crisis. A huge number of Zimbabweans now depend on work in South Africa to sustain themselves and their families. Statistics are unreliable because most Zimbabweans come through the border fence but, by 2009, Doctors Without Borders put the number at an estimated total of 3,000,000.<sup>2</sup> Michael's remittances included basic necessities that his relatives were unable to obtain in Zimbabwe because of huge supply shortages. He himself had sought employment at Grootplaas at the time when other opportunities began to shrink in the 1990s. Formerly an administrator in the Zimbabwean army, he had left just as the economy began contracting because of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP). He had reached Grootplaas by a roundabout route: after a period of attempting to capitalise on increased migration southwards by operating a taxi, he had unsuccessfully sought work in Johannesburg as an undocumented migrant. Gerald had been an activist for the Zimbabwean opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change. He had left Zimbabwe in the early 2000s after having been imprisoned for his political activities. A high-school graduate with A-

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<sup>2</sup> <http://doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/article.cfm?id=3408&cat=special-report>. Accessed 18.13pm on 21/1/10.

levels,<sup>3</sup> he had never expected to be a farm worker. His story of dislocation and personal disruption echoes those of others in Grootplaas' core workforce. Such stories are even more typical in the case of its harvest-time seasonal labourers.

The scene is not only one that speaks of chaos and disruption. It is also, at the same time, a story of the classic dynamics of southern African labour migration, in which black men from rural areas spend their working lives at hubs of capitalist production in order eventually to return home as esteemed elders. As in the better-known case of the mines,<sup>4</sup> the farm's resident black workforce lives in a designated area – the compound – in a highly racially divided setting. For workers on border farms like Grootplaas, spending their wages on remittances draws money away from what they might expend on living life in the compound itself. Labour compounds, in addition to being places of accommodation for workers, become homes and closely knit communities in their own right. As in mine compounds, workforces develop and uphold complex status hierarchies. The terms 'displaced' or 'refugee', on the one hand, and 'labour migrant', on the other, evoke very different images, especially in this region of the world. But here they converge. The effects of various displacements and the legacies of southern Africa's racialised systems of labour migrancy profoundly inflect each other in this place. This thesis explores their interrelation, through an ethnographic study of the border farm that I call Grootplaas.<sup>5</sup>

The thesis tells the story of the rise of the border farms in the 1980s, following the earlier ascendance of other forms of capitalist production in South Africa's far north. The farms were forged in the crucible of mobility, as white farmers left newly independent Zimbabwe or came from other parts of South Africa to plant crops, and temporarily root themselves, on the southern bank of the Limpopo River. The estates have since become focal points around which diverse residents organise their lives, despite the fact that the wider context is a bewildering kaleidoscope of economic informalisation and political upheaval. The farming area, situated far from the closest South African town, appears as a remote community with a stable and permanent workforce that has an extremely low turnover. This apparent isolation and stability, however, is belied by networked connectedness, mobility and variety. The majority of workers hail from Zimbabwe;

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<sup>3</sup> High school final exams.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Gordon 1977; McNamara 1978, 1985; Moodie 1980, 1983, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> A pseudonym, as are all names of farms and people in this thesis.

many have relatives elsewhere in South Africa with whom they remain in constant contact. Large numbers of Zimbabwean seasonal workers are employed on the farms each winter, and while some stay for the whole harvest, others quickly move on southwards into South Africa. The area is shaped by enormous variation in patterns of movement and settlement, as Zimbabweans respond to the general crises in their own particular ways. The farms' resident populations, as this suggests, differ widely in terms of education, occupational background and ethnicity, generating competing notions of status – each a particular historical product. Farm residents are affected in similarly diverse ways by their positioning next to the border, some benefiting from its porosity while others are subjected to its rigid policing as they become the object of regular deportation raids.

Further instability is evident, in that the conditions that produced border capitalist farming are themselves undergoing change. The wider geopolitics of the region, with their emphasis on redressive and restitutive measures, make for an uncertain future. Farmers insure themselves against the possible vagaries of South African land reform by spreading risk across several farms, even securing land in Mozambique so that they can leave South Africa if necessary. Their expansion is equally a response to a liberalised market in which only the largest operators survive. At the same time, some have invited Australian coal prospectors onto their land, keeping their options open in case they are forced to sell. This is far from the popular view of sedentary farmers, rooted in land passed down the generations. In reality, for white farmers and black workers, everyday stability remains provisional.

This thesis demonstrates the social complexities of current southern African transformations. The border farming area has been the product of a particular set of historical factors, which are now in turn undergoing far-reaching change. This study of Grootplaas investigates these changes as they are refracted through the dynamics of its workforce. Both the Zimbabwean crisis and transformation of the South African economic and political landscape since apartheid profoundly affect Grootplaas' population. However, close attention to labour relations in one detailed case shows how these changes intersect with a longer legacy of migrant labour, as they are manifested in particular relationships and arrangements.

Labour migration and displacement – or ‘forced migration’ – are the subjects of two largely separate bodies of literature, with different guiding questions. Scholarship on the latter often explores the nature of people’s attachment to places (e.g. Turton 2005), their experiences of being uprooted (e.g. Loizos 2008), and the political frameworks that allow them to achieve, or prevent them from achieving, redress.<sup>6</sup> Labour migration literature, on the other hand, assuming longer-term continuity, seeks to establish whether migrants seek material accumulation or personal transformation when they move,<sup>7</sup> and explores the moral struggles surrounding, and the consequences of, remittance patterns.<sup>8</sup>

In southern Africa, too, labour migration and displacement have been considered as two different kinds of human mobility. Until apartheid ended in 1994, ‘labour migration’ was the central paradigm for understanding mobility. Literature emphasised the integration of Zimbabwe, South Africa and neighbouring nation states into a single regional political economy in which countless black people from across the subcontinent sought employment in white controlled centres of capitalist production like Johannesburg. It analysed how migrants lived their lives in labour compounds and in townships, in areas that were assumed to be ‘white’ spaces and where they had insecure tenure. And it investigated the relationship between migrants with different backgrounds while nonetheless concentrating – as did the migrants – on their long-term commitment to their more secure ‘home’ settings. With the contraction of southern Africa’s formal sectors, and following Zimbabwe’s political and economic crisis, ‘displacement’ – with its focus on upheaval and uprootedness – has replaced ‘migration’ as the dominant paradigm for understanding Zimbabweans’ mobility. My ethnography of Grootplaas, a farm on the Zimbabwean-South African border, combines *both* paradigms. Zimbabweans are dislocated, but find themselves drawn into a world in which white agricultural estates – equally unstable and fleeting in the longer term – manage for the present to organise their residents’ lives in highly structured ways, spatially, socially and economically.

This thesis examines the relationship between apparently different kinds of spatial dislocation: not only displacement and labour migration, but also capital flows. It does so by looking at a workplace in which they are highly

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<sup>6</sup> e.g. Jing 2003; James 2009; Malkki 1992, 1995a, 1995b

<sup>7</sup> e.g. Ferguson 1999; Gardner & Osella 2003; Parry 2003; Bakewell 2008

<sup>8</sup> e.g. Ferguson 1999; Ballard 2003; McKay 2003; Gamburd 2004; Mazzucato et al. 2006



interdependent, and difficult to distinguish in practice. The thesis shows the limitations of analysing categories of mobility separately in such a situation. White farmers make investments in different countries, seeking the best conditions of accumulation. But they are also fleeing the politics of farming, first in Zimbabwe, now in South Africa, using a rhetoric of *voortrekker*<sup>9</sup> pioneering to legitimate their mobility. Despite the fact that white farmers speak of moving on, permanently employed farm workers depict their lives on the farms in terms of stability and non-movement, asserting their rootedness as members of a resident population. Many such workers attempt to save for retirement, battling against the instabilities of hyperinflation-ridden Zimbabwe in their bid to maintain their kin there. They establish stable structures of hierarchy and authority at Grootplaas that organise their own lives and the border compounds, and shape their relation to the border itself. It is these formalised labour hierarchies that seasonal workers and border traders are forced to negotiate. Seasonal workers, who come for the harvest, comprise both regular circular labour migrants and more recent recruits who seek work as they flee Zimbabwe's crisis. Traders, drawn by the lucrative markets represented by hundreds of waged workers, hail from a variety of national backgrounds (Zimbabwe and South Africa) and employment positions (farm labourers, displaced entrepreneurs, workers from other sectors, members of an aspirant middle class). Migrants with different motivations together make up a nexus point of provisional settlement and stability through the social arrangements on the farm. Understanding these experiences requires looking beyond the questions posed by a focus on displacement or neoliberal fragmentation. In order to analyse the position of Zimbabweans who find themselves on South African farms, classic questions about southern African labour migration need to be brought back into the equation.

Exploring how diverse patterns of movement and settlement intersect in a hub of formal, resident employment has particular relevance in southern Africa. Set against a backdrop of capitalist order and firm state control, the region is currently experiencing particularly acute, although varied, processes of fragmentation. Formerly, it had been characterised by highly centralised regimes geared towards providing capitalist enterprises with cheap, black, migrant labour.

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<sup>9</sup> Afrikaans for 'pioneer', but specifically evokes emigration from the Cape Colony into the interior in the 1830s and 1840s, in what later came to be known as the Great Trek. The Great Trek became romanticised as a focus of an Afrikaner nationalist historical narrative.

Because residence was contingent upon employment, lives were organised by work in extremely broad-reaching ways. The results of liberalisation in the 1990s, however, mean that most people are out of work. The iniquities of 'global' interconnection and capital flows affect people profoundly, yet seem unfathomable. The Zimbabwean crisis has displaced millions, many of whom now seek to make ends meet by any means necessary. The fragmentary character of life is evident in the diversity of reasons why southern Africans move around the region, whether fleeing crisis, seeking employment, trading goods or finding the best conditions for profit. These motivations for movement are evident among the farm's resident population. Countermanding such diversity and flux is the routine and regularisation of the working day. In hubs of capitalist agricultural production, work entails stable residential arrangements, and chains-of-command at work mean round-the-clock authority. Diverse personal histories and experiences of chaos and displacement are transformed into routine, even monotony, as residents become part of the labour hierarchy. Farm workers nonetheless bring their histories of insecurity with them, affecting the ways life is organised on settler farms. And they rework those histories in the setting of a large, racialised, hierarchical workforce.

My thesis investigates the complex effects of these intersecting dynamics for different local residents and for relations among and between them: white farmers, black permanent working populations, seasonal workers, dependents and informal traders. Two broad modalities – experiences of the Zimbabwean crisis and current realities of working and residing on employers' land – constantly interact and shape one another in Grootplaas residents' lives. This ethnographic study offers insight into wider issues: the transformation of settler agriculture; status decline and manual labour among displaced Zimbabweans; insecurity among white farmers in post-apartheid South Africa; the nature of the South African-Zimbabwean border itself.

## *Chapter 1*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

#### **FOR A 'PRODUCTIVIST'/'FRAGMENTATIONIST' ANTHROPOLOGY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

Southern Africa's centralised economies have fragmented. Opportunities for formal employment have contracted. South Africa and Zimbabwe, especially, previously drew vast numbers of black people into formal, though inequitable, employment as labour migrants. The 1990s saw both countries turning to leaner economic models. In today's South Africa, government policies have paved the way for neoliberal open markets and 'flexible accumulation' (Harvey 1990). The widespread casualisation of work, in especially large numbers on commercial farms (e.g. Ewert & du Toit 2005; Addison 2006; Rutherford & Addison 2007), coexists with secure employment for the privileged few, who become targets of such initiatives as Corporate Social Responsibility (e.g. Rajak 2008). Most people are excluded from such employment altogether. In 1990s Zimbabwe, similarly severe loss of employment followed 'the global imperatives of the structural adjustment programme' (Raftopoulos & Phimister 2004: 357; see also Gibbon 1995).

While this reflects trends elsewhere in the world, a sense of fragmentation in southern Africa has been exacerbated by instability from another source. Since 2000, dramatic political-economic crisis in Zimbabwe precipitated one of the world's highest ever rates of hyperinflation (around 150,000% in 2008)<sup>10</sup> and acute supply shortages. This has led to the displacement of millions of people across the region in search of livelihoods. Most head for South Africa, where a citizenry frustrated with mass unemployment has reacted with violent xenophobia (see Morreira 2010).<sup>11</sup> As with similar forms of instability elsewhere, such as the economic decline in the Congo that drove many 'respectable' people to '*se débrouiller*' (fend for themselves; MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000), a large

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<sup>10</sup> 'Zimbabwe inflation passes 100,000%, officials say'.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/feb/22/zimbabwe>. Accessed 11.33am on 19/10/09.

<sup>11</sup> <http://doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/article.cfm?id=3408&cat=special-report>. Accessed 18.13pm on 21/1/10.

number of Zimbabweans seek unfamiliar means, outside their home country, of making ends meet.

The 'informal economy', as practice and academic concern, now appears to sum up southern Africans' livelihood opportunities. Crisis in Zimbabwe meant 'informalisation' of employment, tenure rights, party politics and migration (Raftopoulos, in Hammar et al. 2010: 269). With the collapse of much Zimbabwean industry and commercial agriculture, ordinary people are reduced to finding ad-hoc, survivalist chances to make ends meet: *kukiya-kiya*, 'making do' by means of 'zigzag' arrangements (Jones 2010). For many in South Africa, finding an ever-smaller niche in the overcrowded world of small-scale trade appears the only option beyond state benefits (Ferguson 2007). In both countries, many people's livelihoods and projects have insecure, short-term horizons. Gone are the days of the long-term plan, achieved through stable employment: remitting throughout years of work, accumulating a fund for respectable retirement. Although South Africa is by no means in a state of 'crisis' like Zimbabwe, 'making do' is nonetheless an apposite term to describe the livelihood strategies of large numbers of residents of both countries.

Changes in migration patterns reflect – indeed, epitomise – this wider fragmentation. Large-scale wage labour in centres of capitalist production appears to have disappeared overnight, together with the academic preoccupations which had accompanied it. Earlier scholarly focus on labour migrancy, the 'productivist' historiography of 'the Africa of the labour reserve' (Andersson 2006: 376) has given way to research topics such as trade networks (e.g. Andersson 2006), or identity and 'abjection' in the neoliberal world order (Ferguson 1999).

However, despite current instability and popular efforts to 'make do', labour-intensive hubs of capitalist production continue to exist and influence the worlds around them. How are they shaped by their wider, fragmented surroundings? How, in turn, do they shape them? How does increasing insecurity and 'informalisation' articulate with established models of labour relations? This study, of one specific South African farm on the Zimbabwean border, demonstrates how, although crises do shape the farm's production, hubs of employment organise their working populations in ways similar to the past. This in turn inflects its Zimbabwean farm labourers' experiences of current regional instabilities: that is, of crises. In such a setting, southern Africa's various forms of fragmentation

intersect with highly structured arrangements. This introduction therefore argues for an anthropology that brings together 'productivist' questions with those focused on understanding transformation, disruption and crisis.

My argument is a regional one. Academic literature on Zimbabwe and South Africa has diverged markedly in recent years. This reflects the different histories of the two countries. However, it underplays the political economy they have in common. Scholarship on the former, analysing the Zimbabwean crisis, has often focused on the politics surrounding the Mugabe regime.<sup>12</sup> Central in current analyses of South Africa, in contrast, has been a less personalised and more systemic analysis. Focusing on the diverse effects of neoliberalism, this has covered themes from the shrinking of the state and outsourcing of its roles (Koelble & LiPuma 2005) to the rise of occult economies (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999) to 'declarations of dependence' by insecure people seeking vertical ties of obligation and protection (Ferguson 2009). While Zimbabwe's and South Africa's forms of instability differ in many ways, what they share is their 'informalising' effects on ordinary people. Indeed, whereas Guyer (2004) writes of multiple 'formalisations' to characterise the diverse ways economic activities are brought within the purview of states, recent changes in southern Africa might aptly be described as multiple but mutually reinforcing 'informalisations'. The shared experience of 'making do' in both countries is striking given apparent national contrasts. Later, I address both tropes of disruption – the Zimbabwean crisis and post-apartheid neoliberalism – as they intersect with hierarchised labour relations.

### ***Bringing 'productivism' back in***

The phenomenon of Zimbabweans moving to South Africa does indeed form part of a southern African regional economy very different to the centralised model of old. However, migrants' experiences today continue to be affected by the legacies of racially structured labour migrancy. An example will help elucidate this point, and show how it informs this thesis. Jens Andersson made a study of Malawian migration to, and informal trade with, South Africa. He notes that the 'combining of migration and trade indicates that these movements can no longer be defined narrowly as *labour migration*' (2006: 376, author's emphasis). Andersson suggests

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<sup>12</sup> See Hammar & Raftopoulos 2003; Raftopoulos & Phimister 2004; Ranger 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Raftopoulos 2009.

that changes in South Africa mean we should leave behind the old 'productivist' lens that focused on 'the Africa of the labour reserve' (ibid). He argues for shifting:

'i) from a focus on economic centres and production relations towards the sphere of economic circulation; and ii) from an analysis at the level of large aggregates captured in national categories, to the sub-national level of social actors' organizing practices (ibid: 394-5).

Andersson's second suggestion is very much in line with my approach here; a key aim is to move away from literature framed primarily in terms of 'national categories'. But I wish, rather than jettisoning sensitivity to 'economic centres and production relations', to keep this in focus while combining it with a movement away from the 'national'. The current complexity of migration trends is all the more reason to make sense of *intersections* between apparently different migratory dynamics. Some of these emphasise work, others trade, others again a sense of displaced uprootedness from home. Andersson's data show precisely the continued *relevance* of understanding structured and racialised spatial arrangements built on patterns of labour migrancy. In his case studies, Malawians arriving in South Africa stay in relatives' domestic-worker accommodation, in a way that mirrors earlier patterns of migration to cities. In similar parallel to what happened in the apartheid era, Malawians face 'an immigration regime in which the risk of arrest is reduced by residing on one's employer's premises' (ibid: 393). Meanwhile, pricing in informal trade is itself 'structured by the particular organisation of the parallel migrant labour market' (ibid: 394). The insights of 'productivist' scholarship, explored in this thesis in relation to Zimbabwean migration, are precisely relevant to Andersson's case. 'Economic centres and production relations' remain central to understanding migrants' options and constraints. The key question becomes: how do migrants make use of this legacy of migrancy and its spatial organisation, in negotiating new, volatile realities?

A focus on current fluidity and multiplicity risks underplaying how migrants establish new structures and hierarchies in response to new settings. The latter is something anthropologists and historians have illuminated, by exploring how labour migrants shape their lives despite stark, systemic constraints. In doing so, they have produced insights that remain highly relevant for understanding southern African migration in general, and farm workers on the Zimbabwean-

South African border in particular. Underpinning such research is 'situational analysis', first developed by the Manchester School of anthropology, to understand migrants' working environments. According to this approach, rather than simply reflecting personal histories transposed from 'home', dynamics in workforces are produced in the work setting itself (Mitchell 1956; Epstein 1958). Analysis of migrants must begin with their current environments. 'An African townsman is a townsman, an African miner is a miner', Max Gluckman (1961: 69) famously wrote of the Zambian Copperbelt, arguing that migrants at their place of work could not be seen merely as displaced 'tribesmen' from the countryside. What is crucial is examining what is *produced* collectively among migrants, and how they organise themselves in new ways, not just what people *bring* or *lose* as they move. More recent research in southern Africa itself has put this approach to fruitful use. Examples include showing how migrants build a moral community by constructing a shared past and home despite their diverse backgrounds (James 1999), and exploring how life in a resident workplace produces a particular, shared sense of masculinity (Moodie 1983, 1994). Situational analysis shows how wider processes – southern Africa's various forms of instability – are refracted through, and transformed by, processes and events at one particular site. Although much ethnography is 'situational' – by the nature of its localised, small-scale methodology – situational analysis means something more in cases of southern African labour migration. This is both because of the mass mobility involved, and because of the highly structured character of workforces. Migrants' differences are incorporated into these labour-force structures, in totalising environments where employees live in compounds at their workplaces. In settings like settler farms, the approach shows how migrants collectively organise their lives away from home.

At the same time, understanding current, far-reaching changes in southern Africa requires taking situational analysis a stage further. Appreciating Zimbabweans' diverse experiences of displacement requires understanding both their personal histories beyond Grootplaas and how they intersect with one another in Grootplaas' micro-politics and status hierarchies. Situational analysis also offers a way to deepen analysis of contemporary neoliberalism, the widely noted source of much instability and upheaval in southern Africa. But this requires attention not only to workers, as in classic labour studies, but also to both workplace histories and employers themselves. Capital, people and information

are often seen to be moving ever faster, with disastrous consequences for most. Enriched with different perspectives – those of employers and employees, those from past and present – situational analysis of one workplace reveals how neoliberal flexibility is in fact underpinned by farmers’ life projects, structured hierarchies and complex everyday relationships among members of the labour force, all of which bear the imprint of a regional past. Understanding the legacies shaping southern African labour forces, in turn, requires me to set out a regional history of mobility.

### ***The roots of migrancy in southern Africa***

Zimbabwe and South Africa share wider historical legacies that are key to understanding the character of border farms. The view from the border underlines the need for a regional historical perspective. When Zimbabweans cross the border into South Africa today, they encounter a rural landscape that bears the mark of similar settler-state policies to those that shaped Zimbabwe: sharp divisions between white commercial farms and black communal land. They also follow established patterns of labour migrancy that have long characterised the whole region. Despite clear differences in political history, the economic histories of Zimbabwe and South Africa share a great deal and are deeply interconnected.

Both countries have histories of settler colonialism, and together they historically formed a bloc of state-backed settler capitalism around which the political economy of the region was built. Of relevance here are the shared experiences of racialised access to land, labour migrancy to capitalist centres of production and white-settler agriculture. Moreover, each country has experienced recent comparable trends towards ‘informalisation’ – the contraction of the formal sector that was the focus of labour migrancy – even though in each country this is caused by different processes.

Most obviously relevant to this thesis is the fact that the norms and practices surrounding white settler agriculture in Zimbabwe and South Africa are very similar. There are, it must be said, differences between farmers’ perspectives according to which country they have lived in (on South Africa’s northern border farms they hail from both sides). But farms on both sides of the Limpopo are racially divided places, total institutions whose totalitarian character has been reinforced historically by the exemption of farm workers from most labour



legislation. Farming ideals have promoted the figure of the fatherly farmer looking after his 'people', conferring gifts as he sees fit, rather than engaging in contractual arrangements with clearly defined limits (van Onselen 1992; see also du Toit 1993, Waldman 1996). Workers are cast as children in an extended family, with senior male workers acting as intermediary 'paternal' figures (Waldman 1996: 69). In South Africa, such arrangements have been traced to the Cape's history of slavery, which formally ended in the 1830s, through later Master and Servant Acts and the creation of a large landless rural proletariat (Waldman 1996; Ewert & Hamman 1999). In Zimbabwe, paternalism has a different genealogy. Nevertheless, Rutherford (2001, 2003) has explored a parallel, and similar, form of 'domestic government' on the farms, in which black working populations are considered the white farmer's domestic responsibility and are consequently excluded from any robust sense of national citizenship. Rutherford's Zimbabwean example questions the extent to which farmer paternalism even within South Africa was really descended from Cape slavery. It appears, rather, to have more diffuse regional origins. These emerged from a range of close working relationships, including forms of tenancy and clientage, which only slowly gave way to wage labour (see Phimister 1988: 84 for Southern Rhodesia;<sup>13</sup> van Onselen 1996, Beinart 2001: 14 for South Africa). And they emerged from strategies by which small numbers of isolated white farmers controlled large, black workforces.

Settler agriculture was also deeply affected by the wider southern African system of labour migrancy, which had its origins in the discovery of mineral wealth. Both the Transvaal – which would become the north-eastern part of South Africa – and Southern Rhodesia across the Limpopo River were initially shaped by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century frenzy over gold. Gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand<sup>14</sup> in 1886. By 1900 there were already almost 100,000 black workers on the gold mines. Rapid change in South African economic structure and restructuring of the labour market shaped a system characterised by organised labour supply, oscillating black worker migration, the colour bar (with certain occupations reserved for whites), and industrial relations determined by strong white miner unions (Wilson 1972). The discovery of the Witwatersrand's gold, in turn, underpinned 'the immediate genesis of colonial Zimbabwe' (Phimister 1988: 4).

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<sup>13</sup> The British settler colony later called Zimbabwe. The colony of Northern Rhodesia became Zambia at independence. Following Zambia's independence in 1964, Southern Rhodesia became known simply as Rhodesia.

<sup>14</sup> The hilly area around present-day Johannesburg and the site of a vast gold-bearing reef.

Mineral discoveries brought new importance to the southern African interior, and Cecil Rhodes hoped to find a 'Second Rand' north of the Limpopo River (ibid: 5, 6). These mines, like those to the south, quickly became dependent on migrant black workers, secured by hut taxes and professionalised recruitment. In attempting to satisfy labour demands, they were brought into direct competition with their southern neighbours: 'the Rhodesian Native Labour Bureau was specifically designed to exclude the Rand from certain recruiting grounds and to direct labour to local mines away from those of the Transvaal' (ibid: 50).

The high levels of black labour migration in both Southern Rhodesia and the Transvaal were actively encouraged by state authorities. Although early migrants went to white centres of production to acquire guns (e.g. Delius 1980), moving to work was soon the result of deliberate government policies. Inducing migration was partly achieved by limiting black access to cultivable land. A series of Commissions in Southern Rhodesia allocated reserves for black Rhodesians, a process justified by reference to the idea that European civilisation was being imparted to eager Africans. But the majority of territory was kept for future white use. Meanwhile reserve land was of poor quality and was in the following decade further depleted by population growth (see Palmer 1977). In South Africa, it was the 1913 Natives Land Act that formalised racialised land ownership and access, allocating 8% of land for black African occupation. This represented 'a degree of land alienation unrivalled in any sub-Saharan context' (Beinart 2001: 10). As in Southern Rhodesia, the Act rendered black South Africans' rural livelihoods unsustainable, and further reinforced oscillating labour migration patterns. Africans' wages as migrants supplemented inadequate agricultural yields on overcrowded land, and were used for the payment of taxes. One objective of racialised land allocation was to support white commercial agriculture, by supplying good land while squeezing out black competition. In South Africa, this 'undermin[ed] agricultural commodity production developed by Africans (often on white owned land) during the previous half century', while causing a gradual shift to wage labour in increasingly capitalist white farming (Bernstein 1996: 5). In Southern Rhodesia, similarly, black producers became dependent on a range of commodities during years of agricultural prosperity, which then had to be satisfied through labour migration once their farming operations were squeezed in a

process of 'delayed proletarianisation' (see Arrighi 1970; Kosmin 1977; Phimister 1988).

The racial division of land and patterns of migrancy were messier and more complicated than they sound. In fact, in South Africa, the continuing access to land of black cultivators 'helps explain critical historical issues such as ... the predominance of migrant labour' rather than full proletarianisation (Beinart 2001: 14-15). Both countries saw the gradual creation of rural labour reserves, whose subsistence agriculture supplemented black wages, enabling white employers to offer lower pay (see Wolpe 1972). But land allocation also masked a number of non-capitalist arrangements between white landowners and black residents – tenancy, sharecropping, clientage – as noted above. Change was more complex and regionally diverse than the classic Marxist 'transition' from 'feudal' to 'capitalist' relations. (e.g. Trapido 1978; see Beinart et al. 1986; Bradford 1991; Beinart 2001). One factor in this complexity was that white employers in rural areas – farms and provincial mines – sought workers from far-flung parts, often across national borders, because local populations – attracted by other forms of wage labour, particularly mining – were reluctant to work for them. The outcome of a century-long struggle between 'gold' and 'maize', over agricultural prices and labour supply (Bernstein 1996, 2004), was that farmers addressed their perennial 'labour problem' by using recruits from more peripheral areas of the regional political economy.

White farmers in both countries constantly depended on workers from elsewhere. In the Transvaal, agrarian capitalists relied heavily on Rhodesian migrant labour (see Bradford 1993). In Southern Rhodesia, farm workers hailed from Malawi and Mozambique (Rutherford 2001, 2003). The recent use of migrant workers 'to construct a cheap and manageable workforce' as a response to market liberalisation (Johnston 2007:520) has longstanding precedent in the form of a floating reserve of labour, especially near border areas. Even in the Cape, where labour is considered to be 'local', farm-worker populations experienced the widespread fragmentation of families in a mobile population (e.g. Waldman 1996).

The lives of many black southern Africans were therefore profoundly shaped by experiences of labour migration. A recent survey showed that 39% of a sample of black Zimbabweans had parents or grandparents who had been labour migrants outside Zimbabwe, mainly to South Africa (Tevera & Chikanda 2009: 14).

'A flow of migrant labour created within a *regional* economic system'<sup>15</sup> became a central and enduring feature of southern Africa. Black Rhodesians went to work not only at centres of production in their own national-state's territory; many headed southwards, hoping to attain better conditions and earn higher pay on the Witwatersrand (see van Onselen 1976). By the 1980s, Murray would conceptualise the migrant labour system through a regional, rather than national, unit of analysis. Specific agreements between governments officially enabled the recruitment agency Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WENELA) to recruit for the gold mines. More generally, southern Africa as a whole had in fact become a series of black rural areas, dependent to a greater or lesser extent on white centres of production (Murray 1981). Although they did not benefit from WENELA's recruitment efforts, many white commercial farms in the Transvaal and in Southern Rhodesia relied on this large-scale mobility.

### ***Southern African migration: the 'labour migrancy' view***

Labour migrancy became a central theme in 1970s and 1980s South African anthropology and history. Initially, this took the form of neo-Marxist/revisionist political economy, related to an anti-apartheid stance. 'Culture' and 'tradition' were avoided in social anthropology because of their centrality in Afrikaans-speaking universities' *volkekunde* and 'ethnos theory'. *Volkekunde* emphasised individuals' inseparability from bounded 'cultures', each with its own 'spirit', legitimising apartheid's segregationist policies (see Hammond-Tooke 1997). A political economy approach lent itself to seeing divisions among the dominated as effects of capitalism, as preventing the growth of class-consciousness and perpetuating an exploitative system. This framework had some explanatory power, but was inadequate. In functionalist vein, it viewed state policies as expressions of capitalist interests (Bonner et al. 1993: 1), neglecting apartheid's complexity and contradictions (ibid) and inferring strategy from consequences (e.g Meillassoux 1981). The shortcomings of such an approach were linked to an activist stance, with the role of 'morally imbued social critic' undermining that of 'morally neutral cultural analyst' (Kiernan 1997: 64-5). This rendered narrow both research questions and the interpretation of gathered data. Avoiding considering the experiences of migrants themselves, anthropologists sought the causes and effects

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<sup>15</sup> Mining Commissioner Bulawayo, 1904, in Phimister 1988: 55, my emphasis.

of proletarianisation and exposed rural poverty and dependency (Hammond-Tooke 1997: 180). Paradoxically, wariness of purportedly bounded cultures led anthropologists to neglect social action's meaning for individuals.

Subsequent work moved beyond materialist analyses, overcoming the aversion to studying culture. For some, this took the form of symbolic analysis, making sense of labour migrants' experiences and rituals through focus on 'cosmology': for example, seeing rituals of departure and return as a means of controlling migrants, a collective response to perceived dangers of urban/mining life (McAllister 1980, 1985, 1991; see also e.g. Comaroff 1985; Comaroff & Comaroff 1987, 1989, 1990). Others saw migrant experiences as more fragmentary, with individual agents pursuing strategies to make the best of their situations: for migrant mine workers, there were advantages to emphasising the very ethnic divisions that suited management (e.g. Guy and Thabane 1991, see also 1987).

Concentration on labour migrancy in the classic literature risked masking other forms of southern African mobility. Assuming migrants have similar *class-based status* backgrounds led to the privileging of *ethnicity* as the key category of difference. Of primary concern was the construction and reconfiguration of ethnicity in mine compounds or towns, with especial focus on 'tribal' tensions/violence (see McNamara 1978, 1985; Moodie 1980, 1983, 1994; for former Northern Rhodesia see Mitchell 1956; Epstein 1958; Gluckman 1961). This came at the cost of considering *other* sources of difference among migrants. McNamara's (1978, 1985) data suggests that clashes between Rhodesian and other miners were primarily about class-based status, not ethnicity *per se*. Divisions among workers were treated as immutable, structural outworkings of labour arrangements, rather than the products of workers' wider self-understandings.

More fundamentally, there has been a long history of labour migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa which does *not* fit the established migrancy framework. This history requires a broader view of mobility. Even before the recent increase in migration, Zimbabwe-South African migration had been entrenched for over a century. However, its patterns and effects varied over time. Crisis-related displacement often underlay Rhodesian labour migration. Peaks of Rhodesian migration to South Africa were the result of famine and violence at home. In western Zimbabwe during the 1980s violence of the anti-dissidence campaign

known as *Gukurahundi*,<sup>16</sup> labour migrants ‘were terrorised ... as ex-combatants accused of going to South Africa to train to be “dissidents”, by the police’ (Werbner 1991: 157). For both former guerrillas and other able-bodied men, assumed to be dissidents, rural Matabeleland was dangerous. South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwean towns provided refuge. A year after the 1988 amnesty declaration, most young men, worried about returning, remained in South Africa as labour migrants. ‘Their absence was due in good measure also to the impoverished state of the countryside, following the looting of crops, cattle and personal goods and, most recently, the run of bad years and severe drought’ (ibid: 162-3). In this area, labour migration was related to marginalisation by the Zimbabwean state, the result of persecution and perceived evidence of dissidence. Labour migration was especially associated with ZIPRA because many of its liberation-war fighters had been labour migrants to South Africa (Bhebe & Ranger 1995a: 8). These examples of why Zimbabweans actually went to South Africa caution against overdetermining regional mobility with a single ‘migrancy’ logic. And they suggest that ‘labour migration’ and ‘displacement’ may be less distinct than they initially appear.

Despite earlier over-emphasis on *labour* migration, as opposed to a broader view, this scholarship illuminated how migrants’ experiences, strategies and goals were shaped in adverse conditions. In so doing, such literature has drawn attention to what everyday arrangements migrants produce at their workplaces. It has shown how black town-dwellers historically struggled against the constraints imposed on them by the migrant labour system, which assumed that their homes were elsewhere, in rural reserves. Despite insecure tenure rights, township-dwellers asserted a sense of belonging by adapting their housing (Ginsberg 1996; Lee 2005). Some made use of formal employment by whites as bases for other enterprises, making the best of interstices in racialised systems of control (Bozzoli 1991, 1991a; Preston-Whyte 1991). Others, those with middle-class aspirations in Zimbabwe, sought to define themselves in *opposition* to stereotypes of labour

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<sup>16</sup> This targeted former ZIPRA liberation fighters. ZIPRA and ZANLA were rival liberation armies, the armed wings of the ZAPU and ZANU parties respectively. ZANU emerged dominant post-independence. Western Zimbabwe had been ZIPRA’s recruitment area, and Matabeleland, with a largely Ndebele population, was considered still a ZIPRA stronghold, ZIPRA meanwhile represented as an Ndebele movement. This even though ZIPRA enjoyed little continued popular or ZAPU support. The region’s population was targeted by the ZANLA-dominated Zimbabwean National Army. After this campaign, ZANU nominally incorporated ZAPU and changing its name to ZANU (Patriotic Front), declaring an amnesty in 1988. See Alexander et al 2000; Worby 1998; Werbner 1991.

migrants (e.g. Burke 1996; Scarnecchia 1999; Barnes 1999; West 2002). All of these efforts to establish and maintain dignified lives have their parallels on the border farms that are the subject of this thesis.

On the border farms, workplaces shape the experiences of their residents in ways that require analysis through the lens of labour migrancy. At the same time, the workforces reflect different, but mutually reinforcing, forms of instability. They are composed overwhelmingly of Zimbabweans who have undergone brutal upheaval at home. Workers also face uncertain futures, as white farmers seek to remain mobile to mitigate current risks in South African agriculture, apparently engaging in more flexible forms of capitalism. These sources of instability and fragmentation intersect with structured, hierarchical forms of everyday organisation.

I turn now to examine, in turn, the Zimbabwean crisis and the volatility of South African commercial agriculture, from the perspective of border farm labour relations.

### ***Zimbabwean Crises***

Many of the farms themselves are products of cross-border migration of a kind not normally addressed in the literature, in that several of the white border farmers hail from Zimbabwe. They came in the early 1980s to avoid black rule. Farming in Zimbabwe in the past, especially during the Liberation War, shaped how they now think about farming across the border in South Africa. After white Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain in 1965, ZANU (Zimbabwean African National Union) and ZAPU (Zimbabwean African People's Union) began a fifteen-year armed struggle for majority rule of what would become Zimbabwe. The gradually intensifying conflict was concentrated in rural areas.<sup>17</sup> White farmers, isolated on their land, led militarised lives characterised by periods of army service, armed transport convoys and gatherings for target practice.<sup>18</sup> Border farmers who previously fought as counterinsurgents assess and evaluate their experiences in South Africa – the 1980s 'border war' and later farm attacks – with reference to this earlier period of their lives. Despite white farmers' mobile pasts, and uncertain futures, their enterprises along the Limpopo have become the

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<sup>17</sup> For analyses of this period see Ranger 1982, 1985; Lan 1985; Bourdillon 1987; Kriger 1992; Bhebe & Ranger 1995, 1996; Mtisi et al 2009.

<sup>18</sup> See Godwin & Hancock 1993; Fuller 2002 for a popular, autobiographical account.

workplaces and homes of thousands of black Zimbabweans, whose motivations for leaving Zimbabwe reflect that country's regional politics and recent history of successive upheavals.

*The production of a cross-border mobility*

In border farming operations, the ethnic diversity of the workforce is often marked off in hierarchical terms. In Limpopo, many permanent workers are Venda, members of an ethnic group that is a small minority in both Zimbabwe and South Africa. It is their marginality that makes farm employment in South Africa so important to them. Zimbabwean Venda hail from that country's border area, particularly sidelined in terms of infrastructure, education, land quality and employment opportunities (Mate 2005). This area is in Matabeleland South, a province that experienced violent persecution in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> One strategy to avoid this violence was to cross the border into South Africa (see Werbner 1991). Since the 1980s, when commercial farms established a demand for labour on the South African side of the border, Zimbabweans from just north of the Limpopo River have responded to hardship at home by working on these farms. They have established homes in the labour compounds on the border estates, adapting their houses to assert their rootedness despite the fact that they are sited on employers' land. And they have developed networks of kin, friends and domestic relationships within and among the farm workforces. These Venda border dwellers share not only language and culture but also self-understandings and aspirations, in part because of their rural upbringings and lack of formal education. Many have had long careers on the farms and their workplace seniority there is a source of status.

The 1990s saw Zimbabweans from increasingly diverse socio-economic backgrounds engaging in cross-border migration, as structural adjustment drove a rising number to seek work in South Africa (Zinyama 2000). The 1980s in Zimbabwe saw high state spending on public goods such as education, fuelling the occupational aspirations of a generation of school students. However, 'the limitations of a welfarist programme unaccompanied by sustained economic growth soon became apparent' (Raftopoulos & Phimister 2004: 357). The economic restructuring that followed in the 1990s left many vulnerable, as

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<sup>19</sup> The liberation movement ZAPU was predominantly recruited from Matabeleland, and after the election of ZANU to government after the Liberation War, the continued existence of ZAPU dissidents was taken as justification for the massacre of more than 20,000 civilians, at the hands of the ZANU(PF) government's Fifth Brigade (Muzondidya 2009: 179).



increased responsibilities in formal sector jobs were paralleled by wage reductions while others were simply retrenched. Zimbabwean migrants were both skilled<sup>20</sup> and unskilled, many of the latter seeking formal domestic work, agricultural labour or informal trade.<sup>21</sup> For many, moving to South Africa in the 1990s to 'make do' was a sign that their earlier hopes of 'respectable' success had been shattered.

Increased cross-border migration was enabled by changes in South Africa itself. Following the end of apartheid and the relaxation of border controls, migration into South Africa from across the continent expanded significantly, although the magnitude of the increase is hard to measure and statistics are unreliable (ILO 1998: 8). Some Zimbabweans crossing to South Africa were recruited by the border farms, most of which were responding to the liberalisation of South African agricultural markets. Having previously produced cotton for a domestic market, South African border farmers report having been unable to compete with cheaper imports from China. Export crops like oranges, paid for in foreign currencies, offered higher profits in an era of market liberalisation in South Africa. They also necessitated far larger workforces to maintain orchards and pick, grade and pack fruit.

#### *The post-2000 'Zimbabwean crisis'*

If the 1990s saw greater and more diverse cross-border migration, since 2000 the movement of Zimbabweans to South Africa has increased exponentially. The difference between the two periods is one of kind rather than simply of scale. This new trend was the result of hyperinflation, commodity supply crises and political troubles at home, which have come to be known together as 'the Zimbabwean crisis'.

The causes of the Zimbabwean crisis are complex. The country's economy began to break down in the late 1990s, due to the continuing effects of structural adjustment, expensive military intervention in the Congo (see Raftopoulos 2009), and unbudgeted pay-offs to war veterans demanding recognition for their participation in the Liberation War (see Muzondidya 2009). Fiscal difficulties were

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<sup>20</sup> The Zimbabwe High Commission in Pretoria estimated 60,000 migrants in professional positions in 1998 (Gibbon 1995: 74).

<sup>21</sup> Informal trade was an option Zimbabweans had been making use of since the mid-1980s, notably selling crotchetware and, in the 1980s, supplying spare motor vehicle parts and small machinery to commerce and industry. Such cross-border trade was increasingly 'dominated by women seeking to supplement their family incomes to clothe and educate their children' (Zinyama 2000: 73).

compounded by a crisis of legitimacy for ZANU(PF), when the party lost a nationwide referendum on constitutional reform in 2000. Having proposed an extended presidential term for Robert Mugabe, the new draft constitution was defeated by a coalition of churches, NGOs and unions (the National Constitutional Assembly), which became the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This defeat marked the beginning of a more authoritarian style of rule marked by horrific atrocities (See Dorman 2003).

Popular grievance had already been widespread in the 1990s, because structural adjustment had tended to benefit elites. Consequently, 'a combination of a slow-down in the state's land-reform programme, intensified pressure on land in the [black] communal areas, and economic liberalisation' in the 1990s led to a number of popular occupations of white farmland (Raftopoulos 2009: 211). As ZANU(PF) sought a support base in the face of newly vocal opposition, it provided state backing for these occupations: 'the occupations of 2000 were spearheaded by war veterans and actively encouraged by the President in a process that directly undercut the developmental state' (Alexander 2003: 113). This process culminated in a large-scale confiscation of land from white farmers known as 'fast track' resettlement. The consequent destruction of the commercial agricultural sector sent the Zimbabwean economy into a further tailspin.

The growing crisis since 2000 has led a huge number of Zimbabweans to seek ways of making ends meet outside the country. The vast majority of seasonal workers on South Africa's border farms arrived during this post-2000 period. The politics underpinning the crisis belie the sharp distinction between 'economic' and 'political' motives for migration – a distinction drawn by both South African and British authorities to deny Zimbabweans asylum (Kriger 2010; Engelke *pers. comm.*).<sup>22</sup> In South Africa, 'the legal status options available to [Zimbabweans] – refugees fleeing persecution or economic migrants trying to better their lives – leave most as "illegal foreigners"' (Kriger 2010: 81). In reality, many people were driven to move by a complex combination of economic collapse, new forms of political exclusion and direct coercion in Zimbabwe. ZANU(PF) has attempted to

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<sup>22</sup> The position of the South African authorities changed in July 2008, after the period of fieldwork. 'The Department of Home Affairs opened up a refugee reception centre in Musina, enabling non-South Africans fleeing their homelands to acquire an asylum-seeker permit which enables them to work legally in South Africa and to receive a hearing to make an asylum case'. Further, March 2009 saw the Minister of Home Affairs grant Zimbabweans a special visa status and order a suspension of deportations. In the aftermath, aggressive policing of the border, described in this thesis, was also suspended (Rutherford 2010: 73).

redefine Zimbabwean citizenship: whites, farm workers, urban workers 'without totems',<sup>23</sup> women and members of the political opposition have become excluded from a nationalist project cast as a continued liberation struggle (Raftopoulos 2003; see also Hammar 2003, Ranger 2004).

Some recent Zimbabwean migrants to Limpopo farms, disproportionately seasonal workers, are precisely those disqualified from full citizenship by the Zimbabwean state, including MDC activists who have been victims of Zimbabwean state repression. Those with urban backgrounds often have few connections with the countryside, and lack the legitimation of totemic clan emblems. Some of these left Zimbabwe following May 2005's Operation *Murambatsvina* ('the one who rejects [clears away] the rubbish'): a vast state programme to demolish 'illegal' housing and informal businesses, and send occupants 'back' to familial rural areas to which they had often little or no connection (see Potts 2006). This 'slum clearance' has been seen as part anti-opposition measure and part commitment to modernist 'planning' (ibid). It was, however, at heart a starkly violent assertion of ZANU(PF) power, that a month later had 'resulted in an estimated 300,000 displacements of civilians in urban areas countrywide, with mass loss of livelihoods and property' (SPT 2005). In July 2005, a United Nations report on *Murambatsvina* stated:

'It is estimated that some 700,000 people in cities across the country have lost either their homes, their source of livelihood or both. Indirectly, a further 2.4 million people have been affected in varying degrees. Hundreds of thousands of women, men and children were made homeless, without access to food, water and sanitation, or health care. Education for thousands of school age children has been disrupted. Many of the sick, including those with HIV and AIDS, no longer have access to care. The vast majority of those directly and indirectly affected are the poor and disadvantaged segments of the population' (Tibaijuka 2005).

By September, '2.9 million people across Zimbabwe were in need of food aid', while inflation reached 359.8% and unemployment 80%.<sup>24</sup>

Other residents of the South African border farms, until the land invasions, had been experienced farm workers in Zimbabwe, where they had long been stigmatised because of their outsider, and their quasi-feudal, status. Many of

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<sup>23</sup> Suggesting a lack of proper attachment to rural clans, and therefore a lack of deep autochthonous belonging.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/en/world-report-2006/zimbabwe>. Accessed 18/11/10 at 21.14.

Malawian or Mozambican descent, they were seen in an ambiguous light – oppressed by, but simultaneously people belonging to, the farmer (Rutherford 2001, 2003). ‘Land reform’ for them meant deliberate brutality rivalling the urban experience just described. A recent study by the General Agricultural and Plantation Workers’ Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) described it as

‘a violent, State-sponsored and systematic attack on 1.8 million people in order to wipe out any illusions of political freedom they might have cherished, to force them into the ranks of strict ZANU-PF orthodoxy and to prevent them from lending support to the fledgling Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) opposition party’ (GAPWUZ 2010: 7).

The violations reported by GAPWUZ’s farm-worker respondents included assault (68% of respondents), torture (66%), children forced to watch beatings (38%), rape (11%) and murder (10%) (ibid: 33).

The deepening crisis, however, meant that many recent Zimbabwean migrants to South Africa fit none of these categories, but are drawn from more middle-class backgrounds. During the period of fieldwork, hyperinflation rendered many formal occupations inadequate, making them less viable than minimum-wage work paid in Rands on South African farms.<sup>25</sup> It was not that they lost their jobs, but rather that their pay simply no longer covered transport to and from work. Further, the Zimbabwean government responded to rising consumer costs by fixing commodity prices by decree. The result was that retailers, rather than sell at a loss, stopped stocking controlled goods. South Africa’s attraction is that it not only offers the prospect of pay in Rands, but also access to key supplies no longer procurable in Zimbabwe. Such economic deprivations always have an explicitly political side: those who could not find or retain government employment were often those who refused or failed to enlist in youth camps and become Green Bombers (youth militia; Rutherford 2006). The political causes of Zimbabwe’s crisis are clear to labourers on the border farms. Workforces are vocally anti-ZANU(PF), something especially noticeable during the 2008 elections when many wore MDC T-shirts. The aftermath of the elections further underlined the ZANU(PF) regime’s responsibility for cross-border displacement, when flight from state-sponsored reprisals against opposition voters brought recruits to the farms.

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<sup>25</sup> Minimum wage R989 during fieldwork. Of seasonal employees, packshed workers earned around R1000 because of overtime. Pickers were paid in the mid R800s, because they were paid a piece rate calculated from the hourly minimum wage by assuming an overly ambitious work pace. In 2007, the exchange rate was around one British pound to R14.

Perpetrated by party supporters, war veterans and security services, the wave of violence included harassment, intimidation, beatings, rape, abduction, murder and the burning of homes and businesses.<sup>26</sup>

Recent migrants, in sum, have a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, from former manual workers to former teachers with postgraduate qualifications. They have come to South Africa's border farms at different times, responding to different, interrelated pressures, both economic and political.

Zimbabwe's 'new diasporic communities formed since 2000' experience 'exclusion, distress and hardship' (McGregor 2010: 27). This is reflected in recent scholarly commentary. Considering the Zimbabwean case, Mbembe interprets displacement as experience of 'radical loss', of 'consciousness of the precariousness of life, and of the lack of guarantees to its future' (Hammar et al. 2010: 267). Stepputat similarly emphasises a 'phenomenology of loss', and Guyer a sense of 'dislodgement' – disruption that can occur even without spatial movement (ibid: 268). Worby contends that, for displaced Zimbabweans, 'the temporal horizon for reconciling credits and debts, present capacities and future dependencies, is unknowable and thus in some profound way, undecidable' (2010: 421). The consequent sense of dramatic 'abjection' (Ferguson 1999) is particularly acute precisely because of southern Africa's history of highly structured economies:

'displacement has deepened informalisation. While this has parallels in other African settings, the process is unique in southern Africa because of its relatively well developed formal economies, and because of the way informalisation articulates with residues of older modes of bureaucratic power in a region with histories of particularly strong states' (Hammar et al. 2010: 282).

Displacement, in short, equates to deeply disruptive, forced mobility, which also foregrounds flux and innovation. The flip side is that 'new spaces, agents and dynamics of exchange and accumulation' are being created by it (ibid). *But what new spaces?* 'The boundaries between displacement and migration' need rethinking (ibid). On the South African border, this means attending to the wider patterns of migrancy into which Zimbabweans are drawn. They become members of large workforces, organised according to steep hierarchies and established work

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<sup>26</sup> See e.g. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=80544> accessed 18/11/10 at 20:35; <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR46/024/2008/en/0bbe3547-4d9a-11dd-b4c6-7b3441f92ab8/afr460242008eng.pdf> accessed 18/11/10 at 20:50.

processes. Investigation of the latter invites a return to situational analysis of labour relations.

The context of crisis does indeed call, however, for an approach that is broader than a standard situational analysis. The enormous diversity among Zimbabwean farm workers must be captured by paying attention to their individual histories. Such sensitivity is similarly required in order to illuminate what agricultural work means to migrants of different backgrounds. Rather than simply overdetermining their experiences on the farms by viewing these through a 'labour migrancy' lens, this thesis explores the intersection between the structuring effects of being in a resident, compounded workforce, on the one hand, and Zimbabweans' various backgrounds, self-understandings and (often frustrated) aspirations, on the other. The context of crisis requires going beyond a narrow labour relations focus. It demands exploring how varied personal histories inflect, and are inflected by, social arrangements and hierarchies in the workforce. Migration to the farms on South Africa's northern border is at one level a specific instance of a much wider, historically established pattern of migrancy, described earlier. At another level, Zimbabweans' contemporary mobility cannot be understood without appreciating Zimbabwe's particular history of successive upheavals. By paying attention to both, this study focuses on how farm workers' present experiences are constituted, while avoiding the depoliticising effects of seeing them only as labour migrants (see Rutherford 2010: 72).

However, the value of situational analysis in a labour setting is precisely its local focus as a means to understand differences among workers. Mitchell (1956), for example, dissects a dance performance on the Zambian Copperbelt, making sense of what he observed on-site in terms of a wider account of 'social distance' among ethnic groups. While Zimbabweans have diverse backgrounds and reasons for coming, what equally requires investigation is their convergence in a single workforce. Just as, for Gluckman (1961), an African miner has to be considered as a miner, Zimbabweans on the border farms require understanding as farm workers.

There is another way in which their participation in the farms' workforces ought not be seen simply as the result of an uprooting from Zimbabwe. This is a regional not a national story. As I have noted, the border farms are affected by their wider southern African context characterised by different kinds of instability.

If one is produced by the Zimbabwean crisis, the other is often glossed as the result of 'neoliberalism'.

### ***Markets and mobile agriculture in neoliberal South Africa***

Possibly the most widely noted source of current instability, in southern Africa and elsewhere, is globalised neoliberalism, infused with market-driven short-termism. Despite the 1994 ANC-led government's radical mandate, it soon introduced austere neoliberal monetary policies (Bond 2000). Neoliberalism has been held up as the cause of diverse phenomena, from renewed expressions of autochthony (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000) to the resurgence of chieftaincy and culture in South Africa's 'African Renaissance'<sup>27</sup> (Oomen 2005). Extremely diverse socioeconomic phenomena can be understood as 'concrete, historically specific outworkings of millennial capitalism and the culture of neoliberalism' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000: 334). Migration has become an expression of global capitalism: 'that the new and ever surging waves of migration are linked to the accelerated globalisation of consumer capital is all too obvious', notes Nyamnjoh (2006: 31). Pro-market reforms have been a key source of post-apartheid disillusionment. Many South Africans hoped the end of apartheid would bring new political inclusiveness and socio-economic justice. Such expectations have not been fulfilled. What change there has been is often believed to have benefited a small elite. 'The poorest 50 per cent of the population are worse off economically than they were under apartheid' (Robins 2005). Accompanying unemployment, there has been an intensification of what appear to resemble older forms of tribal authority. Neoliberal policies of privatisation and state-downsizing have outsourced the governance of rural communal areas in a manner reminiscent of apartheid (Koelble & LiPuma 2005).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> A term popularised by South Africa's president Thabo Mbeki, envisioning a future both of "modernity" and, more relevant here, one 'in which African communities succeed in constructing themselves around tradition, legacy and heritage' (Lodge 2003: 230).

<sup>28</sup> One consequence has been widespread xenophobia. In much of South Africa, foreigners, known as *makwerekwere* in imitation of their incompetence in South African languages (Nyamnjoh 2006: 39), are blamed for a variety of social ills (see e.g. McNeill 2009). Strong anti-foreigner sentiments are reinforced by the reimagining of citizenship in South Africa. During apartheid, black South Africans were conscious of sharing a predicament – oppression and exploitation at the hands of an Afrikaner Nationalist regime and white capital – with black non-South Africans. But after 1994, this *regional* inclusivity was compromised by efforts to establish *national* unity (Jensen and Buur 2007). It is notable in passing that, on the remote border farms, the increasingly vitriolic xenophobia to the south, especially towards black Africans, appears distant. Farm residents hear about incidents – such as the outbreaks of violent xenophobia in Johannesburg and Cape Town in 2008 (see Morreira 2010) – on television or from relatives, rather than experience them directly.

At the heart of all this is the fact that the South African transition from 'apartheid' to 'post-apartheid', 'repression' to 'freedom', has been accompanied by others: from 'state' to 'market', from 'racial Fordism' to 'non-racial post-Fordism' and from 'rigidity' to 'flexibility' (Hart 2002: 25). South African farmers are faced with the uncertainties and pressures of such a world. In crop agriculture, the rule tends to be: 'get big or get out'. Among those who survive, aeroplanes, tennis courts and plush houses attest to their success. Most border farmers switched to export fruits from cotton in the 1990s, after agricultural market liberalisation<sup>29</sup> and the import of cheap textiles from China. Go into a London supermarket at any time of the year, and you will be faced with a choice of oranges and other citrus fruits. Perennially available, unexotic, and the world's 'first fruit crop in international trade in terms of value'<sup>30</sup>, oranges are available all-year-round in UK supermarkets like Tesco and Sainsbury's only because southern hemisphere growers fill the gap. South Africa's border farms are among these. Production follows a tight schedule. The crop is sent by buying agents to a number of destinations across Europe and Asia. The last ship consignments, which arrive in Europe around six weeks after fruit is picked, need to clear customs before the end of an import window, after which tariffs climb steeply. This tight schedule reflects the fact that the border farms' survival depends fundamentally on sales in an international market economy.

Given the integration of South African farms into international markets, it is certainly the case that changes in agriculture are in part an effect of global economic instability and casualisation. Since the 1970s, Fordist labour arrangements have given way to 'flexible accumulation': 'the more flexible notion of capital emphasises the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive and the contingent in modern life, rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism' (Harvey 1990: 171). "Global" restructuring of work organisation to ensure cheap, flexible labour has in turn generated the growth of the informal or 'underground' economy (see Castells & Henderson 1987; Sassen-Koob 1987), and

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<sup>29</sup> The huge sums of aid that the South African government had given to white farmers since 1948 had already become too expensive by the 1980s and were cut. But in the 1982 drought 25,000 farmers still received 'R2.7 billion in loans, conversion grants and drought relief' (Lodge 2003: 71). The later 1980s saw the doubling of debt in agriculture (ibid). One result of these changes was the consolidation of farms into bigger operations. But the new dispensation after 1994 went further, leaving commercial agriculture to the mercies of the open market.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.unctad.org/infocomm/anglais/orange/market.htm>, accessed 12/4/10, 12:15pm.



led skilled workers to be redefined as unskilled to cut costs (see Blum 2000 for San Francisco shipyards).

Although analysts of such trends have tended to have factories or urban corporate capitalism in mind (Ortiz 2002), a similar story applies to agriculture. In South African farming, there has been a move towards a 'leaner', supplier model. White farmers today face a liberal buyer's market. In the 1990s, protective marketing boards were largely dismantled and subsidies discontinued. Farmers avoid attachment to their enterprises, and are keen to remain flexible in the face of an uncertain future. Agriculture starts to be viewed as a series of strategic business investments, rather than as a necessarily rooted way of life. This involves seeking new opportunities to develop land, stay mobile and distribute risk across different enterprises and crops in different regions. It also involves 'the intensification of the *fragmentation of labour*' in which potential workers 'pursue their reproduction in conditions of increasingly scarce, insecure and oppressive wage employment' (Bernstein 2007: 45, author's emphasis). On the Zimbabwean border, this is further enabled by the particularly high degree of mobility in the area and the continual presence of military and police border patrols which keep new, undocumented recruits vulnerable. A large, transient labour surplus is a malleable and cheap solution, with workers easily controlled because of their 'grey' legal status.

However, these features of labour organisation, which enable the existence of an apparently more 'globalised' industry, are nonetheless the result of particular, diverse political phenomena, rather than simply of generic 'global' processes. They arise out of South African attempts to redress apartheid injustices and Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis. Farmers face the unpredictable vagaries of post-apartheid land reform (see James 2007). They attempt to cultivate an apparently neoliberal, corporate image precisely to create distance from the paternalist style that characterised earlier agricultural arrangements – now highly symbolic as an unwanted anachronism. Changes are *political economic*, rather than simply attributable to any abstract notion of 'the market'. Analyses of globalisation often risk collapsing diverse histories into flattened accounts. More useful than 'choos[ing] between a rhetoric of containers and a rhetoric of flows' as Cooper says in his critical account of globalisation, 'is addressing demonstrable historical connections (Cooper 2005: 112). What appears merely the result of global forces

may equally reflect regional or national processes. All such processes, moreover, are manifested through actual arrangements in particular workforces.

More fundamentally, neoliberal versatility often relies on established, even rigid, forms of organisation on the ground. As Harvey argues, the advantages to capitalists of changing location or product in pursuit of profit are often counterweighed by the costs of investing in new physical infrastructure and immobile inputs (1990: 234). Such costs contribute to maintaining a status quo. On farms, for example, the flexibility allowed by uprooting one's operation and transplanting it in a more stable, less threatening political environment is counterweighed by the need to invest – in however short a term – in expensive infrastructure. Packsheds are extremely costly, especially when mechanised. Citrus trees take several years to produce saleable fruit, after which they continue producing for around 30 years.

'Part of the insecurity which bedevils capitalism as a social formation arises out of ... instability in the spatial and temporal principles around which social life might be organised. During phases of maximal change, the spatial and temporal bases for reproduction of the social order are subject to the severest disruption' (Harvey 1990: 239).

Although such a period of upheaval is now occurring in South African agriculture, matters are far more complicated than might be conveyed by this image of capitalists darting around the globe, in hypermobile pursuit of profit. Success in any one farming enterprise requires the investment of considerable time. Understanding current South African economic upheaval therefore requires attention to the fact that flexible accumulation is itself dependent on highly non-flexible and structured arrangements.

If neoliberal mobility has its limits, surely the Zimbabwean crisis nevertheless plays right into the hands of farmers as potentially flexible accumulators? The destitute, vulnerable people who come through the border fence do indeed represent a pliable supply of labour. However, the labour force itself also makes an agricultural enterprise more sedentarist and less flexible. Harvey (1990) makes the point that flows of capital are becoming ever faster, in what he calls 'time-space compression'. But in agriculture, capital flows are not always as transient as they may seem. Border farming on the Limpopo River crucially relies on the complex, highly personal hierarchies and organisation that

emerge among workers. Forty years of border farming is not a long history, but it is long enough for hundreds of workers and their dependents to develop homes and lives on the estates. Current risks, the result of political-economic change in South Africa, have indeed led farm owners to emphasise their potential flexibility rather than stressing the rootedness in place that formerly characterised – and may still in some cases be a feature of – white farmers’ self-understandings. But there are limits to this in everyday operations, because such farms continue to rely on core black workforces of permanently employed, resident ‘general workers’, who maintain all aspects of the estates throughout the year. A situational analysis of the labour force of one farm reveals the structured arrangements on which apparently fluid, neoliberal capitalism depends.

Although the relevance of labour migration scholarship appears to be receding, its legacies remain crucial to understanding current realities in neoliberal South Africa. Many people are forced to ‘diversify their forms, and spaces, of employment (and self-employment) to meet their simple reproduction needs as labour (“survival”)’ (Bernstein 2007: 39). But it remains imperative to understand how centres of employment reflect and shape their local surroundings, including the character and domestic arrangements of the labour force. What characterised the region in the past was, precisely, a precarious foothold in formal employment. The gold mines themselves, the paradigmatic case, illustrate the point: ‘a volatile gold price results in the ever-present threat of retrenchments. Such insecurities prevent many mineworkers from living with their families in one household, as another home-base may be needed when jobs are lost’ (Rabe 2006: 86). New forms of insecurity here take remarkably familiar forms, as miners are forced back into oscillating migrancy. We should not *confine* ourselves to ‘productivist’ analysis. But understanding its importance as one modality, and thus comprehending the articulations between different historically established migratory logics, is key in this stable-yet-unstable setting.

### ***Becoming a Grootplaas resident***

I conducted the research for this study by living for 17 months in Grootplaas’ labour compound, from December 2006 to April 2008. In the harvest, I also worked as a picker in a 30-man gang. I had visited Grootplaas during a two-week pilot trip to South Africa in April 2006, when I had been put in touch with Willem,

the farmer, by AgriLimpopo, the less conservative of the province's two farmer's associations. Willem introduced me to his personnel manager, Michael, the man whose preparations for a journey home is described in the prologue. My return to commence fieldwork coincided both with a payday and with the HIV/AIDS peer-educators' Christmas party in the compound, where I spent the weekend, meeting people at the *shebeens*,<sup>31</sup> and later took up temporary residence on the floor of Michael's two-room house. Soon after, I acquired my own room in the compound through the workers' Housing Committee, while continuing to eat, wash and spend time at Michael's house. Although sanction for my presence on the farm was given by the white farmers, such endorsement usually came after arrangements had already been made with the workers with whom I lived. My residence there, like much of life in the border farms' compounds, passed entirely beneath the landowners' radar.

As I established myself in the compound, I encountered surprise from its residents, the farm's black working population. For a white person to live in a farm compound was unheard of. I made particular effort to explain that my purpose in being there was to try to understand people's experiences of life on the farms (*vanhu vanorarama sei pamapurasi* – ChiShona: how people live on the farms) as an anthropologist. Long after I arrived, a few people, observing the time I spent writing fieldnotes at the compound's adult literacy centre each morning, continued to believe I was a computer technician. But several residents, having been formally educated, understood my purpose and explained it to others. The disconnect within the labour force, between exiled Zimbabweans of high status and those who were illiterate, sometimes took on bizarre forms. For example, the farm's storeman, Benjamin, schooled to A-level standard, discussed with my supervisor the politics behind recent professorial appointments in Zimbabwe and South Africa as we walked around the crude one-room houses in the labour compound. On the same visit, her dinnertime conversation with Michael concerned the Zimbabwean owner of South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* newspaper.

My obvious wealth (evidenced by my pick-up truck, purchased for fieldwork) might have created distance between my informants and me. However, the workforce's diversity in terms of class aspiration mitigated this. Differences were soon further occluded by an experience of common masculinity. I lived in the

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<sup>31</sup> Informal beer sellers, run out of residents' rooms.

compound and participated in diverse aspects of its social life, attended an apostolic church, became a fan of the workforce football teams, observed live music acts and celebrated birthdays and New Year. Time spent in the compound after work and on weekends was crucial, when people caught up on news, exchanged gossip and visited *shebeens*. During the day I followed work teams.

In contrast to my relatively easily-achieved camaraderie with the permanent workforce, making relationships with seasonal workers presented distinctive challenges for fieldwork because of their much higher rate of turnover. I needed to get to know people quickly in a setting where many were undocumented and consequently wary. Becoming a member of a picking team enabled me to develop bonds with my team-mates, with my obvious inability at speedy fruit-picking making me more laughable than suspect. As the unpaid 31<sup>st</sup> member of a 30-man team paid on a piece rate, my labour was a bonus contribution to the group, and I was not taking anyone's job. Evening conversations with workmates offered further opportunity to acquaint myself with new arrivals. The seasonal workforce's transience, however, meant that structured interviews with around 160 seasonal employees, focusing on basic personal information, were necessary to gain a wider sense of trends in the population. This was later followed by comparable interviews with around 100 permanent workers,<sup>32</sup> and supported by small-sample surveys to address specific questions.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to the relative ease with which I came to be accepted into the masculine culture of the farm's workforce, my attempts to interact with compound women were less successful. With women my own age (mid-20s), it was difficult to establish relationships without rumour of sexual interest. There were exceptions, but these were insufficient to yield consistent insights into the experience of

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<sup>32</sup> With the help of five research assistants. Originally, I employed three men, with different roles at the farm. One was a permanent worker, one a seasonal picker and one a volunteer of the HIV/AIDS NGO. The male skew was because it was so difficult to find women, due both to a sense of female propriety among many, and a lack of sufficient educational levels among others. I later recruited two women – Granny (see below), and a peer-educator volunteer from the HIV/AIDS NGO working in the compound. But the majority of the data was collected by four men in our twenties and thirties. This doubtless skewed the data, and its quality was further compromised by the number of research assistants. But this was unavoidable, as we gathered information on a large, highly transient population. Interviews with permanent workers used a revised questionnaire, employing only one research assistant, a male permanent worker. As one would expect, the data was far more consistent. All assistants were paid R10 (approx 70p at the time) per interview, each taking around 45 minutes, an amount that was designed to be fair but not extravagant in relation to farm wages. I further organised a lunch for all research assistants at a nearby game lodge's restaurant as a thank-you, as well as an opportunity to discuss as a group the significance of trends in the data.

<sup>33</sup> On residence patterns in the compound; how seasonal workers had heard about employment and the date of recruitment.

female life on the farm. I was able, for example, to socialise with the compound's HIV/AIDS peer educators, whose reputation as occasional sex workers put them beyond the realms of propriety. My participation in Michael's household enabled me to spend time with its female members: his partner, and his female relatives who stayed with him when they worked the harvest. I also worked with an older female informant I addressed as 'Granny', thus underlining a platonic and hierarchical relationship. Accompanied by her and thus fulfilling the demands of propriety, I was able to make visits to women and interview them. Despite my best efforts, however, my data on women's perspectives is thinner than that for men.

I was similarly unable to extend my experience of casual, everyday engagement to my relationship with white farmers. What prevented it was the sharp division along racial lines which continues to characterise many South African workplaces, particularly agricultural ones. Aligning myself more closely with one group automatically implied distancing myself from the other. At the same time that residence in the compound ensured my immersion in its life, residence among farmers was denied to me. They welcomed me into their offices or houses for tea or a meal, but tended not to invite me to parties, to church or to farmers' meetings. Throwing my lot in with workers made me appear strange to farmers. My choice of residence signalled that my views about racial/class distinctions were utterly different to theirs.

Being allowed to live in the Grootplaas compound was undeniably a stroke of luck. Historically, farmers were known for being suspicious of researchers. In South Africa this followed 'exposé' reporting that portrayed Afrikaners in a very bad light (e.g. Crapanzano 1985). In Zimbabwe, Rutherford (2001) was flatly refused when he asked Zimbabwean farmers if he could live in their compound. My access, in contrast, was in part a product of the extremely close monitoring – by supermarkets, agents and government officials – to which such farmers were subject. A mere anthropologist is thought less able than these monitoring agencies to have any effect on farmers' enterprises.

But even having given me permission, farmers tended to look askance at me for my choice of residence. They saw compounds as dirty: as an inappropriate dwelling-place for a white person. The farm owner was probably too media-savvy to invoke notions of racial propriety in trying to dissuade me, but other white people in the area did express disbelief, and even disgust, when they heard where I

was living. Nevertheless, farmers continued to speak to me often and at length, and some had paternalist perspectives on race which gave them a sympathetic view of my project. An older farmer, while he would never himself have lived in the compound, agreed with my approach to fieldwork. For him, immersion was the only way to understand the somewhat romanticised view he had of 'African culture'. My interaction with farmers, then, was sufficient to allow me a differentiated and nuanced perspective on farmer attitudes.

Worktime interaction between farmers and workers was a rich source of data. I supplemented this with regular visits to farmers' offices or houses, where I conducted long, open-ended interviews, some of which I recorded. My discussion of farmers places emphasis on their stated views – consistent with my reliance on this interview data – supported by some observations of working hours and of occasional social gatherings. Farmer control over my access to their private lives, however, denied me any insight into the world of white farmer women. When I asked Willem's wife, Marie, if I could speak with her, I was told 'my husband can tell you everything'. White women's views, and their activities, remained a closed book.

Conducting fieldwork at a site of migrant labour is problematic because the anthropologist lacks deep, everyday understanding of the sending context. I mitigated this by visiting Zimbabwe twice during the period of fieldwork: once with Michael, and once with Benjamin, accompanying them home and providing transport. This gave me a sense, albeit a limited one, of residents' circumstances at home. Visits were only a week long. My hosts' circumstances – both well-established, permanent employees – gave a somewhat skewed picture of connections between Zimbabwe and my fieldsite, although we also visited the homes of people who would later become seasonal workers. I had hoped to make further trips across the border towards the end of fieldwork, but was advised against it as tensions rose around the 2008 Zimbabwe elections. A further potential problem was the fact that many workers move on towards Johannesburg and other South African cities after stints on the border farms. I addressed this by visiting a family that had left the farm to settle in Johannesburg, as well as the Central Methodist Church, a refuge for many destitute Zimbabweans in the city. Both my trips to Zimbabwe and those to Johannesburg broadened my understanding of farm workers' experiences. I do not draw extensively on them in

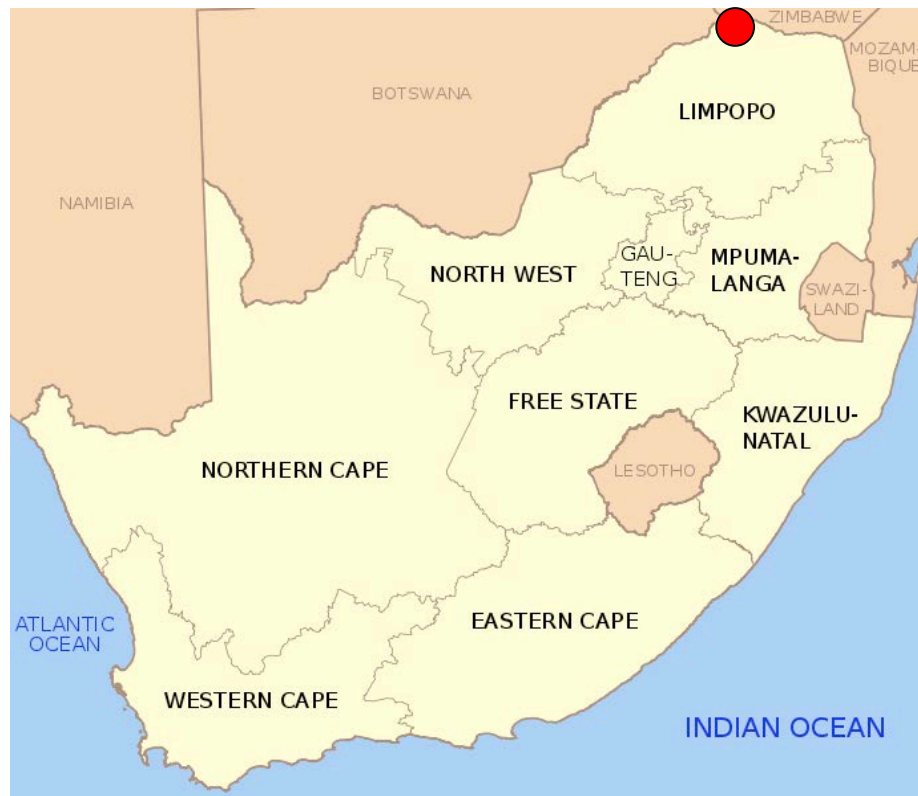
the thesis, the data from which lacks the robustness of my observations on the border farms. Instead, I attempt to make the restrictedness of my fieldsite a strength of the study. Following the long tradition of labour studies in southern Africa, discussed earlier in this introduction, I make sense of Grootplaas residents' experiences in situational terms, in terms of life at the farm itself. I support this by extensive secondary literature. Although not drawn on explicitly, the insights gained through my visits to Zimbabwe and Johannesburg inform my analysis.

I also conducted extensive archival and oral historical research. Concerned to understand the wider context of border farming, I turned first to Musina municipality's archive, then to the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria. I also conducted a number of interviews, some recorded, others merely noted: with farmers across the wider border region; with senior farm workers, and those with long personal histories in the border area; and with key local figures such as the mayor of 1980s Musina (the border town, then known as Messina), former Musina copper miners now residing in South Africa and Zimbabwe, and an amateur historian. All of these people's insights, directly or indirectly, inform my writing.



The Zimbabwean-South African border





The location of my fieldsite in South Africa<sup>34</sup>

### *Outline of the thesis*

The thesis begins by considering the white farmers of South Africa's northern border. **Chapter 2**, which narrates how white settlers came to farm in the border area, shows what the farms – as enterprises – mean to their owners. It moves beyond the conventional scholarly approach, which sees white farmers as enacting a racialised civilising mission. It argues that they are in fact best understood by combining this perspective with one that attends to their ideas about success and failure as farmers. Farmers see success as the result of individual personal effort, and see it evidenced by both the scale of their capitalist enterprises and their transformation of the landscape. They strategise according to ever shorter time-frames, keen to remain flexible. However, far from being simply practitioners of flexible accumulation, farmers have to lay down roots – literally – to succeed.

The thesis continues by setting the farms in the context of the area's past, constructing a history of South Africa's northern border area from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Drawing on archival data, **Chapter 3** investigates the history of two ways of seeing the border area: border zone versus labour-intensive hub of employment.

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<sup>34</sup> Source of map: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_South\\_Africa\\_with\\_English\\_labels.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_South_Africa_with_English_labels.svg), accessed 12/11/10 at 16:10. Symbol marking fieldsite added.

It examines the attempts of emergent settler capitalists in the border area – mine managers and farmers – to gain state recognition for the area as an important place in its own right, a centre of production, rather than a frontier zone. At stake was how the area was to be policed, and how employers on the border, often working at cross purposes with police, would recruit southward cross-border migrants. The chapter, tracing these two ways of seeing the area to the present day, frames the thesis' consideration of the border farms themselves, as focal points on the border that organize and structure life for their residents.

Having considered farming in the border area as a whole, the thesis then focuses more specifically on Grootplaas, and more squarely on the workforce.

**Chapter 4** moves to the workers' compound to examine how permanently employed workers assert a sense of belonging in the compound by adapting their accommodation and through their domestic arrangements. In a manner that echoes southern African studies of black township and mine dwellers, Grootplaas residents confront their insecure tenure by asserting their rootedness. This also highlights the differences between the permanently employed and the seasonal picking workforce. It shows that three factors – legal documentation, length of residence at the farm and access to women for domestic labour – shape the everyday differences between employment categories. It thus demonstrates the complex reality and multi-faceted character of labour hierarchy at Grootplaas. By doing so, the chapter sets up a framework for understanding the centrality of permanent black workers in diverse aspects of farm life. This lays the groundwork for subsequent closer examination of workers' perspectives. The following two chapters address directly how the effects of Zimbabwean displacement are refracted through Grootplaas' labour hierarchies.

**Chapter 5** focuses on male seasonally employed pickers at the farm, showing how the work process – a fast, aggressive affair – is key in establishing camaraderie between new recruits. Belying the typical image of a short-term labour supply, however, many pickers have middle-class backgrounds or aspirations, having been driven to seek this form of work because of Zimbabwe's economic troubles. For them, the picking process is constructed as a way to recreate a middle-class ethic that was historically defined precisely in opposition to labour migrancy. The argument illuminates how class is reimaged and

contested through contrasting models of masculinity in the work process, under conditions of large-scale Zimbabwean displacement.

**Chapter 6** considers the interface between white farmers and black managers. It does so by contrasting the two most senior black employees – the personnel manager and the foreman – their self-understandings and their place in the labour force and work process. This reveals how echoes of a regional history of racialised agricultural paternalism combined with a growing rhetoric of corporate managerialism produce sharp tensions in the workforce. It thereby demonstrates how shifts towards corporate-style management play out through relationships among workers. Addressing the shift to ‘management’ in this manner also reveals how changes in agriculture intersect with those associated with the Zimbabwean crisis. The tensions between the foreman and the personnel manager reflect not only work dynamics and changes in farming, but also the different backgrounds of workers because of Zimbabwe’s decline.

**Chapter 7** addresses the position and role of farm work in a wider economy of trade and services on the farms and across the border. The chapter rounds off the central theme of the thesis – how Grootplaas’ internal arrangements both reflect and refract the wider dynamics of the border and of Zimbabwean displacement. It does so by investigating the material and temporal articulations between ways of ‘making ends meet’. This reveals how waged farm workforces represent key centres of gravity in the economic life of the border area, since even cross-border smugglers rely on their connections to the farms, and the accommodation and markets which these farms provide, for their livelihoods. It shows how senior permanent workers therefore wield considerable power, as traders need their say-so to reside in the compounds. It argues that, for many traders, material *accumulation* may be less important than making *enough* to live on the farms, in socially stable environments where the alternative is insecure and unknown.

Taken together, these chapters explore a case of the establishment and transformation of settler-agricultural labour arrangements. These labour dynamics, I show, act as a prism. They give new meaning to work, movement and upheaval in an era of ‘informalisation’.

## *Chapter 2*

### **'IT'S IN OUR BLOOD, IT'S IN OUR SKIN': SUCCESS, FAILURE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY IN BORDER FARMING**



Eastwards along the Limpopo River, a short distance to the west of the farms

#### ***Introduction: Koos' grand entrance***

In 1982, Koos Viljoen, the Afrikaner founder of Grootplaas Estate, crossed the Limpopo River into South Africa. Having initially moved to Zimbabwe in the 1960s, he had decided to leave, unwilling to live under a black government. This was the aftermath of the 1970s liberation war, in which Koos had contributed his marksmanship and aeroplane-piloting expertise in support of Ian Smith's white regime. For the new ZANU government, the flight of white farmers meant potential economic disaster, including loss of the country's vast commercial agricultural infrastructure. One response was to prohibit the removal of farming equipment beyond Zimbabwe's borders.

That, however, was what Koos intended to do. He had seen potential in the land across the border in South Africa, on the southern bank of the Limpopo.

Lacking sufficient funds for a large tract, he bought two portions of land in partnership with Jan, a farmer from the same Zimbabwean district. Jan saw similar opportunity on the border, and would join him there in 1983. He and Koos had agreed to split their farm after 10 years, once it was established, to ensure that their children would later be able to become farmer-landowners themselves.

Koos rented part of one of the agricultural estates on the Limpopo's northern, Zimbabwean bank. He planted a bit of cotton – enough to make this appear to be a genuine farming venture. Then he drove his agricultural equipment straight across the riverbed of the Limpopo from the Zimbabwean side, putting the word out locally that he was merely running the two farms simultaneously, with the same machinery. It was only through senior government contacts in South Africa, according to Koos, that he avoided being prosecuted for large scale, illegal import after he had crossed. He paid the necessary South African duty but, he told me with satisfaction, the Zimbabwean government could not touch him.

One of Koos' neighbours today remembers his own part in the crossing. Thinus is now South Africa's biggest tomato grower for national brand AllGold's ketchup. He is also the longest standing of the border's surviving farmers. In his seventh year on the Limpopo, he was already settled and knowledgeable about the locale when Koos arrived. Sitting in the port-a-cabin he now uses as an office, he recalled:

‘They crossed right here ... just about 500 metres from where we are now ... It was a lot of work, I think it took them about a week – between a week and two weeks ... It's a whole farm's equipment that they – pipes, pumps, machinery, harvesting equipment, tractors – everything came through the river. One year out of all the years we know, the river didn't stop flowing, so you had to put wire mesh with our old cotton bags that they cut to join them together and put them on the sand so when the tractors went through they could not get stuck. I helped him bring it across, helping him putting the mesh, and helping clearing the south wall [bank] of the Limpopo River to make a gate where he could come through, and just helping with the operation...’

That Koos' border crossing was not only resourceful, but also planned like a covert military operation, is perhaps unsurprising. Before farming and fighting as a counterinsurgent in Rhodesia, he had worked as a diesel mechanic there and in South Africa; farmed and fought against the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya in the 1950s; and been one of only a tiny handful of whites living on the Caprivi Strip, at

the eastern tip of Namibia, in the 1940s, when he floated logs down the Zambezi for a timber company. In Koos' self-understanding, tropes of soldier, pioneer, jack-of-all-trades and bush hunter (of animals and people) combine. This was captured explicitly when he named his new South African farming operation *Houmoed*, an Afrikaans term used in the army, that translates literally as 'hold on', in the sense of 'hold it together a bit longer'.

Koos is seen as an inspirational figure among local white farmers, to whom he is known affectionately as Oom (Uncle) Kees<sup>35</sup> or Oom KK.<sup>36</sup> The story of his arrival is widely known, and when farmers mentioned it to me they assumed that I too would know all about it. The river crossing stands as a shared narrative among the white farmers, a foundational legend that establishes the kind of people they are, and the kind of deed to which many might aspire. This tale is an example of what Rutherford (2001) calls 'pioneer stories'. Rutherford argues that farmers' 'pioneer stories' discursively shape how they think about their relationships with the land and its black population. He shows how farmers imagine themselves through their stories as the frontline of civilisation. They modernise the black residents of their estates while, toughened by 'primitive' life in the bush, avoiding the dulling trappings of modern, urban life. Such stories provide a useful insight into the ways whites speak about and practice farming, as this chapter will explore.

However, the chapter argues that such pioneer stories, when read in the context of farmers' everyday activities on their farms, yield a more complex picture. Farmers talk of transforming the bush into productive farmland because it signals their success – 'making it' – through sheer effort. Indeed, having come from Zimbabwe and from other parts of South Africa, it is precisely this full-time commitment to their work that they share. This chapter considers what the farms mean, *as projects*, to their owners.

### ***Pioneer stories***

On South Africa's northern border, it is black Zimbabwean farm workers that have been seen as incomers, even intruders. But white farmers along the Limpopo River are also recent arrivals. Pioneer stories tell us something about how farmers

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<sup>35</sup> *Oom* means uncle, and is used as a term of intimate respect for all older men in an Afrikaans community. Kees is a childhood nickname.

<sup>36</sup> Another common name for Koos, using the letters of his first and middle names. KK is used by black workers as well as white residents, generally in the context 'Baas KK'.

regard their own mobile histories. They place individuated white men at the centre of an evolutionary narrative:

‘the genre of history ... situated the story-teller and the farm on an advancing border of civilisation, bringing modern order to the bush ... while at the same time it nostalgically invoked a simpler time compared to the hustle and bustle of “modern times”’ (Rutherford 2001: 82-3).

This self-imagination, argues Rutherford, is central to white farmers seeing themselves as fundamentally similar to one another, sharing racialised and gendered roles:

‘Pioneer stories emphasised the “individual” ... about them and other white men. They were the ones who hunted, who supervised the workers, who innovated with scraps, who “opened up” the farm and “made do”. When they talked about neighbouring white farmers, about the “community” that developed between them in the face of common adversaries ... they were always men’ (ibid: 83).

I begin by showing the usefulness of this perspective on how farmers think about themselves and their relationships. Farmers on South Africa’s northern border tell such stories as central modes of self-presentation. Indeed, most are Afrikaners, unlike the majority of Zimbabwe’s white farmers (including Rutherford’s informants). Their stories are inflected by an Afrikaner mythology of mobility: the image of the *voortrekker*, the proverbial Boer who migrated into the interior to avoid British rule (transposed today as the ever-mobile farmer, keeping moving to preserve his way of life); and more generally the *trekboer*, the pioneer farmer of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Some border farmers, and especially Koos, draw on the trekking and/or Anglo-Boer War histories of their ancestors. These have become symbols of Afrikanerdom, centrepieces of the 1930s ‘upsurge in the interest in Afrikaner history that would ultimately lead to the development of a distinctive Afrikaner nationalist school of South African history’ (Gilliomee 2003: 432).

But ‘pioneer stories’ tell us a lot more about farmers than their models of racial difference or how they brought modernity to the ‘primitives’. Among my informants, their stories were about what the *work* of farming means to them. In other words, to understand how settler farmers think about their farming, rather than stop at focusing on the discourses of civilising missions and pioneering

masculine isolation, we should also see farming in terms of the *projects* farmers strive daily to realise.

This opens up new questions. How do farmers *become* the men they aspire to be through their life projects? If farmers understand themselves as pioneering individualists, what does it mean to them to make a success of their enterprises, or not? Rutherford moves the debate about 'white culture' along, by not assuming it to be a reified entity that causes beliefs and behaviours. He writes: 'I prefer to reverse this assumption and look at how these various discourses sustain, among other things, a notion of a unified "European culture" or "race"' (2001: 62-3). He relates 'pioneer stories' to the racialised spatial arrangement of farms, the focus of a later chapter. His discursive starting point is also applicable to Koos and his farm, and thus frames the first part of this chapter. Border farmers' stories do indeed set them apart in terms of 'culture'/'race', often explicitly. But Rutherford's concentration on racial difference and modernising narrative leaves little room to understand how farmers define themselves through the *successes* and *failures* of their enterprises, issues more easily explored by considering farms as projects.

Rutherford's racial focus follows wider trends in studies of southern African settler farming. Much agrarian research has converged on the political economy of racialised paternalism (e.g. van Onselen 1992; du Toit 1993; Sylvain 2001). This framework is indeed central to understanding settler farms, and the relationships among their white and black residents. Much of this thesis will engage explicitly with these debates. But it is also important to appreciate white farmers' own perspectives on their endeavours.

New literature about Zimbabwean farmers places greater emphasis on farmers' imaginations beyond the question of racialised labour relations. This points to a changing stance towards white Zimbabwean agriculture in academic writing since its almost total collapse: greater empathy than analysis of farmers in South Africa. Hughes (2010) seeks to understand how settler farmers build dams, both to satisfy particular aesthetic sensibilities (approximating northern European landscapes) and lay claim to territory by having transformed it. Both impulses have historically been means to assert belonging, and both do so *without* having to engage meaningfully with the majority black population. Before Zimbabwean land reform (beginning in the late 1990s), argues Hughes, farmers simply *ignored* the black population by focusing on the landscape. But Hughes' interest remains the



imagination of racial difference and, indeed racism. This chapter explores farmers' points of view, concentrating on what it takes to 'make it' on the land. A focus on life projects is similarly used by Hammar (2010) in her research on displaced white Zimbabwean farmers in Mozambique. She shows the enormous mental and physical effort involved in starting again, and the changing self-evaluations that accompany subsequent failure. Going beyond a focus on race and the 'civilising mission', such a focus examines what is at stake in farmers' ideals of life-success, and how these ideals connect them to the land.

### ***Pioneer texts***

But let us turn first back to Koos' central place in local white imaginations, to elucidate what pioneer stories look like on the border. His life history conforms to the image of the archetypal pioneering white male in Africa: individually self-sufficient (when not actually alone); resourceful and multi-skilled; ever-ready in the face of adversity (natural and man-made); and handy with a gun. The romantic vision of Koos as hardy pioneer comes not only from his legendary crossing, but also from a book he wrote.

Entitled '*Op die Laaste Spore*' ('On the Last Spoor/Track'), Koos' autobiographical account of his life tells us something of how he presents himself. He had it professionally printed and bound in glossy hard cover, and distributed it to his friends. Hunting is interwoven with stories of pioneering exploits, such as floating logs down the Zambezi and engaging in counter-insurgency operations, and the book ends with musings about evolution and God. White men are the main protagonists. The chapter in which black people come into the sharpest focus – *Mite en Legende* (Myths and Legends) – often refers to whole populations: the Basotho, or the 'Manika' (in Zimbabwe, Manyika, in Mozambique, Manica), for example. Black people generally feature as the manpower for white initiatives, and as the source of tradition, including folkloric yarns and an episode with a *sangoma* (healer). Photos feature countless slain elephants and other big game, many with Koos and other khaki-clad men posing alongside, or feature Koos's wife and children, duly armed with rifles. There are also other images of Koos's exploits. In one series, he braves the Zambezi River in a canoe. In another, a white friend poses next to a timber truck. Many of the photos contain black men carrying out manual labour, but never as the primary object of interest. One, for example, depicts

around eight men using poles to punt a raft across the Zambezi; the real focus of the image, however, is the car on board, suggesting civilisation in the bush.

Koos' bush tracking expertise and hard militarism, part of his pioneer persona, are evident in the book's design (see below). The cover features an elephant he shot as a young man, rendered in the style of a watercolour painting with a sepia pallet. The back cover displays a photograph of the same elephant, with him and his wife sitting embracing on top of the corpse. He is wearing a khaki shirt, shorts and socks, his wife a light dress and sun hat. The words 'Kilo Sierra' under the photograph are the radio code words for the initials of his name, evidencing a similar military aesthetic to that suggested by the farm name Houmoed.



The covers of Koos' autobiography, with real author name covered up for anonymity<sup>37</sup>

A book like Koos' is an unusual form for pioneer narrative. Written down and distributed, it is unlike the various anecdotes farmers tell. Indeed, as a written document, it is one of a group of objects by means of which white residents of the area underline local belonging.

<sup>37</sup> The 'K' in the initials on the back actually refers to his nickname (Koos is a pseudonym), and so will not reveal his identity to any who would not already know. Because the book was published privately, for limited, non-commercial circulation, citing it will not expose the author.

Koos' book is one of several written sources that white residents of the border read with interest as windows into the local past. The content does not portray the area itself. Instead it paints a picture of a key resident, and strives, according to its author '*an die jonger geslag 'n terugblik te gee op 'n vervlōe era waarin hulle voorouers geleef ... het*' (spelling sic; 'to give the younger generation a look back at a bygone era in which their elders lived'). Other historical sources are exchanged and circulated. They include the records of a parliamentary commission detailing land use in the area in the 1940s, and the memoirs of the wife of the English-speaking manager of a local mine who between the 1920s and 1970s owned the land that Grootplaas now occupies. Such books enrich whites' sense of belonging, as they gather detailed information about the area and act as guardians of precious historical sources. In a sense, they become guardians of a particular – settler – version of local history. Indeed, one white amateur historian from a nearby town removed the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century registers from a mission hospital – a national heritage site – because they contained his ancestors' names, and he felt 'his' history was being improperly cared for.

Such written sources are incorporated into local pioneer stories. White residents are knowledgeable about who the oldest families are (cattle farmers dating from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), who has the best historical expertise and who the best collections of documents and photographs (one of these is an estate agent from nearby Musina, mayor of the town in the 1980s, who appropriated a huge collection of photographs and records from Messina Mine when it closed its offices). When I spoke to white residents, from the border to Louis Trichardt south of the Soutpansberg Mountains, the same names kept coming up. For many local white residents, a degree of detailed knowledge about the past asserts their belonging in a place to which people came in scattered groups and in different periods, some only in the 1980s or since.

This self-consciously preserved settler history distinguishes the area from that described by Rutherford (2001). Of Zimbabwean farmers he notes that they 'would likely find my application of the term "history" to their narratives concerning the "past" inappropriate since they lack the wealth of empirical detail that, among other things, helps sustain a notion of "history" as an objective recounting of past events' (2001: 82). In the Limpopo borderlands of South Africa, white residents – farmers and others – take a keen interest in 'history', giving

attention to apparently objective details. Their pioneer stories are peppered with such minutiae as exactly which farmers arrived and which went bankrupt in particular years, and in some cases which families were intermarried with which of the older settler dynasties. I learned from another farming couple, for example, that Koos' son was married into one of the old English farming families whose estates lay to the southeast, as they chronicled the various marriages between lineages, including their own.

Assertions of historical knowledge are often present in farmers' stories. Koos' book is a source for his friends to add detail to their historical consciousness. It is also a classic pioneer story in its own right, squarely in the narrative genre elucidated by Rutherford. Its wealth of historical detail is matched by its relentless focus on an individualised 'I', along with its themes of resourcefulness, bush-readiness and understanding of black 'myth'. However, Koos' book was written as an account of his larger-than-life exploits, and is focused on the exciting highlights of the author's life. The stories told by farmers in person, by contrast, offer a more complex picture, in which the individual self-sufficiency of pioneering masculinity is applied to farmers' everyday concerns, namely their farms.

### ***Men of vision***

In response to my questions, farmers would often describe the development of their farms. They would present this development as the result of their own individual effort, perhaps with the occasional help of another farmer. Recall Thinus' version, above, of Koos' river crossing. It portrays the moving of a whole estate's worth of equipment across a soft, sandy river bed (and national border) as the work of a few people: 'I helped him bring it across, helping him putting the mesh, and helping clearing the south wall [bank] of the Limpopo River to make a gate where he could come through'. Despite the scale of the operation, in its retelling there are only comradely white farmers in sight.

Thinus' description of his own farming history further exemplifies such self-imagination. He tells how he began planting cotton on the Limpopo's south bank in 1975. When he came to the area, he reports, there was little crop farming, with 'very poor irrigation schemes', and much of the land was undeveloped or used for cattle. Thinus bought land from an absentee landowner from Harrismith (in KwaZulu Natal) and 'opened it up', buying further portions of land as he expanded

production. According to Thinus, land along the Limpopo is very fertile, and conditions perfect for farming. But the area's remoteness, lack of basic infrastructure in the early years and the combination of starting from nothing in the middle of a low-level border war drove out all but the most serious would-be farmers. Speaking to Thinus and other border farmers, the picture that emerges is a pantheon of individualised, white, male farmers making their own way, helping one another when necessary. This version of the area's development is reinforced by the black farm workers' practice of referring to farms by the name of the farmer, prefixed by the vernacular term meaning 'place of'. 'KhaDeki' is the 'place of Dirk', who went bankrupt and now manages Jan's estates; KhaRudi refers to one of Koos' sons, Rudi, who now runs their second farm near Komatipoort; KhaGideon and KhaKobus refer to the farms' current farmers, Thinus' two brothers.

Of course, narrating the area's development as the product of such pioneering enterprise does not automatically valorise hierarchies of racial superiority. Some farmers did however make explicit such a framework of interpretation, one with strong paternalist overtones. As Koos spoke to me during my teatime visits to his house, it became clear what being a farmer meant to him. Crucial to this was a fundamental difference between 'European' and 'African', the former characterised by far-sighted vision, the latter by a level of instinct that Europeans have lost by their exposure to 'civilisation'. This contributed to his feeling that his role as a farmer was that of a visionary, pioneer and embodiment of modernity, but accompanied by expertise on 'the people', in this context meaning black labour. He claimed Afrikaners to be especially in demand by the World Bank for the reconstruction of agriculture in post-conflict Mozambique. In other words, farmers like Koos are the frontline of civilisation, but sufficiently in touch with the 'bush' and its people to understand how to command authority there.

Koos would demonstrate such understanding in his anecdotes and in everyday speech. He jokes with workers about Africans' need for another firm hand like that of Shaka, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Zulu king; he commented to me that workers had appreciated his buying a new 4x4 car as, for them, leaders without the right status symbols reflect badly on their followers. Forged in the context of racial inequalities, work situations and colonial and apartheid rule, Koos holds a particular, romanticised ideal of 'the African'. In his accounts, warrior metaphors,

superior skill in tracking animals and superstitions about witchcraft jostle with his assertions of the appreciation of such people for firm authority.

Other farmers in the area would speak in a similarly philosophising tone, even building theorised models of racial difference. On more than one occasion, Jan, Koos' neighbour and former farming partner, spoke to me about the difference between 'ice man' and 'tropical man'. The former, having evolved in the cold, had learnt to save food for the winter, keeping Chicken Licken meals (a joking reference to a South African fast food chain) in his cave. By doing so, he learned to plan. Tropical man, meanwhile, had never lacked access to food through the year, and so had no need to plan. The cultural models are highly gendered, evoking contrasting masculine hunter-gatherers. Though invoking different metaphors, Jan's point was very similar to Koos': Europeans are distinguished from Africans by their 'vision'. Gesturing on one occasion to his Toyota Hilux pickup, Jan told me that this was a product of ice man's cultural advantage. He added that tropical man also has his strong points, but it took him some time to think of any. 'Socialism', he eventually concluded. Koos shared Jan's belief in Africans being more social. For Koos, the strong point of African culture is their diligence in looking after the very young and the old. The culture of the African, or 'tropical man', is the antithesis of individualistic modernity, with its advantages and disadvantages. Another farmer, John, philosophised for an afternoon on the difference between African and European religious outlooks, in terms of their effect on individual responsibility.

It is clear, then, that farmers' stories and musings present white, male farmers as the protagonists in rural development and progress. As Rutherford points out, such narratives reinforce a sense of white community. They do so all the more effectively when some of the stories are sensational and are retold again and again, such as that recounting Koos' river crossing. Pioneer stories often concern the role of farmers' European 'vision' in developing their agricultural estates.

At the same time, farms play the role of illustrating the success of work-intensive projects in farmers' assessments of their own worth.

### ***Pioneering projects***

Departing somewhat from Rutherford's analysis of white Zimbabwean farmers, with its emphasis on race, allows me to develop some insight into other aspects of

farmers' self-understandings. Farmers' stories about bringing civilisation to the wilderness are equally claims about the personal meaning of work. Such claims can be found in other settler narratives, such as those from the U.S.. 'For American newcomers, settled farming held moral as well as physical meaning', notes Valencius, in a history of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American settlers' conceptions of the landscape in relation to health and disease (2002: 195). She explains that 'agricultural labour was not merely labour. It was an engagement with the natural world in which cultivators imposed their own will, putting an end to "the primitive state of nature"' (ibid: 198).

There are important historical differences between agricultural settlement in America and in southern Africa. But in both, the wider resonances of being 'a planter of rows' (ibid: 196) placed white settlers as frontiersmen of civilisation, rationalising an environment through their vision. To appreciate what this means for border farmers in northern South Africa, however, means moving beyond contrasting white 'modernity' to black 'tradition'. Taking Valencius' lead, I turn now to investigate how farmers speak about and practise the work of transforming the landscape into a series of profit-generating farms. Pioneer stories are not merely elaborations of a civilising mission; they are also a way into appreciating the sheer effort farmers feel it takes to transform their environments.

The transformation these farmers have achieved as they built their enterprises is considerable. The border farms lie at intervals along the South African side of the border, their fields, orchards and labour compounds stretching away from the road that runs along the fence. Jan's farm, with 1,000 hectares under cotton and a further 300 under citrus, is the largest cotton producer in South Africa. Thinus', at a little less than 1,000 hectares in total, is the largest supplier of tomatoes for AllGold ketchup, in product and popularity the South African equivalent of Heinz. Koos' Grootplaas reached an output of one million crates of citrus in 2007. Its fruit is sold in Waitrose, Tesco and Sainsbury's in the UK, and in supermarkets across Europe and Asia. Its lands comprise around 450 hectares under orange and grapefruit orchards and a similar hectarage of uncultivated mopaneveld.<sup>38</sup> Such farms require extensive infrastructure for irrigation: Grootplaas has a private, lake-sized dam (reservoir) for the citrus trees, and during

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<sup>38</sup> According to hectarage, Grootplaas appears smaller than its neighbours, but this is misleading. A hectare of citrus trees represents far greater investment and output than the same area of cotton.

fieldwork a second, larger dam was being constructed. These are filled during the two months that the Limpopo River flows, using pumps on the riverbank.



**The border farming area.** Circles are pivot-irrigated fields for crops like cotton, rectangles citrus orchards or tomato fields. Source: South African Municipal Demarcation Board

Farming here is, indeed, hard work. It is puzzling how much effort a white farmer-landowner needs to expend when one considers that he has a workforce of as many as 600 workers. Being managers, however, little of what they do involves manual labour. In this respect settler farms are little different from many other settings of large-scale, organised production where class rather than racial divisions prevail. On farms, however, everyday organisation does make white farmers' roles especially clear and visible. Established ideas about the division of labour, alongside the practicalities of work across hundreds of hectares, place farmers at the centre of their operations. By contrast, in American factories for example, management has to carve out its own space, imposing rules that legitimate its presence but that hinder efficient production (Burawoy 1979).

The work activities of Willem, Koos' son-in-law and farmer at Grootplaas, provide a good example. He is at the farm offices each morning by 6am, and during the harvest may stay at the packshed overseeing work until 10pm. His work involves negotiating with export agents; liaising with inspectors from South African state institutions, foreign supermarkets and EUREPGAP, a European standards agency; and investigating and buying agricultural inputs. As in many other industrial enterprises, while various dimensions of production occur relatively independently of top management, the organisation as a whole is deeply



hierarchical. In particular, there is a bottleneck in communication between people involved in production on the farm and outside organisations, whether state or private. Much of this communication is currently channelled through Willem. His work involves speaking to representatives of institutions with which Grootplaas has dealings, as noted above. As we shall see later in this thesis, farmers like Willem are changing how they speak about and enact their roles, as they attempt to fit a corporate organisational style. It is becoming advantageous for farmers to promote black front-men for their enterprises, to avoid allegations that they are racist. Caused by changes in the export-agriculture economy and in the politics of farming, this privileges some workers, notably clerks, and threatens others, such as foremen. At present, however, the vast majority of communication with buyers and state officials runs through Willem.

There is another area of work that occupies farmers, that of the apex of a chain of command. Farms have peculiar kinds of hierarchies in which nodal points are of key importance. On the one hand, workforces are often dispersed over huge areas. On the other hand, the hierarchy extends beyond work issues, narrowly conceived, based on expectations of 'farmer paternalism'.

Black foremen and white managers with radios are key to organisation in such circumstances, maintaining contact with their two-way radios, acting on their own initiative and representing the farmer on the ground. Willem's wife, Marie, is a crucial go-between, from her office at the workshop. And the packshed during the picking season has its own pecking order. The offices where Willem and his family work represent a key hub in this kaleidoscope of operations. In this sense, the farm has a steep, centralised chain of command.

This steep chain of command affects all aspects of life, because workers live on-site. They come to the farmers with a range of complaints, including marital disputes and tales of weekend violence. This dimension of the labour hierarchy is a central theme in later chapters of the thesis. For now, it is important to note that, for some farmers, arbitrating between workers with respect to their non-work lives is part of a paternalist vision of farming. In other words, this is the practical side of the tales of civilising mission we saw earlier. For others, like Willem, having to intervene in the lives of up to 600 workers and their dependents is the result of established expectations, and it is an annoyance. Willem's language for describing this work is 'labour relations', hardly the rhetoric of paternalist responsibility. And

he reinforces his perspective by claiming not to understand enough about his workers' 'culture' to make sensible decisions about their private affairs. Here, therefore, farmers differ over their proper relationship to their workers; not all fit the model of the modernising pioneer with paternalist responsibilities. All, however, have to engage with established expectations. And this is a key part of their work.

At the same time, farmers are never all that far removed from the everyday tasks of the farm. I would sometimes see Willem not just directly supervising repair work in the workshop, but on occasion even getting under a tractor to fix it himself. In similar vein, another farmer, Thinus, proved to be extremely hands-on when it came to policing the well-being of his crops. I first met Thinus when I was visiting his white neighbour. It was evening – long after dark – and Thinus stormed up to the house to find out who had sprayed dust over his tomatoes by driving too fast. He had been out on his tractor at the time, still in the fields even after his workers had retired for the day. Lying behind white farmers' perceived need to keep a close eye on everything is their assumption that it is *they*, not black workers, who have the necessary vision to farm. The pioneer stories with which we began contain models of racial difference that shape farmers' experiences of their work. In any case, when farmers describe themselves as jacks-of-all-trades – simultaneously businessmen, soil, crop and chemical experts, overseers of labour, mechanics – there is significant truth in what they say.

The farms are, after all, economic projects to which their owners feel deep personal attachment. Thinus expressed this especially clearly. To explain how he came to farm on the border, he felt he should start by explaining: 'We Westhuizens are farmers. It's in our blood, it's in our skin. So, for that purpose, I also went into farming. My brothers also all went into farming'. He went on to describe why he moved here, in 1975, to plant his first crop in 1976:

'I visited the area here, one time in my life, and I saw the opportunity of the best climate, soil – alluvial soils that's been put down by floods from the Limpopo River – and good quality of water. So the very first chance I had – I worked for a boss – I came here, hired a small farm, then I got an opportunity to open up the bush, take the trees out and started opening up this farm. And from there on when I developed the whole farm I bought the neighbours' smaller farms, five of them, until I own six farms today'.

Although this quotation provides ample evidence of the masculine individualism of the pioneer story, it also shows something about the importance of sheer hard work. The lone white man ‘opens up’ the bush, which was, in Thinus’ words, ‘like Africa’. But the transformation achieved is the result of hard, committed effort, and this is what Thinus is keenest to underline. For a farmer like Thinus, *how* he works is central to his self-understanding. ‘I am one of the difficult people in life’, he reflected to me. ‘I’m a perfectionist. I will do a thing right or I will not do it. If I open a farm I will not open a bad farm. If I’ve got a choice to open a farm in the best area I will not open it in a worse area.’ The ‘best area’ is a place of good long-term potential – good climate, soil and water – not the easiest or the most comfortable location. Thinus highlighted the border’s challenges. Infrastructure – electricity, telephones, upgrading the rough dirt roads – only arrived in 1984. Fewer than 20% of the original settlers from the 1980s survived. Most went bankrupt or lacked the necessary commitment to their farms to persevere. The really serious farmers, those who made it, did so because of their hard work. This Thinus emphasised to me, stopping the interview to ensure it be included on the recording. Speaking with slow, measured words, he articulated why so many failed. His thoughts are worth quoting at length, as they state clearly what I heard in different forms from farmers along the border:

‘Although the opportunities here if you know what you want to farm and how you must do it is [sic] the best in South Africa – the yields we take from crops here is higher than any other place in South Africa – but the difficulty to do it is much more than other places because you’ve got to take, our water we take out of the sand of the Limpopo River, not from an open stream and it’s a very hard area. December, January, February is so hot that some people can’t take the heat. So you must know how to make use of that, to benefit out of it. Farmers that messed up, that are not here today, thought it’s very easy. One farmer came here; it looks like he’s doing well. The government is helping to get a loan to come here [in the 1980s], it’ll be very easy. They didn’t know that this area is a difficult area.’

Thinus is an extreme case. He makes a point of his hard work, even above other farmers in the area. He underlines the seriousness of his operation by reporting that even his wife drives tractors and is involved in the planting – something unusual in farmer self-representations and practice. Whatever his pitch for distinctiveness, the basic self-understanding that Thinus conveys is more widely shared. The idea of the pioneer not only foregrounds individualistic white

men, it also emphasises work. And border farmers constantly contrast themselves with those who did not make it. Here is Jim, a much smaller farmer who owns one of Thinus' land portions in partnership with him:

'If you go back into the backgrounds of people here, what were they? Schoolteachers, soldiers, and all the other professions that you can think of. It was actually a minority of people from farming backgrounds that developed this area. So it was "open the land, clear the bush, now we've got to establish water". There's not a tap that you open [and] the water runs out. You've got to go and find that water ... This is all pioneering work that was done by the farmers here. So it was survival of the fittest. And the weaker ones have gone, there's no two ways about that. People didn't all make the grade here. Hence the smaller guys have always been bought out by the bigger guys as it's become more developed.'

It is striking that even Jim, without doubt the smallest landowner in the area, is so keen to romanticise the success of the hard-working pioneer. What the largest and smallest farmers along the border share is a sense of personal character rooted in the valorisation of effort. There is a sense here of what Katherine Newman, in her study of American middle-class downward mobility, calls 'meritocratic individualism': 'At the centre of this doctrine is the notion that individuals are responsible for their own destinies. This idea, which owes its origin to Calvinist theology, carries into the world of work a heavy moralism' (1988: 76). Perhaps unsurprisingly given their commitment to Calvinist churches such as the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) and the more conservative Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (Afrikaans Protestant Church), a similar moralism or 'protestant ethic' (Weber 1992) weighs on border farmers' self-understandings. As a farmer, success and failure in agriculture reveal who you are.



Thinus' tomato fields, stretching back from the border (behind camera), with workers labouring in the distance

Of course, those who did not make it may not share this vision of a clear, somewhat moralistic distinction between success and failure. Whereas I would often hear those who had left described as 'not serious' – suggesting laziness – Dirk took a different tone. Dirk, Jan's manager, was a Zimbabwean who had farmed on the border for twelve years before going bankrupt. Clearly his failure still smarts, all the more because the land he owned still bears his name (KhaDeki). And the distinction widely drawn in the area between hard-working success and its opposite cannot have helped. In Dirk's words:

'Eventually it was impossible to go on. We had a few bad years and made a few bad decisions. It's one of those things. Nobody wants to stop farming. When your costs exceed your income, it doesn't work out, hey? A lot of us on this river at one time and a lot of people left, a lot of people went down the tubes here. Only a few people left [here] from the originals.'

Dirk told me this in a quiet, somewhat resigned tone, with a lot of pauses between his words. When I said that it sounded to me as though he had lasted longer than most, he emphasised how long others had also managed to keep going, an understandably more forgiving view than the dominant one. But it was clear that

failure had an enormous effect on him, from the way he related how he earned a living after losing the farm.

'I wandered around doing all sorts of things, *ja*, a lot of odd jobs. I had a garden service for a while which branched out into other things. *Ja*, it kept food on the table. ... I even worked in a supermarket for a couple of years, *ja*, supermarket manager. As I say, I had my own garden service business. I did some building contract work. Just before I came here I was at Tovi [safari] Lodge for a year or so.'

In effect, when he lost his farm, Dirk lost the sense of direction his project had given him. Successful farmers, in contrast, frame a future around continuing and expanding achievement. Thinus speaks of land purchase as an indicator of success. Koos and his partner did the same in the past, expanding as others went out of business. Now, with no further plan to buy land portions along the border, the farmers at Grootplaas talk of expanding in other ways. They have been increasing the area of planted, productive land. They currently have around 450 hectares planted with citrus. But limits to this expansion are imposed by the amount of water locally available. They have built a new dam to store water, much larger than the first. They also bought the farm Kleinplaas near Komatipoort, on the Mozambican border. This was a way to invest money that would otherwise be taxed as profit, as Grootplaas came close to being 'overcapitalised'; it created another option for one of Koos' sons to farm; and it acted as a security against the risk of land reform. Recently, the family began leasing more land in Mozambique itself. By such means, farmers keep expanding, and keep demonstrating their own success, to themselves and others.

But such farms employ white managers as they expand. Conversely, managers – who may be failed farm owners – contribute to the success of those who have achieved expansion. So not only did Dirk fail in his own enterprise; his work now contributes to another farmer's sense of individual success. The way Dirk speaks of his work as a manager lacks the progressivist sense of relentless improvement that farmer-landowners express. When I asked him what his job involved, he replied 'you tell me'. He was initially employed to look after the primary irrigation systems, the farm's 120 boreholes. But he subsequently also became responsible for the maintenance and picking of 300 hectares of citrus, maintaining the irrigation pivots over another 1,000 hectares of cash crops including cotton, organising and supervising building work and anything else that

requires overseeing. 'I help out wherever', he summarised. We will get a better sense of the key role played in the labour hierarchy by figures like Dirk – or Andre at Grootplaas – in Chapter 6. And it is worth emphasising that, as we shall see in that chapter, white managers' everyday work has most in common with the black foremen who co-ordinate the black workforce, in and out of work time. What is key to note now is the low-status implication of Dirk's position as employed by a farmer, in an area with a dominant sense of success centred on tropes of ownership, self-employment, individual work and initiative. This meaning was explicitly expressed by Andre, Grootplaas' white manager. He explained to me that his reputation among workers is that of a 'poor' person, in contrast with the wealth normally associated with white farmers. Permanent workers, he told me, joke that he is too poor to buy his own farm. Conversely, Andre valorises his proximity to and understanding of the workforce, by implicitly criticising those further up the ladder. He attributes the lack of familiarity with TshiVenda of Koos' younger relatives to the family's snobbishness, born of extreme wealth. In white social circles on the border farms – including *braais* (barbecues) and polocrosse<sup>39</sup> tournaments – managers appear as relatively poor men, in comparison to local farmers who own aeroplanes.

### ***'I'm here to farm': the serious business of border agriculture***

How does these farmers' emphasis on their work shape their imagination of the border agricultural area? The border farmers think of themselves as particularly serious in their enterprises. They see themselves as differing from other settler farmers because it is the *serious* work of agriculture that defines them. Cattle and game farmers 50km behind the border have established an armed security force called Farm Watch as a measure against violent attacks on white farmers. This organisation was behind a number of news reports in 2007, of farmer vigilantism on the border. After I attended one of their self-defence camps, which involved learning to use a range of firearms, I asked Paul, one of Koos' sons, now responsible for Grootplaas' water infrastructure, his opinion of these camps. He referred to the organisers as 'weekend warriors', people with too much time on

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<sup>39</sup> A hybrid combining polo and lacrosse, it is known locally as 'poor man's polo' as it only requires one horse per player per match, rather than one each chucker (game period) as in polo proper. It involves throwing and catching a ball using lacrosse-style sticks, from horseback, and scoring goals between posts at each end of a rectangular playing field.

their hands because they have too little real work to do. For Paul, as for other border farmers, what distinguishes them from the cattle and game farmers – who preceded them in the region, and whose land surrounds them to the south – is that border farming is the real thing. The scale of the enterprises and the work involved defines them.

Border farmers have different explanations for their exceptionalism. For Jim, the border's smallest cultivator, this is a pioneering story:

'I think one must appreciate that the people who developed this area in the 1970s – I know we're not in the real old days where you had pioneers as in America or *voortrekkers* in South Africa which are opening up virgin soil, unknown territories and things like that. But anybody who is pioneering, and I regard this here, in the 1970s, this development, as pioneering, is normally a younger generation of people and generally are more – tend to be more – aggressive than the guy who's going onto a developed piece of land, it's all peaceful and there's settlements and things like that. There's no real challenges to that person who's taking over an established thing. So to be a pioneer you tend to be a little bit more aggressive. One can look through history and that ...'

For Jim, an apt case of comparison was America's cowboys. The young, male aggression of the generation of farmers who settled the border explains their drive to work, and distinguishes the success stories who remain from the many failures who left. Jim's version of border success resonates clearly with the 'pioneer stories' discussed earlier. Here are romanticised, highly masculine figures, beating back the bush: the individualistic pioneer ideal. For Jim, the aggression of young pioneers is what ensures they have the energy for the necessary effort.

Other farmers – especially those with backgrounds in cultivation – have quite different interpretations of the area's success. For Jan, what made the border such a serious agricultural area was the large number of *Zimbabwean* farmers:

'Zimbabwe farmers were good farmers. ... We weren't a politician or a businessman or what-have-you, or a teacher that owned a farm. ... Zimbabwe was a farming country. ... The whole country revolved around farming. So the best of the best were bred there, amongst this farming community. Business-wise and farming-wise and how to make success out of farming. That was the culture of the country. Now, if you look at Zimbabweans who moved out of Zimbabwe, you'll find them – a lot of them, around the world – very, very successful. Very successful. The biggest tobacco farmer in South Africa is a Zimbabwean. The biggest fruit/vegetable [farmer] is a Zimbabwean. The biggest cotton farmer [Jan himself] is a Zimbabwean. And then you look at the citrus...'



For Jan, the point is *not* to become too enamoured of the wider meanings associated with being a settler. We saw earlier that he has detailed and carefully articulated theories of racial difference (ice man versus tropical man). His theory explains, for him, why white people should be running farms, and represents the kind of thinking lying behind pioneer stories. But being serious about farming, for Jan, means focusing on the job at hand, not conflating it with other activities. Unlike Koos, for whom being a farmer, a soldier, a hunter and a mechanic were integrated into being a pioneer, Jan was clear that settling the border was, for him, about finding good land and planting it.

‘My whole business was to farm, not to fight the war. So when I came here, I had the same attitude. I’m here to farm, not to get involved into politics or the war or anything. I’m here to farm and to make a living and to feed the nation. Make a living of course first – that’s what we all do. We all try to say “no, no, we do it for this or for love or that”, but we all do it to live.’

Jan believes that South African farming stagnated historically, becoming tied up in complicated ideas about being a Boer. Consequently, South African farmers lacked skills that Zimbabweans had. The border, says Jan, has benefited from the influx of farmers from the north, serious Zimbabweans who are really interested in getting on with farming. He asserts that there is a fundamental difference between farmers who conflate different masculine ideals, and those whose life revolves simply around farming. He sees this difference as mapping onto one between South African and Zimbabwean models. What is implied is that Zimbabwean farmers, displaced from Zimbabwe in the 1980s, are somehow less mired in South African politics than those from South Africa itself.

Is the story of border farming in fact one about Zimbabwean farming, displaced to South Africa? Matters are in fact far more complicated. Jan’s statements have a political motivation, and cannot simply be taken at face value. Farmers like Jan hope to avoid ‘politics’ in post-apartheid South Africa – unlike their more conservative counterparts in Farm Watch – by presenting themselves primarily in ‘economic’ terms, as businessmen. Such positioning in relation to national politics is evidenced by Jan’s characterisation of the border area itself. He, like many other border farmers, claims that the influence of Zimbabwean farmers on the border has produced a more liberal atmosphere. The view among the area’s Zimbabwean Afrikaners is that they grew up more broad-minded than their

southern counterparts because they learned both Afrikaans and English 'culture'. In Jan's opinion, farmers from Zimbabwe have set the tone on the border, and others have learned to conform. So while border farmers differ from those around them because they are serious about their work, they are also distinguished by their broadmindedness. That is why there is no far-right politics along the Limpopo, unlike on the cattle and game farms away from the river. Such self-presentation is relevant to understanding Jan's assertion that the Zimbabweans along the border have made for a more serious kind of enterprise. Chapter 6 explores this 'business' style among border farmers in detail, and its consequences for workers. For now, it is enough to note that a 'modern' self-presentation – being a serious, business-motivated capitalist, not a traditionalist Boer – has perceived political benefits in the new, somewhat anti-Afrikaner South Africa.

The reality, however, is less clear-cut than this opposition between 'serious' farmer and pioneer suggests. Neither do such differences neatly reflect an opposition between Zimbabwean and South African farmers. To start with, Zimbabwean farmers' outsider status is far from clear. Most have South African genealogies, even upbringings, and acquired South African citizenship when they began farming in South Africa. Unlike their workers, to whom I turn in the following chapters, their mobility was underpinned by secure, rooted legal status. Their Afrikaner backgrounds further mitigated any sense of difference from like-minded 'serious' farmers from South Africa, such as those at nearby Tshipise.<sup>40</sup> Jim and Koos, both of whose experiences of farming were shaped in Zimbabwe, also see themselves in the pioneer mould. Thus, a South African, subscribes to the pioneering ideal, but is also the most 'serious' agrarian capitalist in the area. Despite all of this variation, what is clear is that the border farmers have together developed a competitive, effort-focused sense of farming-as-transformative-life-project, whatever its other associations.

In this section, we have seen two apparently contrasting versions of border exceptionalism. In one, young pioneers succeeded because of their aggression, their vigorous ability to bring energy to their enterprises. In the other, border farmers are serious because their agriculture is pure, untainted by the politics and the imaginaries with which it is often associated. But in both, border farmers differ from other, less intensive farmers because of their capacity to work, to build their

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<sup>40</sup> See next chapter.

lives around commitment to their enterprises. In both, farmers see themselves as lone operators – self-sufficient individuals building life-defining projects. As we saw in the previous section, such an acute sense of individualised responsibility comes with deeply felt, even damaging, personal consequences in the case of failure. The following section examines the further consequences of an ideal of self-sufficiency, even among the successful.

### ***The enterprise strikes back: the consequences of self-sufficiency***

Thus far I have considered ‘pioneer stories’ and their role in farmers’ broader self-understandings. I then took the analysis a stage further by enquiring how farmers think about work in their agricultural projects. Appreciating this latter perspective enables us to explore how farmers experience a sense of individual effort and self-sufficiency not merely as the stuff of romanticising narratives, but as framing interpretations of success and failure. Farmers’ individualised self-understandings are rooted in a way of living, which has real, everyday consequences. Turning to this now requires a description of farmers’ lives beyond their work.

When Koos explained to me what it takes to be a farmer, he emphasised being a ‘loner’ – being comfortable in one’s own company. Sometimes you do not see another person for days, he claimed. That is why he sent all three of his sons away as young men, before he would let them farm. Their choices to farm had to be informed by knowledge of the alternatives. Paul, for example, studied mechanical engineering. The point was that they knew what life was like in society, yet *still* wanted to live in rural isolation. You cannot have a farmer running for the ‘bright lights’ at four o’clock every Friday afternoon, Koos said. Farming requires commitment to a way of life. He recalled with pride how another son, Rudi, who now farms the family estate at Komatipoort, came home whenever he had the chance to ‘sit on the tractor’.

As with many of Koos’ reflections, this sounds like an exercise in self-imagination as a prototypical pioneer, with life lived in the absence of other human company. Certainly there is a degree of exaggeration and romanticisation in these comments. They also betray a sharply racialised sense of proper sociality. Crop farms have large black workforces, and white residents all have domestic workers and gardeners. Not seeing another person for days refers to a lack of *white* company. Koos’ views reflect both a strong sense of racial difference and a taste for

hyperbole. But they also point to the fact that farmers' sense of individualism must be understood in relation to their experiences of everyday sociality.

Border farmers live in farmhouses on their land, each with his nuclear family, at a distance from the compounds in which black workforces reside. Below is a photograph of Koos' house, taken from the end of the driveway. Like other white residences in the area, it conforms to an aesthetic of well-tended, lush gardens, replete with flowers, trees and lawns. Koos' is particularly striking because part of the house is built around a large baobab tree, which therefore appears to emerge through the roof. Interiors vary markedly: Koos' living room furniture is wooden, and built in a *voortrekker* theme, with the arms of chairs and sofa fashioned as wagon wheels; Willem, his son-in-law, has a living room dominated by a large fish-tank and a flat-screen television.



Koos' house, looking up the driveway to the security gate and the baobab tree beyond

Fathers, sons, brothers and white managers live in similar farmhouses scattered across the estates, each surrounded by a garden and a security fence. Even such houses on a single farm are distributed far apart. White residents travel around by four-by-four car or pick-up truck. The fact that many houses must be accessed via the dirt tracks that criss-cross estates means that chance encounters

among farmers from different estates are relatively rare. That said, all border farmers use the road along the border fence as an arterial route. But because, on a daily basis, farmers only move around their own farm, they each drive up and down a different segment of the same road.

Given this distribution across the landscape, the fact that farmers spend most of their waking hours working means that they do not see each other very often. When I was conducting interviews, I was struck by the ways that border farmers defined themselves, as a group, in terms of their shared experiences of arrival, establishment on the land through their work and seriousness about farming. I asked about community, looking for ways that farmers considered themselves bound together socially. But such inquiry was repeatedly met with explanations that they have no time to socialise. As we saw earlier, it is farmers' assumptions about their roles on agricultural estates – assumptions evidenced by pioneer stories and theories about racial difference – that leads them to feel they have so much work to do. But, as Thinus pointed out, success itself created the scale of work involved.

'After it [the land] was bought out it belonged in larger areas to less farmers, like a snowball effect. The more land you work the less time you've got to run around, so today everybody's doing his own thing and you can be so busy that you don't see your neighbour for six months.'

There used to be a large number of families; each farmer initially bought only one or two portions of land along the river. And the farmers were young men, with young children. Six families now largely dominate the border. Thinus, for example, owns six portions of land, and Koos and his sons four. The expansion of farmers like Thinus, Koos and Jan, and the bankruptcy of others like Dirk, means over time that there are fewer white people around with whom to socialise.

White residents of the border estates remember parties in the 1980s, for Christmas and to celebrate successful cotton harvests. One farmer reminisced about fireworks displays in the Limpopo riverbed on Guy Fawkes Day. Doubtless, these accounts of the past are inflected by nostalgia for a lost era, when farmers who are now middle-aged were young men, and the up-and-coming generation were children. It is certainly true that border farmers continue to organise events.

Members of Koos' and Jan's families play polocrosse.<sup>41</sup> They hold tournaments, for which teams travel considerable distances. These, and the practice games that lead up to them, are important opportunities for socialising. Tournaments last whole weekends, with a *braai* (barbecue) and drinks at the *lapa* (barbecue enclosure) on Saturday night. It is often the same families that attend; so durable networks are maintained through the games. These, however, are not frequent occurrences. They take a lot of effort to organise, and divert energy from the work of farming itself, which normally includes Saturdays. As far as everyday sociality goes, there has been a marked change.

Church services provide one opportunity to see people. The Dominee (minister) of the Musina Dutch Reformed Church conducts a service in one of the border farmhouses once a month, rotating between the families. Other weeks, farmers and their families may drive into town for the Sunday service at the church itself. But the split between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Afrikaans Protestant Church (when the former allowed black members of congregations and homosexual Dominees<sup>42</sup>) has complicated this opportunity to meet. Meetings of the local farmers' association may be accompanied by a *braai*. But, taken together, these various get-togethers are a very limited source of sociality.<sup>43</sup>

The son of one farmer, now in his twenties, spoke to me of how there are very few people with whom he can spend time. His twin brother, uninterested in farming, has left. In 2008, he himself had recently completed a course at an agricultural college near Nelspruit, not far from Swaziland. There, he was surrounded by people his own age. When he returns to the border after seeing them, he says, it takes weeks to become reaccustomed to the isolation. He has a beer sometimes with his cousin, Klein Thinus (Little Thinus – Thinus' son). But Klein Thinus, like many of the 'younger generation', is busy taking over running estates, and these younger men are starting families. For those who themselves

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<sup>41</sup> See footnote 39, above.

<sup>42</sup> Following the end of apartheid, and as result of pressure from the ANC government. Of the Afrikaans churches, the Dutch Reformed Church is by far the largest; smaller churches, less symbolically important, were not induced to change after 1994. The Afrikaans Protestant Church was a breakaway from the Dutch Reformed Church by members who opposed the new reforms, and who feel that the Church was erroneously seen as whites-only; the important distinction, they say, is 'cultural' rather than 'racial' – whether or not someone is an Afrikaner (and therefore white). On the border, some farmers, including Koos and Willem, shifted allegiance to the Afrikaans Protestant Church in response to the reforms. This, even though the local DRC Dominee shares their views, and there is no chance of either mixed services or homosexual ministers in the area.

<sup>43</sup> I was not able to attend services, because of my limited access to farmers' private lives, described in the introduction.

farm, there is little time for anything else. For those who are not so busy, the border can be a lonely place.

Koos' grandson – Willem's son – is at present confronting this dilemma. Jacques wants to be a farmer, but is becoming aware of the realities of the isolation involved. When I began fieldwork in 2006, he was in his mid-twenties and finishing his studies in agricultural economics at Stellenbosch. He returned from university with styled hair and board shorts, cast in the image of a surfer. Keen to ensure his son had options in an uncertain future, Willem sent him to Belgium for nine months, where he worked for one of the agents that handle Grootplaas' exports. When Jacques returned, he had made up his mind. He had found Europe cold and alienating. His intentions were reflected in an abrupt change of style: buzz cut, khaki shorts and shirt, walking boots and an underarm holster for his handgun. Willem bought him a pickup truck, and organised for him to manage a farm up the road that had been bought by one of the export agents. The arrangement was ideal, Willem explained. Jacques would run the farm himself, but Willem was close by whenever he was needed, to offer guidance. Jacques could also benefit from Grootplaas' existing procedures, such as for picking up the large sums of money required for monthly paydays.

Jacques was very excited by the opportunity. When I visited him at his new home, he showed me around his packshed, recently up and running, and then the sizeable house and garden. His living room was set up as a perfect bachelor pad, dominated by a huge television, with a large stock of refrigerated beer. But, as we sat down for a drink on the veranda, and he took pot-shots into the garden with his pistol, he revealed his concerns.

The problem was not that Jacques was ill suited to the individualist, isolationist ideal *per se*: he was generally content with his own company. But he did want to get married, so as to have a companion in this choice of life. His father knew this too, and had suggested he begin to think about marriage now. The problem, said Jacques, was that he wanted a woman with education and ambition. Women who want to live with farmers, he complained, lack any real ambition in life, something he had upset his mother by telling her. His model for an appropriate partner presumably derived from his experience at Stellenbosch University. He now had his eye on a woman who worked as a conservation researcher in the game reserve of De Beers' nearby diamond mine. Here was a perfect combination:

she had a goal, but it was compatible with life in the area. As his wife, she would have her own project. But Jacques had only met her once, and not in an overtly romantic capacity. She was the only option he could envisage at the time. There was simply no one else around who fitted the criteria. The masculine, individualist model of the pioneer left Jacques in a difficult position. His idea of an appropriate wife was a woman with her own work into which to throw herself. But he wanted to live a life in which he had sole responsibility for a farm, his own project into which to throw himself, of which to make a success. This is a model of work in which a male farmer defines his life around a farm. His wife plays at best a supporting role in this imaginary. The role of work and the masculine individual in farmers' self-understandings had very palpable consequences for Jacques' chances of realising his more egalitarian notions of marital relations. This left him feeling increasingly worried about a possible future of loneliness in his pioneering isolation.

The sons of farmers who are now reaching adulthood face different challenges from their elders. Koos ran the gauntlet of risk and sheer effort to establish Houmoed and then Grootplaas. But his long days of work lent themselves to romanticisation through pioneer stories, in which lone men hack back the bush. For his grandson, Jacques, there is no bush left to tame. He has taken over a run-down citrus operation, but the packshed and orchards are already there, and his father Willem keeps a protective eye on things. People in Jacques' generation struggle to create meaningful life projects. But the ideal of the individualistic pioneering male – still one to which Jacques aspires – confronts the reality of a landscape with little room to expand. It also confronts the fact that it is not a landscape populated by many other young men trying to make their way. Instead, a few big landowning families now dominate the border. The model of pioneering masculine individualism competes with contrasting expectations about sociality and marriage that derive from experiences at university and agricultural college. On top of all this, farmers today have to adapt their aspirations – as individualistic enterprisers transforming their environments – to a new, highly uncertain reality.

### ***Success on the move?***

Grootplaas' owners' view of the land as a canvas for development – for successful, ever-expanding enterprise – must be understood in the context of current



uncertainties surrounding settler agriculture. A focus on transformative work itself, rather than on landscape being transformed, reflects not only their self-understandings as 'serious' farmers, but also their response to post-apartheid land policies.

During the period of my fieldwork, Grootplaas and the other border farms were gazetted for land reform, something that had been expected for years. This was not an eviction notice, but rather an announcement that a group of black South Africans had claimed the land. The process must be pursued by the Restitution Commission, and if necessary go through the Land Claims Court. It will in all probability take many years, and the outcome is unknown. The claimants have to prove, under the terms of land restitution, that their ancestors were forcibly removed in the period since 1913.<sup>44</sup> In such a process, claimants and existing landowners mobilise experts to demonstrate or deny such displacement (see James 2007). The border farmers have commissioned a report by an anthropologist, which shows that their land has no history of settlement.<sup>45</sup> They contend that any signs of earlier habitation merely indicate the existence of riverside watering points for cattle. They argue that the area was too dry for villages, until the white farmers themselves installed large-scale irrigation systems and boreholes.

For the border farmers, the claim confirms a wider climate of uncertainty, created by land reform across South Africa and post-apartheid hostility to white agriculture. Although they are contesting the claim, it underlines agriculture's precariousness. In response, the farmers adapt their existing ideals of success. Although success remains tied to a sense of transforming the landscape – of building something on the land – farmers have moved towards seeing their enterprise as a series of pragmatic business decisions. Reflecting this, the owners of Grootplaas have attempted to spread their risk. As already mentioned, they extended operations, buying land on the Mozambican border, which they called Kleinplaas. This was a cold-headed business calculation. The land was already under claim in South Africa's land reform programme but, they estimated, the delay on claims was running at ten years. So good money could be made buying the estate cheaply, planting sugar cane (a good crop for fast money) and then selling at

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<sup>44</sup> The year of the Land Act that first explicitly entrenched racialised land ownership in South Africa. See introduction.

<sup>45</sup> The arguments against the claim were explained to me, but I was not allowed to see the report, which had been prepared as confidential evidence.

the government price if the claim is successful. (Like many such claims, it remains unresolved.) More recently, Grootplaas' owners have leased land in Mozambique where, according to Koos, civil war has left the country in an economic plight sufficiently severe to cause its government to welcome white farmers. As Koos sees it, southern African countries will now cycle between welcoming white farmers when they are desperate and resenting them when they are prosperous.

Farmers speak of moving around in response to risks or opportunities. This does not represent a break with the past, however. For the border farmers, a flexible view of their enterprises corresponds to a pioneering ideal. Their arrival on the border was relatively recent, and was motivated by a desire to leave the places where they had farmed previously. Even since the 1980s, many of the farms changed, as they expanded and changed crops: in the 1990s, Koos, his two sons and his son-in-law transformed their huge cotton plantations into citrus orchards. Their various investments in different places now represent forms of security in the face of uncertainty, ensuring they can keep farming. The land in Mozambique represents a way out of South Africa altogether, if necessary, without leaving the sector.

Farmers speak about these strategies in terms that are commensurate with their existing success-stories. In their eyes they are now, as before, ensuring the conditions for transformative expansion. Buying Kleinplaas and leasing land across the border are a way to plough profit back into the business and avoid tax, since Grootplaas risked 'overcapitalisation'. As Castree (2009) argues of capitalism generally, Grootplaas' farmers are bound to a rhythm of reinvesting their profits as capital by expanding their enterprises over ever greater stretches of land. Doing so also brings more farming opportunities for the family's male members. What appears a novel form of agricultural risk aversion, therefore, can equally be understood as pioneering expansion under changing conditions.

What this produces on the border farms themselves is a strange tension. On the one hand, farmers consciously de-root themselves from the estates they cultivate, even though these are their homes. Their hard-headed business acumen has led them to commission a coal-prospecting project on the farms: if they have to sell up, they can ensure a higher price from an Australian mining corporation that has expressed interest than they would receive from the South African state following a land claim. Koos speaks of the possibilities of planting crops for

biodiesel in Mozambique. His son-in-law, Willem, sent Jacques to Belgium after university to work at the other end of the supply chain and acquire 'skills' (although the latter soon decided to return and farm). These farmers see their estates in a much wider context, in which they hope to ensure the possibility of succeeding in agricultural enterprises *somewhere*, and are prepared to stay mobile to do so.

On the other hand, the border farmers' broader views have remarkably little impact on their day-to-day operations. However flexible their plans, success depends in the end on deep commitment to particular projects, rooted in the land. As we have seen in this chapter, this is reflected in the ways farmers speak of their lives and their estates. It is also reflected in the choices they make about running their operations. Towards the end of the period of fieldwork, the Grootplaas farmers began construction of a vast second dam for irrigation, sinking their profits back into the farm despite current uncertainty about the future. Willem constantly establishes new arrangements with supermarkets and acquires funds to improve facilities in the labour compound. Farmers explain that, even in an uncertain environment, one has to keep expanding to survive: 'get big or get out'. As well as being a strategy to stay commercially competitive, this can also be seen as an assertion of permanence in the face of doubt. Changing the landscape is a way to make one's mark (see Hughes 2010 for similar responses in Zimbabwe). Border farmers today, therefore, think flexibly and spread risk, as 21<sup>st</sup>-century pioneers, while also being rooted in place by their personal investment in existing operations.

### ***Conclusion***

Pioneer stories reveal farmers' assumptions about race, class and gender. They help us understand the racialised hierarchies on farms, at the pinnacle of which stand white, male farmers. But they also reveal how farmers see themselves in relation to their life projects. Taking this angle, we see white farmers less as static, stable 'types', but as men with aspirations engaged in *becoming*. We also move beyond analysing *narratives* of pioneering self-sufficiency, to appreciate it as something that is also *practised*. Such self-sufficiency reflects the realities of farming; it is an object of aspiration among farmers that motivates practice; and it frames interpretations of successes, failures and the pains of isolation.

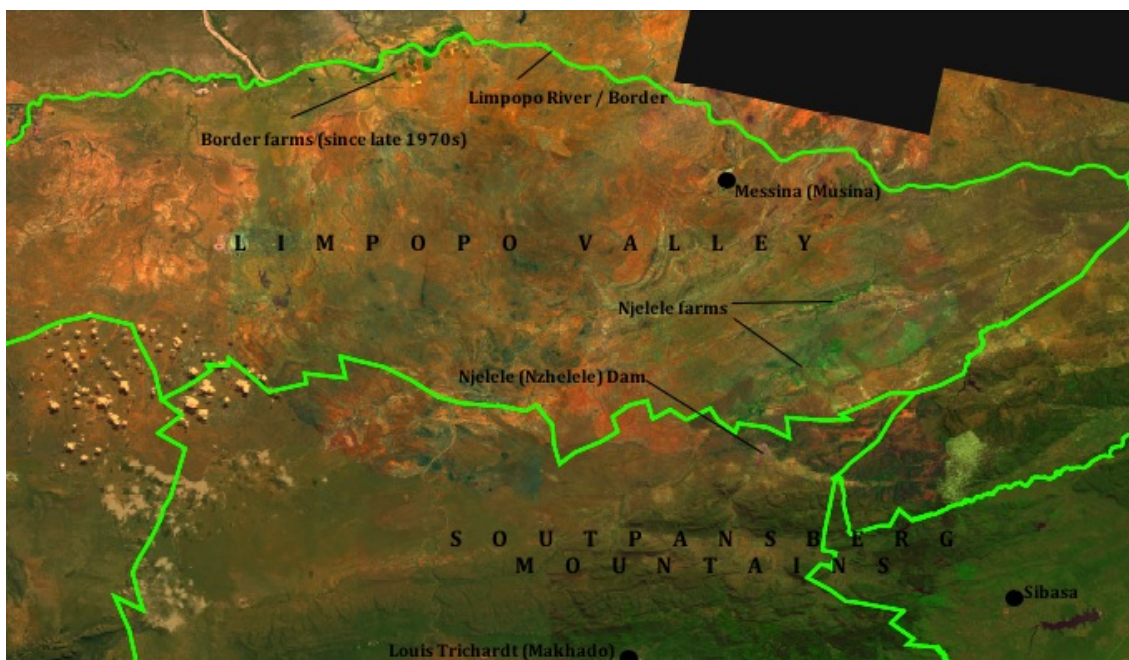
Literature about wage labour and organised production is generally concerned to explore the plight of workers, but it rarely attempts to understand the ways employers understand their lives. This chapter has attempted to elucidate white settler farmers' perspectives about their life projects. It has examined how farmers consider themselves in relation to their work: their enterprises, their successes and their failures. By focusing on the meaning of projects, and of work, for farmers, it has underlined how farmers view 'becoming a man' and making something of one's life. It employed this perspective to make sense of the recent tension in farmers' plans: both detaching themselves in the interests of flexibility, and continuing to invest deep personal commitment in particular agricultural projects.

The current uncertainties involved in agriculture do not affect farmers alone. We have seen in this chapter how farmers consider their success to be a matter of highly individual responsibility. However, focusing on farmers' self-representations, although shedding light on their own lives, gives an over-individualised view of commercial agriculture. In reality, the farms are home to large black working populations. Because farm workers' long-term precariousness is not reflected in the day-to-day dynamics of life at Grootplaas – the subject of much of the thesis – I leave direct consideration of their future prospects to the conclusion. At this stage, it is important to note that the highly structured social arrangements that Grootplaas' residents develop, although they appear durable, depend fundamentally on the continued existence of the farm – something that cannot be guaranteed.

The chapter has focused attention on the border farms as working enterprises. This prepares the ground for the focus of the remainder of the thesis: how the farms as workplaces shape resident populations' lives. The next chapter steps back from the farmers. It examines the border farms as a recent example of a much longer history of border enterprise. Taking this view reveals the primary concern of border capitalism: establishing stable conditions for the control of territory and the recruitment of labour.

## Chapter 3

### 'BEHIND THE MOUNTAIN': CORE, PERIPHERY AND CONTROL IN THE LIMPOPO VALLEY



**The Soutpansberg and Limpopo Valley.** Green boundary lines are present day municipal and national boundaries, kept to show South Africa's northern border. Towns are shown with historical names first, for clarity in this chapter. Source: South African Municipal Demarcation Board, with detail in black added.

#### *Core, periphery and passage*

The previous chapter showed farmers' individualised views of their farms, in which whites exhibit self-sufficiency by establishing agricultural projects in remote places. However, these farms depend on huge workforces. To succeed, white farmers have to maintain a favourable environment for profit-generating production, which means ensuring consistent access to labour. Because workers live on-site, the farms are local social centres. From the perspective of black residents, they are spatial hubs of dense social webs that span the national boundary. The large, waged populations are also focal points of the border's various trade networks. This is an area that represents a coherent meaningful unit in people's lives. From the point of view not only of farmers, but also of farm workers and other residents, the border estates organise people's different activities and relationships.

The Limpopo River's southern bank is the site both of large-scale agrarian capitalism and South Africa's border fence. The central role of labour-intensive workplaces makes the Zimbabwean-South African border different from many others. Anthropologists, keen to demonstrate that borders elsewhere are not the 'self-evident limits of the territory of states', have shown borders to connect, not just divide, populations (Pelkmans 2006: 12). Like the Lesotho-South African border, South Africa's boundary with Zimbabwe is 'itself a place – a unity created around a division' (Coplan 2001: 104). It is not, however, simply a 'border culture' (see Alvarez 1995; Donnan & Wilson 1999). The Zimbabwean-South African border does bisect an ethnic group's area of habitation,<sup>46</sup> that of the Venda. However, the stretch where border farming now operates is dry and inhospitable. Cross-border habitation occurred here largely because the farms themselves – agrarian capitalist enterprises – served as loci of employment and residence which drew people across. Much of the remainder of the thesis explores how people actually live their lives on the farms. What requires examining at this stage is how farmers and other border capitalists have shaped the area through their efforts to secure stable conditions for production.

Border capitalists have had to assert control of territory and labour, on a major migration route and in the face of state policies that cast the area merely as a border to be policed. 'Because the people are moving through, in and out here, and we're the first set of farms on the border, we're obviously drawing a lot of attention.' Sitting on his terrace, his caged pet budgerigars nearby, the Limpopo River not far from his house, retired white farmer Jan described to me the effect on his family's cotton and citrus estate of being situated on the border. 'It is the place a person is going through,' he continued, 'so the local ... authorities ... are there to stop ... infiltration of people; ... it's logical that they will concentrate on this area because this is where the people are moving.'

The area lies squarely in the South African National Defence Force's ten-kilometre-deep militarised 'border zone'. According to this arrangement, the area is less a particular place – drawing people in from Zimbabwe and South Africa for work, trade and other connections – and more an extended barrier on the edge of South Africa. There is a military 'echo' garrison every ten kilometres along the border fence, and the army has jurisdiction ten kilometres into South Africa. The

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<sup>46</sup> As e.g. the Malawian-Mozambican case; see Englund 2002.

garrisons along the border fence house soldiers, who patrol the area daily. Soldiers operate throughout the zone, often staging ambushes on the dirt roads that run between the farms, to trap would-be migrants. Police face media and political pressure to show results in their fight against 'border jumpers'; they conduct raids to deport seasonal workers – many undocumented – who pick and pack produce. Police and army efforts to find 'illegals' for the purpose of deportation challenge the arrangements enabling daily life on the border farms. 'They used to target my shop,' complained Jim, white partner in an estate and owner of the estate's general store:

'[the police van would] stand there in front of the shop..., and every customer had to show his ID document or his permit. ... I went to them, and I said, "Listen guys, I've got a bit of a problem with this. I'm not anti your campaign and your idea but you're actually affecting my business now"'.

Farmers established their farms as capitalist enterprises, investing their sense of personal worth in their projects as we saw in the previous chapter. In so doing, they created hubs of the local economy. State officials' view of the area, on the other hand, is primarily as the border: the hyper-policed edge of a national territory. These opposed ways of thinking about the area have remained remarkably constant, despite obvious changes on both sides of the border.<sup>47</sup>

National boundary or local hub? These logics conflict. Border police and soldiers raid labour compounds in the middle of the night, and have difficulty distinguishing farm workers from transient 'border jumpers'. Bureaucratic delays in government departments mean that many seasonal workers are left undocumented, and they are often treated as 'illegals'. As Jan explained, the attention of border officials

'...is causing a lot of disturbance ..., because every time the police come and raid ... they are disturbing the people that are legally here. Everybody's chased out of his house in the middle of the night and paraded all over the place, and he's got to show his ID documents and what-have-you and ... then he's put into the van and is obviously taken first in for questioning and then released later ... which is causing all the local legal people a lot of grief as well. Which we have always felt to be totally unnecessary, but if you look at it from a policing side, how else

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<sup>47</sup> Since 1994, white farmers in South Africa have had to negotiate with black authorities; since 2000, crisis in Zimbabwe has resulted in mass exodus, fuelling xenophobic sentiments and hysteria about 'border jumpers' south of the Limpopo.

are they going to do it? ... They've got to raid the living quarters where these people are. They've got to have a look at everybody's ID documents and make sure that they is [sic] legally here. Otherwise there'd be no control.'

Belying this impression of effective state control, army and police ability to manage movement in the area is limited. The border is long and stretches of it are remote. The electric fence, erected during apartheid, has had its voltage turned down so that it merely 'detects' people touching it. It is a patchwork of repairs because it is cut so often. Its ceramic and metal parts lie strewn in the no-man's land. Aggressive deportation raids on the farms are less a sign of authority than a response to its limits. They take advantage of easy and obvious targets – hundreds of workers concentrated in compounds – because police and military personnel find it so difficult to capture more transient Zimbabweans.

This chapter examines these opposing priorities, and the forms of control through which they are expressed locally: the Limpopo Valley as place of enterprise, versus the Limpopo Valley as border zone. Such efforts need understanding in terms of a wider history. Cross-border mobility, ineffective state attempts to control its boundaries and local capitalism with resident workforces have all long shaped the area. Indeed, when the border farmers initially came to the area, they were *both* part of border control and at the forefront of border capitalism. For they were intended by the apartheid government as a buffer during the border war of the late 1970s and 1980s. This chapter explores these enduring themes of South Africa's northern frontier. By so doing, it sets border farming in the context of the Limpopo Valley, long considered a border zone. A historical focus reveals border farming as a recent example of white settler attempts to establish large centres of production in the Limpopo Valley, and orient local dynamics around them. This meant creating places of sufficient economic importance to be considered a priority in their own right by state officials, and to be recognized by workers as worth working for. The border farmers, it will become clear, have largely succeeded in doing this, despite their claims to the contrary.

This account does not purport to be an exhaustive history of South Africa's northern border. Instead, I focus on key moments that illuminate the uneasy coexistence of competing perspectives on the Limpopo Valley: those which foreground its position at the centre (a place that draws people in for work) and



those emphasising its peripheral character. I begin by describing the development of border farming itself from the late 1970s. The existence of these farms resulted from government policy underlining the Limpopo Valley's peripheral place in South Africa, a 'buffer zone' to shore up the apartheid state's territorial control. But they became a new centre of production – a place around which local lives became oriented. I then widen the historical scope: first, showing how a distinctive border economy developed on the Limpopo; then examining the moments at which two important centres of production on the edge of a national territory were established. One was Messina Copper Mine, founded at the turn of the 20th century, around which Messina (later Musina) town came to be built. I focus on Messina's efforts to be recognised as an institution both with territorial jurisdiction on the border and with a monopoly over 'its' labour migrants. The other was the arrival of commercial crop farmers in the area north of the Soutpansberg from the 1930s. I explore the contestation that resulted between state employees who regarded the area as a peripheral zone, and capitalist developers who attempted to base their operations there and saw these as constituting the core of a hinterland from which they drew labour. Appreciating this struggle requires understanding state officials' priorities that cast the Limpopo Valley as a periphery: they promoted territorial control as being of foremost importance, while giving preference to the supply of workers to farms in the eastern Transvaal. The chapter finally turns to recent attempts to resolve the tension between perspectives of centre and periphery, however provisionally. In the 1990s, the territory to the north of the Soutpansberg was declared a 'zone of exception', in which farmers had the special right to employ Zimbabweans. This formal exceptional status has since disappeared, but been replaced by ad-hoc agreements between farmers and officials according to a very similar logic. Overall, the chapter reveals how the central logistical problem faced by employers – including the farmers described in the previous chapter – has been the control of labour in an area characterised by mobility and border policing.

### ***Border farms and buffer zone***

Infiltration across the border became a particular police and army priority in recent years. But despite clear recent increase in the numbers of migrants, the

border's economy has long revolved around similar southward movement. As one border farmer put it:

'I don't know why there was an explosion of news in the media, because what they were complaining about ... happened for the last twenty years ... the people crossing the border ... They talked about a mass influx of people, and it's possible that there were a bit more people than normal but it's a process that was going on for the last twenty years and all of a sudden everybody was talking about it.'

Since its inception in the late 1970s, border agriculture has relied on such movement across the national boundary. In its early years, this reliance produced a tension between different understandings of the border. The South African state lacked control in the area. The white farmers came to the border in the first place as part of a state scheme to create a buffer zone in the border war of the late 1970s and 1980s. The apartheid government, plunged into a 'state of emergency' in its heartland and now faced in addition with *Umkhonto we Sizwe*<sup>48</sup> incursions from the north, had very little territorial control along the Limpopo River. The farmers were brought to the area precisely to enhance the state's capacity. However, they came to depend, for their Zimbabwean workers, on precisely the easy, unrestricted mobility across the Limpopo that they were intended to prevent. The new settlers both reinforced the border – which would soon be strengthened with an electric fence – and relied to some degree on its porosity.

The government attracted farmers with low-interest loans for land, and an electrical substation, telephone lines and improved roads were constructed. In return, farmers were required to reside on their estates rather than being absentee landowners, and to participate in the local commando. This, building on earlier models of Boer militias in farming districts, was part of South Africa's system of conscription for all adult white males. Willem, farmer at Grootplaas, explained,

'with the terrorists at that time that came from Zimbabwe, we were always on a standby, so they could call you anytime and say, "ok well we've got a problem here"... We had a commander which would then phone us, or radio us, and say, "... Someone came through with landmines ... We want everybody to get their kit and get together at a certain place and then follow their tracks and see whether we can pick them up...'

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<sup>48</sup> 'Spear of the Nation'. The armed wing of the African National Congress during the anti-apartheid struggle.

This scheme created an entirely new kind of farming along the Limpopo River. Though surveyed and apportioned in the opening years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the southern bank of the Limpopo River remained virtually uncultivated until the 1970s. White farmers had rarely been able to live on agriculture alone. Earlier, hard-up cattle farmers had worked on the nearby copper mine at Messina to supplement their incomes in bad years. Meanwhile, some successful white workers from Messina Mine would acquire land for part-time farming, sinking some of their income into what was in effect little more than an agrarian pastime. The land on which Jan's farm and its neighbour, Grootplaas, now lie, was leased as Crown Land by the manager of Messina Mine, in 1920,<sup>49</sup> bought by him in 1930,<sup>50</sup> used as a weekend retreat and sold only in 1974 after his death.<sup>51</sup> Around this time, the large game and cattle estates along the river were bought and subdivided for profit, but still left mostly undeveloped. It was the arrival of a distinct, new generation of young farmers – many Afrikaners, many from Rhodesia/Zimbabwe – who transformed the border area. They bought up the divided portions and irrigated intensively. As one of the older cattle farmers from nearby remembers,

'the government gave out these farms to farmers at the 4% interest on the capital. They lent them the money to buy the farms at 4%, 8 years without any interest. That's how all these people settled there. ... The whole river area, there was nothing! There were elephants!'

The 'border war' both brought a degree of government support, in the form of 'soft' loans and infrastructure, and complicated the newcomers' primary aim of making a success of commercial farming. The border farmers along the river were focused on intensive irrigation for profit. Unlike the well-known agrarian capitalists of the eastern Transvaal – the 'maize kings' (see Bradford 1993) – who often made their start-up capital in industry, these border cultivators tended to have farming backgrounds. They came because they saw particular opportunity in the fertile alluvial soil of the Limpopo's southern bank. As we have already seen (Chapter 2), success on the land was important, a sign of individual worth and exhibited by profitability.

The insecurity of life of the border showed that South Africa's unwritten policy of deploying farmers as a buffer was not altogether effective. This was

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<sup>49</sup> SAB URU 477, Minute 3067.

<sup>50</sup> Land Affairs, Pretoria: title deeds.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

because of the situation on the South African side. What was conceived as a *buffer* against attacks by *Umkhonto we Sizwe* became a hub of residence and economic activity, and therefore a *site* – a target – for attacks. White residents carried radios, and children were driven to school in military convoys. Initially, remembers Thinus, these new settlers were the border's military presence. 'We were supposed to be the security on the border. There were no army here. We were part of the army. Whilst farming, we were supposed to do the work the army and the police is doing today. That was part of the transaction.' As he remembers it, it was a spate of landmine attacks on the farms – around thirteen exploded, and more were planted – that brought a full-time army presence and the elaborate electric fence in the mid-1980s. The farmers' 'buffer zone' was also their home. As another farmer, Hendrik, recalls, 'it was a tough time. Our next-door neighbour, his house was attacked one night. And on this side, less than one kilometre from here, a landmine was detonated.' Farm work would begin each morning with landmine clearance, the manpower for which came from the black workforce.

In this context, participation in the commando came with advantages for farmers. They were issued with guns and ammunition, which they kept at home. And the commando became an important means of sociality among the young men who took up the loans. According to Hendrik, 'the circumstances, the conditions, actually forced us to stand together. We also had an obligation towards each other'. Willem elaborated on what this meant:

'We had an attack on a farmer ... They shot a rifle grenade from the other side of the fence into the house. And so the next two or three days all the farmers got together and brought some of their builders ... and we fixed up the house and put in new window frames and put on mesh wire.... And the women also had ... a club ... where they ... did different projects to collect money to ... spend on people that lost property ... from attacks.

The commando drew the white community of the border together, not only when disaster struck, but also for training sessions, including for women: how to use rifles, target practice and first aid.

Not that farmers presented this period as all-out warfare. Some were keen to moderate such an impression. One, for example, commented that 'it was stressful because you never knew what could happen next, but it was for a short time – about a year [he said 1987]. I think the people currently in South Africa that live in the cities has got a much, much harder time than we had those years, with

all the crime going on.’ Indeed, Jan, with whom we began the chapter, emphasised that he never felt forced to do anything except farm. For him, as for many along the border, the immediate comparison was with the Zimbabwean liberation war they had left behind. And for him, as for others, settlement along the river meant planting crops and trying to make a success of his venture.

Crop farmers had been settled as a buffer for the border, but established new hubs along it, drawing people into the large working populations. Soon after, a spate of landmine attacks brought an elaborate electric fence. This fence was a barrier not only to *Umkhonto we Sizwe* guerrillas, but also to would-be farm workers. As Jan put it, ‘in the ‘80s, the terrorist situation came. From then on, this distinct line was drawn.’ The new agricultural estates prospered, however, because state control of the area remained limited, the fence was an imperfect barrier and labour recruits found their way through. For farmers, policing the border, on the one hand, and establishing border enterprises whose hinterland lay across the national boundary, on the other, involved conflicting priorities. Over the years, the farmers themselves ceased to be concerned with border policing, and were able to turn back to what they came for in the first place: building capitalist enterprises. But they continue to be affected by their location in a ten-kilometre-deep militarised zone on the edge of South Africa. As we shall see at the end of this chapter, border farmers have had considerable success persuading state officials of their estates’ distinct roles as hubs in local patterns of settlement and movement. In doing so, they have used their location in the border zone as an advantage rather than just a hindrance.

First, however, I turn to demonstrate the even longer history of these dynamics. State efforts at control, migration and settlers’ attempts to orient local arrangements around their enterprises lie at the heart of settler capitalism on South Africa’s northern frontier. Migration from countries to the north – especially Zimbabwe – have shaped the area since the Witwatersrand (the area around Johannesburg) began offering the prospect of cash-paid employment in the 1870s. State officials have been concerned to police human movement in the Limpopo Valley for just as long, and have been continually confounded in their efforts. And, while large-scale agrarian capitalism along the river itself emerged only in the 1970s and 1980s, white settler capitalists in the Limpopo Valley have pushed for state recognition for their enterprises as local centres since at least the 1910s.

Understanding this historical pattern requires beginning with an analysis of how the area's economy was shaped by the nature – and limits – of early colonial settlement.

### *The beginnings of a settler labour economy*



The view northwards across the Limpopo Valley from the Soutpansberg today

The Limpopo Valley has an important history of precolonial settlement. Mapungubwe, the mountain-top centre of a state, abandoned around 1300AD, lies not far from the river's southern bank near the point where South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana now meet. And Musina town (formerly the mining town of Messina), 10km shy of the Zimbabwean border today, was the site of intensive pre-colonial copper working until about the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (see Mamadi 1942). But, by 1870, much of the area was “a desolate region” beyond “where lions abounded and had driven out everybody” ... Thereafter “not a human being could be discovered and the kraals ... had long been deserted”.<sup>52</sup> This sense of remoteness was to remain a dominant perspective on the Limpopo Valley. In 1942, van Warmelo observed, in a Department of Native Affairs Ethnological Publication,

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<sup>52</sup> In Lieutenant Frederick Elton's 1872 account of his attempt to navigate the Limpopo, in Bonner 2003a: 30-31.

that 'the arid, flat mopani [sic] country between the Zoutpansberg and the Limpopo is, and has always been, virtually devoid of inhabitants' (1942: 4).

Early Boer settlement in the area was sparse. The Soutpansberg<sup>53</sup> mountain range had since 1848 been the site of the northernmost *voortrekker* town, Schoemansdal, about 10km west of present-day Louis Trichardt/Makhado. Its economy had centred on hunting elephants, and trading the ivory southwards. Attempts to subdue local African populations generated a trade in unfree child labourers, referred to as *inboekselinge* ('apprentices'). 'Rather than building towns, farms and herds, the few burghers of the district invested their capital in hunting game and increased it by exporting trophies; children were taken as spoils of war because they, too, had export market value' (Boeyens 1994: 187; see also Delius and Trapido 1982).

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**Left:** 'Attack on the VhaVenda of Magoro by a Boer commando and their VaTsonga auxiliaries';  
**Right:** 'Schoemansdal'. 1865 sketches by Alexander Struben, Plates 2 & 3 in Boeyens 1994

Settlement in the northern part of Zoutpansberg District was characterised by repeated displacement. Boer settlement of the Limpopo region in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been weak. But, 'if Zoutpansberg was for two decades a frontier, in 1867 it became an abandoned one, a casualty of the pioneering days when a white population of less than 30 000 spread itself so thinly north and east from the Vaal River as to overreach itself' (Wagner 1980: 316). The Zoutpansberg colony was 200 miles to the north of its neighbour, in a South African Republic that 'was more properly an association of three distinct Boer communities, Potchefstroom, Lydenburg and Zoutpansberg, separated by nature and on occasion as profoundly by man' (ibid: 318). Zoutpansbergers built their economy on the ivory trade, but recruiting black labour meant arming '*swart skuts*' (literally 'black marksmen'), who eventually refused to return their guns. Ultimately, this led to the Venda

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<sup>53</sup> Modern spelling.

driving the Boers out (ibid). With their expulsion ended the trade in child *inboekselinge*. But coordinated efforts to export people from the Zoutpansberg further south as labour were to characterise the area well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The transfer of co-opted labour migrants from the north to areas further south later became the focus of disputes over the Limpopo Valley's relationship to the rest of South Africa.

Displacement, and mobility more generally, made the area an important thoroughfare to and from the area to the north of what later became the border. But this in turn necessitated greater 'stabilisation'. The Limpopo River was – and remains – traversable on foot for much of each year, and the surrounding populations are 'in language and tradition a mixture ... the result of successive migrations from the north and west' (Fouché 1937, in Bonner 2003: 11). The settlement of Rhodesia by British and Afrikaner farmers in the 1890s added more people to those already traversing the valley, with Pont's Drift and Rhodes' Drift connecting the new colony to its southern neighbour across the Limpopo River. The increased expansion of Boer settlement northwards then brought further mobility, as black groups in the valley resisted new Transvaal laws prescribing black 'locations' (reserves) and imposing taxes. One of these groups was the western Venda, who had migrated from north of the Limpopo a century earlier. Their Chief Mphephu was forced across the river in 1898 after defeat by a large Boer commando that had been intended finally to remove him from the area. Members of the Boer commando were to be paid through the system of 'Occupatie Wet', 'which exchanged land – most of which was neither under its [the Republic's] control nor surveyed – in return for residence and military service ... Its simple purpose was to stabilise the area by creating a white security buffer among the previously intractable African chiefdoms' (Bonner 2003b: 32-33). This notion of a white buffer in the north was a precursor to that which became prevalent in the 1980s, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

White occupation of the Limpopo Valley remained irregular. The 1896-7 rinderpest destroyed over 90% of the subcontinent's cattle. Absentee ownership and land speculation were rife, covering the best part of the land for which title deeds had been issued (ibid: 33). And the Second South African War (1899-1902) created an opportunity for displaced black populations to reclaim territory when British forces enacted punitive counter-insurgency techniques against Boers in the



Zoutpansberg region. The Venda chief, Mphephu, returned to the south side of the Limpopo after the war, was allowed to settle by the British, but was then disarmed and relocated east, to what later became the Venda homeland (Motenda 1942: 61).

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, South Africa's northern frontier was characterised by extremely sparse settlement, but also by constant movement and cultural hybridity:

'the 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth Century residents of the Mapungubwe area comprised Venda, Twanamba, Kalanga, Birwa, Lemba and Tlokwa alongside an occasional white farmer. Their scattered settlements in this area represent historical sediments deposited there by larger processes of migration, conquest and trade' (Bonner 2003: 11).

State presence in the Limpopo Valley of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was practically non-existent. Zoutpansberg District, the northernmost part of the Transvaal, was divided by the Soutpansberg Mountains. Sibasa, Spelonken and Pietersburg, the District's administrative centres, all lay to the south of the range (see aerial photo at start of chapter). The border with Rhodesia lay to the north, in the Limpopo Valley, a dry, flat expanse of *mopaneveld*. Very few white people lived north of the mountains. Indeed, from the perspective of white officials, it remained a barely liveable backwater. In 1904, as one official put it: 'a very large extent of uninhabited country lies between the limit occupied by our Natives and the Limpopo ... Owing to the wild and waterless nature of this country, only recognised paths [between isolated kraals] are used in travelling to Rhodesia.'<sup>54</sup>

It was in this context, lacking personnel or direct control near the border, that state officials addressed two related challenges to their authority in the Limpopo Valley: the continuous movement of non-South Africans southwards, and the illicit labour 'bandits' whose business it was to recruit them, voluntarily or otherwise. Central to state officials' preoccupations, then, were attempts to control the movement and recruitment of migrants.

As van Onselen notes, understanding migration southwards into South Africa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century requires seeing the whole region, including Southern and Northern Rhodesia, as part of the same economic system. Within it:

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<sup>54</sup> TAB SNA 191, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1904.

‘the essential objective of the African worker was two-fold: first, he aimed to avoid as far as was humanly possible the prospect of work in the zones of low wages; second, he sought to move as far south as possible. The further south he got, the higher the wages he was likely to receive. Ideally, the goal for a black worker was to sell his labour power in Johannesburg’ (1976: 228-9).

South African work destinations were generally more attractive than Southern Rhodesian ones, and men worked their way south to reach the Limpopo. Having crossed it, the same gradually improving work conditions applied within the Transvaal, although Messina Mine on the border was relatively desirable (ibid: 318, endnote 4). Increasing numbers of migrants from ever-further parts of Southern Rhodesia crossed the Limpopo in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: by the mid-twenties, ‘truckloads of black workers made their way south to the border area around Beitbridge’ (ibid: 237). The greater resources of gold mines on the Witwatersrand continued to make it the ideal destination. Other workplaces like Messina – and later the Limpopo Valley farms – might be staging posts en route, for workers seeking not only pay but also nodes in regional information networks (ibid).

It was virtually impossible for the South African authorities to prevent this migration pattern. But the question of a lack of state control north of the Soutpansberg tended to focus on the equally intractable problem of illicit recruiting agents – known as ‘touts’, ‘bandits’ or ‘pirates’ – who picked off migrants as they headed south. A 1913 report prepared for the Native Commissioner at Pietersburg gives a sense of how ‘labour pirates’ were officially viewed:

“The manner, in which recruiting is done across the borders, amounts to little short of highway robbery. A [licensed] runner with a gang of boys is waylaid and the boys taken from him whether they are willing or not. Of course, the latter do not care who gets the capitation fee for them as long as they can get down to work ... The local term for [the illegal agents] as a class, is the “Bandits” and I do not regard it as too severe a one ... They are all at loggerheads one with the other, and, but for their cowardly attributes which undoubtedly have become accentuated by the lives they lead, violent disruptions would most assuredly occur.”<sup>55</sup>

Despite changing state policy regarding the recruitment of migrants from the north (see below), white outcasts of various kinds continued illegally to divert border crossers and supply them to employers in South Africa for a fee. Indeed,

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<sup>55</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. ‘Extract from report submitted to the Native Commissioner Pietersburg on the 13<sup>th</sup> August 1913 No.56/13/405.’

illicit recruitment was often the means by which licensed agents acquired their workers. 'Shopkeepers, traders, ivory poachers, and big game hunters often doubled as informal brokers acting on behalf of licensed recruiters' (Murray 1995: 385). 'Labour pirates' were a characteristic of the northern border until at least the mid-1940s, when 'state officials at Messina on the border complained bitterly that "the recruitment of foreign natives is a racket out of hand"' (ibid: 396). As Murray argues, their existence complicates sharp conceptual distinctions between free and unfree labour during this period. They connected labour supply (migrants) to demand (mines and farms), but sometimes did this by recruiting at gunpoint. Such underhand coercion even characterised the supply of labour to the Witwatersrand gold-fields (ibid: 377). 'Labour pirates' did not only threaten state assertions of territorial control. As large white-settler enterprises grew up in the Limpopo Valley in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such shadowy operators also challenged local claims to passing migrants.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, then, battle lines around control of territory and human mobility in the Limpopo Valley were drawn. South African authorities had a precarious grip on local goings on. Migrants' attempts to head south for work at decent wages were challenged by labour touts' attempts to divert them to various employers and licensed labour agents for a fee. A new player entered the fray as border capitalists made efforts to cast the area as a distinct local economic centre, both asserting spatial control and claiming migrants as their 'natural' – therefore rightful – labour supply.

### ***A centre at the periphery: land and labour in a company town, 1910-20***

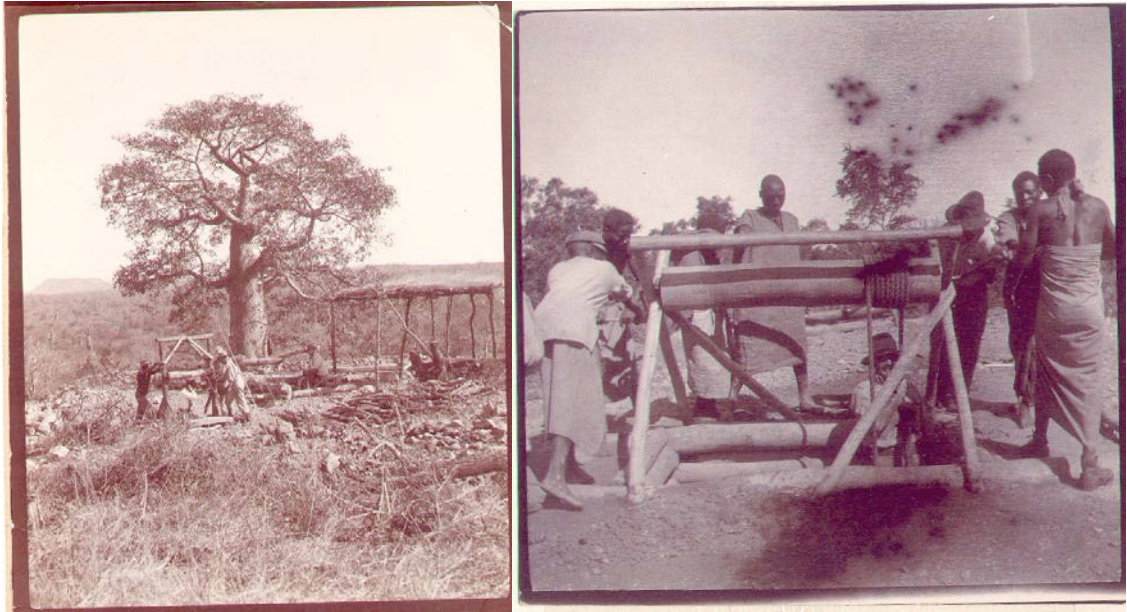
Messina Mine tamed the Transvaal's northern frontier, and become an economic hub in the Limpopo Valley. The year 1904 marked a key turning point for the border region. In March of that year, the British Lieutenant Colonel John Pascoe Grenfell obtained a Discoverer's Certificate for the copper a little south of the Limpopo River's southern bank, 'on certain unproclaimed Government Ground situated on the farm BERKENRODE 1424, 1425' in the Transvaal Colony (certificate quoted in full in Mills 1952: 9).

Grenfell had heard rumours of a history of African copper mining in the area while in Rhodesia during the Second South African War. He garnered interest from two Imperial soldiers, and in 1901 visited the proposed mining area. At the

end of 1902, once the war had ceased, a prospecting team set out northward from Pietersburg, with 'two wagons, 32 oxen, arms and ammunition, food for several months and six or seven horses ... from an army remount depot' (Messina (Transvaal) Development Company 1954a: 5). The mission produced considerable excitement. As the surveyor, Webber, wrote in a report to Grenfell: 'We were dumbfounded! The whole farm is a mass of copper' (quoted in Messina Publicity Association c.1961: 3). Writing to his brother in August 1903, Grenfell recounted Webber's observations, calling the find 'a veritable Copper Rand' (MTDC 1954a: 5). Despite Grenfell's official status as 'discoverer', copper mining had a long history in the Musina area. Accounts differ as to whether the Musina copper miners migrated from Phalaborwa to the south east (Mamadi 1942), whether they were Lemba from the north (Stayt and Thompson, cited in Bonner 2003c: 38) or whether the groups overlapped or co-existed (ibid). Either way, it is clear that copper working had been practised on a large scale. Precolonial mining had ceased in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when Venda and Sotho raiders scattered the Musina community (Mamadi 1942: 83-4).



**Left:** Messina mining camp in 1907; **Right:** Grenfell in camp. Photos courtesy of Brian Kalshoven.



Early shaft sinking at Messina. Photos courtesy of Brian Kalshoven.

Grenfell's Messina Mine created the first concentrated white-settler settlement north of the Soutpansberg. In a somewhat triumphalist tone, a 50<sup>th</sup>-anniversary mine publication recounts the early days, once financial backing was secured from London:

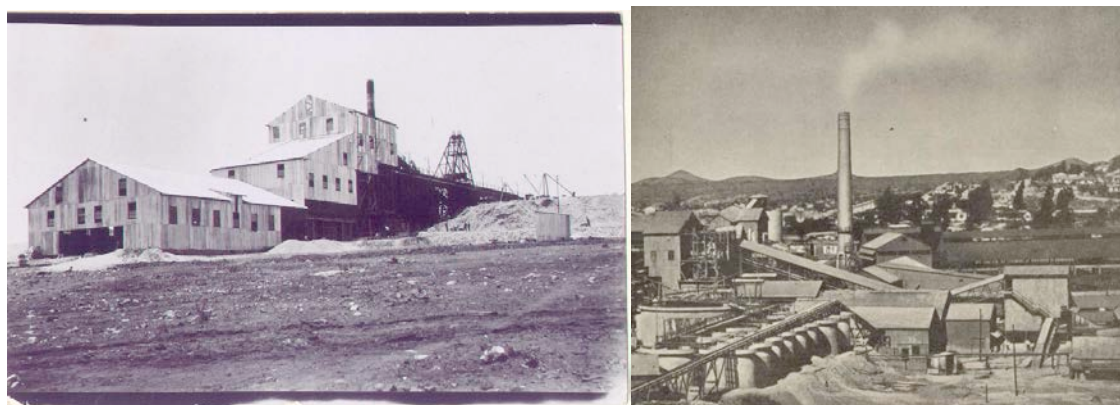
'In the bak-veld, the pioneers sank their shafts. They took on native labourers. Dosing themselves with quinine against malaria they worked on, widening the overgrown trails and building mud and straw huts. The mine and the new community were conquering the scrub' (MTDC 1954a: 6).

Another 1954 company pamphlet trumpeted a half century of expansion:

'Now, employing 500 Europeans and 4,500 Natives, it can be claimed that Company has attained the stature of a large producing company with its own niche in the financial structure of the country, being the only company to produce refined copper in the Union of South Africa, and it enters the 50<sup>th</sup> year of its existence with renewed confidence for the future' (MTDC 1954b: 14).

To these authors, Messina had not only succeeded as a company, but had also 'conquered the scrub'. In 1907, the completion of a road from Pietersburg brought a bi-weekly coach service, and 1908 saw the beginnings of expansion onto new land. Soon after, capital was raised for a concentrating mill and smelting furnace (MTDC 1954b). In 1914, a railway link south was completed for the hand-picked ore. Residential areas were developed. By 1954, 'with the introduction

during the last few years of parks, lawns and flower gardens alongside the tarred thoroughfares, the building of the new Hospital, Company Offices, Recreation Club, and numerous attractive houses', Messina had been 'changed and improved beyond compare' (ibid: 18).



**Left:** the new mill, completed 1913, photo courtesy of Brian Kalshoven;  
**Right:** artist's impression of Messina mine and town for 1954 company pamphlet (MTDC 1954b)

Despite the apparent inevitability of Messina's success from a 1950s vantage point, the mine had been vulnerable. Fluctuating copper prices caused regular crises (temporary closure until government intervened in 1922; crisis until further intervention in the 1930s [MTDC 1954a: 12-13]; eventual closure, following the 1980s crash, in the early 1990s). Added to these economic problems were two key difficulties Messina faced as it grew. Management had to struggle to establish territorial government that went beyond frontier policing. And it needed to secure labour. This was no easy task, despite – or in part because of – the Limpopo Valley's saturation with labour touts.

### *Controlling territory*

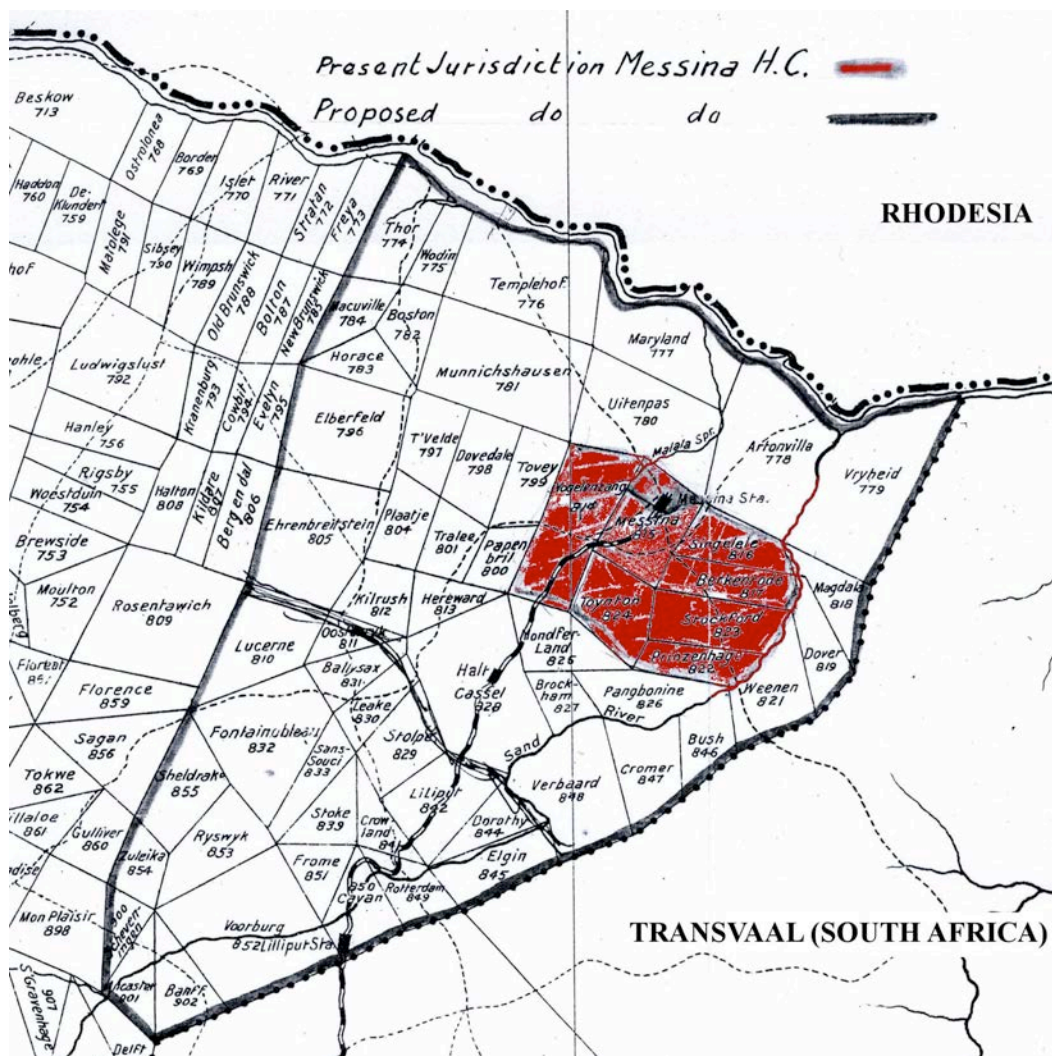
Messina's location – the Limpopo Valley – had been a place for the South African authorities to police (with little success), rather than govern. Now, Messina's managers needed to establish it as a place in its own right. The mine management approached the problem by focusing on health. In 1914, the Company discussed establishing a Health Committee to combat malaria and other illnesses. The proposal was lent a sense of urgency the following April by a malaria outbreak,<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> TAB TPB 1025 TALG 7683. 'Messina Health Committee Establishment'. Provincial Secretary to Magistrate, Louis Trichardt, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1915; Executive Committee Resolution, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1915; Magistrate, Louis Trichardt, to Provincial Secretary, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1915.

no doubt confirmed by smallpox on the mine later in the year.<sup>57</sup> Negotiations on the scope of the Committee's authority began soon focusing on its territorial remit. How much territorial control should the Health Committee have, given its affiliation to – indeed, its part in – the Messina (Transvaal) Development Company, but its stated aims to provide a broader public good? The Committee's answer to this was clear:

'The Messina Health Committee has the honour to apply for jurisdiction over a larger area than what has been granted to it by the Government ... Perhaps the principal object of the Health Committee is to prevent malaria, and to do this, it is necessary to control a large district, in order to prevent the interchange of infection between different parts of the district brought about by the movement of people.'<sup>58</sup>



Planned expansion of Messina Health Committee's jurisdiction, with existing jurisdiction highlighted in red. National Archives of South Africa: TPB 1025 TALG 7683. 'Messina Health Committee Establishment'

<sup>57</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984/12/41. 'Rhodesian Natives employed on Messina Copper Mine'. Mine Secretary, Messina, to Director of Native Labour, October 18<sup>th</sup> 1915.

<sup>58</sup> TAB TPB 1025 TALG 7683. 'Messina Health Committee Establishment'. Messina (Transvaal) Development Company to Resident Magistrate, Louis Trichardt, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1915.

The government took this plan under consideration, but local absentee landowners were strongly opposed. At the heart of their objection was the attempted control by private businessmen over matters of administration that ought to be the remit of the state. The Transvaal Consolidated Land And Exploration Company complained to the Provincial Secretary about being left out of the loop, despite the fact that 'this area, which is equal to a fairly large English county, includes a number of farms which belong to my Company.'<sup>59</sup> They objected that the area was too big to administer properly in the first place. One of the Health Committee's goals was to limit the residence of 'squatters' – black people living around Messina without mine employment – to controlled areas. Transvaal Consolidated noted wryly – and with a hint of sarcasm – that it 'might for this purpose have applied, with as much reason, for jurisdiction over the whole of the Zoutpansberg District as over the area in question.'<sup>60</sup>

The problem was more general than controlling the residence of squatters. This goal was not itself contested by other landowners. However, despite Messina's assurances that they were acting in the public interest, they appeared to be instituting a form of territorial government. Oceana, a company with intentions to begin mining copper, was being asked to place their land under the direct jurisdiction of a body representing the Messina Company. They did not wish to be bound by the decisions of a competitor, including the one which dictated the clearing away of the very timber that would be essential for building their own infrastructure.<sup>61</sup> The representative of another company, Henderson Consolidated, 'view[ed] with grave suspicion such a secret and mysterious attempt to obtain control of my Company's properties, where any straightforward and honest request for facilities for any furtherance of public health would have been so readily considered on its merits.'<sup>62</sup>

Local landowning companies were concerned that Messina Health Committee was attempting to establish itself as a governing institution, but with an

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<sup>59</sup> TAB TPB 1025 TALG 7683. 'Messina Health Committee Establishment'. Transvaal Consolidated Land and Exploration Company to Provincial Secretary, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1915.

<sup>60</sup> TAB TPB 1025 TALG 7683. 'Messina Health Committee Establishment'. Transvaal Consolidated Land and Exploration Company to Provincial Secretary, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1915.

<sup>61</sup> TAB TPB 1025 TALG 7683. 'Messina Health Committee Establishment'. Oceana Consolidated Company to Provincial Secretary, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1915.

<sup>62</sup> TAB TPB 1025 TALG 7683. 'Messina Health Committee Establishment'. Henderson Consolidated Corporation to Provincial Secretary, 9<sup>th</sup> September 1915.



interest in ensuring advantage for the Company. Henderson Consolidated put it in the strongest words:

‘You will note that they [the Committee members] are all practically under the control of Mr. Emery, the Manager of Messina Company, and I consider that it is for certain undisclosed and entirely unjustified objects, connected with the running of his mine, that this gentleman has in view in making the application he has made’<sup>63</sup>

Faced with such opposition, Messina backed off. The Health Committee gained jurisdiction over the ‘reduced area’ over which the mine already had some control (the area marked in red on the map above). It quickly extended its authority beyond sanitation, becoming the town’s government, and was replaced by regular municipal structures only in 1968.

### *Controlling labour*

A further reason to establish Messina as a recognised local centre, with control over human mobility and settlement, concerned the securing of black labour. Messina created an unprecedented labour demand on South Africa’s northern border, and it did so on the route south to the Witwatersrand. Unlike settlers in earlier periods, Messina Mine’s survival depended on large numbers of men *staying* in the area to work, rather than simply passing through. Expansion, from mine camp to mine town to municipality depended on controlling *territory*. But Messina’s success as a productive enterprise depended on orienting people and their movements towards the mine – controlling *labour*.

In March 1912, the Local Board of the Messina (Transvaal) Development Company contacted the Director of Native Affairs, in something of a panic.<sup>64</sup> The company had an agreement with the Government regarding the railway connection soon to be completed, and was attempting to prepare for the connection by developing the mine extensively. Labour supply was falling 50% short. Messina’s location made it difficult to guarantee a workforce, since the area was only sparsely populated. The Board explained that ‘there are no large kraals within a good many miles of Messina.’ Indeed, they claimed, ‘there are only several

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<sup>63</sup> TAB TPB 1025 TALG 7683. ‘Messina Health Committee Establishment’. Henderson Consolidated Corporation to Provincial Secretary, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1915.

<sup>64</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984. ‘Suggestion that the District around Messina Mine be closed to recruiting.’ Acting Secretary to Local Board, Messina, to Director of Native Affairs, Johannesburg, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1912.

isolated huts within this area, and the few natives residing there do not as a rule seek work.'

Attempts to recruit more widely were being thwarted. Labour supply came from two sources. Some hailed from Spelonken, already so 'overrun' with recruiters for mines on the Witwatersrand 'that it may be taken for granted that boys who come from there to Messina are old employees and cannot be recruited or persuaded to go to the Rand, or elsewhere.' The rest – the majority – were southward migrants from Rhodesia. By August 1915, around 1400 black workers out of a total of 2039 came from north of the Limpopo River, and it was assumed by the mine's General Manager and by the Acting Director of Native Labour that 'a large percentage' were Rhodesian.<sup>65</sup>

White recruiters and their 'native runners' were stealing potential workers from under Messina's nose. 'The shortage of labour at Messina', complained the Company's Board, 'is largely due to the increased activity of Native Labour Agents and we are continually faced with difficulties to counteract their efforts to prevent natives from proceeding to Messina, and also taking natives from our Compound already in our employ.' A white agent would 'usually den[y] being at Messina for the purposes of obtaining labour and gives as an excuse that he is hunting or fishing.' The fact that potential recruits crossing the border followed particular paths as they made their way towards Messina made it easy to find them. 'Boys who express willingness to engage for the Rand are diverted past Messina and others are persuaded by the usual means to proceed south and are kept clear of Messina.'<sup>66</sup> Messina's Board asserted that their claim to the labour of migrants passing through their territory should supersede the aims of migrants to head southwards. The Limpopo Valley should be regarded as Messina's proper catchment area, rather than the northern frontier of South Africa.

The protection Messina sought from the Director of Native Affairs asserted their territorial claim, through a ban on recruitment near the mine: 'an area equal to a radius of say 25 miles from Messina should be closed against Native Labour Agents and Runners.' The request was refused, on the perhaps spurious grounds

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<sup>65</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473 DNL.1950/13/D240. 'Illicit recruiting Native labour in Southern Rhodesia.' Acting Director of Native Labour to Secretary for Native Affairs, 27<sup>th</sup> August 1915.

<sup>66</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984. 'Suggestion that the District around Messina Mine be closed to recruiting.' Acting Secretary to Local Board, Messina, to Director of Native Affairs, Johannesburg, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1912.

that so many similar requests had been received from employers, for protection of their perceived 'natural labour reserves'.<sup>67</sup> This, understandably, provoked bitter disappointment by the Board that the Government 'do not offer us any assistance', especially since they were aware that allowances *had* been made in other, similar cases.<sup>68</sup>

This was not the first time that control of labour had been raised as an issue for Messina. The Native Labour Bureau had, in fact, already considered proclaiming Messina a Labour District in 1911, to protect it from labour agents. But it had decided the territory that could reasonably be claimed by the mine under such terms would not reach the Limpopo River, thus defeating the purpose.<sup>69</sup> In any case, proclaiming a Labour District would have come with the downside for the mine of increased government scrutiny. Such scrutiny had, in fact, been suggested by the Secretary of Native Affairs following the alleged ill-treatment of black workers: 'the Manager [of Messina] might be informed that if it should be necessary to proclaim a Labour District in order to protect the employees of the Messina Mine, the Compound Manager would require a license ... the issue and renewal of which is under strict scrutiny.'<sup>70</sup> Formalising a relationship with Government by creating a territorialised Labour District came not just with a monopoly over recruits in the area, but also with heightened bureaucratic scrutiny. Messina, however, wanted it both ways: territorial control both to manage their own affairs and ensure a labour supply.

Trouble with recruiting did not disappear. Shortage of labour was often due to desertion, linked to poor conditions and workers' aims to reach better employment (see van Onselen 1976). In 1915, the visits of 'a clique of Labour Agents recruiting for the Rand ... coincided with the disappearance of the Natives, who cleared off without notice and without finishing their month's work.'<sup>71</sup> This was virtually impossible to prevent, since 'there are so many ways of getting through the bush to the South West of Messina, that there is no

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<sup>67</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984. Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, to Acting Secretary to Local Board, Messina, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1912.

<sup>68</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984. Acting Secretary to Local Board, Messina, to Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1912.

<sup>69</sup> TAB GNLB 43 1285/11/2879/11. Acting Asst. Director, Govt Native Labour Bureau, to Acting Secretary for Native Affairs, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1911.

<sup>70</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984/12/D154. 'Treatment of Native: Messina Copper Mine'. Secretary of Native Affairs to Native Commissioner, Louis Trichardt, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1914.

<sup>71</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984/12/53. LT No. 33/15/1079. 'Messina Copper Mines', 1<sup>st</sup> December 1915.

possibility of getting conclusive results either by Police patrols or by restricting the issue of Passes.'

Part of the problem was noted in a Government report on conditions at the mine. Infrastructure and accommodation were extremely basic: the hospital was a single hut; compound living quarters were overcrowded; huts in the location for married workers were 'of a very poor type generally whilst old sacks and paraffin tins play a great part in protection against the elements'; and latrines were 'obviously inadequate seeing as there are only two latrines containing 8 buckets in each for a complement of rather over 2000 Natives'.<sup>72</sup> Even given that mine compounds elsewhere were often unpleasant, such living conditions make it understandable that workers would leave if offered employment on the gold mines, where bigger mine companies had better-established facilities and could pay more.

By 1918, the mine's dual concerns of territorial control and ensuring a labour supply had become combined. In 1918, Government Notice No.1693/1918 banned the recruitment of migrants from north of latitude 22°S (except with special permission), because of the high mortality of so-called 'tropical natives' on South African mines. This should have helped Messina, which was still allowed to employ Rhodesians, but the South African authorities lacked capacity on the northern border, allowing recruiters to continue their operations. In late 1920, the Messina Company wrote again to the Director of Native Labour: 'if restrictions could be placed upon the recruiting of natives within the area controlled by the Messina Health Committee it would be of considerable assistance.'<sup>73</sup> By the end of the year, the area of the Messina Health Committee's jurisdiction – the reduced territory of seven farms (see above map) – was a specifically prohibited area for labour recruiters.<sup>74</sup> Even then, however, a lack of state capacity placed Messina at the mercy of 'labour pirates'. As late as the mid-1940s, Messina would continue to complain about the 'racket' in clandestine recruitment (Murray 1995: 396).

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<sup>72</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984/12/53. 'Messina Copper Mines', August 1915.

<sup>73</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984/12/53. 'Messina Copper Mines'. Messina (Transvaal) Development Company to Director of Native Labour, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1920.

<sup>74</sup> TAB GNLB 43 984/12/53. 'Messina Copper Mines'. Messina (Transvaal) Development Company to Director of Native Labour, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1920.

The establishment of Messina Mine reveals the meanings of territorial control for a company that was hungry for workers. Messina faced two problems in the years examined here. Both involved attempting to establish the area as a centre, a place of economic importance. The first problem concerned proper government on the frontier. Attention to the Limpopo Valley by South African state officials was about policing, but Messina needed to establish northern Zoutpansberg as a place in its own right, not just the frontier of the larger entity of South Africa. The second problem was about securing labour for the mine, which also took territorial form, as Messina claimed monopoly rights to recruit workers within its area of jurisdiction.

The South African state was to continue to struggle with labour recruiters. Strategies to control 'clandestine immigration' and illicit recruitment in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s reveal that government officials continued to see the Limpopo Valley primarily as a borderland. But in response, a growing community of commercial crop farmers north of the Soutpansberg would come to reiterate Messina's claim that the area was not merely a thoroughfare southwards.

### ***Supply, demand and territory: 'clandestine immigration' and farm labour***

Following the period just described, there were significant continuities in South African policy towards Rhodesian migrants between around 1918 and 1950: one was the abiding dilemma about what to do with a northern border that was very hard to police effectively. Another continuity was that Rhodesians became constantly regarded as fodder in officials' attempts to bend to the demands of big Transvaal agricultural producers. For these farmers, foreign migrant labour was crucial, because of perennial difficulties with finding workers of local provenance. These continuities endured, despite shifting alliances between farmers and national political parties, as well as important differences between administrations in the South African government (see Bradford 1993). My focus here is on the continuities themselves. Policies regarding 'clandestine immigration' during this period reveal the continuing relationship between governing of *territory* – and therefore the movements of people – and supplying *labour* to settler-capitalists.

*The rise of Limpopo commercial agriculture and the Louis Trichardt Labour Depot*

In 1948, the Zoutpansberg Farmers' Union wrote to the Native Commissioner, Louis Trichardt, describing the developing Limpopo Valley crop farms. 'Tens of thousands of pounds and much pioneering work ha[d] been put onto the farms along the Njelele river during the past fifteen years, and this industry ha[d] been built up entirely by prohibited immigrant labour.'<sup>75</sup>

According to one longstanding resident of the valley – a doctor and cattle farmer born in 1926 – the 1930s saw an increase in the number of farmers, but most put their efforts into cattle. Nevertheless, a particular pocket of land between the Soutpansberg and Messina (see map) had been the site of incipient agrarian capitalism since the 1930s. A new government-funded dam was completed on the Njelele (in TshiVenda: *Nzhelele*) River early in 1948, enabling much greater expansion. By the early 1960s, a Messina promotional publication could declare that:

'The old arid area of the Soutpansberg is being rapidly transformed into the country's winter larder, where grapes, vegetables, citrus and sub-tropical fruits flourish. The quality of the citrus is particularly high and a ready export market is found. 114,000 tons of fruit and 9,000 gallons of cream are railed annually to the markets of Pretoria and the Witwatersrand' (Messina Publicity Association c.1961: 4).

Like Messina Mine before it, the Njelele farming area was highly dependent on migrants passing southwards through the farms. In 1947, the Chipise<sup>76</sup> *Boerevereniging* (farmers' union) complained to the Native Commissioner, Louis Trichardt, about the agents recruiting in the area for farmers elsewhere.<sup>77</sup> As the Native Commissioner informed the Chief Native Commissioner at Pietersburg in 1948, 'the foreign Natives entering this district from the North and presenting themselves at the Njelele farms on their way southwards have hitherto been the source of the labour employed by the Njelele farmers.'<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, 'Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.' Charles Chamberlain, Soutpansberg Farmers' Union to Native Commissioner, Louis Trichardt, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1948.

<sup>76</sup> Now Tshipise – TshiVenda: 'hot spring'.

<sup>77</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, 'Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.' Department of Native Affairs to Chief Native Commissioner for Northern Areas, Pietersburg, 21<sup>st</sup> March 1947.

<sup>78</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, 'Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.' Native Commissioner to Chief Native Commissioner, 20<sup>th</sup> April 1948.

It was in 1948, too, that this dependence on northern migrants brought the farmers into conflict with the authorities. In the late 1940s, the northern border region was the site of new labour depots designed to channel Rhodesians crossing the border to farmers, most of whom were situated outside the Njelele region. A network of such depots was established in March 1947, centred on Louis Trichardt. They were intended to 'serve as collecting points from where the recruits will be conveyed by motor lorry to the main depot at Louis Trichardt.'<sup>79</sup> Migrants would be brought to these subsidiary depots by 'native' runners.

The farmers felt that the scheme flouted the importance of productive enterprises north of the Soutpansberg. Indeed, they believed that Farm Labour Scheme efforts to 'comb the district for any incoming boys' violated a 'gentleman's agreement' that 'the Messina Mine and the farmers at the back [i.e. north] of the [Soutpansberg] mountain had first call on incoming prohibited immigrants.' The farmers were now 1,000 workers short: the aggressive efforts of government recruiters for the depots had caused Rhodesians heading southwards to avoid the area. These workers were needed 'to cultivate the out of season fruit, vegetables, and produce crops, grown by the Njelele farmers, that supplies [sic] the markets throughout the Union, during the "out of season" month, when such crops are not available in any other part.'<sup>80</sup> The Njelele farmers saw themselves as the developers of a distinct agricultural area, making an irreplaceable contribution to South Africa because of their location in the north and with a labour hinterland that needed protecting. The Farm Labour Scheme appeared to treat the Limpopo Valley, once again, simply as a zone for border policing and for supplying labour to other regions of the country. Responses to the Njelele farmers in 1948 confirmed this. The Native Commissioner at Louis Trichardt claimed that he was 'unaware of any agreement whereby the Messina Mine and the farmers at the back of the mountain were to be given first call on incoming Native Prohibited Migrants.'

Both farmers and state officials presented the arrangements they proposed as consonant with migrants' choices, each side thereby revealing their perspective on the area. Njelele farmers appealed that, rather than be diverted by government employees, 'prohibited immigrants ... should be allowed to come in the

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<sup>79</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2 'Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.' Secretary of Native Affairs to Chief Native Commissioner, Northern Areas, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1946.

<sup>80</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, 'Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.' Charles Chamberlain, Soutpansberg Farmers' Union to Native Commissioner, Louis Trichardt, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1948.

Zoutpansberg and to work freely.’<sup>81</sup> In this view, workers were heading for the farms – local centres of employment – when they were diverted. The Native Commissioner also framed this case as an issue of the freedom of labour, but with rather different conclusions. Noting the large amount of land under irrigation, the government dam and the good climate, the Native Commissioner alleged that the real problem was low wages. ‘They are ... in a position to afford relatively high wages for their Native labour. Instead they wish to maintain a low wage level at the expense of other farming communities.’<sup>82</sup> By diverting unknowing recruits to their underpaying enterprises, Njelele farmers denied other employers the workforces they deserved as better remunerators. Njelele farmers used workers’ ignorance about proper wages to upset the free market of labour. The centres at which migrants chose to work, given sufficient information, were not at Njelele. Workers were avoiding the farms of their own accord, and the Njelele farmers’ location should bring them no special treatment. These points were endorsed by the Chief Native Commissioner and the Secretary for Native Affairs.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the Native Commissioner contested the farmers’ portrayal of the Farm Labour Scheme. ‘It is untrue that the District is combed for Extra-Union Natives by the organisation,’ he wrote to the Chief Native Commissioner. ‘Extra-Union Natives entering this district at the Border who are contacted there by the Native employees at the subsidiary depots have the said scheme explained to them and are left free to choose whether they will accept employment thereunder or find employment for themselves.’<sup>84</sup> The Farm Labour Scheme itself was part of the range of choices available to migrants.

This disagreement offers a window onto Limpopo Valley agriculture and state officials’ views of migration and labour supply in the late 1940s. But, to make sense of Njelele farmers’ assertions of their own area as a centre of production with ‘first call’ on migrants from their hinterland, we have to appreciate what the Farm Labour Scheme was. It was, as Bradford (1993) argues, the latest state attempt to engage in labour recruitment for other parts of South Africa, notably the

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<sup>81</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, ‘Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.’ Charles Chamberlain, Soutpansberg Farmers’ Union to Native Commissioner, Louis Trichardt, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1948.

<sup>82</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, ‘Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.’ Native Commissioner, Louis Trichardt, to Chief Native Commissioner, Pietersburg, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1948.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid; TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, ‘Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.’ Secretary for Native Affairs to Chief Native Commissioner, Pietersburg, 9<sup>th</sup> April 1948.

<sup>84</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, ‘Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.’ Native Commissioner, Louis Trichardt, to Chief Native Commissioner, Pietersburg, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1948.



eastern Transvaal. Such recruitment was also, I contend, an attempt by state institutions to assert territorial control of the northern frontier, in a manner that cast the Limpopo Valley as a border zone rather than a hub of capitalist production. The object was 'to bring about as far as possible the effective rounding up of foreign Natives entering into the Union across the Rhodesian and the Bechuanaland borders.'<sup>85</sup> I first briefly explain the 1940s Farm Labour Scheme, before turning to the wider trend in government border policy from which it emerged.

While it was true that the labour depots did not 'comb the district' for migrants, this was less because of a benign model of worker choice than because of an enduring lack of government capacity in the area. Contrary to the Native Commissioner's description of the Farm Labour Scheme, above, to be brought to a depot was, in effect, to be arrested. Instructions on running the Louis Trichardt depot for the local Native Commissioner stipulated that:

'Immediately any foreign Native is received into the main depot he must be served with a prohibition notice ... Immediately after service of prohibition notices on a batch of Natives, they should be called upon to elect whether they desire to enter into contracts of employment in terms of the scheme or whether they desire to be repatriated. Any Native who has refused to accept employment should be transported to the border and ordered to return to his country of origin.'<sup>86</sup>

Despite considerable efforts, the depot system was a failure. Foreigners from the north went to great lengths to avoid the coercive scheme, which managed to deliver a mere 1,200 workers to farmers during its operation (Bradford 1993: 112). And big farmers elsewhere in South Africa responded to the scheme's lack of effectiveness by turning back to means of recruiting northerners on the border that recalled earlier banditry. Migrants were 'not merely being assaulted, or robbed, or subjected to touts impersonating the police. Some were also being recruited at gunpoint, hunted like ostriches, or captured by dogs before being stuffed into lorries' (ibid: 115). In recognition of these failings, the scheme was closed in 1949.

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<sup>85</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, 'Depots: Foreign Labour Recruiting Scheme.' Secretary of Native Affairs to Chief Native Commissioner, Pietersburg, 10<sup>th</sup> July 1947.

<sup>86</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, 'Foreign Farm Labour Scheme Louis Trichardt Main File.' - 'Farm labour scheme: special instructions for the Native Commissioner, Louis Trichardt.' Secretary of Native Affairs to Chief Native Commissioner, Northern Areas, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1947.

State endeavours to control the movements of Rhodesians and other alien migrants were not merely ways to placate influential agrarian capitalists. They were also attempts to assert control over territory. Indeed, by 1953, as apartheid under the National Party approached its fifth year, an infrastructure of depots became part of the wider system to control black movement, while the prison system became a primary source of state-provided agricultural labour. When the establishment of a new 'reception depot' at Nigel, east of Johannesburg, was proposed, it was to be 'a place of detention under the provisions of the Immigration Act and any foreign Native can therefore be detained therein in accordance with the said act.' This new depot was to house black non-South Africans who were unemployed and lacked documents for the Union of South Africa or for urban areas. Such 'recruitment' was a means to police illegal immigration while providing labour to farmers. As the Secretary of Native Affairs put it, 'It is not the intention to repatriate these Natives, but the Department is anxious to gain effective control over their movements and to offer them such employment in rural areas as may be available.'<sup>87</sup> The two phrases used by the Secretary of Native Affairs in 1953 – 'gain effective control over their movements' and 'offer them ... employment in rural areas' – are both key to understanding the issues at stake in migration across the Limpopo, as these were seen by midcentury South African officials. They reflect the dual imperatives that had motivated such policies since the 1920s.

*Policemen or recruiters? state intervention on the northern frontier*

In 1921, the South African authorities were starkly confronted by their lack of capacity to police migration on its northern border. The numbers of Rhodesians heading southwards were rising. The Acting Director of Native Labour wrote to the Secretary for Native Affairs that 'we are somewhat embarrassed with large numbers of these [tropical] natives coming through for employment.'<sup>88</sup> He noted, on the other hand, their 'considerable value' to maize farmers on the Highveld. He recommended that employers be required to provide workers with 'two blankets, a jersey and pair of trousers or other equivalent clothing for every native engaged between April and August inclusive.' So, on the one hand, non-South Africans were

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<sup>87</sup> TAB HKN 1/1/52 17N3/20/2, 'Foreign Labour Recruiting Schemes – Louis Trichardt.' Secretary for Native Affairs to Commissioner, South African Police, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1953.

<sup>88</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Acting Director of Native Labour to Secretary for Native Affairs, 18<sup>th</sup> August 1921.

entering the country in large numbers;<sup>89</sup> but, on the other, this could be turned into the basis of a system of labour supply with a veneer of state direction. From the perspective of employers in the Limpopo Valley, however, this would come to signal that the area to the north of the Soutpansberg remained primarily a borderland, to be policed and to provide a source of labour for elsewhere.

The year 1921 was by no means the first spike in migration across the Limpopo. Neither did 1921 mark the beginning of government efforts to divert Rhodesians onto white farms. Messina mine had been struggling to secure adequate labour at times in the previous decade, as we have seen, but a lot of Rhodesians had been crossing the border. They were a source of vulnerable, easily exploitable labour, for anything from Natal collieries<sup>90</sup> to public roads.<sup>91</sup> In April 1917, a representative of the Secretary of Native Affairs sent a telegram to the Rhodesian Chief Native Commissioner in Salisbury, reporting that, 'owing to pressure brought to bear on [the natives] by Rhodesian Government officials to repay grain advances made last year large numbers of tropical Natives from Rhodesia have entered Northern Transvaal in search of work'. He suggested that 'there is serious shortage of farm labour in Zoutpansberg and other districts [in the] Transvaal [and] these Natives might usefully be employed on farms'.<sup>92</sup>

State attempts to control the movement of northerners by gathering them and supplying them as labour to farms require some contextualisation. The recipients of this labour were on the whole the *groot boere* ('big farmers') of the Eastern Transvaal. These 'progressive' farmers, predominantly of Russian Jewish descent, had vast areas planted with maize, and turned large profits. Unlike the smaller Afrikaner farmers around them, with their black tenants, these were true agrarian capitalists, seeking out the cheapest possible wage labour. As in many capitalist operations worldwide, however, this labour was not 'free' but consisted of foreign migrants acquired under coercive conditions (Bradford 1993). Time and

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<sup>89</sup> Indeed, by 1922, among the 'rush of natives to Johannesburg in search of work' there were also large numbers of people from the 'outside Districts of the Union', notably Sibasa in the far north, as severe economic conditions affected rural areas. SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Chief Pass Officer, Johannesburg, to Director of Native Labour, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1922.

<sup>90</sup>SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Vryheid Railway Coal & Iron to Director of Native Labour, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1915; Acting Director of Native Labour to Secretary for Native Affairs, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1915; Secretary for Native Affairs to Rhodesian Chief Native Commissioner, Salisbury, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1916.

<sup>91</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Magistrate, Nylstroom, to Superintendent Roads and Local Works, Pretoria, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1920.

<sup>92</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. 'Natives.' O.H.M.S. for Secretary for Native Affairs to Chief Native Commissioner, Salisbury, 11<sup>th</sup> April 1917.

again, state officials would strive to provide them with this cheap labour, drawing on foreign migrants, prison labour and children. And, time and again, state officials' plans were thwarted by two things. One was the actions of private – often illicit – recruiters, and the other was the resistance of migrants to state intervention (ibid).

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many black South Africans remained averse to wage-work on farms, preferring the better paid and more masculine option of mining and industrial employment (James 2001). Another reason they left the farms, paralleling the experience of Messina Mine, was poor workers' conditions. As one 1920s government report put it:

'Short of fixing the scales of pay and the recruitment and distribution of native labour by the Government there would appear to be no means of meeting the shortage of farm labour except for the farmers to so improve the conditions of employment as to induce the Natives to remain on the farms as labourers. At the present time the tendency is for the [local] Natives to leave the farms as soon as they are occupied [i.e. settled] by Europeans as the conditions of labour do not appeal to them.'<sup>93</sup>

Unlike the gold mines, farmers could not make use of the highly institutionalised infrastructure of the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association to recruit and transport workers. Even Messina Mine, which struggled to make up its complement of employees in its first 20 years of operation, was by the early 1930s drawing in workers from much further afield. Messina's accident books from 1931 to 1934 show that the vast majority of workers hailed from areas a long way to the north of the border, including Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia.<sup>94</sup> Many farmers, by contrast, remained dependent on more or less informal means of labour recruitment.

By 1922, the Director of Native Labour was pushing to regularise arrangements, making use of existing labour recruiters. 'Rhodesian natives continue to filter through to the Rand,' he wrote to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 'and find the greatest difficulty in obtaining employment more especially as they are prohibited from working on the gold mines as they are domiciled north of latitude 22° south.' He proposed that:

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<sup>93</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. 'Native Labour Supply.'

<sup>94</sup> My thanks to Jack Klaff, who acquired the books when the mine closed in the early 1990s and who made them available to me for my research.

“These natives are well suited for farm work and I would advocate their being employed on agricultural work. If you concur I should be glad if ministerial authority might be sought whereby I might be permitted to allow labour organisations that cater for farm labour to engage Rhodesians in Johannesburg for farm work in the Transvaal or other Provinces, Natal excepted, where such labour can be safely employed.”<sup>95</sup>

The trouble with this was again territorial. A 1918 Government Notice<sup>96</sup> had prohibited agents from recruiting Rhodesians in the Union. Subsequent policy was ‘that clandestine Native immigrants from Rhodesia would be confined as far as possible to the Northern Transvaal.’<sup>97</sup> The result was an uneasy compromise requiring state intervention: “The Rhodesians are prohibited immigrants and at a conference with the Chief Native Commissioner, Southern Rhodesia, at Pietersburg in 1918 it was arranged that short of repatriation the recruitment of boys who filtered through would not be allowed but that as far as possible we would place them on farms and industries in the Northern Transvaal.”<sup>98</sup> Migrants would be brought to a depot at Louis Trichardt and allocated to prospective employers. Sending illegal Rhodesians to farms was a good way to transform the problem of limited control of people in South African territory into a functional part of the economy. But it was to be kept as close to the border as possible.

By the 1920s, the ban on recruiters of Rhodesian labour was impossible to maintain. The Director of Native Labour argued that keeping Rhodesians to the Northern Transvaal ‘was not intended to prohibit their employment in other parts of the Union where conditions were satisfactory.’ Rhodesians were anyway in South Africa seeking work well beyond the Northern Transvaal. Limited state capacity ought to be offset by canny employment strategies:

‘It is not possible to repatriate them and they cannot all be absorbed here [Johannesburg], and unless an outlet is found for them they will inevitably drift to slum areas and become criminals. As it is not possible to prevent them from coming to the Rand I think we should do all we can to assist them in finding suitable employment.’<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Director of Native Labour to Secretary for Native Affairs, 13<sup>th</sup> December 1922.

<sup>96</sup> Section 10 of Government Notice No.1693. This refers to active recruitment, as opposed to employment, and was a response to illicit labour agents’ activities on the border.

<sup>97</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Secretary for Native Affairs to Director of Native Labour, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1922.

<sup>98</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. ‘Native Labour Supply.’

<sup>99</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Director of Native Labour to Secretary for Native Affairs, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1923.

Responding to the arrival of 'distinctly embarrassing' numbers of Rhodesians, the Director of Native Labour arranged for provisional permission to be given 'to those labour organisations here who cater for the farmers to engage and attest locally Rhodesian natives for agricultural employment in the Transvaal'.<sup>100</sup>

There were two problems here. The first concerned who was allowed to do the recruiting. Farmers' own representatives for recruiting Rhodesians did not hold regular recruiter licenses, whereas licensed agents were not allowed to sign up Rhodesians because of the 1918 law. As the Sub-Native Commissioner at Pietersburg explained to the Secretary for Native Affairs, after an encounter with a particularly angry licensed labour agent: 'there is not the slightest doubt that these so-called Agents [those of the farmers] are using Native touts, and the licensed Labour Agent has a just grievance that he, the Labour Agent, although his license is endorsed, to recruit for various farmers, he is prohibited from handling Rhodesian Natives.'<sup>101</sup> Laws since 1918 had prescribed that Rhodesians be allocated by the Director of Native Labour, but rules had been relaxed to meet the needs of labour supply and demand, creating the conditions for new 'labour pirates'. The image of the 'bandit' once again reared its head.

The second problem concerned the use of migrants as labour. On the one hand, recruitment created a labour demand, inviting an increased supply of migrants; on the other, the government hoped to discourage migration.<sup>102</sup> Tensions in the arrangements were reflected in the regularity with which the Secretary for Native Affairs emphasised to farmers applying for labour that 'the policy of the Government is to discourage the immigration of these Natives by all possible means.'<sup>103</sup> He meanwhile referred requests to the Director of Native Labour, who by now was being tasked with allocating Rhodesian workers to prospective employers. The larger farmers (discussed by Bradford 1993) themselves had come to rely on the fact of regular, cheap labour supply from Rhodesia. Writing to the Native Sub-Commissioner at Louis Trichardt, the Director of Native Labour noted that 'a small number of comparatively large farmers have learned to rely on the Rhodesian labourers as a strong supplement to their labour

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<sup>100</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Director of Native Labour to Secretary for Native Affairs, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1923.

<sup>101</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Sub-Native Commissioner, Pietersburg, to Secretary for Native Affairs, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1923.

<sup>102</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Secretary for Native Affairs to W.H. Rood, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1924.

<sup>103</sup> E.g. SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Secretary for Native Affairs to Lowveld Farmers Association, Nelspruit, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1924.

force and that the summary closing of this source of supply, at this juncture, is seriously and adversely affecting their farming prospects for the immediate future.’<sup>104</sup>

Underlying both problems was the extent and nature of state oversight, where state institutions had limited capacity. Supplying Rhodesians to employers was justified on the basis that governmental institutions were unable to police the border. Yet the alternative to preventing Rhodesians from entering South Africa had come to look no better: using the same kinds of unscrupulous labour agents with whom officials had long been struggling. As one farmers’ association put it, ‘The Mines have their own Native Labour organisations but the farmers are in the hands of agents who exploit them in a shameful manner.’ In this case, recruiters were using farms as pools from which to recruit labour for elsewhere, simply moving workers around for profit. The farmers’ association’s concerns are reminiscent of those of Messina Mine in the previous decade. The proposed solution here was that ‘if the demand could be met by a Government organisation controlling the indenture of natives on the lines of the present recruiting organisations, there would be a uniformity of methods, especially if stern measures are legalised to carry out such organisations.’<sup>105</sup>

It was as a solution to these problems that a model built on government labour depots was developed. The Director of Native Labour was already responsible for allocating Rhodesians to employers through an existing depot at Louis Trichardt managed by a contractor, but in 1925 the Sub-Native Commissioner at Louis Trichardt took over running it directly. Regulations gave the state, in theory, a monopoly in recruiting migrants from the north, while ‘clandestinely, with no legal basis, the almost moribund labour bureau at Louis Trichardt was resuscitated and supplied with a semi-private bank account’ (Bradford 1993: 103). Indeed, the number of migrants passing through the Louis Trichardt centre – 2 780 in 1925 – meant that capitation costs could be lowered. Officials appeared to be behaving like labour agents off the books, their activities ‘approximat[ing] to recruiting’ and ‘the Government ... making a profit out of its

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<sup>104</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Director of Native Labour to Native Sub-Commissioner, Louis Trichardt, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1924.

<sup>105</sup> SAB NTS 2025 26/80 2598/14/473. Middelburg Distrik Boere Unie to Minister of Labour, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1924.

dealings in this class of labour.’<sup>106</sup> The Control and Audit Office worried that it looked all too much like a profit-motivated labour recruiter:

‘Its basis is the improper entry into the Union of prohibited Rhodesian natives, it serves as an employment bureau for farmers and others who are willing to use such natives, and the larger the number of natives apparently the better the results financially it is able to show. Moreover in certain quarters it might be held to encourage the improper entry of such natives because of the ready means it affords of finding employment.’<sup>107</sup>

Success was illusory. Numbers dropped off in 1926, and it was suspected that migrants were avoiding the depot by entering the country across a different border.<sup>108</sup> If 1925 was the zenith of the labour depot’s operation, by 1929 it was so little used as to be practically irrelevant (Bradford 1993: 105). Once again, limited state capacity to govern territory constrained attempts to intervene in foreign labour recruitment. Seen in terms of the nexus of controlling territory and labour, depots were to be hubs – points of co-ordination and close supervision, where management could be effective. Unsurprisingly, however, it seemed likely that a lesser proportion of Rhodesians was being successfully drawn into the depot system, than that which was avoiding it. A depot could be managed, but also avoided. And it purported to draw labour distribution out of illicit markets, but appeared to participate in those very same markets. Louis Trichardt allocated labour on 12-month contracts to farmers by ballot in the mid-1920s. There was a fine line between administering territory and controlling human mobility on the one hand, and engaging in profitable labour recruitment on the other.

This case study focuses on the period between the 1910s and around 1950. It does so because in this period Rhodesians became crucial to the growth of ‘progressive’ agriculture in the Transvaal. With a severe lack of workers, agrarian capitalists came to rely on migrants from Rhodesia for labour. They successfully petitioned state officials to keep them supplied with workers, whether aliens, convicts or children. The period also shows attempts by senior figures in state institutions to juggle these labour questions with assertions of territorial control. Turning ‘clandestine immigrants’ into workforces appeared to achieve this, but the same

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<sup>106</sup> SAB NTS 2024 26/80 ‘Note on Entry of Rhodesian Natives to Union.’

<sup>107</sup> SAB NTS 2024 26/80 C.A.&G. to Secretary of Native Affairs, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1926.

<sup>108</sup> SAB NTS 2024 26/80 ‘Note on Entry of Rhodesian Natives to Union.’



lack of state capacity that made the border ungovernable in the first place made interventions into labour dynamics limited and often easily avoided by migrants and private recruiters.

Both of these efforts – to supply labour to the eastern Transvaal, and to maintain a veneer of territorial control in the unruly far north – sidelined the priorities of capitalists in the Limpopo Valley itself. It was the state's role as a labour recruiter that brought it into conflict with the growing commercial agricultural sector at Njelele. For farmers north of the Soutpansberg, this was not just a zone in which to control movement by sending Rhodesians to work in the eastern Transvaal. This was a place of its own, a hub of production.

The importance of the Limpopo Valley as labour supplier decreased markedly under apartheid, due not to increased territorial control on the border, but to the provision of local alternatives. These were enabled through the general tightening of controls within South Africa and by schemes providing farmers with unpaid workers from the prison and internal policing system. Black South Africans in the 1950s, hoping for mining contracts, were tricked and coerced into becoming compounded farm labour in appalling conditions, as famously exposed by Drum Magazine exposés (Sampson 2005). The shift from foreign labour was far from complete, of course, and the farms and mines reserved the right to depend on non-South African workers.<sup>109</sup> However, the northern border's role in supplying such labour appears to have changed as a result of tighter territorial control in the core areas of South Africa, beginning with the domestically-oriented 'Farm Labour Scheme: Union' in 1947 (Bradford 1993).

The border remained porous, and a flow of labour across it remained crucial for capitalist enterprises in the Limpopo Valley. Detailed research on 1950s and 1960s border control along the Limpopo River is yet to be conducted. But the later use of farmers as a buffer evidences the border's continued permeability. Indeed, older black workers who had been on South Africa's emerging border farms in the 1970s remember significant local mobility. People moved back and forth across the river between the South African agricultural estates and the Rhodesian commercial farms and Tribal Trust Lands (black reserves). In the 1970s and 1980s, Zimbabwean migration to South Africa was related to the

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<sup>109</sup> This is illustrated by the agricultural and mining sectors' outrage at the 1960s Froneman Commission recommendation that they reduce their dependence on non-South African labour. Their protests led the apartheid government to disregard the Commission's findings (Crush 2000: 2).

marginalisation by the Rhodesian/Zimbabwean state of its southern border areas, and to persecution for alleged dissidence (see introduction to this thesis; also Mate 2005; Werbner 1991). Whatever its causes, it was on this continued cross-border mobility that the border farmers relied. The final section of the chapter turns to examine how these border farmers managed, since the 1980s, to achieve a provisional resolution between conflicting perspectives on the area: porous borderland versus established hub of production.

### ***'Special employment' in the border zone***

The border farmers, as noted earlier, embodied the central tension in border capitalism: they were intended both to be a buffer in a peripheral part of South Africa, and to develop the area as a hub of work and residence in its own right. Farmers like Jan continue to complain about the impact of border policing on his farming.

However, the farmers along the Limpopo were quickly accorded a special status as border employers, and favoured with arrangements that transcended the centre/periphery divide. In the past, labour migration to South Africa was governed by bilateral treaties with surrounding countries, but there was none established with Zimbabwe. The arrangements put into place for border farmers were a pragmatic response to this lack (Crush 2000: 7). 'From the early 1980s, farmers north of the Soutpansberg recruited Zimbabwean workers under the special exemption provision in the Aliens Control Act' (Human Right Watch 2006: 14). By the 1990s, this arrangement became a distinct 'special employment zone', in which farmers did not have to go through the usual bureaucratic channels to recruit workers (Rutherford 2010: 68). Although the special employment zone was discontinued in the late 1990s, its legacy continues to shape border farming. There is a sense in which the area remains recognised both as 'border zone' and 'special employment zone'. The arrangement represented farmers' success in carving out a border area that was also a hub of capitalist enterprise.

In the special employment zone, which ran from the border to the Soutpansberg, Zimbabweans could enter South Africa legally, so long as they carried a special permit (a 'BI-17') linking them with a specific farmer. This produced a distinct border agricultural economy, in which farmers were able to set

their own terms, reinforced by the area's remoteness and norms of white settler agriculture:

'Commercial agriculture within the "special employment zone" resembles a colonial plantation enclave: (a) it produces for distant markets; (b) resources are used on a land-extensive and labour-intensive basis; (c) labour is employed, accommodated and controlled on the farm property and, (d) the sector is isolated by considerable distances from urban centres' (Lincoln & Maririke 2000: 43).

The constitution of the border area as a recognisable centre of agricultural activity had a number of on-the-ground effects, all of which reinforced farmers' locally powerful positions and shaped the place of the farms on the border today. Firstly, for Zimbabweans crossing the border, the system of BI-17 permits placed a premium on connections with particular farmers and their black foremen. This highly personalised system of labour regularisation meant that networks developed between the South African farms and villages across the river in Zimbabwe, as people sought avenues for employment. Not only did this result in webs of kinship and other relationships emerging both across the border and between the border farm populations; it also led foremen to become key figures in the border area. Both the webs of relationships and the central role of foremen continue to shape the border today.

Secondly, cross-border recruitment within this system led to the opening of an 'informal' border post at Gate 17, a point on the border fence immediately adjacent to the farms. According to my informants – both farmers and farm workers – this was a somewhat ad-hoc affair. A few South African officials would set up a mobile station on the southern bank of the Limpopo, specifically to process Zimbabweans heading to border farms under the arrangements of the special employment zone. A published eyewitness account of Gate 17 suggests something similar: a handful of Home Affairs officials and South African soldiers; a military tent as an office, with tea brewed by a woman providing an 'informal service' (possibly a domestic worker from a farm); Zimbabwean officials at a station across the river. White farmers from elsewhere sent pick-up trucks to recruit workers (Lincoln & Maririke 2000: 47-48). The border farmers themselves, however, did not even have to send trucks, since the gate lay at the edge of the farms. Gate 17 explicitly brought together border enforcement and the farms' roles as local hubs – important economic centres that required special access to labour.

Today, although the 'informal' border post has disappeared, it has been replaced by similar, though even more irregular, arrangements. Workers often go through the border fence at the garrisons, with soldiers' permission, or simply use the farms' own gates, which lead to water pumps in the river. Border officials accept that recruits come straight through the fence, bypassing conventional forms of state control.

Thirdly, within this system, it was considered common practice for recruits to make their way to the farms without papers (in this case avoiding Gate 17), where they would in theory be issued with a permit (Lincoln & Maririke 2000). The risk of arrest and deportation when undocumented was borne entirely by the workers themselves. Some farmers, indeed, would not document seasonal workers at all. Migrants crossed clandestinely for several reasons. One was that doing so was fairly straightforward, because border enforcement remained patchy. Another was that what risk there was of deportation was diminished once migrants reached the farms. For the estates were considered 'protected ground', on which one would not be arrested. A third was that, on arrival at the farms, post-hoc legalisation was easy, and indeed remained the most convenient method of documentation. Moreover, many migrants, as in the past, did not yet know their ultimate destinations (Crush 2000: 9). Farmers welcomed this state of affairs, because it meant recruits would turn up ready to work on the first day of the harvest with a minimum of fuss. Documentation, on the other hand, remained somewhat cumbersome. Further, this 'grey' employment status made for a vulnerable, easily exploitable workforce (ibid: 10). Today, precisely these expectations about employment, documentation and risk shape harvest-time recruits' lives on the farms, as they sleep in the bush for fear of police raids.

The special employment zone was discontinued in the late 1990s because of the post-apartheid media and NGO outcry 'that "national sovereignty" be enforced, particularly against what they viewed as an egregious continuation of the authority of white (Afrikaner) farmers in post-Apartheid South Africa' (Rutherford 2010: 69). However, these wider anti-farmer sentiments have minimal impact on the border farms, and the notion that farmers had a central place in controlling local territory and mobility persisted. There was a brief hiatus in the state sanctioned recruitment of Zimbabweans, but this itself revealed farmers' considerable autonomy. In 1999, farmers in the area, who employed around 15,000

Zimbabweans, were ordered by the Department of Home Affairs to recruit South Africans instead (HRW 2006: 14). Farmers I spoke to report having established a recruitment bureau at Messina, but claim that no South Africans came forward. They cited their own remoteness and black South Africans' aversion to agricultural labour as reasons for this. On these grounds, they refused to stop employing Zimbabweans. Quickly, ways were found to continue border agriculture's special arrangements by other means.

The Transvaal Agricultural Union brokered an 'informal agreement' with the Department of Home Affairs in 2001, enabling farmers north of the Soutpansberg to employ Zimbabweans according to the same labour rights as South African workers. In 2004, a Memorandum of Understanding between Zimbabwe and South Africa extended this to the whole of Limpopo Province. Under the Memorandum, Zimbabwean farm workers were (and continue to be) issued with Emergency Travel Documents, in contrast to other Zimbabwean migrants who have to apply for passports.

From 2005, and throughout the period of fieldwork, border farm recruitment was brought into line with standard South African immigration law. Farmers apply for corporate permits, under which a fixed number of foreign workers can be recruited. Corporate permits are issued after employers demonstrate that they are unable to find South Africans to do the work. In practice, however, this leaves ample room for border farmers to be accorded special privileges because of their location: 'proof of the need to employ the requested number of foreigners [is] ... evidently a formality' (HRW 2006: 14). In a more diffuse sense, local authorities continue to acknowledge farmers' centrality in the border's rural areas. Established notions of farmer 'sovereignty' over their land and labour combine with established local arrangements to accord white landowners considerable autonomy from, and freedom to ignore, border authorities (Rutherford & Addison 2007; Rutherford 2008).

Returning to the complaints of Jan and other farmers mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, their predicament must be understood in terms of the widespread recognition of farmers' place on the border. It is true that white farmers along the border today fear police reprisals for harbouring 'illegals'. They feel that they attract little affection from the now-black police force. They are nevertheless in a position to meet with senior police and army officials to negotiate

the status of their workers. One white, high-ranking soldier regularly stops by the border estates to speak with farmers, with whom he is on good terms. And I even heard widespread talk among workers of a neighbouring farmer who had simply blocked the gate to his land and refused the police entry. Farms make laminated employment cards, decorated with Clipart pictures of fruit trees, and issue them to workers. Police and soldiers generally accept these from workers on the farms themselves, although often not when they are caught off the estates. Ad-hoc agreements between farmers, police and army, while only partially and locally effective, mean that farm employment lends some degree of predictability and safety to everyday lives. The provisional security afforded by proof of connection to the farms is so valuable for diverse livelihood strategies that a market in forged employment cards developed in the Zimbabwean border town of Beitbridge. In the century-old conflict between views of the border area as hub or periphery, border farmers have managed to assert their own position, with the farms constantly shaping border policing, and not merely the other way around.

### ***Conclusion***

Different instances of white-settler enterprise in the Limpopo Valley, occurring at various points over the last century, give some insight into the enduring motivations and problems of such enterprises, each with its own relationships to the South African state's attempts to police the area as a border zone. In each case, it was crucial to establish a sense of the Limpopo Valley as a place in its own right, countering the state's attempt to view the area as little more than a frontier for border police. In each case, this was a struggle over the meaning of territory. Such assertions by border capitalists were struggles over local control of labour recruitment, government and simply everyday life.

Understanding these struggles puts today's border farmers' experiences into perspective. They contend with border policing, to be sure. Sometimes, their undocumented workers are deported, hindering production. However, what in fact exists along the border is a compromise that favours farmers. Through this compromise, the farms' local roles are both recognised and tacitly supported. The farms have become social centres of gravity along South Africa's northern border. Exploring the farms' roles in farm workers' lives is the subject of the remainder of this thesis. To that end, the next chapter focuses on the farm of Grootplaas. It

shows how black workers regard the farm not only as site of employment, but also as a place in which their lives are anchored by homes and relationships.

## *Chapter 4*

### **PRODUCING PERMANENCE: EMPLOYMENT AND DOMESTICITY IN THE BLACK WORKFORCE**



Fields stretching back from the border

#### ***Introduction***

The border farmers achieve an on-going compromise with soldiers and police, in which they are recognised as key figures managing territory and labour on South Africa's northern boundary. Their autonomy as settler-landowners reflects colonial- and apartheid-era norms (see du Toit 1993). As the previous chapter noted, the 'special employment zone' of the 1990s made this association with the past too explicit, and consequently drew opprobrium. Farmer sovereignty was, however, perpetuated through informal, on-the-ground understandings with border authorities and Home Affairs officials. According to such understandings, undocumented workers awaiting permits are often left alone by deportation teams. The arrangements represent one way to resolve the age-old conundrum of



capitalists in the area: how to recruit and control workforces to work and live in a place that was also an aggressively policed borderland.

Whereas the previous chapter described the arrangements secured by white farmers, this chapter turns to ways that black farm workers themselves organise their lives. Recent anthropological studies of farms in the region north of the Soutpansberg (the border itself and Tshipise to the southeast) see the circumstances just described as leaving farm workers intensely vulnerable (Rutherford & Addison 2007; Rutherford 2008, 2010). Farmers' agreements with the authorities leave workers caught between overlapping forms of territorial control, rendering them highly exploitable. Border police deport workers. White farmers, attempting to increase 'efficiency' in an environment of competitive neoliberalism, use their sovereignty over land and workers to secure the cheapest and most docile labour possible. Farmers regularly underpay, or dismiss workers without due process. 'Undocumented migrants are attractive to farmers because they are easily accessible and disposable virtually on demand', claims a recent study of the area, 'and are vulnerable to a wide range of abuse and exploitation' (Rutherford & Addison 2007: 625; see also HRW 2006).

It is certainly true that seasonal recruits on the farms are extremely vulnerable. Until agreements are worked out between farmers, police and the military each year, the compounds are perfect targets for deportation teams, full of Zimbabweans whose permits are delayed by bureaucratic inefficiency. At the beginning of the harvest, many workers regularly sleep in the bush, afraid that they will be apprehended if they live in compound housing. Others are locked inside their accommodation by friends, while padlocks on the outside of their doors make their rooms appear empty. In my experience, farmers are generally inconvenienced by the disappearance of their workers after deportation raids. One reason is that South African working visas must be affixed to worker-specific Zimbabwean Emergency Travel Documents.<sup>110</sup> This means that recruiting replacements brings added paperwork. In any case, deported workers generally return to the farms within a couple of days. Having been dropped at Beitbridge and then crossing back again through the border fence, they return to the farm to demand their jobs and wages. However, farmers also clearly benefit from workers' vulnerability. Seasonal workers' fear of police on the roads keeps them confined to

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<sup>110</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, ETDs are substitutes for Zimbabwean passports, developed to streamline the documentation of Zimbabwean farm workers in South Africa.

the labour compounds. In local horror stories, farmers have even been known to manipulate the boundaries between their own territorial authority and that of the police. After a month of work, during which police stay away, farmers contact the authorities, reporting undocumented Zimbabweans on their farms; they thereby avoid paying for labour. Similar stories are told of farmers on the border between Mozambique and South Africa.

However, there is another side to life on the border farms: one of sociability and permanence. The black working populations along the Zimbabwean-South African border are bound together through kinship, friendship and sexual relationships. Such connections also bind the border farming area as a whole, including the one remaining commercial farm on the Zimbabwean side. Although the border farms lie on an important migration route, they are remote and surrounded by game farms. Day-to-day existence for most generally revolves around the string of labour compounds, between which residents travel by bicycle or on foot. Compound residents along the border are also drawn together by their interest in the latest Zimbabwean news. Every evening, radios across the compounds whine with the siren-sounds of the Zimbabwean government's scramblers, as people tune into opposition radio stations. Visits to town are followed by exchanges of newspapers. Work time conversations debate the latest events. Residents are sharply critical of the Mugabe regime, but discussion, especially among permanent workers, is often focused on political intrigue rather than the horrors of state brutality – a sign of workers' distance from the Zimbabwean setting.

The farms act as local hubs, in an area where the border is porous and the compounds represent unusually large, waged populations. These communities consequently draw in many people from the surrounding region. Payday markets attract South African and cross-border trade. Residents of Musina have relatives and acquaintances on the farms. One senior permanent worker at Grootplaas is a bishop in the United African Apostolic Church, known to members of the town congregation. During the harvest, when farm worker populations are at their peak, local music stars play gigs in improvised arenas with cover charged at the entrance, all organised collaboratively by a Grootplaas permanent worker and a border clearing agent from Musina who has a girlfriend in the compound.

These kinds of interaction rely on the cooperation of border guards. Such cooperation exists not just between farmers and state officials, but also more directly and locally between workers and the soldiers who man the garrisons. The farm area's remoteness and its tight communities localise the supposedly impersonal military presence of the border. The army patrols are far from their regiments during their three-month border stints. Soldiers, housed in groups of around ten in tiny buildings, complain of loneliness and boredom. Some are sharply aware that preventing border-jumping is a futile exercise: the fence is long and permeable, and those caught and deported only try to cross again. Many soldiers go to close-by farm compounds for company and sex. They often wander the Grootplaas compound, looking for women to sleep with in exchange for their tinned rations. Some establish longer-term continuity in their relationships with women. At one point, attempting to win favour with the border population, they even fielded a football team in an inter-farm tournament.

Both the more widely held stereotype, of a vulnerable, fugitive existence, and the second, of farms' localising sociability and permanence, are true. What the view from Grootplaas reveals is a sharp difference in this regard between the lives of established permanent-worker residents – *mapermanent* – and their seasonal counterparts. This chapter adds a level to this study of border farming, by demonstrating the *contrasting* experiences of workers according to their place in a farm workforce. It asks: what distinguishes the lives of *mapermanent* from those of less established black residents of Grootplaas?

At one level, the differences between *mapermanent* and the seasonal workforce signal the effects of casualisation, in which the majority of workers become increasingly insecure, with the effect of serving the 'needs of capital'. The casualisation of farm work in South Africa is one consequence of post-apartheid changes in agriculture, what Rutherford and Addison call a 'fundamental class project associated with the current phase of neo-liberal restructuring' (2007: 626). The effect of these changes has been to draw a strong distinction between small, secure core workforces and floating labour reserves with few rights (Ewert & du Toit 2005).

However, this chapter goes beyond such accounts. Distinctions between *mapermanent* and seasonal workers are not simply the transparent results of 'neoliberalism'. Inspired by classic situational analyses, a focus on micro-dynamics

in a resident workforce reveals how workers themselves create distinctions. Different positions in the workforce become resources that workers use to shape diverse aspects of life on the farm. This is similar to Rutherford's (2001) ethnography of Zimbabwean farm workers, which also analyses workers' dependencies in relation to their work roles. In Rutherford's study, senior workers use their positions to control farm residents' access to credit granted by white farmer-employers. Where his case and mine differ, however, is in the degree of fragmentation in the Grootplaas population. At Grootplaas, *mapermanent* take advantage of their relative security among transient, often vulnerable, migrants. As workers, local notables and established residents, *mapermanent* offer a first layer of insight into how the border farm populations structure a fragmented environment.

The chapter therefore begins with distinctions between *mapermanent* and seasonal workers at work itself, before tracing those differences into life in the labour compound outside work time. This reveals that *mapermanent*'s lives are ultimately distinguished by the kinds of relationships with women and soldiers that they are able to forge because of their privileged positions. A range of forms of inequality are organised around the central place of *mapermanent* at Grootplaas. The examination of unequal relations in the compound, presented in this chapter, paves the way for closer attention to the perspectives of different compound residents in the chapters that follow.

### ***Mapermanent and seasonal recruits: the working context***

Grootplaas employs around 140 black permanent employees, mostly Zimbabwean men, to tend orchards, maintain irrigation and water-pump systems and carry out a range of other tasks throughout the year; women are only permanently employed for domestic work in the farm offices and white houses. The vast majority are in their 20s and 30s, with a few of the senior members of the workforce in their 40s. They work according to irregular, task-based regimes with considerable autonomy, living on farms, in some cases the whole of their working lives. The core of this population are TshiVenda-speakers who grew up in the border area, have a history of work on the farms, enjoy support from dense cross-border networks and cross into Zimbabwe regularly to visit kin. In the farm's earlier days, labour demands were met through the recruitment efforts of

particular black workers from villages across the fence. Many workers – permanent and seasonal – still hail from these villages. Those from further afield – often ChiShona speakers – are more marginal, but their numbers are increasing as recent economic and political troubles north of the border lead larger numbers of people from all over Zimbabwe to seek work in South Africa. Some of these *mapermanent* from further afield in Zimbabwe visit home only very rarely, a result not only of the distance and expense involved in travel, but also their commitment to established lives at Grootplaas itself. For all *mapermanent*, however, the significant investments they make in their lives at Grootplaas, described below, compete with the necessity to send money and goods to kin in Zimbabwe.

In April and June, Grootplaas employs around 450 seasonal workers – women in the packshed, and a mostly male workforce of pickers in the orchards. Given high labour mobility and large-scale Zimbabwean displacement through the area, the farm's workforce is extremely varied in terms of patterns of movement and settlement. Many seasonal workers arrive as strangers on the farm, forming part of a flow of 'unknown people' through the area. Some transient migrants from Zimbabwe never previously expected to have to seek low-status agricultural employment. For them, their time as migrant farm labourers is categorically different from their previous lives, and they experience it as exile during a period of exceptional crisis – hyperinflation and political degeneration – at home. Such crisis affects people of very different ages: although the majority of seasonal workers are in their 20s and 30s, a conspicuous minority are over 40, while others are in their teens. In 2007, many, across the age range, were engaging in farm labour for the first time. This sense of upheaval, itself explored in greater depth in the next chapter, is all the more marked because of ways seasonal workers are sharply distinguished from *mapermanent* in the labour process. Seasonal employees' employment status is manifest in diverse aspects of daily life, all of which make for a very different experience to that of the core workforce. The most visible thing setting *mapermanent* and seasonal workers apart is the nature of their respective work.

Seasonal labour, tightly structured and intensive, comes as something of a shock to the inexperienced. Picking in the orchards is carried out in mostly all-male teams of 30. Supervisors drive the work pace by continual shouting. But overseers, drawn from the ranks of the *mapermanent*, also step back from the picking teams,

joke among themselves or with particular pickers and even consult a newspaper for interesting stories. Picking work is analysed in detail in the next chapter. For now, what is important to note is that, by choosing the extent to which they are engaged in the picking process at any particular moment, *mapermanent* underline their difference from seasonal recruits.



Supervisors watching picking

A similar distinction pertains in the packshed, a single, enormous room with a high, corrugated metal roof which, despite a few windows, leaves it bereft of much natural light. In this space are two separate conveyor systems, each for washing and grading fruit (the conveyors come together for packing). The hall of the packshed appears as a mass of green-and-yellow-painted machinery, staffed by rows of women at their stations. Before it reaches the workers, the fruit is tipped from trailers into large, shallow baths of warm water for an initial wash, drawn onto conveyor belts by mechanical paddles, and rinsed by automated spraying machines. Beyond this point wait the pre-graders, the least experienced of the packshed's women, at benches on either side of the conveyors. The conveyors at this stage are partitioned into three tracks, demarcated by metal barriers, and the fruit runs down the two outer tracks at an average of two or three at a time. Pre-graders roll the oranges or grapefruits up and down under fluorescent strip-lights,

checking them for blemishes or green skins which would make them unsalable. Blemished fruit is placed in the middle part of the conveyer, between a pre-grader's station and that of her opposite number. From here it is diverted to a huge cage outside the packshed for sale to local juice makers. Green fruit is thrown down a chute located next to each pre-grader, from where it is conveyed to the ripening room and treated with chemicals. Fruit that passes the pre-graders' judgement is coated with preservative chemicals and a thin layer of wax by machine, before passing to other graders who follow a very similar process to the one just described, this time deciding whether each item is Grade A or B depending on the extent of external blemishes. The fruit then moves on to packing, where each packer has a station continually supplied with fruit and cardboard boxes – the boxes are hooked onto a moving chain overhead by other workers in a separate section. Packing is according to size, and Grade A citrus is first run through an optical machine, which photographs each item to calculate its precise volume.

At all these stages of the packshed process, work is monotonous and regular in comparison to picking in the orchards. Paid by the hour, its pace is set by the conveyors and other machines. The machines themselves are so loud that conversing while working is difficult. One grader highlighted falling asleep as the primary challenge to endurance in grading work, in contrast to the physical exhaustion of picking. But while picking is bounded by a fairly well-defined working day, packshed hours often extend past ten o'clock in the evening to process backlogs of trailers – all work begins around seven o'clock in the morning. The graders, at least, have the advantage of being able to sit down; packers have to stand.



Grootplaas packshed, showing gantries and personnel manager's office

In the packshed, as in the orchards, most of the permanently employed minority carry out supervisory or administrative roles. Above the machinery is a system of gantries from where it is possible to observe all work with a considerable degree of precision. At the central point of the gantry system is the black personnel manager's office, where he and other permanent employees do administrative work. The black packshed manager wanders the gantries, keeping an eye on the work process and the machines, while the grading foreman and forewomen<sup>111</sup> monitor the quality of work at closer range, often coming off the walkways to patrol along the grading rows. The farmer himself regularly wanders around the gantries, flouting his own packshed rules by smoking a cigarette. Below, the women on the conveyors wear *doeks* (headscarves) and aprons, both fulfilling hygiene requirements and conforming to a style worn generally by black women working for white employers in southern Africa. Distinctions of dress and positioning within the packshed are further reflected in the often sharp separation

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<sup>111</sup> These lower-level packshed supervisors – the foreman and forewomen – were not *mapermanent* in 2007, although the foreman was later recruited into the core workforce. Forewomen have well-established connections to Grootplaas and come year after year. One, for example, is the sister of the farm's senior driver. These women are therefore not among those discussed below who experience extreme alienation and vulnerability during their contracts.



between seasonal and permanent workers when they sit outside to eat their packed lunches.

Seasonal workers labour in closely observed and regulated environments, pushed by piece rates or conveyors to process sufficient quantities of fruit to make buying-agent deadlines. *Mapermanent*, as we have seen, are less bound by these work regimes. As supervisors, they are able to dip in and out of the work processes – picking supervisors, especially, are always ready for a chat or a walk. Watchers rather than watched, they are able to maintain the unregulated work rhythms that pertain outside the harvest.

The work of *mapermanent* for much of the year comprises diverse tasks, carried out in small groups according to variable rhythms. This is because the permanent workforce represents a continually available source of adaptable labour, on call at any time. Grootplaas manages with a relatively small permanent workforce by keeping workers flexible. A builder might be taken on because construction work needs doing, with a view to employing the recruit as a farm labourer more generally. Most workers therefore sign contracts simply as ‘general workers’. This workforce is divided into teams: Citrus (trees maintenance), Irrigation (pipes etc.) and the rather generic catch-all ‘Lands’ (from which harvest-time picking-gang supervisors are drawn). But workers can be moved around to suit labour demands, and a worker’s level of responsibility is usually more important than his job description. Work days vary greatly in length, and from worker to worker. The flip side to this is that employees may be called to work at all hours: to remove a log stuck in one of the pumps in the Limpopo River late at night; to help fix a farmer’s pick-up truck broken down in the game farm during recreational hunting; or to switch on an irrigation tap between beers on a Sunday afternoon.

It is not the contrast between harvest and non-harvest time that dictates the difference between this varied irregularity of permanent work and the relentless effort of seasonal work. Rather, such contrasts are a feature of employment category. As we have seen, many permanent employees occupy supervisory roles that allow or dictate variation in individual pace. Others from the core workforce – involved in irrigation, orchard maintenance, security or, for the few permanently employed women, domestic work – remain largely unaffected by the harvest in their daily duties. Agricultural work regimes display similar contrasts to those

found in industrial settings (see Parry 1999). Core employees labour according to a variable 'task orientation' (Thompson 1967), in which spikes in work are matched by long periods of rest. Seasonal labour, tightly coordinated at Grootplaas to process a huge volume of fruit within the tariff window of trade to Europe,<sup>112</sup> contrasts sharply with the task orientation and personal autonomy of core employees.

Seasonal workers, then, engage in tightly controlled, intensive, industrial-style labour. Appreciating the *wider* meaning of this contrast requires looking beyond work itself. As in Mollona's (2005) case of a Sheffield steel workshop, contrasting types of work create a deep sense of difference among workers as particular kinds of people. This sense of difference naturalises labour hierarchies and job categories, blurring the lines between employment and life outside working hours. Roles in the labour process are only the beginning of the differences between modes of living at Grootplaas. 'Permanent' has up until now referred to an employment category characterised by open-ended contracts but, because employment comes with housing, it is also shorthand for open-ended residence at the farm more generally. This is all the more true because of extremely low labour turnover among core employees: during the period of fieldwork, only three *mapermanent* left employment, and only two by choice (the third had been caught poaching). Permanence is further a matter of workers' ability to establish a sense of rootedness through domestic congeniality, something that *mapermanent*'s work positions enable them to achieve. What is at stake here is how workers' roles in production – agricultural employment – affect their reproduction – maintaining the conditions for life in the compound. Turning to Grootplaas' labour compound reveals the broader meanings of workers' categorisation on the border farms.

### ***Living in no-man's land? Transience and rootedness in the compound***

When farmers speak of 'the compound', they have in mind a single, uniform entity, characterised by reference to the race and/or culture of those who dwell in it. Spatial control according to colour has long been a characteristic feature of southern African landscapes. Black living areas in towns and on mines and farms were commonly built to control resident populations and were characterised by

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<sup>112</sup> During the northern hemisphere's summer months – citrus are winter fruits.

regularity, austerity and residents' lack of any permanent rights of residence (see Gordon 1977; McNamara 1978, 1985; Moodie 1994; Ginsberg 1996; Lee 2005). On farms, compounds are widely understood to be the proper place for black sociality, historically also known as kraals or farm villages. Sometimes such areas were and are collections of worker-built mud-and-pole accommodation – sites of far less thoroughgoing control and surveillance than mine compounds or townships. But on large farms like Grootplaas, owners have built brick housing with corrugated metal roofs and metal doors. Ironically, this is both the best farm-worker housing around and the accommodation that most clearly replicates the distinctive township and mine-compound layout, with its connotations of racial separation and utilitarian drabness. By contrast with the lush, private worlds of white farmhouses (see Chapter 2), Grootplaas' compound appears a bleak, regimented place. Employer control is implicit in the layout, where long rows of identical brick cells can be easily surveyed and scanned by farmers, foremen or police. The majority of Grootplaas accommodation takes the form of single rooms arranged in blocks of six, each with its own external door and a small window. Public showers – segregated by sex – are in urine-stained, roofless rooms, in which nozzles in long pipes along one wall release cold water from the farm's boreholes. Pit-latrines are in doorless concrete cubicles in roofed but unlit buildings, making night-time visits challenging at best. For the most senior workers, by age and place in the work hierarchy, these conditions are somewhat improved by two-roomed semi-detached houses, with outhouses containing private showers and flush toilets.



The Grootplaas labour compound

This depiction, with its emphasis on austerity, corresponds to the view taken by many seasonal workers who arrive at Grootplaas. New arrivals see primitive, uncomfortable, prison-like, alienating cells. However, belying the compound's apparent uniformity, *mapermanent* see it very differently: as a place of everyday domicile in which their lives are rooted. In a manner similar to apartheid-era South African township-dwellers (see Ginsberg 1996; Lee 2005), *mapermanent* assert a sense of belonging by adapting their housing, planting gardens and reproducing familiar forms of domesticity. Established residents transform accommodation in ways that bind their personal histories into the fabric of the place. There are differences in the extent to which people are able – or indeed want – to establish sustainable lives in the compound. Exploring this variation offers a window into how different patterns of settlement and movement intersect at Grootplaas.

#### *The compound from a seasonal point of view*

Seasonal workers' difference from *mapermanent* is made clear from the moment of their arrival in the compound. They are allocated bare rooms in a thirty-block grid known as the New Houses or a long barrack-building called the Hostel, their room-mates often chosen by an appointed permanent worker from the *mapermanent*-

organised Housing Committee. Cells are overcrowded – the five Hostel rooms hold twenty to thirty people each. They will have been uninhabited for the six months since the previous harvest and are sometimes rat-infested. Writing in chalk or charcoal on the walls and floors bears the cryptic history of previous occupants.

Both the New Houses and the Hostel are in a distinct area of the compound, a bare slope illuminated by a huge floodlight. This illumination, lack of vegetation and the New Houses' unobstructed grid layout means one can see straight from one end to the other down the rows of blocks. Although a few permanent workers have rooms here, at the end closest to the rest of the compound, much of the New Houses section is uninhabited outside the harvest. Women who do not have full-time jobs can consequently retain rooms in this area during the period before or after harvest, when they work for the farm. They make a living as illegal beersellers, operating *shebeens*. During the harvest, the New Houses are transformed from a relatively quiet area into a bustle of people, cooking fires and, at the weekend, loud parties.



The New Houses

Residential separation is far from complete. Those *mapermanent* residents of the other areas who want to drink, party and find women, for example, frequent the New Houses. Because the *shebeens*, and most televisions recognised as being

for public use, are in the New Houses, the area itself has the air of a free-for-all, in which loud music, gambling and publicly drunken behaviour are common. The rest of the compound, however, remains tranquilly unaffected. The New Houses and the Hostel are seen by many who live in the other parts of the compound as loud, dirty, and a site of immorality. Unsurprisingly, some men who speak of the New Houses in this manner nevertheless go there for recreation. Such visits, however, contain an element of choice, in that they can escape back to the relative tranquillity of their own residence. Their own areas of the compound, permanently occupied, are better kept and have been adapted into homes, taking the edge off the architectural uniformity of the buildings.

Despite such moments of mixing, the fact that seasonal workers reside in a distinct area of the compound itself reinforces their difference from *mapermanent*. It means that they have little reason to spend much time in the other areas unless they know residents sufficiently well to visit them at their houses. The spatial organisation of the compound reflects a wider experience shared across much of the seasonal workforce – limited integration in social networks dominated by permanent residents. The New Houses area itself is easy terrain for border patrols to run down so-called ‘illegals’: it is packed with the seasonally employed, almost all of whom cook outdoors on fires, and it is an open, unobscured stretch with a regimented, easily navigable grid of uniform blocks.



Seasonal workers sit around a fire in the New Houses

There are, it must be said, differences among seasonal recruits' experiences of the compound. Arrivals with urban backgrounds, whose descent into farm employment because of hyperinflation and economic contraction at home is experienced as a form of degradation, see the compound as dirty, noisy and alienating. Those with contrasting backgrounds see particular advantages: those from rural backgrounds appreciate electricity in the rooms and easily accessible boreholes for water; some of the young find opportunities, in the noise and overcrowding, for parties and sexual adventure. A crucial fault line in experiences of the compound is between established residents and new arrivals. This does not map exactly onto employment categories, however. Some (especially female) seasonal workers are the partners or relatives of permanent employees and inhabit the compound – including the New Houses – during non-harvest periods in a variety of domestic arrangements. They are well known at Grootplaas, receive legal documentation most quickly because of their connections and have access to better housing. Contrasting experiences of permanence and seasonality and their spatial connotations, therefore, are not simply reflections of the labour hierarchy. This point is explored in the next chapter. Here, it is relevant to note that such opposed and contrasting ways of living at Grootplaas are shaped by the complex web of relationships in the workforce.

Despite the different social positions of seasonal workers, what the majority share is adverse living conditions. Unlike better-established residents, the way seasonal arrivals are housed leaves them with little ability to shape their environments. This is as much a product of their precarious positions and transience in the area as it is a product of the compound's architecture. At the beginning of the harvest, seasonal employees, concerned to evade deportation, often avoid their rooms altogether. Some sleep in the bush; others have friends lock them in their rooms from the outside to avoid detection.<sup>113</sup> And throughout the harvest, most seasonal workers, having arrived recently and with no investment in compound life, have few comforts in their rooms. Their short time at the farm and their insecurity discourage any significant attempts to adapt accommodation to create congenial living arrangements. Most pickers' rooms are bare, with cardboard on the floor to sleep on, some food, perhaps one or two spare clothes and a piece of wire rigged up as a clothes line between two walls. More extreme are living conditions in the newest housing, the Hostel. Residents – men in most such rooms – sleep twenty or thirty to a room, and complain of lice and sick people coughing in confined conditions. With little space inside, and no electric lighting, residents choose to sit outside around fires when they are not sleeping. Soldiers regularly move through the groups with torches, checking their farm IDs. This cramped block, a clear target for border patrols, epitomises seasonal workers' experience as distinct from permanent residents. It is also the most strongly reminiscent of the infamous mine labour compounds of South Africa's past.



**Left:** Inside a New Houses room; **Right:** the Hostel

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<sup>113</sup> See above, p.108



The way seasonal workers live in the compound is especially central to their experience of Grootplaas because their day-to-day existence is largely confined to this distinct area and to the workplace. Otherwise, they are hemmed in by vulnerability born of their undocumented status. The farm's border location leads to it being treated by the South African army and police as part of the 'border situation', as we saw in the previous chapter. Similarly restrictive is the fact that many seasonal workers never receive work permits due to bureaucratic inefficiency in the South African Department of Home Affairs and the Zimbabwean border authorities. Harvest-time attracts enormous police attention: the border farms suddenly house large numbers of undocumented Zimbabweans, who become easy targets for deportation. Although Zimbabweans without work permits run the risk of being deported at any time during the year, in practice the aggressive police raids begin only with the harvest. Police vehicles, often with army escort, move through the compound at unpredictable times, rounding people up. The afternoon after a weekend police raid, the compound would be deserted except for a few permanent employees drinking beer, its inhabitants hiding in the bush. Farmers negotiate with the police and army. They secure agreements that identity cards produced by the farms will serve as proof of the holder's pending 'legalisation'. But it is some time before such ad-hoc deals become known by, and take effect among, police on the ground. Further, the farm identity cards are not assumed to offer protection off their respective farms. Although police attention tails off during the harvest, the undocumented remain vulnerable.

Because of their vulnerable legal status, it is difficult for undocumented seasonal employees to move around the border area. Walking to work in the morning along the border road, they risk being picked up by army patrols until they have some recognised form of documentation. And walking home from overtime work at the packshed in the thick darkness, workers avoid using torches in case it attracts soldiers. Particular work locations, such as the packshed, are areas safe from the threat of deportation. But the police enter even the orchards – usually to demand oranges – and their arrival sends pickers sprinting through the trees. Always on the look-out for police raids, seasonal workers tend to confine their movements to shuttling between work and compound. While the deportation of workers is inconvenient for farmers, one result is an unassertive labour force whose everyday movement is sharply delimited, as mentioned earlier.

Transient vulnerability and austere accommodation, each reinforcing the other, emphasise seasonal workers' positions as short-term units of labour. It is in contrast to this experience of seasonality – where workers remain vulnerable, easily controlled and confined to designated spaces (work and compound) – that the lives of *mapermanent* need to be understood.

#### *Adaptation and rootedness among mapermanent*

*Mapermanent* see Grootplaas as their home for their working lives. It is not that any of them intends to die and be buried at the farm. Retirement means returning to rural homes in Zimbabwe that have been gradually developed over the years, in the classic mould of regional labour migrants. However, they invest – socially and materially – in their lives at Grootplaas. Some have not been back to Zimbabwe for years.<sup>114</sup>

*Mapermanent's* sense of rootedness both reflects and is augmented by the fact that many have long personal histories of residence at Grootplaas and nearby farms. Indeed, the longest-standing residents have been living on the border farms since the days when other whites owned the land, before their bankruptcy. They can trace the boundaries between the old estates, before they were consolidated by the current farmers. One such long-standing farm dweller is Marula, the foreman, who was born on an estate down the road where his father was a foreman. His many children were born and grew up at Grootplaas or on neighbouring farms. Although they now live in a variety of places – including Johannesburg, Musina, and the former Venda homeland to the southeast – they visit regularly. Marula's teenage daughter, who resides with her grandmother in Musina while she attends high school, spends most weekends with her father. For some of Marula's children, the border farms remain their places of domicile. Marula's youngest son, a toddler, lives with him and his wife. A boy of six years, born to a different mother, stays at her home on a nearby estate, but spends a lot of time in the Grootplaas compound. An adult son, Mpho, is a permanent worker at Grootplaas.

Such personal histories at the farm mean that *mapermanent* experience a far greater sense of local attachment than might be assumed from a narrow focus

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<sup>114</sup> Regarding migrants elsewhere in the region who, despite rarely visiting rural homes, nevertheless preserve an ideal of rural connection and retirement, see Bank (1999) on men in East London hostels.

on their employment. Like other long-standing farm-dwellers, Marula remembers the construction of current dwellings, and the existence of previous compounds, now disappeared. He can pinpoint the site of his now-adult daughter Takalani's birth. At that time, in the 1980s, the site was compound housing; now, it is a patch of non-descript scrub on the edge of the Grootplaas football pitch. Another old resident – a long-standing friend of Marula's – recalls how, in the past, people would live in one compound, as a base, and work on different farms up and down the border, sometimes for food rather than cash wages.

The memories of permanent black residents are shared and maintained through naming practices. Among themselves, permanent workers have their own names for both their employers and the estates, each name encoding a history. Willem, one of Grootplaas' farmers, is known as Mpothe – meaning 'hit'. What is the significance of the nickname? One version of the meaning cites his history of violence towards workers, another his short temper with nosey police during the days of apartheid. Either way, his temperament is noted. The farmer who previously owned the Grootplaas land, Gert van Wyk, was known as Re a tseba, Northern Sotho for 'We know' – he would often underline his command of the language by announcing this phrase to workers. Compounds and areas of farms are known by the names of present or past owners: 'Paul Compound', 'Shala [Charles] Compound', and 'KK'. Grootplaas is still known as KhaRudi, after the son who left to operate the family's Kleinplaas venture but remains workers' favourite farmer. Other farmers and areas are known by names whose meaning has been lost, but which frame places and people in a parallel language to that of white landowners.<sup>115</sup> *Mapermanent* assert rootedness on the farms through their own local historical consciousness, their equivalent to the similarly motivated historical narratives of the white farmers (discussed in Chapter 2).

*Mapermanent* assert a sense of belonging that goes beyond their employment. They do so not only through their shared histories – both told explicitly and encoded in names – but also by adapting their accommodation in the compound, mirroring the homes to which they aspire in rural Zimbabwe. Established residents of the compound adapt their housing, accumulate furniture and other goods and plant gardens, investing in their lives on the border. They do so despite the fact that they live on an employer's land, and will have to leave if

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<sup>115</sup> See van Onselen 1976 for similar practices in early twentieth-century Southern Rhodesia.

they resign their jobs or if they are sacked. Such adaptation of and investment in precarious accommodation parallels accounts of other black-defined spaces in southern Africa. Residents of mine compounds built furniture to improve their bleak accommodation (Gordon 1977), while inheritors of so-called 'matchbox' housing in 1960s township areas like Soweto added flooring and ceilings, plastered walls and planted gardens (Ginsberg 1996; see also Lee 2005). In both cases, they did this in spite of the fact that they lacked any security of tenure and could be ejected at a moment's notice. Indeed, in Soweto, they did so precisely to assert a more enduring right to stay: an expression of rootedness both to other people and themselves. As at Grootplaas, continued residence depended on employment, itself at the discretion of white bosses. But at the farm, as in these other cases, adapting housing is an important way to achieve dignity, respectability and a domestic life beyond such precariousness. Indeed, it claims a wider engagement with the place than simply as a place of employment.

Where the housing of *mapermanent* appears uniform and barrack-like, then, these residents are in a position to adapt and personalise it. They are provided with a room (or two-room house for the most senior workers), in less bleak, windswept surroundings than the New Houses, but without furniture. But over time they build a bed inside, often from wooden forklift truck pallets topped with a sponge mattress. They obtain or build shelving and often decorate it with lace, to store and display crockery and other effects. Such displays of accumulated goods mirror demonstrations of established domesticity in houses in rural Zimbabwe. Practically all permanent residents have electric stoves in their rooms. Stoves make cooking straightforward and relatively quick. Seasonal workers, in contrast, have no option but to gather wood and light fires outside in order to do their cooking. Fridges are not uncommon and a minority of residents buy very large freezers to store beer and meat which they later resell. The number of aerials towering above the brick blocks testifies to the wide ownership of televisions. Indeed, electrical goods are far easier to operate in the compound than they would be in rural Zimbabwe, where many areas lack connection to power grids and appliances require car batteries.

Some adaptations demonstrate both domestic propriety and success. Most residents rig up a wire between two walls, and hang a piece of cloth next to their beds. This way, with their doors open, or a visitor inside, the bed area may remain

out of sight. Screening off the bed allows residents to display their decorated shelves adorned with possessions, while distinguishing between degrees of privacy. Doing so follows the layout of homes in Zimbabwe, where houses are often built with multiple rooms, one a living room replete with decoration and display. In the compound, both decoration and bed-screening are important because much of the day is generally spent outdoors. People sit outside their houses, whose metal roofs make for stifling heat when it is sunny, and leave their doors open most of the time.

In their endeavours to adapt their housing, residents rely on one another. When Michael, personnel manager, wanted a concrete step outside his house, to keep the rain away from his door, he enlisted the help of the farm's builders, who used spare cement from the new Hostel accommodation. Others receive help from Benjamin, the farm storeman. Responsible for looking after work tools and distributing them to other labourers, Benjamin passes the time at work by building furniture for himself and his friends. On days when the white workshop manager is absent, he 'makes mischief', taking scrap metal from the heap next to the workshop. Often, this means connecting metal poles, end to end, creating the tall television aerials that are ubiquitous in the compound (see photograph below). Some projects, however, are more elaborate. A three-legged metal stool took several shifts to complete. Beautifully crafted, it was an object of personal pride for Benjamin, and a gift for his neighbour. Some adaptations of accommodation, therefore, deepen a sense of rootedness in the compound because they attest to the dense web of relationships among *mapermanent*.



Television aerials in the compound

Similar improvements are evident in the space outside the house. Some residents build yards with brick and/or mud walls or plant hedges. Or they build *stoeps* (verandas) to demarcate the ground outside their doors, using concrete or bricks left over from the farm's building projects.<sup>116</sup> A few have even planted trees. Most permanent male residents have vegetable gardens, either by their houses in the case of senior workers, or on the edges of the compound for most others. Not only do these gardens provide a source of relish for *sadza* or *vhuswa* (maize-meal porridge); they underline the permanence of these residents in the farm's landscape. Just as everyone knows which room belongs to a particular resident, so what appear to be large swathes of vegetable patch are in fact several well-marked gardens whose ownership is widely known. Such assertions of belonging among *mapermanent* rely on the fact that people know a great deal about one another and their business: not only where a particular permanent resident lives, but also his or her occupation at the farm and a web of stories and rumours.



*Mapermanent* in a yard constructed outside a room

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<sup>116</sup> A few residents invest yet further in their compound accommodation. Marula, the foreman, as the longest serving and most established black worker, has built an entire compound of his own. His home is in the centre of the larger compound, and he holds court there, with other senior men, to judge disagreements between residents. His specific case is discussed in Chapter 6.

The permanently employed make homes out of their accommodation, adapting it and shaping their apparently rigid environment. Unlike many seasonal recruits, long-term residence makes their relationship with the farm one which involves a great deal more than mere labour. Transient seasonal workers do not do this. They are not around for long enough, live too precariously – even avoiding their rooms altogether at times to avoid deportation – and many have no wish to become better established. Instead, they are eager to move on and away from this inhospitable setting. These mobile, short-term workers would appear, from one point of view, to be ideal as dispensable units of labour, their contracts clearly limited, their movements regulated and their relationship to the farm tenuous.

However, this contrast is too simple, because it assumes that *mapermanent* establish themselves at Grootplaas in isolation from the more transient population around them. In fact, *mapermanent* draw transient people working on different rhythms of settlement and movement into their own projects of rootedness. They do this in two ways. They initiate relationships with mobile women in projects of domesticity. And they maintain the border farming area as a dense community that includes the soldiers, even though the latter are apparently there to enforce the border in a strictly impersonal manner. In the next section, I describe each in turn.



Vegetable gardens

### ***Rooting relationships***

*Mapermanent*, as secure, waged workers just across the border from Zimbabwe, represent stability to those passing through: seasonal recruits, other migrants and soldiers doing their time on the border. The ways they draw transient people into their own lives is usefully conceptualised as 'place-making', in Feuchtwang's definition of 'the centring and marking of a place by the actions and constructions of people tracing salient parts of their daily lives as a homing point in their trajectories' (2004: 10). Feuchtwang emphasises the *gathering* quality of place: the orientation of different locations and movements around a focal point. *Mapermanent* draw people into their lives for their own reasons, but this also 'gathers' various residents of the border area into communities, however provisional, centred around the compounds. This perspective takes us beyond the way Grootplaas residents engage with compound accommodation itself, to consider how the farm represents an important spatial centre of gravity, with *mapermanent* at its heart.

### ***Shifting domesticity***

Unlike seasonal recruits, *mapermanent* have their own housing, work permits and stable incomes. Apart from the immediate benefits, they are also consequently able to attract women as live-in partners. Women come to the farm to seek employment, either in the seasonal workforce or caring for the children of *mapermanent*. From the perspective of women, especially young women, influential men on the farms appear to have clear prospects in what might otherwise be a desperate situation. At the same time, from male *mapermanent*'s perspective, it is through relationships with women who are moving through the area that they are able to replicate homely domestic arrangements. Permanence, in the sense of rootedness, is asserted and experienced as congenial domesticity. Long-term male workers therefore establish lives in ways that cohere with their gendered expectations, through attracting the labour of a floating population of young women. In some cases they establish farm-based 'marriages'. The tension, between women's concerns about their material insecurity and men's concerns to create an agreeable home environment, reflects the enormous inequality between them, in terms of access to income and accommodation.



The case of Michael, personnel manager, is instructive. When I arrived at Grootplaas at the end of 2006, my overwhelming impression, contradicting what I had expected in a border setting, was one of stability. Michael had offered me residence in his house in the compound and I soon found myself to be a member of what looked a lot like stable household unit. All members were Zimbabwean, but they seemed to have made a home out of the barrack-like compound accommodation on this South African farm. Michael lived in the main house with his partner, Purity. Three young women lived in a mud-and-brick room in Michael's yard, in return for cooking and cleaning. Michael and Purity expected to bring their young daughter, Lindsay, to the farm after Christmas. One of the young women had a baby. There were always people around the house, cleaning, resting in the yard, watching television or preparing three daily meals.

It soon became clear that I had arrived in a household, and one situated in an established community in which there were ties of a more or less permanent kind between neighbours. But my initial impression of stable domestic life was somewhat mistaken, at least in the rather static form which I had imagined. When Michael returned after Christmas 2006, he came without Purity, who stayed to look after their sick child in Zimbabwe and whom he would soon abandon in favour of a new, pregnant partner, Holly, whom he had met at the farm. The three young women did not reestablish themselves at Michael's after their Christmas visit home to Zimbabwe. One, Wonder, returned to the compound for a while but stayed with Michael's neighbour, Gregory; she rarely came to Michael's yard. Suddenly Michael and I were living alone, eating far fewer cooked meals and more dry, white bread with soft drinks. For Michael, as for many permanent workers, 'household'-like structures depend on domestic arrangements that involve mobile women. Arrangements were as fleeting and impermanent as the presence of these women themselves, something I found extremely alienating after the apparent conviviality of compound life.

Michael soon responded to the change, complaining that, with a long work day, he did not have time to cook. At his suggestion, we employed a young woman to work, as he had done the previous year. She cooked, cleaned his house and my room, and washed clothes, in return for meals, shelter and pay. She soon moved on. Later, during the harvest, Michael's sister Pula and niece Lovely came to work. Pula needed an income to bring up her young son. She had cattle, but hyperinflation had

meant that there was little point selling them. Lovely had passed four O-levels,<sup>117</sup> and hoped to 'expand' – to take more subjects. The money from farm work was intended to pay for home-based education. This was because Zimbabwe's school system was disintegrating, as teachers' salaries became worthless and parents were unable to pay school fees. Michael ensured that they were employed at the farm. They meanwhile fulfilled all domestic duties during the hours after work, this time without pay. And they continued to do so even when they acquired their own room, until they left the farm after the harvest. By then Holly had given birth, was back on her feet and was keeping Michael's house again.

It is important to note that not all domestic arrangements at Grootplaas are as transient as those just described. Indeed, for Michael, Holly represented the beginning of a more steady way of life. Many *mapermanent*, some married at home, have relationships at the farm. And some of these develop into permanent farm-based arrangements which endure sufficiently for couples to have children. Such farm relationships are not taken home to Zimbabwe. At Christmas, for example, partners may go back to separate marriages and families for a few days. Nevertheless, such partnerships render Grootplaas an important place – it is the only context in which they have permanence. Indeed, an informant warned me when I was conducting an interview that asking about marital status was sensitive for precisely this reason. What I appeared in fact to be probing, she told me, was whether the respondent was *really* married. Whether, in other words, the marriage was ratified and not 'merely' something that was confined to the farm area.

Such 'farm marriages' are far from simply domestic 'arrangements'. At their most stable, they are the basis of families, once again giving greater meaning to 'permanence' at the farm than simply steady employment. The relationship between Norman, the farm's senior driver, and Joyce, another permanent employee, is an example. Norman's wife at home is Sarah, who visits a few times a year. At the same time, he has a well-established, openly declared relationship with Joyce. Together they have a son of about five years old, Sam. Although Norman keeps his own house, and it is here that Sarah stays when she visits, *he* usually stays at Joyce's. The couple have cultivated a comfortable homeliness, and have adapted her room with a sun-shelter outside the door and an old seat from a bus so that Norman and his friends can watch the football on television there. Norman

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<sup>117</sup> Basic level high school exams. The stage before A-level.

and Joyce represent, for their friends among the *mapermanent*, a point of domestic stability around which they can congregate in their leisure time.

Cases like that of Norman and Joyce resemble what became a common practice in Zimbabwean townships and on farms, known in ChiShona as *mapoto* (see Barnes 1999). *Mapoto* – literally ‘pots’ – describes domestic arrangements without formal marriage (i.e. ratified through *roora* [bridewealth], church wedding or state registry). In *mapoto*, women move in with men and receive everyday support from them – food and shelter especially – in return for domestic labour (‘pots’) and sex. Such arrangements developed as a response to situations where men had almost exclusive access to housing, but often lived at a distance from their wives. Women in the arrangements bore the brunt of moral condemnation, having disrupted both patrilineage reproduction – as men and their families had no claim to the children – and notions of respectable propriety. At Grootplaas, as in Zimbabwean townships and farm compounds, male access to housing and their stable wages shape women’s options. But unlike in those settings, the more settled of these relationships are not condemned, but rather seen as permanent within the farm context. There are so few actual marriages at Grootplaas, in which both partners are present, that the better-established farm relationships are seen as positively respectable. In such cases, women stay at the farm all year round.

However, such sedentary domesticity is the experience of a minority of compound residents, often the most senior of the *mapermanent*. In fact, there is a constantly shifting population of mobile women, more or less attached to settled residents. Permanent workers’ wives sometimes come to visit, and while they stay at the farm they look after their husbands and their houses. Other women pass through the compound, either heading south or crossing the border to earn a bit of money at the border farms before going back home. This needs to be understood in its particular local context. The area across the border in Zimbabwe is particularly marginal and under-resourced, a small, TshiVenda-speaking minority with little access to employment (Mate 2005). The area is further prone to drought, and the only real alternatives for wage-work are the sugar plantations of Hippo Valley, Triangle and Mukwasini to their north, in southern Zimbabwe (Lincoln & Maririke 2000: 43-4). With few options, but connections to the South African border farms, many women come for agricultural employment but then follow other opportunities for livelihoods.

This perspective was impressed upon me by Margaret, whom I knew as Granny. Margaret, described in greater detail in the next chapter, was the wife of a security guard at Grootplaas, before she and her husband moved to Johannesburg in 2007. She was 47 at the time, had A-levels and qualifications in teaching and social work, and had worked as a teacher before coming to the farm. At Grootplaas, she had gathered information for a non-profit organisation<sup>118</sup> about the lives of women, and she was keen that I hear of their situations. During the harvest, she accompanied me in conversations with young women, to whom I would have had little access had I not been with her. In the compound, we spoke to teenage girls as they babysat workers' children during the daytime. In the orchards, we spoke to female pickers, a small minority of the picking workforce, who were grouped into separate teams from men. What became clear was how limited many women's options were, as they sought a means of sustenance.

Some young women come to the farm from close by across the border to look after children during the harvest. Female seasonal workers pay girls, sometimes as young as their early teens, to look after their children during the day for a pittance (as little as R150<sup>119</sup> per month). Such girls may live with a relative, who decides how much they should have for themselves and how much they should remit. They may be the only source of cash for their parents. Other young women seek formal work but find only shelter with a permanent worker in return for cooking and cleaning. Although some women have connections to friends or relatives on the farms, regular sojourns at the farms should not necessarily be taken as a sign of attachment. Women are extremely vulnerable and often find themselves without redress in cases of physical and sexual violence. Among themselves, men speak of persuading them 'by force' to engage in sexual intercourse. Ulicki and Crush report, of women migrating from Lesotho to South African farms, that 'fear and loathing are everywhere, bitterness prevails' (2000: 76). Women in this case, as on the Zimbabwean-South African border, return more because of preference for the known over the unknown than out of any enduring rootedness. While migrating southwards into South Africa is always a possibility, it is a radical step into a world of which they have little knowledge, in comparison to stints on the border farms a few kilometres from home.

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<sup>118</sup> At which her cousin worked. See next chapter.

<sup>119</sup> Approximately £10 at the time of fieldwork.

In such precarious circumstances, it is common for women, unemployed or employed, to establish domestic relationships with resident men. Doing so can, among other things, ensure a period of material security and even connections to influential figures like Marula, the foreman. Though often motivated by real affection, and occasionally leading to enduring unions, these relationships are shaped by their wider context of need, exchange and distribution. As in other places built around resident male workforces, women's lack of secure access to income necessitates a degree of 'economic realism', an awareness that there is a transactional dimension to relationships (Vaughan 2010: 22). Relationships involve material support and shelter for women in return for domestic labour and sexual access. For women, one danger is becoming pregnant. Often men do not take responsibility for their children. A child represents another mouth to feed, tying women into even greater dependence on future farm employment and further supportive relationships with wage-earning men.

Unattached young women seeking relationships with men face not only these dangers, but also the condemnation of other women. Regarded as threatening respectability and existing relationships, they are sometimes likened to prostitutes. It is notable, for example, that while Sarah is unhappy about Joyce, she reserves her scathing public comments for *younger* women who come to 'stir up trouble', when she chats with women of her own generation. On one occasion at the end of the harvest, she and others complained that these younger women were waiting for seasonally employed wives to leave for home in Zimbabwe, so that they could work on their husbands. Some men are indeed on the look-out. Michael, for example, during a period without women in the household, turned to finding other possibilities. One morning I turned up at the house to find a young woman cleaning and making breakfast. I had never met her before. Permanent employment – its stability and power in the farm setting – enables particular ways of living at the farm. In this case, Michael had reportedly promised the woman a seasonal job in the packshed.

Women's limited options and precarious lives on the border offer male *mapermanent* opportunities to live rooted lives characterised by congenial domesticity in the compound. Women are central to establishing and maintaining such domesticity. By the time the sun warms the air around 7am, unwaged female residents are sweeping dust out of their rooms. Many have either already prepared

packed lunches for waged men, or will begin cooking for the midday meal in the late morning. And between these meals there are further tasks: hand-washing and hanging clothes, and washing dishes and pots. Afternoons offer a period of leisure, but by around four o'clock women begin disappearing to shower and then cook dinner in time for the end of the farm-working day at five. All of this follows highly gendered notions of appropriate work that extend all the way into the farm's waged economy. The only women permanently employed at Grootplaas are domestic workers in white residents' houses. There are a further twenty or so women who remain on the farm throughout the year, only working full-time during the harvest but paid by the farmer for part-time casual work throughout the year. One regular task in such waged employment is cleaning up the compound, picking up rubbish and sweeping the ground. Even waged employment on the farm, therefore, reflects assumptions about the femininity of domestic labour.

Understanding the different ways of living in the compound requires appreciating how men's place is made in part through female domestic work. Permanently employed men are better able to secure access to women, for sex and domestic arrangements, than transient seasonal workers grouped into cramped shared rooms. It is through relationships with women – many of whom are highly mobile – that permanently settled men are able to achieve living conditions that approximate those of home, in which women clean houses and clothes, and prepare food. Workforce cohesion and embeddedness on southern African farms have historically relied on domestic arrangements within the workforce (see e.g. van Onselen 1992; Waldman 1996). Here, such arrangements depend on the fleeting appearance of women in male workers' compound houses.

Such domestic arrangements contrast with the lives of many seasonal workers. The latter's residence at Grootplaas is lived in all-male rooms, outside which they cook for themselves on fires. Their experiences recall the much-maligned regional history of labour migrancy, with its restriction of movement and residence and the racialised control of space. While young men and women in the seasonal workforce do establish sexual relationships, these are generally fleeting, and not built upon domestic arrangements. Transient men, housed in groups, lack both the stable incomes and the relatively comfortable and private accommodation

which might have enabled them to establish the kinds of relationships that ensure female domestic labour.

### *Localising the military*

In similar vein, but in different register, Grootplaas residents build provisionally stable living arrangements in collusion with soldiers on border duty. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, soldiers establish connections with members of workforces on the border farms. They do so despite the fact that they are rotated between different border garrisons every two weeks, making it difficult for them to become well embedded in compounds' social lives. They do so also despite the fact that they are kept at a distance by some compound residents and, being drawn from different areas of South Africa, often lack the linguistic proficiency necessary to communicate. They are able to integrate to some degree because farm residents see them as a necessary fact of life, even speaking about them with sympathy as men alone on the border, assigned a thankless task. Soldiers, in turn, engage with farm residents in a sufficiently congenial manner to impede impersonal border regulation. It is common for farm residents to go to Zimbabwe for the afternoon to find *Chibhuku* beer ('traditional' beer, commercially produced in Zimbabwe) or to go through the fence at the army guard post to go fishing in the river. They merely let the soldiers know when they intend to come back.

Soldiers, rotating among different garrisons every few weeks, become provisional members of farm communities. One way their role in the border populations is made explicit is as keepers of the peace. On one occasion, for example, when thieves were found within the Grootplaas compound, residents handed them over to the soldiers after beating them. The soldiers are drawn into the settled lives of border farm dwellers: they are empathised with, co-opted into dispute resolution and offer a degree of everyday security.

This fragile relationship is disrupted during the harvest when the army must prove their worth by arresting large numbers of undocumented compound residents, often acting as escorts for the police. At this time, soldiers become less visible at the *shebeens*. However, they do not stop coming to drink or look for women in the compounds. Neither do farm residents entirely lose their sympathy towards soldiers. They see soldiers as having a better local understanding – including of the farms' informal employment card systems – and greater empathy

for residents, than the police. One informant told me that people at Grootplaas are not afraid of the soldiers because it is their job to guard the fence, not arrest people (although I found them also to do the latter). The police patrols come to arrest, whereas she had heard soldiers tell people: ‘we understand things are tough that side [Zimbabwe] and you have to come here, but please don’t cut the fence – otherwise, we get in trouble for not doing our job and have to chase you’. Soldiers and farm residents have to ‘get along and not get each other into trouble’, she concluded. The police, meanwhile, strangers on the farms and known for aggressive behaviour when rounding people up, receive no such sympathy.

Despite the continued blurring of personal and impersonal relationships during the harvest, many seasonal workers view soldiers with greater trepidation than do more established residents. The provisional stability created on the farms, through everyday cooperation between workers and soldiers, leaves recent arrivals – undocumented and afraid of deportation – on the margins. *Mapermanent* have employment permits. Unlike their seasonal counterparts, who often never receive their delayed papers, *mapermanent* are members of a small, indispensable workforce. Their papers are renewed every six months. This difference of legal status has important, wider implications. A greater familiarity with the area means that the better established and better documented do not react to the police or army presence, and are consequently rarely even asked for papers. Seasonal workers often run as soon as they see the *bakkies*<sup>120</sup> belonging to police or soldiers. They lack much of the everyday predictability that permanent workers are able to establish on the border.

The inequality between *mapermanent* and more marginal residents of Grootplaas is clearest when soldiers are explicitly brought in to manage disputes. Like many other aspects of life at Grootplaas, the benefits accrue disproportionately to *mapermanent*. From the perspectives of many soldiers, permanently employed men are well established in the area, while they themselves are just visitors waiting to leave. *Mapermanent* act as gatekeepers to soldiers, buy beer for them and are often able to choose exactly which conflicts are mediated and how they are presented. This offers women and those without connections few options for redress. In one case, a woman had been attacked by a senior permanent male worker. The dispute was brought to the soldiers,

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<sup>120</sup> Pick-up trucks.



represented as one between the culprit and the woman's boyfriend. This was not seen as legitimate by compound women themselves. However, the two men were able to lend weight to their version of justice, by invoking the power of uniformed, armed state officials.<sup>121</sup>

At one extreme, therefore, *mapermanent* enjoy secure, congenial circumstances. At the other, new seasonal recruits and women remain at the whims of farm and state authorities. The contrast drawn at the beginning of this chapter – between the vulnerability and the security of farm workers – is part of an all-pervading distinction between *mapermanent* and Grootplaas' less rooted population of seasonal labourers and unwaged, mobile women. The picture this paints is of *mapermanent* as a local aristocracy of labour, not a common way of describing farm workers in southern Africa. This is true in the short term, reflected in day-to-day workforce and compound dynamics. *Mapermanent* enjoy forms of day-to-day security and comfort denied to many of those around them. However, as the thesis' conclusion will elaborate, the farms themselves, and therefore workers' homes, now have an uncertain future.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter explored how, unlike seasonal recruits, permanent workers' lives on the farm transcend mere wage employment. Rootedness is what permanence is all about, and *Mapermanent* achieve it by drawing women and soldiers into their lives. This is a varied and complex picture. Schematically speaking, *mapermanent* are the most secure Grootplaas residents, and recent, unconnected seasonal arrivals and young women are the least. In between are regular, though sometimes unemployed, visitors to the compound, as well as better-connected seasonal workers. Structuring this inequality are the different kinds of employment in the workforce. However, these differences of employment category take on further meaning in non-work areas of life, forming the basis of further kinds of inequality: between men and women, between those familiar with the border setting and newcomers, and between the well-connected and those without support. What all

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<sup>121</sup> It is important to note here that senior workers' impunity is tacitly guaranteed by the white farmers themselves, as I explain in Chapter 6. Though absent from discussions in the compound, farmers back their core employees by refusing to dismiss them in cases of abuse; such workers are seen as too important for production.

of these differences have in common, however, is that they are shaped by the ways *mapermanent* use their positions to maintain their own everyday stability.

This chapter's account of the place of *mapermanent* at the heart of Grootplaas' working population lays the groundwork for what follows. The thesis turns now to a direct consideration of how structured social arrangements at Grootplaas intersect with large-scale changes and forms of fragmentation in southern Africa. The next chapter focuses on male seasonal recruits and their experiences of displacement from Zimbabwe. It examines how they recreate their varied class and ethnic backgrounds at Grootplaas, through divergent forms of masculinity that are constituted in the work process and in compound life.

## Chapter 5

### CAMARADERIE AND ITS DISCONTENTS: WORKFORCE INTEGRATION AND THE ZIMBABWEAN CRISIS\*



Job-seekers are kept out of the workshop yard by security guards and supervisors

#### **Introduction**

When the harvest begins on the South African-Zimbabwean border, crowds of Zimbabweans appear at the farms' offices, hoping to be recruited. Many have travelled by bus from other parts of Zimbabwe to Beitbridge, the Zimbabwean border town. There, they hear of employment at the border farms. They make their way to the farms by *kombi*<sup>122</sup> taxi, but some are robbed and left stranded en route, and complete their journeys on foot. Others, walking southwards in search of work for South African Rands, stumble upon the farms. All cross the dry Limpopo River and climb through South Africa's boundary fence, evading soldiers and border gangs (*makumakuma*) who are known to rob and rape. By the time the soldiers at

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\* An earlier version of this chapter appeared as an article in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (see Bolt 2010).

<sup>122</sup> Minibus.

the garrison near Grootplaas awake on the morning of recruitment, they are confronted with the sight of hundreds of job-seekers waiting outside the farm gates. They have been there since well before 6am, when recruitment begins.

Torn clothes and broken shoes from long journeys give the crowd a look of uniformity. But there are important differences among Zimbabwean farm workers, of ethnicity, class history, sex and age. So while objective conditions may appear similar, Zimbabweans understand their own place on South African farms and their participation in farm work in divergent ways. Zimbabwe's recent crisis has led a large number of Zimbabweans to seek unfamiliar modes of employment outside the country. For many, farm work represents sharp downward status mobility; not only are a large number well educated, but farm work has long been marginalised, low-status employment in Zimbabwe (Rutherford 2001). And, for some, engaging in such work *as migrants* presents further challenges to notions of respectability.

However, Grootplaas residents' self-understandings *at the farm* do not simply reflect their personal histories. In this setting, such self-understandings also take on particular significance and must be enacted in farm-specific situations. Those who understand farm work as a sharp drop in status – a sign of failure – are typically keen to maintain a strong sense of distinction from the wider farm population. Given a historically powerful bourgeois ideal in Zimbabwe (West 2002), it is perhaps unsurprising that a crucial way in which many farm residents make sense of their place at the farm is through idioms of class. This raises the question: *what happens to class consciousness in conditions of displacement?* How is it imagined and enacted? This chapter explores these themes, thereby examining how experiences of displacement intersect with structured arrangements and hierarchies on the farm. It focuses on male pickers, for reasons of access. As I explained in the introduction, my opportunities for research with men were far greater than those with women.

For male pickers, work is key to the form class distinctions take. It is through work that a particular sense of masculinity, a camaraderie central in lending some unity to the majority of male pickers' experience, is generated – one which resonates with the political economy of sexual and domestic relationships at the farm. Middle-class sensibilities are often expressed in opposition to this camaraderie. Men who display such sensibilities establish distance from both

workplace masculinity and the wider masculinity enacted on the farm which workplace banter reflects. They attain distance by positing an alternative masculinity drawing on bourgeois ideals. And they may also characterise the dominant masculinity in the workforce as ethnically specific to the Venda. So, while historically specific models of class frame the ways residents of Grootplaas establish distinctions, these are played out through notions of masculinity and ethnicity. 'What we understand as class is mediated through other social categories such as masculinity' (Haywood & Mac an Ghail 2003: 39). But class and ethnicity are themselves not static, and are here imagined in the farm context. Among male seasonal pickers, Shona and Ndebele arrivals employ ethnic stereotypes about Venda. Assertions of class difference sometimes take ethnic form, casting Venda as uneducated, as crude relics of colonialism, in contrast to their own perceived sophistication. These draw on stereotyped ethnic histories, but assert differences which map onto idioms of class difference.

Scholarly considerations of masculinity in southern Africa have followed a dominant South African polarity between rural black areas and white production centres. Morrell remarks that 'the major configurations of masculinity which emerged as the twentieth century wore on were shaped by two major experiences and traditions ... the workplace, primarily the mines [and] ... rural life' (2001: 13). As discussed in the introduction, male migrancy has long been a dominant trope in analyses and imaginations of southern African labour, with especial focus on mining. Moodie (1994) underlines the importance of the wider conditions of migration for understanding migrant masculinity on mines. His dual consideration of the work and migration contexts in shaping masculinity is instructive. At Grootplaas, both the rough-and-ready, dominant workplace masculinity and the middle-class response reflect experiences of displacement. Meanwhile, work itself is fundamental: it is in the crucible of the picking work process that divergent masculinities are enacted. But the situation at Grootplaas is crucially unlike classic cases of southern African labour migration such as the miners about whom Moodie writes. Dissenters from the dominant, team-based dynamics of picking-work, in building understandings of their displacement, look to a Zimbabwean middle-class ideal that developed in explicit contrast to the stereotype of the unskilled male labour migrant (West 2002). In other words, some men seek to replicate bourgeois notions of masculinity – which historically sought to maintain the distinction

between 'respectable people' and 'migrants'. But they do so here under conditions of migration, which contain the potential to undermine respectable class status.

The previous chapter demonstrated how differences between *mapermanent* and more transient members of Grootplaas' working population pervade both work and life in the compound. This chapter builds on that account with a more nuanced focus on seasonal workers. What it reveals is that seasonal workers, although very diverse, are polarised according to models of class, these in turn mediated through those of masculinity and ethnicity. Models of class, ethnicity and masculinity reflect different reactions to Zimbabwean displacement, imagined and enacted in the farm setting.

### ***Class, displaced***

To remind the reader, between April and September, Grootplaas employs up to around 450 Zimbabwean seasonal fruit pickers and packshed workers to harvest the grapefruit and orange crops. High labour turnover means that the farm continues to recruit throughout the harvest. The workforce is spatially differentiated by gender, with those in the two spaces (orchards and packshed) known by different terms: permanent employees – *mapermanent* – speak of either *ma-cutters* (pickers) or packshed workers. The distinction is reinforced by the fact that most of the former are men, most of the latter, women. Grading and packing on the packshed conveyors is considered by farmers and workers to be women's work, while men make faster pickers. Indeed, the few female picking teams (and at some level women in general) are employed for reasons that cannot be reduced to efficient production. As one farmer explained, they keep gender ratios more even, ensuring that the compound is not simply full of men with unsatisfied sexual frustrations. This consideration is what underlines farmers' tacit approval of women's presence in the compound, as described in the previous chapter.

Seasonal work plays very different roles in different workers' lives, reflecting different responses to the Zimbabwean crisis. Luck, inclination and timing are often all that separate people passing through from those who stay to work for a while. Some seasonal workers are strangers to the farm, some not. Some intend to work the season and leave early, drawn by South African towns and cities with their less aggressive policing and their fabled opportunities. Others were passing through but find work and stay; others still prefer to be closer to

Zimbabwe and home, and come to work the harvest year after year, or move along the border farms hoping for work.

Furthermore, plans change, depending on logistical considerations, goals (e.g. earning to remit groceries; specific projects like building a house), and experiences at the farm. One significant factor causing such shifts in strategy is the limited amount that workers actually manage to save after having lived and worked at the farm. Pay for pickers is low and, for men, entertaining girlfriends and buying beer can be expensive. Another factor is that Zimbabweans who come to work the harvest are unwilling to return home without something to show for their sojourn in South Africa. Having earned less money than expected, they start to make new plans on the spot. A third factor is that those who hope to find work in Johannesburg (disproportionately young men) often come back to Grootplaas after failing to secure employment. Far from the image many southwards migrants have of Johannesburg as a place of opportunity, many in fact end up sleeping in the corridors of the city's Central Methodist Church. The building has been made available as a kind of reception centre for destitute arrivals, especially from Zimbabwe. Such difficulties making ends meet in Johannesburg mean that, in the months following the end of the harvest, a steady stream of former seasonal workers arrives back in the compound hoping for bits of work. Though by this time of year there are no openings, many of this floating labour reserve will again return to the farms the following April to work another harvest. Despite the enormous diversity of backgrounds and recent migratory experiences among arrivals at Grootplaas, however, seasonal workers do polarise along lines of class aspiration to some extent.

For a significant number of residents at Grootplaas, both permanent and seasonal, working and/or living at Grootplaas is something of a disappointment. For some, farm work represents dramatic occupational status decline; for others, it is the result of failure to achieve social mobility promised by earlier successes at school. They understand their circumstances through a class-based idiom of aspiration, looking to a middle-class ideal. This takes a variety of forms, and is not only shaped by giving meaning to personal *backgrounds* – age, sex, education and occupational history – but is also constrained by individuals' positions *at the farm*. But before turning to this, we must first understand how models of class developed in Zimbabwe.

Under settler rule, the existence of an African middle class did not fit a settler-conceived social order: blacks were assumed to be peasants or unskilled, low-paid workers. As elsewhere in southern Africa, many members of the urban black population had come as labour migrants, and were expected to return home after their factory/mine contracts had ended. 'The state's interest in the development of a small African middle class' nevertheless left aspirations largely frustrated by racialised social stratification (Barnes 1999: 93-4). A class-conscious black elite framed its protests and claims within the idiom of a colour-blind 'civilisation' or 'respectability'. They stressed 'bourgeois domesticity', which included women's self-presentation as perfect homemakers; (unsuccessful) efforts to acquire freehold housing, away from municipal townships; temperance; and conspicuous church 'white weddings'. Of particular importance was extensive (primarily mission) education (West 2002).

The Samkange family, about whom Terence Ranger (1995) has written, were prominent in this elite, not only in emerging African nationalist politics but also in redefining notions of propriety, family and gender. Central to their position was Thompson and Grace Samkange's strong marital partnership, and their 'modernising' emphasis on education, including university, and church participation. Grace, in particular, became an important role-model through her prominent position in the Ruwadzano, as the African Women's Prayer Union became known in Rhodesia. (ibid: 40). 'Great leaders of the Ruwadzano like Grace were famous and honoured figures amongst middle-class Africans in Southern Rhodesia. It was these women who above all sustained the Christian monogamy which was the foundation of the elite family' (ibid: 43).

Such figures were members of the black elite. 'These people polished their domestic and social skills, while the majority – doing what they had to do in order to survive – neatly fulfilled racist prophecies of shiftlessness and immorality' (Barnes 1999: 94). But their way of life and their models of domesticity became the object of aspiration for a wider population. Thompson and Grace Samkange were widely reported on in the black press. Indeed,

'some working-class migrants, particularly those existing wholly outside the formal economy, situationally used certain goods connected with "modern" living to publicly signify their aspirations. These individuals often based their consumption habits on their observations of the African elite' (Burke 1996:184-5).



In any case, for most of this emerging bourgeoisie, aspiration was a central part of class identity. Not marked by wealth, nor by descent from Rhodesia's precolonial rulers, 'as much as anything else, the African middle class in colonial Zimbabwe was held together by a unity of purpose: its members had interests, aspirations, and ideas that set them apart from other social classes, and they were conscious of these differences' (West 2002: 2). Unlike in some of the continent's colonies, 'cultural capital ... consisted more of a Christian, bourgeois, achievement oriented background than of lineal ties to the precolonial rulers' (ibid: 59).

Attaining secure 'respectable' status was indeed often a battle, for early elites and later a broader aspirant bourgeoisie. For those hoping to achieve mobility through education, schooling could establish disorientating distance from one's own family, as Dangarembga describes in her novel *Nervous Conditions* (2004). Meanwhile, it fell on women to maintain the necessary domestic ideal (West 2002). Despite the perceived moral taint of urban life, many endeavoured to spend as much time as possible with their town-dwelling husbands in order to discourage the latter from seeking other women, and to keep a respectable conjugal house based around a resident married couple (see Barnes 1999). As in more elite cases, the idea of a strong marital partnership striving for family and domesticity, upheld crucially by women, was central to notions of respectability and bourgeois masculinity. Further, spatial distinction was central. As Scarnecchia notes, 'the respectable classes actively sought to separate themselves from the lives of the poor and the uneducated in the townships' (Scarnecchia 1999: 161).

Education, marriage, domesticity and distance from townships represented a recognisable package in Zimbabwean bourgeois consciousness (West 2002). While the possibilities to satisfy this ideal were limited under settler rule, post-independence years saw 'unprecedented social mobility for the black majority, as legal barriers underpinning white privilege were removed, the state invested in education and the rapidly expanding public service was Africanised' (McGregor 2008: 469). Middle-class aspirations became more easily realisable. New markers of sophistication, in turn labelled through stereotypes such as '*masalads*' and '*ma-*

*nose brigades*',<sup>123</sup> did not render redundant existing and more widespread models of respectability.

Whereas some analysts have argued that elites are a more appropriate object of study in Africa than a middle class (e.g. Chabal & Daloz 1999), the latter is highly relevant for this study. Middle-class notions of status, with greater emphasis on respectability and sophistication than on wealth or power, remain crucial to appreciating many Zimbabweans' self-understandings. This even following decline in employment and educational opportunities from the 1990s and the consequent rise in material inequality. In recent years, better-off Zimbabweans have turned to places like the UK for livelihood possibilities (see McGregor 2008). An ever-greater number, with fewer resources but in some cases no less sense of their bourgeois status, have made for South Africa, as we shall see below.

At Grootplaas, notions of respectability and sophistication offer a way to maintain a sense of status alongside undesirable farm work. But in its migrant form, this bourgeois model is both more flexible – in that those who adhere to it emphasise or de-emphasise different aspects according to their circumstances – and more tenuous because they lack the support of social circles and respectable occupation. Further, those who understand themselves through this bourgeois model differ in other ways. Some maintain strong connections with rural areas. Others grew up in Bulawayo or Harare and have more overtly urban backgrounds. But what I wish to explore in this chapter are enactments of middle-class respectability in the Grootplaas farm setting, which downplay such differences.

Aspirations to respectability take a variety of forms at Grootplaas, including among non-seasonal workers. Consider Benjamin, 35 years old in 2007. His mother and several siblings have worked as teachers. He has A-levels and his mother hoped he might become a doctor. Although Benjamin has gained certificates in personal management, and worked briefly as a teacher, several failures and unfortunate incidents (notably his brother's death) led him to seek employment at Grootplaas. On the farm he is the storeman (in charge of allocating tools at the workshop) and sometime clerk, as well as a facilitator at the compound's adult literacy centre. Although these are fairly senior posts by farm standards, Benjamin often expresses disappointment at his lack of achievement (and is aware that his mother shares this sentiment), and complains that long

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<sup>123</sup> The former referring to 'those eating salad, a foreign dish', the latter 'those speaking English in a very affected way, "through the nose"' (Veit-Wild 2009: 687; see also McGregor 2008).

working hours prevent him from reading, let alone studying which might open up new opportunities for mobility. But he also often reflects on the considerable responsibility involved in his job, while enjoying the fact that his position means that he is usually left to his own devices. Meanwhile, like Michael, the personnel manager and another adult literacy centre facilitator, his authoritative, reputable role helping others to learn enables him to maintain a sense of respect. And the centre – ‘the school’ – is also a place where, each evening or over the weekend, he can discuss current affairs, the politics of language (English, SiNdebele and ChiShona) or the excesses of other residents’ drinking habits, with others who enjoy such debate. Benjamin lives alone and, apart from occasional assistance from female neighbours, he looks after himself. Importantly, he is known for being unusually unpredatory towards women; he does not drink (a family trait); and he invests significant amounts of time in intellectual self-improvement. Constrained by his living situation, he nevertheless strives to model himself according to a bourgeois model of temperance, restraint and education.

Or consider Margaret. The 47-year-old daughter of a teacher and a taxi-owning businessman, she completed her A-levels, as well as diplomas in teaching, childcare and social work. After 12 years as a teacher in Bulawayo and employment in Johannesburg at a crèche and in catering, she moved to Grootplaas to live with her husband, who had been employed as a security guard. She and her husband not only avoided being out in the compound, especially separately; whenever possible they would also socialise with others who behaved likewise. Margaret would spend most of her time maintaining her husband’s large, senior-worker house on the edge of the compound, and baking cakes which she would sell. Meanwhile, she maintained a sense of difference from other residents: she told me of a brief piece of research she had once conducted at the farm for a cousin at a non-profit organisation.<sup>124</sup> Lacking integration in the farm’s work structure, and still well connected in Johannesburg, she often spoke of leaving. Eventually, her husband was employed as a security guard in Johannesburg, and they moved in with her daughter in Mayfair, west of the city centre. Where Benjamin had to seek a source of individuated, personal pride at Grootplaas itself, Margaret’s bourgeois ideal emphasised her professional background, a domestic and marital ideal and

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<sup>124</sup> As noted in the previous chapter.

continued connections in educated circles. These particular examples by no means exhaust the ways people act on their aspirations.

I began with the broad question: *what happens to class consciousness in conditions of displacement?* As indicated, it is not only people's personal histories that matter in answering this question. For class is constituted in the farm context. As I have shown, this is because people's aspirations are enacted and constrained by their present-day circumstances. In particular, current occupation affects how Grootplaas residents understand themselves. Benjamin's storeman and clerical employment distances him from team-based farm work, while his work as 'school' facilitator ensures him respect as an educated man. Margaret's lack of employment, apart from the survey she had been employed to conduct and the research with which she assisted me, simultaneously allowed her to cultivate a self-understanding as a home-maker while also denying her any strong attachment to the farm or its population.

Seasonal employees, to whom we now turn, are especially constrained by their current occupational circumstances. Those who wish to underscore educational backgrounds similar to those just outlined, or aspirations, lack access to the adult literacy centre, which is reserved for established residents. And for most such workers, Grootplaas represents a stop-over on the way to better employment. Bourgeois aspiration may thus be more about preserving an existing sense of self than really negotiating a sustainable model for farm life. In this respect, their models for life therefore tend to look more like Margaret's than those of Benjamin, as we shall see below. But unlike Margaret, seasonal workers' limited resources make it particularly difficult to attain a domestic ideal, as the previous chapter showed. Meanwhile, seasonal workers face different modes of employment at the farm. Picking work involves a masculinity which presents an especial challenge to those with bourgeois sensibilities.

### ***Work and masculinity in the picking process***

The picking work process is the arena for a performed workplace masculinity characterised by a highly sexualised camaraderie; establishing bonds with other workers depends on effective participation. But it is also in the work process that an alternative self-understanding is instantiated: for those who understand themselves according to middle-class models of behaviour, workplace dynamics

are a strong statement of a masculinity in contrast to which they can understand themselves. Anthropologists of southern African performance in migrant labour settings have illuminated how musical performance can be central to imagining social groupings and conceptions of 'class'.<sup>125</sup> The picking process is no different in this regard. For it aligns men with diverse backgrounds according to two divergent masculinities, themselves reflective of models of class reimagined in the farm context.

Grootplaas's citrus orchards – consisting mostly of Valencia oranges, with the remainder grapefruits – appear as deep-green grids of rectangles from the air. At ground level, arterial dirt roads, offering vehicles access, run between the blocks, composed of wall-like rows of densely-planted trees. Avenues between the rows are kept just wide enough for tractors and their trailers. At the peak of the harvest in 2007 there were 12 picking teams of 30 pickers, of which ten teams were male.

Picking is a fast and aggressive affair. A pair of trailers is left in or at the end of an avenue of trees. Pickers carry large, square, plastic-covered canvas bags with shoulder straps (*zwigege*). Two team members, 'waiters', are designated to bring empty bags and carry full ones to the trailers. They sprint up and down the avenues, shouting 'waiter!' repeatedly to announce their presence to pickers perched on branches or up ladders who pass down their full bags. The latter, meanwhile, shout 'waiter!' to call for a new bag. Others pick at ground level and may run their own bags to the trailers. While some pickers are difficult to see among the dense foliage, waiters remain in the open. Their effort to keep running and keep pickers supplied with bags is visible and crucial to the earning potential of the group. For pickers are paid per trailer, on a group-based piece rate. When the trailers are full, a tractor driver is called from the arterial road, his assistant hooks them up to the tractor and they are hauled off. Meanwhile, the picking team is already seeking out the next trailers. Sometimes there is already a pair waiting, placed by a diligent driver. Otherwise, the most eager pickers run to the road to call for one, and whistle a high, rhythmic monotone as it arrives to announce it and to regenerate the necessary intensity. A picker or two might climb into the trailer as it is hauled down the avenue, whistling and already cutting a few pieces of fruit. Others might have stopped to catch their breath, but by now the cycle and its pace

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<sup>125</sup> See, for example, Erlmann 1992, James n.d..

have started again. When there is a backlog at the packshed there is sometimes a gap in the supply of trailers. Frustrating though this may be, it also offers an opportunity to rest, sleep if necessary and eat some fruit. More often than not, though, breaks are kept to a minimum.



Picking team

Shouting ‘waiter!’ goes beyond simply co-ordinating bag conveyance. It provides a base level of noise that frames the rhythm and intensity of the picking process. This is widely supplemented by more explicit calls of encouragement by pickers and waiters: ‘*A ri thuwe!*’, ‘*a ri dzheni!*’ (TshiVenda: ‘let’s go!’; ‘let’s enter [the trees]!’); ‘*famba, varume!*’, ‘*vari kudei?*’ (ChiShona: lit. ‘go, men!’; ‘what do they want?’).<sup>126</sup> Among the barrage of calls I heard were imperatives to keep working. There might be calls to work through lunch; this while the packshed and permanent workforce, including the picking supervisors and tractor drivers, take a break to eat. Entreaties to work fast and continuously sometimes take on a tone of moral appeal. On one occasion, two pickers were perched on branches in an

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<sup>126</sup> Both TshiVenda and ChiShona are used, but when one woman called for a waiter: ‘*Waiter papi? Waiter u gai?*’ (‘where is the waiter?’ first in ChiShona, then TshiVenda), Ezekiel, the supervisor, explained that she was Shona but trying to conform to the majority language by using TshiVenda.

orange tree. One told the other to pick faster, referring to the fact that they both had wives to look after.

A rough camaraderie characterises these picking teams of often young men. A picking day entails a long string of attempts to generate and maintain intensity, trailer after trailer, for up to ten hours. Work pace often slows in the afternoon as teams tire, but members are aware as the day ends how many trailers they have filled, and whether the number is sufficient to represent a decent wage. This self-imposed work pace and the generation of a work rhythm rely heavily on a particular mode of interaction in which dynamic productivity is connected with a virile, physically powerful masculinity.

Narratives of misogyny and sexual promiscuity are established as means by which male workers can relate to one another and build a sense of collectivity through the work process. On the one hand, a physical, aggressive masculinity helps workers to earn more: associating a sense of manliness with production promotes faster work and greater productivity in the team. But it also establishes common experience and self-understanding beyond work. For many men, agricultural work and farm living are unfamiliar experiences. Contrasting backgrounds can be obstacles to establishing relations. In this context, a set of easily learned, commonly repeated phrases during the work process, and modes of behaviour suggesting a particular understanding of masculinity, can act to bind strangers, albeit sometimes tenuously.

Similar notions of masculinity, generated through work processes in all-male environments, have been widely noted. In ways paralleling studies of southern African music (see e.g. James 1999; Coplan 1987, 1991), performed masculinities produce imagined shared experiences. In an all-male part of the shopfloor in a Northwest English truck factory, joking relationships emphasising male sexual prowess operate to produce conformity among workers: 'mediated through bravado and joking relations, a stereotypical image of self, which was assertive, independent, powerful and sexually insatiable was constructed and protected' (Collinson 1988: 191). A similarly sexualised male bravado obtains among black South African gold miners; indeed, 'sexual expletives and detailed accounts of sexual activity seem basic themes of underground conversation amongst miners all over the world' (Moodie 1983: 181). Male workforces in sectors as diverse as assembling trucks, underground mining and picking fruit are

built upon relationships of camaraderie rooted in sexualised masculinities. This, in turn, is perhaps due to the valorisation of bravery and physical strength. In the picking process at Grootplaas, such a model of performed masculinity ensures fast work and higher pay.

Such a notion of masculinity also frames interactions between pickers and supervisors in the somewhat sheltered setting of the citrus orchards. One day, for example, a supervisor named Hardship was standing by the trailer with another, Ezekiel. As supervisors often did, they joked with and about certain pickers around them. Someone called to 'Superman' (a nickname), a picker nearby in a red cap with the word 'Marihuana' [sic] and a large green illustrative leaf emblazoned on the front. Superman is the twenty-something, younger brother of a long-standing tractor driver at the farm, and was promoted to permanent worker status at the end of the season. The caller said to Superman that it was he who was responsible for a rape at Mopanekop, the neighbouring farm, recently. Supervisors and pickers laughed. Hardship and Ezekiel explained to me in some detail how two men had raped a woman there. The joke had been that Superman must have been responsible for this incident, because he had raped a woman at this farm eight years ago. He replied that that was in the past – he does not do that kind of thing anymore. Although distancing himself from this particular event, he did so with the same loud, joking tone as the other men that made light of the episode. Supervisors and pickers, in an all-male environment and sheltered by rows of citrus trees, established shared knowledge about Superman and his history and contributed towards rendering the farm and its residents familiar to all involved. I never heard comparable conversations between seasonal workers outside the orchards. Unlike the New Houses in the compound, citrus avenues present themselves as circumscribed space in which men can assume that only their picking team can hear them.

Developing good relations with supervisors is important, given their power beyond the work-time context. We saw in the previous chapter that *mapermanent* are at the centre of settled compound life. Senior workers, in addition, enjoy diverse forms of authority. The *khoro* – the community court over which the senior foreman, Marula, presides as a kind of *musanda* (headman) – is overwhelmingly made up of these picking-time supervisors (see next chapter). One is an influential United African Apostolic Church prophet (although he also drinks in the New



Houses on occasions – unlike many self-consciously Christian compound residents, including those in his own congregation). Another runs the seasonal workers' football team and is involved in organising occasional concerts at the farm. How pickers engage with their supervisors during work time contributes to how notions of dominant male behaviour are constituted. Most supervisors engage in the performed, predatory masculinity I have described and so, for pickers, participating in it offers the chance to establish relationships with them. Conversely, the best connected men are those who behave in this manner. On the day just described, supervisors joked with another picker, Tshigidi (lit.: gun), Ezekiel telling me that he likes him a lot because he is funny. Tshigidi is his nickname and is intended to be understood in a sexual sense. He did, however, explain to me that he no longer wants to ask every woman to 'be his wife', as he had done in Zimbabwe, because he is worried about AIDS. Tshigidi's case underlines how the masculinity demonstrated through picking team dynamics is a performance that may not entirely reflect individual members' own sentiments. Nevertheless, a coarse camaraderie connects certain pickers to influential supervisors. Tshigidi is an older man with many years of farm work experience in Zimbabwe. 'The farmers' (i.e. the whites at Grootplaas) joke with him that he was a war veteran, I was told, although he claims he was, on the contrary, working on a (white-owned) farm during the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle. Tshigidi was upgraded to permanent status as a tractor driver towards the end of the harvest, benefiting both from his farm worker background and his easy relationship with supervisors. While very few seasonal workers are upgraded to permanent employment, establishing relationships with supervisors nonetheless renders their time at the farm much more liveable.

For the majority, work banter represents a powerful performance of masculinity because it is not only a product of the work setting and its productive requirements, nor yet only a means to frame the wider farm experience: it also resonates outside work time.<sup>127</sup> Sex talk extends into compound life, albeit with more subtlety than in the apparently sheltered, all-male environment of the orchards. This subtlety is perhaps the result of the fact that, historically, 'the dominant African cultures in Zimbabwe placed a strong taboo upon the open

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<sup>127</sup> A methodological caveat: actual incidence of sexual activity is hard to research, and I, like others, have had to rely on how people talk about it. (See e.g. Campbell 2001.)

discussion of sexual matters' (Epprecht 1998: 636). But it seems fair to suggest that some men behave at Grootplaas in ways they would not at home.

The widespread phenomenon of highly sexualised, predatory masculinities in male workforces appears to suggest that such environments tend to elicit such forms of interaction. Some scholars posit even more direct connections between work and masculinity. Campbell argues, of South African miners, that 'male identities serve as a key coping mechanism for dealing with high risk working conditions, through encouraging men to be brave and fearless in the interests of supporting their families' (2001: 276). Paradoxically, these identities promote risky promiscuity and macho lack of concern for health consequences. I do not wish to make such an argument about pickers at Grootplaas. Masculinity *is* constituted through the work process, but also reflects a *wider context* at the farm.

It has been noted for other places that economically motivated migration, while uncomfortable, can come to offer other attractions.<sup>128</sup> Visitors to Grootplaas would comment to me about the available women, suggesting opportunity or danger.<sup>129</sup> Women in relationships with men would complain about the large number of unattached women who come to the farm, suggesting even that they come to stir up trouble (see previous chapter, also Rutherford 2001). And in one evening's conversation I was told, perhaps with exaggeration, that men might share their girlfriends with 10 or 15 other men; of the large number of people at the farm with 'the epidemic';<sup>130</sup> and how sexual relations are related to fights in the compound. Seasonally employed men, away from home and often from any relatives, are able to take advantage of their residence in a transient population, where women are also away from home and possibilities for recreational sex abound. Yet men often arrive with no resources. Paid according to a piece rate, male pickers tend to earn in the mid-R800s, less than female packshed workers who are paid the hourly minimum wage.<sup>131</sup> Along with their sparse living conditions, shared accommodation and extremely uncertain futures, a lack of material resources limits seasonal workers' chances of establishing domestic (as opposed to merely sexual) arrangements with women. For seasonal workers, the

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<sup>128</sup> See Ventura 2006 for Filipinos in a Japanese slum; Lindquist 2009 for Indonesia.

<sup>129</sup> Of sexually transmitted infection.

<sup>130</sup> HIV/AIDS.

<sup>131</sup> Minimum wage R989 during fieldwork. Of seasonal employees, packshed workers earned around R1000 because of overtime. Female pickers could earn as little as R300, because they were paid on the same piece rate as men but picked more slowly.

political economy of sexual and domestic relationships is one in which sexual encounters tend to be fleeting and lack wider domestic obligations in sharp contrast to those of *mapermanent*, encountered in the previous chapter.

What, then, are we to make of the dominant picking workplace masculinity? It reflects wider lifestyles, and mobilises these in generating camaraderie. Indeed, it comprises a statement about masculinity at the farm. It is against such a performative statement that men with middle-class models of self-understanding define themselves in the farm setting. As I show below, there are limits to the bond established through workplace masculinity: some men have radically different ideas about what it means to be male. They are consequently unwilling to participate in mainstream work dynamics. For those who participate, picking-team work banter facilitates cooperation; for those who opt out, it does the opposite. I now describe how those who look to middle-class models – themselves diverse in background – understand their position at the farm through their reaction to the work process.

### ***'They have offices in the trees': models of masculinity, ethnicity and class***

Alex and Vusa were young men in their late teens who had come to Grootplaas together from Bulawayo in 2007; Simon, 30, had come from Harare and met the other two at the farm. The three lived together in the New Houses. Alex had just completed his A-levels and wanted to save money for a computer to start a DVD rental business. Vusa and Simon were also well educated. As for many others, all three found living on a farm a completely alien, and often alienating, experience: Vusa commented to me that he should take photos to show people at home, and write a book about his experience. In the evenings they would cook outside their room on a fire, and sit inside on the floor along the walls chatting, mixing languages and peppering their English with Americanisms to display a 'hip' urban sophistication (see Veit-Wild 2009). Sometimes conversation would turn to working at the farm. When this occurred, they would establish distance from the dominant model of masculinity at Grootplaas in ethnic terms, imitating Venda phrases and commenting on behaviours they found aggressive among 'people here', such as greeting by exclaiming 'yah!' One evening I was in their room where I had been interviewing their 23-year-old friend, Tendai, who has also reached A-level. A broader conversation developed. He said he had read management books

and knows that managers ought not to manhandle workers. But they get pushed and kicked, he said, by other pickers. Most foremen here are from a particular village near the border. Pickers from these border areas therefore feel that they are superior and can boss others around. 'They have offices in the trees', he said. But such people are not well educated, he continued. They treat the whites on the farm with undue deference, like gods. The implication was that they, as educated people who were the equal of whites, would not need to display such toadying deference. Alex offered in response how *he*, by contrast, had merely thanked the white production manager when the latter complimented his picking. Others had asked him, in hushed tones: 'what did he say?' Alex told me that 'the foremen [supervisors] expect we'll treat them like they treat the white guys', and do whatever they say, even if it is wrong. 'But we say "no, we won't do it like that."' Vusa proceeded to assert that the uneducated at Grootplaas could not argue but instead just got increasingly emotional. Tendai agreed. Earlier, I had asked Tendai for what reasons he might consider leaving the farm. He answered by saying he would leave to find a more skilled, more rewarding job. Reflecting how, for them, picking team dynamics were both alienating and also offered stereotypes against which to maintain a sense of difference, Alex and Vusa imitated the picking-work call – 'Waiter! Waiter!' – and laughed.

For such young men, living in groups in the New Houses, but with middle-class models of behaviour, the work process, masculinity and ethnicity form a nexus – an object from which they can distance themselves. The picking process presents Alex, Simon, Vusa and Tendai with a concentrated, stark form of a stereotype of aggressive, crude Venda men. It exemplifies for them what Venda men are like more generally, offering a stereotyped masculinity against which to define themselves in the farm setting. This foregrounds the importance of their own education. While Tendai cited management texts as a vantage point from which to cast Venda men as inferior, Vusa spoke of writing about his experiences to communicate to other, sophisticated people at home what 'people here' are like. A particular version of respectability emerges through their comments. Unlike the rough behaviour of the majority of men, they characterise themselves through education and etiquette. They spoke of their time at the farm as a difficult period; one which would by implication stand in contrast to their urban, cultivated lives. This was underlined by stories of home, which involved driving cars (remember

that they are barely beyond school-leaving age) and, in Alex's case, these accounts were illustrated by a photo album of his well-dressed family. This album was Alex's continued connection to the kind of respectable family ideal West (2002) describes.

They are not alone in framing class models through ethnic difference. George is a Shona: a Rastafarian musician with A-levels from a multi-racial (i.e. formerly 'white') school. He sought work as a picker at Grootplaas in 2007. Two years before, his handicraft business had been destroyed during the 'slum clearance' of *Murambatsvina*, and he eventually decided he had no other option but to jump the border. After the 2008 elections, George returned to Grootplaas. His status as an MDC activist now gave him added cause to leave Zimbabwe, given the wave of state-sponsored violence against those who voted for the opposition. His reasons for being at the farm – the collapse of his livelihood and his fears for his personal safety – illustrate the simultaneously economic and political nature of displacement.

George and his housemates – friends from home (one with primary education only, the other up to the year before O-level) – told me their opinions about Venda people. They are vulgar, violent and their women engage in prostitution. The very sexual relations that are so often the stuff of picking dynamics are here cast as the marks of an ethnic other. George commented, in a conversation with the other two, that the difference can be explained as a result of educational hierarchy: Shona are the best educated, followed by Ndebele, with Venda as a poor third since they always left school to work on the farms. This followed the trio's comments that they stayed inside their house in the evenings because they feared unprovoked violence by Venda. The problem, they said, was 'tribalism' (a word I often heard used). But education here operates as a marker of ethnic difference, itself expressed through divergent models of masculinity.

In a discussion of similar kinds of 'traditionalist' versus 'respectable' dichotomies, James (1990) highlights how ethnic stereotypes, in an area further south, mobilised different historical events and processes, making them grist for the mill of present-day concerns. At Grootplaas, class and ethnic backgrounds are seen to correlate, and they are mobilised together in the construction of stereotypes. Venda from the border areas tend to have lower levels of education than people from areas further north in Zimbabwe. Marginalised within

Zimbabwe, they supposedly expect to work on the border farms, and therefore lack incentives to push for other opportunities. I was told that many farm residents from the far south of Zimbabwe leave school early and cross the border to get a job. Girls in their early teens cross to look after the children of family friends or relatives who work on the farms, for a bit of cash for their own parents. Meanwhile, an established history of work on South African farms – work of extremely low status and symbolic of a past racial order – contributes to border-dwelling Venda being cast as overly deferential towards whites and, in a sense, colonial relics themselves. Education and notions of class are intertwined with ethnicity in the stereotypes held by farm residents. Often these stereotypes associate Venda with, and revolve around, interpretations of the masculinity generated through the picking work process. The stereotypes do not run only one way. Non-Venda from further north are cast as taking employment opportunities on the farm previously enjoyed exclusively by southern Venda. And for some, resentment at the flood of Shona work-seekers is augmented by the perception that it was Shona who ruined Zimbabwe in the first place. This Shona dominance, like former class relations, is now reversed on the farm.

But for some of those who consider themselves more sophisticated, complaint in the shelter of their rooms is not enough. While the examples I have cited so far involve men living at Grootplaas without women, others come with spouses. Chipso, 31, was a businessman who arrived at the farm with his wife, Siyanda. Previously he had come to the farm to sell cigarettes, and was now continuing to supplement his wage with cigarette sales (see Chapter 7). Even so, he was keen to assert a sense of respectability. He was quick to point to others' lack of education, and highlighted his difference from them by dressing in a grey suit and brown leather shoes on his final day at Grootplaas. Although he described himself as a drinker, he would often be in his room in the New Houses with his wife, distancing himself from the stereotype of the predatory man who consumes vast quantities of beer and dances into the night. Like Margaret, mentioned earlier, he sheltered his marriage from compound life, and described the close companionship with his wife as based on deep mutual understanding. Assertions of ethnic difference are perhaps foremost among men living in groups; but for those who are a little older, and accompanied by spouses, the defence of a domestic ideal become more important. One of his closest companions was

Jameson, a man with a similar view of his role as a man – one which reflects the middle-class model under discussion. I now describe Jameson's case in somewhat more detail, since he most clearly exemplifies this predicament of trying to preserve a bourgeois marital ideal.

Jameson was 40 in 2007. He had come to Grootplaas with his wife, Jenny, from Zvishavane, where they had lived with their two children along with Jameson's sister's son and his father's younger brother's daughter. He had succeeded not only in passing his A-levels, but had also completed a Bachelors degree and a postgraduate diploma, as well as a certificate in entrepreneurial development which he undertook in Nairobi. He had worked as a teacher, as well as in a post office and for the Zimbabwe Election Support Network and the National Constitutional Assembly. Jenny had been to a mission-run secondary boarding school, where she passed her O-levels. Both speak ChiShona and English. Like many others, they left to come to South Africa because the Zimbabwean dollar had deteriorated to the point where teaching did not provide enough for Jameson to support his family. There was also perhaps another side to their migration, which neither articulated explicitly: Jameson's employment by the National Constitutional Assembly would have marked him out as a political dissident, leaving him potentially vulnerable. They had travelled to Beitbridge, where they joined others, to go a farm on the Zimbabwean side of the border. There, they were told of job opportunities on the South African side. Jenny was employed as a cotton picker on one of the border farms; Jameson heard that Grootplaas was recruiting citrus-pickers.

Jameson and Jenny displayed a self-consciously bourgeois, Christian respectability, which defined their difference from others. They attempted to maintain the conditions in which their established notions of respectable behaviour could be enacted. Luckily for Jameson and Jenny, his brief stint in the packshed (see below) had secured them a room outside the New Houses. They opted out of much of the dominant social life of the compound, avoiding drinking (he does not drink beer, only the occasional glass of wine), dancing and looking for sexual partners. They and others with similar views would keep their distance from the New Houses at night when possible and Jameson told me that he would go to church on Saturday nights when he got the chance – in Jameson's case, to the

Armed For Harvest<sup>132</sup> services held in the compound hall. Jameson and Jenny's effort to maintain a class-specific lifestyle by maintaining a sharp separation from compound dynamics mirrors strategies of spatial distinction in Zimbabwean historical imaginations of class (Scarnecchia 1999; West 2002).



The object of avoidance: dancing and drinking at the New Houses

The two couples – Jameson and Jenny, and Chipo and Siyanda – despite their short stay at the farm, worked to establish a degree of domesticity in their rooms. Jameson and Jenny had rigged a piece of net cloth to separate their sleeping area from the rest of the room, and they bought an electric camping stove to cook inside. Chipo and his wife had done something similar. And when I visited, they would either invite me inside the room (in the evening; both couples) or offer me soft drink and biscuits outside on chairs or stools (only Jameson and Jenny had the facilities for this). Their use of space (inviting me, and other guests I brought, inside the room), and in Jameson's and Jenny's case their style of refreshments, demonstrated through their house-keeping and hospitality both 'domesticity' and 'modern respectability' (see Rutherford 2001: 120).

Like Margaret, Chipo and their spouses, and emphasising their difference from many others, Jameson and Jenny avoided any extended separation. They

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<sup>132</sup> The name of a church.



would spend every evening in their room together. Jameson's presentation of his relationship with Jenny tells us something about how he understands himself as a man. Jameson would generally refer to Jenny simply as 'my wife', rather than by name. In doing this, he foregrounded the formal status of their relationship in a way I seldom heard, except in the case of Margaret and her husband. Jameson would present his marriage as a partnership of joint, coordinated effort and decision, and this inflected his and Jenny's discussions about how to proceed after their stint at the farm (they intended to work in Pretoria, Jameson possibly going ahead to find accommodation). Crucially, this was a marital ideal under threat: Jameson felt that, now that he knew what went on at the farms, he could never leave Jenny unaccompanied here.

But it was in picking work that Jameson had most sharply to contrast himself with others. His pleated trousers, tucked-in, long-sleeved shirt and gold-rimmed glasses set him apart from other pickers. He soon established a reputation in the team and throughout the farm. Everyone knew him as Magogoros – 'glasses' – because he was the only person in the compound who wore glasses all the time. His quiet voice, reserved manner and occasional correction of workmates' factual assertions compounded a professorial stereotype. Within a couple of weeks, he was promoted to a clerical job in the packshed after the personnel manager, Michael, noticed him. Jenny was also promoted to a job as a fruit packer in the packshed. However, Jameson was soon demoted and sent back to picking because of personal differences with Michael, rumoured by some (including Jameson himself) to be a consequence of Michael viewing Jameson's education as threatening his own educated status and his job.

Back in the orchards, he told his team-mates to stop addressing him in the same crude tone as they did each other. He was particularly disgusted by references to one's 'mother's birth canal', as he expressed it. His attempts to explain this in his own words are evidence of his profound feelings of unease with the tone that flavours the constant stream of banter accompanying work. On the same day, he reported, one man had commented he would not return home in the two-week break between the grapefruit harvest and the start of the oranges; another asked him: 'Why? Did you eat your mother with your penis and are worried about it?' Jameson was upset that men around him felt they could speak

thus to an older man, although there were older pickers who participated in the banter.

In this way, Jameson, in effect, opted out of the work process, and he and one other man who took offence were posted to clearing the trees of oranges the team had missed, thus working at a distance from the rest of the group. He later also worked loading fallen oranges onto trailers, with others who had been 'chosen' by their supervisors. George was among them. Conversation in this work team was dominated by discussions of the educational hierarchies between ethnic groups which George had described to me elsewhere. They also addressed Zimbabwean politics, more so than any other seasonal workers with whom I spoke. This is perhaps unsurprising, given their backgrounds. Jameson, remember, had worked for the opposition National Constitutional Assembly, as well as for an organisation that promoted electoral freedom. George had lost his shop in *Murambatsvina* and had later been a vocal MDC supporter. But discussions of politics were equally a means of asserting difference from other workers. Through these conversations, they shared a sense of educated understanding about the big picture of Zimbabwean politics. The tone was one of detached analysis: was Morgan Tsvangirai, MDC leader, sufficiently educated to run the country, or should the role fall to rival Arthur Mutambara, on account of his PhD?

Picking teams operate according to a particular masculinity. But, clearing reject oranges, Jameson and George asserted and performed their own, contrasting self-understandings. This was in turn paralleled outside worktime. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one man with whom Jameson did enjoy talking in the compound was Benjamin, the storeman described earlier.

Connell (2005) contends that different masculinities must be understood in relation to one another, ordered through unequal power relations. Those described in this section present and understand themselves according to a notion of masculinity which might have asserted its superiority in other settings, but one which is marginalised by the more dominant masculinity evident in the picking process. They understand themselves through culturally dominant ideals of having succeeded – as having attained the credentials and manners of the Zimbabwean middle class (see West 2002) – while now lacking the material and occupational bases of this class position, as well as social networks and other means of power associated with this background. Modes of self-presentation, which may have

contributed to reproducing relatively privileged positions at home, do Jameson and others little service on a farm where there is a different dominant masculinity. At Grootplaas, they find themselves faced with a worktime register of interaction between men which, making explicit how these other men spend their time outside work, disrupts their ideals of appropriate male behaviour.

### ***Conclusion***

Zimbabwean male seasonal pickers at Grootplaas enact divergent masculinities along class lines, sometimes also framed in ethnic terms. This reveals that models of middle-class respectability powerfully shape how residents of Grootplaas distinguish among one another. Departing from a historical perspective on Zimbabwean middle-class consciousness, and exploring how a bourgeois model is mobilised by some in the farm context, I analysed the picking work process as a performance of divergent masculinities. For many male pickers at Grootplaas, a particular sexualised masculinity establishes bonds at work which reflect realities in the compound. This masculinity, generated through the work process, binds diverse workers together, establishes shared experience and builds good relations with powerful supervisors. The interactions involved also appear to establish the basis of effective teamwork. But some men, understanding themselves through a model of respectability, are alienated both by the masculinity of the work process and by that of the compound life that it reflects. Contrasting masculinities, sometimes interpreted through an ethnic lens, reveal important models of class difference at work among residents, and polarisation according to these models. These models in turn both reflect and shape experiences of Zimbabwean displacement.

The next chapter turns to the most senior members of the black workforce. Building on this chapter's analysis, it examines how class-based aspirations, forged in the context of Zimbabwean displacement, shape the meanings of contrasting models of agricultural labour relations: settler paternalism and corporate-style managerialism.

## Chapter 6

### 'MANAGEMENT' OR 'PATERNALISM'? RACE AND REGISTERS OF LABOUR HIERARCHY



Pickers finishing work

#### ***Introduction***

The sharp spatial separation of white farmhouses and black compounds are stark reminders of class and racial inequality at Grootplaas, suggesting a familiar story of outmoded settler estates as remote, totalising worlds. Farmers appear to fit popular conceptions, with their uniform of two-tone khaki shirts, rugby shorts and occasionally hand guns – emblems of a vilified settler history. But settler agriculture has seen important changes. Farmers have adapted to new times. Their iconic khaki shirts often now display the logos of export agents. While commercial farms remain divided between white farmers and black labourers, reframing labour arrangements in limited ways can be useful for farmers. Historically, farmers saw themselves as paternal figures, safeguarding the lives of their black 'people'. (Such assumptions sounded benign, but the presumptions

about a wholly-owned workforce also served to justify, or hide, abuse.) This is the view that underlies farmers' musings on racial difference in their 'pioneer stories' (Chapter 2). Farmers are now keen to assert that their enterprises are businesses like any other, that laws of supply and demand and budgeting concerns – rather than labour relations – are paramount. Squeezed by a liberal buyers' market on the one hand and post-apartheid minimum wage and housing legislation on the other, they are increasingly unable or unwilling to continue promoting themselves as their workers' fatherly protectors.

The result is, broadly, a shift from 'paternalism' towards an emphasis on neoliberal 'management'. Responsibilities that are not explicitly guaranteed by contracts or laws are abrogated. Existing scholarship has been concerned to define paternalism itself, in order to specify what has changed. Du Toit (1993) sees it as a hegemonic discourse in which farms are presented as being united in the face of outside threat rather than divided by class contradiction. 'Paternalism' here appears as a coherent framework of shared understandings among farmers and farm workers. Its diverse relationships become reified as a system of sorts, that can retract, be replaced by or articulate with new arrangements, such as 'neoliberalism' (see e.g. Addison 2006).

It is difficult, however, to distinguish one discursive regime from another in practice. Attempts to define paternalism have oversimplified an amorphous and ever-changing array of work arrangements. They have suggested stable arrangements, whereas farming areas have long been characterized by the fragmenting and atomisation of black families in a mobile population (e.g. Waldman 1996). At Grootplaas, as I showed in previous chapters, permanent workers establish a degree of homeliness, adapting accommodation and maintaining domestic arrangements with kin, visiting spouses or in relationships that have permanence only at the farm. These possibilities are denied to seasonal workers by their transience and overcrowded, shared housing. This suggests that whatever paternalism does exist, is restricted to the permanent workforce. However, picking supervisors establish themselves as important pastoral figures with wide-ranging responsibilities beyond work, offering quicker access to documentation, use of vegetable gardens and safe places to keep earnings. A regional history of workforce fragmentation on the farms coexists with continuing

vertical dependencies among workers, belying any simple shift from paternalism to more atomised, neoliberal managerialism.

Indeed, recent changes in agriculture do not merely have fragmentary effects. They also create new bases for hierarchies and arrangements between workers. Much of the shift towards corporatisation on farms is driven by relationships between farmers and supermarkets, but these relationships nevertheless potentially create new vertical dependencies within workforces. Farmers become more integrated into relations with 'capital upstream and downstream of farming' (Bernstein 2007: 40). Reflecting this, supermarkets now establish development projects on farms for workers. These enable supermarkets to sell 'ethical' produce while tying farmers into supply chains. In farm workforces themselves, key workers act as gatekeepers, controlling access to the resulting facilities – crèches, literacy centres, games rooms, and football equipment. At a farm like Grootplaas, such gatekeepers strive thereby to gain authority in the time beyond working hours.

A useful way of understanding the complexities of change on southern Africa's farms is to begin with the relationships and dependencies among workers and other compound residents. Doing so avoids the risk of presenting change merely as top-down, driven by farmers or outside forces, and losing sight of farm workers' diverse circumstances, agendas and projects. One study of paternalism that takes this kind of bottom-up view is Rutherford's account of 'domestic government' on Zimbabwean farms, which sensitively illuminates different workers' arrangements and plans (2001: 14), all broadly embraced within the paternalist model. But, unlike Rutherford's Zimbabwean case, in contemporary South Africa paternalism is seen as a distinct regime opposed to 'management'. As farmers have been pressurised to corporatise, 'paternalism' and 'management' appear as two competing, and incompatible, models of agriculture.

What this approach reveals is that paternalism and management are not only analysts' models. This chapter explores how they are interpretive tools for farm-dwellers themselves and how, especially, they are manipulated by senior workers to buttress their own status. At a time of uncertainty and contestation within settler agriculture, management *and* paternalism receive support from different quarters at different times. What is at stake are contrasting visions and interpretations of settler agriculture, emphasised and de-emphasised strategically

by particular farmers and employees. Regional farming's history leaves paternalism and management standing opposed as clusters of ideas not only about the scope of vertical obligations and dependencies, but also about how hierarchy, race and class are imagined more broadly. Paternalism is a recognisable *ideal*, drawing explicitly on racialised, generalised authority and responsibility to subordinates. It is constantly being reinvented to justify decisions, actions and arrangements (James 2007: 232). Managerialism – emphasising bounded work responsibilities and a deracialised management/labour distinction – serves equally justificatory purposes, both within and outside workforces. Its use as a justificatory measure is impelled by pressure to change which comes from various external sources: government, buying-agents and supermarkets.

But workforces are more individuated than they initially appear, or than existing accounts allow. Appreciating this reveals that, rather than being merely top-down, hierarchies are most intensely shaped by particular senior black employees, whose status is most at stake. They represent the interface between black workers and white bosses and senior managers, who perceive one another largely through employment relations. It is for senior black employees, especially, that paternalism and managerialism serve as models through which the meanings of race, class and status are played out. Appreciating their roles in shaping labour hierarchies reveals how the broad shift from paternalism to managerialism in South African settler agriculture is refracted and constituted in the dynamics of workforces themselves.

This chapter is organised around a rivalry between Grootplaas' two most senior black workers: South African Marula, the foreman, and Zimbabwean Michael, the personnel manager. Their enmity reflects their different positions: top supervisor out in the orchards, and office-based administrator. Each attempts to undermine the other through belittling comments: Michael is unreasonable in his dealings with subordinates; Marula is stupid and uneducated. Underlying this is the threat each presents to the other's status. Marula worked his way slowly up to the position of foreman, loosely modelled on that of village headman. This position, formerly known as 'bossboy', is central to the paternalist vision of agriculture in southern Africa and equally iconic in literary representations of settler farming:<sup>133</sup> the intermediary father-figure with broad authority and responsibility over

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<sup>133</sup> Such as J.M. Coetzee's *In The Heart of the Country* (2004[1976]) and Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (2007[1950]).

workers. Marula's status is directly challenged by Michael, who casts his professional success at Grootplaas in a globalised managerial idiom, avoiding specifics of farm work or settler history.

Although their perspectives are expressions of individual personality, they draw on available discursive resources shaped by wider circumstances. Their conflict reflects, in one workforce, a struggle between contrasting ways of seeing South African settler agriculture. The positions 'personnel manager' and 'foreman', drawing on competing languages of hierarchy, cannot be easily or simply ranked vis-à-vis one another. Expressed through the wrong register, each man's occupation looks distinctly inferior. As I was told by one worker, Marula is the man on the ground, the man who deals with people. This in opposition to Michael's role as distant figure of command, like a white man, the boss, and one who is therefore a superior. Michael asks for ten more workers; Marula finds them. But a worker from a neighbouring farm offered a contrasting interpretation when he unwittingly provoked Michael's ire, by calling him 'clerk of Grootplaas'. This contestation produced heated debates between each top worker and other residents, in which I became implicated. For, although I occupied my own room in the compound, I lived as a satellite of Michael's household. But I would also while away evenings and weekend afternoons at Marula's house, or at one of the compound's many beer sellers. Residents often voiced their views about one or the other figure of authority.

The chapter demonstrates how paternalism and management are resources in struggles over status and self-understanding at Grootplaas, and not just analysts' models of labour relations. It explores how both apparently 'old' and 'new' frameworks are employed concurrently in this case of large-scale transformation. This draws on the kind of interactionist perspective exemplified by Epstein's (1958) work on copper mining in Zambia. Epstein challenged 1950s teleological depictions of urbanisation and modernisation through close attention to the roles and perspectives of intercalary figures – senior members of the workforce. He showed forms of authority with different sources, conflicting and pertaining to different spheres of life. A gradual shift from 'tribal' to class-based authority structures on the Copperbelt between the 1930s and 1950s involved competition between different bases of hierarchy that, crucially, were *all products of the mine setting*. As on the Copperbelt, those with intercalary roles on settler farms like



Grootplaas are the senior black employees. They represent the interface between the black workforce and white bosses and senior managers, who perceive one another largely through the narrow lens of employment relations. Their interface is one of both work and racial categories, deeply intertwined – bosses and labour, white and black. This class/racial division inflects how ‘paternalist’ and ‘managerial’ ideals are understood as they are evoked and enacted by both employers and intercalary employees. At Grootplaas, a situational perspective reveals farmers even on one farm combining registers differently depending on contingent priorities: projecting an image of themselves or the farm to the outside world or governing workers. And it reveals how intercalary workers – like Michael and Marula – shape the everyday meanings of labour hierarchies to maintain their own status.

This approach illuminates both the effects of a shift towards corporate norms and the effects of Zimbabwean displacement on the border farms. Conflicts over models of labour hierarchy mobilise diverse resources, including those from top-down interventions like supermarket projects in the compound. These conflicts play into further struggles over class-based status, explored in the previous chapter. Competition between the status that comes from schooling and that which comes from workforce seniority plays directly into the competition between managerial and more established idioms of authority. As we have already seen, large-scale displacement from Zimbabwe has meant that the border farms’ black workforce is extremely diverse in terms of class-based aspiration. Some new arrivals are unwilling to accept the racialised, generalised forms of authority – ‘paternalism’ – seen as normal by many established residents. For such workers, evoking a corporate-style rhetoric – which itself stands as a mark of wider experience and schooling – can offer a resource for reinterpreting labour relations. The experiences of Michael and Marula and the way they are interpreted each reflect a response to Zimbabwean displacement. Locally powerful norms of seniority on a relatively secluded farm confront the wider reach of educational and occupational status. The following sections describe Marula’s and Michael’s work roles, before turning to a consideration of their authority beyond work. The chapter then interprets these competing registers of hierarchy in terms of the highly situational priorities both of Marula and Michael, and of different white farmers.

***Marula: one man and his bakkie***<sup>134</sup>

Each day, Marula ranges across the farm, visiting various workers and work-teams in his *bakkie*. A man in his late 40s, his voice husky, one eye milky from cataracts, he easily communicates gravitas. This despite the fact that his pink bomber-jacket, worn baseball cap and old t-shirts lack the sartorial elegance of some younger workers. His presence is vastly augmented by his *bakkie*, handed down to him via farmers and then white managers.

On a fairly typical work day in February 2007, Marula began his afternoon by driving to some orchards. Six permanent workers were cutting down a row of pine trees to allow the adjacent orchard greater access to sunlight, aided by the dragging power of a tractor. Marula watched for a while. Andre, the white production manager, stopped by. When Marula was warned that falling trees might hit his *bakkie*, he drove to where mangoes are grown for consumption on the farm. Another group had finished clearing debris, and Marula gave them a lift back to the compound. On his way to the eastern part of the farm, Marula drove a group of women to the army station: they sought access to the Limpopo for a fishing expedition. He turned off into orchards to visit the old women who were posted at intervals to look out for baboons stealing fruit. In the compound Marula bought three cigarettes and, patrolling around, shared these with groups of male workers. As the time approached 5pm, Marula made one last trip to the orchards, dropped tools at the workshop and called it a day.

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<sup>134</sup> Pick-up truck.



Marula by his *bakkie* with other permanent workers, stopping to check the news

Marula moves around to supervise different jobs, but in many cases there is already a supervisor on-hand and tasks are fulfilled adequately without him. At some level it is difficult to see what he does. But his job consists in his place in the labour hierarchy, at the interface between white and black. Marula, one of the farm's few South Africans, speaks Afrikaans, and so can discuss matters in whites' mother tongue without the Zimbabwean majority understanding. But most of the time, Marula does not work through face-to-face interactions with whites. His very responsibility consists in working on his own initiative; his effect is to *extend* the labour hierarchy – and, by implication, the farmers' gaze – over a wide area, as he moves about the farm. By doing favours along the way – giving a lift, sharing a cigarette – he maintains both a superior and sympathetic position, a fatherly figure in the workforce. Meanwhile, as the radio on his *bakkie* crackles constantly with communication between the farm's vehicles and the office, he brings with him the institutional weight of the white employers. Other farms along the border have similar central figures, whose business it is to have a broad understanding of the whole estate: the foreman of a neighbouring farm, for example, made a point of telling me, when I visited, that the reason he already knew who I was, was because it was his 'business to know'.

Marula's role as lynchpin, necessary because of a rigid black/white separation, is intrinsic to the racial micropolitics of farms. Whites on the farm rarely enter the compound; it is Marula who usually gathers workers, including for emergency jobs in the evenings, at night or over weekends. This divide is characterised by constrained forms of communication. The farmers address most black residents in a pidgin called Tatelapa.<sup>135</sup> This is the agricultural equivalent of Fanakolo, a hybrid language developed on the mines largely as a means for whites to direct black subordinates and lacking much range of expression. But even when issuing commands, the farmers speak regularly to only a few workers. Generally, supervisory employees direct the wider labour force. These are Marula himself; two more junior, specialised foremen; and Andre, the white production manager. Willem, the white farmer, who spends much of his time around the offices, represents a distant authority. He is more a last resort for complaints or appeals for leave than a direct overseer of labour.

It is between Marula and the white manager, Andre, that the white/black divide is most blurred. Andre speaks TshiVenda and gossips with workers out in the orchards. His and Marula's roles often appear similar: each drives around in his *bakkie*, supervising a range of tasks; each negotiates his authority through a mixture of command and easy informality. Yet, within the world of farming in the region, they are vastly different. Andre's involvement as a white employee in the farmers' social circles places him as a relatively poor man, in comparison to local farmers who own aeroplanes. It is not without reason that permanent workers joke that he is too poor to buy his own farm. Yet Andre is unambiguously one of the local white community. Marula, meanwhile, has very different expectations. His occupation as foreman places him in a patriarchal role that extends into the compound. This is the culmination of a life climbing upwards through the ranks of the workforce, in a highly racialised setting where he has risen as far as he can. Despite the day-to-day similarity between Marula's and Andre's roles, the ways they are seen by everyone on the farms – and the ways they see themselves – reflect and reinforce notions of racial division.

Marula's position in the orchards – in relation to black workers and to Andre – emerges most clearly during the harvest. Picking work in mostly 30-man gangs is fast, aggressive and often forges strong bonds between recruits, as the

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<sup>135</sup> Also sometimes called ChiLapalapa, using ChiShona/TshiVenda grammatical form.

previous chapter showed. Supervisors participate in the crude, highly energised banter. But Marula stands above all of this, as he patrols the orchards in his *bakkie* at his own discretion, jokes both with Andre and the supervisors who work under him and shares a newspaper with them. He drives the work pace not by continual shouting, as do the supervisors, but by highlighting the potential vulnerability of seasonal pickers: if they do not follow orders – correct picking technique, keeping to the correct route between compound and orchards – they can go back to Zimbabwe or find employment elsewhere. Once again, he evokes the larger institutional power of the farm.

Marula often announces a briefing, generally responding to complaints about pickers from white management. Sometimes Andre stands a short distance from him, backing the weight of his words but also introducing ambiguity as to whose words they really are. Nevertheless, Marula's speeches demonstrate his own authority and that of his supervisors. This is emphasised by the form such addresses take. He often drives up in his *bakkie*. His supervisors are on the back, sitting on the sides or standing and looking down at the waiting 360-strong picking force, as though riding a chariot. To speak, he disembarks and stands by or on it, the supervisors often in a group nearby, apart from the pickers. When talks are given at the end of the working day, the *bakkie* pulls away in the direction of the compound, kicking up dust in the wake of which the column of pickers embarks on the long walk back.



Marula and Andre gather pickers for a meeting

Marula's flexible yet racially inflected authority must be understood in the wider context of farm labour in general at Grootplaas. As noted in Chapter 4, the farm manages with a relatively small permanent workforce by keeping workers flexible. A worker's level of responsibility is usually more important than his job description. Drivers are higher than run-of-the-mill labourers. And the driver who operates not only tractors or forklifts but also lorries and other vehicles is superior again. Such responsibility is reflected in pay. Marula's role as foreman is as diverse and flexible as the workers he supervises. It places him at the centre of the labour process, and he constantly works with Andre, permanent workers and, during the harvest, seasonal pickers, holding the labour hierarchy together.

### ***Michael: the power of paper***

Michael's position contrasts starkly with Marula's. Each work day just before 7am, Michael cycles into the office at the farm's workshop. He wears a collared shirt, often white, tucked into a belted pair of dark trousers, and is armed with his 3G Technology mobile phone despite the lack of reception across much of the farm. Desks run along two walls of the small office reserved for him and Benjamin, the workshop storeman who helps him with paperwork. The room is dominated by a

collection of grey, chest-high filing cabinets containing records of present and recent workers. On the opposite side of the room is a door leading to a hallway, which in turn leads onto the rest of the workshop offices where whites work: Willem, his wife, brother-in-law and the secretary (the daughter of a neighbouring farmer). While they all come through this door to seek out Michael or Benjamin, the latter rarely enter the rest of the office block. Michael and Benjamin work in close proximity to farmers and administrators. But they are overwhelmingly confined to responding to rather than initiating interactions. Nevertheless, such proximity ensures their easy access to the farmers in the eyes of other workers.

Michael's primary responsibility for much of the year is renewing permits. He maintains the paperwork and occasionally travels to Beitbridge border post to negotiate with both the Zimbabwean and South African sides. This requires not only knowledge of the various documents, but also the relationships and expertise to negotiate the bureaucracies at Beitbridge. This is of vital importance in a heavily policed border area, where Zimbabweans without papers risk deportation. Further enhancing Michael's reputation, the job involves a high degree of literacy. This both resonates with a widespread valorisation of formal school education – itself the result of Zimbabwe's colonial and postcolonial class history – and harks back to some workers' happier days in higher-status work than agricultural labour.

Though conspicuously solitary compared to Marula, Michael also sits at the interface between white and black, especially during the harvest. Enlisting the help of other workers, Michael moves the filing cabinets to the packshed and takes on a greater range of responsibilities. With a small team of other workers, he supervises harvest-time recruitment. He takes the new recruits to Beitbridge to arrange their visas. Throughout the harvest he handles paperwork for fruit-buyers, and prints destination labels for the fruit pallets, work he refers to as 'data input'. The computer and buyer paperwork are in Willem's own office at the packshed. So what other workers see is Michael, dressed in an official-looking white coat and wielding a clipboard, spending hours each day in a room with their distant employer.

Michael shares Marula's proximity to the white bosses, but this closeness is of a different kind. Michael is not a lynchpin in the hierarchy in the sense of a daily avenue of communication between bosses and workers. His position confines him to narrower spaces of work-related responsibility. Consequently, he relies on

formal channels to emphasise his seniority. One is his ability to hire and fire through explicit, private appeal to Willem. Another lies in the paperwork itself. Faced with large numbers of workers who need permits, he can exercise a degree of choice in whose he processes, and when. Especially during the harvest, when there are hundreds of recruits and many never receive legal documents, handling paperwork confers a great deal of power. But this power is limited when Michael is confronted by workers who have influence of their own. After Michael withheld the paperwork for one female worker, her husband assaulted him in his office. The latter was confident of Andre's support to prevent his dismissal. When Michael is challenged like this, turning to the white farmers themselves can bring further complication. Michael has in fact been assaulted several times in the past, but he rarely reports such incidents because making a public issue of them would diminish his own sense of authority.

Despite such occasional assaults, however, compound residents continue to see Michael as a figure of high status and connection to the bosses. He is understood to be a man of great influence. His monthly pay, once equal to Marula's, is now the highest among black employees. Since Michael's work is highly unusual in the black workforce, it is known that Willem sees him as indispensable and hears his complaints. But Marula is more central to the day-to-day labour process involving most workers. Meanwhile Michael's authority comes from his responsibility for records to which others lack access, through interactions with a powerful boss which, behind the doors of offices, others are unable to observe.

### ***Models of hierarchy in the compound***

At one level, this is a rivalry between chief supervisor and office worker, one that appears time and again in studies of work (e.g. Beynon 1973; Burawoy 1979). But in a South African resident farm workforce, the contrast has particular consequences that extend far beyond the working day. In particular it can be seen in contrasting residential arrangements. Not only do workers live in close proximity, at their place of work; housing is also basic and much of compound life takes place outdoors. As in the classic cases of the mines (see Gordon 1977; Moodie 1994), relationships forged in the workplace spill over into compound life more generally (for Zimbabwean farms see Rutherford 2001). At Grootplaas,



senior workers buttress their work-related status in the compound, and their behaviour in the compound mirrors that which characterises their work.

Marula's dwelling reflects this. Centrally located, it is a focal point of the compound along with the farmer-owned shop. As the longest serving and most established black worker, he has two two-room senior workers' houses, and therefore his own toilet/shower block. He has built his own compound around this double-house, with a yard marked by low mud walls; a wood-covered porch; a mud/wood outhouse; a driveway; a fire-heated boiler and underground piping to his shower for hot water. In the tree in front of the house is a treehouse for his many children. But most importantly, underneath the tree is a seating area for drinking and holding court, with a second row of lower benches for busier occasions. Here, the *khoro*<sup>136</sup> sits to judge minor disputes among compound residents, such as adultery cases. Led by Marula, other elders are largely men from his Lands team who become picking supervisors during the harvest.



The yard of Marula's house, with the *khoro* on the right

It is not only in the highly institutionalised *khoro* that Marula wields influence. He is widely known to help those who ask. For example, he takes in particularly conspicuous new arrivals. Two female teachers became seasonal

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<sup>136</sup> Court of compound elders.

workers. He felt they would suffer in noisy seasonal accommodation, and had them share a room with his daughters. Looking after such highly educated women buttressed his status as protector. Similarly, a healer stayed with him for several months, and Marula meanwhile availed himself of his services to secure protection from invisible attack. The lines are blurred that distinguish an act of personal, individual assistance from one involving resort to the *khoro* or to Marula's worktime, foreman's role. For Marula is often to be found on weekends relaxing in his seating area with his drinking partners, many of whom are the court elders. At other times he cruises around the compound in his *bakkie*: occasionally recruiting men for unexpected jobs; more often just surveying the lie of the land. But whether as part of an institution built around him and his home – the *khoro* – or in his own right as foreman, Marula dispenses judgement and assistance. The generalised authority of his daytime work extends around the clock and into the compound. Marula is seen by residents not only as representative of white bosses, but also as a source of authority in his own right.

Marula's idioms of authority, and his and others' expectations of his position, are mirrored in less pronounced ways by other senior men at Grootplaas. As discussed in the previous chapter, the men who belong to Marula's Lands worker team have occupations as picking supervisors which are inseparable from their positions as local notables. Pickers are keen to establish good relations with them to ensure beneficial treatment outside as well as during work. Many supervisors sit on the *khoro*. Meanwhile one, Hardship, in his mid-twenties and still too young for the *khoro*, is nevertheless closely associated with Marula. He is responsible for the recruitment process and the daily register for pickers, both of which offer opportunities for preferential treatment. He also organises a seasonal-worker football team, which furnishes further occasion to dispense favours. The team members, being temporary workers, share accommodation and lack secure places for their monthly wages. Hardship and his coach look after their earnings, storing them in their own, lockable, permanent-worker rooms. Hardship goes further, even allowing them to use his vegetable garden. His high status in the compound is boosted through his role as organiser of high profile gigs at the farm, status further reflected in his leather wide-brimmed hat and jacket. For Hardship, as for other supervisors, his conspicuous influence during and outside work establishes him both as figure of authority and as provider of assistance.

The status of Marula and his supervisors is buttressed by residents' appeals for assistance and judgement. In contrast, Michael is known in the compound as telling others to sort out their own problems: 'you've got your job, I've got mine'. Matters are of course more complicated. Michael does form personal relations with and helps particular people. When impressed by a newcomer's education, he may act to ensure that they are offered employment in the packshed, which amounts to indoor work with higher pay. But, reflecting a more sharply bounded notion of occupational authority, Michael's assistance to others in the compound is confined to dispensing highly individualised favours.



Michael's yard

While Marula's well-visited house suggests an extension of family life into the compound, the appearance of Michael's senior-worker house underlines his privacy. The outside is strikingly unadorned: a bare yard is marked by a high hedge and contains only a low table for washing up, a disused vegetable garden and a crumbling mud-and-pole shed built by a previous occupant. Even in comparison to most other senior workers, Michael's yard looks basic, even neglected. This is not the case inside the house. Unlike other residents, he has bought a double bed and sprung mattress, and owns not only a large television but also hi-fi separates and

floor-standing speakers.<sup>137</sup> With these he entertains guests, either sitting inside or watching the television through the door. Sometimes, he moves one speaker into the yard, pumping out loud music in the manner of the compound's beer-sellers, declaring his resources to all around. But only a select few – the men Michael is drinking with at the time – are welcome to join. At other times, he brings guests into the house and shuts the door, an unusual practice in the compound. Michael's privacy limits discussion of his non-work past. Keen to highlight his professional success, he keeps details about the rest of his life to himself. For example, though he has several adult and school-going children, I was long into fieldwork before I even heard mention of them.

While Marula's lifestyle is intended to place him at the centre of residents' existence, Michael's marks his managerial seclusion and sophistication – his difference from mere farm workers. Idioms of management and paternalism are played out even in workers' living spaces. But the managerial model is valued only by Michael and a few other residents. And the mode of sociality it promotes – with its sharp distinctions between manager and rank-and-file and between work and leisure-time responsibilities – leaves him isolated.

Michael's situation is all the more difficult because he has incompatible goals. For, despite his aspirations to managerial sophistication and distance, he is nevertheless keen to assert his importance in farm dwellers' non-work lives. Drawing a sharp distinction between work and leisure time, he turns to alternative pastoral roles, consistent with his self-understanding, which he has accrued through the interventions of a British supermarket's development foundation. This is an organisation intended to address the historical disadvantage of South African farm labourers, in accordance with government policy to promote Black Economic Empowerment. Michael's education and current administrative occupation make him an obvious gatekeeper with the supermarket fund. His task is to represent and make evident that which farm workers have the potential to become. In the words of the foundation website, it is intended that workers be 'empowered and given

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<sup>137</sup> Unlike Marula's investments, most of Michael's are potentially mobile. In the last few years, Michael has begun buying building materials for a home next to his brother's (mother's sister's son's) house in Beitbridge District in Zimbabwe. Now in his late 40s, he is now thinking of establishing a home beyond the farm. Marula, a South African born onto a farm down the border road, has nowhere else to go except his mother's house in Musina town 60km away. Most residents do have somewhere else to go.

skills that will allow them to take more economic responsibilities in the future.’<sup>138</sup> He was appointed the senior facilitator at the foundation-funded Adult Literacy Centre, known by compound residents as ‘the School’. Perched at the top of a small slope, above the compound shop and the senior workers’ houses, the School mainly teaches computer-based courses in English reading and writing. Certificates, accredited by a well-known South African educational institution, are issued on completion of a proficiency level. Offering educational advice, overseeing work sessions, marking homework and chasing up course participants are all tasks which enable Michael to extend an educated style of authority into the compound. This is a source of status that Michael is more than willing to mobilise in his disputes with Marula, as he bitingly suggests to the latter that he come to the School to learn some English. However, attendance is wavering, and no one has yet completed a course. Workers, who feel that they are stuck working on a remote farm, have difficulty seeing the point in such qualifications. Michael’s teaching responsibility, though a way to occupy a pastoral role while underlining his difference from other workers, appears similarly peripheral.

The Supermarket foundation offers Michael a further opportunity to accrue authority outside work time. During the period of fieldwork, Michael gradually became established as a spokesperson for the farm, representing it in meetings with the foundation. He was subsequently chosen by the foundation as a ‘beneficiary’ member of its Board of Directors. This meant attending meetings across South Africa and assessing applications for project funds from other foundation-affiliated farms. His position signals his administrative responsibility and status well beyond the farm, and his difference from his co-workers. He holds meetings in the compound, to gather requests for projects that he takes to the foundation. This underlines a quasi-paternal role as a dispenser of foundation wealth. However, as with his teaching position, these efforts meet with limited success. Workers feel that, as in his work for the School, Michael is too keen to underline his difference and distance from other workers. At one meeting, Michael was shouted down, and the meeting abandoned, because it was felt that he was making decisions about workers’ welfare that were not his to make. He had begun organising the establishment of a games room and of land for workers’ gardens. Despite the obvious utility of both, it was objected that he had not consulted his

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<sup>138</sup> <http://www.waitrose.com/food/originofourfood/foundation.aspx>. Accessed on 8/1/10 at 16:47.

fellow compound-dwellers. It is in part because of his failure to find a central position in compound life consonant with his managerial aspiration that Michael asserts his status through stark seclusion.

We have seen how Grootplaas' top black workers' occupations contrast, and how they each relate to wider work processes. Their roles spill over into the wider life of the compound, with each presenting himself through different notions of work-based responsibility and status. But to grasp what is at stake beyond simply different jobs requires us to ask what Michael and Marula represent at Grootplaas. What each man evokes either helps to constitute or challenges interpretations of contemporary settler farming. For these occupations are expressed through contrasting models of seniority. To understand these conflicting registers, we first turn to the perspectives of the white farmers.

### ***Paternalism versus managerialism: farmers' perspectives***

Formally retired from the daily running of the farm, Koos has a clear awareness of what he has achieved. He emphasises not only how he cleared bush and planted the area with other men of his generation, but also talks of his previous experiences, agricultural, commercial and military, from the Free State to Kenya. As he spoke to me during my teatime visits to his house, it became clear what being a farmer meant to him. Crucial to this was a fundamental difference between 'European' and 'African', the former characterised by far-sighted vision, the latter by a level of instinct that Europeans have lost through exposure to 'civilisation'. His self-understanding as a farmer was that of a visionary, pioneer and embodiment of modernity, a figure of guidance (see Chapter 2). Koos sees Afrikaners in particular as experts on 'the people', in this context meaning black labour.

As noted in Chapter 2, Koos employs a romanticised stereotype of 'the African'. Other farmers in the area would speak in a similar manner with similar enthusiasm. His traditionalist representation extends to Grootplaas' work hierarchy. Koos gives a particular gloss to Marula's role in the workforce, to the way he holds court and looks out for the interests of residents in the compound. Despite his involvement in smuggling and game poaching, Koos said, 'we support Marula as an *induna*. That's why he drives the newest *bakkie*.' The term *induna* suggests a headman-like idiom of authority, evoking earlier labour structures on mines in the region. But claiming that 'we support Marula as an *induna*' goes

further, suggesting that his authority is merely sanctioned by the farmers. This sounds more reminiscent of indirect rule than it does a description of an employee. Certainly it is a long way off the managerial idiom on which Michael relies.

Koos is unimpressed by Michael, and scornful of his display of education. As Koos tells it, things were tense between them from the outset. When Michael was employed, he insisted on speaking English, not Fanakolo or an African language, and a violent confrontation was narrowly avoided. Koos revealed the importance of this point, when he claimed that his own rapport with workers owes much to his ability to 'speak the lingo'. Michael's insistence on speaking English disrupted Koos' self-presentation as a particular kind of farmer who understands African workers, speaks their languages, knows their stories and wants to keep them in their place.

Koos sounds a lot like the classic image of the settler farmer, with his self-understanding as pioneering visionary, and his image of Marula as a chief-like figure. Koos' son-in-law, Willem, illustrates a contrasting depiction of farming. Willem is concerned to present the Grootplaas enterprise as a profit-driven organisation like any other, rather than as a project of settler vision and paternalism. Michael's position – as a black employee who is the managerial personnel manager, not a manual worker – enables Willem to emphasise this version of agriculture. It was no accident that Michael was the first worker to whom I was introduced at Grootplaas. Willem also prefers to see sharp separation between work and home life. Feeling that he has only a limited grasp of dynamics within the workforce and the 'cultural' bases of disputes among workers, he speaks of his reluctance to intervene in non-work matters.

Unlike with Koos, the proper place for me to spend time with Willem was in his office. During one such meeting, Willem set out the Grootplaas labour hierarchy, using very different language from Koos. He first described the company's four shareholders – Willem himself, Koos, and two of Koos' sons. He then moved on to senior employees: there is the (white) workshop foreman and mechanic, and Andre, the production manager, who handles everything to do with growing the fruit. Also part of management are Michael, personnel manager; Marula, general manager; and the (black) packshed manager. These three sit on the management side of the table in discussions with workers, and are salaried.

The contrasts with Koos' vision appear to herald a transformation in the nature of farming. They may indeed derive partly from generational difference, but they also reflect different backgrounds. Willem, now in his late 40s, was born in Rhodesia, the son of a school headmaster. Before he married into Koos' family, he had trained to be an electrical draughtsman. Crucially, moreover, differences in perspective between Koos and Willem are a reflection of their different roles *now*. Koos used conversations with me to express a romanticised account of the enterprises and successes characterising his life. For this, he drew on an equally romantic African backdrop. For Willem, speaking to me, a researcher, was more of an exercise in public relations. As the man responsible for representing the farm to buyers, supermarkets and government, he was keen to highlight how – far from the oft romanticised or vilified popular image – farming is about running a production-oriented business. Speaking of the 'management side of the table', and the three black employees sitting there, Willem painted a picture in which management and labour are key polarities, as in any industrial operation, but race is not.

Within this new understanding, Michael is a key figure, since he is the one black employee who is not a manual labourer. Willem is keen to promote him as evidence of Grootplaas' businesslike outlook. In conversations with me, he was careful to underline Michael's organisational importance, something he did not do in the case of Marula. Michael's directorship at the British supermarket development foundation lent Willem's assertions greater plausibility, giving a new reality to the figure of black manager, and underlining Grootplaas' willingness to adapt.

Michael's occupation appears to fit better with the younger Willem's account of farming, Marula with that of the older man, Koos. But a non-racial, managerial version of farming barely extends beyond the office. Despite Willem's managerial rhetoric, Grootplaas is run according to highly racialised conceptions of proper pay, accommodation and modes of interaction. Revealingly, when Willem described the farm's labour hierarchy, he listed white before black managers. With Michael, Willem adopts a commanding tone he would not use with whites: words slowly articulated and a hard, monotonous edge to his voice. Whereas with Andre, the white production manager, he discusses progress in the orchards over an afternoon cup of tea in the tea room, with Michael his interaction is kept strictly to



the office. In this regard, Michael remains unambiguously a black worker, separated by the racial divide reflected in the farm-house/compound distinction.

Willem himself draws on both idioms – management and paternalism – depending on the situation. In conversation with me he emphasised the former. But he speaks to workers about his role as protector of his ‘people’: the police, for example, must speak to him before interfering with the farm’s population. While complaining that the minimum wage and accommodation standards make it difficult for them to sustain off-the-books generosity, he and other local farmers talk about their continuing pastoral obligations towards workers: transport to hospital; flexibility about work leave according to workers’ needs; rewarding loyal service through employment into older age and providing jobs for relatives. Some offer free transport to football matches. For the HIV/AIDS peer education team’s Christmas party, Willem’s son, Jacques, shot a warthog for their *braai*.<sup>139</sup> The farmer’s wife may send small birthday gifts to the children of senior workers. The farming family also donates cast-offs to the workforce: the presence in the compound of items like their unwanted dartboard are evidence not only of the farm’s sharp inequalities, but also of farmers’ self-conceptions as benevolent patriarchs.

Willem’s and Koos’ perspectives suggest managerialism at Grootplaas to be little more than rhetoric, a way of casting the status quo in a new idiom while establishing Michael as a symbolic black manager. Neither is managerialism as a description of actual work dynamics widely shared among most established workers. I heard comments criticising Willem’s sharply bounded conception of work for being unusually abrupt. Meanwhile, Koos’ own self-understanding receives support. People comment on his racism, but also praise him for his fluent SeSotho, in which he chats and jokes. Koos’ version of Marula’s position – one involving a vaguely defined, generalised authority, legitimised by workers, cast in a headman-like idiom – is broadly accepted. Koos’ negative opinion of Michael as an ill-fitting member of the workforce is similarly reflected among workers. Although Michael’s new role as supermarket foundation director is important for the farm’s external image, on the farm itself it casts him as different from everyone else and leaves him isolated.

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<sup>139</sup> Barbecue.

This difference, however, is one Michael himself promotes. Willem's need to present Grootplaas as on a trajectory towards adaptation resonates with Michael's own aspirations. Michael and Marula are not merely shaped by the views of their employers. Each promotes his own version of seniority and status. Exploring their self-understandings reveals how managerial and paternalist ideals of labour hierarchy at Grootplaas refract concerns related to Zimbabwean migration into South Africa.

### ***Managerialism and paternalism: conflicting registers of status***

Michael came to the farm in 1997, when Zimbabwe's economy was beginning to suffer but before the exponential increase in emigration. Like many more recent Zimbabweans, he lacks a lifelong farm background and is keen to avoid having people draw the conclusion that he has sunk to the level of farm labourer, an occupation so demonised in Zimbabwe that many farms there historically employed Malawians or Mozambicans (Rutherford 2001). He characterises his past in terms of an education-centred narrative, marked by the accumulation of formal qualifications: O-levels, and diploma courses in Personnel Management, Office Management and Admin, Computers and Modern Management. His parents hailed from a town in southern Zimbabwe, but he was sent to stay with his mother's sister in a rural area. The reason was to ensure that he avoid urban distractions and concentrate on his schoolwork at a church-run day school. For secondary school, he returned to town. When asked in an interview why he left school, he cited financial constraints like many other respondents. But he also added that he wanted to spend his time doing courses relating to his office work, that of till operator in a bakery. At 18 he entered the army for fifteen years, finishing as an administrator/supervisor. After a brief stint driving a taxi he had bought, he visited his now-deceased brother at Grootplaas and found employment. As he recounts his arrival, he had to hide his true, highly skilled nature from workers to avoid hostile attention. Only when he was told there was no permanent labouring job available did he reveal his qualifications and secure himself a 'management' job.

Michael now speaks proudly of his position as 'manager of this organisation', employing distinctly corporate language. But he is also aware that his job can be framed as little more than that of a farm labourer, a feeling

augmented by the contrast between his own fate and that of his younger brother. In 2007, Saul,<sup>140</sup> a registered tour guide living in Midrand outside Johannesburg, visited the farm for the first time, arriving in his new double-cab *bakkie*. As we sat with beers in front of Michael's house, Saul told Michael how he, his older brother, had been a role model growing up. But now he was disappointed: for Michael had become a mere farm worker. Michael validated his position by saying that people here need leaders, but the conversation had touched a nerve.

For those, like Michael, who are disappointed with their fates but have attained a senior post on the border farms, a managerial idiom can serve to maintain a sense of self-respect. Benjamin, the storeman/clerk with whom Michael works, feels a similar ambiguity. Michael emphasises his authority as manager, rather than mere farm worker, by establishing difference from everybody else: through his administrative work, connection to the British supermarket, proximity to the white bosses in their office and private life in the compound, replete with high-status consumer goods. This is one way of dealing with a problem faced by an increasing number of Zimbabweans: how to assert their histories of education and class aspiration, now lost due to economic collapse at home and consequent geographical dislocation. No doubt Michael feels all the more acutely the need to be not 'just' a farm labourer as he seeks out and engages the best educated of the new arrivals.

As the previous chapter illustrated, the class dimensions of this distinction are inflected by ethnic ones, mobilised together in the construction of stereotypes. The core workforce at Grootplaas is Venda speaking. But those seasonal workers who have higher-status backgrounds tend to be Shona, or Ndebele like Michael. Marginalised within Zimbabwe, Venda from the border areas tend to have lower levels of education than people from further north. An established history of work on South African farms contributes to their being cast as overly deferential towards whites and, in a sense, as colonial relics. Seasonal workers with higher status backgrounds assert their difference in ways that mirror Michael's, referring to management books to criticise work dynamics, characterising themselves through education and etiquette and telling stories of home that emphasise access to commodities like cars. The few couples granted their own accommodation invite guests inside their rooms rather than socialise in public.

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<sup>140</sup> Actually his mother's sister's son, but his mother's sister has taken on a motherly role since he lived with her, and especially since his own mother's death in 1996.

Michael's style is impressive to some of Grootplaas' workers with middle-class aspirations. But they are seasonal recruits who move on. And in any case, Michael remains too much of a permanent fixture at the farm for the most elite of seasonal workers to identify with him. Meanwhile, a reaction to this same influx of relatively well-educated Zimbabweans buttresses Marula's position within the more influential permanent workforce. He has accrued widespread respect and status among permanent workers, especially Venda speakers like him, after long years working on border farms. Marula was born on a nearby estate in 1959. His father and two brothers were foremen, his three other deceased siblings farm workers. Although some siblings attended school, Marula never had the opportunity to do so because his parents lacked the money at the point when he might have been eligible. He advanced slowly, beginning as a shepherd, then progressing to gardener, mechanic and driver, and eventually became a foreman. At Grootplaas, he can still point to old boundaries, and the sites of old compounds such as what is now the football pitch, where his daughter was born over 24 years ago. Speaking of his achievements, Marula emphasises his experience. Sons, daughters, other relatives and old friends from the farms visit regularly. He is well-placed to cast himself in the classic patriarchal role.

Marula is increasingly faced with recruits who draw on alternative bases of status to which he lacks access: education, urban sophistication, even non-Venda-ness. He is quick to point out that, while he may have no schooling, he *does* know farming. But this makes it all the more important for him to underline his centrality and superiority within the world of the farm. In this he receives support from senior workers who hail from rural areas just across the national boundary fence. They, like Marula, have attained powerful positions at Grootplaas, but are made to feel like yokels by some of their subordinates. From their perspectives, a previously Venda-dominated area has become overrun by non-Venda. Farm hierarchy is given new meaning as it confronts assertions of superiority based on personal histories far from the farming area.

### ***Conclusion***

Literature on South African farm labour explores paternalism's characteristics, as a benchmark against which to measure its waxing or waning, and hence the transformation of labour relations. The resulting impression is of undifferentiated

workforces experiencing change from above. This resonates powerfully with a popular regional view of farm workers: rag-clad masses on remote, semi-feudal estates. This chapter and the previous one have shown how farm workers are, in contrast, highly differentiated in class, status and ethnic terms.

The value of situational analysis like Epstein's was in exploring how particular relationships and events refract wider processes. At Grootplaas these are of different scales: a personal rivalry between two workers refracts farming's racial micropolitics; the border and Zimbabwean displacement; the South African political context; supermarket corporate social responsibility agendas. These intersect, creating both allegiances and rivalries. In a period of uncertainty in agriculture, different visions of farming – an established paternalist model and a corporate managerial one – are taken seriously for different reasons. Both Michael's and Marula's styles of status and seniority are more than what they seem, and can only be understood through workers' reactions to these broader visions and the processes they entail.

Focusing on two top workers at Grootplaas, we see two visions of agriculture not only coexisting, but actively constituting each other as opposites through their rivalry. Both Marula and Michael are invaluable to the farm; neither can depose the other. Pressure to corporatise comes to farms through particular farmers, like Willem. But they moderate their outlook selectively in light of anti-corporatising paternalist ideals. And a 'modern', even 'neoliberal', hands-off approach leads them to avoid actively engineering change *within* the workforce. The combined effect means that farmers present one face to the outside and another to the workforce. Meanwhile, workers produce or challenge hierarchy themselves. Transformation involves all these, and is thus far from merely planned or top-down.

But Grootplaas lies not merely at the intersection of layered processes, but also of contrasting personal histories. While agrarian transformation itself is not simply cumulative and linear, we must attend to actors' own senses of cumulative experience. This requires transcending classic situational approaches. Epstein's focus on actors' current, situational roles risks being accused of presentism, and begs awareness of how people see the present in terms of their pasts. Understanding Grootplaas residents' roles involves relating them to their criteria of life-success. Marula's position as foreman represents the culmination of his long

rise through farm-worker ranks. Michael's managerial position is the proper endpoint for his accumulation of qualifications. Their dispute is intractable precisely because each man's success frames the other as a failure. Koos sees *his* life as that of the classic white pioneer. His and Marula's interpretations of their pasts reinforce one another. At the same time, Koos' imagination of farming – white visionaries and traditionalist Africans – undermines Michael's educational achievement. Michael's self-understanding undermines Koos' sense of accumulated expertise about 'the people'. The meanings of paternalism and management are shaped, not just by Grootplaas' various relationships, but also by the collision of its residents' historical experiences.

This chapter and the previous two employed a close analysis of dynamics in the Grootplaas workforce. They revealed how established, structured arrangements among residents at the farm both reflect and are produced by wider processes – changes in South African commercial agriculture and the effects of the Zimbabwean crisis. The final chapter of the thesis broadens its scope, while still taking a situational focus on Grootplaas, by examining how the economy of the border and of remittances is structured by farm life.

## Chapter 7

### WAGED ENTREPRENEURS, POLICED INFORMALITY: WORK, THE REGULATION OF SPACE AND THE ECONOMY OF THE ZIMBABWEAN- SOUTH AFRICAN BORDER



Informal *bakkie* taxi carrying departing seasonal workers and their supplies

#### ***Introduction***

As noted in the opening pages of this thesis, southern Africa's centralised, highly regulated economy, built on migrant labour, has fragmented. Many people have turned to informal livelihood strategies. Consequently, according to Jens Andersson, the 'combining of migration and trade indicates that these movements can no longer be defined narrowly as *labour* migration' (2006: 376, author's emphasis). Andersson argues for a shift 'from a focus on economic centres and production relations towards the sphere of economic circulation' (ibid: 394) – in other words from work to trade. Taking seriously the point that migrants move for different reasons according to different patterns, however, means exploring the *intersections* between different forms of human mobility in the region, including

between those oriented around trade and those concerning continuing labour migration. The latter involves attending to how traders and their businesses shape, and are shaped by, the experience and economic arrangements of waged working populations.

The small-scale trade at issue is what is often referred to as 'informal'. Informal economic activity is most simply defined by its extra-legality: 'income generating activities that take place outside the regulatory framework of the state' (Castells & Portes, in Meagher 2010: 14). Following scholars' recognition that state-sanctioned activities and illegal ones often interpenetrate, and may in some cases not be distinct at all, the usefulness of the term 'informality' has been called into question (e.g. Roitman 2004). What doing away with the term leaves unexplored, however, is how informality is constituted in opposition to formal work in particular settings. How, in other words, are small businesses, lacking state regulation, built around centres of waged employment? How they are different from the waged sector, and how do they articulate with it?

This chapter employs the analysis built up through the thesis, of Grootplaas' resident population, to make sense of the wider economy of the Zimbabwean-South African border. Earlier chapters demonstrated how *mapermanent* achieve provisional stability in compound life, and how more marginal farm dwellers relate to and largely depend on them. The thesis now turns to the relationships between border farms' settled populations and small-scale business along and across the border, demonstrating their interrelations. At Grootplaas, formal and informal livelihoods constantly permeate and constitute one another. The border farms represent islands of relative security on the border. White farmers' control of their land is relatively predictable, in part because it can be negotiated through senior black workers, and it mediates the sometimes unpredictable regulation of the state. Further, living in the border farm communities can offer a degree of everyday stability, unlike life in crisis-ridden Zimbabwe to the north, and in contrast to the uncertainty of South Africa's cities. For those employed on an ad-hoc basis or staying on the farms through personal connections, business ventures bring in the regular income that enables them to continue residing there.

There has been a particular lack of attention to the relationships between formal employment and informal trade in the literature on border economies. In anthropological research, borders are often seen as sites of opportunity in the face



of marginality, where state attempts to define spatial boundaries are perpetually confounded by creative enterprises and brokerage. Formal places of work are largely absent from such accounts. Border zones are often sites of activities – smuggling, local ‘vigilante’ justice, unauthorised movement – that are officially illegal but have become accepted features of everyday life for resident populations (see e.g. van Schendel 2005). From border-dwellers’ perspectives, there is an important distinction between ‘formal political authority’ – a legalistic, top-down view – and ‘non-formal social authority’ – local mores that are illegible to the state (Abraham & van Schendel 2005: 19). This distinction is key to understanding the murky realities of border areas. Making sense of economic activity in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, which relies on connections across international borders, MacGaffey (1991) highlights the role of the ‘second economy’, a similar concept to ‘informality’. Creative entrepreneurship seeks out the interstices of state regulation. Keen to show how border areas are more fluid, and the state more contested, than often assumed, anthropologists of borders highlight local arrangements and activities that pass beneath the official radar. In doing so, they explore how illegibility from the view of the state offers opportunities to those in the know. Flynn notes that:

‘Differences in national economic policies, regional resources, and monetary currencies make borders lucrative zones of exchange and trade, often illicit and clandestine. Smuggling occurs across borders around the world, providing an important means of livelihood for border residents and prompting creative social networking and cross-border ties within borderland populations’ (1997: 313).

In this view, then, borders are shadowy places, a far cry from the structured arrangements of on-site workforces. There is some truth to these characterisations, born out by my own observations of the Zimbabwean-South African border. The military are trained in bush tracking by a local game farmer to hunt down Zimbabweans who have come through the fence. They are concerned to catch not only ‘border jumpers’ seeking work in South Africa, but also smugglers. Smuggled goods include precious stones from Zimbabwean mines and contraband cigarettes in bulk. Gangs known as *makumakuma* operate along the border, robbing and raping those attempting to cross. State officials themselves make the most of their location. Reportedly, underpaid Zimbabwean police and soldiers also extract wealth from passing migrants. South African soldiers are known by

Zimbabwean women to accept sexual favours in return for letting them go if they are apprehended.

However, on the banks of the Limpopo, the routine dynamics of workplaces and the businesses of informal traders are deeply intertwined. A narrow focus on the more furtive side of borderlands risks skewing and misrepresenting them. While the existing focus on clandestine activities casts border dwellers as perpetually preoccupied with resisting state regulation, Zimbabwean-South African border dwellers make the most of their location by being *visible* to state officials in a specific way – as waged farm workers. This legitimates their presence, leaving them free to pursue a range of business ventures. Understanding this, in turn, reveals how the border farm workforces shape, and are shaped by, local informal business.

It is not only on borders that informal economic activity, associated with entrepreneurial creativity, is starkly contrasted with the drudgery of formal employment. As in the sharp distinction that is drawn between that which occurs ‘above’ and that ‘below the radar’ in the anthropology of borders, informal economic activity is approached as qualitatively different from waged employment because of the resourceful entrepreneurship involved. What the case of the Zimbabwean-South African border reveals, however, is the tight intertwining of wage-work and small-scale enterprise. Arrivals at Grootplaas seek waged agricultural employment as a foothold in building more lucrative businesses; they take their moneymaking strategies with them as they enter waged labour forces; and they use their incomes to trade goods back home to Zimbabwe.

As the first part of this chapter shows, in many cases such businesses are not so much cases of moonlighting; they are, especially for non-permanent workers, the ultimate goal of farm employment. Their ventures allow them to keep afloat their lives on the farm – a relatively secure island of employment and dense social relationships. Indeed, although some farm businesspeople make considerable profits, others see far more modest returns, enough merely to get by. What they share is a desire to stay on the farm. The second part of the chapter takes a wider view of the border farms, demonstrating further how waged employment establishes workers as traders. Although the thesis takes a workplace as its focus, this part of the chapter brings Zimbabwean workers’ remittances into the analysis. For it is when they remit that many workers’ practices lie at the

interface between wage labour and informal trade. Remittances often take the form of goods for resale, as they seek out further opportunities to make a living in an uncertain and volatile economic environment at home. Striving for a degree of stability and predictability under unstable conditions, displaced Zimbabweans are in this sense both labour migrants and traders.

By unpacking the material and temporal articulations between waged work and other means of making ends meet, this chapter reveals border residents' wider projects to achieve a degree of everyday security through their workplaces. At the same time, it shows the farm compounds to be hubs for the border's economy, illustrating how resident workplaces act as magnets for diverse livelihood activities. First, however, I discuss the meanings of economic 'formality' and 'informality', and their particular regional inflection in southern Africa.

### ***Space and the informal economy in southern Africa***

The official compound shop is located in the middle of the Grootplaas compound. It opens onto the compound hall, a raised concrete area without walls, shaded by a corrugated metal roof, where meetings are held. At weekends, men play pool or table football in the games room, draughts or dice on boards chalked onto the concrete floor of the hall. More generally, when the shop is open it is a place for passing the time of day and catching up on gossip with Esther or Lindiwe, the two black women who are employed permanently as shopkeepers and live in the compound. Even during the working week, there is often someone – an off-duty worker, an unemployed person, or the compound's children – leaning on the shop's fold-down hatch. The shop is the responsibility of the wife of Paul, Koos' son and one of the white farmers. But she rarely enters the compound and, like other white residents at Grootplaas, when she does so she drives in and spends little time outside her four-wheel drive. A diverse stock is kept, catering to the compound's daily needs given residents' limited access to town. Frozen chicken, canned foods for relish, sauces and spreads, milk, painkillers, washing powder, soap, toothpaste, sweets and soft drinks (cans or bottles): this gives some idea of the range. Stock is sold at slightly more than town prices. Airtime (credit) for pay-as-you-go mobile phones is sold at official price and is an especially popular purchase. In South African terms, the shop is much like a lot of general stores.

During the harvest, maize meal is distributed from the shop at bulk-purchase rates on credit to seasonal employees who choose to participate in the scheme. In this respect, seasonal employees are dependent on the farmers for their staple food through a farm-bound paternalist arrangement. The money is docked from their wages. But this is no classic company store, supplying workers with the lion's share of their daily needs while getting them into debt. Except for this maize scheme, the shop requires immediate cash payments. This and its rigid, timetabled opening hours discourage potential customers. And so residents turn towards the more flexible world of compound business. Residents sell groceries, beer and soft drinks from their rooms, on credit and at all hours. There is a slightly higher mark-up on goods than at the compound shop, but profit margins are not large. Men who own *bakkies*<sup>141</sup> drive the border road to the official border post at Beitbridge and to Musina. There is a further plethora of enterprises, from pot-making to hair-cutting, baby-sitting to clothes-mending. These businesses, by offering credit, allow residents to handle the constraints of monthly wage-rhythms.

Meanwhile, on the first Friday of every month – payday at the border farms – large numbers of women travel to the farming area to sell goods to newly paid workers. With wage work paid at approximately the South African minimum wage,<sup>142</sup> those who receive such wages working on the farms represent a lucrative opportunity. Taken together, and in the context of widespread unemployment in South Africa, the farms make up an unusually large, and unusually constant, wage-earning population. Seasonal workers, unable to risk or afford going to town, are especially good customers. Most market traders are Venda and hail from different places in or near the nearby former Venda homeland, or from Musina. Farm sales are part of the monthly regional circuit, with stops timed to coincide with differing paydays. They also stop off at schools when teachers are paid, at offices and police stations after pay and at town markets.

From the perspective of farm residents, these traders satisfy demands for spikes of consumption immediately after pay. For many workers, payday is the time not only to pay off debts to businesspeople in the compound, but also to splash out on new items of clothing, food and non-perishable groceries like soap. Some purchases are for use in the compound, others for remittance.

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<sup>141</sup> Pick-up trucks.

<sup>142</sup> R989/month in 2007. Workers are paid either by the hour, which provides them with this monthly minimum, or, in the case of pickers, according to a piece-rate calculation that leads to underpayment.

Understanding small-scale trade of this kind in relation to labour dynamics requires discussion of the meaning of 'the informal economy'. For Keith Hart, who set the terms of more recent discussions, the formal/informal distinction, at one level a matter of whether or not transactions were subject to state regulation, was also a distinction 'between wage-earning and self-employment. The key variable is the degree of rationalisation of work – that is to say, whether or not labour is recruited on a permanent basis for fixed rewards' (1973: 68). Wilson formulates a version of this distinction as follows:

The surplus labour force must create employment for itself in order to survive. This self-generated employment, marked by a qualitatively different mode of production from that employed in the formal sector, constitutes the informal sector (2005: 38).

This relationship between different forms of livelihood has been interpreted in different ways. The informal economy has been variously valorised or condemned for its difference from organised production, seen as precapitalist, a reserve of potential wage labour and the epitome of capitalist fragmentation, or peopled by budding entrepreneurs (Fernandez-Kelly 2006). While earlier research saw the informal sector as something that would dwindle with expanding capitalist production, more recent analysts have shown this to rest on false, teleological assumptions. Informalisation, far from disappearing, is a worldwide trend with Africa on its frontline: 'the informalising dynamics of contemporary Africa represent an extreme in a wider global trajectory of rapid informalisation' (Meagher 2010: 14). In southern Africa, informalisation is the result of different processes, both Zimbabwean economic collapse (see Jones 2010) and globalised neoliberalism (see Bernstein 2007).

As Fernandez-Kelly (2006) notes, what is required is attention to how informality itself is shaped in particular settings. One approach is to consider the priorities and capacities of different state institutions, as Fernandez-Kelly suggests, since formal work comes within state purview. With regard to borders, this has meant close attention to policing, smuggling and brokerage. The on-the-ground realities of state regulation can lead to the view that the concept of informality is useless and misleading. Taking this position, Roitman (2004) discards the concept of informality outright. She shows how the cross-border trade of guns, diamonds, contraband petrol and other extralegal goods serves to strengthen rather than

challenge the local state in the Chad basin. The trade she observes is therefore not 'beyond the state' or 'antistate' (ibid: 192).

This rejection of informality is a sign of the times. As Meagher remarks,

'amid processes of deregulation, globalisation and weakening states, informal forms of economic organization have become so pervasive, and so deeply intertwined with formal economic structures that the old notion of an "informal sector" or "informal economy" has been called into question' (2010: 11).

However, the complete collapse of the formal/informal distinction leads to a loss of analytical purchase on real differences among economic activities. Arguing that differences have become blurred or non-existent leaves analysts little room to examine the actual processes involved in informalisation (ibid).

Where informality is acknowledged, one danger is essentialising its character. In much research, as illustrated by the border literature discussed above, informality is seen to be characterised by creativity, adaptive agency and entrepreneurship. Such creativity may even spill over, outside narrowly economic strategy. In *Congo-Paris*, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000) describe traders from Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville to Paris, who contest legal, spatial, institutional and moral boundaries through their activities. They 'demonstrate an oppositional counterhegemonic culture in the ostentatious, competitive consumption of their lifestyle' (ibid: 7). Informal traders excitingly shape worlds that are invisible, or only partially visible, to state officials. For some analysts, indeed, this shadowy world is an especial feature of Africa, where 'smugglers, diamond diggers, currency traders, fraudsters and simple migrants all find ways of evading laws, frontiers and official exchanges rates' (Bayart 2000: 260).

What is required is analysis of informal practices with sensitivity to the particular legacies, linkages and localities that shape them (Grabher & Stark, in Meagher 2010: 24-5). What this means is attention to the institutional context, with its changing history. There is more to this than figuring out how the state sees, or what reinforces state power. If the formal sector is taken to mean officially regulated waged employment, as is it for Hart and others, then what demands investigation is the nexus of control by *both state officials and employers*. Preoccupations with entrepreneurial exceptionalism draw attention away from

close analysis of the ways unregulated business and law-bound waged employment constitute one another. The usefulness of the notion of informality is in leaving room to explore this articulation. In border research especially, preoccupations with traffic through the fence may lead informality to be conceptualised narrowly, primarily in relation to illegal trade. This focus leaves less well examined how such practices relate to, and are interwoven with, organised production. The case of the Zimbabwean-South African border enables us to move away from accounts limited to cross-border traders, to explore how 'wage-earning and self-employment' (Hart 1973: 68) articulate. How do businesspeople and waged workers differ in such a setting?

Rather than sharply delimited spheres, 'formal' and 'informal' economies are intimately related to one another. Indeed, their relationship can take different forms. Informal activity can be conceptualised as what happens *beyond* the rules of formality. This is the perspective taken in much of the literature discussed above, and is the version that leads Roitman (2004) to contest the validity of the distinction. But informal activity can also be read as *complementary* to formal arrangements, or even as *necessary* to their function (Hart *pers. comm.*).<sup>143</sup> The case of Grootplaas evidences these latter two definitions. The fact of white farmer control of the land leaves the formal black workforce stranded in the middle of the countryside in compounds, with limited access to goods and services. These are provided informally, by people who rely on connections to the farm through employment and influential friends for their residence. Informal services are what enable workers' lives at the farm, and therefore what underpins the farm's formal production.

Using the formal/informal distinction to make sense of people's livelihood possibilities and their connections has a particular spatial inflection in southern Africa. The region's history has produced particular notions of informality, formality and the relationship between them. Since 'informal' refers to unregulated activity, its meaning has been associated with racialised apartheid- and colonial-era policies that controlled black movement and residence, often in the service of capitalist interests. Resident labour forces have a long history. Historically, black labourers on the mines lived in compounds – in those cases fenced and tightly controlled (Gordon 1977; Moodie 1994). More generally, black movement,

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<sup>143</sup> Thanks to Keith Hart for pointing out this distinction.

settlement and residence was controlled under South African apartheid and in pre-independence Rhodesia, in part by designating townships characterised by regularity, austerity and residents' lack of any permanent rights of tenure (e.g. Ginsberg 1996; Barnes 1999; Lee 2005). In a southern African context, formal employment was historically defined as working for whites, and had a spatial dimension because of corresponding access to accommodation.

It is therefore unsurprising that, as Preston-Whyte (1991) and Bozzoli (1991; 1991a) show, many women who moved to cities during the apartheid era pursued livelihood strategies that were defined in opposition to employment by whites: that is, to their own domestic work or their husbands' waged jobs. In the former case, residence in white homes offered a base from which women could establish businesses such as clothes repairs and liquor brewing. Such women, as in compounds on the mines (see Moodie 1994), established a range of businesses to satisfy black demands for (sometimes illegal) goods and services, in the interstices of white spatial control.

Studies of informal black businesses in white-designated spaces have focused on the mines and on domestic work. Meanwhile, Rogerson contends, 'in South Africa, home-based enterprises, including the running of backyard workshops, hairdressing salons, shebeens, or spaza<sup>144</sup> operations, have long been a hidden feature of the urban scene' (1991: 336). White farming areas have not received the same attention in discussions of the South African 'informal sector'. And yet farm spatialities share features with the spatial orders of domestic work and those of urban township businesses. For on the one hand, black residents live on private, white-owned land and therefore, like many domestic workers, depend on their employers for residence. But on the other hand, the compound is a zone of relative autonomy, where the farmers keep their distance and where black residents openly establish various businesses. Although police and army personnel regularly patrol the farm compounds, they are willing to enter into agreements with farmers about the status of their 'people', even if the latter are undocumented. Being tied into the spatial logic of the farms and their compounds ensures that residing on the border and establishing businesses there are possible. At Grootplaas, the most important conceptual distinction between ways of making a living is not legal (e.g. grocery sales) as opposed to illegal (e.g. smuggling, alcohol

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<sup>144</sup> Small, informal retail shop, often run from seller's place of residence.



sales). Rather, it is farm employment as opposed to other ways of making money while resident on farmers' land.

'Illegality' is marked out in some business settings by its risks. But on the Zimbabwean-South African border, the risks of illegal trade are relatively low. Residents do not foreground distinctions between 'legal' and 'illegal' goods, except insofar as they affect the risk of *kusungwa* (being arrested). While sellers speak of having their beer confiscated by police, I never saw this happen, and it is sold and consumed publicly in the relatively secluded farm compound. Cigarettes are easily mobile and sold in small quantities. And although inspectors occasionally come to check for smuggled meat – the problem here is foot-and-mouth disease – a far greater risk is being caught poaching game from the estate by the farmer. Despite concerns about large-scale smuggling of cigarettes and precious stones into South Africa, farm populations are generally left alone to bring goods through the fence for consumption in the residential labour compounds. In the process, precious stones are sometimes also conveyed. Border-patrol preoccupation with 'illegal' migrants is what isolates seasonal workers, whose fear of arrest turns them into lucrative, captive consumer markets on the border farms. But for businesspeople themselves, crucial challenges stem from the relationship between waged work and their own enterprises.

Could all of this not be interpreted simply as a case of workers moonlighting to supplement their wages? Hart (1973), in his study of economic opportunities in Accra, notes the importance of moonlighting to supplement daily earnings, and shows people juggling different sources of income from both official and unofficial economies. As one would expect, there are many such cases at Grootplaas. Gregory, for example, is a senior permanent employee who works the water pumps in the orchards. Outside his working hours he sets up his Singer sewing machine under a tree in his yard, and plies a brisk trade repairing clothes. His goal, he says, is to live on his income from tailoring so that he can remit his farm wages to keep his children in school.

However, the distinction between farm employment and other ways of making money while resident on farmers' land is characterised by complex mutual dependences, and requires further unpacking. This is more than a case of moonlighting. As we shall see, farm work *itself* cannot be fully understood without appreciating that for many it keeps open valuable informal economic

opportunities, some which bring in more money than agricultural employment itself. Meanwhile, the form remittances take in the context of economic crisis in Zimbabwe blur the lines between formal employment and informal trade. Formal employment may therefore be seen as a key *resource* in wider strategies of business-establishment, material accumulation and attempts to establish predictable lives on the farms.

### ***Making money at Grootplaas: spatial and temporal articulations***

'I am a businessman', announced Chipso triumphantly. Dressed in a suit and wielding a wad of thousands of South African Rands, he was preparing to leave Grootplaas for his home in Zimbabwe following the end of the 2007 harvest. He had worked the picking season in the packshed, loading crates of citrus onto pallets. But the money in his hand was not his pay packet from the farm. He had spent the previous evening rushing around, tracking down the large number of residents who owed him for the loose Madison cigarettes he had been selling throughout the picking season. Bringing cartons across the border from Zimbabwe, he had begun selling cigarettes at Mopanekop, the neighbouring farm, in 2000. He returned there to continue selling during the harvest most years until 2006, when he came to Grootplaas and was employed seasonally, first as a picker and then in the packshed. This was his second year working at Grootplaas, and his cigarette business had flourished. Having stable accommodation during the harvest, a place where customers could find him, as well as a permit (he was one of the few seasonal men to receive one) all helped his enterprise. His case is illuminating. For his cross-border sales preceded waged employment, which then further enabled his money-making. It did so by allowing him a degree of stability, and by securing him a work permit. This meant that police and soldiers, concerned with 'border-jumpers', would leave him alone. Waged employment left him nevertheless feeling fundamentally a businessman, as his sartorial transformation and his explicit declaration, just mentioned, attest. It was a resource in consolidating his enterprise. It made him visible to state officials in a particular way: as a legitimately employed worker.

In some cases, the link between farm work and wider money-making strategies is not merely a matter of secure residence. For some men, it is precisely their *employment* that offers business opportunities. Consider Daniel, a tractor

driver who dealt *mbanje* (marijuana) while working. The *mbanje* is brought through the fence by women, in plastic cups that are a standard unit of sale. His job involved pulling full trailers of oranges from the picking teams to designated places in the orchards, from where further drivers would take them to the packshed. And he would bring empty trailers from here back to the picking teams. There was a lot of waiting, within close range of pickers, offering ample opportunities for clients to approach him. This was essential to his business. For *mbanje* is consumed by men as a work stimulant. He could not have sold as much had he been a foreman, say, in the steady-paced, conveyor belt-driven world of the predominantly female packshed. His close proximity to competitive, aggressive male picking teams was the ideal setting for his business.

Selling cigarettes and marijuana are at least mobile activities. For these, farm employment is useful in embedding sellers in the working population. But many people attempt to establish more enduring enterprises, such as a *spaza* (grocery shop) or *shebeen* (bar). Chipo would have been unable to found anything of this sort because of the seasonal character of his employment: his residence lasted only five months. Daniel had, in fact, sold beer in the past, but had stopped, possibly because illness left him increasingly weak and tired.

Longer-term enterprises develop through stable residence, and at the same time contribute to their owners' rootedness in the Grootplaas population. Consider the case of MaiJimmy (the mother of Jimmy), Daniel's sister. She sells beer from her room, drawing weekend revellers with her sound system. Soldiers, as valued guest customers, sometimes sit inside her room on stools to drink and talk while she shuttles in and out serving beer to sweating Saturday night dancers. But she also sells salt, sugar, light bulbs, toilet rolls, soft drinks, yoghurt and other products from Musina. Having begun by buying a fridge and a single crate of beer for resale in 2005, she had soon extended to *braaing* (barbecuing) small fish called *bakawaya*<sup>145</sup> during the harvest and then to a wider range of stock. She, like other *spaza* and *shebeen* 'owners', relies on her room in the compound for business. She lives and trades there all year round, but to do so she must work the picking season in the packshed, and remain on call for odd jobs as a 'semi-permanent' employee throughout the year – one of around 20 such women. Of course, farm employment brings in money, which is badly needed since she looks after several

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<sup>145</sup> Described to me in English as mackerel.

siblings' children in Zimbabwe, now including those of her brother Daniel, who died in 2007. But, whereas she used to sell 'part-time', alongside more extensive formal employment, she shifted her primary emphasis to her sales as they bring in more cash. Her farm work can therefore not be understood without grasping that what she mainly needs is continued access to her room, in which she can keep and sell her stock. And as one of the established, 'semi-permanent' women at the farm, she has a work permit, which offers her immensely greater security. Meanwhile, the income from her *spaza* enables her to stay at the farm throughout the year, despite the fact that she gets only an irregular income from the farm itself. Both forms of work have allowed her to build a relatively stable, predictable life at Grootplaas among people she knows well. The short-term exchange of her business transactions has contributed to her long-term place in the social life of the compound.

It is less easy for men to maintain a similar balance between wage work and trade. This is because the 'semi-permanent' employment category is exclusively female. Such women represent a reserve of labour to clean the compound and guard the orchards against baboons. They are also retained to mitigate the almost entirely male composition of the permanently resident workforce. Men are either 'permanent', in which case they work full-time throughout the year, or they are 'seasonal', in which case their employment and their status as residents ceases in September or shortly afterwards. Permanent workers do sometimes run businesses like *shebeens* – Daniel did so before his illness – but such enterprises are necessarily undertaken on a part-time basis. Where trader men do benefit from the residential security afforded by work on the farm, it is not their own but their wives' or girlfriends' semi-permanent status that enables this. Full-time male taxi drivers and *spaza/shebeen* owners use their female companions' accommodation as a base. Josiah, for example is a former employee, but because of his girlfriend's continued employment is permitted to stay in the compound and help her run their store. From her room, they sell both beer and groceries. They also attract dancers and gamblers who can listen to booming music under the light rigged on the wall outside. This gathering point is therefore also an ideal place for them and Guidance (Josiah's brother and a picker) to cook and sell *makwinya* (fried dough balls). A major social spot, its role as a *shebeen* overshadows that as a grocery store, rivalling MaiJimmy's establishment on the next row. The room is a crucial

base for income-generating activities, not only for Josiah and his girlfriend, but for his brother Guidance too.

Businesses like MaiJimmy's are supplied by informal taxi services operated by men who own *bakkies* and wait for customers at a clearing on the compound's edge, next to the border road. Basically a lay-by marked off with old tires embedded in the ground, the compound's car park is known by some, jokingly, as Park Station, after Johannesburg's central transport hub. Given the farm's distance from town, it is through these informal taxis that Grootplaas residents mitigate their dependence on their employers. Permanent workers ride them to town for shopping trips after payday, and traders depend on them to bring in new stock. Exploring one taxi driver's experience further illuminates how the nexus of compound enterprises operates.



Park Station

Cornelius was born and grew up on a farm down the road, the son of Zimbabweans although his father became a naturalised South African. He himself holds dual citizenship. He worked for years as a driver for a delivery company based at Polokwane, three hours to the south, using his brother's car. On one trip to Grootplaas he met his wife, who works at the packshed. He started from that date to take regular drives up to the farm when he had time off work. While doing

this, he would offer lifts to people travelling between the farm, the border post and Musina. He quickly realised that he could make much more money by doing this than in his delivery job, and moved in with his wife at Grootplaas. He switched to driving the border route, still in his brother's car, in 2005. He already had some savings, but began to build on them by selling soft drinks from his wife's room in the compound. A reflection of how lucrative such trade can be, he bought a small *bakkie* within the year. Cornelius now has a home at Makushu in the former Venda homeland, beyond Musina to the southeast. He goes there at month-end and holidays, but otherwise stays at Grootplaas with his wife, or in the compound at Swartvlei, another border farm, where a brother of his works.

Cornelius started small, accumulating start-up capital by selling drinks, in a manner similar to other businessmen on the border farms. He, like them, was able to secure the crucially important residential base in the compound. Most permanent employees are men but, as noted, their jobs leave little time for well-developed enterprises. Very few women are employed full-time throughout the year. But 'semi-permanently' employed female residents have both the permanent accommodation and time to run well-established businesses. Men who wish to make a living from business in the compound must also have kinship or other connections with existing residents, which in turn are built through their business activities. Cornelius' experience reflects this. Although he now has a house in Venda, his enterprise continues to depend on residence in the border compounds, and is therefore enabled by his wife and brother's jobs. His business is defined by its simultaneous dependence on and independence from the wage-logic of the farms.

The conditions for residence on the farm are of greater consequence for such informal businesspeople than their legal status. Regulation means sanction from the farmer more than the state here. However, given the hands-off character of white farmers' labour control, this regulation is usually mediated by senior permanent workers. Farmers themselves have limited knowledge of or interest in the goings-on of the compound. Traders and drivers are vulnerable to the power of *mapermanent*, who have the ear of their employer – especially the most senior such as Marula, Michael or Hardship. In Cornelius' case, some workers resent him staying on the farm and making money from the workforce. During my fieldwork, Cornelius was told to leave by one of the farmers, having been accused of stealing

petrol. It emerged, he said, that he had been set up and reported on by influential male workers who had attempted to make advances towards his wife. After being rejected by her, they attempted to get rid of the couple by having her dismissed from employment, thus denying both of them a residential base. Although Cornelius and his wife successfully convinced one of the farmers of the situation and were not ejected, the example shows how precarious their position is. It is not only that Cornelius' position is dependent on his wife's employment and residence. It is also that, as a woman in the compound with no influential male employee to speak for her, his wife's own position is itself precarious because of the considerable power of particular male permanent workers.

Like the 'informal' activities organised around domestic work in South Africa's cities, business possibilities rely on continued residence. But unlike in such situations, the continued right of residence at Grootplaas depends on mediated paternalism. Ultimately, the goodwill of powerful permanent workers is what spells the success or failure of informal business in the compound. They must ensure that they maintain good relations with the permanent workforce, and therefore extend credit on very generous terms. MaiJimmy, for instance, like other similar vendors, sells almost all of her stock on credit, writing customers into her account book and chasing them up after the monthly payday. MaiJimmy claims that she assesses customers according to need rather than trust. She sizes up their domestic obligations – how many mouths they have to feed – and makes concessions accordingly.

These credit arrangements supply traders with customers throughout the month, despite the fluctuations in available cash around the monthly pay cycle. But extending credit is also a risky practice. There is very high labour turnover among seasonal workers, and many leave without settling their debts. Traders attempt to mitigate this by waiting at the farm offices at payday, each with a brown exercise book in which accounts are recorded. Their aim is to catch workers as soon as they receive their money for the month. However, even this strategy is difficult to implement. It is hard to guarantee repayment even from well-known customers. Sellers do not seem to collaborate to blacklist customers who default on their debts. And businesspeople are low-key about demanding their money. Sometimes, sellers' concerns to maintain good relations with customers makes them reluctant to demand the settlement of debts. The official compound shop, established merely

to keep workers supplied with necessities, neither depends for its existence on a healthy profit, nor must it contend with the risks of credit or a precarious foothold in the compound. But traders and drivers have to negotiate their informality, in the sense of running non-farm enterprises on farm land, without enforceable sanctions. For them, flexible hours and generous credit policies are ways to ensure reasonably stable customer bases. Informal business relies on relationships with other farm residents. In turn, businesspeople become key figures in the compound.

Traders and taxi drivers – people like MaiJimmy and Cornelius – are mutually dependent in their precariousness. Drivers not only transport people, they also bring commodities to compound traders. Some charge a small fee. Others buy goods and sell them on to traders at a marked up price. These arrangements are flexible. Drivers might go to Musina even without customers, in order to bring stock, losing money on petrol by doing so. At other times they may bring small packets of goods for no transport fee. Regular customers may have their luggage fee waived when they travel. These concessions are important because compound residents who make a living from selling town goods or providing transport depend on a degree of predictability. They need steady demand and a reliable customer base.

Diverse businesspeople ply their trades at Grootplaas. They do so in the face of residential and financial precariousness. But this ensures that they offer generous terms of credit and are prepared to work all hours. Their flexibility makes them crucial to the Grootplaas workforce. For the fact of monthly pay and consequent cash fluctuations in the compound would make life very difficult without credit. This flexibility both responds to the wage rhythms of the farm, including the rigid hours of the compound shop, and also defines the informal compound economy in opposition to them. The temporal articulations between waged work and informal trade are as crucial as the spatial connections. In the face of the monthly rhythm of farm wages, businesspeople both offer a steady supply of goods and services on credit and require a steady stream of customers, which they ensure through a high degree of flexibility. The constraints placed on farm workers' lives by their white employers offer opportunities to informal businesspeople. But the farms themselves can only function because black residents satisfy these workers' needs by establishing informal arrangements.



The relationship between waged work and informal business does not stop here. Businesspeople in the compound buy their supplies from wholesalers in Musina, and both their trade and that of taxi drivers stem from the farm's isolation. For undocumented seasonal workers, especially, leaving the farm to go to town is a great risk. But in theory, any resident could begin selling goods he or she had bought in Musina, and many permanent workers do so on occasion, capitalising on the expense and difficulty of transport to town in return for a small profit.

In a parallel manner, Grootplaas workers – permanent and seasonal – make the most of the fact that they are in South Africa and can obtain daily necessities, unlike people they have left behind in Zimbabwe. Border farm workers' relative ease of access to basic commodities that are scarce in Zimbabwe shapes the form remittances take. Seasonal workers especially, unsure of their own futures or that of Zimbabwe, attempt to leave their options as open as possible. There is often little distinction between remittances narrowly conceived, consumption on the farm itself and cross-border trade. At Grootplaas, migrants' remittances as members of a labour force and their roles in trade networks require understanding in relation to one another.

### ***Sending soap: remittances as business***

During the period of fieldwork – midway through a period of acute hyperinflation and commodity shortages in Zimbabwe – Grootplaas workers' employment in South Africa represented access not only to Rand currency but also to a range of goods.<sup>146</sup> Sending such goods to Zimbabwe became a key means for workers to send their earnings home, in a form that would hold more stable value than the hyperinflationary Zimbabwean Dollar. Doing so also enabled Grootplaas residents to remain flexible in their investments. For their purchases could be consumed on the farm or sent home as needed, and used or sold there. Consumption in the compound, remittances from farm labour and cross-border trade often blurred into one another. As Rutherford (2008) observes, such survivalist strategies occasionally become means for modest accumulation. Whereas the previous section showed how border trade is structured by workforce dynamics, this section shows how workers' economic strategies responded to the worst period of

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<sup>146</sup> I shift here into the past tense, as what I now describe was a direct result of hyperinflation and supply shortages following government-imposed price-fixing in Zimbabwe, both phenomena specific to the period of fieldwork.

the Zimbabwean crisis. Despite the focus of this present study on labour relations at a workplace, and despite the fact that my limited access to Zimbabwe presented problems gathering data on workers' connections to their Zimbabwean homes, this section broadens the scope of the thesis. It analyses workers' consumption in terms of their remittance practices.

There are differences between *mapermanent* and seasonal workers in their use of earnings, reflecting the contrasting place of farm employment in their lives more generally, as explored in Chapters 4 and 5. Underlying these differences, however, are similar efforts to hedge bets in the face of uncertain futures. Secure employment, and wages according to the South African hourly minimum, enable *mapermanent* to remit larger amounts of cash, and to do so more steadily. *Mapermanent* take goods and money home themselves, send them back with workers from the same area of Zimbabwe, or employ the services of a trusted bus driver at Beitbridge. Cash remittances regularly top R500 monthly, around half of pay, and may exceed R1000 in the case of those with successful business operations. Beyond this, *mapermanent* juggle ways of spending their money. As noted in the opening pages of the thesis, many save for their retirement, acquiring housing materials and occasionally cattle. These larger investments are sometimes achieved through rotating credit groups, which emerge and disappear depending on their members' reliability. At the same time, *mapermanent* invest in life in the compound, as discussed in Chapter 4. Spending on housing, girlfriends and beer, all of which root *mapermanent* in the compound, divert considerable resources from other projects. A third way of spending earnings became particularly important during the period of fieldwork, as hyperinflation rocketed and retail-store shelves in Zimbabwe lay empty. *Mapermanent* would put a large proportion of their earnings – up to R500 monthly – into non-perishable groceries for kin at home.

This somewhat schematic account gives some sense of *mapermanent's* competing priorities. What it does not do, however, is convey the extent to which *mapermanent* attempted to remain flexible in uncertain circumstances. Their use of commodities blurred the boundaries between these apparently different logics of expenditure, allowing particular purchases to be used for different goals as needed.

Among the seasonal workforce, in contrast, pay according to a piece rate leaves many pickers with too little money to send home. Their high turnover also

makes it difficult to arrange remittances. Those hoping to find further employment in cities to the south must factor in the costs of transport, and a brief stint on the border farms leaves little opportunity to arrange remittances. Moreover, whereas *mapermanent* are embedded in networks of other border residents to organise sending resources to Zimbabwe, many seasonal workers, as newcomers, lack the necessary connections. Some seasonal workers do send, or hope to send, something home monthly during their contracts, but the amounts are much smaller than in the case of *mapermanent*. Instead, for many, end-of-harvest spikes in spending form the basis of their remittances. Mirroring *mapermanent* responses to the Zimbabwean crisis, however, seasonal workers' remittances at the end of their 2007 contracts combined cash and commodities. Like *mapermanent*, they attempted to keep their options open, albeit with fewer resources than their core-workforce counterparts.

A starting point for understanding workers' attempts to maintain flexibility is the compound's payday market. At the end of each month, the compounds of the border farms are abruptly transformed by large numbers of saleswomen. The market at the end of the final payday of the harvest is especially large. At Grootplaas, it covers a whole section of the compound around the crèche and adult literacy centre. Women arrive packed onto informal *bakkie* taxis, lugging 'Filipino Suitcases': enormous, tartan-patterned, woven nylon bags – large enough for an adult to fit inside – full of stock. By late afternoon this section of the compound is covered in plastic sheets, on which diverse goods are laid out. There are clothes, new and second hand. Food on sale is both fresh – such as tomatoes, apples and potatoes – and ready-cooked, including hard-boiled eggs and deep-fried chips. *Mashonja* (mopane worms)<sup>147</sup> are sold dried, both long-lasting and ready to cook. Traders also sell music cassettes. Especially popular are non-perishable groceries, such as Omo clothes-washing powder, and the rival powder MAQ. Workers are usually paid during the afternoon. As they filter back from the workshop, the market area fills up with potential customers, who wander among the displayed offerings, browsing, comparing prices, some snacking on the deep-fried chips, apples or hard-boiled eggs being sold. At dusk, traders light candles or turn on battery-powered lamps, which they have embedded in the ground. When trade

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<sup>147</sup> Caterpillars of a large moth, dried for sale and fried or stewed as a relish.

finally wanes, well into the night, the traders sleep on their plastic sheets, by their stock.



Monthly payday market in Grootplaas compound

In 2007, departing seasonal workers at Grootplaas bought large quantities of goods from the market for remittance. These included clothes, but groceries predominated. Trips by taxi to Musina, en route to the border post, were further occasion to procure supplies. There was little fear of deportation among those already on their way to Zimbabwe. In Musina, one man bought a DVD player, at his wife's behest, as well as a new case for a mobile phone he had bought second-hand from another departing worker, and Chipu, whom we met earlier, bought a two-foot tall amplifier – both from a shop where a former farm worker from the border area now worked. But far more popular, and reflecting spending in the compound, were the wholesalers where compound traders themselves buy their wares. The Musina trips were, in effect, a means to circumvent the middle-man, since they involved very similar purchases to those made at the market. Departing workers spent very large amounts of money on groceries. Chipu and his wife, for example bought a vast quantity of different items – biscuits, corn snacks, a box of green-bar clothes soap, a bag of bath soaps, rice, flour and a number of other things. The total cost was R665, the majority of a monthly wage at Grootplaas.



Seasonal workers leaving the compound after the harvest, and waiting with luggage at the border, after a trip to Musina

These spikes of spending reflect wider choices about consumption, oriented towards remittance. Both permanent and seasonal workers send both cash and commodities home to kin. Their ad-hoc remittance strategies contrast with the model suggested by classic accounts of regional labour migration from the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Mayer 1980; McAllister 1980; Murray 1981), which focused chiefly on the gold mines. In those cases, male labour migrants in the region remitted wages with the very particular goal of building up their homesteads. Like their contracts for employment, their remittances appeared highly structured. Social mechanisms strongly encouraged labour migrants to avoid spending their wages at their workplaces and to send home the cash they earned. Indeed, in some cases like that of Mozambican miners, this was formalised through a system of compulsory remittance.

But there has also been a long regional history in which migrants sent home a range of commodities in a more ad hoc manner, to address supply differentials between places of work and home. Zimbabwean women have sold crotchetware and cigarettes in South Africa and returned with in-demand goods at least since the 1980s (see Zinyama 2000; Muzvidziwa 2001). In the early 2000s, Mozambicans in Mpumulanga Province, South Africa, would take home whatever commodities were needed (Norman 2005). During acute hyperinflation and supply shortages in Zimbabwe, Grootplaas employees sent a lot of their remittances in the form of diverse goods – a picture that defies an overly structural account. This cannot be seen as an unprecedented response to the Zimbabwean crisis, given the

well-established practice of using migrant earnings to send home needed items. But just as Zimbabweans responded to Economic Structural Adjustment Policies by expanding and adapting existing patterns of cross-border trade in the 1990s, so those who worked on South African farms between 2006 and 2008 reoriented well-worn practices of remittance-in-kind to address contemporary economic troubles at home: the range of goods they sent, including basic staples, reflected the widespread shortages there.

Zimbabwean farm workers engaged with hyperinflation through particular strategies of remitting goods. As economic anthropologists have shown, in any social setting there are categories of wealth that are not exchangeable for one another (e.g. Bohannon 1955; Gudeman 2010; see also Parry & Bloch 1989). Distinct categories of value may be especially useful for labour migrants facing the perennial problem of earning wealth, sending it home, but not being around to control its use. Ferguson (1985, 1992) explores the remittance strategies of male labour migrants from rural Lesotho. They invest in cows, which are purchasable with cash, but can only be sold – re-exchanged for cash – under dire circumstances. By buying cows and defending the one-way barrier between livestock and money, these men attempt to hold value in a form protected from the everyday material demands of kin at home.

But Zimbabwean labour migrants on South African border farms have done the opposite, responding to economic crisis at home by *avoiding* investing in goods not easily re-exchanged there. Rather than sending goods whose use and exchange can easily be controlled, they have hedged their bets as a response to hyperinflation. As noted, almost all sent both goods and cash, in somewhat varying proportions, but it is the *choice* of goods that is most revealing. Although especially permanent workers would invest in things like livestock and housing materials, most non-cash remittances took the form of small, everyday commodities that could both be used back at home or resold there for Zimbabwean Dollars as needed – things like soap, cooking oil, flour, matches. Grootplaas workers followed remittance patterns more akin to those of cross-border traders than the classic cases of Southern African labour migration. Sending goods with different possible uses – either easy exchange or non-conversion – was a response to the particular effects of Zimbabwean hyperinflation. Zimbabweans at Grootplaas relied on *fluid* boundaries between small commodities and cash. Their remittance of a range of

staples addressed shortages that resulted from government-enforced price-fixing. Meanwhile these staples could easily be sold in small quantities, for Zimbabwean Dollars that were necessary but lost value at an alarming pace.

By bringing goods to Grootplaas and its neighbours, therefore, the monthly market traders were not only supplying commodities for daily use. They were also delivering supplies which could be remitted. In the context of hyperinflation-induced price-fixing, non-perishable groceries had particular value. Firstly, families relied on migrants outside Zimbabwe to send groceries for their own use. Cooking oil was hard to acquire in Zimbabwe for a while and consequently Grootplaas workers would send it home. The large quantities of body cream and washing powder sold at the compound market on the last day of the 2007 harvest were not just for use in the compound. With certain items, shortages in Zimbabwe offered a further possibility: to take home a non-perishable good in bulk, and sell it off as cash was needed. Green bar soap – each piece around a foot long, and used to wash clothes – is particularly well suited to transport. The long oblongs do not decompose and come in neatly packed wholesale boxes of 24. One way to hold wealth when remitting, therefore, is to become a trader oneself, albeit on a very small scale. The market traders who come to Grootplaas therefore sell to people who now extend trade networks into Zimbabwe in response to distribution problems there. The farm represents a nexus-point in a wider regional, informal-sector supply chain, because it is the source of waged employment.

The crucial point here, however, is that soap and similar commodities lent themselves to *different* uses. I heard both personal use and resale cited as reasons to remit such items rather than money. But remitters did not need to decide beforehand: kin needed soap, but they might also use it to exchange for Zimbabwean Dollars. This was important given the potential risks of being caught selling Rands for Zimbabwean Dollars on the black market.<sup>148</sup> Similarly, goods bought for use in the compound could also be used for remittance. Just as soap and cooking oil offered flexibility back at home, possessions at the farm defied sharp distinctions between goods for the workplace and those for remittance. Many at Grootplaas feel themselves to be in exile from economic circumstances back in

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<sup>148</sup> In September 2008, Zimbabwean Central Bank Governor Gideon Gono licensed certain shops to sell goods for foreign currency (Mail & Guardian 2008). Since then, Zimbabwe has moved towards being officially a multi-currency economy, with the Zimbabwean Dollar alongside the US Dollar and the South African Rand. At the time of my fieldwork, however, Rands could not legally be used in shops.

Zimbabwe, where their earnings rapidly declined in real value. Such purchases – hotplates for cooking, blankets and crockery for comfort in compound rooms, warm fleece jackets for early mornings at work – operate as another way to hedge bets. This by setting up lives at Grootplaas with items that can also easily be taken and used at home when necessary. Attempts to establish the conditions for congenial domesticity, described in Chapter 4, do not preclude later reuse of some resources beyond the farm. This is all the more important, given the uncertain future of Grootplaas itself, to which I turn in the Conclusion of the thesis.

During the period of fieldwork, Zimbabweans at Grootplaas did not target particular forms of wealth that kept spheres of use and exchange sharply separated. Quite the opposite: they kept their options open with goods that blurred such distinctions, a response to the unsettling instability of hyperinflation. Appreciating Grootplaas employees' flexible approach towards commodities – eliding work use and home use, personal consumption and trade – in turn enables us to understand their responses to hyperinflation as part of a wider reorientation of the border's economy. In turn, it once again calls into question sharp distinctions between wage work and other ways of making ends meet on the border.

### ***Conclusion***

Anthropological literature on borders often focuses narrowly on the clandestine informal economy. By neglecting wage-work in such settings, such authors cast a sharp distinction between informal and formal economic activity that ignores the ways workplaces relate to their surroundings: the world of 'production' to the world of 'reproduction'. By celebrating the below-the-radar creativity of informal entrepreneurs, without exploring the articulation between such businesspeople and formal wage work, organised production is often marginalised from accounts. Reflecting this, Andersson (2006) neglects 'productivism' – a focus on labour relations – in his account of migrant trade with which I began. This chapter has offered an account of informal economic activities that explores their articulation with wage-work. What Grootplaas illustrates is how a workforce both structures and is structured by the local informal economy.

On the Zimbabwean-South African border, a range of goods and services is key to the economic life of the area's agricultural estates. Settler agriculture, to keep turning a profit, relies on diverse informal efforts to meet basic needs in



workforces. In turn, some link with secure employment at the farms is imperative if one is to establish business activities. Jobs ensure accommodation, and recognition of employment by soldiers and police ensures a degree of security. Traders either hold agricultural jobs themselves, or live with others who do, calling into question any sharp distinction between the workforce and the various enterprises that surround it. Formal and informal livelihoods not only coexist, but also directly constitute one another. Meanwhile, understanding the logic of consumption at the farms' monthly markets blurs boundaries between workers and entrepreneurs, as farm employees often plan to resell goods in Zimbabwe as a response to economic uncertainty there. They work as small-scale traders in response to acute commodity shortages at home. From one perspective, Grootplaas' compound is full of businesspeople. But these various forms of work and exchange are all ways that Grootplaas residents, surrounded by transience and uncertainty, reorient their practices to establish provisional stability. The Conclusion of this thesis turns to the theme of uncertainty itself, exploring Grootplaas residents' prospects as the farm's future is called into question.

## CONCLUSION: BETWEEN PRODUCTION AND FRAGMENTATION

What might be the fate of the arrangements described here in the longer term? Two developments towards the end of my fieldwork had profound implications for the future of Grootplaas, and the fate of its residents. One was the Zimbabwean elections of March 2008. The other was the appearance of a research team looking for coal in the uncultivated parts of the border estates, as farmers considered selling their land to mining concerns. Each was the subject of intense discussion in the compound. Here were two sources of possible change in the lives of workers and their dependents. From the point of view of this thesis, these two moments provoke wider reflection. Caught between fragmentation and organised production, what are the prospects of farm workers on the Zimbabwean-South African border?

### ***Continuity and change: the 2008 Zimbabwean election and the coal prospectors***

On Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2008, the day of Zimbabwe's presidential and parliamentary elections, the excitement in the Grootplaas compound was palpable. Some *mapermanent* were wearing bright yellow T-shirts advertising Simba Makoni, the presidential candidate for the breakaway faction of the MDC opposition party. The T-shirts had been distributed at the Beitbridge border post, and Grootplaas residents had acquired them en-route from a trip to Musina. Few farm dwellers, however, ended up crossing the border to vote. Many had not been able to return to Zimbabwe to register, during the official period several months before. For others, the trip to vote was too expensive and meant taking time off work. There were also concerns in some quarters about political violence, and assumptions that the elections would be rigged as earlier ones had been – '*zvakangofanana*' ('it's all just the same') was one way I heard this put. Nevertheless, the results were eagerly anticipated by most. Discussions around the compound conveyed the hope – for some the belief – that this election *would* be different to previous ones: that it would be fair and would bring a new government to power. One worker, in greeting as he walked passed, mimed a spanking action in

the air. The MDC symbol is an open hand; the spank, I was told, symbolised 'the MDC effect' on ZANU(PF) in the elections.

Strikingly, given the political atrocities that have characterised recent ZANU(PF) rule, much talk of change was less concerned with the cessation of violence than with what one might expect in less volatile settings: the implementation of effective policy. 'Why is Mugabe saying what he *will* do; why has he not already done it or [why is he not] doing it now?' asked one man. Another expressed the matter by means of an agricultural metaphor: 'we need to change fields from a non-productive to a productive one'. Hope for a better Zimbabwe emphasised economic improvement, and many saw an MDC government as a way to bring back 'white investment'. Underlying all this, however, was an awareness of recent injustices, although this was still couched in relatively mild terms. Mugabe was not a 'tyrant', but 'a father living well while not supporting his family'. Support for Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the main MDC opposition party, was expressed in similarly low-key terms. He was a good prospect, not because of his stirring qualities, but because his recent arrest and assault proved that he *was* in opposition rather than being a collaborator in Mugabe's regime. Border farm residents' hopes for change thus focused both on the possibilities for economic stabilisation and improvement, and on the possibilities for an end to the brutality of the current regime. But in both cases they were cautiously expressed.

Soon, however, the mood in the compound turned less hopeful. The elections had been on a Saturday; by midweek there was still no announcement of the winner. Rumours about the imminent release of results, fuelled by media speculation, proved unfounded. Residents rushed to their televisions and radios after work each evening in vain. A week after the polls closed, MaiJimmy the *shebeen* owner, upset and suspicious, complained to her customers: ZANU(PF) was already talking about a re-run of the election, even though no official results had been announced.<sup>149</sup>

Workers' anticipation of change at home was replaced by their resignation about the confirmation of ZANU(PF)'s stranglehold on power. Circumstances

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<sup>149</sup> The two MDC factions were eventually recognised as constituting a parliamentary majority. In early May, a re-run for the Presidency was declared, as Tsvangirai's lead over Mugabe was deemed too small to constitute an outright victory. In the June re-run of the elections, ZANU(PF) backed violent reprisals against opposition voters, and Tsvangirai consequently retired from the presidential race. A 'power-sharing' deal was struck, with Mugabe continuing as President and Tsvangirai as Prime Minister. ZANU(PF) retained control of state institutions such as key state security forces.

appeared set to continue as before, and this continuity was underlined by the arrival of the harvest in Grootplaas' yearly productive cycle. Once again, hundreds of prospective pickers climbed through the border fence, lacking other livelihood options. Among them, as before, were those who feared for their safety, but now with greater intensity. They had voted MDC and now faced a litany of violent acts by youth militia, state security personnel and war veterans backed by ZANU(PF).<sup>150</sup> George, the picker described in Chapter 5, was one such fugitive. Grootplaas residents had not been unrealistic about the speed of Zimbabwe's hoped-for transformation; the kinds of changes that would allow them to leave farm employment would, they expected, take a long time. The damage done to the Zimbabwean economy would, it was often remarked, take years to undo, even with a new government. But at least, they felt, a new government would mark the eventual end to Zimbabwe's turmoil. However, it was now clear that the political situation that underlay Zimbabwe's crisis remained in place. Residents now increasingly spoke of the power behind Mugabe of Joint Operations Command – the clique in control of state security forces – and the generals' own pecuniary interest in maintaining current conditions.

Farm workers' indefinite dependence on farm employment was what the elections – and the fact that they brought no change for ordinary Zimbabweans – underlined with stark clarity. As Worby (2010) notes, one characteristic of the Zimbabwean crisis from the point of view of displaced Zimbabweans is its open-endedness, its 'temporal uncertainty' and its 'indefinite indignity'. Competing with a sense of temporary exile, therefore, is one of 'abjection', the sense of 'debasing, hopelessness and socio-political ostracism' (ibid: 431) that results from the collapse of previous notions of life-success and personal progression (see Ferguson 1999). For Grootplaas' more transient residents, in particular, there was no end in sight to a life of employment-seeking migration.

What made all of this worse was the gradual realisation that the future of the border farms themselves was anything but secure. *Mapermanent* themselves, it seemed, might soon join their seasonal counterparts as part of a floating regional reserve of labour. In the last six months of my fieldwork (i.e. from late 2007), rumours began spreading of the possible sale of Grootplaas to a coal mining concern. It had long been known among farmers and *mapermanent* that there was

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<sup>150</sup> See Introduction.

coal under the farm, and some long-term compound residents had anticipated such a sale. But whereas in the past the farmers had merely prospected themselves, now an Australian multinational corporation was taking core samples from across the estates. The uncertain future of the farm highlighted the contrast between the attitudes of *mapermanent*, those of the seasonal workers, and those of the farmers. *Mapermanent* had invested in the compound and had settled in its barrack housing. For them, Grootplaas was their home. Seasonal workers were less rooted in life at the farm than *mapermanent*. But, for many of them, the farm was a point of stability in a continual search for livelihood. Not only a place of employment, it was also a hub of diverse relationships. It was a place to which they knew they could return each year for work, and where they could expect to see familiar faces. For the white farmers, as for their core employees, the farm was home. However, faced with a precarious environment for white commercial agriculture, farmers increasingly saw the estates in terms of business decisions. The prospect of land claims on the border farms had led them to view their land as an asset. If necessary, they would sell for as good a price as possible before moving on. Unlike members of their black workforce, the farmers could – and did – respond to insecurity by becoming more flexible capitalists with a portfolio of investments.

Circumstances in Zimbabwe thus leave farm residents still dependent on South African employment. But particular sites of agricultural employment – well-known social hubs, in which conditions of work and residence have customarily been ameliorated by connections to senior workers – look increasingly insecure. Their disappearance would have an impact on many seasonal workers and transient residents. It would, however, represent an especially acute predicament for *mapermanent*. Farmers now spread their risk by planning to move on in the event of a successful land claim. *Mapermanent*, however, are unable to mitigate their own risk by such means. The decline of Grootplaas would mean a loss not only of occupation, but also of residence and a web of social relationships: indeed, of the very ‘hubs of employment’ with their accompanying structured arrangements which this thesis has analysed.

Faced with the possible end of life at Grootplaas, *mapermanent*'s responses were varied. One worker with a long history of employment, who had been living at the farm since before the present farmers bought it, assumed that residents would simply stay put and revert to subsistence agriculture, planting mealies

(maize). After all, this was not only a commercial farm; it was also a home to black residents. A female compound-dweller asserted a similar sense of the right to reside when she commented: 'If this mining comes here they are bound to look for other places for us because we have been staying here for a long time and we will not go anywhere. This is our home; they must build houses for us. Where will we go?'

Most *mapermanent*, as noted elsewhere in the thesis, have homes in Zimbabwe where they can reside, but Zimbabwe's ongoing crisis means that such homes are places merely of shelter, not production or sustenance. The situation is even more tenuous, and extends beyond the 'Zimbabwe crisis', for senior workers like Michael and Marula: the former a Zimbabwean, the latter a South African. In both cases, the overturning of the fragile and delicate balance presently in existence on border farms would spell massive and unsettling change. Michael, having long lived a mobile existence, is only now beginning to build a rural home for his retirement. He believes that his qualifications would make him a valuable asset elsewhere in South Africa if he left the farm, but the number of highly qualified Zimbabweans seeking work makes any better-paid or higher-status employment doubtful. More likely, he would start to resemble Jameson or George, who sought short-term contracts for wages while at the same time attempting to retain their fragile self-understandings based on their status in a previous life. Marula, in contrast, has no home beyond Grootplaas, except his mother's house in Musina's township. In a manner typical of the classic South African farm worker, he felt that he had the right to live and work at Grootplaas because of his long personal, familial and working history there. Such claims, however, are unlikely to be observed by a transnational mining corporation. In all likelihood, if the border farms disappear, *mapermanent* will join their seasonal counterparts, moving from place to place in search of waged employment. In the process, they will lose the various forms of status and stability they have secured in the farms' workforces.

This story of the two scenarios of change, with the threats and promises they contain, raises wider questions about the relationship between fragmentation and production in contemporary southern Africa. Whereas this thesis explored their intersection through a study of labour relations, it concludes by reflecting on the further fragmentation that will likely result from the decline of hubs of

employment and the unravelling of their structured labour arrangements. This, in turn, throws into relief what would be lost in the case of such decline.

### ***Fragmentation and capitalist production***

The two aspects discussed above - Zimbabwe's recent crisis and the insecurity of South African agriculture - both have particular causes, though these are intertwined.<sup>151</sup> However, their *effects* contribute to a process of fragmentation that is endemic in the southern African region, as argued in the Introduction to this thesis. Such uprooting of populations produces a floating reserve of vulnerable work-seekers, and has widely been seen as central to the creation of workforces under capitalism. According to this narrative, economic relations - including labour relations - are disembedded, disconnected from the various social ties of power and obligation in which people live. The employment relationship becomes one of contract, and workers become atomised and alienated from one another. In Marx's somewhat ironic terms, workers are 'freed' from social and material obstacles - existing hierarchies and access to resources - to seek new employment, or reject wage work altogether and starve (see Elster 1985: 211). Does fragmentation in southern Africa lead to a similar disembedding of economic relations in the interests of capital?

Karl Polanyi's classic account of the genesis of industrial capitalism explores this topic. In *The Great Transformation* (2001[1944]), he argues that fragmentation made possible the creation and intensification of capitalist production in the paradigmatic case of 19<sup>th</sup>-century England.<sup>152</sup> A market-driven capitalist economy, he asserts, depends on markets in labour and land - people and natural resources - which have to become commodities for purchase and sale. Economic relations, including labour relations, had to become disembedded from the web of social ties in which people lived and from which they derived support.

Labour, like land, is a 'fictional commodity' because people are not merely produced for sale. Their commoditisation is ultimately unsustainable because it

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<sup>151</sup> See Alden & Anseeuw (2009) on the influence of Zimbabwean on South African land reform.

<sup>152</sup> Though largely a historical account about England (and secondarily Europe) in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Polanyi's narrative offers a way of thinking comparatively about the place of economic relations and wage work in social life. This requires a somewhat schematic view, which downplays the complexities of Polanyi's account. A comparative and schematic use of Polanyi's insights is nevertheless invited by his own use of ethnographic and historical examples to broaden the scope of his argument.

creates impossible conditions for life. Nevertheless, people's productive activities – their labour – come to be reconceptualised as something available for purchase. The creation of waged workforces required 'the smashing up of social structures in order to extract the element of labour from them' (ibid: 172). What this meant was breaking down forms of dependence – those of kinship, as well as vertical ties of paternalism – and replacing them with individualised contracts:

'To separate labour from other activities of life and to subject it to the laws of the market was to annihilate all organic forms of existence and to replace them by a different type of organisation, an atomistic and individualistic one' (ibid: 171).

For Polanyi, this is not merely an English story. He is keen to show parallel processes at work in colonial settings, including in South Africa (ibid: 164-5). In such settings, 'the disintegration of the cultural environment of the victim is ... the cause of the degradation' (ibid: 164). The result, whether in England or in South Africa, is the atomisation of workers' lives, and a disembedding of their labour from social relations.

Though not the result of deliberate policy to create a workforce,<sup>153</sup> the effect of Zimbabwean displacement has been that it causes Zimbabweans to travel – alone or in small groups – to places away from home to work for wages. The atomising effects described by Polanyi appear to be illustrated by the experiences of seasonal workers on the border farms. Their insecure existence, bare accommodation and merely provisional associations with one another turn them into conveniently malleable units of labour. Within the region, such displacement has its precedents. As Chapter 3 showed, upheavals north of the Limpopo River have long created a flow of potential workers willing to engage in employment avoided by South Africans. However, unlike the 'delayed proletarianisation' of classic regional literature, in which workers relied on a rural base to supplement their wages, many of today's displaced Zimbabweans are the sole source of income for their kin. Many, indeed, with urban backgrounds and total dependence on waged employment, have no rural base at all. Like Polanyi's 19<sup>th</sup>-century workers, the displacement of Zimbabweans leaves them entirely at the mercy of capitalists' demands for labour. Indeed, the ad-hoc, mobile livelihood strategies pursued by

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<sup>153</sup> As were earlier patterns of labour migration in southern Africa. See Introduction.



many who come to the border farms as seasonal workers seem perfectly to epitomise Marx's characterisation of proletarian life, noted above.

For 'respectable' Zimbabweans who now find themselves on commercial farms, the experience is one of precipitous decline. In this respect they resemble the country folk whom Polanyi depicts settling in urban industrial settings: 'the moral and cultural catastrophe of the English cottager or copyholder of decent ancestry, who found himself hopelessly sinking in the social and physical slums of some Northwestern factory neighbourhood' (ibid: 182). As I have shown in this thesis, what Zimbabwean fragmentation has created is a large population of diverse migrants who, despite their contrasting backgrounds, now represent a large labour reserve on which white farmers and others are able to draw. Zimbabwean displacement appears to have created precisely the disembedding of economic relations that enables uprooted migrants' labour to be bought and sold as easily as possible.

However, understanding the relationship between regional fragmentation and capitalist production requires that we distinguish different forms of economic disembeddedness.

### ***Between production and fragmentation: a mediated paternalism***

The discussion above focuses on the circulation of uprooted people as wage-dependent workers. People become detached from wider ties, and are left as mere workers, because they are forced to leave home and follow potential employment. This is disembeddedness as a *precondition* for the creation of workforces. In today's southern Africa, as in Polanyi's England, the making of such a labour force is helped along by the fragmenting effects of displacement. Workers' labour is seen as a commodity by the time they arrive for recruitment.

But what about the organisation of work itself? Workers' relations with their employers and with one another, *as workers*, are often seen as similarly disembedded from wider social ties. Carrier (1992), in his study of changes in the organisation of production during the rise of industrial capitalism, notes a gradual separation of work from non-work settings. At work, he contends, there is 'a growing alienation of people from each other, from their activities and the products of those activities' (ibid: 553). Workplaces, in other words, are increasingly impersonal spaces, with workers reduced to their functional roles,

defined by contracts. With the rise of flexible accumulation, such commoditisation is intensified. Indeed, for Sennett (1998), the short-term nature of recent capitalism 'corrodes' people's very character. They are induced to display traits that reflect the organisation of production: 'the capacity to let go of one's past, the confidence to accept fragmentation' (ibid: 63). In other words, the disembedding of one's own labour, of one's capacity to secure a livelihood, must appear a virtue since it complies with the logic imposed by capitalism.

As this thesis has shown, the impersonalisation of work relations and the emphasis on workers as mere labour are often ways for employers to abrogate responsibility for their employees. This is especially clear among farmers in South Africa. Many farmers, responding to wider instability, attempt to negotiate relationships with their workers through a shift to the language of markets.

However, to understand the nuances of impersonalisation, and alienation in labour relations, it is not enough to look at employer-employee relations. Labour processes often rely on manifold personal, non-contractual relationships and obligations among workers (see e.g. Burawoy 1979). Appreciating this complicates notions of the disembeddedness of labour. What the apparent disembeddedness of labour relations disguises is the 'social embeddedness of capitalist forms of livelihood' (Mollona 2009: xvi). The case explored in this thesis takes this observation further. For it shows how, in cases where employers move towards narrower notions of contract-based work, senior workers may continue to operate according to established arrangements, or even intensify them. They do so to maintain their own status using existing idioms of authority. In doing so, they maintain forms of labour hierarchy that embed work in other aspects of life, creating a mediated paternalism.

This thesis therefore demonstrates that farmers increasingly respond to surrounding pressures by treating their workers' labour as a commodity – the object of purchase and sale. This takes the form of a shift from settler paternalism towards a businesslike, corporate-style managerialism. However, what the thesis also shows is the shift of paternalist roles down the labour hierarchy. Despite the distance many farmers put between themselves and their workers' lives, and despite some farmers' eagerness to assert that employment contracts are the extent of their obligations, *mapermanent* place themselves at the centre of webs of vertical dependence in workforces. Workforce hierarchy, forms of authority

outside working hours and domestic life in the compounds are all interrelated. In turn, they all reflect the continued existence of paternalism in the workforce, despite its abrogation by employers.

Such mediated paternalism in turn affects labour circulation. This is the first sense of disembeddedness, discussed above. It is explained by Breman, who draws on Polanyi to observe a 'Great Transformation in the setting of Asia'. He notes the character of migration in such a context of upheaval:

'Circulation is work related ... Those who are not fit to work, because they are too young or too old to earn at least their own keep, are discouraged from accompanying members of the household who move off. It means that labour power, not the social unit of which it is part, is made mobile' (2009: 6).

The contrast between Breman's description and the case of the border farms is instructive. The number of dependents and the presence of children on the farms suggests that the situation is less clear-cut than one in which only labour power is made mobile. Further, there are different forms of labour on the farms, all embedded in the mediated paternalism through which *mapermanent* remain influential. The dynamics of formal employment, domestic relationships and the work of traders and drivers show that 'social units' and 'labour power' cannot be separated here.

All of this could be seen as paralleling Carrier's remark that, in the history of industrial capitalism, 'workers frequently found informal ways to assert their control over production and to introduce sociality into the impersonality of the firm' (1992: 552). It also appears to parallel Polanyi's (2001[1944]) claim that, because attempts to commoditise people's lives are unsustainable (people cannot live according to the whims of market demands), there must be a 'double movement'. Workers and others respond to the vagaries of a market economy by protesting, and forcing the implementation of ameliorative measures. But what this thesis shows is that production need not be based on disembedding workers from social arrangements at all. While *employers* treat employees as commodities, and limit their obligations to contracts, this does not mean that *workers* see one another in the same impersonal manner. Indeed, it is the fact that they do not do so that enables efficient production and accrues profits to employers.

This suggests a broader conclusion. The fragmentation that leaves whole populations desperately seeking waged employment provides vulnerable, malleable workers. Indeed, as Polanyi shows, such fragmentation lies at the heart of capitalist production. But this disembedding is not simply paralleled in workers' relationships. Workers are not necessarily alienated from one another. On the contrary, this thesis has shown how workforces transform the fragmentation around them and embed workers in new social arrangements. Capitalist production, driven by the need to turn a profit while harnessing wider instability, often leads to the decline of paternalist ties at the level of employers/landlords. But matters may be more complicated in labour hierarchies themselves, as workers maintain their own version of vertical, socially embedded forms of obligation.

### ***Coda: a return to circulation?***

This conclusion is not necessarily one which bodes well for the future. There are two aspects to its lack of optimism. Firstly, as Mollona (2005) notes, the embedding of workplace arrangements in wider social relationships is often a response to intensified exploitation, and one that allows workers to exploit one another. Flexible regimes established by employers can create relations of bonded labour among workers. Social embeddedness is not always of equal benefit to all. The blurring between work and non-work authority in Mollona's case of Sheffield steel workers bears striking resemblance to the material discussed in this thesis:

'Through their power and authority, embedded in the social hierarchy of the neighbourhood, [the senior workers] coerce the younger workers of the factory and external contractors into production. Outside the shop-floor, the elder workers coerce their children and wives into informal production and control the flow of money and labour' (2005: 544).

Just as pre-capitalist forms of dependency were exploitative, though in different ways to the arrangements of waged labour, so non-contractual ties between workers enable certain powerful figures to benefit at the cost of others. On the border farms, dense webs of relationships mean that work is anything but impersonal and disembedded from social life. Life on the farms is also, however, profoundly unequal.

The second aspect returns us to the point mentioned above: the finite character of border farming and its probable decline. If employers move, they rupture the dense social ties among workers, on which effective work depends. The fact that work relies on diverse arrangements and relationships among workers renders the end of employment another form of displacement. It leaves them free, once again, to sell their labour in a fragmented, mobile population. Even formerly permanent workers may become disconnected from stable social relationships, seeking buyers of their labour power. Seasonal workers will come to lack a hub of known social relationships, in which working life is embedded.

It is as yet unclear what will happen to the border farms, but the dangers invite a fittingly Polanyian gloss. As Polanyi might see it, the potential end of South African border farming represents an intensification of the process of land commodification. For Polanyi, not only labour but also land is commoditised in the establishment of capitalism, and is thereby 'disembedded' from the complex web of relationships in which people live. The natural environment must be subordinated as a raw material to mass production. 'To separate land from man and to organise society in such a way as to satisfy the requirements of a real-estate market was a vital part of the utopian concept of a market economy' (2001[1944]: 187). To be sure, land is already privately owned in this setting, and the farmers' monopoly of ownership shapes workers' lives profoundly. But now, the effect of instability – partly the result of the vagaries of land reform – is precisely to shift farmers' views of their enterprises from one of settlement towards one of transactive business. For workers, this means that they not only face a future as part of a regional labour reserve (even more so than previously), but also have to contend with employers themselves moving, as locations are assessed by reference to their profitability and security for white farmers.

The 'disembedding' of labour and land, and their consolidation as commodities for purchase, are inseparable in practice. As we have seen in this thesis, as farmers move increasingly towards a 'business' view of their enterprises, they also see themselves as having fewer obligations towards their workers. Their relationships with their 'people' are primarily based on contracts for wages. Detachment from the land and detachment from the resident workforce go hand in hand. In each case, relationships are increasingly narrowed and are framed in terms of transaction and profit. Indeed, farmers' portrayals of their own

enterprises as the outcome of individual effort is a way for them to frame success that downplays both obligations to workers and the importance of particular, regionally specific, pieces of land.

Recent regional fragmentation from the farmers' perspective, in short, appears to be intensifying the destabilising processes that Polanyi analyses. From workers' perspectives, the damaging effects of these processes follow precisely from the embedded nature of work itself. Paternalism among workers means that labour relations on the border farms are deeply entwined with wider social dynamics. On the Limpopo River, it will not be work that alienates people from one another; it will be the end of employment itself.

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