Resisting feminised precarity
Farm workers in post-strike Western Cape, South Africa
Åsa Eriksson

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Abstract
This dissertation seeks to contribute to the body of research on gender, neoliberal globalisation and work, and on the forms of resistance people engage in within a deeply unequal global order. It was devised in relation to developments during and after widespread, unprecedented labour and social protests among farm workers in export-oriented agriculture in the Western Cape, South Africa, 2012–2013. The protests, referred to in popular discourse as the ‘farm worker strike’, are widely held to have been spearheaded by people in the most precarious positions: seasonal workers, including migrants both from within and outside South Africa, many of whom were women. The dissertation draws on multi-sited ethnography conducted among farm workers in several of the areas to which the protests spread, during what I refer to as the post-strike moment.

The aim of the study is to contribute to an understanding of differently positioned farm workers’ experiences of work and life precarity, organising and resistance – as well as to the interlinkages between these phenomena. Using intersectionality as an ‘analytic sensibility’, the dissertation explores how power relations linked to gender, race/ethnicity and nationality/migration status may be understood as shaped by, and contributing to shaping, work and life precarity. It also looks at how these hierarchies are articulated through labour regimes on farms and through workers’ resistance. Moreover, it interrogates labour activism as a route to resisting not only socio-economic deprivation and apartheid legacies, but further to restoring a sense of dignity (of labour).

The dissertation engages with various broader theoretical discussions. It deliberates on the overlaps between the notions of feminisation of labour, precarious work and precarity – conceiving of precarity as a feminised phenomenon. Experiences of precarity in the Western Cape farmlands, it suggests, are shaped by the devaluing of some workers, linked to racism, sexism and global inequalities, as well as to historical and contemporary processes of dispossession. The dissertation also describes how (some) female farm workers, through presenting themselves as knowledgeable about their rights, and through accentuating feminised aspects of care and responsibility in their activism, position themselves as respectable. Furthermore, through identifying silences and exclusions in representations of farm workers, it contributes to writing black/African female migrant workers back into the strike narrative as important and militant actors. Finally, the dissertation argues that attention to multiple forms of violence – slow, structural, symbolic and direct – and the violence of globalisation under neoliberalism is crucial in order to understand the messy and violent aspects of the ‘farm worker strike’. Importantly, it explores these topics as informed by broader global developments, through which power, control and the retention of value are increasingly placed outside of the deeply unequal spaces that constitute commercial farming areas, discussing links with Sweden as a destination for South African wine and deciduous fruit.

Keywords: gender, race/ethnicity, precarity, feminisation of labour, resistance, intersectionality, farm work, South Africa, Sweden.

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RESISTING FEMINISED PRECARITY
Åsa Eriksson
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To all amazing social justice activists who tirelessly struggle for this world to be a better place for all of us.

To Ivan, who fills my life with joy every day.

To the living memory of my mother Berit.
## Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ iii

Abbreviations.................................................................................................................. vi

Chapter 1 | Introduction and theory................................................................. 1
   Aim and research questions....................................................................................... 3
   Theoretical framework.............................................................................................. 5
      Post-colonial theoretical departure points................................................................. 6
         Perspectives on Western Cape commercial farmlands........................................... 7
   Intersectionality as an analytic sensibility................................................................. 13
      On the use of racialised and gendered terminology............................................... 17
   Neoliberal globalisation, the economy and work...................................................... 18
   Precarious employment, precarity, the precariat....................................................... 19
      Feminisation and the gendered division of labour in global production................... 23
   Organising, resistance and dignity............................................................................ 26
   Theoretical perspectives on violence........................................................................ 28
   Precariousness, precarity and dehumanisation......................................................... 32
   Concluding remarks and thesis outline...................................................................... 34

Chapter 2 | Ethnographic fieldwork in the post-strike moment...................... 36
   Western Cape commercial farming areas as a research site.................................... 37
      On positionality: being an outsider connected through activism............................ 42
   Multi-sited ethnography: constructing the field....................................................... 44
      Entering the field.................................................................................................... 48
   Ethnographic research methods.............................................................................. 51
   Ethical considerations and afterthoughts on the research........................................ 55

Chapter 3 | Who and what is a farm worker?.................................................. 61
   Restructuring of work and fragmenting farm worker identities.............................. 64
   Representations of Western Cape farm workers...................................................... 68
      Aunty Martina: achieving security in one’s own right........................................... 70
      Refilwe, Stephen and Tshepo: a long-term temporary presence............................ 73
      Clara and Tafadzwa: favoured and resented foreign labourers.............................. 76
   Un-becoming farm workers.................................................................................... 83
   Narratives on the contested identity of farm worker.............................................. 88
   Conclusion: implications for representations of farm workers............................ 90
Chapter 4 | Docile feminised labourers, dangerous masculinities and robots…95
A background to female and migrant labour on farms................................................. 96
The danger of mixing farm labourers............................................................................ 98
Dangerous black masculinities and good female migrants.............................................. 101
Gender division of labour and the feminisation of work.................................................... 107
Emily and Clara: feminised bodies under surveillance.................................................. 112
On violence................................................................................................................... 115
Narratives on dehumanisation....................................................................................... 117
Conclusion: an intersectional reading of narratives on work......................................... 122

Chapter 5 | Women’s narratives on activism: towards resistive respectability. 125
Resistance to violence and the violence of resistance....................................................... 126
Conditions for labour activism on commercial farms...................................................... 128
Reclaiming dignity and respectability through organising.............................................. 132
Community struggles, power and respect..................................................................... 138
‘Rights talk’ and resistive subjectivities.......................................................................... 142
Moderate union strategies and the policing of borders.................................................... 151
Conclusion: ‘rights talk’ and activist respectability.......................................................... 154

Chapter 6 | Snap! The ‘farm worker strike’ as a response to slow violence.....157
The ‘farm worker strike’: a brief and partial historicisation............................................. 158
From initiators to invisible: complicating the strike narrative...................................... 163
Were strike participants ‘real’ farm workers?................................................................. 168
Gendered experiences of backlash in the post-strike moment....................................... 171
Workers’ narratives on violence and transient moral orders......................................... 174
A farmers’ perspective.................................................................................................... 182
Tshepo’s story: a wild-cat strike and violent responses.................................................. 184
Declining worker power and discourses of whiteness..................................................... 186
Conclusion: silences, exclusions and violence continuums.......................................... 188

Chapter 7 | On feminised precarity and resistance in a neoliberal era...........191
Intersectional readings of farm workers and the strike.................................................... 192
Precarisation of labour and the power of gender............................................................ 196
Precarity, violence and resistance.................................................................................. 201
Global friction and interconnection with Sweden.......................................................... 206
Systembolaget’s uneasy relation to power in the global economy................................ 207
Neoliberal subjects and the cult of female entrepreneurship........................................ 210
Global worker solidarity and corporate ties.................................................................. 213

Samman fattning på svenska............................................................................................ 218

References..................................................................................................................... 223
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Stockholm, July 2018
Åsa Eriksson
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>African National Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAWUSA</td>
<td>Bawsi Agricultural Workers’ Union of South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCMA</td>
<td>Commission for Conciliation, Arbitration and Mediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COSATU</td>
<td>Congress of South African Trade Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSAAWU</td>
<td>Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>Corporate social responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAWU</td>
<td>The Food and Allied Workers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HPA</td>
<td>Hexvallei Plaaswerkers Associasie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICU</td>
<td>Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILRIG</td>
<td>International Labour Research and Information Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUF</td>
<td>International Union of Foodworkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUM</td>
<td>National Union of Mineworkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASSOP</td>
<td>People Against Suffering, Oppression and Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAAPAWU</td>
<td>South African Agricultural Plantation and Allied Workers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SER</td>
<td>Standard employment relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPP</td>
<td>Surplus People Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCOE</td>
<td>Trust for Community Outreach and Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UIF</td>
<td>Unemployment Insurance Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>VAT</td>
<td>Value added tax</td>
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Chapter 1 | Introduction and theory

On a wall in the office where I used to work, at a Swedish solidarity organisation supporting Southern African popular movements, hung a framed enlargement of an illustrated poem entitled ‘Blodsdruvor’. The poem, which was published in Sweden’s largest daily newspaper in 1983, urges readers not to buy ‘blood grapes’ from South Africa, noting how ‘red black blood’ is seeping from the bunches sold in supermarkets (Bäckman, 1983). The accompanying illustration depicts what I read as a cluster of red blood cells in the shape of a bunch of grapes, drawing attention to the racialised violence acted out on the bodies of black workers in the apartheid state, not least on white-owned commercial farms. At the time, in the 1980s, consuming South African wine or fruit was an act tainted with shame. Numerous Swedes joined solidarity initiatives in support of the struggle against apartheid, through social movements, churches, trade unions and political parties, forming the largest and most broad-based solidarity movement the country has ever seen (Thörn, 2010). Partly as a result of this mobilisation, in 1985 Sweden became the first country to introduce a ban on importing agricultural produce from South Africa (Norén, 2006). The boycott, followed by a complete trade embargo from 1987, was lifted only in 1993, a year ahead of the first multi-racial elections in South Africa.

Today, the discourse surrounding the consumption of South African products has shifted radically in many ways – although, lately, echoes from the past have resurfaced. Deciduous fruit is nowadays available in an increasing number of shapes and varieties, year-round, at ever more affordable prices in Swedish supermarkets, and South Africa is a top sourcing country for wine and table grapes. For the most part, however, little is known about the people involved in the production of these goods. While the media occasionally reports on the plight of black farm workers in the democratic rainbow nation,¹ the solution offered has long been spelled consumption, not labour solidarity and certainly not boycott. In my nearest grocery shop, retailer ICA tellingly markets its own brand of table grapes by asserting on the label that “Our grapes make South African women

¹ The ‘rainbow nation’ was a metaphor popularised by former President Nelson Mandela during the transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994, invoking an idea of a multicultural South Africa. For a critical discussion on post-apartheid South Africa, national identity formation and the rainbow nation, see e.g. Alexander (2002).
entrepreneurs.” The grapes, which in the struggle poem were imagined as saturated with workers’ blood, are here constructed as ripe with the promise of prosperity and empowerment for women: indeed the retailer suggests that black female workers’ primary concern today is not putting food on the table, but striving for real independence and a life to be proud of (ICA, 2015a). This exemplifies a common neoliberal discourse which positions women and girls in the global south at the centre of development and progress, and oppressive local cultures and laws as the main obstacles they face. It further invokes the individualistic agency of conscientious (female) middle-class consumers in the global north, who, by choosing the right product, can presumably assist their southern sisters to enter into the realms of global capital, as entrepreneurs (Dolan and Rayak, 2016; Shain, 2013; Spivak, 2000).

At times, however, reality clashes profoundly with such tropes. In November 2012, a period of labour unrest commonly referred to as the ‘farm worker strike’ broke out in the rural town of De Doorns, a centre for table grape production in South Africa’s Western Cape Province. In an unprecedented expression of unity amidst inter-group tension and competition for jobs, within a short time, tens of thousands of farm workers and other residents of some 25 rural towns around the province took to the streets, occupied roads and stayed away from work, some also setting vineyards on fire in frustration over the lack of meaningful change in their lives since the end of apartheid (Ntsebeza, 2013). The unrest, widely held to have been started by precariously positioned workers outside of labour organisations, exposed a disjuncture between notions of work and female entrepreneurship as routes to empowerment, pride and independence – and female (and male) farm workers’ lived experiences of precarity. In a photograph from the strike period (see page 93), two young women are sitting in the middle of a road, in front of eight police cars, defiantly sporting a placard that reads “Let’s stand for – R150 All of us!” Such images represent another tale of present-day neoliberal globalisation which has perhaps attracted less attention: that of popular resistance against the violence embedded in global production and women’s central roles in such struggles (Mohanty, 2003). The call for 150 rand per day – a doubling of the then minimum wage – is a further stark reminder that putting food on the table remains a primary concern for farm workers, given that even this amount was estimated to be nowhere near enough to cover for the cost of an adequately nutritious diet (Meyer et al., 2012). As research over the past few decades has shown, people in communities relying on commercial farm work experience frequent hungry periods, and children are often underweight or stunted (Du Toit, 2004; Kruger et al., 2006).

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2 Translated from Swedish: “Våra vindrivor gör kvinnor till företagare i Sydafrika”.
The gravity of the problems exposed by protesters in 2012 were brought to the attention of the Swedish public a few years later, through extensive media coverage of a conflict at a large wine producer in 2016. During this strike, a discourse reminiscent of the 1980s resurfaced again. Karel Swart, deputy general secretary of the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers’ Union [CSAWU], was cited urging Swedish consumers to boycott ‘blood wine’ from the producer during the strike: “For every sip you take, you support slave-like working conditions and human rights violations” (Alestig, 2016).

Drawing on fieldwork conducted among farm workers in the Western Cape during what I refer to as the post-strike moment, the period just after the 2012–2013 labour unrest, this dissertation seeks to move beyond these narratives – illuminating stories of work and resistance that bring into question neoliberal discourses of female entrepreneurship as a route to prosperity, and challenge representations of commercial farmlands as breath-taking empty landscapes devoid of people, while at the same time complicating union discourse on farm workers as a uniform category. In this way, I hope to illuminate some of the developments and non-developments prompting a return to depictions of wine and fruit as saturated with workers blood. Farm workers’ everyday experiences, which speak to both struggles to put food on the table and a life to be proud of, are analysed against the backdrop of neoliberal globalisation processes that have rendered work and lives more precarious across the globe – and resistance perhaps more perilous.

Aim and research questions

This PhD research project was conceived out of a theoretical interest in the broad field of gender, neoliberal globalisation and work. It is premised on the assumption that globalisation processes have rendered work more precarious and informal on a global scale and have made it increasingly challenging for workers to organise, at least in ways that are sanctioned by the industry and the state and not met with violence, and that these processes are gendered. The project was further developed in relation to an empirical interest in developments during and after the widespread, unprotected labour unrest among commercial farm workers in South Africa’s Western Cape province in 2012–2013, which lasted on-and-off for three months and brought about a 52 percent increase in the statutory minimum wage. This unprecedented wave of protests, referred to in popular discourse as the ‘farm worker strike’, was spearheaded primarily by people in the most insecure

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3 Researchers have cautioned against using the popular term ‘farm worker strike’ because protesters were both farm workers and other community members, who both raised labour-related concerns and demanded service delivery, housing and access to land (for a discussion,
positions: seasonal workers, including migrants from both within and outside South Africa, many of whom were women (Ntsebeza, 2013; Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015).

The aim of this study is to contribute to an understanding of differently positioned farm workers’ experiences of work and life precarity, organising and resistance – as well as to the interlinkages between these phenomena – during what I refer to as the ‘post-strike moment’. It looks at how such experiences are shaped by, and contribute to shaping, power inequalities articulated through gender, race/ethnicity and nationality/migration status. Importantly, the study seeks to locate developments affecting farm workers in the Western Cape within a global context, where power, control and retention of value are increasingly located outside of the deeply unequal spaces that commercial farming areas make up, discussing links with Sweden as an important destination for South African wine and fruit.

Underlying the specific questions examined in the empirical chapters are a broader set of queries which can be formulated as follows: How may a reading which pays attention to intersecting power relations contribute to an understanding of the diverse ways in which work and life precarity is lived and resisted among farm labourers? What may such a reading tell us about the interlinkages between precarity, resistance and the multiple expressions of violence in the commercial farmlands? In what ways may it contribute to understandings of the ‘farm worker strike’? Furthermore, what were some of the forms of sustained open resistance in the farmlands during this period, and how may we understand resistive subjectivities as taking shape in relation to gendered and racialised discourses and power hierarchies?

In short, the study draws on ethnographic fieldwork among farm workers in several of the localities to which the labour protests spread, primarily women and (to some extent) female and male migrant workers, most of whom had experience of taking part in organising and resistance. The choice to focus primarily on female workers (of different nationalities, ethnicities and areas of origin) and migrant workers (irrespective of gender) was informed by several factors. Firstly, women and migrant workers are strongly overrepresented in the most precarious work arrangements, and have historically been constructed as secondary or auxiliary workers, less likely to secure permanent jobs or access non-wage benefits such as housing in one’s own name or on-the-job training. Secondly, women and migrant workers were identified as being among the key drivers in the mass protests (Ntsebeza, 2013; Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015). Thirdly, migrant workers in particular have until recently been under-represented in research on farm workers in the Western Cape, which for a long time tended to privilege the

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4 I use the term migrant worker to refer both to immigrants from other countries and migrants from other provinces in South Africa unless otherwise specified.
voices of on-farm, year-round workers, for practical reasons of access or by design (see e.g. Du Toit, 2005). While female farm workers do feature in research, including in studies of specific unions or organisations (e.g. White, 2010; Solomon, 2013), little attention has been devoted to understanding how other interlocking power relations separate people gendered as women from one another – or to explore the formation of women’s resistive subjectivities, as I set out to do in this dissertation. Fourthly, I believe that persons with experience of multiple, intersecting forms of exclusion and othering, at work and through organising, will be in a position to reflect well on the interplay between gender and other power hierarchies with labour regimes on farms and organising and resistance.

The farm worker strike and its aftermath, along with the underlying structures and developments raises many questions that lend themselves to a gender analysis – a take on the protests that I argue has been given only scant attention in the academic analyses published to date (Ntsebeza, 2013; Visser and Ferrer, 2015; Webb, 2017; Weso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015). This dissertation, however, does not focus solely on the ‘strike’ and its gendered impact, but uses this specific moment as a nodal point against which gendered experiences of work and life precarity, organising and resistance are discussed. These topics are explored through what can be described as a multi-sited ethnography, drawing primarily on interviews and recorded conversations with farm workers, but also with other stakeholders such as employer representatives. Fieldwork took place in or around eleven localities in the Western Cape Province between August 2013 and February 2014, as well as during shorter periods between 2014 and 2017.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework I draw upon when discussing these questions and analysing the research material is broad and varied. It touches upon a variety of theoretical fields: post-colonial feminist theory; intersectionality theory; gender analysis of the global restructuring of the economy and its impact on feminised and other workers; theories on work- and life precarity; on labour related organising and resistance; as well as theories on violence. These theoretical areas are briefly introduced below, and discussed further in relation to the empirical material presented in each chapter. Previous research is partly presented in relation to the theory discussion, and partly presented at the beginning of the four empirical chapters, and integrated into the analysis. In the first section, below, in which feminist post-colonial perspectives are introduced, I briefly digress from the focus on theory to present a short overview of historical accounts of farm work in the Western Cape during colonial and white minority rule up until the end of apartheid. This, I argue, holds important keys to understanding the present.
Post-colonial theoretical departure points

In trying to make sense of the heterogeneous social spaces which make up the Western Cape commercial farming areas, and how these are entangled in global webs of power relations, post-colonial (feminist) theory offers productive analytical entry-points. Characterised by extreme material inequalities between farm business owners and the landless rural poor, and (racialised) restrictions on movement in areas where a vast amount of land is privatised and surrounded by fences, the Western Cape farmlands may be thought of as a ‘contact zone’. Mary Louise Pratt (1991:34) uses this term to describe social spaces “where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.” Pratt (1991) notes that contact zones also harbour phenomena like transculturation, denunciation and collaboration, with the margins being spaces where exploitation, subjugation and possibility are entangled in complex ways (see also Ross, 2010:209). I find the concept particularly useful when trying to make visible the ways in which global capital profits from the inequalities in such zones.

As post-colonial theory has made visible and comprehensible, colonial relations of domination and subordination continue to inform the present, articulating with neoliberalism in shaping economic relations, knowledge production and discourse in spaces across the globe (see e.g. de los Reyes, 2011; Loomba, 2005). In line with this perspective, coloniality is visible today through the deep material inequalities in a post-colonial world, as well as through the discourses and symbols that explain and normalise such relations. In the context of this study, we may note how affordable wine and deciduous fruit is made available year round to consumers (including parts of the working class) in Sweden, while commercial farm workers in South Africa are called unrealistic when they demand a near doubling of the minimum wage – which, as recounted in the introduction, would still not meet the nutritional needs of their families (Meyer et al. 2012). Furthermore, when the Swedish media reports on exploitative conditions and health hazards for South African farm workers, the problem is generally firmly located at the site of production – in the contact zone as it were. While certain producers are shamed, and the sale of their products questioned, scant attention is given to the influential role played by Swedish actors. For instance, the fact that up to 80 percent of the value of a box of wine sold in the shops of the state-owned alcohol monopoly Systembolaget remains in Sweden through alcohol tax, VAT and mark-up costs is rarely mentioned, nor is Systembolaget’s role as a leading player in the wine industry globally and a top destination for South African wine (Greenberg, 2012) discussed in-depth. It is thus in the ‘contact zone’ that the unequal power relations involved in production are primarily embodied and negotiated, resulting, in
the words of Gloria Anzaldúa (2012 [1987]:25), in an open wound, where “the Third world grates against the first and bleeds”.

Looking at the commercial farming areas of the Western Cape as a contact zone, then, it is laden with a violent colonial and white settler history: of dispossession of land, slavery, indentured labour, master-servant relationships and paternalism, where the lineages of contemporary actors may include ‘masters’ turned bosses and enslaved people turned workers. Coloniality further operates at the level of discourse, through stereotypical representations and ‘knowledges’ of farmworkers, their aspirations and (presumed lack of) skills, which are embedded within institutions of power, influencing how present-day inequalities are spoken of and understood (Loomba, 2005).

As philosopher Achille Mbembe (2015:16) has suggested, rather than thinking of time as linear – of a before and after colonialism – the present in contemporary Africa is perhaps most productively envisaged as a “time of entanglement”, an “interlocking of presents, pasts and futures” enclosing many different durations. In this present, remnants of colonial violence may present themselves in the form of brutalisation, arbitrariness and authoritarian configurations of power (Mbembe, 2015:14–18). Thinking with Mbembe, it is important to familiarise oneself with the colonial and apartheid history of South Africa in order to produce knowledge of the present, including how farm workers and their struggles are spoken of (see also Hartnack, 2016). A brief account of post-colonial as well as Marxist inspired historical analyses of farm work in the Western Cape and beyond is thus presented below, with an emphasis on discourses that still resonate in the present.

**Perspectives on Western Cape commercial farmlands**

The first agricultural estates in the Western Cape were set up shortly after Dutch settlers founded the Cape Colony in 1652 – mainly producing wheat and wine – and most of these farms were commercialised early on, by the year 1800 (Ross, 1986:64).\(^5\) In this venture, colonialists relied on slaves, predominately men, who were brought in from other parts of Africa, as well as from India, Indonesia and other places in Asia. European expansion into the interior of the Cape further resulted in the curtailing of access to natural resources such as water and grazing land for the nomadic indigenous KhoiKhoi groups, who fought the settlers in two wars during the 17th century (Randle, 2014). Over time, the KhoiKhoi were incorporated as nominally free, low-status farm labour, after having been prohibited from accessing their natural resources, forced to pay post-war tributes to the

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\(^5\)The Cape colony encompassed a much larger area than the present-day Western Cape Province, including parts of the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape Provinces.
settlers and later on coerced, through legal and extra-legal means, to work on farms (Randle, 2014; Williams, 2010).

While the model of farming in the Cape differed from other colonies, with medium-sized owner-driven farms instead of the large plantations usually associated with slavery, historian Robert Ross (1986:76) notes that land ownership and slave ownership was exceptionally concurrent here, with 90 percent of non-pastoralist farmers relying on one or more slaves by the year 1800. The intimacy of the small farms in the Cape, Ross (1986:76–79) argues, did not lead to a less brutal version of slavery than in other parts of the ‘new world’, however, as some have suggested. Slave holders flogging their labourers and raping enslaved women in order to increase their workforce were key elements of slavery here, as elsewhere (Scully, 1997).

Analysing archival data from the period just before and after the abolition of slavery, historian Pamela Scully (1997) further draws attention to the centrality of ideas about the nuclear family and gender relations for the ways in which local actors created meaning from – and fought for – emancipation. Under slavery, enslaved farm labourers in the Cape colony were denied the right to a family life: most marriages were not recognised, and male slaves could not claim paternity of their children. Also, when the father was a slave-holder, children born to female slaves inherited the status of their mothers, and members of the same family were generally sold separately and became scattered across the Cape farming areas, in a familiar pattern (Scully, 1997). Missionaries and the abolitionist movement were also preoccupied by ideas of the family, albeit from the standpoint that slavery was immoral since it disrupted God-given, ‘natural’ gender roles. These actors, Scully notes (1997:36), framed their struggle for emancipation in part as liberating enslaved men into a masculine position of protector, or owner, of his wife – who in turn was imagined as being able to graduate into morality by moving into the private realm of the nuclear family. Ideals of female domesticity, based on European upper-class norms, were however neither attainable nor, perhaps, desired and most women engaged in waged labour after emancipation, while families often continued to be separated, or resided in shared dormitories.

When slavery was abolished in 1834, and due to the subsequent adoption of new marriage laws, women were considered legal minors and placed under the authority of their husbands or partners, who were now given sole control over matters concerning the couple’s children (Scully, 1997). This positioned women as vulnerable to sexual violence both within the family and from white former slave holders. Moreover, their status as women was contested during the period of amelioration and emancipation, including by employers, who resisted laws forbidding the flogging of black women, whom they considered to be masculine and promiscuous (Scully, 1997:42). Freed black men, on the other hand, sought to assert their masculine position
through adhering to norms of marriage, holding a regular job and being part of a Christian mission (Scully, 1997:178).

Unsurprisingly, the abolition of slavery in 1834 did not change patterns of exploitation and abuse overnight. At first, a four-year obligatory apprenticeship was introduced on farms, and after that, farmers successfully lobbied for new laws that gave them access to cheap and controlled labour, including through the prohibition of vagrancy, and a right to indenture children whose families were raided, the children captured and used as unpaid workers, under the guise of them being destitute (Levine, 2013; Scully, 1997). Moreover, while freed women and men sought to liberate themselves through education and resisted full-time work under gruelling conditions on farms, few avenues were available to access land or alternative livelihoods (Ross, 1986; Scully, 1997; Williams, 2010). Of the roughly 25,000 slaves who were emancipated in the Western Cape when the apprenticeship period ended in 1838, it is estimated that 7,000 left the farms to live in villages and on mission stations over the next ten years, whereas the majority continued to reside on farms (Randle, 2014). Having enforced emancipation from above, Britain further committed to compensating not the former Cape slaves but the slave owners for their loss of ‘property’ (Randle, 2014).⁶

After emancipation, former slave-holders continued to organise labour on their farms based on the fictive idea of the ‘farm as family’ that had arisen during slavery, generating labour “through the ties of violence and the language of family obligation”, assuming a moral entitlement to the labour of spouses and the children of male employees residing on the farms (Scully, 1997:177). Such ideas were central to the paternalist labour regimes that prevailed on farms well into the 20th century, and continue to articulate with new forms of management in the present, characterised by some as “neopaternalist” (Ewert and Hamman, 1996; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996).

Traditional paternalism has been described as a set of intimate, quasi-kinship and deeply unequal power relations based on white men’s control over women, children and other men (Du Toit, 1993; Orton, Barrientos and McClenaghan, 2001; Van Onselen, 1992). It was above all a violent system, in which farmers historically assumed the role of patriarchal father figures who ruled through discipline, punishment and favouritism – with the brutality of racism at times mitigated by acts of paternal benevolence (Bradford, 1987; Van Onselen 1992). Labour relations on farms were typically personal and informal, and farm residents were construed as bound together by a shared interest in the prosperity of the farm community (Du Toit, 1993). The ‘familial’ relations were deeply unequal, with adult workers

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⁶This compensation was paid out through bills of credit in London – but still a lot of farmers went bankrupt after emancipation, because they had used their slaves as mortgage, and could not afford to travel to England to claim the compensation (Randle, 2014)
being called ‘girls’ and ‘boys’, and only the farmer and his wife, performing
the roles of father and mother figures, ascended to positions of speaking
subjects (Du Toit, 1993; Waldman, 1996). Payment of parts of the salary in
wine through the ‘dop system’, which had been an important pillar of
slavery, continued to be used well into the 20th century. The distribution of
cheap alcohol at regular intervals during the day strengthened farm owners’
power and control over workers, who were in this way made docile (Scully,
1997; Williams, 2010).

Opportunities for open defiance were heavily circumscribed under
paternalism in other ways too, with threats to the farm community being
understood as coming from the world outside of the farm only. Workers
involved in labour activism were in paternalist discourse rendered foreign
and stigmatised as ‘trouble-makers’, and on-farm workers’ resistance thus
largely took hidden forms, such as sabotage or pilfering (Du Toit, 1993).
Indeed, some analysts have characterised paternalist farms as ‘total
institutions’, with farmers’ influence reaching well beyond the farm gates,
severely limiting worker autonomy and access to independent, oppositional
analysis of their social situation (Nasson, 1984). Still, other stories have
been told too, including of young women who under the apartheid era openly
challenged farmers or escaped the harsh life on farms by relocating
elsewhere (Waldman, 1996). Women were also, as mentioned above,
together with children constructed as secondary workers in paternalist
discourse, expected to provide their labour when needed, their employment
mediated through the contracts of their male partners (Kritzinger and Vorster,
1996). Being excluded from claiming positions as workers in their own right,
women relied on men for access to on-farm housing, which further
entrenched male dominance over women (Orton, Barrientos and Roussow,
2001). As will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four, this history is still
reflected in women’s positioning in farm hierarchies today.

Present-day labour relations on farms are also shaped by the 20th century
institutionalisation of racial segregation, which sought to confine black
African people to crowded and impoverished native reserves, unless they
held a regular full-time job or formed part of a desired reserve army of
labourers in white South Africa. Such exploitation was made possible
through the prior dehumanisation of black Africans and other non-white
people in colonial discourse. Cecil John Rhodes, who was elected Prime
Minister in the Cape Colony in 1890, drew on colonial ideas of non-whites
living in a state of infinite childhood, and propounded treating ‘the natives’
as children and a ‘subject race’, something he linked, in one of his speeches,

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7 Bill Nasson’s (1984) essay on farm schooling, which suggested that commercial farms be
regarded as ‘total institutions’ (drawing on Goffman 1961, 1983), sparked a productive
academic debate on work regimes on farms and farm worker agency, that continued for the
next several decades (Du Toit, 1993).
to Africans relying on indigenous systems of communal tenure instead of private ownership of land (Magubane, 1996:109–110).

Among the racial legislation adopted in the early years of the Union of South Africa, the Natives Land Act of 1913 is an infamous example, limiting Africans, by far the largest population group, to owning only seven to eight percent of the land in the country. As Beinart and Delius (2014:669) note, however, this Act “recognised rather than caused dispossession” as white settlers had already deprived Africans and the Khoisan of their land.

The nationalist Afrikaner coalition’s ascendance to power in 1948 is often described as an intensification of earlier forms of segregation, informed by a more brutal racial ideology. Influential Marxist analyst Harold Wolpe suggests, however, that the apartheid regime’s racist repression should be read as a response to protests threatening to undermine the reproduction of cheap labour power through coercion: the basis of South African capitalism at the time. Wolpe characterises apartheid as:

*the mechanism specific to South Africa* in the period of secondary industrialization, of maintaining a high rate of capitalist exploitation through a system which guarantees a cheap and controlled labour-force, under circumstances in which the conditions of reproduction (the redistributive African economy in the Reserves) of that labour-force is rapidly disintegrating. (Wolpe, 1972:433)

Analysing the role of commercial farmers’ interest groups during the 1940s and 1950s, Morris (1977) further shows how the struggle for state power which saw the ascendance of the apartheid government was in parts a struggle over the size of the reserve army of labour available to urban and semi-urban industries. Organised agriculture (like the mining industry) had experienced a shortage of labour during the 1920s and 1930s, and again in the 1940s as many Africans left white farming areas to seek work in the cities. During this period of economic decline, social conflict was on the rise with intense struggles over wages, housing and land in both rural and urban areas (Bradford, 1987; Wolpe, 1972). Partly as a response to the threat of revolt by black protesters, and siding with white urban industrialists above commercial farmers, the pre-apartheid United Party government had relaxed influx control measures, enabling increased rural to urban migration (Morris, 1977). Frustrated at how such measures drained white farms of a cheap and readily available labour force, and hampered ambitions to advance the capitalisation of agriculture, farmers’ interest groups put forward a number of demands in the early 1940s, many of which were later adopted by the apartheid government. These proposals, Morris (1977) note, included the establishment of labour bureaus to redirect ‘natives’ to areas where work was

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8 The Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, unifying the formerly British colonies and the annexed former Boer republics: Cape Colony, Transvaal, Natal and the Orange Free State.
available and further restricting urbanisation through dividing black people into rural and urban labourers. Notably, it also included demands to abolish labour tenancy and squatting (renting pieces of land) on white-owned farms, in order to force all non-white farm dwellers to depend on selling their labour power to farmers as full-time, year-round labourers, or, as they were referred to, servants (Morris, 1977). Between 1960 and 1974, roughly 1.5 million labour tenants and squatters were forcibly removed from white farms, linked to such legal amendments (Morris, 1977).

While commercial farms in the Western Cape during the apartheid years, like now, had a predominately coloured⁹ core of on-farm labour, who were given work preference over black Africans as I revert to below, many farms also relied on the migrant labour system, which was a hallmark of apartheid. As Wolpe observes, this system effectively combined capitalist modes of production with pre-capitalist ones in the African reserves, where land was communally owned and its produce distributed within kinship networks (Wolpe, 1972).¹⁰ This, he notes, enabled mine and farm owners to pay African migrants below the cost of their reproduction as their insufficient wages would presumably be supplemented by (women’s) unpaid care work and subsistence farming in the reserves, accessed through networks of reciprocal obligations. When conditions in the reserves deteriorated from the 1920s onwards, through state orchestrated underdevelopment, overcrowding, soil erosion and inappropriate farming techniques, a surplus was no longer produced, and many migrants lost their links with family and kin in the rural areas (Wolpe, 1972). The unstable equilibrium between production, reproduction and social obligation, Wolpe notes, was thus disrupted, leading to rural and urban struggles as noted above.

Apartheid rule underwent repeated political and economic crises until it was finally dismantled in the early 1990s, when transition towards a non-racial state began. In this period, the commercial agricultural sector experienced a crisis of profitability, later coupled with the deregularisation and liberalisation of trade. As I discuss in Chapter Three, this prompted incomplete reforms of paternalist labour regimes, through the introduction of new forms of management aimed at increasing efficiency and competitiveness (Du Toit, 1993).¹¹ As the African National Congress [ANC] rose to power in 1994, new laws were gradually introduced to protect farm

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⁹ For a discussion of terminology on race and ethnicity in this dissertation, see the next section.

¹⁰ The capitalist mode of production refers to a specific form of organising social productive forces whereby workers sell their labour power to the (non-labouring) owners of the means of production, who appropriate surplus value by remunerating the workers less than the value of the produce (Wolpe, 1975; Fornäs, 2013)

¹¹ Kritzinger and Vorster (1996) and Ewert and Hamman (1996) use the term ‘neopaternalism’ in describing how the transformation of labour regimes on farms has never been complete, but draws on both traditional paternalism and more recent managerialism.
workers and include them for the first time in the country’s labour legislation, and in 2002 a statutory minimum wage for farm workers was introduced. Taken together, these developments have had mixed outcomes for workers, as I return to in Chapter Three, and the past few decades have seen a shrinking agricultural labour force, casualisation and a movement of workers off farms, and deepening divides between differently positioned farm labourers (Ewert and Du Toit, 2005).

Racialised gendered tropes and stereotypes rearticulating colonial and apartheid discourse, some of which have been touched upon above, still circulate in the present in the commercial farmlands. This includes remnants of a colonial *hierarchy of races* creating differentiation and division among people by attributing different strengths, skills and shortcomings to different ethnic groups, permeated with ideas of gender and (hetero-)sexuality (Loomba, 2005; Spivak, 2000). Such stereotypes, and how they are invoked in labour regimes on farms, are discussed in Chapter Four.

Some analysts argue, however, that the continued reading of labour relations and profound inequality in the Western Cape against the history of slavery and its aftermath may blur what should instead be thought of as central features of neoliberalism. Anthropologist Susan Levine (2013:91) stresses that “current practices on farms are firmly rooted in contemporary political and economic structures operative in the new democracy.” While I agree with this point, the neoliberal present must be thought of as permeated with colonial history – as a *time of entanglement* as it were (Mbembe, 2015:14–18). I discuss this briefly below, and more thoroughly in Chapters Three and Four where I elaborate on the restructuring of South African agriculture and how it impacts on everyday life and identities among farm workers. First, however, I shall deliberate on how the dissertation engages intersectionality in its analysis.

**Intersectionality as an analytic sensibility**

In researching farm workers variegated experiences of work and life precarity, organising and resistance, I draw on the theorisation of intersectionality. In line with Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013:795), I think of intersectionality as an “analytic sensibility” that I use throughout the research process, which relies on an “intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.” This sensibility informs my reading of how the perpetuation and justification of material inequalities in the commercial farmlands articulates with the interlocking categories of gender, class, race/ethnicity and nationality (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013). It also informs my analysis of how the global context shapes farm workers’ experiences (Collins and Bilge, 2016).

Intersectionality, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013:797) suggest, may help to “reveal how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through
the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories” (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013:795). These categories are in turn conceived of as “always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power” (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013:795).

While my main focus is on structural and political inequality and how power operates (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013; de los Reyes and Mulinari, 2005), I also explore in Chapter Five how female farm workers’ activist subjectivities take shape in relation to such inequalities and their positioning within overlapping axes of power.

Intersectionality theory grew out of the critique posed by black and other racialised feminist intellectuals in the United States and elsewhere against the marginalisation of black women’s experiences in institutions, legal frameworks, structures and movements. During the 1970 and 1980s, a multitude of academic, activist and artistic expression emerged which problematised structural discrimination and how the white-dominated feminist movement marginalised black women, including through its focus on a universal or ‘pure’ gender, as though gender was separable from other articulations of power through class, race/ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and other categories (see e.g. bell hooks, 1984; Collins, 1990; Davis, 1983; Hull, 1982; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Trinh, 1989). These black feminist interventions drew attention to how demands made on behalf of all women were primarily based on the realities and priorities of privileged groups of white women. A broad body of analysis of structural and political inequality in relation to power hierarchies emerged, often focusing on race, class, gender and sexuality, which contributed to the theorisation of intersectionality – sometimes under other names. On the African continent, feminists have a long history of questioning the presumed supremacy of gender over other power relations and criticising earlier assumptions of a universal sisterhood under white-Western female leadership – what Nkiru Nzegwu (1990) refers to as ‘sisterarchy’. Feminist scholars have drawn attention to how gender is intertwined in complex ways with other locally intelligible systems of power, including imperial relations, age and status (see e.g. Imam, 1997; Lewis, 2008; Mbilinyi, 1992; Oyèwùmí, 1997, 2004).

The concept of intersectionality was coined by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in a ground-breaking article demonstrating how anti-discrimination law had failed to protect black women in the United States. Analysing high-profile labour law suits, Crenshaw showed that, because notions of racial discrimination were based on the experiences of black men and notions of gender discrimination on the experiences of white women, black women facing racialised gender discrimination found their attempts to seek justice rebutted (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Using the metaphor of an intersection, she illuminated how power relations linked to race and gender cannot be understood as exclusive or separable, since a single-axis reading of
power risks placing black women in a blind spot, in which their experiences are made invisible (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Intersectionality may thus be thought of as an attempt to bridge and further deepen earlier, often compartmentalised analyses of power linked to race, class and gender.

When Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality, she described it as a ‘preliminary concept’ that united activism and theory development, connecting black feminist politics with post-modern theory (Crenshaw, 1991:1244). Since then, it has developed into a key theoretical and methodological notion, viewed by some as the most important contribution so far of women’s and gender studies, jointly with other fields, to the theorisation of power (McCall, 2005).

Parallel to its increasing popularity in a variety of academic fields and among activists, intersectionality has been criticised within feminist circles. While some argue that a focus on complex intersectional identity formations may lead to political fragmentation detrimental to feminism, others emphasise the risk of intersectionality reproducing the same categorisations and othering that it seeks to undo, or fear that the link to activism and opposition to inequality has got lost along the way (see Collins and Bilge 2016; Puar 2012). While there is reason to be concerned about a de-linking of intersectionality from politics and a blurring of its historical roots, which may lead to privileged white middle-class feminists paying lip-service to difference without taking seriously the challenges that intersectionality poses to the category of woman (Carbin and Tornhill, 2004), I still prefer to think with Tomlinson (2013), that fears which have more to do with how an intersectional analysis is carried out and for what purpose, than with a serious questioning of intersectionality as such should not taint the concept.

In fact, I argue that it would be difficult to study gendered experiences of work, organising and resistance among Western Cape farm labourers, as I do, without an intersectional lens – regardless of what terminology one uses. The South African apartheid system operated precisely through classifying people according to notions of race and gender, denying or providing different possibilities, including in relation to work and where and how one could reside, based on such (overlapping) categorisation. This legacy remains highly visible in post-apartheid commercial farming areas. Using an intersectional analytic sensibility, I will focus primarily on power relations linked to gender, race/ethnicity, class and nationality/migration status, discussing how these categories are drawn upon in the organisation of work on farms, as well as in organising and resistance – since I view these categories as being the most tangibly deployed for dividing commercial farm

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12 It should be noted that the concept is also informed by discussions within critical theory, for instance on race, class and nation (de los Reyes and Mulinari, 2005).

workers, as I discuss in Chapter Four.\textsuperscript{14} Class relations, which were foregrounded during the labour unrest, are mainly explored as being articulated with visible identities of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality. Reflecting on the relationship between class and race, critical theorist Stuart Hall (1980:341) has suggested that race may in part be viewed as:

\begin{quote}
... the modality in which class is ‘lived’, the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and ‘fought through’. This has consequences for the whole class, not specifically for its ‘racially defined’ segment. It has consequences in terms of the internal fractioning and division within the working class which, among other ways, are articulated in part through race.
\end{quote}

Sociologist Bernard Magubane (2000:478) has similarly argued that race and racism under apartheid became “the reinforcing agent of class exploitation and it was also the lightning rod redirecting the antagonism of poor white workers and those who labored under class oppression”. Gender, as I will return to below, also played, and continues to play, a crucial yet somewhat different role vis-à-vis class in global production.

Since the fall of apartheid, class relations have to some extent become disentangled from race relations, through policies of black economic empowerment and affirmative action that facilitated the establishment of a black ruling class and an expansion of the black middle class. As a consequence, some analysts conclude that enduring “racial inequalities reflect class stratification rather than racial discrimination”, albeit ‘race’ continues to have cultural and social importance (Seekings, 2008:2). Approaching inequality as above all a question of class, however, may hide the long-term effects of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. In the commercial farming areas of the Western Cape, class is still to a large extent lived through ‘race’. Farm workers are ‘black’ and ‘coloured’, sometimes foreign migrants, further stratified by gender and position at work, and the vast majority of commercial farm business owners are white.

As I will argue throughout the dissertation, class in commercial farming areas still articulates with gender, race/ethnicity and nationality/migration status – and these categories function to some extent to facilitate the extraction of surplus labour, to justify differentiated treatment among farm labourers, and to deflect anger away from employer representatives and the state towards othered co-workers and neighbours. Moreover, echoes of the historical articulation of class and race which “made the anguished existence of blacks acceptable as natural, immutable, and indeed deserved”

\textsuperscript{14} Age, ability and sexual orientation are other important axes of power to which I give meagre attention in this dissertation, as and when they emerge in the narratives I explore. (Hetero)sexuality is discussed as interrelated with gendered and racialised hierarchies.
(Magubane, 2000:477) may be found in some present-day discourses on the social conditions of farm labourers, much as the articulations of class, race and gender position women as secondary workers (see below).

**On the use of racialised and gendered terminology**

Analysing and writing about inequalities, exclusions and power hierarchies, as I do, requires that I name and thus to some extent reproduce (while also deconstructing) identity categories (c.f. Mohanty, 2003:246). While I adhere as much as possible to locally intelligible categories used by farm workers to refer to themselves and others, some may have preferred not to be positioned as migrant, coloured, Zimbabwean, woman and so forth – and may regard other parts of their identities as more central. It is important to note that I view the categories and positions I name as unstable and porous, to some extent renegotiable, in other ways tenacious, at times deliberately claimed, sometimes for a political purpose, at other times ascribed and resisted, but nevertheless frequently drawn upon in the organisation of work, resistance and social life (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013).

The use of the categories of race and ethnicity in this dissertation needs some further mention. The apartheid regime classified the people of South Africa according to at first three, and later four, main racial categories which supported discrimination and a division of labour facilitating apartheid capitalism: Black African (also Bantu or Native), Coloured, White and Indian/Asian. This deeply problematic nomenclature was previously avoided by some researchers as a way of showing aversion to the system (for a discussion, see Posel, Hyslop and Nieftagodien, 2001) and many use the term ‘black’ primarily in a political sense, referring to all non-white persons. The terminology has to some extent been retained by post-apartheid governments; for example, in statistics. In this dissertation, I refer to this terminology, recognising the importance of socially constructed categories for people’s lived experiences and social identities, and further drawing attention to how this classification of people continues to inform material inequalities today. As noted above, farm workers in the Western Cape have historically primarily pertained to the (diverse) category of coloured, due to the apartheid-era coloured labour preference policy, stipulating that black Africans could only be considered for a job in the province if there were no white or coloured applicants. This, and other apartheid legislation aimed at preventing most black Africans from residing permanently in the province, continue to inform the work place divisions I explore in the dissertation. Coloured, according to historian Mohamed Adhikari (1994:101):

alludes to a phenotypically diverse group of people descended largely from Cape slaves, indigenous Khoisan peoples, and other blacks who had been assimilated to Cape colonial society by the late nineteenth century. Being also partly descended from European settlers, Coloureds are
popularly regarded as being of ‘mixed race’ and hold an intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy, distinct from the dominant white minority and the numerically preponderant African population.

Elsewhere, coloured has been referred to as a creolised, racialised cultural identity (Adhikari, 2008; Du Toit, 2004), that has struggled against the stigma associated with illegitimacy and non-authenticity (Hendricks, 2005). Meanwhile, black African migrants from other provinces or neighbouring countries have long been hired in peak seasons, some over time having settled permanently in the mushrooming informal settlements around rural towns (see further Chapter Two). In writing about this very diverse group – which includes indigenous groups such as Xhosa, Tswana or Sotho – I mainly use the term black African, as most research participants would refer to themselves and others as black (and at times African), and since these categories are important for the work regimes I write about. Foreign migrants would at times also speak, for example, of ‘us blacks’. Ascribed and/or claimed categories such as ‘black’, ‘coloured’, ‘Zimbabwean’, ‘foreigner’, ‘woman farm worker’ and ‘white farmer’ thus figure in the dissertation.

Neoliberal globalisation, the economy and work

As suggested in the previous sections, this research was devised against the backdrop of the changing relations between capital and labour associated with neoliberal globalisation processes – its economic aspects understood broadly as the accelerated pace and reach of capital as well as production and people’s mobility within or across boundaries and borders on a global scale (Acker, 2004). As feminist researchers have demonstrated, the global restructuring of the economy is a deeply gendered process, and one that must be understood in terms of both continuity (linked to coloniality) and change (see e.g. Acker, 2004; Peterson, 2003). Historically entrenched power relations of gender, race/ethnicity, nation, class and so forth that are both institutionalised and internalised are drawn upon, intensified or recast in new ways through globalisation processes, shaping its developments and uneven outcomes. Neoliberal globalisation may thus be thought of as a process that “exacerbates the gap between over- and under-valorized individuals and nations, even as the rhetoric of neoliberalism obscures that polarization” (Peterson, 2003:13).

Neoliberalism is, however, an unsatisfactory term which, according to Stuart Hall (2011:706), may be understood as at most a provisional, yet politically necessary, concept – differently understood, defined and explored between and within academic disciplines. Among other things, it has been thought of as a “hegemonic form of discourse”, presented as the only alternative for staggering economies world wide, and as a theory of a set of
political economic priorities championing a (state-regulated) free-market economy, deregulation, privatisation and drastically reduced government social provisioning (Harvey, 2005:3). Such economic policy shifts were introduced in Southern Africa through structural adjustment programmes during the 1980s and 1990s, upon which loans and financial support from the World Bank and the IMF were conditioned. As feminist analysts have shown, these programmes disproportionately affected women (and children), who bore the brunt of the impact of drastically reduced funding for health care and education, and simultaneously often faced greater job insecurity or, as small-scale farmers producing for the local market, struggled to compete with cheap imported foodstuffs (see e.g. Mbilinyi, 2002).

Researchers who, like Harvey, focus on the political economy aspects of neoliberalisation have been polarised between those preferring to think of neoliberalism as a hegemonic force determining outcomes in spaces around the globe, and those approaching neoliberalism as localised, hybrid and unstable processes (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010). In a South African context, Gillian Hart (2004:97) has advocated configuring critical ethnography as a way of exploring how globalisation is constituted, practised and experienced in specific locations rather than as case studies of the impact of hegemonic processes. I would like this dissertation to be read as aligned with such a perspective, contributing to an exploration of how experiences of work, organising and resistance are narrated by some precariously positioned workers in the aftermath of rural labour protests. By focusing on what has been described elsewhere as a specific ‘ethnographic moment’ embedded in complex, on-going processes of change (Acker, 2004:22), I attempt to delineate a partial, space and time bound snapshot of how neoliberal shifts in commercial agriculture are experienced and resisted, primarily from the points of view of differently positioned Western Cape farm workers. In the next section, I briefly expand on how neoliberal restructuring has contributed to reconfiguring the organisation of labour globally, and has made work and life insecure for many people, including Western Cape farm workers, and how this has been theorised.

**Precarious employment, precarity, the precariat**

Analysts of global labour markets in the era of neoliberalism have noted three interlinked trends: a rapid expansion of the labour force in the global south primarily through the recruitment of female workers (see next section), a feminisation of migration for work in the global north and other zones of

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15 In other academic disciplines, researchers have approached neoliberalism as, for example, a political philosophy and an ideology, as cultural politics and so forth (for a brief overview, see e.g. Scharff, 2014).
16 As I will discuss in Chapter Three, multi-racial democracy in South Africa arrived after the height of structural adjustment. The newly elected ANC government still took advice from the same institutions, and adopted policies which may be characterised as neoliberal.
economic growth, and a shift towards more precarious employment. The latter term seeks to capture a combination of aspects that contribute to making life insecure and uncertain, including work with low remuneration and limited or no access to social benefits or statutory entitlements (Vosko, 2010:2). It is shaped by a complex array of factors, including the employment relationship (length and extent of contract, employment type), labour market trends and one’s social location (e.g. citizenship, migration status and gender) (Vosko, 2010). Studying the precarisation of employment, sociologists in the global north have used as a benchmark the notion of a standard employment relationship [SER], signifying a stable, full-time job with social protection and basic conditions guaranteed by law or collective agreement (Bosch, 2004). As feminist and other critical analysts have noted, however, such arrangements make up a temporal and spatial parenthesis in the history of capitalism, extended primarily to white men in early industrialised welfare states, and dependent on women’s unpaid domestic work as well as on accumulation by dispossession in the colonies (see e.g. Casas-Cortés, 2014; Federici, 2006; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Munck, 2013). In Europe, the erosion of the (limited) SER and dismantling of the welfare state is nevertheless visible through an increase in agency work and short-term contracts and the introduction of new, low-paid forms of employment, in which workers are excluded from social security (Meardi, Martín and Riera, 2012; Weinkopf, 2009). In the global south, informal, insecure and hyper-exploitative forms of employment have always been the norm, but there too a shift has been noted from permanent to casual contracts and hiring through labour brokering arrangements in previously better off sectors, including industrial and public sector work in countries like South Africa (ILO, 2011; Pons-Vignon and Anseeuw, 2009). Work on commercial farms in South Africa, with its history of violent, paternalist labour relations, has also become more insecure over the past few decades. This, it has been suggested, is partly linked to large overseas retailers having gained increased power and control over production processes, and simultaneously retaining an increasing share of the value of the produce, while pushing producer prices down to unsustainably low levels (Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2004; Barrientos, Kritzinger and Rossouw, 2004). At the same time, retailers pride themselves as being socially responsible through introducing codes of conduct to which producers must adhere, and which adds to their costs (Barrientos, 2008; Smith et al., 2004). In response to

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17 In 2004, the supermarket chain Willy’s ran a campaign in Sweden taking pride in squeezing prices on fruit: “Våra inköpare är fruktade världen över. Det syns på prislappen.” (Our purchasers are feared/connected world wide. It shows on the price tag.)

18 This is not to say that codes of conduct are inutile. Positive effects have been noted when it comes to issues like health and safety and adherence to statutory minimum wages, although primarily for permanent employees, but less so in relation to living wages or the protection of workers in precarious positions (Barrientos and Smith, 2007). See further Chapter Seven.
these mixed messages, and neoliberal policy shifts locally, many producers have downsized their permanent workforce, relying increasingly on casualised and externalised workers who cannot access non-wage benefits such as free housing – moves that have contributed to rendering work and lives more precarious for the majority of farm workers (Barrientos, 2008; Du Toit and Ally, 2003; Kritzinger, Barrientos and Rossouw 2004; Visser, 2016). However, the nature of such shifts differs in important ways from developments in early industrialised countries in the global north, as I return to in Chapter Three.

Analysing narratives of farm work in a context of neoliberalisation, I approach precarious employment as intimately enmeshed with and shaped by other social dynamics, including government policy on work and social welfare, unpaid care work, migration, and family and community relations, contributing to making life itself precarious (Clement et al, 2009). In doing so, I draw on the concept of precarity which is understood to have transcended standard sociological definitions of work-related insecurity to incorporate the crisis of work and the welfare state in late capitalism. Precarity, in this framing, refers to “an entire normative, political, and discursive order forcing persons and communities to depend for their survival on uncertain and un.rewarding employment prospects” (Barchiesi, 2016:876). Precarity has also been conceived of as an existential condition epitomised by capital’s “capture of life beyond the workplace” (see Barchiesi, 2012:3). While some aspects of such capture are novel, feminist analysts remind us that capitalist accumulation has always centrally depended on reaping the fruits of women’s unpaid reproductive labour (Fantone, 2007; Federici, 2006). Precarity, it has thus been suggested, signals “the reactivation and reshufflimg of an old system of devaluation shaped by feminisation, heteronormativity, and the coloniality of power”, which makes not only work but life itself more uncertain, for some aggravated by a precarious migration status (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014: 198). One may thus argue that feminised and racialised precarity has always existed, in the global north as well as in the south, but when it is no longer only women, migrants and people of colour whose work and lives are characterised by precarity, it becomes a more urgent topic for discussion (Federici, 2006).

Precarity as a concept is moreover closely linked to the politicisation of precariousness and the self-organising of differently positioned workers, students and migrants based on shared experiences of insecurity (Casas-Cortés, 2014; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). It relates closely to the notion of a precariat – the people inhabiting precarious jobs and leading precarious lives – popularised by social movements in Southern Europe in the early 2000s and used as a rallying call for protests. In an influential book, Guy Standing (2011:24) proposes that the precariat

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19 For a genealogy of the notion of precarity, see e.g. Casas-Cortés, 2014 and Munck, 2013.
makes up an “emerging dangerous class”, lacking a sense of occupational identity, and at risk of being attracted by neo-fascism unless targeted by a politics of inclusive social justice – a notion which has received substantial criticism. Social movements mobilising as ‘the precariat’ have largely been based in welfare states in the global north, which have seen an erosion of social protection, and they tended to draw on an imaginary of loss – of a past presumably characterised by access to decent work and social security. Some analysts therefore question the usefulness of precarity as a social movement project in countries with different historical and political trajectories (Barchiesi, 2012; Munck, 2013).

As alluded to above, an important aspect of this scepticism is that work and life precarity are no novelty to people living in the global south. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2012:123) point out, it was in the global south that some of the first critiques of and most hard-felt challenges against neoliberalism developed. In Africa, they note, most people have long worked under dismal conditions aimed at keeping wages down and hampering attempts to organise and resist, and the forms of market disciplinary regulations which characterise liberal states in Euro-America have never been fully implemented there. Post-colonial legacies have, moreover, contributed to systems of governance characterised by “kleptocratic patronage” in many African countries (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012:124). Taken together, these factors are extremely favourable for unscrupulous and predatory financial capital under neoliberalism, allowing for “optimal profit at minimal cost, with little infrastructural investment” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012:124). In their analysis, development towards and responses to neoliberalisation in Africa are in many ways ahead of those in Euro-America – including the coping mechanisms of ordinary people, who often engage in informal work. This is so precisely because of the history of colonialism, where African countries functioned as “zones of occupation geared toward imperial extraction”, a pattern that in many ways is still in place, as neo-colonial developments have led to African countries being burdened by debt and primarily engaging in raw material export (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012:123).

In line with this reasoning, Munck (2013:757) has suggested that in order for the notion of precarity to be relevant in the global south, it should be analysed as interlinked with “the broader process of dispossession and the generation of new ‘surplus populations’” in such contexts, where the making of new emerging working classes has gone hand in hand with other.

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20 Standing’s idea of an “emerging dangerous class formation” has been critiqued for being pathologising, Euro-centric and nostalgic, and for not convincingly demonstrating that a new class is indeed in the making (Munck, 2013). Furthermore, populist/neo-fascist political parties in Europe have been very hostile to vast sections of the precariat and instead mainly attracted male workers with fairly stable jobs, enjoying the remnants of social protection, as their voters (Barchiesi, 2012; Munck, 2013; Sannerstedt, 2013:64).
categories of people being deprived of land and other means of subsistence. In addition, Barchiesi (2012, 2016) proposes that the precarity of black workers in South Africa cannot be understood in relation to the workplace and the organisation of production alone, but needs to consider deeper layers of racialised structural violence, hinging on the repudiation of blackness. Blackness, Barchiesi (2016:884) notes, entered “the vocabulary of white modernity to designate a condition of existence marked by gratuitous violence and incapacitation.” In South African colonial and settler discourse, he argues, blackness was posited as incompatible with civilised humanity and as such subjected to a state-sanctioned violence which preceded and exceeded histories of economic exploitation under settler capitalism (Barchiesi, 2016:879-880). As I return to below, colonialists imagined participation in waged work as “a marker of progress and civilisation for ‘natives’ striving to emerge from blackness intended as a reality of sloth, stagnation, and barbarism” (Barchiesi, 2016:883). It is important to take these interventions into account when analysing farm workers’ experiences of precarity. I return to discussing the usage of the notion of precarity in a South African context in the concluding chapter.

Analyses of the casualisation and externalisation of work on deciduous fruit and wine farms are not only aligned with debates on precarity, but also tap into the interlinked notion of the feminisation of labour (Kritzinger and Vorster, 1998). In the next section, I turn to discussing this and other concepts emerging from feminist theorisations of gender, work and globalisation.

**Feminisation and the gendered division of labour in global production**

Feminist researchers within fields such as economics, sociology and anthropology have interrogated how, from the 1970s onwards, companies in the global north increasingly began to outsource manufacturing – and later on call centres, customer services and to some extent commercial agriculture – to the global south, and how young women in particular were recruited for such work (see e.g. Bair, 2010; Benería and Roldán, 1987; Elson and Pearson, 1981; Mies, 1982; Mohanty, 2003; Ong, 1987). Perceived as exhibiting qualities desired by capital: as cheap, docile and dexterous workers, readily available and not unionised, these racialised female workers were incorporated under adverse terms, including informally, in global production networks (Salzinger, 2003; Peterson, 2003; Mohanty, 2003; Ong, 1987). Insecure, or, as it were, precarious forms of employment prevailed, designed to cushion fluctuating demand, with much of the work in the burgeoning deregulated export-processing zones being exempt from national labour laws. This resulted in limited opportunities for negotiating better wages and working conditions and frequent spells of unemployment. The twin phenomena of a growing female workforce in export industries, and a weakening of the position of workers in previously more stable jobs, mainly
men, has further been coupled with the down-grading of work as such – from manufacturing to assembly or skilled to unskilled (Salzinger, 2003).

Researchers speak of these processes as the feminisation of labour, which refers to two parallel developments: an increased proportion of women in the work force, but also a feminisation of work itself, whereby hiring arrangements, status and conditions have deteriorated to a (sub-)standard that women have traditionally had to accept – in other words, it alludes to a general mode of production (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014; Peterson and Runyan, 2010; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz, 1995; Standing, 1989). Feminisation also refers to the increasing demand for emotional labour associated with the expansion of service jobs, a trait that women have been trained to excel in through unpaid care work, although it is rarely rewarded in monetary terms (Fantone, 2007; Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014).

Feminist scholars have further noted how ideas of productive femininity and the stereotype of the nimble-fingered, docile, (hetero-)sexualised and disposable ‘third-world woman worker’ functions as a transnational fantasy actively produced on the shop floor, invoked in discourses circulating in multinational companies and states trying to attract investment (Bair, 2010; Salzinger, 2003; Wright, 2006). Gendered and racialised exploitable workers, under this logic, as alluded to above, are not a pre-existing group ready to be hired – even if circumstances of poverty and inequality are an enabling factor – but are created at the site of production (Salzinger, 2003; Wright, 2006). Comparing research on racialised female workers in home-based and factory work in geographically and socio-culturally different contexts, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003:148) notes that, despite obvious differences, the contemporary ways in which global capital is organised “positions these workers in very similar ways, effectively reproducing and transforming locally specific hierarchies.” Common aspects of such transnational positioning include ideas of (appropriate forms of) heterosexual family life, domesticity, flexibility, invisibility and expectations of women’s presence in the work place being temporary (Mohanty, 2003). Sociologist Leslie Salzinger (2003:25) has further drawn attention to how the centrality of gender in global production rests on a combination of uncritical acceptance of gender as a key category for organising and dividing labour and a flexibility with regards to what the categories of masculine and feminine denote, which allows for tremendous local variation. The power of such constructs relies on their resonance with both local gender ideologies and the interests of capital (Mies, 2014).

Importantly, however, researchers have observed that, in spite of work being coupled with unsatisfactory wages and working conditions and few opportunities for advancement, it has still had a positive impact on the lives of many women. Female workers in export-production speak of how they have gained confidence and a voice in their families and increased access to public space through their positions as workers, or found support and
meaning in their work teams (see e.g. Kabeer, 2000; Ong, 1987; Dolan, 2004).

It should come as no surprise that women have been specifically sought after during the past few decades as capital has intensified and diversified its global activities in a quest for higher profit. This pattern resembles the early days of industrialisation, when women and children were in high demand for work regarded as requiring few qualifications, with the textile and clothing industries being prime examples. Ironically, this was made possible through the positioning of women (and children) as not-workers, but as working women (and children), with women’s social identities still associated with their position within the heterosexual family, as mothers, wives or daughters rather than as workers (Mies, 2014; Simonton, 2006). Women’s status as non-workers meant that they could easily be channelled into casual and flexible work, where they functioned as what Engels and later Marx called a ‘reserve army of labour’ (Mies, 2014; Simonton, 2006). The construction of the heterosexual family as an economic unit, within which women’s wages were conceived of as complementary to those of a male breadwinner, and notions of young, yet-to-be-married women working for ‘pin money’, coupled with normative understandings of women as more docile and less prone to protest than men, have contributed to women being thought of as well-suited to ‘cheap work’ (Bair, 2010). Such understandings continue to circulate today, with stereotypes such as the male breadwinner and the (unpaid) female care giver remaining deeply entrenched (Peterson and Runyan, 2010).

Related to this is the gender division of labour, the process of organising work through constructing certain tasks and positions in the work place as ‘feminine’, and others as ‘masculine’, and the recruitment of ‘women’ and ‘men’ to fill such positions, linked to power, status and value. Notions of complementarity at work become intelligible through cultural norms that uphold a binary gender division, where women and men are perceived as each other’s opposites, which in turn has its foundation in what has been termed compulsory heterosexuality (Rubin, 1975; Wittig, 1992). A gender division of labour, furthermore, draws on a separation of productive from reproductive work, with women associated with the latter (Acker, 2004). Links between ‘women’s work’ and reproduction are at times straight forward, in jobs like sub-nursing or cleaning, while gender is invoked in less obvious ways on the assembly line or in commercial agriculture. In the latter type of work, certain tasks are constructed as ‘heavy’, ‘hard’ or ‘skilled’ (and thus masculinised) and other tasks as ‘light’, ‘unskilled’ or requiring ‘dexterity’ (and thus feminised). Such notions continue to position women as secondary and seasonal workers on farms, as I discuss in Chapter Four.

With this dissertation, I attempt to contribute to discussions within the broad field of research on gender and work in global production, by exploring how profitable gendered and racialised farm labourers are evoked
through discourses on commercial farms (Salzinger, 2003). In addition, I seek to contribute to the body of research which looks at how workers organise under such circumstances, a topic to which I will now turn.

Organising, resistance and dignity

Analyses of resistance among farm labourers in South Africa have often focused on what James C. Scott (1990) has referred to as ‘hidden transcripts’, such as sabotage, pilfering, go-slow, evasion and ridicule – understood as the primary and perhaps only avenues available for expressing agency without jeopardising one’s job (Du Toit, 1995, 2005; Waldman, 2006). I have instead opted to focus on open expressions of resistance, including the ‘farm worker strike’ against which this research project is devised, and the formation of resistive or activist subjectivities among female workers involved in organisational spaces.

Analysing narratives on organising and resistance, I draw on the theorisation of labour organising as a potential path for workers to restore a sense of dignity and respectability. The strong attachment between work, dignity and respectability in South Africa – historically and today – has been discussed by Franco Barchiesi in his 2011 book “Precarious liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Post-apartheid South Africa”. Drawing on research among (primarily male) factory and municipal workers in Gauteng Province, he problematises the discrepancy between post-apartheid governments’ continued investment in paid work and job creation as a path to social development, and workers’ everyday experiences of employment as increasingly precarious and undignified.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many black South Africans resisted being incorporated as low-paid waged labourers for the benefit of white capital, preferring to rely on small-scale farming in the reserves or short-term, precarious – including illegal and informal – jobs in white South Africa when the needs arose, as this offered a greater degree of freedom. To remedy the resulting shortage of labour on the mines and on commercial farms, white minority governments introduced a range of coercive measures, including massive land dispossession, hut taxes and restrictions on movement outside of the ‘native’ reserves. Such moves were justified in colonial discourse by claims that black people would benefit from being taught the dignity of labour, signalling a view of black bodies as associated with sloth and laziness, redeemable only through work (Barchiesi, 2011:28–34, 2016).

In spite of this troubling colonial connotation, the black elites dominating the ANC during the early 20th century did not essentially depart from a discursive attachment between work and dignity. Township youth attempting to escape waged work under gruelling conditions were consequently seen as lacking self-respect. Still, for most of the 20th century, African workers were
excluded from the legal definition of an employee, and thus from the right to unionise, bargain collectively or take part in protected strikes, a right extended to this group only from 1979 onwards.\textsuperscript{21} Racialised inequality was further institutionalised in work places with a discourse of ‘decency’ linked to whiteness. A policy of ‘civilised labour’, conceived of as “work done by people whose standard of living conforms to the decent standard of white living”\textsuperscript{22} (Apartheid museum, 2008:29) was adopted, for example, in order to guarantee that whites and some groups of coloured workers in low-skilled jobs received work preference and better conditions than African workers (Barchiesi, 2011:32–40).

As popular resistance intensified from the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century onwards, the ANC continued to imagine work as the most viable route to liberation and empowerment, once racial divisions in the workplace were overcome. Multiracial unions also reflected on labour organising and the identity of worker as offering the greatest potential for black South Africans to “reclaim their human dignity” (Theron, 2007:3 in Barchiesi, 2011:49). Although it is not the central line of inquiry in his book, Barchiesi (2011) presents accounts of (male) workers speaking nostalgically of how participation in labour organising brought about a sense of pride, self-respect, autonomy and indeed the dignity that work itself failed to offer – one example being that of workers conceiving of strikes as attempts to restore their humanity. Among his interviewees, he notes, older African workers conceived of the trade union’s exposure and historicising of oppression at work as what turned “waged labor from a reality of vulnerability and exploitation into a promise of liberation and dignity” (Barchiesi, 2011:233).

The links between dignity and union activism in South Africa are also discussed by Dunbar Moodie in an article exploring the rapid ascent of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the 1980s, with NUM leaders at the time describing the goal of the union as being precisely to restore the dignity of black mine workers (Moodie, 2010). Seeking to explain the exceptional speed at which NUM grew, and developed into what Eddie Webster (1998) refers to as a social movement union, Moodie uses Raymond Williams’ concept of ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams, 1977, in Moodie, 2010), which underscores shared but not yet collectively expressed emotions and feelings amongst a collective as a precondition for a social movement to emerge. Drawing on Palesa Sebilo’s research among migrant mine workers from Lesotho in the late 1970s (Sebilo 1979, in Moodie, 2010), Moodie suggests that a growing numbers of mine workers at the time shared a

\textsuperscript{21} African workers were finally included in the legal definition of an employee through new laws in 1979 and 1981. By then, the route to citizenship had again been foreclosed, however, as unions were forbidden by law to make political demands or go on unprotected strikes (Barchiesi, 2011: 50–51).

\textsuperscript{22} Extract from Hertzog’s circular to government departments 1924-10-31 (cited in Apartheid Museum, 2008:29).
sensation that no redemption was within reach, either in their home areas or on the mines, which could enable them to restore their dignity and self-respect by countering the poverty, racism, violence and danger associated with work on the mines. In this context, a gifted, radical local union leader, Lira Setona, rose to power – at first within, and with time in defiance of, the union structures – through his ability to tap into these emotions and ignite a spark setting off mass action aimed at making the mines ungovernable. Refusing to give in to union orders, Setona led his colleagues into a massive strike, which eventually ended with 14,000 workers being dismissed and bussed home (Moodie, 2010). Through its successful attempts to calm the situation while taking seriously the grievances of workers, using a leadership style relying on what Moodie (2010:171, drawing on Foucault, 1982) describes as “pastoral power”, NUM with time secured support, and according to Moodie started to be regarded as a vehicle with the potential of rehabilitating workers’ integrity and dignity.

Although commercial farm work in the present-day Western Cape is a different context temporally, spatially and politically, I suggest that attention to “situationally structured” feelings as a precondition for mobilisation (Moodie, 2010:164, drawing on Williams, 1977), and the union rhetoric centred on respect and the restoring of workers’ dignity has a bearing on my explorations of farm worker activists’ narratives on resistance, including during the 2012–2013 labour unrest. Indeed, Du Toit (1993:334), in his study on Western Cape wine farms, observed how recognition, respect and humane treatment were central to the demands of unionised workers – some seeing participation in the union as a way to assert their dignity as farm workers. One important factor influencing the differentiated experiences of work, organising and resistance among farm labourers is the violence that labour organising is likely to be met with and draws upon. In the next section, I therefore briefly delve into theories of violence.

Theoretical perspectives on violence

Embedded in the highly unequal relationships in the commercial farming areas of the Western Cape is the presence of various forms of violence (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Levine, 2013). While it might not be fruitful for the purpose of this dissertation to arrive at a definition encompassing everything that may constitute violence in the given context, I suggest that considering some of its features, and various attempts to understand violence from different theoretical and empirical points of departure, may be helpful when seeking to make sense of experiences of precarity and resistance – not least in relation to the messy and, although differently interpreted, violent ‘farm worker strike’.

Medical anthropologists Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004:1-2) have described violence as a ‘slippery concept’, one that does not
easily lend itself to categorisation. Violence, they suggest, “can be everything and nothing; legitimate or illegitimate; visible or invisible; necessary or useless; senseless and gratuitous or utterly rational and strategic” (Schepers-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004:2). In an early attempt at theorising violence, Johan Galtung (1969) introduced the concept of structural violence, to describe the indirect violence built into societal structures which affects people’s life chances. More recently, he has crystallised three types of violence: direct/personal, indirect/structural and cultural, conceiving of violence as “avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to life, lowering the real level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible”, something which also includes threats of violence (Galtung, 1990:292). Such basic human needs are divided into four different categories: the needs for survival, well-being, identity and freedom (with the tentative addition of ecological balance to include the non-human). It is worthwhile to consider some of these aspects when trying to understand the multiple expressions of violence that emerge in my material and in other studies of farm work in the province.

Further exploring indirect forms of violence, Rob Nixon (2011:2) has theorised what he calls slow violence, drawing attention to the temporal and incremental aspects of some forms of violence – including environmental destruction, climate change and the long-term, toxic after-effects of war. He defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all”, and therefore not responded to with the necessary urgency (Nixon, 2011:2). Slow violence, Nixon argues (2011:11), avoids the static element built into definitions of structural violence, suggesting that in comparison, his concept “has a wider descriptive range in calling attention, not simply to questions of agency, but to broader, more complex descriptive categories of violence enacted slowly over time.”

In a recent anthology (van der Waal, 2014), South African anthropologists draw on Nixon’s theorising in exploring the long-term effects of various waves of violent disposessions (including of land) in the Dwars river valley located in the Cape Winelands district. One of the contributors, Lou-Marié Kruger (2014), analyses the narratives of people whom she has met with as a clinical psychologist, and uses the term ‘the slow violence of poverty’ to describe the protracted and interconnected hardships affecting the lives of her informants, who include but are not exclusively farm workers. The stories shared in her text describe direct (personal) violence in the form of

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23 Nixon (2011) illustrates the importance of time through the example of the Vietnam War, where casualties were counted as the number of people killed during the conflict, whereas long-term effects such as deaths and impairments linked to the use of Agent Orange were less widely acknowledged or accounted for.
repeated instances of domestic violence or verbal abuse, but also institutionalised racism and sexism, unfair labour practices, hunger, inferior healthcare and education, crime and substance abuse, to mention but a few (Kruger, 2014). Taken together, Kruger (2014) conceives of these experiences as different expressions of ‘slow violence’, transmitted from one generation to another among the rural working (and non-working) poor as a whole. This actualises Nixon’s (2011:11) understanding of how indirect violence may function as “a catalyst for more recognisable, overt violence.” Such overt expressions of violence also exist in parallel with what Bourdieu (2004) refers to as symbolic violence – a form of violence rendered invisible, incorporated into societal structures as well as into the bodies and minds of the oppressed through processes of naturalisation, so that they participate in their own domination (see further Chapter Five).

Achille Mbembe (2015) has used the term ‘postcolony’ in casting light on how the violence that was central to colonial dominance remains a key feature of many African state formations today, where violent post-colonial forms of governance, ‘commandement’, have replaced colonial ones. While post-apartheid South Africa is often presented as a successful exception, a country with a modern, liberal constitution, functioning institutions, and comparative freedom of speech, today’s post-colonial and post-apartheid social fabric is saturated with various forms of violence. In her book on rape in South Africa, Pumla Dineo Gqola (2015:54) writes of the alarming prevalence of sexual and other forms of violence as both “a legacy of unfinished pasts” – imparted from generation to generation – and “emboldening forms of violence” in the present. The slave-era institutionalisation of rape in the Cape colony, the armed struggle against colonial violence, the structural violence and high levels of militarisation and militaristic control in the apartheid state, as well as the patriarchal nature of both white and black society today, makes up a dangerous cocktail, she cautions, where violence is bound to take on gendered forms (Gqola, 2015).

Various expressions of violence are further embedded in the globalised labour market in the country – epitomised by the heightened (and televised) violent moment in August 2012, when 34 mine workers were shot dead by police near the town of Marikana in the North West Province, while striking for better working conditions at a platinum mine.24 The decision to use live ammunition against unarmed protesters in an attempt to break the strike allegedly implicated prominent ANC leaders on the board of the mining company (see e.g. Desai, 2013).

Strikes in South Africa both during and after apartheid have also been characterised by high levels of direct violence both against and amongst workers, including at times deadly attacks on suspected strike-breakers and

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24 The World Economic Forum has repeatedly ranked South Africa at the bottom in its Global Competitiveness Index when it comes to cooperation in labour–employer relations.
members of rival union factions (see e.g. Chinguno, 2013; von Holdt, 2010, 2012). This phenomenon must be analysed in relation to both the broader context of structural violence and social injustice, and the sense of agency and empowerment that workers experience when taking part in violent strike action, bringing to mind Fanon’s (2005 [1961]) understanding of violent resistance against colonialism as a way of asserting popular power (von Holdt, 2012). In a South African context, subaltern classes regularly engage in collective violence to advance their cause, including during strikes, since it “is intrinsic to the meaning of the strike and because it has proven its effectiveness” (von Holdt, 2010:141). Less visible forms of work-related violence, including premature deaths caused by accidents, long-term exposure to chemicals and heavy work form part of the everyday exploitation of the bodies of black workers, as a constant but silenced accompanying feature of the organisation of (global) work (Nixon, 2011:6).

Taking note of such complexities, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004:19) propose blurring the boundaries between different types of violence: the mundane ‘everyday violence’ (Scheper-Hughes, 1992) which receives little attention and recognition in spite of its vast and deadly effects – including disease, slow starvation and humiliation – and direct violence in both peace and wartime, suggesting that all of these may be understood as taking place within a “violence continuum”. They further note that the most violent acts often “consist of conduct that is socially permitted, encouraged, or enjoined as a moral right or duty” (Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes, 2004:5). Moreover, they suggest that the power and meaning of violence is above all derived from its social and cultural dimensions, stressing the importance of including in any definition of violence its non-physical aspects, such as “assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim” (Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes, 2004:2).

Thinking with Nixon (2011) and Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes (2004), I attempt throughout this dissertation to primarily discuss the less exceptional expressions of structural, everyday and slow violence, while still not shying away from retelling the more striking but perhaps less representative stories, because omitting such tales would “mask one thread of the many forms that structural violence takes in the Western Cape” (Levine, 2013:49). One important argument for grounding a discussion on structural and other forms of violence in theory is that the concept of violence in the Western Cape farmlands tends to be spoken of in ways which draws attention only to certain violent actions while omitting others, and focusing on some actors but not others. By reading the developments during and after the strike against the notion of a violence continuum, I will attempt to identify some of the complex interlinkages between work and life precarity, violence and resistance, and how such phenomena are entangled with intersecting power relations linked to gender, class, race/ethnicity and nationality/migration status.
Precariousness, precarity and dehumanisation

An aspect of violence that I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four is dehumanisation, emerging from farm worker narratives of not feeling recognised as human in the workplace. This form of violence is discussed by Judith Butler in two books in which she elaborates on the notions of precariousness and precarity (2004, 2009). Drawing on philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who has conceptualised an ethics based on apprehension of the precarious life of the Other, Butler explores the relationship between representation, humanisation and dehumanisation as well as precarity in a broader sense, and the link between violence and ethics. She develops her ideas in the context of post-September 11, analysing the framing of anti-terrorism measures and warfare by the United States that followed, as well as interlinked questions of immigration and multi-culturalism. She suggests, however, that her readings may also have implications for other debates (Butler, 2009) – and I argue that precarious work and precarity in a context of neo-liberal globalisation may be one.

Looking at how loss of life is differently represented in the media and attributed different values within politics through racism and nationalism, Butler explores the idea of some lives not being constructed as grievable, or apprehended as life as such. If some lives, she writes, are “not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense” (Butler, 2009:1). One of Butler’s key points (building on Levinas) is that precariousness must be understood as a shared condition, because everyone’s life is insecure, and in some ways interlinked with those of others, dependent on an (invisible) network of hands for its survival. Importantly, she distinguishes between precariousness as an existential concept, and the interlinked notion of precarity which is shaped by political decisions.

In Butler’s (2009:25) reading, precarity designates: “that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.” The differential distribution of precarity between populations is a question of both materiality and perception, she notes, since “those whose lives are not regarded as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death” (Butler, 2009:25). From this, it follows that, while not everything may be reduced to perception, the ways in which lives are framed and perceived (as grievable, as life as we know it) does have material consequences (Butler, 2009:25).

In order for life to appear precarious, and thus in need of, and entitled to, forms of protection and support, it must first be apprehended as such. “The apprehension of grievability”, Butler (2009:15) therefore notes, “precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life.” Such mechanisms, I
suggest, may be worth exploring in relation to how labour is valued in circumstances where the need for survival, exemplified by whether workers can afford adequately nutritious food, may be deemed by policymakers and capital as less important than the profitability and future of commercial farms in the forms in which we know them (see e.g. Meyer et al., 2012).

On a similar note, Paulina de los Reyes, in an analysis of European Union policy texts on immigration, has suggested that when people seeking refuge in Europe are constructed as a non-gendered (threatening) mass, it becomes impossible for refugees to occupy recognisable (gendered) subject positions and thus be apprehended as human (de los Reyes, 2013:80). She uses the term defeminisation to draw attention to the non-recognition of female immigrants as subjects as one important aspect of dehumanisation, reminding us that the possibility of apprehending gender is an important aspect of apprehending the human (de los Reyes, 2013:80).

For the purpose of this dissertation, Judith Butler’s (2004, 2009) elaborations appear relevant for analysing how farm workers narrate experiences of dehumanisation. Included in this are their reflections on experiences of being defeminised (de los Reyes, 2013). Furthermore, I draw on Butler’s conceptualisation of precarity and precariousness (together with the more work-oriented definitions discussed above), as she brings together several aspects that I see as central in understanding the context of export-oriented commercial farm work in the Western Cape: differential exposure to hunger, insecurity and violence depending on how people are caught within intersections of power linked to gender, race/ethnicity and nationality.

In relation to commercial farm work, anthropologist Peter Benson (2008), in ways somewhat parallel to Butler’s, has drawn on Levinas’ conceptualisation of ethics, as well as on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) theorisation of ‘faciality’ (visagéité) in exploring structural violence on tobacco farms in the United States. At his research sites, seasonally employed labourers are predominately Mexican migrants with undocumented status, housed on farms (Benson, 2008). Benson notes how racist attitudes and negative stereotypes towards immigrants allow farm owners and managers not to feel compelled to act ethically when engaging face-to-face with these workers. Through their ways of seeing, they envisage someone who does not belong to the community, to whom blame may be transferred in the wake of increased economic pressure caused by

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25 Curiously, EU and US policy makers strongly emphasise gender elsewhere, for example making notions of ‘women’s rights’ and ‘sexual freedom’ central in motivating its aggression towards Muslims and other ‘Others’, who are constructed as opposing the rights of women and the LGBT community (Butler, 2008). For defeminisation as a process of dehumanisation, see also Hortense Spillers’ seminal essay ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’ (1987), in which she argues that the pathologisations of black motherhood and black femininity in contemporary US political discourse can be traced back to the transformation of the captive body into ungendered flesh, that marked slavery in the United States.
neoliberalisation (Benson, 2008). Using the concept of faciality, Benson refers both to the interlinkages between power and perception, and to a construction of ethical stances based on what is seen in the faces of others. Faciality, he suggests “is crucial to the constitution and perpetuation of structural violence because how people see others can help legitimise patterns of social subordination, economic exploitation, and spatial segregation” (Benson, 2008:596).

While my theoretical entry point is different, focusing on gender which Benson does not mention, and my material differs from his detailed observations of mimicking and facial gestures, there are many parallels between our research contexts, in relation to discourses and the differentiated value attributed to lives on farms, which I return to in Chapters Four and Six.

Concluding remarks and thesis outline

In this chapter, I have briefly introduced my research project, its aims and research questions. I have also presented the theoretical framework used in the dissertation, making a circular movement from the (violent) colonial history of commercial farming in the Western Cape to intersectionality theory, the theorisation of neoliberal globalisation and restructuring, the precarisation and feminisation of labour, organising and resistance and finally violence, dehumanisation and precarity. The main concepts which I have discussed, and will return to throughout the dissertation, include ‘contact zone’ (Pratt, 1991), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), precarity and precarious life (Butler, 2004, 2009), the feminisation and precarity of labour (e.g. Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014), the gender division of labour and productive femininity (e.g. Salzinger, 2003) as well as dignity of labour and labour activism as a route to restoring workers’ dignity (Barchiesi, 2011; Moodie, 2010). I also engage with the concepts of structural violence (Galtung, 1969), slow violence (Nixon, 2011), the violence continuum (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois) and faciality (Benson, 2008).

The dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter Two, ‘Ethnographic fieldwork in the post-strike moment’ describes the fieldwork, discusses methodological questions, and brings the text closer to the empirical context through introducing the research sites. Chapter Three, ‘Who and what is a farm worker?’, discusses how the neoliberal restructuring of commercial agriculture in South Africa has affected the size, composition and conditions of the labour force, and how this has contributed to a reconfiguring of what and who a farm worker is considered to be at present. Some of the differently positioned research participants are introduced in this chapter. Chapter Four, ‘Docile feminised labourers, dangerous masculinities and robots’ explores how power hierarchies linked to (primarily) gender, race/ethnicity and nationality are shaped by, and
contribute to shaping, the organisation of work, drawing on research participants’ narratives on work and life precarity, violence and dehumanisation, as well as observations from a few localities. The dissertation then moves on to discussing how workers organise and resist work and life precarity and experiences of dehumanisation. In Chapter Five, ‘Women’s narratives on activism: towards resistive respectability’, I explore how female farm workers’ resistive/activist subjectivities are forged out of their experiences of challenging power holders – looking particularly at the importance given to a discourse of rights in this endeavour. In Chapter Six, ‘Snap! The ‘farm worker strike’ as a response to slow violence’, I turn to the 2012–2013 protests as a key contemporary example of such open resistance, using intersectionality theory to explore the dynamics among farm workers in the post-strike moment. I also look at narratives of violence in the strike, and interlinkages between precarity, violence and resistance.

In the final chapter, ‘On feminised precarity and resistance under neoliberal globalisation’, I present and discuss my conclusions from the study, and elaborate on the interconnections between the Western Cape farmlands and Sweden as an important destination country for deciduous fruit and wine. Through eclectically selected examples from the media and advertisements, I discuss material inequalities along the value chain of fruit and wine as well as neoliberal and post-colonial discourses in representations of (female) farm workers in Sweden, and labour solidarity between the two countries.
Chapter 2 | Ethnographic fieldwork in the post-strike moment

The car is becoming unbearably hot under the blazing sun, and I roll down the windows, letting the slight breeze carry dust from the dirt road into the compartment as I wait for a group of migrant workers outside a large table grape farm where they are temporarily based. Keeping an eye on time, with a feeling that I shouldn’t stay here too long, that it would not be good for the workers to be seen with me – foreign, white, often mistaken for a journalist – I try to catch some glimpses of life in the migrant workers’ compound. To simply pop in and say hello is impossible, as the area is fenced and guards stand by the entrance, checking IDs to ensure that only workers on the farm may enter. Inside the compound are several brick buildings, with small dorms but also large halls where 40 to 50 people live together, as well as military tents, where I am told that workers squeeze together in triple bunk-beds standing directly on the muddy grass. Small groups of mainly young female migrants are queuing by the entrance, waiting to board the taxis taking them to and from the nearest town some 20 minutes’ drive away, paying for the ride themselves as nothing except a place to sleep is provided free of charge. Apart from functioning as a place to do the weekly shopping, the town does not play an important role in the lives of the workers I interact with, who are housed here for between 5 and 11 months per year, using most of their salaries to support children and dependents living elsewhere. The farm crèche, which is featured on the company’s web page, is available only to permanent staff, out of whom some 150 persons live in single houses across the road from the compound. During peak season, at least 2 000 workers live here, mainly migrants from former homelands, but also immigrants from neighbouring countries. A large majority are women, I am told, mostly in their 20s or early 30s. Possibly, the work force on this farm, which includes people commuting from nearby towns, is representative of the Western Cape deciduous fruit industry today – a sector where labour has become increasingly casualised and diversified, and where women make up the majority of workers during season time.

The scene described above, a snap-shot reflection from a site where research for this dissertation was conducted, is a (condensed and edited) excerpt from my field notes. It speaks to one of multiple trajectories of change taking place across the Western Cape commercial farming areas,
rendering the occupational category of ‘farm worker’ more diverse, fragmented and precarious.

In this chapter, I will reflect on some important aspects of ethnographic fieldwork and feminist empirical research more broadly: the construction of the field of research, choice of sites, methods used, strategies for entering the field and, importantly, ethical considerations and my own positionality (Davies, 2008; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002; Skeggs, 2001). Firstly, however, I will briefly introduce the context and locations in which I conducted fieldwork.

Map of the Western Cape Province

Western Cape commercial farming areas as a research site

How should one begin to describe a field which is not an isolated place but a string of sites that may be seen as linked through experiences of (resistance towards) work and life precarity? Which is scattered around two or three different river valleys, divided by mountain ranges and extending into three of the five rural district municipalities of the Western Cape province – an area the size of Greece, or slightly larger than Malawi? Where some farms span vast areas, housing thousands of migrant workers in huge compounds, while others are small establishments of a few dozen hectares, characterized by picturesque orchards or vineyards, with rustic tree-lined avenues and lush
green slopes in which workers’ quarters are embedded here and there. Travelling past free-standing worker houses with well-kept gardens on some of the more scenic farms, one might not recall the make-shift shacks of corrugated iron standing on the bare, windy hills which one drove past on the way, where other workers live, possibly in much greater numbers. Or, as is at times the case, one might neglect to consider whether there are houses on the farm that are hidden out of sight: tiny shacks without water or sanitation, or huge compounds with crowded dormitories. Web pages catering for tourists to the renowned wine routes that traverse the area contribute to a sense of this being a place where labourers are but an absent presence, with their featured photographs of scenic views of tamed nature void of people, vines in endless straight lines, or close-ups of details from luxurious lodges (Du Toit, 2013).

Reading feminist scholar Gabeba Baderoon (2014) helps to put this sense of visual distraction into perspective, as she alerts us to how picturesque representations of Cape colonial landscapes historically served to divert attention away from the violence to which black workers were exposed here – in spite of the presence of compliant, exoticised Malay slaves depicted along the edges of paintings. More recently, in her research on child labour, Susan Levine (2011:263) has drawn attention to the spatial differentiation between what one of her informants called “display vineyards”, easily accessible to tourists and ethical auditors, and the vineyards far up the mountain slopes, where vulnerable categories of workers such as children were more likely to be found.26 In the Cape farmlands, the post-colonial is literally staged on the scene of the colonial, where 19th century on-farm manor buildings and workers’ houses in whitewashed stone have been refurbished to accommodate today’s workers and employers – or converted into offices and accommodation for tourists seeking an ‘authentic’ farm experience. The seemingly jovial term ‘family farm’ used in advertising to signal that the farm is run by its owner, further invokes the past in the present, bringing to mind the notion of the farm as a family under paternalism, in its early and most brutal form governed with “fists, whips and guns” at times coupled with acts of benevolence and a closeness that prevented resistance (Bradford, 1987:55). On a few farms, the violent history of farming in the Cape is reflected in museum exhibitions.

As I conducted this research project, I interacted with participants in many different physical locations, most of them situated just outside the farms themselves, but where farm dynamics still dictate the rhythms of everyday life. It could be a workers’ house on the outskirts of a farm, one in a row of small, white stone-houses with broken windows and damp-stained

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26 As Levine (2011) points out, since the introduction of new legislation to prevent child labour in 1994, the number of children working on farms has drastically reduced. Linked to this, her ethnography shows how child hunger has increased.
walls where I spent much time with a farm worker/friend – talking about issues on and far beyond her farm. It could be an area of newly built, state-subsidised two-bedroom brick houses in a dry and dusty rural township, or the crowded informal settlement some hundred meters to the side, housing predominately migrant workers, renting tiny, over-priced rooms in shacks of corrugated iron, worrying over issues of safety. It could be the office space of an organisation or a series of workshops. It could be a newly developed settlement adjacent to a township, acting as a dumping site for people who had been evicted from nearby farms, no longer wanted as farm labourers.

What could be said of these places if one were to connect the dots, what are some of the main features of the society within which these separate sites – towns, farms, townships, organisations – are located? As discussed in Chapter One, South Africa is haunted by a violent history, from colonialism and slavery to apartheid rule, which only ended in the early 1990s, and through which a system of institutionalised inequality based on race, ethnicity and gender was created. A central feature of colonialism was the massive dispossession of land from black people, greater and more profound here than elsewhere on the continent (Lahiff, 2007), and their forced removal to the apartheid homelands, accompanied by a migrant labour system that ensured access to cheap labour for white-run industries, including on commercial farms. Present-day land reform programmes, as of yet firmly upholding the protection of private property, have not managed to address this historical injustice in any substantial way – and migration for work, when this can be found, is still a key feature of social life. The crisis of work in the post-apartheid state has however meant that remittances by migrant workers are nowadays at times coupled with cash transfers from rural areas to urban centres, enabled by old-age pensions and grants (Du Toit and Neves, 2009; Ferguson, 2013b).

During the first 20 years of democracy, the South African ‘rainbow nation’ has been celebrated abroad for its nation-building through reconciliation, its progressive liberal constitution and wealth of creativity – but also renowned for alarming levels of gender-based violence and HIV prevalence, and extreme gaps between rich and poor. Over the past two decades, reports on political developments in the country have become increasingly gloomy.

The Western Cape Province then, where research for this PhD project was conducted, has six million residents out of whom 208,000 were estimated to work in commercial agriculture during the first quarter of 2018 (Statistics

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27 When apartheid ended, 86 percent of agricultural land in South Africa, 68 percent of the total surface area, was owned by white people (only 11 percent of the population). The African majority had under apartheid been pushed together in poverty-stricken native homelands or ‘Bantustans’ (Lahiff, 2007).
South Africa, 2011, 2018). Outside of Cape Town, one in every five formally employed persons in the province works in commercial agriculture (Statistics South Africa, 2018). The agricultural sector nationally has further been shedding jobs on a large scale over the past 30 years, and many smaller farms have been taken over by large consortiums (Bernstein, 2013). During the post-strike moment, farmers and their interest groups moreover complained about labour costs becoming unaffordable given their inability to influence retail prices, and many spoke at length about plans to mechanise and retrench, which weighed heavily on the shoulders of farm workers. However, there are indications that the downward trend in agricultural employment has levelled out in recent years (Visser and Ferrer, 2015).

It was suggested in Chapter One that the commercial farming areas of the Western Cape may be read as a contact zone (Pratt, 1991) saturated with a violent history. It could further be envisaged as a ‘diaspora space’ (Brah, 1996:181) in which many residents have lived for most of their lives, while others have arrived more recently; first- or second-generation migrants from poorer provinces who came to find work on farms during peak season, some of whom have settled permanently; foreign migrants escaping political persecution or a collapsing economy in their home countries, who often work as seasonal or casual labourers; and wealthy foreigners from overseas who have bought farms here, some perhaps investing in a small wine farm as a lifestyle choice, and visit irregularly, leaving managers in charge of a labour force they may know little about. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Three, it is a contact zone that has seen many dramatic changes since the 1980s – the radical down-sizing of the workforce and massive movement of workers off farms in response to political and economic changes being the most profound one. Together with in-migration, this has contributed to a mushrooming of informal settlements around rural towns (Wegerif, Russell and Grundling, 2005). These areas serve as depositories for cheapened surplus labour, where competition between labour brokers and among differently positioned workers is at times fierce.

Hierarchies of race/ethnicity, gender, class and nationality continue to shape life here in profound ways, articulating with labour regimes and the spatial layout of farms and rural towns. The predominately white farm owners and top managers, although a socio-economically diverse group, would generally reside in (often) lavish on-farm manor buildings, or in spacious refurbished old stone houses within the city centre or leafy

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28 As ethnicity is a category that is discussed in this dissertation, linked to power and material injustice, it might be worth noting that according to the latest Census, 49 percent of the population in the Western Cape counts as Coloured, 33 percent as African, 16 percent as White, 1 percent as Indian or Asian, and 1.6 percent as other (Statistics South Africa, 2011).

29 While some farms are owned by large (including foreign) companies, it has been noted that many smaller or medium-sized farms are struggling to make a profit, and a majority of farms have an annual turn-over of below 500,000 rand per year (Visser and Ferrer, 2015:214).
suburban villas, while stand-alone, family-unit workers’ houses on farms would be the home to a small core of permanently employed, mostly coloured on-farm workers. The labour compounds erected on some farms would primarily make up temporary residences for black African seasonal migrants from other provinces or neighbouring countries. The apartheid-era spatial segregation in rural towns is still visible in the present, with coloured permanent and seasonal labourers mostly residing in what used to be designated coloured townships (generally closer to town and better serviced) and black African seasonal and permanent workers primarily in previous African townships (often more remote and with lower standards of housing), although some areas are more mixed. Foreign labourers would generally rent backyard dwellings in townships, or reside in more recently established informal settlements in houses of corrugated iron sheets and wooden planks. Studies from the early post-apartheid years further observed a feminisation of the labour force, with female workers constituting 50 percent or more of the total work force on deciduous fruit farms, primarily in seasonal or casual positions (Barrientos et al., 2005; Du Toit and Ally, 2003; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1998). On table grape farms, young female migrants would at times outnumber all other sub-categories of workers during the four to six months labour-intensive season time, often staying on-farm in shared dormitories, as in the example with which I opened this chapter. Neoliberal globalisation processes and policy shifts aimed at deregulating the sector have further been coupled with a casualisation of employment, with the real income of most farm labourers, Visser (2016) suggests, being lower today than it was in the 1970s, when non-wage benefits such as housing and food items were more often made available.

This changing nature of farm work, together with frustration at the lack of substantial improvements for working-class people since the fall of apartheid – of which the massacre of mine workers in Marikana became a brutal reminder – created a breeding ground for the farm worker unrest of 2012–2013, which forms the temporal and spatial delimitation for this study. As noted in Chapter One, the protests started in early November 2012 in the table grape producing areas surrounding De Doorns, primarily led by what in the standard labour literature have often been referred to as ‘atypical’ workers: seasonal and casual workers living off-farm, many of them women, and more or less recently arrived (male and female) migrants, who were mostly not members of trade unions (Ntsebeza, 2013; Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015). It was inspired by several local strikes in the area, primarily one in August/September of that year, involving roughly 350 workers, overwhelmingly black African women living away from the farm.

The protests lasted until January 2013, being called on and off several times during that period. National days of action were further announced – and many of the workers in this study took part in at least some of these different protest activities. This included, apart from the mass stay-away,
marches, picketing with placards demanding 150 rand per day (a more than doubling of the then minimum wage) and blocking of national roads and entry points to farms, pack houses and refineries. More confrontational or ‘violent’ methods were also used by some protesters, including stone-throwing and setting vineyards and in some cases buildings or vehicles alight. The police responded to the protests by using teargas, water cannons and rubber bullets, and three farm workers were reportedly shot dead during this period, while many others were injured. Farmers also hired private security firms to guard their premises and some patrolled the streets to keep protesters at bay. Opinions differed among farm workers when it came to the use of confrontational or ‘violent’ means of protest, some seeing this as the only way of achieving change while others were highly critical. As will be discussed in Chapter Six, both collaboration and disunity were noted amongst differently positioned farm labourers during this period, in which anti-foreigner sentiments and rifts between workers who were still experiencing some forms of paternalistic protection on farms and those who did not were brought to the surface. As I shall discuss, to some extent this led to the gradual silencing of migrant workers, both female and male, who had played important roles at the onset of the protests. As the next season started, moreover, a few local strikes erupted as some workers claimed that the wage increase announced by the Minister of Labour in February 2013 (up to 105 rand per day, a 52% increase) was eaten up by hefty deductions introduced by farm companies, and rising food prices.

This chapter will now turn to discussing the field work process, starting with a reflection on my positionality.

On positionality: being an outsider connected through activism

As I researched farm workers’ experiences of precarity, organising and resistance in the Western Cape, I neither would nor could pretend to be a neutral by-stander. Working for a Swedish solidarity organisation based in the Eastern Cape between 2003 and 2005, and in the years that followed studying for a master’s degree in Gender Studies at the University of Cape Town, I had got to know many activists working with social justice and land rights in rural areas, including in farm worker unions. During the years prior to commencing the research, and in a slightly altered role afterwards, I was involved in an international campaign for better working conditions and a fairer redistribution of the value of wine produced in South Africa, Argentina and Chile, and exported to the Nordic alcohol monopolies. This engagement had meant hosting South African union activists visiting Sweden and organising meetings with Swedish organisations, unions, parliamentarians and business representatives, as well as drafting opinion pieces and open letters together with organisations in several countries – with the aim of supporting farm workers’ demands for social and gender justice, including a
greater share of the profit made from wine sales in the Nordic countries. Activist experience, prior knowledge and connections thus helped create opportunities for this research project and, together with my location as a white female PhD candidate in Gender Studies based in Sweden, informed my analytical sensibilities.

Taking a position in support of precariously positioned workers, it should be noted, did not equate to uncritical support of the methods and strategies of the organisations or individuals to whom I related through campaign work or the research. This would moreover be an impossible project when writing from a position as researcher (Mulinari, 2011:179). Still, in order to separate the research from involvement in campaigning, re-positioning myself as an ethnographer, “a listener and a teller of tales” (Tsing, 2005:271), I opted not to use a specific organisation as the arena for research, but to link up with activists associated with various different organisations, focusing on how they gave meaning to work, organising and resistance, while attempting to avoid being pulled into organisational politics and disagreements, including in relation to the campaign.

My involvement in this research project may also be viewed as a product of the complex, contradictory, close but unequal relationship between Sweden and South Africa. This includes trade connections, such as the export of wine and deciduous fruit to Sweden, as well as the many links and shared history emanating from (solidarity with) the struggle against apartheid. This solidarity plays a central role in Sweden’s construction of itself as a colour-blind nation, with an “internationalist national identity” (Thörn, 2010:116); hence, the former white apartheid government epitomises everything from which Sweden would wish to disassociate itself. The project may further be inscribed within a tradition in which Swedish-based researchers have had much more opportunity to study and historicise links between the two countries than vice versa. In my case, a generous stipend made it possible for me to spend five months in South Africa together with my family, and also allowing me to be mobile, as the funds were sufficient for me to hire a small car for this period.³⁰

The multiple material- and other inequalities between myself and my farm labourer interlocutors, many of whom were exposed to attempts to undermine their power and sense of worth through economic marginalisation coupled with racism and sexism, influenced how I was perceived and what people chose to share with me. Some would place a lot of hope in the research, suggesting that if foreign consumers were informed about the conditions under which they lived and laboured, this would lead to a public outcry followed by substantive changes on farms. Thus, as a foreign academic (or student as most people would rather describe me) sympathetic to the struggles of rural people, I was to some extent given an important (and

³⁰The stipend was issued by Rhodins stiftelse
difficult) position as mediator of grievances. Others appeared in some instances to be careful not to mention less righteous aspects of the farm worker protests to me. It is likely they were concerned about presenting themselves and the movements of which they were part in the best possible light.

The extent to which people would welcome me, turn down invitations to converse or hang out and challenge me would also depend on these power differences – as did the kind of queries I felt comfortable pursuing. As anthropologist Fiona Ross (2010:5) notes in her research in a township outside of Cape Town, writing about social life under difficult conditions carries with it great risks: "of pathologising, of generating fixed positions, of blaming victims." I was at times perhaps too cautious about probing certain less comfortable topics further as I tried to navigate the challenging moral terrain through focusing overtly on structural conditions, agency and resistance, and firmly locating narratives within a context of neoliberal globalisation. The dangers of mis-perception and mis-representation, together with cultural, linguistic, material and other divides, made the path towards building trust and negotiating unobtrusive ways of relating – or even speaking – perilous. Among the research participants, however, were several powerful and outspoken activists, who were used to relating to journalists, scholars and foreign activists, and who through their compassion and drive to share their experiences of injustices and of attempts to confront these as widely as possible, did their best to help guide me. With some people, over time, the relationship turned into a deeper long-term engagement, where friendship and research relations became increasingly entangled, making it difficult to make sense of what to write and what to leave out, and how to write without hurting (for more on this, see below, under ethics).

**Multi-sited ethnography: constructing the field**

As Vered Amit (2000) points out, the ethnographic field is not something that is simply out there, ready for the researcher to explore. Rather, "it has to be laboriously constructed, prised apart from all the other possibilities for contextualisation to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred" (Amit, 2000:6). The construction of the field is further shaped by an ethnographer’s relational, financial and professional opportunities and assets (discussed in the previous section) as well as by one’s location within the academy, in my case as a scholar of Gender Studies, sensitised to certain concepts and methods (Amit, 2000).

The delimitation of this study is not constructed as a neatly cut-off physical space, such as one farm or town, or in relation to a specific type of agricultural produce, nor is it confined to members of one particular union or support organisation. Instead, as noted earlier, it is crafted around the post-
strike moment, as a particular time-and-space-bound ethnographic moment, and it is this which makes up the principal demarcation of the study (see Acker, 2004). The people and places that form part of the study may be described as connected through experiences of organising and resistance during this decisive moment – and furthermore they resided (temporarily or permanently) in or near eleven of the 25 towns to which the 2012–2013 protests spread.

The field that I have constructed may be read as simultaneously both diffuse and in some ways fairly integrated. It is partly made up of different self-constituted social groups concentrated in particular localities in the Western Cape (identifying as members of local unions or organisations for example), some of whom would meet in provincial activist networking spaces, such as the Farm Worker Coalition set up during the strike, or at public hearings or marches. Others would have a much more vague and distant link with an organisation or union, although they shared connections to geographical areas with others, through migration for seasonal work on commercial farms, or through family or kinship ties. Among the research participants, some related with ease to the social category of farm worker while others did not, despite having experience of doing the same kind of work over a substantial period of time.

The selection and combining of a diverse group of participants, whose experiences are shaped by their positioning within hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality as well as their personal histories, is primarily a research intervention. The research design is, however, supported by the logic of the strike itself, which spread in ways that cut across sectors, locations and organisations, to farms and areas with different historical trajectories and work force compositions. Through the same logic, I included Sweden as a site-at-a-distance, drawing on media reports, (documentation of) solidarity campaigns and advertisements speaking of farm workers in South Africa, in order to depict how global connections may contribute to shaping Western Cape realities in an era of neoliberal globalisation (Tsing, 2005).

Constructing a field of research, Amit (2000:6) suggests, “involves efforts to accommodate and interweave sets of relationships and engagements developed in one context with those arising in another.” Apart from motivating the linking of the various sites alluded to above, in my case this further involved finding ways of interweaving experiences and relationships emanating from my involvement in solidarity campaigning vis-à-vis the Nordic alcohol monopolies and work for a non-governmental organisation

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31I have also interacted with a few farm workers who have no association with any trade union, worker organisation, or strike committee etc. I draw partly on such workers’ narratives in Chapters Three and Four.
[NGO] supporting organisations in the sector, with those developing during the research.

The construction of the field has not allowed for such a deep engagement with and understanding of one particular place or group as the archetypical anthropological experience of a long, deep immersion within one place (see e.g. Caputo, 2000; Gemzöe, 2004, on the hierarchical valuing of fieldwork). The design I chose, I suggest, has other advantages, such as enabling the identification of similarities and differences emerging in the narratives of differently positioned workers, who form part of an increasingly variegated collective of people working on commercial farms, and contextualising these experiences as shaped by processes of neoliberal globalisation.

The approach to ethnography used in this study would perhaps best be described as multi-sited (Marcus, 1998). It could further be characterised as translocal, with a transnational component (Hannerz, 2001), constructed through a ‘pick’, connecting various pieces of material from different locations in a way which “links ethnographic detail with political economy” (Agar, 1996:13). Following Marcus (1998), I understand multi-sited ethnography as a method hinging on the theorisation of a “world system”, understood broadly as mechanisms that redistribute surplus value from the peripheries to the core(s) (Wallerstein, 1974) – although such distinctions have become increasingly blurred through globalisation processes (Brah, 1996). Multi-sited ethnography, according to this reading, is developed as a way of studying multiply positioned phenomena in a context of globalisation (Marcus, 1998). It does not, however, seek to portray an entire world system (in this study: of loosely interconnected, place-based neoliberalisation processes and their impact on work and life precarity, organising and resistance). It claims, instead, that:

any ethnography of a cultural formation in the world system is also an ethnography of the system, and therefore cannot be understood only in terms of the conventional single site mise-en-scène of ethnographic research, assuming indeed it is the cultural formation, produced in several different locales, rather than the conditions of a particular set of subjects that is the object of the study. (Marcus, 1998:83)

Put differently, researchers have stressed that studies of specific localities must take into account how globalisation processes both shape and are shaped by local dynamics (Hart, 2002). More recently, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005:4) has used the term “friction” to refer to the “awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” that co-produces (global) cultures and power.

While I have not conducted fieldwork in more than one country, as Marcus (1998) did, or explored in depth the contradictory and unexpected engagements of both local and transnational actors in one specific area (Hart,
2002; Tsing, 2005), I still align my study with these researchers’ perspectives. In the concluding chapter, I highlight how local developments take shape in relation to global interconnection and multiply positioned phenomena and pay attention to postcolonial ties between South Africa and Sweden as an important destination for South African wine and deciduous fruit. Within the Western Cape commercial farming areas, I have further moved between multiple sites, including organisational spaces and rural places. I have listened to the narratives of differently positioned workers, most of whom are engaged in work which is undoubtedly precarious, from employment arrangements, to length of contracts, to low pay to work-related health risks – and who, with a few exceptions, are involved in organisations and/or have taken part in strike action, resisting power inequalities at work and beyond.

The decision to ‘keep on moving’ between several sites, and to select some locations and groups of people for more in-depth exploration, was linked to my primary interest not being to examine one particular organisational strategy and practice, or to attempt to map and capture all that goes on in one specific locality. Instead, by way of fragments, I sought to sketch a broader picture of work and life precarity and resistance during the post-strike moment – explored as a form of variegated “cultural formation” produced in several places, speaking with Marcus (1998:83). Furthermore, I attempted to capture variations within the broad category of farm worker, taking note of the often very specific connotations attached to ‘farm workers’ and ‘farm women’ in organisational and popular discourse in the Western Cape, where migrant workers’ experiences have tended to be omitted. This required a flexible approach, adapting to social circumstances, opportunity and chance, and I constantly constructed and reconstructed the field during my fieldwork (Amit, 2000). Drawing on the opportunities made available through prior connections, I thus used purposive sampling and snowballing techniques – asking people whom I had got to know to refer me to other prospective participants – in making contact with differently positioned farm workers whom I thought could bring new or additional perspectives to the study.

As noted above, the research took me to eleven of the roughly 25 (smaller or larger) rural centres in which strike action took place in 2012–2013 (Ntsebeza, 2013). It follows that I visited some areas only once or twice, in order to attend meetings and/or speak to specific individuals, whereas I became a more regular presence elsewhere (see map on page 37). This mobility further meant that, apart from shorter vignettes, I only occasionally delve into deeper engagements with the histories of specific localities, when the narratives I analyse require this. In hindsight, it would probably have been possible to select one small town where the actors whose narratives I was interested in studying are all present: on-farm female workers who claimed to have experienced job losses or being put on short time in the post-
strike moment, seasonal off-farm workers who were actively involved in the protests, migrants from other provinces living in compounds on farms, as well as foreign migrants who often faced difficulties both with the authorities, employers and South African neighbours and co-workers. Limiting the study geographically in this way would have made the work easier and deepened my understanding of one area. But the multi-sited option had other advantages, allowing me to identify patterns that transcended specific localities. It did, however, require more work to synthesise the data, and placed additional responsibility on me as a researcher attempting to represent the material in ways that do justice to multiple voices and perspectives (Agar, 1996).

Entering the field

As I embarked on my PhD studies, I intended to approach a women-led farm worker trade union, Sikhula Sonke, that I knew from previous work and activism, to see if I would be able to study its work as part of a multi-sited research project on alternative, feminist strategies for organising precarious workers. The union’s organising strategies and its attempts to take gender seriously, both internally and externally, as well as its methods for reaching out to female seasonal workers, stood out as innovative. But shortly into my studies, two parallel developments made me rethink this idea. First, the historical farm worker unrest that broke out caught my interest. It was initiated by precariously positioned workers outside of trade unions or organisations, many of them women and/or migrants. Some among these grassroots leaders were also highly critical of how trade unions stepped in later and, with time, took control of the protests (Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015). During this period, moreover, the women-led union went through a crisis, which severely affected its activities. This led me to opt for a different construction of the field, as discussed above.

Prior to arriving in Cape Town at the end of August 2013 for the long fieldwork period, I had visited the area for three weeks in order to speak to different actors about my project and get a sense of what happened during the strike and afterwards. I combined this task with taking part in an international campaign gathering, at which activists from local farm worker organisations were present. During these weeks, I spoke with several organisational representatives, some of whom came across as very positive about the research idea and about exploring possible ways of collaborating through participative research methods. By the time I commenced fieldwork in early September, however, this interest had waned. While several organisations generously allowed me to attend meetings and workshops (and open events such as lectures and marches), where I could introduce myself and connect with farm workers, my attempts to explore possible collaborations were less successful. This more distant relationship might
have been a result of several factors, including organisations and trade unions being under a great deal of pressure during this difficult period, and struggling to cope with servicing and assisting members facing problems. In this situation, I perhaps failed to represent the research project in a way that made sense, or disappointed organisations, as I preferred to take a cautious position at the outset, seeking not to take on work which it would be difficult to deliver. The fact that the space was volatile, and things kept changing rapidly, hardly helped: from rumours of a follow-up strike to cancelled meetings and funding crises.

In my experience, then, doing fieldwork amongst Western Cape farm workers during the post-strike moment meant manoeuvring in a space characterised by tension, uncertainty and conflict, in which agendas and associations were at times carefully considered before doors were opened – or closed. It was also a time during which some individuals who had taken part in the large-scale protests or local strikes had lost their jobs, been served with notices of eviction and/or faced charges of public violence. Disagreements around strategies, alliances, leadership styles, and how and in what ways it was justified to resort to more ‘violent’ or confrontational methods in response to the slow violence of poverty were at the time straining relations amongst differently positioned workers as well as between and within organisations. These conflicts were partly played out within power hierarchies formed around gender, race/ethnicity and nationality – hierarchies that were at times reinforced through employer strategies but also through ways of organising, as I will discuss in Chapters Five and Six.

My choice to relate to people and groups with different organisational affiliations, presenting myself as someone prepared to talk to anyone, was likely to have come across as extra suspicious during this chaotic period. I would often be asked about my meetings with people from other organisations and groups, what I thought of them, what I was doing with them and so forth (cf. Agar, 1996). I would emphasise that, in my role as a researcher, my orientation was towards workers (and the unemployed) in precarious positions and their struggle for social justice, regardless of which organisations or groups they were part of (this also tended to shift).\(^{32}\) This was complicated to some extent by my perceived links with a few organisational leaders, and with an important Swedish funder. Furthermore, the translator/research assistant with whom I worked during parts of the fieldwork was a former employee of a trade union in the sector, which, albeit helpful when it came to providing useful information and at times assisting research participants, prompted one group of disgruntled former members to decide not to meet with me.

\(^{32}\)This included, of course, not sharing information that I had been given in confidence, or in interviews, with others.
As I continued to explore some organisational spaces through attending public and internal gatherings, I soon realised that the people I was meeting in this way were primarily coloured workers who had been residing permanently in the area for a long time, whether on or off farms. In order to meet with migrant workers from other provinces or neighbouring countries, categories of workers identified as protest initiators, who generally inhabit more precarious work positions, and were thus central to my research focus, I needed to explore other avenues. I did so by approaching a migrant rights organisation working against xenophobia in one of the strike hotspot areas, but also through friends, and making contact with the few migrant and black African workers I met in different organisational spaces.

Meeting with farm workers could at times be a huge challenge. In accessing people residing on farms for conversations in their spare time, one must consider that commercial farms are private property and entry into workers’ residential areas is restricted. This is a major concern for trade unions and organisations in the sector, which demand the unconditional right to visit their members after working hours, and at times do so without asking permission first from farm owners, depending on the set-up of the farm.

During the fieldwork, on several occasions I accompanied union and organisational representatives to farms without seeking separate permission first from farm owners – joining in for meetings and once also at a negotiation, always presenting myself as a PhD student doing fieldwork when I had the chance to do so. I have also travelled on my own to visit workers who invited me to their houses without first clearing this with the farm owners. The scenarios through which this has happened differ. Some of them live on farms where workers’ houses are directly accessible from public roads, with no fencing or guards in sight, and where no one is in the habit of asking the owners for permission to receive visitors. Others live on farms where access is restricted, and here I did as the person I went to visit saw fit – signing in as a visitor to a named worker who collected me at the gate, or picking the person up outside the gate, and taking them to a nearby area or the closest town for conversation.

In one case, I negotiated access through a forewoman, Aunty Martina, whom I was acquainted with through a friend, to a farm presented to me as among the better ones in terms of labour relations. Here, I was allowed to join in and observe the work for a few days. The specific purpose of this was to get a better understanding of how work is organised in practice on a table grape farm, and how hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality are drawn on in this endeavour, a question explored in Chapter Four. However, as one main focus of the research was workers’ variegated experiences of the ‘farm worker strike’ and other forms of organising, I did not see negotiating long-term access to one or more specific farms (as some researchers have done, e.g. Addison, 2013; Brandt, 2013; Bolt, 2015) as either feasible, or the most pertinent strategy. It should further be stressed that it has never been the
conditions on one particular farm or location that I sought to study – all the names of research participants and farms are omitted or substituted with pseudonyms. Rather, I wanted to access interlinked narratives on work- and life precarity, labour regimes on farms and organising and resistance among differently positioned workers, and (to some extent) the perspectives of employer representatives and other key stakeholders during the post-strike moment.

A major limitation during fieldwork was that I spoke limited (Afrikaans), very little (isiXhosa) or none at all (Shona, Sesotho or Setswana) of the widely-spoken languages among farm workers in the region. This caused me to seek out English-speaking people (or use a mix of English and Afrikaans) and, in a limited number of interviews, to work with an interpreter/assistant as discussed. While I could quite soon manage one-to-one conversations on familiar topics in Afrikaans, and understand the essence of discussions during organisational meetings and workshops, I could never quite grasp the finer nuances or engage in group discussions on unknown topics. Another major challenge was finding time to just hang out, since farm labourers would work long hours, at times doing extra work over weekends, in order to increase their incomes. Finding a space that allowed for a long uninterrupted discussion was hard, especially when I could not meet people in their (temporary or permanent) on-farm residences. Chats beyond the boundary of the farm, in cafés or public spaces in nearby towns, then became the only viable option. I also gave people lifts, accompanied them while doing errands, or drove for an outing together on their rare day off, combining informal conversation and interviews with people’s other priorities (for a related strategy, see Brandt, 2013).

**Ethnographic research methods**

In order to explore how farm labourers experienced and gave meaning to precarious work, organising and resistance during the post-strike moment, I used a variety of ethnographic methods, including: unstructured and semi-structured interviews, analysis of texts (news articles, TV documentaries, organisational documents and advertisement) and participant observation. All in all, I spent around eight months in the (south-western parts of) the Western Cape between 2013 and 2017, with five months at the end of 2013 and early 2014 being the longest continuous stay. In addition, I have had research related interactions on WhatsApp, Messenger and Skype – and spent time with union and organisational representatives when they visited Sweden in connection with campaign activities or as part of initiatives by business or government agencies. As mentioned above, with the 2012–2013 unrest spreading from location to location in an unpredictable manner, not fitting into neat studiable clusters according to type of crop, farm size or geographical area, my field work too was conducted at multiple sites and
localities. With time, I realised that this also fitted with many people’s life trajectories, as even the more established farm labourers had often grown up and worked on farms in other parts of the province before becoming rooted in the urban location or farm where they now resided. Migrant workers were also constantly on the move – between farms and their home areas, but also in and out of farm work. Farm workers’ experiences and the 2012–2013 protests were further narrated and given meaning in places like Sweden too, through travelling labour activists, business representatives, news reports and advertisements.

My choice to work with (multi-sited) ethnography was met from the outset with some resistance from peers and organisational representatives, who were sceptical of its usefulness and how I would ‘fit in’ and be accepted as a long-term presence, given both my background and the demanding nature of such interaction. Some research participants were puzzled as to why I wanted to keep coming back, hang out, and continue to join in with meetings or activities in my capacity as a researcher (although I would often be made to feel welcome as a friend), signalling that my attempts to explain the idea of ethnographic research were not always successful.\footnote{Introducing oneself and the research in a way that makes sense to people during fieldwork is a difficulty shared by many ethnographers, see for example Agar, 1996, for a discussion on this. One of the strategies I used besides giving oral information about the project and asking for oral consent to record interviews was (in most cases) to also provide written information about the project, in English and Afrikaans, should participants want to know more or have concerns about participation afterwards. I further asked for reconfirmation regarding participation in the dissertation from those participants whom I managed to meet with again towards the end of the research period, which provided a further opportunity to return to discussing the basic ideas behind the research and my responsibilities as a researcher.}

I felt compelled to set up interviews very early on in the fieldwork, before really knowing myself where I was headed, mainly due to practical reasons, such as the long distance to some areas, where I could only meet people outside of farms, and on Sundays. This was also encouraged by the people who helped facilitate my research, who tended to view interviews as a more serious and explicable research strategy than informal conversation and just hanging out. With some people, interviews ended up being a one-off event, and the only accessible way of interacting when my attempts to find opportunities to hang out in the contexts in which they moved about failed. Often, I had to think on my feet, such as on the occasion when I arrived for what I thought was a casual visit to the neighbourhood of an interlocutor and discovered that she had gathered a group of fellow activists and neighbours in her kitchen, waiting to be interviewed by the researcher. I had further placed myself in a situation where I felt pressed for time, as I had had to limit my long field stay to five months due to family reasons, and as I knew the busy months of December and January were approaching.
A majority of my (unstructured and semi-structured) interviews were conducted with more than one person. This was, among other things, a result of most people not having a private space where we could sit and talk – and no such space could be found nearby – resulting in someone who was in the room anyway joining in the conversation. Frequently, farm workers also suggested that I meet with them and one or two other people at the same time – or just brought a friend along. At times, I had to adapt my approach, postponing parts of the interview for another occasion to allow for unexpected issues to surface in the conversation. I further recorded many informal conversations just in case, as I feared not being able to capture discussions very well afterwards, due to language challenges, and since I often had to drive a long way (between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours to most field sites) and ended up meeting with many people during long and packed days. In both the conversations and the interviews, I was generally an active participant, probing, suggesting and at times sharing my experiences and views, as I saw this not only as a way of gaining trust, but also as central in the process of elaborating shared knowledge (Davies, 2008).

Looking at the interview as an interaction, in which interviewer and interviewees are engaged in joint knowledge production, it becomes important to take account of how I was perceived (Davies, 2008). At times, interlocutors knew (of) me, and I (of) them, from previous solidarity work. I would still be an odd presence in any context: foreign, white, academic – at times also positioned as someone who, through my writing, could potentially bring their concerns forward to consumers abroad. This – combined with the fact that I mainly interacted with people who had taken part in different forms of organising – likely influenced some people to focus overtly on problematic aspects of farm work. What people were willing to share with me also depended more on my ability to develop meaningful rapport than prior relations. Working through an interpreter, as I did on some occasions, generally made it harder to move beyond a simple recounting of events to getting at the deeper meanings, although with some people this instead facilitated the establishment of a good connection. A few interviews did not work out at all for different reasons, such as interference from other people or my inability to create a comfortable atmosphere for reflection, and these are excluded from the analysed material.

Some of the (few) white managers/farm owners I interviewed would identify me primarily as a white woman, expecting me to understand and relate to their perspectives, including feelings of fear related to a perceived threat from black African men against white people in general. Here, I could still claim the position of foreigner and researcher, encouraging the person to elaborate upon what this fear was all about. In other situations, my perceived links with a funding partner, the Swedish NGO I used to work for, as well as my relations with people implicated in organisational power struggles, are likely to have shaped the kind of stories that I heard and the spaces I was
invited to visit. In the politically polarised post-strike period, invitations to join and observe activities also at times came with conditions that made me very uneasy, as in the case of a union leader saying: “You can come along if you promise to support us.” Sometimes, I was also pulled in during meetings, as a presumably neutral outsider who could support someone’s story (“ask Åsa, she was there!”).

All in all, I conducted around 35 semi-structured or unstructured (individual or group) interviews with farm workers, four with farmers or managers and sixteen with other stake holders, including staff members of trade unions and other organisations working with farm workers, government agencies and local political representatives. In addition, I interviewed several farm workers more than once. The interviews range from 20 minutes to three hours – with the average just over an hour. Most interviews are with women, a result of my choice of focus for the research as discussed in Chapter One. While my ambition was to also prioritise the voices of foreign and South African migrant workers, these categories are still under-represented due to difficulties with access. Alongside the interviews, my data also consist of field notes from workshops, meetings, marches and other gatherings as well as from informally hanging out with farm labourers and working in the vineyards for a few days on a farm. Participant observation entailed engaging all my senses in the research, seeing, hearing, sensing – turning the whole body into an instrument of research, including paying attention to, and analysing, feelings. This “feel-work” (González-Fernández, 2018:44) included recording the strong unease and fear and I felt at times when moving through spaces controlled by white farmers; the worry about interlocutors who insisted on driving with me for a few blocks as I was leaving their house and had to walk back home at dusk, in areas highly unsafe for women and foreigners; and the pain and stress inflicted upon the labouring body in the vineyards. Still, the bulk of the material I have analysed consists of recorded and transcribed conversations, as interviewing was more feasible than other methods because of the difficult negotiations required for participant observation.

Often, I found myself having to be persistent when trying to take part in meetings or gatherings, as dates often changed, information came late and, needless to say, I was not a priority. This is to be expected when spreading oneself as I did across different spaces, but it may also signal that at times I might not have been a very desirable presence, as alluded to above, due to my prior connections, feminist queries and methodological choices – or my personality. At times, I pushed things hard (too hard?) – as in the case of one farm where I took part in the work for a few days, staying with a friend’s relative who is a forewoman, and who had suggested that I come and ask at her farm if I could take part in the work. When I arrived at the pack house at a quarter to six one Monday morning, as she had proposed, I discovered that she had not given prior notice to the farmer beforehand that I would enquire
about an opportunity to observe the work. I was given the go-ahead anyway to stay on as a participant observer through positive support from a manager (whom I later learnt had known that I would come and had discussed this with the farmer who claimed to know nothing about it). But later, when I spoke to the farmer again, he wanted to ascertain that I was not ‘political’ and had no hidden agenda. I assured him I was not political despite feeling uneasy (what would it mean to not be political?) and focused on why I was there: to deepen my understanding of how work is organised on farms, as part of my research on the work and life experiences of female and/or migrant workers. I was allowed to stay on, despite the sensitive topic. When I approached the farmer again, however, to come back when the grapes were being packed, as the manager and forewoman had encouraged me to do, I at first got no reply, and when I persisted was told there were no vacancies, and that I could at best come and view the pack shed for a few minutes. Something had clearly changed, whether the farmer was getting cold feet after scrutinising the information I had shared, googling me, or other workers reporting on my odd questions or mistakes during the work in the vineyards. I cannot know, but I was only allowed a brief glance into the pack house and did not dare to set up interviews off-farm due to fear for workers’ safety.

Ethical considerations and afterthoughts on the research

As I reflect on the research process in hindsight, a whirlwind of strong and at times conflicting emotions emerge, ranging from guilt and shame to anger, joy, fear, despair, doubt, determination and, possibly, hope. These feelings speak both to my anxieties about the research project itself, conceptually as well as practically, and to the context and situations in which I found myself. The Western Cape farmlands is in many ways a merciless, brutal and ugly place below the breathtakingly beautiful surface, where respect for (some) human lives is depressingly low, and where poverty, violence, humiliation and a wearing down of bodies through exposure to chemicals and harsh work lead to too many lives ending prematurely. As in other places that are both at the margins and the centre – as a hub for deciduous fruit and wine production, distributed to and made profitable in many parts of the world – the unfathomable coping strategies, creativity and resistance that many working-class and non-working-class people display are nevertheless mind-blowing.

Relations between researchers and farm workers in such a space inevitably take shape against the backdrop of a long history of violence: from colonialism and slavery to post-colonial injustices, neo-liberal austerity and economic exploitation, which cannot be undone or swept under the carpet. How does one navigate as a researcher under such circumstances: can
there be a truly ethical approach? On a conceptual level, this research project in and of itself, given my privileged position vis-à-vis the people I am writing about, is open to critique from a post-colonial feminist perspective, as it fits neatly within the (rightly) criticised tradition of studying the other (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Skeggs, 2001), even though my focus is on the global system within which such othering is made profitable. It may further be read as part of a tradition in which ethnographers have set out to *give voice* to ‘the other’, a project that has tended to be silent about the power inequalities involved in knowledge production and writing, and/or has represented ‘the other’ as authentic (Narayan, 1993; Skeggs, 2001). Even though I do not use bold claims like *giving voice* to presumably voiceless others, are my attempts at re-presenting their narratives really that different?

Thinking with Aihwa Ong (1995), the answer to this question would depend upon how one conceives of power in a research context. While being acutely aware of my privileged position in power hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity, class and nationality compared to the farm workers I came to know, and the responsibility this entails, farm workers are nevertheless “active cultural producers in their own rights, whose voices insist on being heard” and who make choices around how and what to narrate, if power is conceived of in Foucauldian terms, as a productive force (Ong, 1995:353–4). Through this logic, re-presenting farm workers’ stories and viewpoints, as I have aspired to do, may contribute to already on-going attempts by some among this diverse, fluid, hybrid and mobile category of people to intervene in and disrupt dominant global narratives (Ong, 1995). While this does not reduce the power that I have when initiating research interactions and producing the final text, Ong (1995:354) suggests that “there is greater betrayal in allowing our personal doubts to stand in the way of representing their claims, interests and perspectives.” A more crucial ethical concern, she proposes, relates to re-presenting (farm workers) views without mis-representing the political intent of their narratives. This still opens me up to critique about how well my outsider position enables me to hear and re-present complex and variegated farm worker stories.

Thinking further about ethics at a practical level, I have been guided by and sought to adhere to general principles of feminist research. These include being transparent and reflecting upon the power relations involved in the research project and my own positioning (Skeggs, 2001) and attempting to be mindful not to represent research participants as powerless or pathologised (Bhavnani, 1994), including through my focus on aspects of their lives relating to organising and resistance. Carolyn Ellis (2007) has further proposed that ethics be envisioned as entailing three dimensions: procedural ethics – declaring one’s commitment to adhering to the research standards required by universities, such as informed consent, confidentiality and protecting participants from harm; ethics in practice/situational ethics, which concerns the handling of difficult situations as they emerge during
fieldwork; and relational ethics, which refers to how connections between researchers and research subjects are managed.

In my experience, everyday fieldwork meant navigating a range of immediate ethical dilemmas that often presented themselves with little advance notice or time to think things through. This could be on a small scale, like deciding on my feet whether to go along or not when a group of farm workers I had gone to visit for the first time rushed inside the police cordons to engage in crowd handling, in a potentially violent situation I knew little about. Or, more difficult: being told by a union leader that ‘outsiders’ would be removed from farms — was this a real threat that I should act upon, or just an attempt to inflate his own power? The safety of interlocutors was another major ethical concern. While in Ellis’ (2007) categorisation, this appears primarily to be a procedural matter, presumably resolved before fieldwork commences, in my case it required constant consideration. Even though I had decided beforehand not to publish the names of individuals, farms or organisations, people who knew the context well would still probably be able to identify some individuals or groups.34

Thinking further about safety: might inviting me to their house, talking to me or driving with me in the vicinity of their workplace give farm labourers problems at a later stage? One farmer I interviewed, for example, spoke openly about an employee being verbally disciplined by the larger worker collective after raising a concern with an inspector from the Department of Labour. When he suggested the next minute that I speak to some of his employees, I quickly declined, but what about speaking to someone in their house in the nearby township? My approach, primarily, with a few exceptions, was to speak to people who had links with organisations, and were thus likely to be able to draw on support networks should problems arise at a later stage, when I was not around. Quite a few of the farm workers in the study are also well-known locally through their activism, and had already lost their work before I met with them, linked to union or protest activity. Furthermore, I spent a lot of time thinking about my own boundaries during fieldwork: where do I stand when it comes to resisting the slow violence of poverty, evictions, and verbal abuse with more confrontational or ‘violent’ means? I did not need to declare my position as such, but keeping quiet could also be read as taking a position, and I would probe into and at times openly express disagreement upon hearing anti-foreigner statements.

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34 Several research participants expressed a desire that their real name be used in this dissertation. In spite of this, I have opted not to use real names (and have elaborated on the reasons), as this in some cases would have revealed the identity of others who did not want to be named, and moreover since it is difficult to predict the possible negative consequence of using the real names of participants. From a research perspective, it is the broader questions and similarities as well as contradictions in narratives that are of interest, not the specific actions of named individuals.
What Ellis (2007) describes as relational ethics, paying attention to the interconnectedness between researcher and participants, and building relationships that are respectful, dignified and non-exploitative, relates closely to how feminist ethnographers have attempted to negotiate the power inequalities embedded in any empirical research project. One important strategy has been to try and give something substantial back to participants, for instance through reciprocating knowledge (see e.g. Oakley, 1981). As discussed above, while my ambition was to contribute to the work of organisations through this research, I did not succeed in doing so, beyond mere technical assistance now and then ahead of attempts to influence retailers in Sweden. Still, I believe that this did not mean that the relationships that developed during my fieldwork were necessarily only about research – or went in one direction only. Relational ethics, Ellis suggests, “requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations” (Ellis, 2007:4). Being an engaged listener, who kept returning more or less regularly over the years, and also engaged emotionally in some farm workers’ lives when invited to do so, I believe that my presence, to some of the people I became closest to, was/is valuable in their lives, just as theirs was/is in mine. Some people would bring this up in interviews or text messages, emphasising the importance of having a space to reflect upon their lives with an outsider, and they would tell me how much a friendly call had meant in times of distress, or underline how important it was that I did not change but remained the same. Likewise, when my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer as I was writing up this dissertation, I received supportive messages from a few of the friends I had made through this research, which formed part of the supportive network I needed to endure the stressful and emotionally draining period of nursing my mother in her home during the last period of her life, while at the same time mothering my child, and trying to continue my work.

How do such relationships develop? To begin with, a few among the more well-known labour and community activists with whom I interacted had hinted at the possibility of getting paid – as this had been the practice in relationships they had had with journalists or other researchers during or just after the strikes. Others simply asked the relevant question: what’s in it for us? When I explained that there would be no immediate gain apart from the interaction and dialogue, that any potential impact of what I would write, or bring forth in public, would be at another level, attempting to create awareness or influence retailers in Sweden or elsewhere – nothing that would change the here and now, people still decided to participate.

Some time into the fieldwork, I started to reciprocate participants’ time in other ways: offering to give people lifts, lunch, or on one occasion a full day’s outing in Cape Town once for a group of migrant workers whose plans for a first-time visit to the city had failed. As people mostly do when they
have money to spare, I contributed in small ways towards urgent needs when I could, like funeral costs, bringing food when there was none at home, or bread when someone offered tea. I helped pay the arrears when electricity had been cut, shared simple Christmas gifts, or small amounts of cash when some one’s house burnt down and he lost all his belongings, and when another person was robbed of a whole month’s salary. I also made cash or food donations to organisations. Did these limited material contributions influence people’s willingness to meet with me and share their stories? I do not think so: these small contributions were nothing much to discuss, but rather just happened with time as relationships evolved – and most people never asked for assistance. But giving people lifts or going for an outing did create opportunities for interacting when this was sometimes hard, because of workers’ limited time or lack of control over who they could invite to their place of residence. Keeping in touch, sharing thoughts and supporting people when I could also became a way to acknowledge the relationships that had developed through the research (Ellis, 2007).

As is often discussed in literature on feminist methodology, difficult ethical considerations are intimately linked with politics (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002; Skeggs, 2001). It has been suggested that the most central question informing feminist ethnography should be “in whose interest?” is it conducted, which makes up one important aspect of ethics (Skeggs, 2001:437). For me, the politics informing this research project derive from my involvement in solidarity work, being located in Sweden, which is one of many destination countries where much of the value accrued from the work of marginalised South African farm workers is retained. Being committed to struggles for social and gender justice, my answer to the question “in whose interest?” may be formulated as “for the strengthening of activism in different locations”, including through theory development. The motive for this project would thus be to make a small contribution towards producing useful academic and activist knowledge with regards to how power relations of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality are produced and drawn upon and for what purpose in the global production networks of deciduous fruit and wine. This includes exploring how the precarity emanating from such inequalities is interlinked with neo-colonial relations between Sweden and South Africa. The politics behind the project does not, however, limit the power inequalities involved in research production, nor does it mask the power that I as a researcher have in formulating the research questions, analysis and final text. It also does not mitigate the injustice of there being another possible outcome for me as a researcher, that of aspiring to a university degree.

To sum up, my experience of field work does not fit neatly into the image of a well-structured and coherent scientific research process that I would have wanted to present. Rather, it has been riddled with ethical dilemmas,
unease and improvisation in a challenging context. I feared disappointing people, as so many other actors have done for years, through unsuccessful attempts to bring concerns forward in meaningful ways: from politicians and civil servants to union organisers, NGO staff and researchers. Recalling some of the worst stories told to me, I was tempted on several occasions to give up the lengthy processes and deep engagement with theory that ethnographic research requires and expose what I knew in a tabloid instead, had I truly believed that this would lead to radical and sustainable improvements in farm workers’ lives.

Is it possible, one may ask, to claim to have adhered to feminist ethics in research (in whose interest?) while feeling uncertain about whether the research will contribute to tangible improvements for farm labourers? While struggling with questions of whether research interactions, writing and representation may be non-hurtful? Or is the position in which I find myself, similarly to other researchers exploring global injustices, so compromised as to render research projects such as this one non-justifiable from a feminist outlook? Although I repeatedly considered pulling out, before, during and after the fieldwork, I chose to continue the project, staying with the discomfort, and believing in the possibility of (this) research having a potentially meaningful impact, however limited, both for academia and also beyond. This, I guess, has to rely in some ways on hope, but a hope which is intimately linked to hard, persistent engagement.

From this discussion about the research process, and the difficulties embedded in this project, I will now move on to presenting the empirical data, starting, in the next chapter, with discussions and analyses of how the restructuring of commercial agriculture since the 1980s has impacted upon understandings of what a farm worker is in the present-day Western Cape.

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35 The misfit between ethnographic research methods and historical notions of ‘scientific’ research, as developed within natural science, has been written of extensively (see e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Puddephatt, Shaffir and Kleinknecht, 2009).
Chapter 3 | Who and what is a farm worker?

In the early stages of field work, I kept reflecting on a seemingly simple set of questions that continued to follow me throughout the research project: What is a farm worker in the present-day Western Cape? Who are researchers and activists referring to when speaking of farm workers, and who may assert a farm worker identity? Reading about and talking to people involved in the 2012–2013 ‘farm worker strike’ in the province as it happened and afterwards, I came across conflicting interpretations, and realised there were many different angles and layers to this set of questions. Some of these will be discussed in this chapter and others in Chapter Six as I explain below.

It is not surprising that the meaning of the category of farm worker would be disputed in the post-strike moment, because the composition of the labour force and the nature of work itself on many commercial farms had shifted significantly over the previous decades. As noted in Chapter One, this period has seen a casualisation of the workforce and increased use of labour brokering arrangements, as well as a massive relocation of workers from on-farm workers houses to nearby informal settlements, where many would seek to complement their often seasonal or casual remuneration from farm work with other sources of income (Du Toit and Ally, 2003; Greenberg, 2010; Kritzinger, Barrientos and Rossouw, 2004; Visser and Ferrer, 2015). The gap between better and worse positioned workers had further deepened (Ewert and Du Toit, 2005), and the composition of the workforce in the deciduous fruit and wine sector had become increasingly diverse, with a larger share of black African migrants from other provinces or further afield in Africa – and women (Du Toit and Ally, 2003; Visser and Ferrer, 2015).

In spite of these increased complexities, many of the people I interacted with during the post-strike moment spoke authoritatively about the plight of farm workers, as if everybody working on farms formed one homogeneous collective, facing the same challenges. Such an analysis tended to privilege the experiences of on-farm, permanent workers, most of whom are coloured and Afrikaans-speaking. A representative of a local organisation that

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36 The arguments in this section have been developed in an article (Eriksson, 2017)
37 Farmers’ organisations and some politicians further alleged that the strike was ‘politically motivated’, suggesting that it was initiated by the ANC and other parties hoping to ascend to power in the Western Cape, a stronghold of the Democratic Alliance, whose electoral base is predominately white (see Chapter Six).
emerged during this period, seeing itself as the voice of farm workers, referred tellingly to four things one cannot take away from a farm worker: “his pride, his wife, his children, and his money” – an analysis that excludes not only women, queer folks, and people who are unmarried or do not have children, but also in a way all migrant workers residing in labour compounds on farms, separated from their families.

The meaning of the category of farm worker was contested in at least two different, interrelated ways during the post-strike moment – regarding what and who a farm worker is (do seasonal and casual off-farm labourers, migrants and women count as ‘real’ farm workers?) and who may represent farm workers’ struggles, and in what ways. As I return to in Chapter Six, a common claim by farmers and managers, as well as some of the more established farm workers I interacted with during this period, was that strike participants were not (real) farm workers. While this was partly true in the sense that other local residents and sympathisers joined the protests (Ntsebeza, 2013; Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015) – statements dismissing protesters as newcomers, foreign elements or a bunch of vigilantes up in the informal settlements appeared to also contain a rejection based on visible appearance and histories of (un-)belonging in commercial farming areas, as well as on the politics of the protesters, where the use of methods labelled violent did not fit with dominant understandings of farm workers as apolitical and loyal to – or fearful of – farmers.

Linked to this were disputes around who could speak on behalf of farm workers, a topic I elaborate upon further in Chapter Six. As noted in Chapter Two, media, activist and academic analysis during the time suggested that it was primarily categories of farm workers who would previously have been seen as atypical or less ‘real’ workers: seasonal or casual workers mainly residing off farms, many of them migrants and/or women, who were the drivers behind the uprising, which was initially organised outside of labour organisations (Ntsebeza, 2013; Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015). Still, established male union leaders gradually emerged as the main spokespeople. As I discuss in this chapter, precariously positioned categories of workers, especially migrants, were under-represented in most organisational and union spaces, including those where the post-strike situation was reflected upon. In addition, until fairly recently, they had received limited attention in research on farm work in the province, which previously focused primarily on the experiences of permanent coloured labourers residing on farms (Du Toit, 2005).

The conflicting interpretations of what a farm worker is, and how this collective should be represented and by whom inspired me to try and meet with workers who were differently positioned within power hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality. Some time into the field work, I wrote this reflection, thinking about the difficult task of re-presenting farm workers in a non-essentialist way:
Is a farm worker a young single mother speaking four languages perfectly, who migrates to work on farms five months per year, when she can no longer find a job in her home town? Is it someone who skips the union meeting and spends half her salary on a ticket to Rihanna’s Cape Town show with her transgender sisters? Is it a union leader, getting by in some inexplicable way on the 315 rand per week the farm company pays after putting her on short time, and in between work and family responsibilities heads meetings, negotiates with donors, and travels both within the country and abroad campaigning? Is it an unemployed woman, living in a dilapidated house shared with another family on a farm, the rooms just separated by thin sheets, someone who sees no way out, unable to adequately feed her children or pay their transport to school? Is it someone who was not afraid to set vineyards on fire in retaliation and anger during the strike, and who would do it again to put an end to exploitation? Is it someone who just says: ‘I’ve had it,’ leaving her work, leaving her house to put up a shack in a squatter camp because she can’t stand the combination of racist attitudes from white managers and abuse from her spouse any longer, someone who claims not to worry where the next meal is going to come from? Someone who has advanced to a managerial position against all odds, and feels happy and proud of the fruits of her labour? Some one whose employer promised to build her a house if she vacated the farm by retirement but who is still waiting, living in a shanty town without water or electricity – a dumping ground for former farm workers?

Is it a worker from a former Bantustan, recruited through collusion between foremen and headmen, sleeping in a dorm with eight others for eleven months of the year, while remaining on a seasonal status? Can it be someone who laughs when he is demoted and receives a cut back in salary, feeling happy about having led the uprising for which he is now being punished? Someone whose attempts to get a house in her own name on the farm is repeatedly turned down, who shares a tiny room with her kids, because she is a single mother and perhaps not embodying what employers regard as respectable femininity? Someone who walks into the boss’s office saying: ‘I want to be trained as a forklift driver, women should be given chances too!’ Or someone who looks at the ground, responding to crude orders with a ‘Ja, meneer’, ‘Ja, mevrou’, clenching his fist in his pocket? Someone who fears violent outbursts from the farmer or foremen, but is even more afraid of her neighbours working the same fields as her, labelling her foreigner, someone stealing local jobs? And what then is a ‘woman farm worker’? In some ways perhaps better positioned than male colleagues as her (seasonal) labour, presumed docility and dexterity may be sought after, in other ways always more vulnerable – both to exploitation at work and violence in the home. Yes, it is all of these. But what perhaps unites the category of ‘farm workers’, if employers get to have their say, is increasingly someone skilled, able-bodied, working fast and hard, being flexible without making demands, someone whose unpaid care work does not infringe upon farm work.
In this chapter, I will attempt to say something in response to the
questions: Who and what is a farm worker in the present-day Western Cape?
while not claiming the impossible: to give one coherent answer. In order to
speak to these questions, or at least nuance them, I will discuss continuities
and changes in commercial agriculture, look at how Western Cape farm
workers are represented in research and organisational spaces, and introduce
some of the differently positioned individuals with whom I have interacted
during the field work, who all have at least a couple of years’ experience of
working on farms, and who relate in very different ways to farm worker as a
social identity. In this endeavour, I draw inspiration from critical feminist
interrogations of the (masculinised) category of worker, and from the
challenges intersectionality poses to the category of women.

Restructuring of work and fragmenting farm worker identities

The social identity of farm worker has never been stable or homogeneous,
yet, over the past few decades, it has become increasingly fragmented, writes
sociologist Stephen Greenberg, with farm work turning into “one of a range
of livelihoods strategies that rural or marginalised urban citizens adopted to
make ends meet” as jobs became more scarce and precarious (Greenberg,
2010:17). While this resonates with the narratives of many participants in
this study, the dissolving or renegotiation of the identity of farm worker is
nevertheless a complex, uneven and contested long-term process. Work on
commercial farms in the Western Cape today encompasses a multitude of
hiring arrangements, many of them highly insecure and responding to
employer demands for flexibility. It is carried out by a more diverse, reduced
and casualised workforce, of whom a growing number live away from the
farms. At the same time, a small core of permanent workers with sought-
after skills, generally coloured men residing on farms, have advanced to
better-paid, more secure positions with benefits, making the workforce more
divided and heterogeneous than before (Du Toit, 2004; Ewert and Du Toit,
2005; Orton, Barrientos and McClenaghan, 2001). This, Ewert and Hamman
(1996:162) observed, saw the emergence of an “ethnic alliance” between
white farm owners and better positioned coloured labourers on some farms.

The social identities of coloured, on-farm workers and dwellers in the
province have, however, become destabilised, as sociologist Andries Du Toit
(1995:244-245) has shown, through the introduction of managerial reforms
from the 1980s onwards, which saw a slow and uneven rearticulation of
traditional paternalist relations of authority.38 In the process, the unreliable

38 Du Toit (1993:327) stresses that the transformation of traditional paternalist labour relations
and the discourses through which these were given meaning was never complete as “Even the
most traditionalist of farmers pay lip-service to the language of reform, and on even the most
and conditioned forms of social protection associated with the deeply unequal paternalist labour regimes were gradually dismantled for the majority of workers, and numerous ‘unproductive’ farm dwellers were displaced and marginalised (Du Toit, 1995). The partial and incomplete shift from paternalism, with its emphasis on a ‘special’ understanding between workers and farmers and denial of conflict on farms, to more impersonal and ‘rational’ management speech, contributed to opening up spaces for new ways of constructing identities, making claims and resisting (Du Toit, 1995). Importantly, however, these new regimes continue to connect with earlier forms of racialised paternalism (Du Toit, 1993; Addison, 2014b; Bolt, 2016a). The complex, overlapping political and economic developments influencing these shifts have been extensively analysed elsewhere (see e.g. Bernstein, 2013; Du Toit, 2004; Greenberg 2010; Kritzinger, Barrientos and Rossouw 2004; Tilley, 2002; Visser and Ferrer, 2015). Nevertheless, I will highlight a few points that I believe are key to understanding what has changed, why this is important, and what are some of the gendered consequences of these shifts.

During the years following its sweeping victory in the 1994 elections, the ANC pushed through economic programs that have been described as “harsh home-grown structural adjustment” (Hart, 2013:4), opening up to global markets and prioritising the creation of a black capitalist class above improved material conditions for broader sections of black South Africans. Although later attempting to recast itself as pro-poor, and describing South Africa as a developmental state, these initial neo-liberal policy priorities became decisive for the future direction of the new democracy. With regard to the commercial farming sector, there was a broad political consensus that, as apartheid rule had been defeated, the violent and abusive features of paternalism needed to be done away with, not least in order to reach export markets (Du Toit, 2004). Many commercial farms had already embarked on reforms in labour relations during the 1980s, through development initiatives aimed at improving the lives of farm dwellers, organised under the umbrella of the Rural Foundation (see e.g. Du Toit, 1993; Mayson, 1990).

The preferred routes to change towards the end of apartheid differed amongst politically influential actors however, and the 1990s saw a plethora of legal and policy reforms, with mixed outcomes. Laws were introduced or rewritten in order to include farm workers in South Africa’s labour legislation for the first time, to protect workers against the worst forms of financial exploitation through a statutory minimum wage, to extend security of tenure to people residing permanently and over time on farms and to encourage the emergence of industrial-style labour relations. Such regulatory
interventions by the state were paralleled by moves to deregulate and promote free-market competition (Du Toit, 2004; Visser and Ferrer, 2015). A scrapping of agricultural subsidies was high on the agenda of the World Trade Organisation when it was formed in 1995, and, as a new member, South Africa was not only quick to comply with its neoliberal policies, but went beyond what was required, introducing market-oriented shifts “so extensive that South African agriculture is now one of the least state-protected agricultural sectors in the world” (Tilley, 2002:4; see also Bernstein, 2013; Visser and Ferrer, 2015). Such decisions should be seen in the light of both the previous decades’ crisis in profitability on many farms that had been protected under the previous regime, and the political impossibility of continued sponsorship of the white farming community, which had benefited under apartheid from agricultural credits and subsidies, protection through marketing boards and a cooperative monopoly, and access to well-resourced extension services (Bernstein, 2013; Visser and Ferrer, 2015). This period of neoliberal democratisation ran parallel not only to vast changes in the national economy – rising inflation, higher interest rates, falling exchange rates and the pressures of sanctions – but also to a restructuring of agro-food production networks globally. This resulted in increasingly buyer-driven value chains monitored against retailer codes of conduct, fierce competition and a price squeeze, which weakened the bargaining power of most South African producers (Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2004; Du Toit, 2004; Visser and Ferrer, 2015).

In response to these shifts, Western Cape deciduous fruit and wine farmers generally opted to restructure their operations in order to reduce the costs, risks and burdens linked to employing large numbers of permanent, on-farm labour, through a casualisation and externalisation of the work force (i.e. deferring risk onto workers), moving workers off farms and, when

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39 Labour relations in commercial agriculture – until then largely unregulated – were incorporated into labour legislation through the extension of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1993, 1997), the adoption of the Labour Relations Act (1995) and the Unemployment Insurance Act (1993). The Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA), 1997, and the Land Reform (Labour Tenants) Act (LTA), 1996, further sought to protect the tenure rights of long-term farm labourers. The piece of legislation having the most direct impact on farm workers’ working and living conditions is according to Theron, Godfrey and Visser (2007:16), the sectoral determination which was introduced in 2002 and came into effect in 2003, giving the Minister of Labour the power to determine a minimum wage and regulate working conditions. As these authors note, this legislation was fiercely resisted by employer organisations such as AgriSA, who warned that its introduction would cause massive job losses – an effect dampened by the fact that the first minimum wage was lower than the average wage.

40 State support for commercial farms in South Africa amounted to three percent during 2008–2010 according to producer support estimates, compared to the OECD average of 20 percent (OECD, 2011). Bernstein (2013) notes, however, how white farmers mobilised through their interest groups to ensure that capitalist agriculture was protected during the transition.
possible, as was the case in the wine sector, mechanisation (Du Toit, 2004; Kritzinger, Barrientos and Roussow 2004).\footnote{While labour statistics in agriculture are generally held to be unreliable, one example of the trend towards a reduced and casualised workforce may be found in the annual statistical booklets of the South African Table Grape Industry [SATI]. Judging from their data, the number of permanent workers in the Hex River Valley surrounding De Doorns shrank from 5337 in 2009/2010 to 3104 in 2016/2017, while the number of seasonal workers remained fairly similar (SATI, 2011, 2017).} We may thus note how, from the mid-90s onwards, while farm workers were, in theory at least, emboldened by the outlawing of racial discrimination and (on-paper) access to human rights and protection at work – including the right to form and join unions – the simultaneous restructuring of the economy meant increased insecurity, and a dismantling of some of the previous, albeit problematic and uneven, forms of paternalist ‘protection’ in exchange for a precarious freedom that rendered some winners and many others losers (Ewert and Du Toit, 2005).

On some farms, labour regimes may nowadays be characterised by hands-off, impersonal and less subjective management styles than before – although the stereotypical figure of a paternalistic white farmer controlling his workers may have returned in a new shape, as a powerful black foreman, manager or labour broker, who is likely to be less able to show benevolence (Addison, 2014b; Bolt, 2016b). The new landscape further saw a continuation and intensification of an off-farm movement – one study estimating that 3.7 million people across the country were displaced from farms between 1984 and 2004, out of whom 1.7 million, the majority of them women and children, were evicted – many moving to cities further away or to the outskirts of nearby towns (Wegerif, Russell and Grundling, 2005). This shift was key to the erosion of one of the most important aspects of paternalist control over workers lives: the provision of on-farm housing (Du Toit, 2004).

Statistics regarding the employment of farm workers, albeit highly unreliable, further indicate that around 40 percent of farm workers lost their jobs between 1993 and 2006 (Bernstein, 2013), although there are indications that this downward trend has levelled out in recent years (Visser and Ferrer, 2015). While some see these trends as exacerbated by unforeseen negative side effects of the new laws – such as farm owners seeking to avoid legal obligations by evicting and retrenching workers (Visser and Ferrer, 2015) – other analysts understand it primarily as part of overall neo-liberal shifts in agriculture (Bernstein, 2013; Wegerif, Russell and Grundling, 2005). These shifts have had serious implications for women, as farmer strategies for avoiding risks, costs and burdens have meant a further evasion of the responsibility for social reproduction. When coupled with inadequate government support, and gender inequality, this has added further weight to (primarily) women’s burden of unpaid care work. According to Visser
(2016), the reduction of non-wage benefits has resulted in the majority of farm workers, while better protected by human and labour rights legislation, being worse off economically today than during the 1970s.

Given the multiple processes at the time, shifts within commercial agriculture over the past few decades may thus be thought of as a response not solely to neoliberal policy shifts, but also to new laws aimed at protecting workers, land-reform policies, attempts to improve the reputation of the industry and pressure from global retailers (Bolt, 2016a).

As noted in Chapter Two, while coloured labourers continued to make up the bulk of the permanent workforce residing on farms, supplemented with black African seasonal labour housed in on-farm compounds, the increasingly populous informal settlements near rural towns where seasonal, casual and permanent labourers often reside are very heterogeneous. They are made up of coloured families who used to live on farms, black African South Africans who settled in the Cape recently or arrived a generation or two back, and foreign migrants.42 Studies from the early 2000s indicated that, among this increasingly diverse pool of off-farm workers, it was women – whose social identity as ‘worker’ has always been under question – who continued to be the first choice for seasonal and casual jobs, often hired through labour brokering arrangements (Du Toit and Ally, 2003; Orton, Barrientos and McClenaghan, 2001).

To conclude, I have proposed an addition to the analysis of fragmentation and destabilisation of farm worker identities, suggesting that apart from this being linked to increased precarity and job scarcity prompting rural labourers to engage in multiple income-generating strategies (Greenberg, 2010), and to (incomplete) shifts in paternalist labour regimes on farms (Du Toit, 1995), it also speaks to the diversification of visible identities – gender, race/ethnicity and nationality – and histories of (un)belonging in commercial farmlands. This was brought to the surface in the post-strike moment through the questioning of protesters’ authenticity as farm workers.

Representations of Western Cape farm workers

As alluded to above, ethnographic and other explorations of working- and living conditions or organising among commercial farm workers on Western Cape deciduous fruit and wine farms tended for a long period to focus almost exclusively on coloured labourers residing on farms (Du Toit, 2005). This is not surprising as this group made up the core of year-round workers and continues to do so today. In the 1990s, before, during and just after the

42 While the Cape was a coloured labour preferential area during apartheid, and laws prevented black African workers from settling here permanently with their families, many still managed to eke out (an undocumented) living here, including on farms.
transition to multi-racial democracy, several influential studies drawing on field work in the Western Cape were published, including Andries Du Toit’s (1993, 1995) exploration of paternalist discourse among permanent (mostly male) coloured workers residing on fruit and wine farms, anthropologist Linda Waldman’s (1993, 1996) ethnography of adolescent experience and gender on table grape farms and Kritzinger and Vorster’s (1996, 1998) extensive interview studies among female (and male) workers, farmers and farmers’ wives, as well as Ewert and Hamman’s (1996, 1999) surveys on the organisation of labour for which farmers and senior male workers were interviewed.43

During the early 2000s, researchers started to document the experiences of off-farm, seasonal and casual labourers in the province, groups that had grown rapidly since the 1980s and whose experiences had received little attention until that point (Du Toit, 2005). These studies took an interest in the multiple livelihood strategies of off-farm labourers, or explored experiences of labour brokering arrangements and informalisation of work (see e.g. Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2004; Barrientos, 2008; Du Toit, 2005; Du Toit and Ally, 2003; Kritzinger, Barrientos and Roussow 2004). While more inclusive of differently gendered and racialised categories of people labouring on farms, there was still little in-depth attention paid to the specific concerns of black African migrant labourers or to power relations between farm workers. That being said, some research from this period and onwards does explore the experiences of farm workers and dwellers from other sub-groups, including children and black African off-farm labourers (e.g. Levine 2011, 2013). Other studies discuss relations between foreign migrants, South African workers and the predominately white farm owners (e.g. Theron, 2010, 2012; Kerr and Durrheim, 2013; Kerr, Durrheim and Dixon, 2017) or describe the life experiences of differently positioned residents within a rural locality in the farmlands (van der Waal, 2012). Still, I think it is no exaggeration to suggest that there are very few in-depth explorations of the experiences of migrant farm workers from other provinces or countries who have arrived more or less recently in the Western Cape, or studies which set out to explore intersecting power relations.

I want to make a few points regarding what I view as some of the consequences of the strong focus until the early 2000s on more established groups, primarily coloured labourers living and working permanently on farms – to some extent also with an overt focus on men. To start with, I suggest that the privileging of some voices over others, based on ethnicity, gender, nationality and form of employment, as discussed above, risks

43 Ahead of this, several noteworthy papers based primarily on survey research among farm labourers and farmers in the Western Cape were published in conjunction with the SALDRU farm labour conference at the University of Cape Town in September 1976. These may be retrieved from: http://opensaldru.uct.ac.za/handle/11090/674
contributing to the experiences of one specific group being taken as representative of all farm workers. One example of this is explorations of the category of female farm workers, which, it has been noted, has become increasingly diverse (see e.g. Barrientos, Kritzinger and Rossouw, 2004; Orton, Barrientos and McLenaghan, 2001). Still, some authors apply terminology which blurs differences and homogenises experiences, for example through using epithets like ‘farmwomen’ without further discussion of power differences among female labourers (see e.g. Devereux and Solomon, 2011; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1998). As I shall return to later, when the everyday experiences and concerns of farmwomen are analysed, the voices of migrant women often appear to have been excluded (cf. Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). This tendency is not limited to research, but is generally even more striking in industry and organisational discourse – with many farm worker organisations in the province having few black African farm worker (migrants or not) members or representatives. As I return to in Chapter Six, this contributed to the initial sense of disbelief at the dawn of the 2012–2013 province-wide farm worker protests.

From here, I shall present some ethnographic accounts stemming from interactions during my fieldwork with differently positioned farm labourers, all working on farms but under very different arrangements. While the narratives I present below are mere fragments of highly variegated experiences, I believe that, when put together, they may illuminate parts of an (incomplete) pattern of how work and life precarity is experienced by differently positioned farm labourers at the present moment.

Aunty Martina: achieving security in one’s own right

A siren sounds across the vineyard, indicating that it is time for lunch-break on a small, neat and successful table grape farm in the Cape Winelands District. Parts of the team that I have joined finally lower their shoulders after spending the last few hours on foot, arms lifted high to clean bunches of grapes on the vines at an efficient pace that I struggled to keep up with. Most start walking towards the tractors and bakkies (pick-up trucks) transporting the workers living on the farm back to their permanent or temporary places of residence – migrant women in shared dormitories, and permanent workers in stand-alone houses. A few casual workers, most of whom will eat their packed lunches seated in the vineyard, and some of the on-farm migrants only allow themselves a short pause, either chasing a better piece-work rate or struggling to meet the daily target. Three failures to cover the stipulated amount of vakkie (sections of the wine stock), that each worker must complete means a person must leave the farm. Unsurprisingly then, every second of work counts on this farm – so that when someone stretches for too long or extends the 15-minute break we take in the vineyard twice daily with 10, 20 or 30 seconds, it is impossible not to notice.
When it is time to travel back to the farm yard after lunch, in order to be ready when the siren calls us back to work – everyone is well ahead of schedule, despite having cooked, cleaned and tended to children. I seem to be the only one struggling, and feel pressured to run the last few steps to the bakkie in order not to delay the others, who are already seated in the back of the vehicle, patiently watching me hurry.

Aunty Martina, a widowed coloured forewoman close to retirement age with whom I stayed for a few nights, occupies a two-bedroom house on the farm in her own name, independent of a male partner, sharing it with two grand-children while her daughter and partner sleep in a trailer in the backyard. Martina may be seen as representative of a relatively recent development, in which women living on farms have begun to secure more highly skilled permanent jobs, and at times also houses in their own names, making the category of female farmworkers more socio-economically diverse (Orton, Barrientos and McClanaghan, 2001). This has meant quite a remarkable shift during her lifetime.

Like many other people born on commercial farms in the 1950s, Aunty Martina started working early, by 11 years of age. Her first job was as a child-minder on a farm a few hours’ drive from where she grew up, allowing her to see her family only once a month. At 13, she started cleaning in the same house and at 16, she moved back to the farm where her parents lived, labouring as a seasonal farm worker in the area. At 20, she married and came to the farm where she now lives, near her parents’ place. By then, and until the mid-80s, a major concern for Martina, and many other young women on the farm, was the dop system, she says, a widespread practice of paying workers part of their salary in wine, which originated during colonialism, and which has been found to persist in some places after it was outlawed, at least into the late 1990s (London, 1999). The dop system ensured that the workforce was kept docile (Scully, 1997), and its legacy is hard-felt in the Western Cape today, with extreme levels of foetal alcohol spectrum disorders and rampant alcohol dependency among both men and women in the commercial farming areas.

The farm owners back then gave the men alcohol as part of their payment and they have actually made alcoholics of our men. The men used to get a ... jug of alcohol when they started work, at 11 o’clock tea break, lunch break, 4 o’clock tea break and when they finished at night ... The women wanted to stop the dop system and established a farm committee... After the alcohol was taken away, we had less domestic violence at weekends.44

Aunty Martina connects her husband’s kidney failure – which left him incapacitated and unable to work long before retirement – and his premature

44The interview with Aunty Martina was done in Afrikaans and has been translated and transcribed by a research assistant.
death to the dop system, contributing to the precarity of her family. During the 1990s, and for 12 years, Aunty Martina’s family lived off-farm in an informal settlement, due to what she describes as personal trouble in her marriage. With her husband unable to work, he stayed at home looking after one of their grandchildren, while Aunty Martina worked on different farms, moving in between seasons, and living away from home for months at a time, always being the person responsible for bringing together a team of seasonal workers.

After the death of her husband, the son of the previous farmer asked her to come back to the farm, offering to build a house for her, as all the existing farm houses were occupied. She has been a permanent employee, and a forewoman, since then – a move which has secured her strong commitment to the farm. While we talked, she often returned to giving praise to the farmer, whom she has known since he was a little child, as she worked for his father (other persons visiting her house at times voiced more critical opinions). The fact that she now has a house in her own name and has been promised that she can stay there until she dies, is something she sees as remarkable. Historically housing contracts were linked to the contracts of permanently employed men – whose wives and children were seen as resources to be drawn upon during peak season rather than workers in their own right (Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996).

I mean, what farmer is going to take on a woman who doesn’t have a husband to work for the house for instance? We’re four women on the farm whose husbands have died, we’re working for our own houses!

Permanent workers living on the farm, like Aunty Martina, get a comparatively generous bonus at the end of the season, she explains, depending on how well the farm has fared. Last year, she used this bonus to go on a road trip together with her daughter and grandchild in a small van she has acquired. Still, she says that even though relations on the farm, payment and benefits are much better now, she experiences the work itself as more stressful. Long ago, she recalls perhaps with some nostalgia, that there was time for chatting and relaxing during the day, unlike now.

The working conditions were actually better for me back then because now everything must be on time and perfect, back then we just worked because work was work; there was no supervision, my father-in-law only supervised us now and then.

These days, a strict piece work system is in place, with high expectations on performance, putting pressure on her as a forewoman as well. She needs to quickly monitor how everyone is faring, and calculate how much of the vineyards her team must cover during each part of the day in order to keep
on track with the farmer’s expectations. All workers’ names are written with crayons on the sections of the rows they cover in the vineyard, and if someone has been negligent at work, that person may be reprimanded in front of the rest of the team by a forewoman or manager. While appreciating her work, Aunty Martina, who suffers from high blood pressure and diabetes, is looking forward to retirement when she can relax, and rest her legs and back which often pain her when she climbs over the water pipes in the vineyards, monitoring her work team and helping out here and there. The state pension is however much less than what she earns now, and in spite of having many side-incomes, selling small things from her house like bags of crisps, pastries that she bakes, or hiring out her old but well-kept van, she might still decide to keep on working for a few more years, at least during the peak season. The futures of her grandchild and child with mental disabilities living at her house appear uncertain however, as they are not guaranteed the right to stay on and occupy the house after Aunty Martina dies, when the security she has achieved for herself expires.

Refilwe, Stephen and Tshepo: a long-term temporary presence

The majority of people labouring on the farm where Aunty Martina resides are not permanently employed on-farm workers like herself. During the peak season, those busy at work in the vineyards are instead primarily Xhosa-speaking women from the Eastern Cape, many of them young single mothers who live in shared dormitories on the farm – as well as coloured women, and a handful of men, who commute from townships near the surrounding towns. Residing together with one’s children or partner is not possible for the on-farm migrants, as the dormitory set-up does not allow for such arrangements. Some among them move around between seasons, moreover, alternating between working on this farm and on apple or citrus farms an hour or two from here, and shorter stays back in the Eastern Cape with their families and children in between, in a pattern reminiscent of the apartheid era’s circular migration.45

Refilwe, a 26-year-old Tswana-speaking woman from the North-West Province, is in some ways a typical migrant farm worker – being young and a single mother of two. In other ways she is not, as she comes from a small city in a mining area and is an active member of a trade union on a large table grape farm located a couple of hours’ drive from where Aunty Martina lives. Farm work is for Refilwe what Greenberg (2010), as noted earlier, described as one livelihood strategy among others: the only opportunity that

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45 Statistical data suggests that internal migration has escalated in South Africa since the 1990s, with over half of the male population and approximately 20 percent of females between 35-50 years being temporary migrants, while women form a large majority of what counts as permanent migrants (Collinson et al, 2003, data from 1999–2003)
opened up at a time when she desperately needed to shoulder the responsibility of breadwinner after a separation, and the cafés where she had previously worked on and off as a waitress no longer had any openings. During the two seasons that she had worked on the farm when we first met, Refilwe tried to maximise her earnings as a general worker in the vineyards and later in the pack house, working overtime during the weekends when possible, while also working informally as a hairdresser in the migrant workers’ compound. Most of her salary was sent back to her sister, who cared for her younger child while she was away, while her former partner’s family took care of the older child. She further saved a few hundred rand per month intended to last during the off-season, with as little as 150 rand per week budgeted for expenditures while living on the farm. When we spent time together, she would now and then withdraw money from her savings account, however, saying that she found it hard to resist ‘beautiful things’ – the roses in life as it were – like buying something small for herself or organising an outing for her birthday.

On the farm, the new minimum wage of 105 rand per day had been implemented, but at the same time hefty deductions were introduced at the start of the season after the farm worker strike, including for transport from one’s home area to the farm. In Refilwe’s case, this transport had meant standing in the back of a truck for most of the night she claimed.46 Upon arriving at the farm, and learning about the new deductions, she could not simply pack up and go home, having travelled here without a cent in her pocket, because she depended on an advance payment from the farm – a situation resembling bonded labour.

While there is little time or space to spend money during the week, Refilwe and her friends travelled to a nearby town to buy groceries at the weekend, and at night, parties would be thrown in the workers’ compound on the large farm. When I dropped them off late on a couple of weekend evenings, the sound of house music could be heard from afar, bouncing across the dusty plain as the sun was setting. With few other distractions, the bar was a popular hang-out – a temptation that, according to Refilwe, resulted not only in many of the predominately young (female) workers going home with little money saved, but further in unwanted pregnancies and HIV infections.

For migrant workers, life was more costly in many ways than for those residing permanently in the area. Refilwe and her union colleagues would complain, for instance, about migrants being denied free health care by the local clinic, instead being referred to a more expensive private clinic by the farm company. Stephen, a migrant worker from a rural area in a neighbouring province, was also part of the same union. He had worked on

46 The newly introduced deduction for transport came to almost one week’s salary, which prompted workers on the farm to go on strike in late 2013, see further Chapter Six.
the farm for many years when we met, living in the compound for eleven months per year, but was still regarded a seasonal worker. This meant that he was never paid during the month of May, when he went off and travelled back to the rural area to visit his mother. He also could not transfer into the neighbouring housing area on the farm, where on-farm coloured permanent workers lived in single houses, one per family. This is a predicament that he shares with many others, and recent research suggests a need for regularisation of protection for temporary workers, and particularly for long-term seasonal workers (Alford, 2015; Visser and Ferrer, 2015).  

Tshepo, another union member who, like Stephen, is from a rural area and in his early middle-age, had two children from previous relationships who lived with their mothers, and to whose up-keep he said that he contributed now and then, when he had money to spare. Tshepo worked on the farm for around six months per year and, like Refilwe, had a side business to augment the meagre income from farm work, repairing shoes during evenings and on his days off. A familiar gendered socio-economic concern that he raised was the incompatibility of low-paid seasonal farm work and ambitions to save enough money to afford to get married, as this would be expected to be preceded by paying bride wealth, lobola. This predicament is often cited as a source of great frustration among working class men and a primary reason why many never marry (Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger, 2012; Langa and Kiguwa, 2013).

On two farms that use on-farm labour, I interviewed a farmer and a manager who took pride in the high return rates of migrant workers, who came back season after season. Typically, their arguments would go: people return here every year, which must mean that they like it. They would attribute this to the farm having facilities of a high standard, satisfactory working conditions and/or providing free meals. One senior manager went so far as to call the migrant workers’ compound at the farm where he works ‘The Transkei Sun’ – referring to the former African homeland Transkei and, presumably, a luxury hotel chain. As we stopped by for a quick glance at the facility after the interview, he repeatedly stressed how clean and spacious the dormitories were – we did not enter them – and drew attention to an outdoor seating area for socialising. He further pointed out that the nutritional value

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47 The distinction between different forms of employment is at times blurred. Researchers have categorised non-permanent jobs in different ways, for instance referring to the needs-based but not permanent work that many on-farm women have traditionally been engaged in as ‘regular’, while ‘casual’ work has been used to describe contracts shorter than peak season (see Visser, 2016 for a discussion). The term ‘seasonal worker’ may further be used to refer both to those who work only in the strict harvesting and packing season and people like Steven, who works 11 months per year, but is still not classed as a permanent employee (Visser, 2016).

48 To contextualise this statement, it has been noted that 46 percent of children in South Africa had absent fathers by 2002 (Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger, 2012).
of the food served to migrant workers slightly exceeded what was required in terms of calorie intake. In a joking tone that laid bare deeply racialised power inequalities, he said that “They [migrant workers] are even getting more than they should here” – signalling that, for some, being provided with anything above the bare minimum should be regarded as a luxury.

The black African migrant farm workers I spoke to – although none from this specific farm – described farm work in very different ways, however: as a last resort when desperately needing an income to get by and settle debts. While Western Cape farms were generally preferred to those in other provinces, as wages and conditions tended to be better, decisions to return to a familiar farm appeared to be linked to hopes of getting a chance to start the season a bit early, or make use of the small advance payment provided at the beginning of the season, until the first wage was paid out. It could also, as Johnston (2007) notes in her research in the Free State, be linked to fears that conditions may be even more difficult elsewhere.

Clara and Tafadzwa: favoured and resented foreign labourers

Workers who have emigrated from a neighbouring country are probably least likely to be able to draw on remnants of traditional paternalism – or new laws and policies – to secure work, tenure rights or non-wage benefits on Western Cape farms. Instead, family and kinship ties are central for securing work and support. Foreign migrants, some of whom lack work permits, fear police raids and deportation, and at times also live in fear of violence from South African neighbours, with whom they are competing for jobs. In De Doorns, the epicentre of the farm worker protests, Zimbabweans were particularly targeted by anti-foreigner sentiments during the post-strike moment. In this important table grape district, around 20 percent of seasonal workers are foreign migrants, the most sizeable nationality group being Zimbabweans (Visser and Ferrer, 2015:154). In local discourse, ‘Zimbabwean’ was at times used interchangeably with ‘foreigner’.49

Negative sentiments surfacing in conversations with other farm labourers, politicians and some organisational representatives positioned Zimbabweans as stealing jobs from local people, as the sweethearts of employers, and as too scared to protest.50 It was further suggested that they undermined the

49 Zimbabwean farm workers made up 15 percent of the seasonal workforce in 2013–2014, while six percent were from Lesotho, according to a producer survey cited in Visser and Ferrer, 2015. Only four percent of permanent workers were foreigners, which refutes perceptions of foreigners taking local jobs. It should be noted though that the presence of Zimbabweans in De Doorns at least during the 2009 expulsion is likely to have been higher, as 3000 were reported to have been displaced at the time (see next page), while 10,000 people work on farms in the area during peak season (Visser and Ferrer, 2015).

50 In attempting to read such statements it is important to take note of how the culture and condition of organizing within the labour movement, as well as the prevalence of popular
bargaining position of South Africans by accepting salaries below the minimum wage or working overtime without compensation – ideas that previous research in De Doorns has refuted (Theron 2010; Visser and Ferrer, 2015). These perceptions contributed to rendering Zimbabweans simultaneously vulnerable – to anti-foreigner violence by other workers – and sought after by farmers. The latter, on the other hand, offered them some safety (Theron, 2010, 2012). Notably, the arrival of Zimbabwean migrants in great numbers coincided with a gradual but significant replacing of permanent jobs with seasonal work in the area: according to industry figures from 6000 permanent workers in 2008–9 to 3104 in 2016–2017 (SATI, 2011, 2017).

A representative of a local refugee rights group suggested that when Zimbabweans started arriving in De Doorns in 2002, and established themselves as a sizeable minority from around 2006, this impacted upon the organisation of work on farms in the area, with employers experiencing increased productivity (see also Kerr, Durrheim and Dixon, 2017). He attributes this to the first wave of migrants being well-educated, English-speaking bread-winners who left their children in the care of relatives at home, who saw their stay as temporary, and who worked hard to make as much money as possible until the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe eased. A combination of work discipline, skill, physical strength and ‘outsourcing’ of care work to relatives at home, coupled with their temporary presence and desperation thus made Zimbabweans attractive as farm labourers (see also Kerr, Durrheim and Dixon, 2017).  

Clara, who worked on a table grape farm in De Doorns when we first met in late 2013, would fit well into the first-wave migrant category. She speaks perfect English, has a secondary school (O-level) certificate and used to work as a substitute teacher in Zimbabwe before arriving in South Africa in 2008, accompanied by her husband Tafadzwa. Being compelled to leave by the deteriorating economic situation at home, they saved some cash, dressed up in nice clothes and through a stroke of luck, and by greasing a few palms, made their way through the border crossing at Beitbridge, eventually ending up in De Doorns after a short period in the greater Johannesburg area.

Their was a journey of great risk-taking and hardship. On the border, the couple lost all their savings to a con-man pretending to work for the border police. While awaiting the outcome of the asylum application on the South

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public protest would differ in fundamental ways between South Africa and Zimbabwe, depending on the countries’ respective histories of labour organizing, struggle for freedom and different levels and forms of state repression presently.

51 Similar observations has been made by other researchers (for example Barrientos & Visser, 2012:22-23 and Visser and Ferrer, 2015). Visser and Ferrer (2015) note that one of three producers they interviewed in the Western Cape preferred to employ workers from Zimbabwe and Lesotho, who were seen as more reliable, including since they cannot fall back on meagre and elusive social grants (see also Johnston, 2007).
African side, Tafadzwa was falsely accused of theft, and narrowly escaped an angry mob intent on killing him, and later on he became severely ill due to lack of food. Their path towards De Doorns further included walking on foot for long stretches and throughout the night along the freeway to Johannesburg, a hot-spot for violent crime, being let down by close friends and helped by strangers. For some time, they found refuge with kin around Johannesburg, Tafadzwa working in a shop, while Clara resorted to knocking on the doors of suburban houses, asking to do gardening or sweeping the yard in exchange for cash. Upon hearing that work was plentiful on farms in De Doorns, Clara decided to travel there on her own, and secured work on a table grape farm through her kinship network.

In spite of describing her arrival in the informal settlements around De Doorns as quite dramatic, she painted a rosy picture of the place as a Mecca for work, where they could live in private flats, in order to encourage Tafadzwa to join her.52 Disembarking from the truck in which he had hitch-hiked there, he was so disoriented by the sight of the crowded shanty town that he left one shoe behind. They had just settled in, renting a small informal house near central De Doorns, when anti-foreigner violence erupted, turning their lives upside-down.

It was in November 2009 that Zimbabweans were targeted in an attempt to drive away foreign farm workers from De Doorns. Approximately 3 000 people were displaced, many having their houses destroyed and property stolen by other local residents (Misago, 2009). Clara and Tafadzwa were at work that day, and upon hearing what was happening, they hurried back to the informal settlement only to find that local youths had ripped off the door to their house of corrugated iron sheets and were busy helping themselves to their belongings, which lay scattered around. The police, Clara says, did nothing.53 While there were no reports of deadly violence, the United Nations Refugee Agency put up a camp for displaced persons at a local sports field, which for the following year became home to most Zimbabweans opting to remain in De Doorns, while some were accommodated in empty on-farm workers’ houses (Misago, 2009). Research on the cause of the expulsion identified competition between Zimbabwean and South African labour brokers, including the involvement of a local ward councillor in this conflict, as well as local authorities lacking political and administrative power vis-à-vis farmers, as some of the factors behind the violence (Misago, 2009).

Competition between Zimbabweans and South Africans expressed itself in several ways before the incident, between labour brokers as the report

52 Other researchers have also pointed to the existence of migrant networks, as well as the accessibility of De Doorns, which is situated on the national road N1, contributing to its popularity (Theron, 2010, 2012).
53 Visser and Ferrer, 2015, suggest that police may even have been implicated in the violence.
points out, as well as among job-seekers and with regards to the provision of housing, where Clara and others suggest that Zimbabweans were the first to start setting up, and renting out, informal houses on an empty piece of land which now constitutes part of the township Stofland. Prior to the expulsion, seven Zimbabweans had been killed here when their house was set on fire. The expulsion was further preceded by meetings in the locality inciting hatred against foreigners, allegedly in the presence of local politicians.

In an article on anti-xenophobia discourse in the aftermath of this crisis, Phillipa Kerr and Kevin Durrheim (2013) question using the term ‘xenophobic violence’, as it firmly places the blame on local working-class people, without paying any attention to the structural violence they experience, including unemployment or underemployment, poverty, illness and general life and work precarity (see also Theron, 2010, 2012). By using an anti-xenophobia discourse, farmers could thus position themselves as moral persons condemning violence, while at the same time fending off criticism of a labour system from which they benefit and which, Kerr and Durrheim (2013:577) suggest, “produced some of the very conditions for this violence to occur in the first place”.

South African residents of De Doorns interviewed in Kerr and Durrheim’s study indeed saw the farmers as the main cause of the conflict, through their preference for hiring Zimbabwean labourers. Still, the violence became directed at Zimbabweans, who were an easier target. Thinking with Bernard Magubane (2000:478), the anti-foreigner discourse in De Doorns may be understood as a “lightning rod”, redirecting the frustrations of precariously positioned South Africans.

Kerr and Durrheim’s Zimbabwean interviewees on the other hand described their relationship to farmers in positive terms, and presented themselves as ‘better workers’. The (few) Zimbabwean workers I interacted with expressed more ambivalent views. While recognising and at times repeating the stereotypes of hard-working Zimbabweans and ‘lazy’ coloured workers circulating in the area, referring both to an ethos of hard work and to a behaviour prompted by desperation, none would claim the position of ‘better worker’ for themselves. On the contrary, a person like Clara said: “People working here their whole life – I feel they are strong.” This was perhaps an insight gained gradually, over time. Clara and others further took a more critical stand vis-à-vis farmers compared to Kerr and Durrheim’s interviewees. While expressing appreciation towards those who offered practical assistance during the crisis, Clara also questioned their motives.

On the day we were chased from our homes, the farmers came the next day [to the camp] to ask us to come and work, and we chased them away. But they came back, they brought food and clothes and were very

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54 Independent online (IOL news) reported on this tragedy 2009-02-23
supportive.
[A bit later] But it’s not us that they want, they want our labour ... They say we work for less money.

Clara further charges those farmers who came to the camp with solely selfish motives, and imitates someone saying hastily: “Time, time, the clock is ticking – you must come to work!”

After the 2009 incident, Clara took most of what remained of her family’s belongings with her, as free transport was available for those wishing to return home. But coming back, “being a person”, as she puts it, she gradually bought new things to replace what had been stolen or brought back home – like a TV, an electric kettle and other utilities that make life in exile easier. For some time, the couple’s youngest child also came to live with them in De Doorns, attending a nearby school for a year before returning to his grandmother in Harare.

At the end of 2013, Clara spoke of the situation at work as being at times tense and uncomfortable because anti-foreigner sentiments would be directed against her and other colleagues. Still, she attempted to assert her room for manoeuvring, and pointed to the advantages of collaborating across difference.

So I was talking to the other girls who also work there the other week and they were saying that ‘Hey, people like you, you must go, what, what.’ And I said: ‘It’s fine, we can go back and stay in the tents again, but we will work. If you push us, we’ll go and stay in [compounds on] the farms. So let’s work together. Because now we are staying in the community. Like here we are renting ... we also give you our money. We don’t mind. We pay, we stay in the community, we buy electricity, we help you. But if you don’t want us, we will go and stay in the tents, it’s free.’

Since 2009 and up until the time of writing this text, De Doorns has been spared from further large-scale anti-foreigner violence, including when such violence erupted in other parts of South Africa in 2015. A well-connected Zimbabwean refugee-rights activist who formerly worked on farms expressed optimism, noting how workers of different nationalities and ethnicities had started collaborating more in recent years. Still, De Doorns remained a place associated with lack of safety for Clara and others. In 2015, she and Tafadzwa felt compelled to relocate elsewhere due to this fear of violence.

Tafadzwa had up until that time worked on a citrus farm near De Doorns, for most of the time as a foreman, and in that capacity he had been responsible for bringing in teams of casual workers. Work on the farm had been divided along lines of ethnicity and/or nationality (see Chapter Four), so that, for instance, he was at first asked to manage a team of Zimbabwean
workers. This, he suggested, served to suppress resistance among workers. Being new in the job and fairly young, however, Tafadzwa sensed that his Zimbabwean co-workers might not respect him as a supervisor, and asked to be assigned a team of migrant workers from Lesotho instead. Seeing that the ethnic division of work teams caused rivalry in the form of both verbal and physical fights at work, he proposed that work be organised differently and started mixing workers of different nationalities and ethnicities in his team, hoping to ease the tension between workers. This new regime, which was supported by the manager, also made recruitment of workers less uncomfortable, he claims.

So ... if you go out and look for people, you come across people who are sitting there... They don’t work. They are South Africans, just sitting there, and, once they see you coming they know you are looking for people, right, and [if] you by-pass them – they call you apartheid. ‘Why did you leave us?’ And it was very difficult to go into the location to look for people until I said I must ... get five of the South Africans, and you know, you start with the South Africans, before you have your five Zimbabweans. Then they would know, they would see that... you have got the five South Africans, five Sotho’s, five coloureds [and] lastly – five Zimbabwean people.\(^{55}\)

Other foremen followed suit, and soon all the teams on the farm included labourers of different ethnicities and nationalities, although they were still all male. This created new problems as harvest began, however, with complaints that fruits were remaining on the trees – a problem that would earlier have been mitigated more easily, when, according to Tafadzwa, a spirit of solidarity could be forged linked to nationality; for example, by seeking to avoid having others labelling Zimbabweans as careless.

A system of checking individual performance – common on many farms – was introduced by the manager, by which all workers were given a unique number, posted to the tree they were working on to ensure that it was cleared of fruit before they moved on. This caused frustration and Tafadzwa describes how his perceived closeness to the manager created conflicts with other workers, including fellow Zimbabweans. According to Clara, co-workers labelled him “the boss’s child” to discredit him – a common accusation in paternalist discourse. The situation was further complicated when Tafadzwa denied a South African, who had used a false ID, a place on his team. When the person started spreading rumours accusing him of cruelty, Tafadzwa perceived this as a serious threat. Despite appreciating his job, he jumped at the opportunity to relocate to a small farm near a central

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\(^{55}\) In this quote, Tafadzwa distinguishes between foreign workers from Zimbabwe and Lesotho as well as between coloured and black African (presumably Xhosa) labourers.
town when a relative told him of a job opening. Not long after this, he secured work as a skilled craftsman in the town.

And worse when people they … don’t hesitate to kill. Even if you walk into the shops you can be killed, they can do anything. So I decided ah-ah, this is more than enough, I must leave now … Then I left.

Clara’s experiences of precarity have been slightly different. After she left the farm where she had worked for several years, due to stress and harsh treatment (see Chapter Four), she tried to set up a small business in Zimbabwe, but struggled to make a profit. Returning to De Doorns, she was hired by a labour broker to work on a farm where wages were lower but the work itself much more comfortable. A short while into this job however, she fell off the truck travelling back from the farm one afternoon, and was hospitalised for weeks with a leg injury, and was later unable to do heavy work for over a year. Being employed by a labour broker, and not having a union to turn to at the time, her attempts to get compensation from her employer after the accident were unsuccessful. As a foreign worker, she could not apply for state grants and was thus left to rely on her husband’s salary.

In our conversations, Clara gave many examples of female migrants’ specific vulnerability, linked to their economic position. Most foreign workers, like herself, struggle to open bank accounts, which may create specific problems for women. Clara has so far been lucky, using the account of an in-law who has meticulously kept the money for her, and remitting parts of her salary to her mother-in-law in Zimbabwe, who cares for her children. Others with fewer options would carry large amounts of cash on them, or place the money in a tin which they buried in the ground inside the informal house where they resided, in spite of the high risk of robberies and break-ins. Clara shared several cautionary tales that appeared to be circulating in De Doorns, centring around a Zimbabwean woman who entered into a common marriage arrangement with a countryman she had met there, leaving the man in charge of her earnings. At the end of the season, the man, through different sneaky strategies, managed to take off with all her savings, leaving the woman stranded and cashless, while he returned to a wife and children in Zimbabwe whom she had not known existed. Regardless of whether this reflects a real pattern or not, it speaks to perceptions of gendered precarity and risk among (some) female foreign farm workers.

After her accident and relocation to a nearby town, Clara got by through working as a nanny, a domestic worker and doing odd informal jobs for a white woman she had come to know before securing work in a restaurant. Looking back upon her experience of farm work in hindsight, Clara envisions it as a first step in an upward migration trajectory.
Un-becoming farm workers 56

Moving through the Western Cape farmlands after the 2012–2013 unrest, I regularly met with women who had lived most of their lives on farms, and whose social identities were firmly vested in farm life, but who had been pushed out of farm work in recent years. Some had also been evicted or felt compelled to move out of the farm on their own accord, whereas others remained in their on-farm workers’ house – an option primarily available to women whose partner still worked on the farm. These women, most of whom were coloured, mainly related the loss of work to unpaid care responsibilities or personal health problems – and at times to labour activism. Whereas this had positioned them as undesirable farm workers, they did not un-become farm workers merely through losing their jobs and moving away from the farms (Bolt, 2017; Hartnack, 2017; Kaur, 2017).

In the Langeberg area, unionised labourers from a handful of families residing on a grape-producing farm had received notice of retrenchment and eviction after taking part in strike action in 2012–2013. I spoke with members of this group on several occasions as they met with union organisers and attended court hearings in town, seeking to challenge attempts by the farm owner to evict them. It was only after some time however, as I had a longer conversation with six of the women seated on the lawn outside the farm houses which they still occupied, that I realised that four of them were already out of work well before the protests, while one person worked elsewhere. The reasons they gave for this revealed how work-related health problems, primarily arthritis, and unpaid care work at times infringing on their availability for work had rendered them undesirable as employees. Iris, a middle-aged woman, claimed that she lost her job after repeatedly accompanying a young child to the doctor when he broke his arm and the fracture did not heal properly: “Then the farmer wasn’t satisfied with me having to go to the doctor every day and then he fired me.”

In neighbouring Breede Valley municipality, I visited Nomabongo on a regular basis during fieldwork. Nomabongo is a black African middle-aged community activist, serving within the leadership structure of a farm worker organisation as well as in the local ANC branch. She resided in an informal housing area near a small rural town and, like most of her neighbours, had lived and worked on a nearby farm before ending up in this rapidly growing settlement. While many had come here after losing their jobs and being evicted from farms, Nomabongo was somewhat of an exception as she had taken a conscious decision to resign and move out of the workers’ house where she had lived with her husband and children for over ten years,

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56 This alludes to a title from a panel session at the Anthropology Southern Africa [ASNA] conference 2016, (Un)becoming farm workers in Southern Africa, organised by Tarindar Kaur and Femke Brandt, which I was part of; and a subsequent special issue (40:4) of the ASNA journal in 2017, on farm worker identities.
relocating here on her own after disputes both at work and in her marriage (see Chapter Five). One morning, when I visited Nomabongo in her spacious house of wooden planks and corrugated iron sheets, she had invited some of her female neighbours, also active in the same organisation as her, to come and speak to us.\footnote{In this unstructured group interview conducted in Afrikaans, I was assisted by a research assistant who also transcribed and translated the interview.} None of the women were working on farms at the time – instead, they got by through picking and selling firewood and assisting neighbours with everyday chores like cleaning plates in exchange for food or cash – or relied on insufficient child support or other social grants.

As we sat down to talk on chairs and buckets turned upside-down in Nomabongo’s kitchen, I learnt that the women had all been pushed off farms involuntarily: the area, they claimed, is notorious for evictions.\footnote{Recent attempts at retrieving statistical data on evictions have been largely unsuccessful, and there is poor record-keeping of such cases (Visser and Ferrer, 2015).} Most of them lamented having to live here – the informal settlement was to them a place associated with violence and crime, and fear that one’s children would be drawn into drug abuse or transactional sex, and it also lacked the sense of community they had experienced on the farms.\footnote{A few months after this meeting, Nomabongo called to tell me the tragic news that one of the women from this group had been assaulted and killed as she was returning home one evening.} While all spoke bitterly of the desperation and humiliation associated with evictions, the words of Kathy, an elderly lady, stuck in my mind. She described having been so traumatised when the farmer told her to vacate her house that she was hospitalised for a week.\footnote{In her research on an informal settlement on the outskirts of Cape Town, anthropologist Fiona Ross has highlighted the deeply gendered social practices through which women in particular have been forced off farms; for example as a result of a husband dying or losing his work. The term ‘weggegooi’ (thrown away, discarded) was repeatedly used by her informants, signalling the humiliating, gendered condition of being kicked out into an uncertain, unrespectable future (Ross, 2010).} The bad feeling she got upon receiving the news of eviction was, in her words, “almost the same as a death sentence”. She described having asked the farmer in desperation:

‘Baas, where must I go?’ He told me it doesn’t matter, just see to it that my house is emptied. I was astonished at his response. But every evening when I pray, I still pray for him as well.

According to Nomabongo, some of the elderly farm workers in the area had lost parts of their belongings, including identity cards, during evictions as their possessions were hastily packed into boxes and left by the road side. Such misfortune, which made it difficult to draw state pensions, grimly mirrored the partial loss of identity and sense of self associated with the involuntary relocations.
In the new context in which they found themselves, some of the women eventually became involved in organising for change, through an income-generating cooperative that for various reasons failed, and repeated petitions to the local government, demanding access to electricity and security for tenants in the area. Here, too, employer decisions to dismiss and evict them were understood as being linked to reproductive responsibilities, ill-health and union activity. Their narratives further drew attention to how women and their children become undesirable as on-farm workers once they are no longer attached to a permanently employed male farm worker. Sina, for instance, asserted that her whole family was evicted after her husband had an argument with the farmer related to accusations of theft and subsequently lost his work – an experience very similar to that of female off-farm workers I interacted with elsewhere. Yolanda, a single mother of four, on the other hand described how she was repeatedly harassed by the farmer about her young adult sons living with her in the on-farm workers’ house, as they worked away from the farm.

So when the farmer’s children grew up they started to bother me about my children … That farmer only works with four men, then he wanted to know all the time: ‘[Yolanda], when are your children leaving my farm? They don’t work here so they can’t stay here.’ Then I say, ‘Kleinbaas’\[61\] when is Kleinbaas going to give my children work?’ They do get work elsewhere, but they don’t get a house where they find work because they are still too young … The eldest is only 22 and the other one is younger than 20 years old, then I still have two adopted children as well. So it’s the three sons that are a problem for him. He doesn’t want to give them work because he doesn’t work with a lot of people but he wants them to leave the farm because they work on another farm.

A couple of years ago, when a medical doctor declared that Yolanda was no longer fit to do farm work, she stopped working, and subsequently lost her on-farm housing and relocated here together with her children.

The fact that farm owners identified grown-up children residing with their parents on farms as a problem emerged in farm worker narratives elsewhere too. During the post-strike moment, backlash in the form of deductions for children over 18 living with their parents was a recurring complaint raised by farm labourers (see further Chapter Six). Reluctance to accommodate children on farms was not unique to this specific moment however. Auntie Lily, a coloured woman in her fifties residing in De Doorns, had worked for the better part of her life on fruit and table grape farms, residing for many years on farms but nowadays living in a house of her own in a township. Several years previously, her brother and his wife had passed away in a short period of time, and it was decided that Auntie Lily and her husband would

\[61\] Literally ‘small boss’, referring to the farmer’s son.
take responsibility for raising the couple’s two orphaned children. At the
time, she was living in what she describes as a spacious on-farm workers’
house with three bedrooms, together with her husband and children, in a
nearby district. But while they felt there was plenty of room in the house, the
farm owner would not allow them to take in the orphaned children. She
recalls being told “this farm is not a crèche!” In the end, they saw no other
option than to resign, and move out of the farm, into the house where her
brother and his wife had lived, in a township near De Doorns. Looking back
on this experience, Aunty Lily, who is a labour- and community activist,
understands this as a constructive dismissal.

While these narratives are just a few examples of how female farm
workers understood and gave meaning to job losses and evictions, it is
striking to observe how care responsibilities and personal health
problems that may have developed because of work in the first place were constructed
as key impediments to work, and perceived as informing employer decisions
to evict and lay off female labourers. Such decisions further emerge as being
linked to women’s historical position as secondary workers, dependent on a
spouse or adult male relative for access to (primarily seasonal) work and
housing – which is still very much a reality among women living on farms
today (Du Toit and Ally, 2003; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996; Swanepoel,
2017).

The on-farm female labourers appeared to be caught between two
conflicting demands – positioned as working women rather than workers in
their own right (Mies, 2014; Simonton, 2006) and thus expected to take
responsibility for caring for children as well as sick and elderly family
members, while fulfilling such obligations made them vulnerable to loss of
work if they could not also adhere to what was depicted as increasingly strict
work regimes on farms. Burdened with unpaid care work, including
accommodating children and self-care, the women became positioned as
non-desired workers and eventually as non-workers, whose attempts to make
claims on farmers for support for the social reproduction of their families
were rejected, while state grants were inadequate to meet their needs.62

As noted elsewhere, paternalism has historically enabled farm workers
across Southern Africa to make claims for such contributions from farmers,
as well as to critique their conduct (Du Toit, 1993; Sylvain, 2001).
Researching farm labourers in Zimbabwe, anthropologist Blair Rutherford
(2008:79) uses the term ‘mode of belonging’ in referring to “the routinized
discourses, social practices and institutional arrangements through which
people make claims for resources and rights, the ways through which they

62 As Du Toit (1995:298) has pointed out, the impersonal relations and discourses on
efficiency with which corporate managerialism was imbued, rendered seasonally or casually
employed farm dwellers more vulnerable than before due to their status as expendable labour.
This presumably also included others constructed as less productive; for example, female
workers whose unpaid care work infringed on their availability for paid work.
become ‘incorporated’ in particular places.” The degree to which farm labourers could purport to belong and make claims depended on their position within a system of power on white commercial farms that Rutherford calls domestic government – where the colonial state deferred the power to govern farm workers’ lives to commercial farmers: a system largely retained after liberation (Rutherford, 2001, 2008). Then, and up until the radical changes brought about by the Fast Track Land Reform Programme in that country,63 the degree of belonging was linked to gender, nationality, age, seniority, and whether one was a casual, seasonal or permanent worker (Rutherford, 2008).

In a Western Cape context, such modes of belonging may perhaps be understood to have become less attainable for most workers, or attuned to new subjects of power on farms, through the partial re-articulation of traditional farm paternalism and its particular formulations of a moral community, to more rational and impersonal management models. The benefits in kind that were characteristic of paternalist work regimes, unevenly available and generally conceived of as gifts (Du Toit, 1993), such as the provision of food rations and access to free housing or support for children’s education, are nowadays mainly available to a small core of on-farm labourers (Ewert and Du Toit, 1995; Swanepoel, 2017). Ethical auditor and scholar Janie Swanepoel (2017:311) observed, further, that some farmers constructed these ‘additional benefits’ as incompatible with a legal/ethical audit framework. She suggested that if the farmers were confronted with claims of non-compliance with codes of conduct, for failing to offer permanent jobs to seasonally hired wives of male permanent workers, some would rather respond by withdrawing all such benefits for their families.

Managing the partial and incomplete transition from more traditional paternalist frameworks was, as the narratives above suggest, very difficult for some female farm workers, who still asked the same farmer who had mercilessly evicted them for advice and included them in their prayers. Thinking with anthropologist James Ferguson (2013a), vulnerably positioned farm workers’ declaring their dependence on an employer – and making claims based on this presumably shared understanding of mutual obligation – while easily perceived as backward-looking nostalgia, should perhaps rather be understood as a rational survival strategy in an increasingly unstable and

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63 A Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) was implemented in Zimbabwe from the year 2000, with the aim of radically shifting land ownership patterns in the country, given that, since independence in 1980, commercial farmland had largely remained in the hands of white farmers. The FTLRP was heavily criticised by human-rights groups and European governments who condemned the violence against farm workers and white farmers, as well as the political opportunism associated with the land invasions. More recently, several researchers in Zimbabwe have instead pointed to the successes of the programme, in relation both to redistribution and food sovereignty. For an overview of these debates and research on the FTLRP’s impact on farm labourers’ livelihoods and identities, see e.g. Hartnack, 2016.
precarious world. Such expressions of a desire to depend, on employers, the state or other poor people, Ferguson (2013a:231) argues, speak to socio-economic and political shifts in the late- and post-apartheid era, which has seen the phenomenon of jobless growth and a rapid devaluing of people and labour power, which in a pre- and early-capitalist era were regarded as a scarce and valuable resource. Today, he suggests, to the most disadvantaged people, “subjection can only appear as a step up”, when the alternative is abjection – not being worth subjecting (Ferguson, 2013a:231). Ferguson’s ideas may help us to understand how detrimental a notice of retrenchment and eviction may be to female farm labourers, as it signals a disruption of familiar “modes of belonging”, and an inability to make claims or receive recognition of one’s humanity within such frameworks, while lacking alternative forms of support.

As I have sought to demonstrate in this section, processes of ‘un-becoming’ farm workers appears to have a strong gender dimension in terms of who is considered a ‘real’ and essential worker, and also because support for the reproduction of the labour force – and of life – seemed to be one of the principal casualties of the incomplete shift towards more impersonal labour regimes. Histories of residing in and belonging to the area, to farms, of being entangled in local networks of people and pertaining to a certain ethnic group still meant, however, that many of the women whose histories this section has provided a mere glimpse of continued to identify at least partly as farm workers. This is a topic I discuss further in the next section.

Narratives on the contested identity of farm worker

Being pushed out of farm work, and at times off farms altogether, did not mean that the female (former) farm labourers neither wanted nor could distance themselves from the social identity of farm worker. As elsewhere in the region, the stigmatised category of farm worker is filled with meanings beyond that of the work itself, having taken shape against broader historical, social and political processes (Hartnack, 2017). In the post-strike Western Cape, the people I interacted with related in uneven and partly contradictory ways to the category of farm worker, depending on their histories of (un)belonging. While the narratives of evicted and laid off female on-farm labourers in the previous section reveal a strong emotional attachment to farms and the identity of farm worker, others had more mixed views. This is perhaps not surprising given the diversity within the category, which I have sought to provide some glimpses of through the ethnography presented so far in this chapter. This had a bearing on the labour unrest of 2012–2013 where, as I discuss further in Chapter Six, speaking as farm workers made it possible to make demands on employers and the state. Hence, during this period, the identity of farm worker was claimed, contested and rejected in
intricate ways, linked to power hierarchies and histories of (un)belonging (Bolt, 2017). Below, I present two short vignettes that represent divergent ways of understanding and relating to the category of farm worker.

Aunty Lavona is a coloured woman in her fifties living in De Doorns, where she is active in several organisations, including a farm worker organisation. Having grown up on farms, and for most of her life earned her living as a farm worker, she had recently stopped working when we first met in 2013, due to health problems. Furthermore, she was deeply involved during the 2012–2013 protests and was one of several activists in the area who received a house in a township near central De Doorns during this period. Reflecting on what the social identity of farm worker meant to her currently, she expressed some ambivalence. Being a farm worker was for her closely connected to living on and being part of a farm, she suggested (cf. Du Toit, 1993). When she moved into the township, she therefore experienced that her everyday life, and social identity, changed radically, although she still referred to herself as a farm worker and was part of farm worker organising.

I still feel like a farmworker, but in ways I have changed. Because I don’t think farm any more. I think more like town now. You see a different kind of structure you’re living in. Everything’s changed around you … The other day a lady from the farm where I used to work came up to me and wanted to hug … The feeling I got – it was different. I was so glad to see her and give her a hug. Because we don’t see each other anymore. That life… I say it like that – that struggling life! My stress was very high when I used to live there. I was very, very sick. Now I am not as sick any more, I don’t have that stress … today the farmer says this, tomorrow he says that, the day after tomorrow he says this. You really don’t know who you are. If you live on a farm, you’re in a cage … you have to ask permission to go somewhere. Even when I was at home, when I was living on a farm, if they close the gates you have to go all the way around, if you don’t have a key. And that is not there anymore… The identity had changed… and it changed a lot.

What Aunty Lavona’s reflection seems to suggest is that there are several possible and somewhat conflicting ways of understanding what being a farm worker entails today. While she equates the social identity of farm worker with living on the farm, in some ways she still thinks of herself as a farm worker. At the same time, residing in a township and having reoriented her life and livelihood strategies towards town, she feels different from those who remain on-farm. This is symbolised, in her reflection, by the strange feeling she got when hugging a former colleague who still lives within the universe of the farm. She further contrasts the sense of freedom she has now with the stressful sensation of “living in a cage”, at the mercy of a farmer who might change the rules of engagement from one day to the next – an
observation which brings to mind Linda Waldman’s (1993) ethnographic descriptions of farm workers feeling ‘stuck’, unable to find a way out of farms.

Migrant labourers with a shorter history of working on farms whom I spoke to tended to have a more straightforward understanding of what a farm worker currently is in the Western Cape. Clara, the Zimbabwean woman who worked for six years on farms around De Doorns until her recent relocation, did not equate being a farm worker with living on – or being part of – farms, nor with any specific characteristics, but placed the emphasis solely on the work itself. During the time when she still worked on farms for most of the year, she would speak of herself as a farm worker, she claims. Farm worker was to her a transient identity, however, something of there and then, linked to the temporary livelihood strategy she relied on when lacking other options, in no way of deep importance to her own self-understanding.

When asked to reflect on who a farm worker is today, she drew attention to the variety of trajectories that pull people into working on farms, including a mix of class and educational backgrounds, something she summarises concisely: “Maybe way back they [farm workers] were labourers, but now they’re everybody.” As an outsider, she thus conceived of people labouring on farms as a diverse group – perhaps referring primarily to the mixed class backgrounds of Zimbabwean migrant farm workers (Bolt, 2010). In her reading, they would automatically become ‘farm workers’ in the process, as she saw farm worker solely as an occupational category – and furthermore as a temporary one, that one would detach from when taking up other work. As I shall discuss in Chapter Four, however, Clara would also at times draw on paternalist discourse in making sense of her experiences on farms.

Conclusion: implications for representations of farm workers

During the post-strike moment, the meaning of the category of farm worker was contested in at least two interrelated ways: regarding what/who a farm worker is (do seasonal and casual off-farm labourers, and migrants count as ‘real’ farm workers?) and who may represent farm workers’ struggles, and in what ways. Such contestations tell of on-going processes of social change, prompted by a restructuring of commercial agriculture and subsequent shifts in ‘modes of belonging’ on commercial farms (Rutherford, 2008). While the social identity of farm worker has never been stable or homogeneous, it has become increasingly fragmented over the past few decades, researchers have suggested, including through a growth in precarious labour arrangements and a diversification of livelihood strategies (Greenberg, 2010) coupled with partial and incomplete shifts in paternalist labour regimes on Western Cape farms (Du Toit, 1993, 2004). Adding to this, I proposed that a greater
diversity in the histories of (un)belonging in commercial farmlands and farm workers’ visible identities (gender, race/ethnicity and nationality) contributed to such processes.

Using the contestations of farm workers in the post-strike moment as a point of departure, and further drawing inspiration from critical feminist interrogation of the (masculinised) category of ‘worker’, and from intersectional deconstruction of the category ‘women’, I discussed the challenges this posed to dominant representations of Western Cape farm workers, which had up until fairly recently tended to overtly reflect the experiences of more established (often coloured, on-farm) categories of workers. Through presenting ethnography on differently positioned workers, I sought to illustrate how diverse categories such as ‘farmwomen’ are, drawing attention to how histories of (un)belonging, work trajectories and hiring arrangements interrelate with hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality/migration status. The ethnographic vignettes depicted how some female labourers had advanced to better-paid positions and accessed on-farm housing in their own names while others were hired under extremely precarious terms and resided in crowded on-farm workers’ compounds. Foreign migrants were simultaneously positioned as preferred labourers and pathologised by South African co-workers. The ethnography sought to highlight some of the varied and complex vulnerabilities these differently positioned farm workers grappled with.

I also explored narratives of women who had resided and worked for many years on commercial farms, but were recently laid off and/or evicted. In their understandings, such decisions were sparked by illness and responsibility for unpaid care work, including accommodating children – the reproduction of the work force and of life – which contributed to positioning them as non-essential farm workers and eventually as non-workers. This was further linked to their position as ‘working female spouses’ rather than female workers in their own right, who became vulnerable to eviction when their male partner, the ‘real’ worker as it were, lost his permanent job and the right to occupancy of an on-farm house that came with it (Mies, 2014; Simonton, 2006). The construction of the heterosexual family as an economic unit, and women’s position as secondary workers within it, primarily associated with the role of care giver, thus contributed to the vulnerability of these on-farm female labourers (cf. Acker, 2004; Bair, 2010; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996; Peterson and Runyan, 2010). This role, however, appeared to clash with what was described as increased demands on worker productivity on some farms, coupled with employer attempts to evade responsibility for the reproduction of the workforce, save for smaller groups of core labourers. An expression of the awkward rearticulation of paternalism with depersonalised (neoliberal) management styles (Addison, 2014b; Bolt, 2016a), such evasions, and withdrawal of what under paternalism was referred to as ‘additional benefits’ such as food rations, free
transport and accommodation, thus appeared to be the first sacrifice of such shifts (Swanepoel, 2017; White, 2010). This, I carefully suggested, made some on-farm women particularly vulnerable to ceasing to be farm workers.

In the final section, I discussed how farm labourers’ highly variegated histories of belonging in the commercial farmlands, and experiences at work and in communities, meant that they related in very different ways to the category of farm worker.

To conclude, I suggest that, by deconstructing the category of farm worker and using intersectionality as an analytic sensibility, we may illuminate contestations around who is seen as a real and important farm labourer and whose experiences are taken as representative of farm workers. From here, I will move on to describe the becoming of ‘farm workers’ through the work process, and how this is shaped in decisive ways by the categorisation of workers according to gender, race/ethnicity and nationality.
Protesters displaying their demand for 150 rand per day during the Western Cape ‘farm worker strike’. (The women on the picture are not part of the research). Photographer: Agnes Nygren

Farm workers alighting from a truck on their way back from work.
Township in the Cape Winelands, home to many off-farm workers. Photographer: Agnes Nygren

Protest march in Cape Town, 2013. Photographer: Agnes Nygren
Chapter 4 | Docile feminised labourers, dangerous masculinities and robots

“They [female migrant workers] are more suited for the pack shed, where they arrange flowers and put them in a nice bouquet.”

[human resources manager on a farm, white male]

“I would never let a woman work with a spade”

[farm owner, white male]

”…if they see you as a black person standing still, they are gonna bite your head off. Because you have to work like a slave if you are black. But then if you are coloured you can act like you are white, nobody cares.”

[migrant worker, black African woman]

Labour regimes on farms are an important arena within which farm worker identities take shape, and where profitable gendered and racialised labourers are invoked through the work process (Weeks, 2011). In the narratives of the farm workers and employer representatives I interacted with during the post-strike moment, ideologies of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality emerged as closely entangled with how work was organised and given meaning on Western Cape farms. Notions such as women’s and men’s work were commonly used and some also crudely accounted for differences in hiring arrangements, working conditions and forms of residence as being linked to whether workers were positioned as ‘black’, ‘coloured’ or ‘white’, and sometimes ‘foreigners’. Such generalisations conceal differences within the categories, however, since ‘farmwomen’, to take one example, are an increasingly diverse group, as discussed in Chapter Three.

While the division and classification of workers and (to some extent) tasks based on categories seemed to be broadly accepted, the local articulations of such constructs took different, and at times even opposing, forms. Workplace hierarchies and divisions, further, had several overlapping dimensions; between permanent and temporary employees, between migrants and local residents, between workers residing on- or off farms, and between those employed directly or through labour brokers, to mention just a few (Visser and Ferrer, 2015).

In this chapter, I will explore how the organisation of work contributes to shaping, and is shaped by, ideologies linked to intersecting power relations
of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality, drawing on worker and employer narratives and observations from a few localities. Acknowledging the great differences between farms depending on crop, size, location, form of ownership, leadership styles and personalities, I will primarily analyse recurring discourses – and counter-discourses – from interviews and observations which speak to the persistence of stereotypical ideas associated with these categories. This includes the tropes of ‘productive and docile femininities’ and ‘violent black masculinities’. I will discuss examples of how such tropes appear to inform hiring strategies aimed at creating and maintaining a cheap, flexible and skilled workforce in a context of neoliberal globalisation – which in turn contributes to shaping what kind of positions at work, and room for manoeuvring, are available to differently positioned workers. In doing so, I draw attention to how workers and employer representatives draw upon, co-construct or challenge such stereotypes. The latter part of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of how these constructions of gendered and racialised worker categories appear to be coupled with a dehumanisation of (some) workers and of differentiated exposure to various forms of violence (Butler, 2004, 2009).

Importantly, while the narratives I analyse in this chapter provide many examples of problematic labour practices, large-scale studies indicate that compliance with labour laws and health and safety regulations has improved over recent years at an overall level, and perhaps particularly so in the Western Cape, where export-oriented farms are regularly subjected to ethical audits (Visser and Ferrer, 2015).

A background to female and migrant labour on farms

As noted in Chapter One, the need for labour during peak seasons on Western Cape commercial farms was historically met through the recruitment of black African seasonal migrant workers, primarily men who were housed in on-farm workers’ compounds, and through the construction of ‘family employment’. The latter arrangement implied that contracts with permanently employed male (mostly coloured) workers residing on farms ensured access to the cheap and readily available labour of his dependants when the need arose – something which contributed to positioning women and children as secondary workers (Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996; Orton, Barrientos and McClenaghan, 2001).

Independent recruiting of female labourers has a long history in some areas, however, for instance, women and girls were hired to the Rhodes fruit factory in Groot Drakenstein during the 1900s, initially for the peak season and later on all year round (Randle, 2014). Before the Second World War, pack-house workers were according to Levy (1976) mainly white women. When this group started accessing better-paid jobs in the urban service
sector, and new technology simplifying the work process became available, employers started recruiting coloured female labourers, whose wages could be kept lower (Levy, 1976; Visser, 2016). Black African male migrants from other provinces have also formed part of farm labour in the province since at least the 1880s. In Drakenstein Valley, the substantial influx of labourers from the Eastern Cape during the 1940s prompted the construction of single-sex dormitories on farms (Randle, 2014). The system of employing on-farm migrant labour continues to be in operation on many farms, with both women and men being recruited for such arrangements during peak seasons.

When apartheid laws introduced in the 1950s sought to delimit the possibilities for all but a small number of Africans to work and reside on a permanent basis in the province, the farming industry also intensified its use of prison labour, a practice that had been in place from as early as 1888 (Williams, 2010). Convicts were usually hired from nearby regular prisons, although a number of farms also housed farm prisons (Williams, 2010). According to the 1975 Theron Commission report (cited in Williams, 2010:186), convicts made up as much as 19 percent of the labour on wine farms in key wine-producing areas at the time, contributing to substantially suppress farm worker wages. In response to international pressure, prison labour was banned in 1986 (Williams, 2010).

From the mid-1980s onwards, laws which restricted the movement of black people were gradually being abolished, and more and more residents from the impoverished former African homelands came to look for work in the province, including on farms. At the same time, the restructuring of work on commercial farms discussed in Chapter Three saw a voluntary or coerced movement of (predominately coloured) labourers from farms to cities or to burgeoning nearby rural settlements, where cheap labour became available in abundance. Female labourers residing off-farm were recruited in their own names, independent of a male partner, and formed the majority of seasonal labourers on many deciduous fruit farms (Orton, Barrientos and McClenaghan, 2001). While the women gained increased access to independent work, they were for the most part hired in precarious positions, as seasonal, casual and at times externalised labour, with fewer opportunities than before to access non-wage benefits such as food provision or access to loans (Du Toit and Ewert, 2002; Orton, Barrientos and McClenaghan, 2001; van der Waal, 2014). Restructuring on farms may thus be understood as having created independent job opportunities for women, without reforming the gendered power structures that kept most women in subordinate positions.

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64 The Coloured labour preference act, giving coloured people preference for work over Africans in the Western Cape was repealed in 1984, while laws compelling African’s to carry passes as an influx-control measure were abolished in 1986. Throughout the apartheid period, many African’s who lacked the required permissions defied these laws and found ways of residing with their families in the province, including on commercial farms.
The increased presence of female farm workers prompted some researchers to speak of a feminisation of certain commercial agricultural sectors, notably the deciduous fruit and wine industries (e.g. Devereux and Solomon 2011; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1998). As noted in Chapter One, the feminisation of labour signals both that women form a growing share of the workforce, and that hiring arrangements, status and conditions have become more insecure, in general deteriorating to a standard previously only acceptable to women. If one was to use this term in relation to commercial farm work in the Western Cape, one would need to keep in mind that jobs which migrant workers – both men and women – have historically been referred to, have always been feminised and precarious: low-paid, only available for parts of the year and without access to non-wage benefits. Currently, however, the proportion of workers hired under these insecure terms has increased and, in this worker category, women are often in the majority. It is moreover important to be cognisant of the fact that commercial farming in itself will always depend on a vulnerable, low-paid group of workers hired seasonally – migrant workers and/or (other) feminised workers – if a cost structure which depends on a cheapened and fairly large manual labour force is to remain intact.

Having to accept working conditions and forms of employment that could be described as feminised does not mean however that female, male and trans-identified labourers who take up such jobs perform the same tasks in the workplace. In line with earlier research findings (Ewert and Hamman, 1996; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996; Orton, Barrientos and McClenaghan, 2001), the farm workers I interacted with described how divisions of tasks and routines at work were still often based on gender. On some farms, the work-day would be differently structured according to gendered expectations. For instance, women would start later, based on the assumption that they are the ones who should prepare children for school, and they would instead be given a shorter mid-morning break – or work shorter hours than men and accordingly be paid less. On other farms, nearly all the employees were women, who said they were doing both ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s’ work. Thus, as I shall discuss throughout the chapter, while gender appeared to be a meaningful category in the organisation of labour on farms, the local enactment of gendered work regimes varied (Salzinger, 2003).

The danger of mixing farm labourers

It was one of the (few) employer representatives I interviewed who articulated it most clearly. One must be careful, he asserts, not to mix seasonal migrant workers from different ethnic groups. On second thoughts, he strengthened the statement by saying one must be very careful not to mix
– as ‘they’ have different cultures and ways of doing things. Therefore, migrant workers living in the hostel on the large mixed-crop farm where he works as a manager are all from the same remote rural area and ethnic group. Mixing genders among black African seasonal workers is also something he associates with danger. Hence, it is avoided by only housing male migrants in the on-farm hostel, while female migrants reside in nearby informal settlements and commute to work.

Ja, we can’t mix the gender there at the hostel ... it would create ... a lot of ... problems for us unfortunately. We do have a small hostel at the back here ... where they do stay female workers ... One per room. There, there is a mix, there are young coloured guys staying with them ... in other rooms. But ja, down there, no!

Discourses alluding to the importance of maintaining and policing binary or multiple divisions of workers, or the dangers of mixing frequently recurred as I moved between different localities in the (south-western parts of) the Western Cape Province during the post-strike moment. Such statements were reiterated in different ways by workers as well as employer representatives. ‘Women’s work’ should not be conflated with ‘men’s work’. Racial and ethnic groups were at times differentiated spatially, as in the example above, being housed in a separate part of the farm, and movement around the farm would be more restricted for some than for others. 65

Working conditions and opportunities to advance on the job may also be similarly dependent on what a union leader I spoke to ironically referred to as the farmer’s “colourful treatment”. Based on their experiences of the farms on which they had worked, some workers understood top management positions as exclusively white, and opportunities to take up work in administration as more available for certain segments of workers positioned as white or coloured, whereas general workers were coloured or black African. Workers who had climbed the racialised hierarchies on farms against all the odds spoke of experiencing insecurity in their new positions. This was the case for Aviwe, a middle-aged, black African union representative who is permanently employed and works for a mixed-crop farming company but resides in a township with her two daughters. Some years back, Aviwe was offered a position in the farm office, after acquiring the necessary skills at evening classes. Having worked for a couple of years in this new job, she relates being instructed to train a coloured female co-worker on how to use a computer and perform the other tasks at work, under the presumption that she could use an assistant. Upon completing this task, however, Aviwe was assigned to work in the fields again, while the coloured woman remained in the office. Aviwe ascribes this entirely to hierarchies of

65 See also Johnston, 2007, on how work teams and dormitories are organised around ethnicity on Free state farms.
race: “... it's the way life is here in the Cape. The colour of your skin lets you down.”

Refilwe, who works on a large table-grape farm, similarly assures me that a black African person working in the office would be unheard of. Verbally walking me through the on-farm migrant workers compound where she has been based for five or six months annually for the past couple of years, she explains how foremen and team leaders from different ethnic groups, such as Xhosa or Tswana, would primarily manage and reside adjacent to seasonal workers from the same background. Forming ethnically uniform work teams may facilitate communication within the teams when there are language barriers, which indeed is a challenge on farms using migrant labour. But, in her experience, the ethnic division of work teams appeared to also be used to instil a spirit of competition by pitching differently racialised groups of workers against each other, in similar ways as Tafadzwa described on the citrus farm where he worked (see Chapter Three). A foreman could, for example, scold workers from one group and argue that “the Xhosa do the job better”, linked to the payment of bonuses, Refilwe claimed. On the farm, permanent coloured workers were allowed to enter the (primarily) black African migrant workers’ compounds, but not vice versa – and sometimes guards would be deployed at the entrance to the residential area for permanent workers, she claimed.

In other areas, workers suggested that farmers or managers drew on ethnic divides to curb worker action, including through the arrangements for on-farm housing (see Johnston, 2007 and Levine, 2013, for similar observations), or in more explicit ways. During a strike in the Langeberg area in 2016, for instance, a union member claimed that her employer phoned up coloured labourers to persuade them to come back to work, and thus undermine the strike, while no similar calls were made to black African labourers. Interactions at work between differently racialised workers were also actively broken up by middle managers, she told me.

But what is this fear of ‘mixing’ all about? To the employer representative quoted above, it appeared to be linked to an imagined threat of violent black masculinities. “Young coloured guys”, for example, could share a hostel with women of the same ethnicity, while mixed gender (or ethnic) accommodation was unthinkable for black African migrants. What he did not mention is that it is primarily women with children and unmarried couples who live in the tiny, approximately eight square metre, single rooms in the hostel he is referring to. Here, there appeared to be a further link between respectability, related to age, marital status and position, and access to a stand-alone house on the farm. Black African masculinities on the other hand seemed to be constructed as loaded with sticky notions of danger – of fighting, violence and possibly sexualities out of control. Most importantly however, it was the employer for whom any ‘trouble’ must be avoided.
Dangerous black masculinities and good female migrants

On a table grape farm where I stayed for a few days in the stand-alone house of an older, permanently employed coloured forewoman, Aunty Martina, and participated in work (see Chapter Three), I was offered a crude explanation as to why the farmer only hired female on-farm seasonal migrants. One morning as I was leaving for the vineyards together with Aunty Martina and her colleagues, I suddenly had an opening to interview the farm owner. As I sat down beside the shiny wooden desk in his executive office, trying to avoid leaving lumps of earth or stains from my work pants and hiking boots, I started asking some general questions about the farm, and the gender composition of the workforce.

Mr Adriaanse. I would have hired men but normally there is a bit of a problem. Åsa: What kind of problem?
Mr Adriaanse: They are quite aggressive. It is sometimes difficult to keep order if you have ten men together from the Eastern Cape. It can get difficult if they stay on the farm for such a long period. Åsa: In what way...?
Mr Adriaanse: It is dangerous for my family to begin with, with a lot of murders and stuff. I am a bit scared that something can happen. I am scared about fighting and aggressive behaviour ... I get [hire] a few men from [nearby town]. Coloured people are humorous and easy going so that is fine ... But it is not easy with the Xhosa men, they are dangerous and aggressive. And I don’t want to take chances. But the women are good, who come to our farm. They come every year.

Having spent the previous day in the lush vineyards of his medium-sized table grape farm, head stuck in the vines while cutting out spoilt or too small grapes from the bunches, I could not have failed to notice the strong dominance of female workers. In and around the small team which I was told to join, there were only women, apart from the farm manager, who kept coming and going, demonstrating the work and inspecting how we were faring while shouting odd words of instruction he had picked up in isi-Xhosa classes: Sebenza nzima! Jonga phakathi! (Work hard! Look inside [the vines]!). This was something of a model farm, a successful and expanding business with award-winning grapes, where the work pace and expectations of performance was high, but where everyone I spoke to stressed that

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66 While it may appear disturbing that I use the title Mr in naming white farm owners and (white or coloured) managers, and use the first names of farm workers (at times with the addition of the respectful term Auntie), I have opted to do so simply based on the fact that I only engaged with farmers and managers during formal interviews, and never got to know them by their first names, while I was much closer to many of the farm workers in the study. This further reflects on hierarchies in the farmlands (cf. Waldman, 1996:64).
minimum wages were paid out without deductions, and permanent workers received a comparatively generous bonus at the end of the season (although, I would add, seasonal workers kept asking if I knew of any job openings elsewhere, anything but farm work).

In three dormitories on the farm, just over 40 women were housed, primarily from the Eastern Cape, sleeping in narrow bunk beds packed close together to make some room for cooking and for a few worn-out chairs and plastic buckets turned upside-down by the entrance. As a couple of the workers explained, young single mothers were in the majority, with their children being looked after by grandmothers and other relatives in their home areas during their four to six-month contracts. The lorry and bakkie ferrying an equivalent number of seasonal workers from nearby townships, which drove into the courtyard early each morning and parked in front of the farm workshop in good time before the siren called us to work by six-fifteen, were also mainly filled with women, joined by a handful of men, all coloured.

Language barriers and practical arrangements resulted in there being limited interaction between the different groups of female workers, even though some work teams were mixed. At lunch time, most of the on-farm migrants would be transported back to their shared accommodation seated on tractor trailers, on the burning hot iron, while permanent workers generally travelled in the back of a bakkie, together with a few of the seasonal coloured workers – while others stayed on in the vineyards, having their breakfast and lunch seated among the vines or working throughout the break.

The very first time I visited Aunty Martina, in the company of a relative of hers, I had been told in passing that black men were not allowed on the farm – a comment I had disregarded then. While it became clear in the interview with Mr Adriaanse that ‘Xhosa men’ would not be employed here, I never figured out what the boundaries were for visitors – except that overnight stays by male partners, boyfriends or spouses were clearly off limits. Mr Adriaanse further stated that women were “obviously better at” the smaller, finer work of cutting, sorting and packing, while he asserted that on his farm, women would never be allowed to work with a spade. In order to provide year-round employment to the (coloured) women workers living on the farm, he had planted citrus, which they worked with in the off-season, when he describes work in the vineyard as “more physical”, and thus taken up by men.

Such arguments being used to motivate the workforce composition and division of tasks echoes findings from earlier research on farm work in the Western Cape (Ewert and Hamman, 1996; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996), as well as research on gender, globalisation and global work elsewhere, where, as discussed in the introductory chapter, persistent discourses circulating in transnational corporations, associates (‘third world’) women workers with dexterity, nimble fingers, docility and disposability (Mohanty, 2003;
Salzinger, 2003; Wright, 2006; Bair, 2010). But, while I had been prepared to hear arguments on the desirable qualities of women informing the hiring strategies for seasonal workers, I had not expected that employers would speak to me so openly about making decisions on recruitment based on the fear of violent masculinities.

That black masculinities are represented as exceptionally violent is unsurprising, however, given how central such constructs were in colonial and apartheid discourses – particularly during periods of heightened popular resistance (see below). The apartheid government used the racist notion of die swart gevaar (the black menace) to instil fear among white South Africans of the chaos and violence that would presumably be unleashed if apartheid laws would be repealed and leaders of the black resistance movements, many of whom were Xhosa-speaking men from the Eastern Cape, would be brought to power (an historical irony given how central violence was to white minority rule). As noted in Chapter One, violence is deeply embedded in the social fabric of South Africa, including in work regimes, and it has historically been central to constructions of dominant forms of both black and white masculinities (Breckenridge, 1998; Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger, 2012). Given this history and the extreme levels of social injustice, violent crime is a severe problem in rural areas, affecting both farm workers and farmers, as I will discuss in Chapter Five.

As I continued my field work, and went through my field notes in more detail, it became apparent that discourses attaching danger and threat to a specific construction of black masculinities were drawn upon in many different situations. This construction was not only used as a way of justifying the hiring of men from the same rural area, or the same ethnicity, or hiring exclusively women as on-farm seasonal labour, but was also evoked by workers themselves.

A couple of weeks after I was able to briefly experience work on Mr Adriaanse’s farm, I was seated on a dusty slope leading down towards the bank of a river that marked the boundary of a large table grape farm in an adjacent district municipality, sipping lukewarm coke from Styrofoam cups in the afternoon heat and chatting to a couple of migrant farm workers and a union official. Stephen, a middle-aged migrant labourer active in the union, was giving us an update on the recent developments on the farm. While he mostly spoke of the fate of workers losing their jobs after a strike on the farm, like himself, he suddenly shifted topics and narrated a story of violence being used as a form of counter-power by subordinated workers. Two male migrant workers had recently been dismissed from the farm, he said, after beating up a foreman who was supposed to bring money to their families, but had failed to do so. The foreman was now supposedly in hospital and the workers had had to leave the farm. While I made no attempt to find out whether this was a rumour or an accurate account of events, it nevertheless reinforced ideas of black masculinities as violent, albeit, in this discourse,
violence was seen as a tool that could potentially undermine the power of male supervisors.

Some days later, when I returned to pick up three migrant workers on the farm, Refilwe, Mpho and Tshepo, for an outing on their day off, we started talking about the differential treatment of women and men in the workplace, and all three agreed that women were being pushed much harder than men. Refilwe connected this to the trope of violent black masculinities, arguing that fear of violence may influence team leaders and foremen to treat male (migrant) workers less harshly than they do women.

Refilwe: That is what I think. Because they know that if they do that to men… men are like... men are violent. They are in a ... space where they can fight for themselves but we can’t. We can shout at them but we can’t fight with them. Because we don’t have as much power as men.

Âsa: So, it is like the threat of someone being physically...?

Refilwe: Exactly.

Discourses constructing black masculinities as violent, and a counter-force to violence from farm owners and managers, also came through startlingly in conversations with workers in other parts of the province. Nyarai, who is in her late 30s, migrated from Zimbabwe to South Africa in 2008 to look for work when she could no longer support herself and her parents and siblings on the meagre salary she earned as a factory worker in her home country. Having travelled on her own on via irregular and dangerous routes into South Africa, crossing the Limpopo river which separates the two countries, she first worked for a short while on a farm in Limpopo Province, and after that in Pretoria, before she joined some of her family members already living in De Doorns, and started working on a table grape farm. She repeats a discourse which constructs black masculinities as something that may keep farmers on their toes. Reflecting generally on employers’ fear of being challenged by male workers, she says:

Nyarai: Yeah, they know that if ... he didn’t pay the overtime or whatever... he gonna beat her [him] ...

Âsa: So that could also be a reason, you think, that they want to employ women, or?

Nyarai: Ja … They maybe ... some of the women, they don’t know how to fight, they just talk, but they don’t know how to fight. So a man can... fight any time.

Clara, who is also a Zimbabwean migrant working on farms in De Doorns (see Chapter Three), recalled an incident in the vineyards when the farmer, as she puts it, was abusing a male worker.

Clara: And he [the farmer] clapped [smacked] a man – in the field. And
the man took a knife and ... I don’t know, I think he cut him on the elbow there.
Ása: Ok?
Clara: Yeah, but then he is afraid of those men because he... he wants somebody like that, somebody who reacts also if he is ... angry. Then the man also got angry so he was afraid.
Á: So that person was allowed to stay on the farm?
Clara: Yes! He is working until now. He is working there.

As noted earlier, feminist and post-colonial researchers have shown how stereotypical constructions of black masculinities as violent and dangerous were key features in colonial discourse, and even earlier, as such ideas were evoked to make sense of pre-colonial encounters (see e.g. Loomba, 2005). In the Cape Colony, representations of male slaves as violent, promiscuous and powerful prevailed during the post-emancipation period, and tended to be heightened during times of work-related conflict (Scully, 1997:36). Such constructions were drawn upon to motivate brutal treatment of formerly enslaved men. Discourses surrounding female farm workers at the time were more ambiguous. Women were at once constructed as the beacon of morality in the black farmworker community, and as immoral, masculine and perhaps not women at all, and thus in need of discipline, control – and reform (Scully, 1997:45–46).

There are many possible parallels that one might (carefully) draw with discourses circulating in the post-colonial, post-apartheid and neoliberal ‘contact zone’ which the Western Cape farmlands make up today. That some employers speak of black masculinities as violent or dangerous, and allow this to influence their hiring practices, is something which also emerges in other research on farm work in the Western Cape. Sociologists Joachim Ewert and Johann Hamman note that some farmers they interviewed considered that hiring a substantial number of African men as permanent, on-farm workers would be “inviting trouble” to the farm, presumably fearing ethnic friction and/or union vanguardism (Ewert and Hamman, 1996:159).

Anthropologist Susan Levine (2013:44) quotes a farmer who associates danger, high expectations of salary and food and readiness to fight with or even kill coloured co-workers with what he refers to as “local blacks”, presumably men. Reflecting generally on farmers’ attitudes to black people living in the area where she has been doing research, Levine writes that “In their opinion, distant labour was more reliable, more easily disposable and less expensive, with individual workers more vulnerable and therefore less likely to cause conflict” (2013:44). While she does not make a specific point about the link between a construction of (local) black masculinities as violent and a preference for more ‘docile’ distant labour, I would suggest that such a reading might be pertinent.
Similarly, Deborah Johnston (2007:514) observes in her study on women from Lesotho working on commercial farms in the Free State that it is ideas of docility rather than the prospect of being able to pay female workers slightly less that influence employers to reject male job applicants, whom one recruiter she spoke to described as ‘less industrious’ and ‘more troublesome’ than women.67 Such stereotypes are, however, contravened by her female interviewees, who do challenge their working conditions and payment, albeit rarely with favourable outcomes (Johnston, 2007). Conducting a study in the same province, Ulicki and Crush (2000) also identify a preference for female migrants from Lesotho, noting that farmers associated ideas such as ‘laziness’ and ‘cheek’ with both South African workers and male migrants from Lesotho. They also report instances of conflict and even physical fights in labour offices in Lesotho, where men looking for farm work sometimes try to keep female applicants out (Ulicki and Crush, 2000:71). None of these authors delve further into analysing the meaning imbued in, or consequences of, perceptions of violent, troublesome or cheeky black masculinities.

As I will discuss further in Chapter Six, the discourses associating black masculinities with power, danger and violence that appeared to be prevalent, drawing on colonial and apartheid tropes, are likely to also be informed by the association between present-day popular protest, including strikes, and violent tactics, and attention to the role played by men in such actions (Langa and Kiguwa, 2013; von Holdt, 2012). I would carefully suggest that stereotypical representations of violent black masculinities which ignore the context of structural violence may successfully undermine support for collectives of (masculinised) workers challenging working conditions, through fuelling a reading of such groups as irrationally violent and dangerous, and thus ‘deserving’ of harsh retaliatory measures by police, security companies and employers. This may in turn, as in the examples above, inform decisions to give sole preference to women workers on some farms, or to recruit migrant workers from remote places and housed in separate compounds on other farms, often under the ‘control’ of a foreman or contractor from the same area. Such discourses may further influence decisions to mechanise or change production routines. One farmer I interviewed, for instance, spoke of how the introduction of new varieties of table grapes had reduced the number of male contract workers needed in the vineyard during peak season, when worker action is most likely to take place (see also Bernstein, 2013; Wilderman, 2015).

Parallel, and contrasting discourses associating female workers with endurance, docility and hard work were also strongly present in my material, as alluded to above. Such notions were at times coupled with ideas of work

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67 Analysing statistics from 2011 until 2013, Visser and Ferrer (2015) note that, all other things being equal, employers paid women between six and 11 percent less than men.
itself holding the potential to uplift, develop or ‘help’ women labouring on farms, which were reiterated by workers, employers and overseas retailers. In the section that follows, I will discuss some of these constructions of femininity relating to the organisation of work.

Gender division of labour and the feminisation of work

While gendered expectations on workers – whereby some are constructed as good and others as violent or dangerous – appeared to have prompted a feminisation of the workforce on some deciduous fruit and wine farms, such shifts were also made possible by the migration of new groups of female job-seekers into nearby rural centres. In an area where a previous study had noted a very low proportion of particularly black African female workers on farms (Du Toit and Ally, 2003), a white human resources manager of a large mixed-crop farm told me that black African women had begun to be hired as seasonal workers on his farm some ten years back when they, as he puts it, became available “to use”. This was due to migration patterns bringing more and more workers mainly from the Eastern Cape into (primarily) informal settlements in the area, many of them women accompanying husbands or boyfriends already working on farms (for a similar point, see Visser and Ferrer, 2015). When we spoke, the manager suggested that there are now more black African female job-seekers residing in the area than can be employed on farms.

Mr Booysen: “Over the [last] 10 years, ja we have… seen that – the black women can be competitive in the workforce as a sorter … We can train them up to do certain elementary tasks. Because of, you know, where they come from. They never had any kind of formal training, and are not familiar with farm activities. They normally live… there in the Transkei… doing their own thing, planting mealies and … having a small … veggie garden and that kind of thing, but they were never exposed to these kinds of activities on a fruit farm in the Western Cape. That was done by … coloured women who grew up on the farm.”

As this quote suggests, recently arrived black African female job-seekers are incorporated into an existing gender order on the farm, taking up work that was previously ‘reserved’ for coloured women. The offensive remarks made by Mr Booysen about what constitutes skills, and who may be trained to take up what kind of positions indicate a situation that would strongly limit the options available to this category of workers. A construction of sorting as the principal task for black African women, for example, effectively means that there will only be three or four months per year during which they can access work.
Despite there being more female job-seekers in the area than can be employed during peak season, teams of male migrant workers are still brought in from the Eastern Cape and housed on the farm. Mr Booysen claims that this hiring strategy is informed by the kind of tasks carried out by migrant workers.68 Since more pickers than sorters are needed in the fruit section, he argues, and with picking being physically heavy work, it is only suited to masculinised bodies.

And you know the men are stronger in doing that ... carrying a ladder and it’s up and down all day you know, picking ... And your sorters are more standing around a bin and doing the… sorting work and the quality control there ... The women are traditionally you know, more unfit and are... with all respect to black ladies, a bit on the big side ... So they are better suited and built doing sorting work ... But the picking is our main function where we need the most people, that is why there are more men than women.

A construction of certain bodies, marked by gender, race/ethnicity and nationality, as possessing certain skills and physical qualities, and lacking others, thus appeared to influence who would be hired for what position on this particular farm. One may note the sharp contrast with Mr Adriansee’s table grape farm, where he claimed to have opted for only recruiting women as on-farm migrant labourers due to a fear of (Xhosa) men being violent. Such a gender division of labour would, however, also be influenced by the kind of farming being undertaken. Table grape farms often hired a large proportion of female workers, primarily during peak season, as the handling of the delicate grapes in the vineyard and pack houses requires patience and dexterity – qualities primarily associated with the category of women workers (Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996; Ewert and Hamman, 1996; Visser and Ferrer, 2015). Picking apples and citrus, on the other hand, was seen in some places as work primarily suited to men, while women were hired as sorters.

Hegemonic forms of dividing work by gender could be up for renegotiation, however. Among the transgender women I spoke to, some were able to refuse the farmers or managers attempts to position them as men, and could for instance join all-female work teams.69 On other farms, I was told of farmers brutally rejecting such requests, referring to sex and gender as God-given and assigning transwomen to ‘men’s work’. While some employers appeared to be deliberately moving away from notions of

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68 Elsewhere, it has been suggested that the continued use of on-farm migrant labour is primarily linked to the level off control this offers employers, as labourers residing on-farm are less likely to be absent from work (Visser and Ferrer, 2015).

69 One transgender union activist told me of how she at times succeeded in negotiating her ambiguous position on the farm to her advantage – being allowed a house in her own name (often only accessible to men) while still opting to start work later in the mornings, with the all-female work team.
men’s and women’s work carried out by bodies gendered ‘in the right way’, this did not mean that such categories stopped being meaningful to farm labourers, as I describe below.

Belonging to two preferred categories of workers on table grape farms in De Doorns, and furthermore having family members in the area, Zimbabwean female migrant Nyarai had no trouble finding work when she arrived in 2008. As discussed in Chapter Three, local discourse constructed Zimbabweans as the sweethearts of farmers, presumed to embody desired qualities such as being hard-working, skilled, well-versed in English and docile. In addition, female labourers formed a majority of seasonal workers on table grape farms, making up 65 percent of the 10,000 seasonal workers in 2013–2014 (Hex Valley Table Grape Association, no date, cited in Visser and Ferrer, 2015:154). On the farm where Nyarai worked, labourers were almost exclusively (black African) women, including migrants from other provinces or neighbouring countries. The employer apparently saw few limits to the kind of tasks female bodies could perform. Nyarai and her female co-workers were thus assigned to do what they perceived to be ‘men’s work’ like planting trees and carrying heavy crates of grapes for long distances, as the farmer allegedly did not allow tractors in the vineyard. According to Nyarai, the farmer spoke of women as being the only ones who were patient enough to work with his grapes.

Nyarai: ... the old white man doesn’t want to see a man holding a grape ...
They do some of the jobs, not grape.
Ása: And why is he doing that, have you heard him speak about that some time or?
Nyarai: Yeah, he said ‘I don’t want the men to work with my grape because they are rough’ (giggles).

Her Zimbabwean colleague Clara similarly recalled hearing the employer associate qualities like honesty and hard work with female workers, giving this as a reason for the preference in hiring women.

He said women are hard because they know what they are working for.
That is what he wants, he wants women.

A similar discourse seemed to be circulating on the large table grape farm where Refilwe worked, in an adjacent district municipality. Refilwe suggested that one reason for the large majority of female migrant workers was that men would refuse some labour intensive tasks.

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70 While Afrikaans was the commonly spoken language in the area, several research participants noted that command of English was desired, likely primarily for translation purposes as many more newly arrived migrant workers did not speak Afrikaans.
Because men, they just won’t... just agree to cut. If there is any job they were gonna do in the packing store, either they want to check or either they would do those pallets, that is the only thing ... Apparently they say it’s ... quite a lot because you stand for a long time, cutting and cutting and cutting and not going anywhere.... So they don’t want to do that.

Women, on the other hand, were not allowed to work with harvesting grapes from the vine in the section where she works, she says.

Because they are saying that if there are women who do that they will be lazy, because after men cut the grapes, they can sleep, they can do whatever until the grapes ... are in the box and then they have to cut again. So it seems their work is more easy because after cutting the grapes, they rest for like maybe three to four hours. But we are working through the whole day.

What the narratives above appear to suggest – regardless of whether claims that men rest for hours are accurate or not – is a general expectation that male workers should do the heavier work, while female workers are expected to both endure repetitive tasks better – and work much harder. According to this discourse, female (migrant) workers are constructed as hard-working, obedient and non-threatening, carrying out tedious tasks that demand a lot of patience without causing problems or protesting (cf. Johnston, 2007, Ulicki and Crush, 2000). Male workers, on the other hand, can presumably negotiate more leeway, drawing on the power of (threats of) violence associated with black African masculinities.

On the farm where Clara worked when we first met, the farm owner paid some of the highest salaries in the area, but took no responsibility for housing, reproduction, illness and the like. The work pace and expectations on worker performance were also very high. Clara described how she and her almost exclusively female group of co-workers would run in the vineyards in order to do as much work as possible during the day, hoping to meet the targets for receiving the daily remuneration, and also chasing better piece-work rates. Bodily pain, high blood pressure, extreme tiredness and groaning in one’s sleep are some of what Clara and other colleagues describe as physical reactions from working on the farm.

This narrative of physically heavy work and speed resemble how Clara’s husband described work on the male-only citrus farm where he was employed (see Chapter Three) – where workers would also run the short distances between the trees while carrying heavy bags of citrus – the atmosphere in the workplace being competitive and tense, and verbal or

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71 This statement is supported by workers on other farms. Aviwe for example claims that male workers may refuse tasks they dislike, which are then passed on to female workers. Similar observations are made by Ulicki and Crush (2000) and Ewert and Hamman (1996).
physical fights between workers erupting at times. Here, he claimed that the manager only wanted male workers, drawing on notions of the work being ‘too heavy’ and ‘not healthy’ for women. Anthropologist Maxim Bolt (2010), in his research on an orange farm in Limpopo, has similarly noted how (primarily) a physical, aggressive masculinity was invoked through the work process, pushing workers to be fast in order to earn more – while, he suggests, also offering a sense of collective identity among the diverse group of male workers, divided by hierarchies of class, ethnicity and nationality.

Challenging the harsh work and the ways in which women workers were treated on the table grape farm, Clara framed her critique in part as a problem caused by the divergence from a more traditionally gendered division of work, complaining that “women are doing the work that is supposed to be done by men!” Clara and a few of her female colleagues whom I spoke to further complained about not being treated as women on the farm. Women-identified farm workers lamenting not being treated as women also emerged in conversations I had elsewhere in the province. Describing the heavy work on the mixed-crop farm where she is currently employed, standing up the whole day, and at times picking up and removing heavy stones to allow the tractor to pass, tasks she considered to be ‘men’s work’, Aviwe directed her critique towards the Minister of Land Affairs, Mildred Ollifant, for failing to recognise farm workers as women, and not doing enough to support this category of workers:

Because being a woman doesn’t mean you have to work in the rain. Now we work in the rain ... If you don’t want to work in that rain your hours will be deducted.

Working in the rain or not has a specific meaning in commercial agriculture, as it is linked to payment and type of contract, and furthermore since it is one of the ways by which workers are divided. At Aviwe’s workplace, she claims that men could sit in the store room when it rains and still get paid, while women continued working outside in order not to have money deducted from their salaries. Elsewhere, a union representative told me that black African women on the farm where he lives were sent home without pay when it rained, whereas ‘coloured’ women could continue working under a roof, getting paid as usual – possibly linked to who is recognised as a ‘real’ female farmworker.

In previous research, it has been pointed out that female farm workers often co-construct and contribute to upholding the gender division of labour, expressing discontent when work is organised in ways that disturbs the gender order (see Orton, Barrientos and McCloughan, 2001). Looking at what comes out in my material, I would suggest that this discontent is perhaps primarily a rejection of harsher working conditions, a development from which women workers may create meaning and then challenge by
formulating their critique as a defence of the dominant gender order at work. Complaints about not being treated as a woman on the farm, or having to do men’s work, may be understood, I would suggest, as a form of resistance to the undermining of one’s dignity and human worth, for which being recognised as a gendered body is a central aspect, as I will return to in the final sections of this chapter.

Breaking away from established constructions of women’s and men’s work on farms may also be uncomfortable for some farmers. Mr Adriaanse, for instance, took pride in maintaining a gender division of labour on his table grape farm, stressing firmly that he would never allow a woman to work with a spade or do other tasks which he regarded as ‘hard work’, although he supported women taking up leadership positions, as forewomen.

As I have sought to demonstrate in this section, discourses of gender, interlocked with those of race/ethnicity and nationality, are actively drawn upon in narratives on hiring strategies and the organising of work, even though farmers and managers may reach very different conclusions about how best to capitalise on these power hierarchies. This brings to mind sociologist Leslie Salzinger’s (2003:25) argument that the centrality of gender in global production rests on the combination of uncritical acceptance of gender as a key category for organising and dividing labour, and a flexibility with regard to what the categories of masculine and feminine denote – allowing for tremendous variation according to hyper-local circumstances, traditions and ideologies – including between neighbouring farms.

Emily and Clara: feminised bodies under surveillance

It is lunch hour on a small wine farm in the Cape Winelands district, and I am sitting with Emily – a coloured union leader, permanently employed and living on the farm – at an outdoor table, having a chat during her unpaid break, both of us grabbing something to eat from the farm café where she currently works as a cleaner. Until recently, Emily worked in the vineyards, but this task has now been outsourced to a contractor. Responding to my routine question about how things have been on the farm since we last met, Emily’s colleague standing next to us points over his shoulder at a surveillance camera recently attached to the wall of the building, saying: “That is our big boss”. The camera, aimed straight at us, is an uncomfortable reminder of what Emily and many other farm workers have been telling me during my fieldwork, of uneasy feelings of constantly being watched. As we take the dishes inside, Emily asks me to duck down and peep into the kitchen where she nowadays spends much of her working days washing dishes, showing me the camera placed just above the sink, the lens potentially capturing her every bodily movement. In the cellar and restaurant, cameras are also plentiful, and Emily links this to the prevention of theft from
employees: as she and her colleagues leave the farm in the evenings, guards search through their bags. Not knowing for certain whether someone is watching the camera recordings or not, she suggests that it is captured on a computer placed in the main building, and randomly observed by management monitoring work performance – a reflection that brings to mind Foucault’s (1995 [1975]:195–228) theorising of the self-disciplining function of a panopticon. Today, however, Emily does not worry about extending her lunch break a bit, nor about being watched, as most managers are not around, only her immediate boss, whom she describes as ok.

Reflections of fear and unease in relation to cameras and other forms of surveillance emerge in conversations with workers in different locations. A common tale is that of cameras being placed not only in pack houses but also in vineyards, and how workers who are caught eating a few grapes, or packing a bunch of grapes to take home, are fired and evicted (cf. Levine, 2013). One family, whom I and an employee of an NGO meet by chance, as we drive past the place where they are temporarily camping out, on the side of the road next to the farm where they used to live, claimed to have been let go and evicted for precisely this reason. In spite of being beneficiaries of an equity scheme, and thus presumably co-owners of part of the farm, they were now homeless and sleeping in a car and under a tarpaulin sheet, waiting for the municipality to offer them temporary housing.

On the table grape farm in De Doorns where Clara worked for several years, horror-stories relating to surveillance were plentiful, and uncomfortable. Being caught on camera talking to a colleague led to having 50 rand deducted from one’s daily salary, Clara claimed, and other ‘offences’, like going to the toilet before lunch break, or committing a mistake in the handling of grapes, also resulted in various forms of punishment, she said.

There were the rules, let’s say like – you weren’t supposed to cut the grapes or what. Then you made a mistake and you took out one, let’s say, it’s not rotten. Maybe he sees you, there was a camera, he would zoom [in on] us one by one. Zoom you and see how you are working and then maybe he finds you’ve got a fault or you did something ... He would come and scream at you. And then all those supervisors, they would come. They would take you to sort of a cage, it was called a cage [a small building], and there, they would discipline you verbally. They would insult. … Åsa: What would they say more or less...?
Clara: Like in Afrikaans let’s say “Jou poes” [cunt], or whatever. They would be very, very abusive. They would scream at you ... And every day when you are working they would tell you: ‘If you don’t work hard, you will go. We will fire you.’ Every day you’d be stressed, because they would be reminding you every day that you can [be sent] home any time. And then the boss will also come there and ... tell you that whatever the supervisors say, it’s him. He ... would also do the same. So, if they ... think
or they see that you are unfit to work on the farm, you can just go. And the boss ... if he comes himself, he was very, very hard. He would scream and your whole body would shake and – everybody would be quiet.

Clara describes how a climate of fear would be engrained in the relations on the farm even when no cameras were present. Just seeing the farmer’s car parked nearby would suffice to change the atmosphere, with the (nearly all female) supervisors becoming aggressive, calling the work teams together more often and complaining about how the work was carried out, she says.

And then they want the boss to see that they are powerful or maybe...

Because that’s when they would start insulting you – they want to impress the boss, you know ... by showing that they are in control.

During my short sojourn on the farm where Aunty Martina lives, I also felt uneasy at the thought of making a mistake. Despite the comparatively comfortable working environment, I could not stop thinking about what we were repeatedly reminded of: how valuable the grapes were. One day, I happened to cut off a not-yet-ripe bunch of grapes by mistake – I was a disastrous ‘recruitment’, as far from nimble fingers as one could get. Not knowing whether I should report this to someone, I uncomfortably put the bunch in my pocket to show the supervisor next time she passed by. This act did not go unnoticed. Soon, a few of the women working on the rows in front of and behind me had noticed and were eyeing me. One woman tried to gesticulate to me what I was supposed to do, and when I failed to understand, she quickly ran over to where I was, dug a hole with her foot, cut the bunch in pieces and buried it there, covered with soil and leaves. “They will scream at you!” she cautioned, before hurrying back to the section where she was working.

On Clara’s farm, where there was much greater pressure on workers, she recalls being told: “My grapes are more valuable than you!” Even mundane acts, like going to the bathroom, could be riddled with fear.

And then there was a time when the toilet wasn’t working. And then you weren’t allowed to go into the fields. But there was no toilet! It’s like that son [of the owner], if he saw you there ... he would stop his car – maybe I was there and [gesticulates like someone squatting] I would have to just [haul up] my clothes and run – for my dear life. Because he would wait for you. He would reverse and see you ... But he knew there was no toilet! Where did he want us to go? Those guys! But he wants you to work.
On violence

Experiences of verbal abuse in the workplace undermining one’s “sense of worth or dignity” (Schep-P-Hughes and Bourgouis, 2004:5) were shared by workers across the province. Such violent outbursts appeared at times to be linked to work performance, as in the examples above, where sitting down to breathe for a few seconds, or raising concerns about labour conditions, could result in being shouted at or told to take one’s bags and leave. On other occasions, the use of foul language appeared to be linked to worker resistance: Clara, for instance, described how the farm owner where she worked became furious, shouting at the workers and calling them dirty, disorganised and disrespectful after a labour dispute. The use of demeaning and aggressive language towards female workers in particular, and restrictions on their visits to the toilet, or failure to provide such facilities, Ross (2013:63) suggests, may be understood as part of a regime of control built upon bodily degradation and humiliation.

My fieldwork notes are also full of observations of what I regard as socially sanctioned violent behaviour in the Western Cape commercial farmlands. The most mundane, everyday instances would perhaps be bakkie’s driving past on the road with a white farmer/manager behind the wheel, and one or more black workers cowering in the open back, including in the rain and strong wind, despite there being space inside the car. While both workers and employers may justify this division for different reasons, from my position as an outsider, I read such normalised, compartmentalised journeys in the contact zone as expressions of structural and symbolic violence. In similar ways, I understand as (structural) violence the mere existence of large areas of small, dilapidated houses made of iron sheets and wooden planks crowded together on a dusty plain alongside the main roads in areas surrounded by luxurious accommodation for tourists and large export farms. Remaining with the hurtful denial of personhood that make up “avoidable insults” against human needs – and thus violence, speaking with Galtung (1990:292) – there is also the overt humiliation which farm workers I interacted with recalled having experienced. To name but a few: hearing a boss saying that his dogs would work better than you. Hearing the farmer’s wife calling you filthy, arguing that the ‘dirty’ state of your house scares off visitors, and handing you a jar of soap with which you are instructed to clean the outer walls – while refusing to install in-door toilets or renovate the communal ablution blocks so that you end up using the vineyards as a toilet. Hearing the farmer’s wife saying that all you and your neighbours on the farm know how to do is to ‘breed’. Seeing the farmer pass you by in his bakkie without even looking at you as you walk along a dirt road towards the

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highway in the remote area where you reside, carrying your sick baby in your arms, headed towards the nearest clinic some 20 minutes’ drive from here. Receiving a letter written in a depersonalised tone in which you are told to vacate the house you have lived in for many years, as it is going to be transformed into accommodation for tourists. Seeing your immediate boss pick up the faxed letter sent over by the clinic as proof that you went for a doctor’s appointment, tearing it up and throwing it away, and deducting money for unpaid leave.

Of course, my field work notes also include more positive tales. Some farm workers, including union representatives, spoke appreciatively of how they prayed together with – and under the leadership of – their employers, in what still appears to be a common set-up on owner-run farms. While to an outsider like me, this may read as a re-articulation of paternalist power relations and the symbolic violence embedded therein, many seemed to genuinely welcome such practices, seeing it as a recognition of a shared humanity. Some further asserted that the farmer they worked for is ‘a nice guy’, qualifying such ambiguous statements by referring to unexpected concessions interpreted as acts of kindness, like the provision of housing for single female workers. But there are also worse examples. Union organisers relating how members were beaten up after drawing attention to problems on the farm (see e.g. Knoetze, 2015), farm worker families being unlawfully evicted or, as I discuss in Chapter Six, being chased off the farm by employer representatives on quads.

There are also the phone calls and messages conveying bad news that I have received throughout the years which speak to the grip of slow and structural violence in farming areas: of farm workers succumbing to violent crime, illness or accidents. Receiving an excited message from Aviwe about a local strike on a few farms in her area – and meeting her a few days later only to hear that the workers’ action was cancelled when one of the most devoted female participants was run over by a (probably stressed) truck driver from one of the farms, as she had volunteered to stand by the road and alert casual workers about the conflict. Taken together, these incidents – mundane, everyday, or extraordinary – give an indication of the many shapes and forms that violence takes in commercial farming areas, slow or instant, structural (indirect), personal (direct) or symbolic, in the form of threats or through actions carried through (see also Levine, 2013).

The reflections from workers presented and discussed so far in this chapter have primarily (with a few exceptions) come from black African female workers, many of them migrants. Workers from this diverse sub-group, such as Clara, Refilwe and Aviwe, related experiences of being actively racialised and receiving harsher and more impersonal treatment from employer representatives compared to both men of the same nationality and/or race/ethnicity and coloured female co-workers. As noted in Chapter Three, members of this heterogeneous worker category are only very rarely
employed on a permanent basis or offered single housing on farms. This results in workers being less well-known to managers and farmers compared to coloured on-farm labourers, who might still be entangled in the unequal yet intimate power dynamics characteristic of farm paternalism – and able to make claims drawing on paternalist modes of belonging (Rutherford, 2008).

Still, as researchers have noted, the lines are not clear-cut, and paternalism has often mutated and found new forms; for instance, through shifting power to foremen or labour brokers of the same ethnicity as migrant workers (see e.g. Addison, 2014b; Bolt, 2016a). Migrant workers, too, may be caught in patterns of relating that presume some closeness or intimacy with employers. Clara, for instance, spoke of how she and her off-farm, mainly black African, co-workers would request permission to pray for the (old) farmer when he was sick and had been hospitalised, despite fearing him. One such prayer session, upon his return to the farm, ended in workers being screamed at, she says, as he claimed they were standing too close to his car, that it might become scratched: an uncomfortable reminder of the juxtaposition of intimacy and violence under paternalism (Du Toit, 1993).

Experiences of remaining unknown to, and unseen by, managers and farmers, unless being subjected to reprimands, left several of my interlocutors pertaining to the diverse groups of workers labelled ‘foreigners’, migrants, and/or black African with feelings of not being recognised as human by their employers. In the next section, I analyse how such experiences of ‘dehumanisation’ by employer representatives are narrated and understood by research participants.

Narratives on dehumanisation

One day, as I was driving towards Cape Town with Refilwe, Mpho and Tshepo, three migrant labourers working on a large table grape farm, I was told a story which spoke with painful adjacency to the questions posed by Judith Butler (2004, 2009) regarding which lives are grievable. On the farm, Refilwe told me, she had come to know of a young woman who had been sick for months, and thus unable to work. The woman had nonetheless continued to stay in the migrant workers’ compound, without any one taking her to hospital, or coming to take her home. Recently, she had passed away. This had not provoked any disruption of daily life or work on the farm according to Refilwe, no minute of silence observed, nor any public acknowledgement of the passing of one of their colleagues. The foreman in charge of the section where the young woman stayed did not even seem to care, Refilwe alleged. What would happen to the body of the deceased was moreover still unresolved, she suggested, as the young woman’s family was struggling to source enough funds to transport her home to be buried. The large farm company had not offered to pay for the transport home, as far as
Refillwe knew. Reflecting on this situation as we sat down to talk in a café later in the day, her (male) colleague Tshepo said:

These are things that we experience as farm workers. We… we’re nothing, we’re nothing… We are not valuable. But … the value that we give… that we produce for the country and the owner... that’s more important than our lives … than our own beings … Even when someone dies, that is nothing... We can’t stand and say... let’s pay respect to the person. Nothing! No. It’s just normal, just normal – nothing.

What Tshepo agonisingly described as being (treated as) nothing, as not valuable resonates uncomfortably with Judith Butler’s reflections on precarity and grievability in the context of wars, or more specifically in relation to the (representational) ‘framing’ of wars. In her words, “The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life” (Butler, 2009:15).

Butler extends her philosophical reasoning to situations of major crisis, such as famine, but I suggest that this reading may be similarly applicable in the context of neoliberal spaces of production in a post-colonial ‘contact zone’. If life on a commercial farm just moves on after the death of a worker, as suggested by Refilwe, with no space to mourn, no joint procedure for paying last respects, no arrangements for the swift and dignified transport of the body home – it appears as though the life of a migrant worker, in this context, is not apprehended as grievable by those in control of the farm space. And if grievability is not apprehended, black female migrants’ lives, thinking with Butler, are likely not to be apprehended as such, as human, ‘precarious life’.

Tshepo’s reflection captures well how the small group of unionised seasonal migrant workers I interacted with from this farm talked about how they felt positioned as dispensable, as ‘not quite’ human beings in their work (and temporary living) place. Refilwe describes her experience of dehumanisation as related to the harshness of the work, the manner in which middle managers spoke to her, and the level of control that management had over workers’ lives, while at the same time they would know nothing about their migrant employees, not even their names. She elaborates:

We’re not human beings actually in … their eyes. We’re nothing but machines… in … their eyes. We’re nothing but robots. Because normally we can tell a robot to do this… and do that… it’s like they turn us on and they turn us off.

Beyond carrying out the tasks necessary for the table grape production to continue uninterrupted, according to this discourse, workers are not (supposed to be) seen or heard by the management. Matters of life, death,
reproduction, caring for children, the elderly and the sick, living conditions in the compounds – all of this can be understood as ‘muted’ and not the responsibility of the farm – it is rather things the ‘robot’ workers must attend to quietly while they are ‘turned off’. Refilwe’s analysis is a striking reminder of Karl Marx’s (1944) projections of labour under capitalism bringing about alienation and estrangement, not only from the commodity one produces for the profit of others and from the work process, but also a concomitant alienation from one’s colleagues and ultimately from oneself, from one’s own human essence (see Fornäs, 2013:51).

Refilwe and Tshepo further suggested that pregnant women were hired like anyone else as part of the seasonal workforce, as long as they were prepared to endure the hard work. This is a stark contrast to many other farms; for example, the small table grape farm run by Mr Adriaanse, who admitted to refraining from hiring (visibly) pregnant seasonal migrants, as he did not want to be held responsible in case of an accident or illness at work. But on this farm, pregnant or not, female migrant workers were expected to keep up with the pace of work, and appeared not to be offered lighter tasks, Refilwe and Tshepo claimed. They shared a couple of examples of colleagues who had miscarried recently, and who had been sent to the hospital to fend for themselves, and came back as soon as they were discharged. While, if their observations are accurate, it could be read as positive that black female migrant women appeared not to be discriminated against for being pregnant, this could similarly be interpreted as one of the practices through which this category of workers is not recognised as women, if no special attention is paid to the health hazards associated with hard physical labour, or exposure to pesticides during pregnancy. This brings to mind how captive black women’s bodies under slavery were positioned as ungendered flesh (Spillers, 1987) or how refugees today are constructed as a non-gendered, threatening mass in European Union policies (de los Reyes, 2013), making it impossible for (some) women to occupy recognisable subject positions. Since the possibility of apprehending gender is key to apprehending the human, Paulina de los Reyes (2013:80) argues, ‘defeminisation’ makes up one important component of ‘dehumanisation’.

The processes of defeminisation are not uniform however. While Refilwe and her (young, black African female migrant) colleague Mpho understand the farm space as ‘dehumanising’, where they are expected to act as nameless, hard-working and presumably non-gendered robots, being turned on and off as needed, there are also parallel processes of feminisation and sexualisation. Male team leaders or foremen monitoring the work in the vineyards and in the pack house would, for example, approach young female migrants asking them to be their girlfriends. Turning such ‘offers’ down means that your life is likely to be very miserable for the rest of the season, Refilwe and Mpho explained, sharing a recent experience (see also Addison, 2014a; Bolt, 2016b). A while back, Mpho had refused to date a team leader
in her work section and, as a result, both she and Refilwe were punished, as the two of them are close friends, with Refilwe being known as an outspoken person who stands up for herself and those around her. Says Refilwe:

He would make us work more than other people did. He didn’t want to see us talk to anybody. We were like ... supposed to be zombies working all day. We were not supposed to go to the toilet. I remember I said to him: ‘Can I please go to the girls?’ He was like this ... [looks straight ahead, pretends not to see]. No, he never answered me. And they did the same to her too.

The team leader went further and demoted them to less desirable positions in the pack house than the year before – positions that would be likely to result in fewer opportunities to get a bonus. It was only when Refilwe and Mpho threatened to leave the farm immediately, and expose the team leader, that they managed to put a halt to this discriminatory treatment – a quite remarkable victory against a senior person on the farm. One may thus observe how the two unionised female migrants described being positioned in one of two extremes: as sexualised bodies, expected to be available to male team leaders and foremen and/or, when this position was rejected, as *zombies, slaves, robots* or other non-human creatures, according to the varying metaphors used by Refilwe. Through ways of seeing that were influenced by sexism and racism, (some) male superiors’ thus appeared not to recognise the humanity of, or feel obliged to act ethically towards, female migrant workers whom they met face to face – what Peter Benson (2008) refers to as ‘faciality’.  

Refilwe further shares a reflection which painfully crystallises the racialised hierarchies she observed in the workplace, where different rules appeared to be applied to ‘black’ and ‘coloured’ female workers.

And even in the packing store – the coloureds, they are not told what they gonna do. They choose whatever they gonna do ... and even if they stand still they don’t want to work, they gonna stand still, no one is gonna ask them why are you not working? But if they see you as a black person standing still, they’re gonna bite your head off. Because you have to work like a slave if you’re black. But then if you’re coloured you can act like you are white, nobody cares.

As with migrant workers on other farms, Refilwe’s experiences of being treated differently through racialisation processes included the manner of being spoken to by employer representatives and/or a general feeling of not being seen as a human being. Refilwe drew on the trope of slavery, referring

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73 Conceptualising faciality, Benson (2008) draws on Levinas’ theorizing of the “face of the other” as vulnerable to violence and on Deleuze and Guattari’s term visagéité.
to expectations from management that she as a black person should work ‘like a slave’, whereas a coloured worker ‘can act’ like a white person, which I interpret as acting like someone whose human presence is apprehended in the work place, and who may thus have some degree of freedom regarding how she carries out her work. The familiar trope of slavery, as well as other tropes relating to a dehumanising discourse, was drawn upon also by many other actors, including some of the more radical trade unions and support organisations. Posters and appeals would for example use word combinations such as ‘slave wages’ or ‘slave conditions’. That such comparisons are made is not surprising given the history of the area, combined with the lack of adequately meaningful shifts of power relations or satisfactory improvements in people’s lives since the advent of democracy. It may further be taken to represent an understanding of precarity, drawing on Barchiesi (2012, 2016), as related not only to socio-economic conditions of black workers, but also to blackness as an ontological position connected to slavery rather than waged work.

Discourses of feeling dehumanised in different ways at work, brought up by some but far from all interlocutors, were also constructed in relation to other not-quite-human animals. Clara for example, suggested that if I was to come and observe how she and the other women moved from one heavy task to another, at times running in the vineyards, I would be likely to think “...yuh, these people are animals!” Nyarai similarly complained about the farmer shouting, and threatening her and the other workers, using another analogy to describe the dehumanising effect of such treatment: “It’s like if we’re kids”. Treatment, working conditions and explicit use of words aimed at undermining workers sense of worth or dignity, as pointed out by Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes (2004:5) may thus contribute to feelings of dehumanisation at work.

On some farms, moreover, protection and benefits would be offered selectively, signalling that some workers’ lives were apprehended as precarious, and in need of support and protection, and others not (Butler, 2009). Workers and employer representatives on a few farms related to me how coloured farm labourers were offered training during the off-season in order to help them ‘develop’ including through extending normative (white/middle-class) notions of gender to this worker category, through topics such as how to be a better husband/wife (or parent). When I asked a manager whether white office staff attended such training, he appeared to think I was joking. He went on to tell me that migrants were not included as their presence on farms was temporary. In my reading, this re-emphasised a racial hierarchy in which white staff were positioned as already complete, coloured permanent workers as having the potential to develop (into fuller human beings) and (black African) migrant workers as not worth exposing to such processes.
To take another example, on the farm where Refilwe, Mpho and Tshepo worked, the company’s web page featured pictures of a crèche which was said to be available to workers’ children. This service was only extended to the 100-150 households living in single houses on the farm however: permanently employed on-farm workers of coloured ethnicity. All other workers, including the up to 2000 or more people residing on a ‘temporary’ basis in the migrant workers’ compound were not allowed to bring their children onto the farm.\footnote{Notably, while most come for 3-6 months annually, one worker I talked to lived and worked here 11 months per year before losing his job.} Neither were the children of those many hundreds who travelled to work from nearby towns, mainly during peak season, offered a space here. While migrant labourers might not want to bring their children onto the farm under current conditions, one could still argue that they are apprehended neither as workers nor, perhaps, as people with the right to a family life. The issue of who may claim the position of a farm worker fully belonging on farms, which was discussed in the previous chapter, may thus be understood as running much deeper than one’s worker-status per se. More profoundly, I suggest, it may be seen as connected to questions of whose lives are apprehended as precarious, grievable life.

Conclusion: an intersectional reading of narratives on work

In this chapter, I have applied intersectionality as an analytic sensibility (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013) in exploring how experiences of work and the organisation of labour on commercial farms were spoken of in the post-strike Western Cape. Analysing the narratives of differently positioned farm labourers, as well as a few farmers and managers, I have sought to contribute to an analysis of how power hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality are drawn upon to give meaning to continuities and changes in work regimes on farms at this specific moment, informed by neoliberal globalisation processes as well as legacies of apartheid and colonialism. Given the great differences between farms – linked to type of crop, size, location, management structures, local histories and leadership styles – I have primarily sought to identify discourses (and counter-discourses) and tropes relating to such power hierarchies, and to interrogate how these were mobilised by employers and employees in narratives on work.

I discussed two broad and interlinked discourses: one describing female (and other feminised) labourers as docile, hard-working and dexterous, and another depicting black African male workers as potentially violent, and suitable for fast and heavy work. These discursive associations appeared in different ways to inform hiring strategies – on some farms prompting decisions to only recruit female on-farm labourers, while elsewhere male
migrants from a small rural area were housed separately on the farm, to avoid the trouble associated with ‘mixing’ differently positioned workers. The association between black African masculinities and violence was also drawn on by workers, who understood this threat of violence as a source of power, creating some room for manoeuvring at work and allowing black African men to reject more tedious tasks. Female black African migrants in this study, on the other hand, related experiences of being monitored and pushed much harder compared both to coloured female co-workers and black African men.

In line with earlier research, I have described gender, race/ethnicity and nationality as powerful constructs in the organisation of work on commercial farms (see e.g. Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996; Orton, Barrientos and McClenaghan, 2001; Du Toit, 2004). These power hierarchies continued to a large extent to articulate with type and length of contracts, access to on-farm housing and other benefits, payment and opportunities to advance on the job in a context where divides between better and worse positioned workers have deepened (Ewert and Du Toit, 2005). With regard to the gender division of tasks in the work place, my material further indicated that, while notions such as ‘women’s work’ (generally seasonal, ‘light’ and requiring dexterity and diligence) and ‘men’s work’ (generally permanent, ‘heavy’ and ‘skilled’) were commonly accepted, the local enactment of such notions could differ starkly. This agrees closely with sociologist Leslie Salzinger’s (2003:25) understanding of the centrality of gender in global production, which, she suggests, rests on an uncritical acceptance of gender as a key category for organising and dividing labour – and at the same time great flexibility in terms of what the categories of masculine and feminine denote. As Maria Mies (2013), among others, has observed, the power of such constructs lies in its resonance with both local gender ideologies and the interests of capital (see also Peterson and Runyan, 2010). In addition, gender ideologies always articulate with ideologies of race/ethnicity and coloniality (Mohanty, 2003).

What is of interest to this study, however, is not to seek to determine which sub-category of labourers was most disadvantaged – this would probably vary to some extent over time and between rural towns and farms – but to show how such differentiation and divisions were experienced by precariously positioned farm labourers, and drawn upon by employers in constructing and maintaining a cheap, docile, skilled, readily available and disposable (feminised) labour force (Mohanty, 2003; Ong, 1987; Peterson, 2003; Salzinger, 2003).

My material also demonstrated how structural, slow, direct and symbolic forms of violence are intrinsic to the ways in which work on commercial farms is organised under neo-liberal globalisation. Black African (female or male) migrant interlocutors narrated experiences of dehumanisation at work, referring to how they felt treated like a ‘zombie’, ‘slave’ or ‘robot’ rather than a worker. Some female migrants further described how they were
subjected to sexual harassment by team leaders and foremen, and how they rejected such advances, while at the same time they were not treated as women, and forced to do ‘men’s work’ – and thus ‘defeminised’, which has been described as a central aspect of dehumanisation (de los Reyes, 2013:80). The interlocking of racism and sexism appeared to influence some employer representatives’ ways of (not) seeing (female) black African farm workers so that they did not feel compelled to act ethically towards them in face-to-face encounters (Benson, 2008). Thinking with Judith Butler (2009) and Franco Barchiesi (2016:884), the differently distributed precarity among black farm workers may thus be understood as relating both to socio-economic experiences and to perceptions of farm labourers that are deeply embedded in the post-colonial, where blackness entered “the vocabulary of white modernity to designate a condition of existence marked by gratuitous violence and incapacitation.” Through this logic, exposure to structural violence is disproportionately borne by “those whose lives are not regarded as potentially grievable, and hence valuable” (Butler, 2009:25). In other words, divisions based on race/ethnicity, gender and nationality – interlinked with hiring arrangements and histories of belonging (or not) in commercial farming areas – may be understood as shaping not only differentiated working and living conditions, but also the extent to which workers were apprehended as human (or not) in the work-place.

In the following chapter, I discuss worker narratives on organising and resistance and in other ways insisting on being apprehended as human, grievable life, in this deeply disabling context.
Chapter 5 | Women’s narratives on activism: towards resistive respectability

The farm workers who in the previous chapters narrated experiences of precarity, paternalist legacies and dehumanisation in the workplace were involved in different ways in resisting their marginalisation. In this chapter and the next, I turn to this resistance, exploring some of the ways in which people respond to the violence embedded in labour regimes on farms and the social conditions in the surrounding commercial farmlands. I approach this topic by analysing how resistance is spoken of, understood and given meaning by workers with experience of labour organising or partaking in strikes.75 I further discuss interlinkages between resistance, social identities and violence. In this chapter, I draw on interactions with around a dozen female farm workers, the majority of them coloured women actively involved in unions or other organisations supporting female or migrant workers. Through analysing their narratives and the discursive strategies they employ, I seek to understand how resistive (or activist) subjectivities are formed and what it means for them to assert a position as a female activist (cf. Mills, 2005).76 In particular, I focus on accounts revolving around organising and resistance as a possible route to refuting symbolic violence, receiving respect and being perceived as respectable – and how a discourse of rights is drawn upon in this endeavour. In the process, negative stereotypes of farm workers are challenged and disproved. Chapter Six turns more explicitly to the ‘farm worker strike’ of 2012–2013, offering a reading of this historic albeit complex, messy and – although differently interpreted – violent event.

I locate these explorations vis-à-vis historical discussions of work in South Africa, particularly the notion of dignity that colonialists, the liberation movement and post-apartheid governments alike have attached to work – which clashes fundamentally with workers’ lived experiences (Barchiesi, 2011). Parallel to this, and important to my argument, labour

75 The strategies of the various trade unions, strike committees and worker organisations active in the sector are not discussed in detail, as this falls outside the scope of this dissertation and has to some extent been analysed elsewhere (Klerck and Naidoo, 2003; Naidoo, Klerch and Manganeng, 2007; Pahle, 2015; White, 2010; Wilderman, 2015; Ntsbeza, 2013; Webb, 2017).

76 The term ‘activist’ refers to a “person who takes or supports vigorous action, especially for a political cause” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, 1989).
activism, including strikes, has been spoken of in union discourse as a preferred route to restoring workers’ dignity and making claims to embodied citizenship (Barchiesi, 2011; Moodie, 2010). Central to my understanding of farm worker resistance is also a reading of Western Cape commercial farming areas as a post-colonial ‘contact zone’ laden with a violent history of colonialism and apartheid and shaped by the deep inequalities of globalisation under neoliberalism (Pratt, 1991). Within this global order, precarity is unevenly distributed among different bodies, and the powerful role of international retailers demanding high quality at low cost is rendered invisible. I start this chapter with a reflection on violence in commercial farming areas, after which I review the literature on labour organising in the sector before embarking on an exploration of ethnographic accounts of farm workers’ experiences of organising and resistance.

Resistance to violence and the violence of resistance

In the opening chapter, I suggested that precarity, violence and resistance are interlinked in complex and intricate ways. Drawing on Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes (2004:5), I noted that violence as a concept is slippery and difficult to define, and that it is expressed in a variety of forms – structural, everyday, direct or slow – all of which may be understood as taking place within a continuum, where the most violent conduct is often that which is “socially permitted, encouraged, or enjoined as a moral right or duty.” As these authors note, any attempt to theorise violence should take into account some of its non-physical forms, including “assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim” (Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes, 2004:2). This resonates with Pierre Bourdieu’s (2004) elaborations of symbolic violence, which refers to a form of power that is rendered invisible, influencing the oppressed to participate in, and thus entrenching, their own domination by adopting the oppressor’s viewpoint, including of themselves. This kind of violence relies on a complicity which equals neither “passive submission to an external constraint nor a free adherence to values” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004:274). Deeply embedded in the minds and bodies of the oppressed, through “schemes of perceptions and dispositions (to admire, respect, love, etc.)”, symbolic violence cannot be done away with by will power or consciousness-raising alone, but requires a radical upheaval of the social conditions within which it is produced (Bourdieu, 2004:341).

The resistance that farm workers engage in grapples in various ways, I suggest, with these multiple, complex and interlinked forms of violence. In a South African context, analysts of violence have further drawn on Frantz Fanon’s (2005 [1961]) theorising of areas controlled by colonial states as shaped by a racialised brutality which the colonised resisted through violent
means in order to gain independence as well as to reassert their humanity (Bolt and Rajak, 2016; von Holdt, 2012) – a topic I return to in Chapter Six.

Violence is a highly contested issue in the Western Cape farmlands however, with strong polarisation between differently positioned actors regarding what constitutes violence, who is (mostly) affected by it, in what ways and for what reasons. Reports documenting human rights violations on farms have often been dismissed as exaggerated by the industry, as illustrated by the massive criticism of a report on human rights for farm workers and dwellers in the Western Cape in 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Some farmers’ interest organisations as well as white-power groups in South Africa on the other hand depict white farmers as targets of a spree of racially motivated killings (Gedye, 2018) – causing racist organisations in places like Sweden to organise demonstrations against what they call the ‘genocide’ of whites in South Africa (Dalsbro, 2010).

Reports on violent and at times deadly attacks on farm owners are indeed recurring and deeply disturbing. While statistics on violent crime on farms is unreliable, few would dispute that white farmers – just like black farm workers and dwellers – are highly vulnerable to violence: for instance, the police have declared the investigation of what in popular discourse is referred to as ‘farm attacks’ or ‘farm killings’ to be a priority (Wilkinson, 2017). The 2003 Special Committee of Inquiry into Farm Attacks, however, resisted a reading of such crimes as politically motivated or caused by racial hatred against whites, and argued that robbery was the main motive (Wilkinson, 2017). Over the past decade, there have also been recurring media reports on violence by white farmers against their black employees – including male workers being beaten to death or fed to lions after being suspected of theft, or young girls being shot at or beaten while entering farms to collect firewood or to play (Meldrum, 2005; Montsho, 2017; eNCA, 2018). Such reports arouse latent fury among many South Africans at the persistent racism in post-apartheid society (see e.g. AFP, 2016; Flanagan, 2016).

The commercial farmlands are further plagued by high levels of interpersonal violence amongst rural dwellers, including men’s violence against women (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Solomon, 2013). The most common and deadly violence, however, the mundane ‘slow violence’ of poverty (Nixon, 2011; Kruger, 2014) resulting in premature deaths through malnutrition and poverty-related illnesses such as the co-infectious high rates of tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS, alcohol-related deaths linked to the (now

77 The report “Ripe with Abuse: Human Rights Conditions in South Africa’s Fruit and Wine Industries” claimed that a majority of farm labourers in the Western Cape had experienced labour rights violations, and violation of their rights to health and housing, drawing on interviews with 133 farm workers and dwellers and other key stakeholders (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Critics, including from the farming industry, claimed that the report was not representative, and had drawn conclusions based on what must be regarded as worst cases.
outlawed) dop system or work-related injuries and illnesses are generally less likely to be spoken of as violence. All such examples taken together are important in trying to make sense of the space available for labour organising among farm workers, as well as its focus and nature, which I discuss further in the next section, and for understanding the ‘farm worker strike’, which I return to in Chapter Six.

Conditions for labour activism on commercial farms

Given this background, commercial farming areas in South Africa are unsurprisingly a harsh and challenging place for farm workers to organise and claim labour and broader human rights (see e.g. Klerck and Naidoo, 2003, 2010; Pahle, 2015; Webb, 2017). While moderate forms of activism are tolerated by some employers, elsewhere joining a union is associated with a high risk of victimisation (Klerck and Naidoo; 2003; Pahle, 2015; Webb, 2015). Workers using confrontational methods have reported facing threats, punishment in the form of benefits or opportunities for promotion being withdrawn, dismissal and eviction from their on-farm accommodation and black-listing (see e.g. Klerck and Naidoo, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2011; Webb, 2017). In this hostile context, unionisations levels are low, most estimates suggesting figures of around five percent, and very little collective bargaining takes place, prompting some researchers to describe farm workers’ trade union rights as a paper product (e.g. Pahle, 2015).

In a book chapter drawing on research among union organisers in the Eastern Cape, Klerck and Naidoo (2003) identify a number of structural factors that complicate organising in the sector – all rooted in the history of racist, patriarchal paternalism, which still contributes to shaping the present. The most important challenge, they suggest, is farmers’ resistance to unions. This is further complicated by the peculiar feature of commercial farms as encompassing both the work place – a site of production – and the homes – a site of reproduction – of both (some) workers, migrant workers in compounds and permanent workers in stand-alone worker houses, and of farmers and/or managers (Klerck and Naidoo, 2003). Fences, locked gates, no-entry signboards and notices alerting visitors that security companies are guarding the premises contribute to visibly marking the farms as private property – including the entrance to workers’ housing areas. The sceptical

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78While all studies concur that union density in the sector is very low, estimates vary. Pahle (2015) suggests, based on data from unions, that at most 4.6 percent of farm workers are union members, while Visser (2016) suggests “below 5 percent”. A recent ILO report, referring to a quarterly labour force survey, indicated that unionisation levels amounted to 6.5 percent among farmhands and labourers, 9.1 percent among hand-packers and other manufacturing labourers and as many as 52 percent in the (small) category of heavy truck and lorry drivers. Union members are mostly permanent workers (Visser and Ferrer, 2015).
attitude among farmers towards ‘outsiders’ interfering in labour issues on the farm, about which researchers on farm paternalism have written extensively, is re-enacted in the present with union organisers being denied access to actual or prospective members on farms, and facing court interdicts and charges of trespassing if they persist (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Klerck and Naidoo, 2003). For, while farm workers’ right to receive visitors is protected by law, this right is contested and has to be negotiated, as other frameworks of rights aimed at protecting businesses require visitors to report to management and ask permission to enter the farm.\footnote{The right to receive visitors is regulated in the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (1997), section 3. Trade unions may further negotiate a recognition agreement which allows them access to members when they organise a minimum threshold of workers determined by the Commission for Conciliation, Arbitration and Mediation [CCMA]. Organisational rights, enabling unions to bargain collectively, requires a share of 50 + 1 percent of members on the farm or in the workplace.}\footnote{To take one recent example, trade union CSAAWU in 2015 reported on a member being beaten by the farmer after a union official paid him a visit at his on-farm house (see Knoetze, 2015)} Within this overlapping and to some extent contradictory framework of rights, power relations are tilted in ways which, according to union activists, places the protection of property rights and business interests above organisational rights (see e.g. Pahle, 2015). When farm labourers invite union organisers for conversations in their homes during off-hours, this may mean a considerable risk, with workers facing the prospect of discrimination at work, facing threats of dismissal and eviction – or even being physically assaulted (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Klerck and Naidoo, 2003; Pahle, 2015; Webb, 2017)\footnote{Information based on interviews with employees of trade unions CSAAWU, Sikhula Sonke, Bawusa and FAWU in the Western Cape, as well as with workers who were or had been members of trade unions. The Department of Labour, it has been suggested, is also very under-resourced and only manages to inspect a small proportion of farms (Naidoo, Klerck and Manganeng, 2007; Pahle, 2015).}.\footnote{In a context of financial dependency, such pressure is perhaps more likely to be subtle, however; farmers sharing cautionary tales of labourers elsewhere being punished after joining unions may suffice to deter his/her (on-farm) employees from doing the same (Visser and Ferrer, 2015).} Drawing on a survey in three areas of the Western Cape, Visser and Ferrer (2015) estimate that ten percent of farm workers in their sample had experienced victimisation or intimidation in relation to joining a union – a figure that is likely to be very conservative, considering claims by unions that seasonally employed members are often not rehired the following year.\footnote{Studies have also noted that farm workers are often disillusioned with unions, lamenting that members are not being adequately serviced (see e.g. Klerck and Naidoo, 2003; Pahle, 2015; Visser and Ferrer, 2015). Farms being located geographically far apart, away from public transportation routes and often with small workforces, contributes to making organising
and bringing labourers together for off-farm meetings costly and strenuous – further complicated by the long working hours. As farm work is one of the lowest paid occupations in the country, union fees have to be kept very low, which means that unions must be able to do a lot of work, in widely dispersed locations, using innovative strategies to access and gain the trust of workers, and offer labour and human rights training, all with minimal resources. In response to this, many unions have opted to prioritise bigger farms and large wineries with factory-like settings in order to maximise their impact. This means that they primarily reach better positioned, permanently employed workers while failing to bring on board seasonal or casual workers (Klerck and Naidoo, 2003). The fact that unions are mostly urban-based and draw on models of organising developed in urban spaces has also been identified as a weakness (Klerck and Naidoo, 2003; Webb, 2017).

The union organisers interviewed by Klerck and Naidoo (2003) responded to these challenges by taking a hard-line approach, emboldening workers to break their dependence on, and fear of, farmers. In Klerck and Naidoo’s reading, however, a militant approach to farmers will be detrimental to unions, with a high risk of workers losing their jobs and being evicted, while a non-confrontational approach centred on dialogue is likely to create feelings of alienation and distrust among members. They therefore suggest that farm workers are likely to see unions “at best as irrelevant, and at worst as a threat” (Klerck and Naidoo, 2003:165).

The constrained context for organising on commercial farms should also be understood in relation to the deeply unequal configuration of power in the rural towns scattered around Western Cape farming areas (Du Toit, 2004; Levine, 2013; Webb, 2017). In such spaces, (primarily) white elites are often powerfully positioned in most of the institutions that influence farm workers’ lives, including municipalities, courts, local businesses or clinics – and may also be closely connected through kinship ties. Commercial farmers also have strong and powerful interest groups and networks, both locally and nationally, and a fall-out with one farmer may complicate relations with other farmers and white residents. Labour and rural organisers and researchers have further drawn attention to how the voices of the local white elite, as elsewhere in the world, are taken much more seriously than those of the racialised poor, notably in relation to the justice system (see e.g. Levine, 2013; Trust for Community Outreach and Education, 2016).

When I attended a court hearing regarding an application to evict farm workers who had been on strike, I saw such power being manifested through who was in the room (the white farmer did not appear but sent a legal representative) and how differently positioned actors were addressed, with the white judge accusing the visibly uncomfortable coloured farm worker families of having been swept up and banded together by someone influencing them to use a standardised answer to his questions. As Levine (2013:43–57) describes in her ethnography on child labour, even when clear
evidence is presented of violence at the hands of a local white farmer towards his workers, he is likely to be acquitted and remain in his position – while, if there is an order to compensate the survivors of such violence, this may arrive too late or be paltry. The precarity of farm workers, and obstacles to confronting and shifting unequal power relations on farms, is thus a condition that should be viewed in the light of racialised and classed hierarchies within the community as a whole, where white elites still hold a lot of power in relation to whose lives will be apprehended, and whose rights will be recognised and enjoyed.

While rural South Africa has historically been a site of intense struggles, primarily over access to land, trade unions have grappled with establishing a presence on commercial farms. A notable exception is the short-lived but highly visible involvement of the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of South Africa (ICU) in rural Natal, Transvaal and the Orange Free State in the late 1920s (Bradford, 1987). The past decades have seen many small unions come and go, leaving farm workers without support when suddenly closing its doors – further contributing to distrust in unions (Pahle, 2015).

In the Western Cape, there is a plethora of small and financially weak farm worker unions, many leading an ephemeral existence, not formally registered and operating out of mobile offices (Pahle, 2015). Among the larger unions, one may note three male-led ones: the Food and Allied Workers Union [FAWU], until recently a part of the Congress of South African Trade Unions [COSATU], which according to a local organiser had some 1 000 farm workers among its members in the province; the CSAAWU, organising some 2 000 members and aligned to the independent left; and BAWUSA, a pro-ANC union that was highly vocal and actively recruited during the farm worker strike (see Chapter Six), but within a short time saw a massive walk-out of disgruntled members. Sikhula Sonke, a female-led social movement trade union which focused on empowering female farm workers (to some extent consciously including transwomen), reported having 5 000 members at its height (White, 2010), but was deregistered during the post-strike moment. While these unions have

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82 The most successful recent attempt at recruiting farm workers is that of the COSATU-aligned farm-worker-only union, the South African Agricultural Plantation and Allied Workers Union [SAAPAWU], which counted some 25,000 members before it closed down in 1995 (Pahle, 2015).
83 Non-union labour activists and researchers have critiqued unions for not adequately adapting their work to current shifts in the organisation of work on farms, or adequately using legal frameworks (Pahle, 2015).
84 In April 2017, both CSAAWU and FAWU joined the new South African Federation of Trade unions [SAFTU].
85 Interview with a regional organiser from FAWU, 2015.
86 Oral information from CSAAWU’s deputy general secretary, 2014.
87 See White (2010) for an exploration of the impact of Sikhula Sonke’s work. The union, which was started through an initiative of the Women on Farms Project, went through a crisis
reported important victories for individual members (e.g. White, 2010), successful large-scale mobilisation still remains to be seen.

Farm workers’ labour struggles notably also take place in non-union spaces, with support from organisations devoted to political education (e.g. ILRIG; Khanya College), refugee rights (PASSOP; Scalabrini Centre), rural women (Women on Farms Project; Mawubuye Land Rights Forum) or the rural poor more broadly (Surplus People Project [SPP]) as well as legal advice offices providing, among other things, human and labour rights training and assistance in labour or land disputes.

After this brief overview of the context of farm worker organising, I now turn to ethnographic accounts of female farm workers’ resistance. The interlocutors whose narratives I analyse in the following sections have experience of organising in various spaces, such as trade unions, strike committees, and community groups set up by NGOs. Among them, some are newcomers while others are long-term members, spokespersons, shop stewards or union leaders (albeit still working on farms).\(^{88}\) Some self-present as activists while others did not use this term during our interactions.

Reclaiming dignity and respectability through organising

One afternoon, Emily and I are seated on the couches of her two-bedroom house on a small wine farm in the Cape Winelands municipality, for once having a long and fairly uninterrupted conversation about her long-time experience as a labour activist. The house, which she shares with two of her children and their families and sometimes her husband, who works elsewhere, is unusually quiet, the grandchildren mainly playing outside. Ironically, this momentary gap in her tight schedule of work, activism and family responsibilities opened up after management put all female workers on short-time the year before, as business is doing badly. In spite of being a permanent employee, she thus works, and is only paid for, three days per week, destabilising her financial situation. As I will return to in Chapter Six, her permanently employed female colleagues residing off-farm were laid off shortly afterwards, their work initially taken over by a contractor bringing in casual workers.

As a pioneer in several organisations, Emily’s analysis of the essence of, and obstacles to, organising among female farm workers carries weight and is likely to both have influenced and be reflective of organisational discourse. Emily became involved in labour activism during the late

\(^{88}\) While some of these research participants are union leaders, or were prominent figures during the 2012–2013 unrest, most are not known beyond their locality, and/or have only brief experience of labour organising.
apartheid years, when she was elected as shop steward of a trade union that came to recruit on her farm. She explains that labourers at the time had no choice but to accept farmers’ unilateral decisions, including about wages. Nevertheless, she boldly agreed to lead her co-workers in an unprotected strike, which was resolved amicably, with some improvements for workers. Shortly after this, Emily joined, and became a leader within, an organisation that sought to address the specific problems faced by women on farms, including lack of security of tenure, job insecurity and sexual- and gender-based violence. Out of this work, the idea of establishing a female-led union developed, and in the early 2000s, Sikhula Sonke came into being. Although Emily and her fellow activists had initially envisioned the union as an organisation solely for women, South Africa’s legislation prohibited such an arrangement. Therefore, the union accepted men as members, but its constitution stated that it should work primarily in the interests of women, that members can be excluded for using violence against women, and that men may only be elected to certain positions (White, 2010). The founder members envisioned a union that would act to oppose the multiple forms of oppression that women face on farms, in communities and in their homes, and, according to Emily, it would encourage women to take pride in their identities.

We as farm women, when we built this organisation … We were not ashamed of … not having decent clothes, not having enough education or … being so clever and bright as the others. We were not ashamed to go to meetings with a black eye. Our focus was to fight for a better future for our kids, for ourselves, to learn more … and more.

In my reading, Emily suggests that involvement in labour organising with the aim of building a better future enabled female farm workers to rise above their everyday experiences of violence and humiliation and begin to reclaim a sense of pride and dignity (see also White, 2010). In this way, the symbolic violence contributing to keeping women in a marginalised position could potentially begin to crumble. Emily’s ambition was acknowledged by several more devoted union members. Aviwe, who was a shop steward and served on a branch committee, told me that involvement in the union had brought about radical change in her life, making her feel like “a proud farm worker”, and providing her with a sense of “having a backbone” that supported her in standing tall and voicing her concerns to farm management. Such action enabled her and others like her to potentially gain respect from both co-workers and managers.

Miranda, also a shop steward, spoke appreciatively of how managers on her farm had started to see and respect her after she successfully intervened on behalf of a member who was threatened with dismissal. Having a sense that something was amiss in the way the case was handled, Miranda asked to
see the attendance register and noted that the person was on sick leave on the
day when the problem she was accused of having caused occurred. Armed
with this information, and with knowledge of the procedures that ought to be
followed in dismissal cases, Miranda challenged the formal structures and
brought the case straight to a top manager. She was proven right, and the
woman kept her job while the middle managers were allegedly reprimanded.

... From that day, they get respect for me ... And the top [manager] … if
they discuss something… he said: ‘Go and tell [Miranda], or if you have a
meeting, can you please call [Miranda] to sit in and listen to the stuff we
plan’ … They have respect for me, and he sees me now. You see, because I
was stepping on their toes … From that time, I saw … things have
changed … They [managers] greet us. They ask the workers: ‘How are
you? How is your day?’

Her account was undermined by a manager on the farm however, who in
an interview down-played the role of Miranda’s organisation and dismissed
unions as useless as I revert to below.

Labour researchers have suggested that notions of human dignity and
respect lie at the heart of union organising and are embedded in the more
concrete worker demands for material decency – from liveable wages to
adequate sanitation facilities (Gallin, 2001; Ross, 2013). Drawing on
fieldwork in male-dominated union spaces in South Africa, Moodie (2010)
and Barchiesi (2011) have further observed how labour activism in itself is
understood by some devoted union members as a vehicle to restore the
dignity of which work had deprived them. Such formulations should be read
vis-à-vis the powerful association between dignity and labour in the
discourses of both colonialists, the liberation movement and present-day
policy makers advocating for workfare programmes, as discussed in Chapter
One (Barchiesi, 2011, 2016). While one may note strong similarities between
Moodie’s and Barchiesi’s material and the narratives presented above, I
would suggest that Emily’s reflection also speaks to other, gendered notions
of respectability linked to activism.89 She indicates, I would carefully
suggest, that activism as a route to strengthening members’ sense of pride
and dignity entails not only resistance to exploitation at work, but also a
rejection of some of the violence embedded in gendered notions of
respectability, including in relation to physical appearance, (lack of)
education and visible marks of gender-based violence. According to this
reading, through involvement in a struggle for a better future together with

89For a comparison, see for instance de la Cadena (2000) on ‘respeto’ (respect) as an
alternative working-class moral code among market-place mestizas in Cusco, Peru. ‘Respeto’,
de la Cadena (2000:180) notes, defies elite ideas of domesticity and sexual decency and
emphasises values such as hard work and achievement.
other women, female union members are able to position themselves as respectable in new ways.

Kathryn, a long-term member working permanently on the farm where she resides, reflected on this topic while narrating how she had started to respect herself and be respected by the on-farm community and employer representatives in turn as a result of her involvement in the union.

[Before joining the union] I used to drink a lot, I had to be violent weekend times and that – (I) wasn’t a pretty face at all… But when I joined the group and… they learn [sic!] me how to be a woman again – and how to appreciate myself and appreciate my children and be loved. And that is why my community they start to – to love me again, to make me … one of them again. Because of my bad manners, people [previously] just turned their backs on me.

In the years prior to joining the union, Kathryn explains that she had at one point ended up in a physical fight with a (male) co-worker in the orchard – and she links this propensity for getting into trouble with her position as a shop steward of a confrontational, male-led union at the time. After this incident, she was reassigned to work in the kitchen of the farm owner – a move she speaks of as the employer wanting to teach her manners, something he imagined could be attained through performing feminised work within a secluded, domestic space. Kathryn’s reflection above however suggests that involvement in the union offered an alternative route to becoming respectable, given that she conformed to some gendered expectations. The most important part, she suggests, was to demonstrate to other community members that she was a responsible person, including through refraining from drinking, reasserting her position as a mother and devoting time to union work.90 One may thus suggest that this engagement enabled her to embody a recognisable and respectable gendered subject position.

Elaine Salo’s (2003, 2009) and Fiona Ross’s (2010) theorising of the gendered notion of respectability, ordentlikheid, drawing on longitudinal ethnographic work in marginalised Afrikaans-speaking urban dwellings near Cape Town, may be helpful in interpreting Kathryn’s narrative.91 In Salo’s

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90 There are striking similarities here with how Beverley Skeggs understands respectability among young, white working-class women in Britain attending caring courses. “Responsibility as one of the key signifiers of respectability is demonstrated through self-performances, such as conduct and manners, or through the care and obligations to others (e.g. familial, voluntary and occupational caring)” (2002:56).

91 The notion of ‘ordentlikheid’ has profoundly influenced social history among coloured and white residents of the Cape since colonial times. It is associated with Christian values, family-orientation, ‘proper’ behaviour, including respect for the community’s spatial and moral boundaries, and devotion to the group one belongs to (R. Ross, 1999; Ross, 2010; Pfigu, Gabriel and van der Waal, 2014; Salo, 2003, 2009; Teppo, 2015).
and Ross’s research settings, the social and physical work that primarily women undertook in order to be seen as moral beings involved caring for both appearances and people, and sustaining kin and friendship relations (Ross, 2010:36–49). Striving to live up to these ideals is a daunting task, however, in a context of precarity, poverty, uncertainty and violence, which undermines such endeavours and makes life unpredictable and rou/raw – ordentlikheid’s antithesis (Ross, 2010:36-49). While my aim here is not to scrutinise precisely how ordentlikheid was negotiated by Afrikaans-speaking female farm workers, I find the links between such gendered ideals and the notion of activism as a path to restoring dignity (of labour) to be productive in analysing how resistive subjectivities were formed among female farm workers. I suggest that one may think of (female-led) organisations, as Kathryn’s reflection indicates, as potentially offering spaces for members to reclaim their dignity, through both transcending and conforming to notions of gendered respectability in different ways. Many female activists not only struggled against attempts to undermine their sense of self and dignity in the workplace, but also faced parallel battles in communities and families, as I shall now briefly discuss.

Returning to the conversation in Emily’s house, she identified men’s violence as a key impediment to activism – the extreme way of governing the boundaries of female lives and enforcing norms of gender and sexuality. She used an example from her own life, where for years she had experienced verbal and physical abuse, and recalled an incident when her husband tried to prevent her from leaving for the annual congress of her trade union. On that day, she called the police – and a police van arrived at her house at the same moment as the commuter taxi coming to fetch her for the congress.

That Sunday I leave this house and it was a fight between me and my husband. He was drunk and he didn’t want me to go. He controlled my life and /.../ swearing at me and believed I was a bad woman. ‘You are going there for a man, you are not going to a meeting, you are lying to me’ and all that stuff they said to us as women, and also my husband. /.../ I was so tired and I had friends visiting me – a lady friend with her partner. And… she was also from the same organisation and – you feel ashamed in front of your friends or your kids! And then I saw this shoe of my friend with a nice heel. And I took that shoe and I stamped him [giggles], on his head. And the bleeding! But I was so angry and frustrated and disappointed and... sad in my inside, because I am a leader. I have to educate other women not to allow abuse in your life, so how can I allow this? And that… you sit with very frustrated emotions and feelings as a leader. You

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92 Fiona Ross (2010:42) draws here on Levi-Strauss’ distinction between raw and cooked. She translates ordentlikheid into English as decency, respectability and ‘rou’ as raw, rough, anti-social, uniformed. Beverley Skeggs (2002) similarly highlights the long history of dividing the British working classes into the opposing categories of ‘rough’ and ‘respectable’, and the strong link between respectability and moral authority.
have to stand in front of people, educate them ... but in the meantime you are also a victim of abuse.

Leaving for the congress that Sunday, Emily says she felt *deurmekaar* (confused) and sad, and could not share the excitement of her fellow activists, but had to pretend. As she opened up to a union colleague, however, it turned out that she had also faced violence on that same day.

And then we could talk and cry together ... And then... we could laugh at our lives. We could talk and we laughed to each other at ... what happened to us on these specific days.

Elsewhere too, female farm labourers related experiences of husbands physically trying to prevent their wives from attending meetings, or of being bad-mouthed by community members, who suggested that activism-related travels were merely an excuse for meeting lovers in other cities. According to Emily, the female-led union provided a supportive space where women could share such ordeals, including of intimate partner violence, that were often considered taboo to raise elsewhere. She suggests, however, that from her position as a leader there followed self-expectations that she should have risen above the structures creating the conditions for such violence, refusing to ‘allow’ abuse in her own life.

It is important to note, however, that not everyone experienced female-only farm worker spaces as equally safe and inclusive. Such spaces were predominately home to coloured Afrikaans-speaking workers, many of whom were or had until recently been residing permanently on farms. As discussed in Chapter Three, the experiences of this specific group of farm women at times tended to be conflated with the experiences of all female farm workers, contributing to placing black African and migrant female workers in a discursive shadow (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). To take just one example, Nomabongo, an activist hailing from the Eastern Cape who had lived for years in the Western Cape farmlands, pointed out that being the “one and only [black person] between the coloureds” at times made her feel uncomfortable, and recalled situations when fellow activists used the deeply racist term ‘kaffir’ in referring to black African people. Elsewhere, black African female interlocutors noted that the problems they faced on farms or in communities were not prioritised by organisations, and lamented how difficult it was to make their voices heard in such spaces, including due to the decision to only use Afrikaans in many forums.

To sum up, I have suggested in this section that active involvement in (female-led) organisations was regarded by some female farm workers as a potential path to strengthening one’s sense of pride, respect and dignity. This

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93 Using the k-word amounts to hate speech and is punishable by law in South Africa.
relied on adhering to some notions of gendered respectability – such as responsibility and mothering – while rejecting or transcending others, including the entanglement between a community’s physical, social and moral boundaries (Salo, 2003), which could render travelling to represent one’s organisation in other areas suspicious. Exposure to violence and precarity could, however, undermine such endeavours, in spite of efforts to break away from the stigma and shame embedded in the symbolic and direct forms of violence that female farm workers encountered.

**Community struggles, power and respect**

Experiences of being seen and treated with respect through one’s activism did not only emanate from strictly labour-related engagements, but could equally be linked to involvement in other community struggles. In this section of the chapter, I shall briefly look at how a loosely knit group of female farm labourers in the rural town of De Doorns, most of whom had worked and lived for many years on farms, narrated their experiences of organising and resistance, what it meant to them and how it affected their position within the locality. Their reflections, as I will show, complicate what women’s organising as farm workers entails, including since they engaged in complexly connected struggles around labour, service delivery, gender-based violence and crime prevention.

In the Hex River Valley surrounding De Doorns, most farms produce table grapes, and in the highly seasonal production process, women continue to be the preferred labourers. Access to an income during at least parts of the year is likely to be one of the factors contributing to the relatively strong voice that the group of primarily seasonally employed coloured women had, both during the 2012–2013 unrest and in everyday community matters. As Elaine Salo has noted, coloured adult women historically played important roles in shaping local moral economies in the Western Cape, linked to their positions as preferred labourers in the urban-based textile industry and as intermediaries between the apartheid bureaucracy and coloured communities (Salo, 2003). Acting from a respectable position as mothers, to whom the comparatively generous apartheid-era child welfare grant was distributed, the women visited administrative offices for welfare, housing, education and prisons, bringing forward community concerns (Salo, 2003). After the textile industry collapsed and social grants were drastically reduced, however, women’s position started to be challenged. In Salo’s research site, the township Manenberg near Cape Town, gangsters began to dispute senior

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94 As noted in Chapter Three, a survey by the Hex River Table Grape Association (HTA), cited in Visser and Ferrer (2015:154), indicates that nearly twice as many women as men are employed on table grape farms in the Hex River Valley during peak season.
women’s power to define the public sphere as ‘moral’ and became increasingly important arbiters of local personhood (Salo, 2003). While De Doorns is decidedly a different context, I would carefully suggest that Salo’s analysis is helpful for understanding power dynamics here, too.

Dene, Aunty Lily, Aunty Jennie and Aunty Lavona were some of the central figures in the local structure of a women’s organisation, and played important roles in the province-wide protests. Like several others in the group, they claimed to be unable to find work the following season due to this involvement. Reflecting on the causes of the ‘farm worker strike’, they, like many others, referred to how farm labourers have struggled under difficult conditions for generations. Still, when asked to describe their own motives for getting involved, the answers I received were to some extent delinked from their personal work experiences. I was told that, on good days during peak season, they often earned well above the daily minimum wage, being skilled and fast workers who could benefit from the piece-work system.

Dene, a middle-aged woman who had lost her work due to disputes with her employer during the strike period, suggested that a concrete aim of protesting was to ensure stability of income throughout the year for permanently employed workers living on farms, given that the off-season offered fewer opportunities to earn extra. Aunty Lavona, who had recently left farm work linked to a workplace accident, also spoke of how she became involved in order to “fight for our farm workers” – seemingly referring to other (real?) farm workers: permanent employees living on farms (see Chapter Three). The women in the group further described their role as that of local leaders, and spoke of youngsters in the area as ‘our children’, thus positioning themselves as mothers.

Moreover, I witnessed, and was often reminded of, how much time some of the leading activists in the group devoted to supporting others, never turning down calls for help, at times to the detriment of their own well-being. The discursive resources that the women drew on in re-presenting themselves thus invoked feminised ideals of self-sacrifice, responsibility and mothering.95 Such ideals, as noted above, are central to gendered notions of respectability – where, as research in another part of the Western Cape farmlands has proposed (van der Heijden, 2014:159), ‘doing good’ for one’s community is important for being perceived as a ‘good woman’. Moreover, the women emphasised their own power and the voice they had in the community, which in turn was closely linked to their activist engagements, including openly confronting farmers and other power holders and voicing community concerns vis-à-vis the authorities – reminiscent of coloured women’s position in urban spaces under apartheid (Salo, 2003).

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95 See Mills (2005) for similar points in research on female labour activists in Bangkok.
As I visited the group regularly during the season following the strike, and less frequently during the years that followed, I was sporadically offered insight into some of their highly varied activist engagements. Once, I came along while they successfully intervened, and helped calm, a potentially violent conflict involving a gang from a neighbouring town that had allegedly come to recruit members at a local school, and local youth armed with hammers and knobkerries – a situation closely monitored and partly cordoned off by a large team of armed police officers. During the tense situation, two of the women boldly walked up to the crowd of impatient, visibly angered neighbourhood youngsters, stood in front of them and gave an improvised speech declaring their support and intention to help resolve the situation. From there, they hurried up to where the police were standing, asking them to refrain from intervening forcefully. Eventually, the crowd dispersed without any blood being shed.

On their own account, the women acted that day from a position as community leaders and ‘mothers’ seeking to protect local youth. The maternal identity appeared to allow them a legitimate platform from which to act. While resembling Elaine Salo’s elaborations on adult women’s position in the urban Western Cape, this also brings to mind how South African women in the nationalist discourse of both the ANC and white Afrikaners have historically been positioned as ‘mothers in the struggle’ and symbols of nationhood (Hassim, 2006; McClintock, 1991). As Anne McClintock notes, this traditional gender role offered legitimacy for women to actively partake in the fight for or against apartheid, using both peaceful and more violent technologies (McClintock, 1991, see also Britton and Fish, 2009; Hassim, 2006; Geisler, 2004). Militant grassroots struggles against white minority rule during the 20th century have also often been spearheaded by women – from the beer protests in Kwa-Zulu Natal during the 1920s and 1930s, to the famous 1956 women’s march against pass laws, to the 1970s–80s Crossroads campaign in defiance of apartheid laws preventing African families from settling in Cape Town (Hassim, 2006; Kaplan, 1997). Women also continued to form the backbone of the so-called ‘new’ social movements emerging across the country during the early 2000s, although they rarely reached leadership positions or received recognition as political actors (Benjamin, 2004; Erikkson, 2007).

Returning to De Doorns, during another visit, I joined some of the women from the group when they pursued a labour-related case at the local police station, where the door was open for them and their words were taken seriously, seniors not present being alerted of their visit via telephone. Whenever we strolled down the streets in the town centre, they would be approached by people asking for assistance, young men (skollie types in Aunty Lavona’s words)96 seeking advice in minor disputes, or farm workers

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96 The term commonly refers to a gangster, or someone naughty or ill-mannered.
who had been fired, evicted or sexually harassed on farms and were desperately looking for someone to help them. Reflecting on the incident with the local youth and outside ‘gangsters’, Aunty Lily suggested:

What I can see is that the community has a respect for us as women. The moment we went and stood in front of them, you can see they listen. Aunty Jennie added:
Even the police, the police are looking up to women in this area ... If the women go forward, then the police listen.

I was told on another occasion that some farmers in the area had started calling the leading activists among them ‘the big five’.\textsuperscript{97} Aunty Jennie, for instance, claimed that she was pushed out from a new workplace just days after being hired, when her identity became known to the employer, who told her “You’re one of the big five”. In spite of the women being known as powerful, their power could thus still be topped by white farmers denying them work, in a context where farm work offers one of the few avenues for working-class women to provide for their families. Unlike leading male activists in the area, the women were not co-opted into leadership positions in male-dominated unions but were rather asked to do the footwork for such organisations without remuneration.\textsuperscript{98} Moreover, they were at times subjected to name-calling and ridicule by other community members, who accused them of being mere attention-seekers.

This being said, through their labour and community activism, and presumably their respectable position as mothers, these women were taken seriously by many different actors, from police officers to young men associated with gangsterism, to shop stewards of male-dominated unions who would call them for advice. In describing how such recognition affected them, Dene and Aunty Lavona said that it made them feel “very proud”, “so high”, “very, very important” and “more powerful”.\textsuperscript{99} For some of the leaders in the group, this activism appeared to offer at least a temporary way out of farm work, through voluntary assignments for various organisations, some of which came with limited forms of remuneration.

The women’s strong position in the community was, I suggest, at least partly linked to them being perceived as having knowledge of human and labour rights, and being prepared to stand up for those rights by challenging injustices affecting the farm worker community, a topic to which I now turn.

\textsuperscript{97} A term used by the tourism industry, and hunters, to refer to the five most prominent animals on the savannah.

\textsuperscript{98} The women-led trade union Sikhula Sonke working primarily to strengthen the position of female farm workers is a notable exception to male-dominated unions.

\textsuperscript{99} Elsewhere, it has been suggested that, when women who are structurally disadvantaged self-present as powerful, this should be read as an outright refusal to be positioned as powerless (Skeggs, 2002:10).
‘Rights talk’ and resistive subjectivities

Speaking to female farm worker activists across the Western Cape during the post-strike moment, I often noticed how strongly some of them emphasised the importance of having knowledge about rights. The oft-used proclamation “I know my rights” appeared for many to represent a nodal point in their identity as a union member or community activist. By using what historian Jacob Dlamini has called a “language of rights” to oppose a “language of paternalism” in a conflict over legitimacy (Dlamini, 2015),100 the activists were not only able to challenge – at times successfully – profoundly unequal power relations in an acceptable and non-violent manner, but they could also strengthen their position as respectable moral beings. A language of rights thus appeared to operate as a meaningful yet flexible local discourse, in spite of the discrepancies between knowledge of human and labour rights and the often bleak prospect of accessing justice (here I draw on Morreira, 2013, see below).

As discussed in Chapter Three, paternalist labour regimes prevailed on commercial farms in the Western Cape after the abolition of slavery and well into the 20th century. Under paternalism, being a farm worker residing permanently on a farm entailed becoming absorbed into a community of shared interests – to become ‘part of the farm’ (Du Toit, 1993; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1998). Through this logic, lived experiences of deep power inequalities, violence and abuse were discursively subsumed under the idea of unity within the farm, and any threats to the farm community were constructed as coming from the outside only (Du Toit, 1993). Farm workers as rights-bearers, and speaking subjects in their own right, was a foreign notion under paternalism, which left no room for an independent civil society on farms (Du Toit, 1993).

While the past few decades have seen extensive shifts in the organisation of labour on farms, paternalist labour regimes and discourse still resonate in the present, also on farms that have adopted less personal management styles (Ewert and Hamman, 1996; Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996; Du Toit and Ewert, 2005). Farmers may, for instance, retain a close relationship to a small core

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100 Jacob Dlamini introduces these concepts in a book chapter analysing a legal dispute over the rights of ‘exempted natives’ to buy land in the Transvaal during the period just before the introduction of the 1913 Land Act. He defines a “language of paternalism” as “the grammar and syntax through which colonial officials … expressed what they saw as their mandate with regard to Africans”, and the opposing “language of rights” as “the myriad modes through which ‘exempted natives’ … could articulate claims for entitlements, privileges and rights as self-conscious subjects of the British Empire” (Dlamini, 2015:41). A “language of rights” enabled Africans to challenge the colonial authorities in a manner intelligible to the latter, in a battle over legitimacy – related to what Deborah Posel calls a “language of legitimation” – as opposed to a clash between irreconcilable ideologies (Posel, 1984, cited in Dlamini, 2015:41). While today’s context is obviously very different, I find these thought figures to still be relevant.
of on-farm, permanent workers, while leaving paternalist governance over the lives of off-farm and migrant workers to other authoritarian power figures, including foremen or labour brokers (Addison, 2014b; Bolt, 2016a; Bolt and Rajak, 2016).

Discourses of paternalism and discourses of rights may thus to some extent be conflated, with the claims and requests for favours that are typical of paternalist labour regimes at times articulated as rights (Du Toit, 1993; White, 2010). The increased emphasis on rights over the past few decades would be linked, among other things, to some labour and rural organisations having sought to break farm workers’ dependency on farmers through empowering them with knowledge of their (recently achieved) human and labour rights. A discourse of rights and its associated legal frameworks and organisations might, for some active members, possibly make up an alternative ‘mode of belonging’ through which farm workers attempt to make claims for resources and improved conditions (Rutherford, 2008).\(^\text{101}\)

Among the female labour activists whom I interacted with, some would repeatedly refer to a before and after knowing their rights, placing difficult experiences on farms in a (near or distant) past, when they lacked this awareness. Says Aunty Lily:

You know why I really became a community worker, way back? Something happened to one of my family members. And we didn’t know our rights … and because of that we couldn’t do anything … I said to myself: ‘I can’t do anything, but I won’t sit with my hands folded – and see that something happens to other people like that’ … And I met [women’s organisation] in 2000 … so I started getting involved … and, yeah, now I’m so wise … nobody can tell me about my farm worker rights, nobody! Nobody can tell me anything about the Children’s Act … because I know that!

Aunty Lily and several other farm workers repeatedly spoke with appreciation about receiving rights education within organisations and unions, with some suggesting that being part of such training had changed the ways in which they looked upon themselves and were met by others. Aunty Sandra, a coloured female farm worker with long experience of union work, for example, attributed her confidence and power (as a woman activist) to such processes.

Through the training that I got from [names two organisations], I am this strong woman that I am today … I can today fight for my rights, because I

\(^{101}\) White (2010:678), however, points out that female members of the union Sikhula Sonke want both their rights and to continue to be a part of the paternalist farm-as-family community.
know my rights.\textsuperscript{102}

The interplay between activists and staff members of farm worker organisations offering popular education thus emerged as one among several trajectories influencing the loud presence of a discourse of rights among some organised farm workers in the post-strike moment. The fact that many would formulate their grievances as workers using a language of rights is not surprising given political developments in South Africa, as well as beyond its borders, during the past few decades. In Africa south of the Sahara, “the willingness and ability to claim rights” has been called the most successful reform of post-colonial liberal democracies (Englund, 2000:579).

In the Western Cape, the extension of laws to protect farm workers’ labour rights and security of tenure from the early 1990s onwards has further enabled and encouraged farm labourers to conceive of themselves, and make claims, as rights-holding individuals. The prevalence of a discourse of rights should moreover be understood against the backdrop of broader trajectories of change during the transition from apartheid to multi-racial democracy, such as the adoption of a new constitution with its accompanying liberal institutions. While the overthrowing of apartheid, and Nelson Mandela as a person, are iconic within the global human rights movement, it was only in the mid-1980s that the ANC started to fully re-embrace a rhetoric of human rights – having previously rejected liberalism and its narrow focus on the rights-holding, independent individual (Dubow, 2012:87–112). Curiously, the Nationalist Party also began to champion rights during that period, lobbying for the protection of private property and (white) minority rights as the ANC rose to power (Dubow, 2012:104–107).

While the adoption of a rhetoric of rights is generally embraced as positive, some analysts caution that a hegemonic discourse of rights risks becoming rhetorical rather than liberating, since the possibility of having one’s rights protected, and not bargained away, still depends on how one is positioned within local and global power hierarchies (see e.g. Englund, 2004). Writing on Zimbabwean farm labourers, Rutherford (2008) has further suggested that, in order to fruitfully interrogate the increased interest in rights, one would do well to look beyond the concrete claims for rights of a particular identity category (e.g. farm workers’ labour rights), and to take into account the broader processes of identification and contestation shaping how resources are controlled and accessed. Moreover, Francis Nyamnjoh (2004) notes that the liberal democratic conceptualisation of rights tends to exclude locally intelligible ways of understanding human dignity and value

\textsuperscript{102} My perceived links with organisations, having at times been introduced to interlocutors by organisational leaders and in some instances having conversations with interlocutors in the presence of an organiser or elected representative of an organisation or union, was very likely to be one reason why some people kept giving credit to specific organisations during our conversations.
on the African continent, where creative responses have been forged which intertwine individual and community rights.

In her dissertation on the circulation of (human) rights discourses among Zimbabweans in Zimbabwe and South Africa, anthropologist Shannon Morreia (2013) demonstrates that ‘human rights’ functions as a useful, locally translated discourse, widely drawn upon in organising. The allure of ‘rights talk’, she argues, lies in its ability “to encompass varied ideologies and moralities, and to re-present them under the symbolically powerful banner of ‘human rights’” (Morreia, 2013:35). Such flexible, popular translations of human rights, however, clashed fundamentally with legal interpretations, exemplified in her study by Zimbabwean asylum seekers who experienced that what they claimed as human rights violations in their applications did not make them eligible for protection in South Africa. Morreia’s (2013) interlocutors regarded the ability to live a dignified life, look after their (close and extended) family and maintain relationships to be key aspects of human rights – emphasising cultural norms of sociality. This, she argues, speaks to local understandings of personhood for which upholding links with family and kin across generations, through care-giving, paying bride wealth and so on, is central to being a moral person (Morreia, 2013:162). These relational aspects of being human are emphasised in the philosophical concepts Ubuntu103 (Xhosa/Zulu) or Unhu (Shona), which may be seen to hold at its core the English term ‘dignity’ (Morreia 2013:160). Dignity, and being able to live a dignified life, was closely linked for Morreia’s (2013) interlocutors with their socio-economic situation, including being paid a fair wage that facilitates the maintenance of relations and the fulfilling of social obligations.

Fiona Ross (2010) makes similar observations, noting that residents in the informal settlement where she has done fieldwork link decency, and decent work, with having a stable and reliable income that facilitates the uninterrupted upholding of social ties throughout the year. Accordingly, they regarded seasonal and casual farm work as ‘not decent’, since it is short term, pays a low salary and generally does not allow workers to qualify for unemployment insurance, to cover expenses during the off-season. Ross’s

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103 A lot has been written about Ubuntu, with some referring to it as both an influential philosophical term (or a philosophy) and a dominant culture in much of sub-Saharan Africa (see e.g. Eze, 2008). Ubuntu is often referred to by way of the Zulu proverb “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, interpreted by Dzobo as “we are, therefore I am, and since I am, therefore we are” (Dzobo, 1992, cited in Eze, 2008:388). One’s subjectivity, according to this way of thinking, is “in part constituted by other persons with whom I share the social world” (Eze, 2008: 387). The term Ubuntu has been popularised both locally (by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu) and globally, where it has been appropriated by private companies as well as organisations (e.g. Ubuntu Cola, Linux OS Ubuntu). In South Africa, politicians have drawn on Ubuntu to encourage women in underprivileged communities to voluntarily, in return for a meagre stipend at best, provide home-based care for the many bed-ridden people suffering from TB, AIDS and other poverty-related diseases.
(2010) and Morreia’s (2013) analyses, I suggest, hold one among several keys to unlocking the deeper meanings embedded in the complex interplay between struggles for dignity, respectability and moral personhood, and the importance that activists place on having knowledge of rights. Female farm workers’ emphasis on rights should be understood, I suggest, as including both aspects of socio-economic precarity, which often fall outside of a labour law framework, and forms of racist and sexist treatment at work that may or may not fall under anti-discrimination legislation.

Returning to my study, some female activists spoke about being well versed in labour and human rights as a source of strength, confidence and pride — emphasising how it enabled them to stand up for themselves and others. The tension between self-presenting as a person knowing her rights, and being caught in a work situation where these rights are not respected, did, however, create difficulties. Nyarai, a Zimbabwean migrant farm worker who had been part of a local strike committee, explains that she opted not to return to a farm where she used to work at the start of the new season, because she considered treatment to be dehumanising — and the work situation far from ‘decent’. She suggested that if she had returned to work on the farm, she would have been acting like a person who did not know her rights — a position she wanted to avoid:

… if you’ve got a complaint [on the farm], they don’t want you to complain. They treat us as if we are not people … No matter how hard it is, how you feel … If you complain they said you’re going to be fired … So that is why I decided not to go there, I don’t want to go. Because I know my – my human rights. So I don’t want to be like someone who don’t know how … my rights is.

Nyarai’s reflection above suggests, in my reading, that returning to the farm would not only entail enduring an abusive situation: being perceived as a person who did not know her rights could also subvert the respect she had earned in the community, linked to her position on a local strike committee. Remaining true to the ideal of being a principled and knowledgeable activist came at a high cost, however, as Nyarai could not know for certain whether the informal work she engaged in would sustain her financially during the coming year – nor if she would be able to find other work should the need arise.

Emphasising her position as a person who had stood up for workers’ rights, she referred in what I read as a slightly condescending tone to those among her South African colleagues who had remained silent as people who did not know their rights. In doing so, she not only asserted her own respectable resistive position but also countered anti-foreigner discourses circulating in the Hex River Valley where she resided, in which
Zimbabweans were spoken of as too afraid to challenge farmers. Said Nyarai:

You know these South Africans – some, they’re afraid of complaining. They don’t know their rights. They said: ‘If I complain … If the boss heard that it’s me who complained about that … he’s going to fire me.’ That’s why they’re afraid of it.

In Nyarai’s case, her decision not to return to the farm for the new season had been preceded by attempts to openly challenge conditions in the workplace, including through a strike. The workers’ collective power was compromised the following season, however – something Nyarai and others relate to threats from the owner, retrenchments, and workers being let down by the union organiser. The harsh work pace and disrespect for workers’ humanity which she described as having ensued made her tense, her blood pressure rising dangerously high. In the end, she saw no other option than to leave.

Nomabongo, an experienced activist, similarly left a permanent job, and her home, on a wine farm as a response to being subjected to treatment that undermined her sense of dignity. As noted in Chapter Three, Nomabongo, who is originally from the Eastern Cape but has lived for many years in the Cape Winelands, spoke of how the combination of racist treatment at work, where she felt particularly targeted by her closest manager, and violence in the home finally became too much.

I didn’t have … the balance. I am going to the work – it’s not right. At home – you think … I’ve got no balance... I must leave one of those things. [Leave] marriage … or leave work.

She describes the farm where she had lived as pervaded by a clear racial hierarchy, where white people had a lot of privileges and watched each other’s backs, whereas coloured workers were slightly better treated than black people – for example being driven to the clinic whereas black people had to walk. At work, she was constantly met with suspicion and disrespect from her closest manager.

My boss … was very hard on me, I don’t know why. I asked her: ‘Why do you do this to me, I’m also a human being like you, why do you do this?’

Nomabongo describes how the manager scolded her and gave crude orders instead of asking politely, and never thanked her. Apart from understanding such treatment as being linked to racism, she also suggests that it was related to her involvement in party politics. Deciding that she could no longer face difficulties both at work and at home, Nomabongo filed
her resignation papers – and has since relocated to an informal settlement where she lives on her own. In spite of the hardships in the area, with high levels of poverty and violence, she describes living outside of farms as a relief, as no one monitors her every step as they did on the farm – an experience likely to have been influenced by her position as a black African permanent migrant, having grown up away from farms. While struggling financially during the time we were interacting, taking temporary work on farms under a labour broker and for the Department of Public Works, she made an effort to come across as a person who was coping well and living a respectable (activist) life in relation to her former employer. This involved avoiding at all costs being seen as resorting to what has elsewhere been described as the lowest form of struggle for survival – begging or searching for thrown-away food (Ross, 2010:108).

I’m telling you now, since I left my job they must not find me suffering, that I’m eating out of rubbish bins, I will stay strong. My son went to [do] casual [work] in the [wine] cellar the other day and they asked him where I am and if I am still involved in politics and he said: ‘Yes my mother is still involved in politics.’ I don’t work, but my son stood by me.

Nomabongo’s reflection speaks closely to the dignity and respectability that may emanate from a resistive position. It further illuminates some of the challenges that principled, politically engaged workers may face on farms. Even the individuals who reported receiving respect from farmers or managers due to their knowledge of rights needed to remain on the right side of the thin line between being perceived as knowledgeable and, importantly, respectful – or as someone who was too confrontational and thus disrespectful. Managing this balancing act would include, at least on some farms, not coming across as too slim (clever) or political. Several farm workers related how managers or farmers had told them to stop trying to be clever, or had labelled them political, when they questioned labour practices on farms. This, presumably, represented a transgression of the norms governing how someone perceived as a ‘farm worker’ should act (see also Du Toit, 1995). According to Aunty Lily, there is a close link between speaking openly about rights and being labelled political:

… if you know your rights, the farmers will always say you are political. I don’t know why they said we are political when we know our rights? … When you speak about your rights and say: ‘No, the law doesn’t say this, the law doesn’t say that… and … in there is written up, like … I must have my contract in my hands, I must read my contract’ … Then you are political.
Some farmers, it was claimed, would openly state that political farm workers would not be allowed on their farm. This was a common topic in conversations I had with the female community activists in De Doorns, who claimed to be struggling to find work in the post-strike period. During our interactions, the group narrative often developed as follows:

[Aunty Jennie]: Last week I phoned [a relative] and asked: ‘When are we gonna start work?’ And he said: ‘No, no, no – I don’t want you on my farm!’
[Aunty Lily]: [turning to me] He [the relative] is also a manager on the farm ... Now they say we are too talkative and we are – too political, as we are politicians!
[Dene]: … because we know our rights!

In the experience of these women, some farmers or managers thus equated knowledge of labour and human rights with being political. While a discourse of rights has generally been understood as associated with more moderate, reform-oriented strategies compared to discourses of power, that are more closely connected with revolutionary strategies (see e.g. Mamdani, 1993), rights talk and politics appeared in this context to be viewed as two nodes on a sliding scale, where activists who know their rights may mobilise the power of the worker collective and jointly demand that laws are adhered to. Mr Karolus, a leader of a new (in my reading conservative) farm worker association that purported to truly represent farm workers and was critical of the 2012–2013 unrest, accordingly expressed a clear distance between farm workers and politicians. In an interview, he envisioned another path towards respectability and dignity for farm workers: as self-sacrificing servants not only of the farm but of the whole country – and laughed at the idea of farm workers assuming political subjecthood:

Now, farm workers are not politicians, ha-ha. We do what we think we love the most – to do our work. And it’s a pleasure for us – for me as a farm worker – to wake up in the morning, I said to myself: ‘I have a land to give some food.’

Such romanticised understandings of farm workers drew heavily on paternalist discourse, within which farms are constructed as harmonious, conflict-free communities despite compelling evidence of violence and disunity – an understanding that is perhaps only relevant to some among the small group of permanent workers who have advanced on the job, to which Mr Karolus belonged. That employers, and anti-union farm worker

104 While communicating criticism of ‘political’ farm workers, this reflection presents another way of rejecting negative stereotypes of farm workers as poor, uneducated and docile, instead emphasising the important roles played by farm workers in feeding the nation.
organisations, would want workers to stay clear of politics is not surprising, however, given the tension surrounding labour conditions on farms, where negative publicity is common, and may be detrimental to farm businesses.\textsuperscript{105} Some farm workers who were active in unions or had taken part in strikes described how relations in their workplaces had become frosty afterwards. Requests for favours from farmers, such as an advance on salary, would be abruptly turned down, they suggested, despite such practices having previously been common (see also Visser and Ferrer, 2015). Rowena, a coloured female farm worker involved in the De Doorns protests, noted:

\ldots before they ask maybe: ‘Sir, can you help me with 400 rand?’ [He] give him without \ldots moaning or talking. Now, they are always: ‘Hey, go to the strike, ask the committee, ask Nosey.’\textsuperscript{106}

Such employer responses resonate closely with the testimonies recorded by Naidoo, Klerck and Manganeng (2007) from a public hearing around the new sectoral determination in 2004. In the hearings, farm workers and councillors claimed that farmers told them to go and ask Mandela or Mbeki whenever they pleaded for labour and social rights to be implemented:

These attitudes among farmers contribute to the politicisation of labour and tenure law enforcement on commercial farms and reinforce the need for parallel statutory remedies for workers. (Naidoo, Klerck and Manganeng, 2007:37, see also Human Rights Watch, 2011:76)

Making claims that read as ‘political’ in a post- or neo-paternalist framework, moreover, challenges the authority of farmers, and their wives, who previously, it has been suggested, were the only people who could ascend to positions as speaking subjects on farms (Du Toit, 1993; Waldman, 1996). By telling workers to go and ask non-white male leaders for assistance – be it ‘fathers of the [non-racial South African] nation’ like Mandela or Mbeki or spokespersons of unions – or even an immaterial thing like the strike, farmers showed open hostility towards the formalisation and juridification of labour relations, as Naidoo, Klerck and Manganeng (2007) point out. Moreover, it exposed, I suggest, the violence and arbitrariness of previous farmer paternalism, as well as a ‘wounded pride’ and anger linked to having been replaced as the sole patriarch dictating the rules of engagement on farms.

Female farm workers who challenged established local patriarchal orders – including through strike action – reported being told by farmers or managers that “you don’t have respect any more”, signalling that they had

\textsuperscript{105} As I noted in Chapter Two, the key question for the farmer who generously allowed me to take part in and observe work on his farm for a few days was whether I was political or not.

\textsuperscript{106} Referring to Nosey Pieterse, (former) President of trade union BAWUSA.
forfeited their position as (possibly) respectable in the eyes of employers. Through claiming positions as persons with knowledge of human and labour rights, these women further defied the negative perceptions of farm workers that prevail in the commercial farmlands, expressed through stereotypes and derogatory labelling of farm workers as scared of farmers, unskilled, ‘dom’ (dumb) or drinkers. As discussed above, some also successfully forged a link between ‘knowing one’s rights’ and a locally intelligible version of activist respectability, independent from (some) farmers’ and managers’ anachronistic representations of respect and morals. In doing so, I suggest, they contributed to opening up spaces for new, respectable farm worker identities to emerge – associated with notions such as knowledge, courage and independence. In the process, the activists faced attempts to undermine and belittle them, and even to exclude them from a position as farm worker altogether.

Several workers, like Nomabongo and Nyarai, saw no other option but to leave their work in a situation where assaults on their sense of dignity and self-worth continued unabated. Leading female protesters in De Doorns also claimed that they could not find farm work the following seasons, a condition which some perhaps partly embraced, seeking new ways of getting by, linked to their activist position. Regardless of whether they left farm work by force or by choice, this nevertheless draws attention to the gap between knowledge of rights and access to justice, and the sometimes unrealistic faith in what can be achieved through a legal framework alone. Before concluding the chapter, I present an example which speaks to both the possibilities and the limitations of organising strategies relying primarily on a framework of rights and on ‘orderly’ relations on farms.

Moderate union strategies and the policing of borders

Earlier in this chapter, I wrote about Miranda, the union representative who reflected upon how managers on the farm where she worked had started to see her, greet her and respect her after she successfully challenged how a dismissal case was handled. In this section, I return to Miranda – and her colleague Kathryn – and their experiences of organising a picket on their farm on a national day of action during the 2012–2013 protests. The reactions of management at the time, I suggest, expose how the firm but ‘orderly’, ‘respectful’ and non-confrontational strategies their organisation advocates operate within boundaries policed by violence.

Both Kathryn and Miranda belong to a relatively privileged class of permanent workers, living and working on a farm where relations between the union, which organised 30 percent of the permanent workforce at the time, and the employer were formalised, and conditions and salaries exceeded the statutory minimum. While Kathryn praised the union’s
relationship with farm management, a senior manager I interviewed did not speak of her union in equally positive terms.

I have very little … experience with them … They are not that involved on [name of farm] … I must actually beg them sometimes to get involved … They helped me the other day getting an exemption thing from the Department of Labour [concerning overtime during peak season] and so on … But apart from that, no … [The union] doesn’t negotiate, we tell them our plans.107

Talking in general about trade unions in the agricultural sector, the manager referred to them cruelly as “a useless bunch”, only interested in subscription fees and not servicing members who faced problems – an analysis that was repeated by farmers and managers I interacted with elsewhere. He further suggested that more radical unions would stir up emotions and anger, get workers to go on an unprotected strike and not be there to support them when the poor outjie loses his job – a statement which positions farmers/managers as innocent in relation to dismissals of striking workers, and militant workers as male. He at first described the relationship with Miranda’s union as distant, almost non-existent, but then praised an individual (female) union leader for engaging in feminised activities such as setting up a vegetable garden, and organising awareness raising on HIV/Aids and domestic violence.

In the interview, he thus presented two polarised, gendered interpretations of confrontational (masculine) versus moderate (feminine) trade union strategies – unions as troublemakers causing (male) workers to lose their jobs, or as acceptable but completely harmless creatures which at best may be ‘useful’ when the farm company seeks to bend the rules, or be seen as supportive of workers’ welfare – in ways thus confirming the bleak picture of unions offered by Klerck and Naidoo (2003), discussed above. This reading may very well have been informed by a desire to down-play unions in front of me, I cannot know. Small cracks in this dismissive attitude emerged, however, when we spoke about the picket Kathryn and Miranda were part of organising during the province-wide protests. Around that time, the farm company had intended to pay out an annual bonus to permanent staff, but due to the picket it was withheld, I was told, as the company wanted to see what the workers “were up to”. During that time, the understanding relationship that Miranda had praised was disrupted. She recalls:

...at that time, they didn’t trust us. Because they know, and they see on the news what’s happening on the other farms … So they come forward with

107 To gain organisational rights, enabling collective bargaining, the union must recruit 50% of the employees on the farm (or a section of the farm).
dogs and security and stuff. We said: ‘There’s no need for you here! ... We are not into violence!’... And we tell them – but they don’t trust us because they’re too afraid.

In spite of the presence of security guards with dogs, Miranda and Kathryn spoke of the joy and sense of purpose they gained as leaders of the all-female team organising the half-day picket. They made sure to carefully follow procedures and do things “the orderly way”, consulting management about taking time off, but also attempting to unite workers who have been kept apart through involving both (coloured) permanent workers and (black African male) seasonal migrants residing in on-farm compounds. Although the organising team vowed to follow non-violent principles, this commitment was not trusted – something which Kathryn discounted on the basis of the leaders being (respectable) women, and thus presumably by default non-violent.

[Some] people went back to the managers and [said]: ‘Oh, they said they’re gonna burn down the farm ... and they gonna do this, and ...’ But we are the ladies – we are the speakers at that meeting! There was no man talking!

With a list of demands, the key being a substantial wage increase for seasonal workers, Miranda, Kathryn and 50 or 60 other people marched towards the gate of the farm and onto the road, peacefully as they had promised, while holding up placards with their demands and asking that the farmer and labour brokers come there to speak to them directly. Kathryn said:

And that was very embarrassed for the farmers ... because [the manager] has to go ... from the office down to the road there to talk to the people ... And so the owner of the farm also was very furious with us... He said to us ‘Why can’t we talk like civil people around a table?’ But we never ever got a chance to talk to him! We had just to stop there at [the manager’s] office.

According to Kathryn and Miranda, an agreement was signed there on the spot, in which management undertook to raise the wages of seasonal workers by 20 rand per day (on top of the then minimum wage), and make other improvements such as providing free protective clothing and maternity leave for seasonal workers. As she came back to work the next day, Miranda describes how a middle-manager saluted her with respect, acknowledging the power of ‘strong women’.

My manager came to me … and he said to us: ‘I take my hat off for somebody that stands up for what they want.’ And he said: ‘I will see that
you get paid’ [registering a leave day instead of deducting it from the salary].

The top manager, however, downplayed the picket during our interview, claiming that nothing was achieved through it – except for the re-establishment of a forum for seasonal workers. Still, his comment-in-passing, on how the company withheld the bonus because of the picket, together with information on how guards with dogs were deployed, opens up space for other interpretations. It signals, I suggest, both a readiness at the slightest sign of threat to the status quo to withdraw any privileges afforded to better positioned workers, like a bonus, and demonstrating preparedness to immediately respond to any sign of worker militancy with violence. The manager’s belittling of the union and refusal to give recognition to the women leaders for successfully organising a non-violent picket during a period characterised by distrust and open confrontation, may further be read as an attempt to undermine their “sense of worth or value” (Bourgeois and Scheper-Hughes, 2004:2). I would further carefully suggest that the precarious negotiations involved in this ‘orderly’ engagement with employers drew on both a knowledge of rights and being perceived as respectable, exemplified here by the assertion that a meeting addressed by ‘ladies’ only would never advocate the use of violence.

Conclusion: ‘rights talk’ and activist respectability

In this chapter, I have explored how female farm workers spoke of and gave meaning to their experiences of labour and community organising during the post-strike moment. I have focused particularly on narratives centring on how resistive (or activist) subjectivities are formed, and what it means to claim a position as a female activist against the backdrop of precarity, paternalist legacies and dehumanisation in farming areas. I drew mainly on interactions with coloured women who had lived and worked for a long time on farms.

An important theoretical departure point was the notion of ‘dignity of labour’, which was drawn upon in different albeit parallel ways by colonialists, the liberation movement and present-day policy makers (Barchiesi, 2011). Labour researchers have stressed that, at the heart of labour organising, lies a struggle for respect and the defence of one’s human dignity, which informs the concrete material demands articulated by workers (Gallin, 2001; Ross, 2013). In a South African context, Barchiesi (2011) and Moodie (2010), have further observed how leaders and members in predominately male union spaces have conceived of partaking in labour struggles as bringing about a dignity that work itself may have failed to offer. In many ways, this resembles the female farm worker narratives analysed in
this chapter, which are replete with references to how co-workers, community members and some employer representatives started to see and respect them due to their labour or broader community activism. In addition to this, I suggested that the women’s positions as dignified resistive subjects depended on adherence to (some) notions of gendered respectability, while other, more violent, notions were rejected or transcended (Salo, 2003; Ross, 2010).

The women notably accentuated elements of responsibility, self-sacrifice and mothering when speaking of their activism, while challenging gendered restrictions on mobility, including by travelling out of town to attend meetings. Participation in farm worker spaces catering especially for women was spoken of by some as enabling them to reject feelings of shame linked to everyday experiences of violence and humiliation in the farmlands, thus contributing to refuting symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004). Such endeavours were hampered, however, by gendered power structures at work and in communities, leaving some vulnerable to intimate partner violence, while others felt excluded due to their race/ethnicity or nationality.

A seemingly important route for female activists to have their grievances taken seriously and being respected, as well as to assert their moral personhood, was through acquiring knowledge of labour and human rights – and demonstrating the courage to claim those rights. The oft-repeated phrase “I know my rights” served the dual purpose, I suggested, of legitimising critique of labour regimes on farms within a recognised and state-sanctioned framework, while also giving female activists status as intermediaries between co-workers or community members and employers or state institutions. A discourse of rights, as discussed by Morreira (2013), among others, could further be used to incorporate issues beyond more strictly interpreted labour rights, relating to dignity and social justice.

Through their resistive positions, I suggest, the women further dispelled negative stereotypes that depict farm workers (and women) as uneducated, unskilled and too scared of farmers to dare voice their concerns, thus contributing to inscribing the identity of farm worker with new meanings: knowledge, power and respect. This respectable position was a precarious one, however, as workers speaking openly about labour and human rights risked being labelled ‘slim’ (clever), political or trouble-makers – something which could exclude them from a position as a ‘real’ and employable farm worker altogether. Some, moreover, felt compelled to leave farms where undignified treatment continued unabated, even when lacking alternative work, including because they did not want to be seen as someone who did not know her rights. This draws attention to the discrepancy between having rights on paper while facing continued structural and direct forms of violence at work and in the community. The ‘farm worker strike’, which I turn to in the next chapter, may be seen as an attempt to protest – and bridge
– this gap. As I shall discuss, the ‘strike’ brought to the surface questions of what forms of “avoidable insults to basic human needs” are counted as violence in popular discourse, and which actors are perceived to be violent (Galtung, 1990:292).
Chapter 6 | Snap! The ‘farm worker strike’ as a response to slow violence

In this chapter, I discuss the 2012–2013 ‘farm worker strike’ in the Western Cape as a moment when some rural workers’ patience to endure poverty and inequality, and the lack of meaningful transformation in post-apartheid South Africa snapped (Ahmed, 2017, see below). This made visible the bitter experiences of socio-economic deprivation, racism and premature deaths linked to the slow violence of poverty in commercial farming areas, which I have discussed in the previous chapters (Nixon, 2011; Kruger, 2014). It further actualised questions about the links between violence and dignity. The labour unrest was made possible by unexpected alliances between people who have often been divided and kept apart on farms and in communities linked to hierarchies of race/ethnicity, nationality and gender. At the same time, it exposed divisions and disunity among differently positioned farm workers and rural dwellers. The fact that workers initially organised independently of labour organisations indicated that such groupings had failed to reach out to, or provide a platform for, the growing numbers of farm workers in insecure positions to voice their concerns.

As alluded to earlier, the protests brought a number of contentious issues to the fore: Were protesters ‘real’ farm workers who could purport to speak on behalf of people labouring on farms? Why were both the ‘strike’ and the response from the state and capital so messy and violent? Whose resistance was recognised, whose voices were heard and who appeared to be particularly affected by the backlash after the protests? In this chapter, I attempt to speak to these contestations, drawing primarily on the narratives of workers, farmers and managers residing in the vicinity of 11 of the 25 rural centres to which protest action spread (Ntsebeza, 2013). My analysis of how these differently positioned actors understood and gave meaning to the labour unrest uses two interlinked theoretical departure points: an analytic

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108 As noted in Chapter One, while in popular discourse, the events of late 2012 and early 2013 is referred to as the farm worker strike, many analysts refrain from using this term, as the protests involved a broad range of actors and concerned also non-labour related issues (see e.g. Ntsebeza, 2013). I consider the events to contain elements of both an unprotected strike among farm labourers and a more broad based uprising in rural areas (see also Wilderman, 2015), and alter between the terms ‘farm worker strike’, ‘protests’ and ‘unrest’ in the text. In the dissertation, it is the labour related aspects of the protests that are in focus.
sensibility towards intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013) and a reading of the strike as taking shape against a backdrop of various forms of violence that permeated the Western Cape commercial farming areas: symbolic, structural, slow and direct – and the violence of globalisation under neoliberalism.

As I will attempt to demonstrate in this chapter, recognition of power hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality among the protesters – including in relation to notions of authentic farm worker identities – may broaden and complicate our understanding of what transpired. Paying attention to how a “violence continuum” (Schepers-Hughes, and Bourgois, 2004:19) shapes everyday life in the farmlands may also make the violent and messy nature of the protests more comprehensible.

Taken together, these two perspectives inform a discussion on the interlinkages between precarity, violence and resistance. In the next section, I start by presenting one possible way of untangling the complex events of 2012–2013.

The ‘farm worker strike’: a brief and partial historicisation

When farm workers in De Doorns embarked on a mass stay-away in early November 2012, blocked the national road and sported placards demanding a salary of 150 rand per day – a doubling of the minimum wage – both outsiders and people who knew the sector well were shocked and emotional. Labour analysts and staff members of rural organisations whom I spoke to said they had never expected a protest of this scale and nature to occur, spreading as it did to at least 25 rural towns and involving tens of thousands of people (see also Andrews, 2012; Ntsebeza, 2013). Farm workers whom I interacted with in other parts of the province also experienced a sense of disbelief upon seeing the De Doorns protesters on TV – for some, this was followed by feelings of euphoria inspiring solidarity action, while others were horrified by what they saw as disorder, chaos and violence (see also Wilderman, 2015). Media reports at the time featured the testimonies of white farmers, who expressed anger and feelings of betrayal at the prospect of familial ties built on acts of charity and support conditioned upon allegiance suddenly being (ungratefully) broken.109

The shared sense of the strike as a rupture exposed how hitherto dominant representations of farm workers had become outdated. As noted in Chapters Three and Five, for a long time research had focused primarily on coloured

109 In an article in Daily Maverick, Rebecca Davis (2013) cites from an open letter by a female farmer carrying the following message to farm workers during the strike period: “When you said you were hungry we have brought you food, when you forgot your lunch I have made you sandwiches. You have been part of our family and part of every celebration we have ever had. If you want to strike today, then don’t bother coming back.”
workers residing on farms, and consequently it depicted working conditions as prevailed not only by extreme power inequalities, abysmal wages and racism, but notably also by farm management’s control over workers’ lives. This control was exacerbated by the tying of the occupancy of houses to the work contract, and restrictions on the right to receive visitors after hours. Given these limitations, farm workers had been believed to be too dependent on farmers to dare to engage in sustained open defiance, further aggravated by political inexperience, as popular movements had not managed to mobilise in the farmlands during late apartheid (Ntsebeza, 2013).\footnote{Ntsebeza (2013) draws attention to another aspect of why the uprising was considered so unlikely, namely that concerns of the rural poor in South Africa have over the past decades been articulated primarily by NGOs, and not by community-led movements, unlike during the 1960s, when rural dwellers self-organised to resist the forced removals associated with the apartheid government’s betterment schemes.}

The ‘farm worker strike’ was thus unprecedented and historical, and in the seasons that followed it was a constant point of reference for many people in the sector, although, with time, the tendency to speak of before and after the ‘strike’ faded. Thinking with Sara Ahmed (2017), who has introduced the term ‘snap’ in order to creatively and positively explore painful breaking points in feminist lives, one may similarly envision the farm worker protests as a moment when something irrevocably snapped. Using the metaphor of a twig that, giving into pressure, loudly interrupts what for those unaffected had appeared to be harmonious silence, Ahmed (2017:188-189) writes:

A snap seems the start of something, a transformation of something; it is how a twig might end up broken in two pieces. A snap might even seem like a violent moment; the unbecoming of something. But a snap would only be the beginning insofar as we did not notice the pressure on the twig.

The eruption of protests in November 2012, which rapidly develop into large-scale unrest, was thus heard as a snap – by the farming industry, politicians and many farm workers – in spite of the fact that pressure on the collective twig had been building up over centuries of oppression. As noted in Chapter Three, the previous few decades had seen a further diversification and precarisation of employment relations and the influx of new groups of workers – changes to which dominant representations of farm workers in the Western Cape were slow to adapt. This, coupled with the fact that more workers lived outside of farms, and for better or worse were less able to make claims on farmers for the provision of housing, benefits or favours, contributed to patterns of paternalist dependency crumbling away or taking new forms. Since workers became oriented towards rural towns rather than farms and since seasonal or casual farm work often made up just one of several livelihood strategies for marginalised rural or urban people, the
identity of farm worker became increasingly fragmented (Greenberg, 2010). Moreover, the introduction of laws and regulations aimed at protecting farm workers and strengthening a culture of human rights had shifted local discourse so that collective action to claim one’s rights became a thinkable option, at least for some of the people working on farms, as discussed in Chapter Five (see also Wilderman, 2015).

While the political conditions for large-scale protest may thus be understood to have been ripe, the availability of networks and structures through which mobilisation may happen are also necessary pre-conditions for collective action (Ballard et al., 2006:3–8). This, according to analysts, was enabled by new technology, migration networks, experience from service delivery protests and a concentration of many workers in rural towns as well as the more critical mindset of a younger generation of farm workers (Andrews, 2012; Wilderman, 2015). In addition to this, such a mobilisation may be understood to have necessitated the pre-existence of shared emotions, or “structures of feeling”, on the basis of which common grievances could be articulated (Williams, 1977, in Moodie, 2010).

The farm worker protests notably broke out only three months after the wild-cat strike at a mine in the North West Province, where 34 mine workers were shot dead by police near the town of Marikana, several of them in front of TV-cameras. The Marikana massacre, to date the deadliness state-sanctioned violence against black (male) workers since the fall of apartheid, shook South Africa deeply. The anger it provoked most likely contributed fuel enabling farm workers to snap: people who moved around in strike hotspot areas reported hearing frequent references to Marikana at the time (see also Andrews, 2012). This aside, a couple of local strikes in De Doorns have been identified as the immediate triggers for the massive labour unrest (Knoetze, 2012; Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015).

During the initial strike, which I write about in the next section, protesters were almost exclusively black African female workers, including migrants from other provinces or further afield in Africa, who were employed on insecure contracts and living outside of the farms. In the large-scale protests that followed, participants were also predominately off-farm seasonal and casual workers, many of them women and migrants (Andrews, 2012;  

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111 Personal communication with staff members of organisations supporting farm worker organising.

112 In a paper on the farm worker uprising, Jesse Wilderman (2015) suggests a number of factors that were important for the fast and far-reaching spread of the protests. These include: 1) TV broadcasts on the De Doorns protests, where farm workers were given a chance to voice their concerns without mediation from unions or organisations; 2) the rapid establishment of local coordinating committees, uniting organisations already active in the areas; 3) the presence of extensive networks enabled by migration and off-farm settlement; and 4) the innovative use of cheap and accessible communication technologies to facilitate instant, large-scale information sharing (through WhatsApp, chat groups etc).
Ntsebeza, 2013; Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015). While the standard literature on trade unions understand these precariously positioned categories of workers to be the most difficult to organise, in the Western Cape farming context they were initiators of the labour unrest, albeit more rarely union members. Permanently employed workers, whose whole families often depend on farmers for salaries, housing and other forms of support, were generally more reluctant to take part.

In places like De Doorns, vocal local residents, including some who had worked most of their lives on farms, spoke to journalists, using their real names and appearing on pictures or live broadcast, passionately sharing their anger and frustration about the plight of farm workers, in spite of the obvious risks involved, as they might be fired or not re-hired afterwards. The radical meaning of the decision to speak out should be understood both vis-à-vis the (post-)paternalist relations of dependency in the farmlands where few other jobs are available – and in light of the narratives of symbolic violence, verbal abuse and dehumanisation discussed in Chapter Four.

If we think of the eruption of the protest as a snap, we may consider how several previous ‘truths’ were audibly disproved, including that of farm workers’ docility. Moreover, when thousands of farm workers snapped – other rural residents did so too, with youth, the unemployed and small-scale farmers forming part of the protests. The demands raised were both workplace related – besides the 150 rand per day, important because it was relevant to both on-farm and off-farm workers, also improved on-farm housing, shorter working days and maternity benefits – and related to service provision, with calls for free (or subsidised) municipal services, housing and land, primarily addressing the different layers of government (Ntsebeza, 2013; Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015).

It is not surprising that numerous grievances surfaced all at once if we consider people’s increasingly complex and fragmenting social identities, and if we take into account that the twig had been bending under multiple forms of pressure for generations. The farm workers I interviewed spoke of feelings of anger and frustration as driving forces in the protests, some referring to workers being “fed up with the slavery”, emphasised that the strike had created an opportunity to “take out our frustrations” or said that it was linked to past injustices. More recently arrived permanent or temporary migrants, with only a short history in the farmlands, expressed frustration too – linked to a disappointment at the lack of meaningful change since apartheid, for some exacerbated by the racialised inequalities they were experiencing on farms.

Many farm workers also described their aim as fighting for a better life for their children – while the precise content of their demands, apart from the
R150, was less often elaborated upon. This perhaps allows us to think of what lay at the heart of the unrest as being farm workers (and other rural dwellers) wanting to be treated with respect and dignity, and being able to lead lives they considered decent, for which a reliable and sufficient income would be a crucial aspect, as discussed in Chapter Five.

Waging a struggle with the aim of radically improving working and living conditions, and, as it were, asserting their human dignity, some participants had early into the protests started including in their repertoire of tactics that of barricading roads and setting vineyards and farm equipment alight, in ways which resembled service delivery protests. In strike hot-spot areas, the situation was very tense on some days, with shops being looted and vehicles set alight. The police were tasked with restoring the order which protesters sought to disrupt and in doing so used not only water cannons and tear gas to control the crowds, but also fired rubber-coated bullets at (suspected) protesters and, it was alleged, live ammunition (see e.g. Davies and Stegemann, 2012; Fogel, 2013). Protesters defended themselves and kept roads closed by throwing stones. In the process, many black rural dwellers were injured, and three people were shot dead. The violence against protesters further allegedly implicated private security firms hired by farm companies (Felix and Hartley, 2013; Kretzmann, 2012, Davis, 2012).

Hundreds of protesters, and a few farmers, were arrested during this period, the former group primarily charged with public violence, and some remained in custody for months (see e.g. Koyana, 2012).

The protests moved in waves, with large numbers of workers taking part in the November stay-away for a few weeks, followed by a return to work in anticipation of negotiations yielding results, and then renewed strike action during December and January. These uneven developments have been attributed to the uncertainty of, and struggle over, leadership and direction. For although the labour action was initiated by workers outside of formal organisations, very soon some male union officials started to gain control over its development, taking on the role of spokespersons and unilaterally calling the strike on and off on several occasions, allegedly without sufficiently consulting protesters, which caused much tension (Ntsebeza, 2013; Wesso, 2013). \[115\]

\[113\] Some mentioned demands for an on-farm crèche and equal pay, and in local strikes preceding or following the large-scale protests, more precise demands relating to salaries or deductions were brought up.

\[114\] From 2004, a sharp increase in protests over service delivery (water, sanitation, housing etc.) and social inclusion more broadly have been noted in poor communities across the country. The tactics have included, for instance, barricading roads and burning tyres, and protesters have mainly addressed local government (see e.g. Alexander, 2010; Hart, 2013; Langa and Kiguwa, 2013).

\[115\] Some labour organisations on the other hand reportedly tried to influence members not to take part in strike action. According to disgruntled members I spoke to, the organisers of one union allegedly sent text messages warning members of the consequences of ‘illegal’ strikes.
By mid-January, the protests eventually fizzled out, and in February 2013, a new minimum wage of 105 rand per day was announced by the Minister of Labour, Mildred Oliphant. This amount was close to what had been suggested in a report by a research agency mandated to propose a sustainable compromise between ‘the farm worker dilemma’ – being able to meet the basic needs of workers and their families – and the ‘farmer dilemma’, avoiding a situation where some less profitable farms would have to discontinue their operations (Meyer et al., 2012). As this problem description reveals, less profitable local producers were to some extent in a fix, seeing pressures from global retailers demanding high quality at a low cost as incompatible with workers’ demands for higher wages and improved conditions (Alford, 2015).

While the wage increase was considered a partial victory, disappointment soon grew, with some workers and organisations reporting a backlash in the form of retrenchments, the removal of benefits and the introduction of new or increased salary deductions for housing and services (interviews with protest participants and union organisers; Ntsebeza, 2013).  

The statutory minimum wage at the time of the strike was nowhere near enough to cover the most basic needs of workers and their families, as even the farmers I spoke to admitted. Also, the R150 per day, which was not achieved, was calculated as being enough to meet only 61 percent of the nutritional needs of a family of five, with two full-time, year-round workers – a set-up few could aspire to (Meyer et al., 2012). Still, it has been argued that the call for a doubling of the minimum wage, however inadequate this would be, nevertheless signalled that deeper layers of discontent had been brought to the surface – that something had snapped irrevocably, and that farmers’ power over workers had potentially begun to erode (Andrews, 2012). There are, however, also practical reasons why protesters decided to demand precisely 150 rand per day, as similar amounts had been achieved during local strikes in De Doorns at this period. Below, I shall briefly elaborate on primarily the first strike, which serves as a starting point for an attempt to read the protests through an intersectional lens.

From initiators to invisible: complicating the strike narrative

It was in late August 2012 that workers on a table grape farm in De Doorns went on strike, in response to information that salaries would be drastically cut when a large company took over the operation of the farm after the death of the previous owner. Workers on the farm, roughly 350 at the time, were almost exclusively black African women, I was told, many of them moreover

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116 As I return to discuss later in the Chapter, some analysts suggest that such claims have been exaggerated (Visser, 2016).
migrants from other provinces or from Lesotho and Zimbabwe – categories of workers generally considered least likely to resist (see e.g. Johnston, 2007; Ulicki and Crush, 2000). These female workers’ attachment to the farm was further precarious, with contracts allegedly running for only three months at a time only. Despite of, or perhaps because of this, they successfully got together, consulted a refugee rights organisation and later a trade union, elected a committee and took the decision to strike.

Clara, whom I have written about extensively in Chapters Three and Four, was one of the participants in this strike. Although she had previously had to relocate temporarily to a camp for internally displaced persons after the expulsion of Zimbabweans in 2009, she depicts this strike as a moment of unity, as well as excitement and determination, bringing together workers across divisions of race/ethnicity, nationality and gender. Workers on the farm, she says, would rise early in the morning and walk jointly from Stofland informal settlement to the farm gates at 4 am, assisting each other in keeping spirits high throughout the day by toyi-toying – singing and dancing to South African struggle songs. Those who were hesitant about joining in were convinced to come aboard through a mixture of persuasion and pressure, she observed. However, Clara’s narrative suggests that vulnerability and militancy were entangled in complex ways for foreign female workers. While she describes having participated on an equal footing with others, as a Zimbabwean, she remained mindful of strike outcomes that would in any way disadvantage South Africans.

We [immigrant workers] were there, we also said no, we can’t work, this is our bread ... where we are the ones that planted those trees! ... People incited each other until there was unity ... And also, what he [the manager] did, when he lowered the wages ... We were working in spans [groups] of ... 20 people, and he said he can only get eight people from that group. The twelve people had to go back home. That is the day people striked! [Embarked on the second phase of the strike]. In all, now you lower our wages and ... now you are dividing us there. Our friends, our mates are going home to sit while we are working, it was bad. As for us foreigners, it wasn’t going to be good, because now I was working and I was a foreigner. And people who were South Africans, they had to go back home. It would cause trouble for me.

As Clara’s account suggests, disagreements over salary cuts were followed by conflicts over an attempt to substantially reduce the workforce — something workers protested through strike action in both August and September, followed by negotiations between the strike committee, the union FAWU, and the farm management. A settlement was reached within a short time, which according to workers meant a moratorium on retrenchments,
while the earlier salary structure was put back in place, with a slight increase to at most 137 rand per day for the highest paid category of workers.

While it is widely held that the strike on the farm where Clara worked inspired the large-scale protests (see e.g. Knoetze 2012; Wesso, 2013), some have suggested that developments during a strike on a mushroom farm in De Doorns during this period was also a source of inspiration (see also Visser and Ferrer, 2015). Workers on the mushroom farm – including a large number of foreign migrants – claimed to have been paid below the minimum wage for a long time. After making demands for 120 rand per day, 57 workers were reported to have been fired, among them a group of Lesotho nationals who were subsequently arrested, some of them detained for lacking work permits or permission to stay in the country (Hwese, 2012; Hwese, Luhanga and de Klee, 2012). After the arrests, co-workers gathered outside the De Doorns police station, demanding their release. Local community leaders as well as staff members of support organisations whom I spoke to claimed that an agreement was reached to substantially increase daily wages on this farm as well.\(^{117}\)

The implications of foreign migrants, and to a lesser extent black African women hailing from other provinces, playing leading roles in these initial strikes, and achieving among the highest wage levels in the valley, is an aspect of the ‘farm worker strike’ that I suggest has not been adequately analysed (Eriksson, 2017). As word spread of their successes, some South African residents of De Doorns expressed feelings of entitlement to the same pay levels or more. One coloured female farm worker, who played an active role in the province-wide protests, said:

Why you wanna give that people a lot of money but you can’t give us that same amount? ... Then we see the ... mushroom [workers] get it right... so why can’t WE do it?\(^{118}\)

Such discourses may indicate, I suggest, that some established De Doorns residents experienced the achievements of foreign migrants as yet another wound, contributing one of several sparks to the protests. For while in some ways the 2012–2013 protest represented an extraordinary moment of unity, where farm workers and other rural dwellers who had long been kept apart through markers of difference such as race/ethnicity, nationality and gender came together to demand 150 rand per day from employers and the state, rifts between differently positioned workers also surfaced during this time. Importantly though, unlike in 2009, when Zimbabwean workers were expelled from De Doorns by other residents frustrated with the employer

\(^{117}\) Several foreign migrants from this group were held in a detention centre as the mass protests broke out, for lacking work and residence permits.

\(^{118}\) That this analysis was prevalent is also confirmed in interviews with organisational representatives.
preference for migrant labour, this time, the anger primarily inspired action against farmers and the state.

Shortly after Clara and her colleagues had reached an agreement with management on their farm and returned to work, De Doorns became the scene of a massive uprising. While supportive of the call for 150 rand per day, Clara and other Zimbabweans residing in De Doorns whom I spoke to felt tense at the time, and feared that the unrest would spark another expulsion of Zimbabweans if protesters did not achieve what they wanted. Such fear was expressed in strikingly similar words by several people: “they will start it like a strike, and then it will turn on us.” Sensing that anger could easily be directed towards Zimbabweans, Clara felt that coming to the forefront of the strike was not an option for her. So, being there, but standing far at the back, or remaining in her rented shack, was the strategy she resorted to.

You know what, when we are doing this strike, we have to stay at home because when we are there they turn at us again. If we don’t go, they want us there. If we go, they point fingers at us and say: ‘Hey, these people they take our jobs’. No, it won’t be good for us. Sometimes we just go there to the meetings, but we stand very far … just looking at what they’re doing. Because if you participate in it, sometimes they will just … it will turn against us.

Nyarai, who like Clara resided in a township in De Doorns and had been part of a strike committee on the farm where she used to work, showing considerable militancy, also expressed mixed sentiments. While backing the demand for 150 rand per day, she was concerned about the conflicts that might arise if she and others ran out of money to pay the rent for the informal houses in which they resided. Nyarai describes a situation in which many Zimbabweans like herself (and probably also other farm labourers) were in a fix, not daring to go back to work in order not to upset and possibly attract violence from local landlords, who still expected rent payments.

You see, some of the people, like myself, I rent from someone. When came the time they want their money – where can I get that money if I’m not working? But they don’t want us to work.

As trade unions gradually strengthened their position in the ‘farm worker strike’ and well-known South African male unionists ascended to positions as spokespersons, the voices of male and female migrant workers from other provinces, as well as from Zimbabwe and Lesotho, gradually became marginalised (Wesso, 2013). Some migrant workers allegedly received death threats from other community members aligned with trade unions (Knoetze, 2014). During the transition from individual farm strikes to mass protests,
one may thus observe how foreign migrants became discursively excluded from the farm worker collective, despite the leading roles that some foreign nationals had played at the onset of the protests, including providing legal advice to protesters (Christie, 2012). This was visible, for instance, in statements by the Farm Worker Strike Coalition, whose list of demands included that “Employment should be given to South African citizens first; farmers must stop employing foreigners as cheap labour” (Surplus People’s Project, 2012). The striking farm workers whom the coalition claimed to represent thus appeared to be restricted to nationals, something which speaks to broader patterns of exclusion of non-citizens (Eriksson, 2017).

Similarly, one may note how concerns raised by some of the female migrant workers whom I wrote about in Chapter Four, including of sexual harassment and coercion by middle managers, were not given prominence. The gradual emergence of trade unions as more central actors in the strike and negotiations seems instead to have coincided with a re-centring of concerns solely relevant to workers residing permanently on farms. This included demands for access to crèches and play parks on farms, and to improved and rent-free on-farm housing. Some union representatives whom I interviewed referred to such demands as being especially relevant to women. In the process, we may thus note how female foreign migrants became relegated to a discursive shadow, excluded (as foreigners) from a position as ‘primary’ or ‘real’ farm workers, who could insist on job preference, while important concerns for both foreign and South African migrant women were not embraced in articulations of demands on behalf of farm women. This speaks closely to the discursive exclusions of black women in US anti-discrimination law, which Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) drew attention to in her conceptualisation of intersectionality. What initially appeared to have started out as fairly inclusive local strikes thus developed in a way that with time decisively excluded non-South Africans, attenuated the voices of migrant workers from other provinces and magnified the perspectives of more established workers (Eriksson, 2017).

During the post-strike moment, some of Clara’s colleagues on the farm again started expressing anti-foreigner sentiments, saying to her that Zimbabweans must go home, as noted in Chapter Three. This coincided with a shift in management on the farm, as family members of the previous owner took over operations from the large company. According to Clara and other former workers, a climate of fear ensued, in which employees were told that the farm would be closed if they ever protested again, and that unions were not allowed (see also SAPA, 2012). Many workers, including the chairperson of the strike committee, were not called back to the farm for the next season. Threats of enhanced structural violence thus appear to have contributed to,

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119 Some more inclusive demands were articulated at the time, however, including paid maternity leave.
and drawn upon, divisions between workers of different nationalities. This brings to mind Kerr, Durrheim and Dixon’s (2017) observation regarding the 2009 expulsion of Zimbabweans from De Doorns; namely, that what appeared on the surface to be a conflict with xenophobic undertones between two groups, foreign and national farm workers, revolved around, at least to some extent, both groups’ relationship with white farmers, who in turn could distance themselves from the violence by using anti-xenophobic discourse.\(^{120}\)

In the next section, I discuss attempts to discredit protesters, including through questioning whether they were ‘real’ farm workers who could purport to speak on behalf of others.

Were strike participants ‘real’ farm workers?

The ‘farm worker strike’ and its aftermath, as discussed in Chapter Three, brought to the surface complex, on-going renegotiations, and contestations, of the identity of farm worker. This was perhaps most visibly actualised through recurring claims that protest participants were not farm workers – at times accompanied by allegations that the strike was solely a politically orchestrated event aimed at overthrowing the provincial government (Eriksson, 2017).\(^{121}\) In this section, I analyse some of these attempts to delink protesters from farm workers which, I argue, illuminate other important questions looming below the surface, concerning what a real farm worker is considered to be in contemporary Western Cape and who may claim a farm worker identity.

As discussed earlier, processes of casualisation and precarisation of labour on farms had resulted in an increased fragmentation of worker identities, as many people resided outside of farms and relied on other sources of income during perhaps the greater part of the year (Greenberg, 2010). Farm labourers’ work trajectories had diversified in other ways too, with an influx of new groups of people, including foreign migrants who, as noted in the previous section, were to some extent excluded from the category of ‘farm worker’. The events of 2012–2013 combined aspects of a labour conflict and a broader rural uprising, in which the amorphous collective of people working on farms was joined by youth and other rural dwellers, adding demands for service provision and access to housing and land (Ntsebeza, 2013; Wesso, 2013; Wilderman, 2015). That being said, tens

\(^{120}\)Tensions between differently positioned workers have found different time- and place-bound expressions. Ewert and Hamman (1996), for instance, describe a similar hostility between ‘coloureds’ and ‘blacks’, linked to relations with white farmers.

\(^{121}\) While the possible involvement and influence of party-political interests in the ‘farm worker strike’ was debated at the time, and indeed would be a pertinent topic to explore, it does not lie within the scope of this dissertation to do so.
of thousands of people who worked for at least part of the year on farms certainly took to the streets, withdrew their labour and demanded liveable wages. The few farmers and managers I spoke to, however, in different ways rejected the idea of farm workers as organisers of, and participators in, protest action of this scale and nature. In the words of one table grape farmer in the Cape Winelands:

The strikers, those were people from Cape Town. I saw it with my own eyes. It wasn’t the farm workers ... We didn’t even know them.

One middle manager representing a conservative local farm worker association\textsuperscript{122} similarly suggested that it was “the foreign elements, people who come from outside” who initiated the strike for political reasons, convincing people from the informal settlements to join in. Relatedly, a white top manager of a large mixed-crop farm described the protesters as “a group of vigilantes up in the informal settlement trying their luck”.

Opposing views on whether the protesters were farm workers or not thus pointed among other things to a polarisation between what one farm manager described as ‘traditional’ farm workers – epitomised by coloured labourers working and residing on farms – and ‘newcomers’ – particularly black African migrant workers from near or far, living in informal settlements (see also Alford, 2015). When strike sceptics, as above, claimed that most farm workers continued to work during the protests, and referred to protesters as “not farm workers”, I suggest that this may rather be read as not ‘traditional’ farm workers (i.e. coloured employees residing on farms). Some established or ‘traditional’ farm workers whom I spoke to lamented that protest leaders did not take into account the long-term consequences for them. Aunty Sandra, a pioneer in a union and a women’s organisation who lives and works permanently on a farm, claimed that she tried to caution protesting ‘newcomers’ in her area:

So the Thursday, the black people [seasonal migrant workers] called me [to come and meet with them], and I told them that it’s very dangerous to strike and you don’t know what it is that you’re striking for. You’re now burning things down – at the end of the day if you leave here you’re going to your houses … It’s the people who remain behind that you’re shooting in the foot.

The fear that more recently arrived workers, less invested in farm life, would make the already precarious situation of on-farm workers even worse, and threaten hard-won gains secured over time, may thus for some be one factor behind attempts to delink protesters from ‘real’ farm workers.

\textsuperscript{122} The spokespersons of the organisation did not openly criticise employers and emphasised individual responsibility while disregarding structural inequality.
In De Doorns, where most workers resided outside of the farms and withdrew their labour during the protests, an outright denial of participants being farm workers was less possible. One farmer I interviewed instead offered a different reading, which still positioned most farm workers as not participating in the protests ‘in spirit’ – even when they took part in marches.

Then we realised it’s a few ... guys that is striking [striking] and 95 percent of the people are forced. We saw from ... the koppie [small hill] here how ... people with prams with kids in ... they want to turn around and then they get smacked in the face and that kind of stuff.

As this reflection suggests, the questioning of protesters’ authenticity as farm workers could also entail a critique of methods considered to be violent – linked both to threats towards suspected strike breakers, and to tactics such as burning and looting. An active member of a union that distanced itself from the protests, and who worked and lived permanently on a farm, claimed for instance that: “People came from Cape Town to farms ... beaten up our workers, forced our workers to have strikes.”

Through marking protesters as both ‘outsiders’ and ‘violent’ – the latter a quality presumably incompatible with dominant notions of farm workers, as I elaborate on below – the union member thus contributed to positioning them as not ‘real’ farm workers. The conflicting opinions around who was a ‘real’ farm worker during the protests also surfaced as a debate over leadership among the protesters. A farm manager and one of the leaders of a farm worker organisation primarily made up of ‘traditional’ farm workers, would for example claim to represent the authentic voice of farm workers – while questioning union leaders claiming to speak on behalf of protesters:

They said that they speak for farm workers, but they are no farm workers … They speak in the name of farm workers. [But] who can better speak for a farm worker than a farm worker?

While this statement primarily seeks to undermine well-known trade unionists purporting to be spokespersons for the protests – the manager continues by referring to people never having picked a grape or worked under the hot sun – she would insinuate in other ways that ‘newcomers’ were not authentic ‘farm workers’. Representatives of the organisation would for instance speak of farm workers “here from the valley”, and not attempt to organise foreign migrants, signalling that not all people labouring on farms would be considered farm workers.

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123 One may note a parallel with how farm workers in Zimbabwe, many of whom are of foreign descent, have been labelled ‘foreigners’ and ‘deficient moral citizens’ in government discourse in that country (Hartnack, 2017; Moyo, Rutherford and Amanor-Wilks, 2000).
Of course, it is important to point out that by no means all permanently employed, on-farm coloured workers were against the strike. On the contrary, in several areas, leading conveners of farm worker forums coming out in support of the De Doorns protesters belonged to precisely this category of workers. Thus, opinions of and actions in the strike did not in any way neatly overlap with power hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality and so forth. Nevertheless, the discursive figure of the ‘newcomer’ or ‘outsider’ positioned in contrast to the ‘traditional’ or ‘real’ farm worker was actively drawn upon, and represents, I suggest, one important dimension of conflicting opinions in and of the strike. This was further linked to the contentious issue of strike violence. I shall return below to discuss how workers sought to give meaning to the use of ‘violence’ by different actors in the strike, and how this relates to local notions of moral personhood and dignity (or the lack thereof). Before this, I shall however discuss how backlash impacted on differently positioned categories of workers after the strike.

Gendered experiences of backlash in the post-strike moment

During the post-strike moment, labour- and other rural organisations in the Western Cape protested the various forms of backlash that farm workers were exposed to as the new minimum wage entered into effect. The nature and magnitude of such problems, and who was mostly affected, has been debated (Visser and Ferrer, 2015; Visser, 2016), and my field work data also shows a mixed pattern. While some of the farm workers I interacted with had not experienced changes in their work places, others who had been very actively involved in the protests, including shop stewards, reported having lost their jobs for this reason – moreover, the on-farm workers amongst them had been served with notices of eviction. Through unions and organisations, I further met with people who claimed that their wage increments had been partially recuperated by farm companies through new or increased deductions for rent, electricity and transportation and/or the withdrawal of non-wage benefits in response to the new minimum wage of 105 rand per day (see also Kaur, 2017; Ntsebeza, 2013). This, some asserted, made their financial situation even more desperate than before the strike. Anger at new or increased deductions further sparked a few local strikes the following season.

In De Doorns, Ceres, Citrusdal and elsewhere, workers I spoke to also lamented that breaks had been scrapped or shortened, indicating that farm companies found multiple ways of recovering the increased labour costs. Moreover, one manager on a large farm told me in an interview that a labour consultant had advised farmers in the area where he worked that the time was now right for introducing deductions – a proposal he criticised.
While these narratives do speak to one of many post-strike trajectories, they do not present us with evidence of the extent to which workers experienced backlash. If we are to take seriously the claims that most producers are price-takers, with little room for manoeuvring in a context where overseas retailers expect high quality at low cost, then a higher statutory minimum wage would have had to be recuperated via the cutting of costs in one way or another. Shortly after the new sectoral determination was announced in 2013, the Department of Labour (2013) reported that over 900 companies had applied for a temporary exemption from paying the new minimum wage, on the grounds that they could not afford the cost increment. A country-wide study commissioned by the ILO and a state of knowledge review on farm work in the province argue that reports of a backlash against permanent on-farm labourers in particular have been exaggerated, and that if there was indeed a backlash, migrant and seasonal workers in precarious positions would have been hardest hit (Visser and Ferrer, 2015; Visser, 2016; see also Alford, 2015). During the field work, I came across reports of migrant seasonal workers being fired and sent home after partaking in strike activities in 2012 and 2013. Such stories were also reported in newspapers.

In line with observations from organisations and other ethnographers (Kaur, 2017; Levine, 2014), my data further indicates that gendered power relations played into who was affected by the backlash and in what ways. Differently positioned female workers seemed to be particularly vulnerable when some farms opted to downsize, casualise or put parts of their workforce on short-time in the post-strike moment. Some linked this firmly to their own active involvement in the protests. Unionised female workers on two grape-producing farms in the Cape Winelands district whom I spoke to lamented that although both male and female on-farm coloured labourers took part in the strike action, only the women were laid off or faced with unilateral decisions from farmers to employ them on more precarious terms afterwards – including offering them only seasonal work. Some described this as an attempt to punish them for the militancy they had shown as women, which brings to mind Visser’s (2016:31) proposal that employer bitterness might have been an important driving force behind the backlash.

Refraining from taking part in strike action did not necessarily protect women from losing their jobs during this period, however. On the farm where Emily lives, all seven of her unionised female colleagues were laid off about a year after the protests, with the management claiming to have run out of funds. While no one knows for sure why Emily was spared, it is not an

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124 Staff members of Sikhula Sonke as well as the Women on Farms Project told me about farms where all the female workers were let go. Leaders within CSAAWU moreover reported that all the female workers on one of the farms where they organise were externalised during this period, their contracts allegedly cancelled in lieu of more insecure employment through a labour contractor.
unreasonable guess that it was linked both to her prominent position in the union and to the fact that she has occupied one of the houses on the farm in her own name for many years, which makes it hard to legally evict her. By contrast, her colleagues, while also permanently employed, had moved away from the farm in recent years, often linked to their partners falling out of favour with management.

Ahead of harvest time that year, one could note from afar how the vineyards on the farm had a gloomy, neglected appearance – overgrown in some spots and dried out elsewhere. Until a decision was made on the fate of the farm, Emily told me, a team of mostly male contract workers was hired to take over the women’s work – the meagre harvest that year was in the end only fit for vinegar. As we paid a visit to a row of houses adjacent to a nearby farm, where several of Emily’s former colleagues were living, Vera suggested wryly that the farm owner may not be struggling that hard financially after all. She pointed towards a building site in the distance, where the owner of the farm, a foreigner based overseas, was busy constructing what appeared to be a huge and luxurious mansion in the making. How come the same farmer cannot continue hiring her and the six other women for 125 rand per day on the new minimum wage, she asked rhetorically – a sharp and unsentimental observation on the value attributed to different lives in this post-colonial ‘contact zone’ (Pratt, 1991). Like most of the women, Vera lived with a partner on whose work the occupancy of their shared house depended, drawing UIF money while hoping to find casual work on nearby farms at the start of the next season. The worries she expressed over the future were concrete and to the point: will her partner start complaining about and possibly refusing to support her oldest child, from a previous relationship, when they have to rely only on his salary?

The women’s bitter experiences of retrenchment were further aggravated by the fact that all the male workers – save for one older man of retirement age – had been offered alternative work, including newly hired, non-unionised adolescents without family responsibilities. The decision to restrict retrenchment to the women thus appears to have been informed by outdated notions of men as breadwinners and ‘real’ workers, whereas women were still seen as secondary workers, possibly also combined with an aversion towards unions.

In other parts of the province, such as Citrusdal and Barrydale, female farm workers told me that their weekly working hours had been reduced during the season following the strike, putting them into more dire straits economically than before, in spite of the minimum wage hike, while male workers continued working full time. I would carefully suggest that these responses taken together signal that, in addition to what has elsewhere been observed with regard to migrant workers (Visser and Ferrer, 2015; Visser,

125 After the annual increment, this was the new minimum wage in 2015.
2016), some employers appeared to consider (parts of) their female labour force especially dispensable and replaceable as the new minimum wage came into effect. With regards to female on-farm workers experiencing job losses or an unfavourable renegotiation of their contracts, this rearticulates their historical exclusion from notions of ‘real’ or essential workers, informed by associations between women and unpaid care work (Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996). Female seasonal workers (including migrants) residing outside of farms were on the other hand already hired on precarious terms, at times through labour brokering arrangements, and thus excluded from the security that a status as ‘real’ worker could bring.

Several factors informed the vulnerability of female workers. As noted in Chapter Three, as paternalist labour regimes were partly and unevenly dismantled or found new (management/neoliberal) expressions, and labour relations became more formalised through laws and regulations, much fewer workers could access the kind of benefits which some farms had provided, including food stuffs, loans, access to houses or support to children’s education (Swanepoel, 2017). Furthermore, if female workers had previously been desired primarily as cheapened labour, the wage increment might have made their labour less attractive compared to other worker categories. A small core of (primarily) male on-farm, permanent workers, in contrast, had been made less dispensable, through training for so-called qualified work, like tractor driving, or tasks that need to be carried out during unsocial working hours, like watering.

While it is not possible to comment on the magnitude of the problem of backlash in the post-strike moment, responses by some employers, including through laying off employees, reducing working hours and introducing a harder work regime with shorter breaks, nevertheless drew attention to the fact that commercial farming areas are spaces saturated with structural and symbolic violence – and the violence embedded in neoliberal globalisation. This may speak both to the difficult financial position on some farms, and to employers’ bitterness at the protesters (Visser, 2016). I have suggested in this section that women and black/African migrants appeared to be particularly exposed to an intensification of such violence, linked to their historical positions as secondary workers.

Workers’ narratives on violence and transient moral orders

As noted above, the eruption of large-scale protests in the farmlands during 2012 may be understood as a moment of catharsis, or, as it were, snap (Ahmed, 2017), when years of pent-up anger was brought to a point where it boiled over. It was in many ways a productive moment, where at least some protesters expressed joy and satisfaction over being able to openly reject
their marginalisation and the absence of meaningful transformation since 1994 – and to some extent being listened to. Aunty Lavona elaborates:

You see – if we didn’t strike, we would have never known that we could stand up for our rights like that ... without any organisation or things like that ... It’s already history and that’s why I’m so glad because – my mother and my father were farmworkers and they never fought for their rights and they never even knew that they had rights!

Karneels, a middle-aged permanent worker residing on a farm and active in several organisations, was one of the protest leaders in his area. When we met a year later, he was euphoric about the role he had played, in spite of having been demoted to a lower-paid position at work in response to his involvement.

I am extremely happy, I am possibly the happiest man on earth. I am proud that I am part of the history of [home area] strike, that I was the convenor and the leader of the march ... It’s my wish to see that my work and attempts have brought about a change in poor people’s lives.

Elsewhere too, the workers I spoke to who had played leading roles in the protests and had lost their jobs afterwards, most of them women, emphasised how uplifting this active involvement had been, in spite of the often dire consequences. Judith, a coloured female farm dweller who, together with several co-workers, received notice of eviction from their employer after they had participated in the protests and abstained from work, remarked boldly that: “At least we tried, we didn’t take it lying down.” This, in my reading, signalled that, even if she had to go through the trauma of losing her home, she felt that she had defended something more important: her dignity.126 Elsewhere, female workers sought to give meaning to their current predicaments by suggesting that they had been targeted for being more militant activists than men. These reflections suggest that, to some, participation in the ‘farm worker strike’ brought about a sense of dignity, if not of labour per se, then of protest.

When farm workers snapped, however, feelings of bitterness and indignation at times surfaced forcefully. Emily claimed that she had to step in and calm members during strike period gatherings.

because our members were very … frustrated about all the oppression of the past years ... then people decide that we should march and burn out the farmer and his dog and his grave … And we as leaders had to educate our people not to take that process.

126 Judith and her neighbours were members of a trade union, and with time, a settlement was reached, and the families were allowed to stay on in their houses.
Expressions of a desire for revenge were not translated into direct violence targeting farmers or managers during this period, however – or if such violence did occurred, it was not widely reported. The violence implicating protesters – setting vineyards on fire and throwing stones at police while attempting to keep roads closed – indicated instead, some have noted, that most people sought above all to have their plight taken seriously. One former union leader who was not involved in the strike suggested:

I won’t say the intention was to burn the vineyard or ... destroy the land or whatever ... I think ... the workers ... just wanted to be heard ... I am not a supporter of violence ... but there was no ... farmer killed ... in this violence – but farmworkers were killed ... fighting this brutality.

Research on labour organising in other sectors has suggested that the use of violent tactics, such as burning and occupying roads, is embedded in the meaning of strikes in post-apartheid South Africa (von Holdt, 2010). Moreover, violence between workers, and especially towards suspected strike-breakers, has been rife both during and after apartheid. This has rendered workers in the most precarious positions vulnerable, be they strike breakers or foreign workers (von Holdt, 2010, 2012). During the recent mine worker strike in Marikana, Chinguno (2013) suggests that workers’ use of violence was closely linked to the increased fragmentation and diversification of the workforce associated with processes of casualisation. This undermined union mobilisation and made institutionalised forms of negotiating with employers more elusive. In such contexts, he suggests, violence becomes an alternative way of forging solidarity and militancy among differently positioned protesters (Chinguno, 2013).

Decisions to resort to using violent tactics, such as barricading roads and setting vineyards on fire, were further informed by such tactics having proven effective for putting one’s messages across (von Holdt, 2010, 2013; see also Alexander, Runciman and Ngwane, 2013; Langa and Kiguwa, 2013). Aviwe, for instance, described how protesters in her area, accustomed to having their concerns overlooked by farmers and policy makers, concluded that it was only through burning that they would be heard, even though, she suggests, this was not ideally how labour activists should act.

Aviwe: We got attention when we burnt the lorries. That is where we got attention.
Ása: So you are saying that was the only way to …?
Aviwe: That was the best way! We let the boere [white farmers] come to us … They wouldn’t have come if we didn’t react in that manner. Because that manner that we reacted was not a comradely manner, but … we

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127 Some people appeared at times to conflate the word ‘strike’ with violent protest.
thought that was the solution and that was the solution.”

Vanessa, a coloured female farm worker who played an active role in the protests in another area, argued further that by throwing stones or setting trees alight, workers communicated that enough is enough, and that they would no longer put up with the ongoing problems on farms.

Workers can’t tolerate these things any more. That’s why we’re burning some of the vineyards and trees down, just to make a point: ‘You must listen to our conditions on the farm!’

Similarly, workers participating in blocking roads to delimit the transportation of harvested fruits from the farms saw such measures as necessary in order for farm businesses to feel the pinch and be forced to the negotiating table. Some also suggested that the strike was something of a last resort for them, after having participated in many gatherings where farm workers voiced their grievances in front of commercial farmers’ associations, the Department of Labour and responsible Ministers without seeing any improvements (see also Alexander, Runciman and Ngwane, 2013). Says Aunty Lavona, who used to be active in the trade union movement:

They’re pretending now that they never heard of any problem. But from day one they knew ... I even went to ... a meeting in Jo’burg where we got the Ministers ... where we were talking about all the problems on the farms. But now they ... said that ... they didn’t know ... You see? ... Like: ‘I wash my hands in clean water.’

Others claimed that protesters would never have resorted to methods generally described as violent, exemplified in particular by stone-throwing, had the police not responded to the strike with what they saw as a disproportionate use of violence. Says Aunty Lily:

The strike would never get out of hand. Never! If it wasn’t for the police standing on the bridge and shooting our children ... We were ... having ... a meeting there on the field. And when we get there: ‘Gock-gock-gock-gock’ [imitates the sound of gunshots]. So when we saw that, wow! It was chaos in De Doorns. That’s where the strike really starts! ... When the police start shooting at our children.

As I suggested in Chapter One, much of the popular and media discourse on violence in the Western Cape during and after the protests tended to draw

128 The use of ‘we’ in this statement does not imply that the interviewee participated in acts of burning herself, rather, it should be understood as a collective ‘we’: we protesting workers.
129 Ibid.
attention primarily to the more conspicuous acts carried out by protesters there and then: blocking roads, burning vineyards, looting shops or throwing stones at police, journalists or strike-breakers. While acts of violence carried out by the police, private security companies and farmers were indeed reported – two strike-related deaths implicated police – these were generally not described as threatening public safety, or causing the protests to become violent (Pointer, 2013). I also did not come across any discussions of poverty as a form of “slow violence” in itself (c.f. Nixon, 2011; Kruger, 2014). In her paper on media coverage of the strike, Rebecca Pointer (2013) argues that the media’s framing of the events contributed to foreclosing possibilities for radical shifts in social and economic relations and in identities, by presenting a rapid restoration of order as desirable, and holding onto notions of employment as the most important route to development and empowerment. Still, there were multiple, competing media frames at the time, including those foregrounding police brutality. In some journalistic accounts, farm workers and other community members were depicted showing bullet wounds, some claiming not to have had anything to do with the strike before being shot in their yards or even inside their houses (see e.g. Davis and Stegemann, 2012; Hartley, 2013).

Union organisers and staff members of rural organisations whom I spoke to also brought up numerous examples of participants being subjected to threats or direct violence by employers and private security firms during this period. This included foremen or managers pulling out their guns and threatening to shoot workers, some also proceeding to fire warning shots (see also Andrews, 2012). Several farm workers told me of how managers or farmers had driven at high speed through crowds of workers, and some related how groups of white vigilante groups patrolled the streets of small towns, armed with guns. Some such cases were reported to the police and covered in the news (see e.g. Hartley, 2013; SAPA, 2012).

Incident of violence between workers, including stone-throwing directed at strike breakers, were also observed. These were seen by some as unacceptable while others suggested that such measures were necessary in order to prevent an undermining of the strike (cf. Chinguno, 2013). As noted in the section above, in some places Zimbabweans were particularly vulnerable to such violence.

The farm worker strike was thus in many ways highly complex, messy and saturated with different forms of violence, which posed challenges to the forms of resistive subjectivities that the female farm worker activists whom I wrote about in Chapter Five had forged through their involvement in labour and community activism. While taking part in strike action was seen by

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130 One exception is an editorial piece in the Mail and Guardian (2012) which proposes that “If things became violent quickly, perhaps that is because there is persistent violence in the lives of people who are unemployed for much of the year.”
some as a route towards a dignity of labour – or of protest – some aspects of strike violence potentially countered attempts to be seen as responsible and respectable. Through emphasising violent aspects of the protests, implying that violence was rife and carried out solely at the hands of protesters, some employer representatives, and farm workers critical of the strike, constructed a link between taking part in the protests and loss of dignity. A farm worker in a managerial position, who also represented a farm worker organisation, claimed that women going to work in De Doorns were pulled down from trucks and beaten by protesters – analysing the strike as a moment in which “people’s dignity is dropped.” In contrast, she described the objective of her organisation as giving farm workers their ‘waardigheid’ (dignity) back. Some strike sceptics thus considered a replacement of order and rules with protest, including with methods understood as violent, as creating chaos – undermining aspirations to be respectable.

Miranda, the unionised on-farm worker whom I wrote about in that chapter, for instance, did not see taking part in the protests as an option, claiming that as workers living on-farm, “we can’t go with a strike that goes with violence … ‘cause they really go out of order.” The unprotected and thus implicitly disorderly nature of the strike was to her incompatible with good union practice:

We go according to rules ... and that is what we tell them [employers asking about her union’s stance on the protests]. We are not gonna step out of the rules ... We stand by that.

While union activists like Miranda felt that they were, to some extent, able to make themselves heard and to negotiate improvements within an ‘orderly’ and non-confrontational framework, and had further invested in casting themselves as moral persons through strategies that did not match those of the protests, such experiences were not shared by everyone. Some among the workers who saw no other option than confrontational resistance interpreted activist respectability in different ways – seeing also more violent labour protests, in a Fanonian sense, as a path to resisting dehumanisation, achieving substantial improvements and restoring their dignity as noted above (Fanon, 2005 [1961]; see also Bolt and Rajak, 2016; von Holdt, 2012). Such readings are likely to have relied on an understanding of what von Holdt (2010:145-146) has described as an alternative yet transient “local moral order” being in place during the strike, where the overall goal – often presented as achieving a better life for one’s children – overrode a possible reluctance to engage in violence. The temporary and unstable nature of such ‘moral orders’ was perhaps best captured by Aviwe, who viewed the use of confrontational or violent tactics in order to get attention during the protests as “100 percent OK”, but criticised unions that resorted to aggressive
behaviour during negotiations: “Out of violence, you don’t get nothing ... One of us must calm down, then we talk.”

The alternative moral order during protests could also entail setting gendered expectations temporarily aside – like keeping one’s yard clean, cooking, or buying Christmas clothes for one’s children. As Aviwe put it: “That time, the pain we felt: let us forget about our children!”

In the situation that unfolded, characterised by many as one of ‘chaos’, some engaged in violent forms of civil disobedience, including throwing stones at the police officers who were shooting rubber bullets. Being seen by others taking part in such action seemed, for some of the women I spoke to, to also represent a transgression of the more flexible strike-time moral order. In spite of repeatedly speaking with pride about being active in the protests, a few activists appeared to recall feelings of both pride and shame when seeing themselves on TV throwing stones. Stone-throwing thus appeared, I would carefully suggest, to also clash with more generous gendered ideals of (activist) respectability for some activists. Says Aunty Lily:

One day when I was sitting watching e.tv, I told myself: O Heer! [oh Lord] [Is] that me? Throwing stones like that? ... I couldn’t believe it. No, no, no – I am not going to throw stones anymore.

Dene recalls being ‘saved’ by a cap she had borrowed from a friend, which covered her face when a TV crew filmed a clash between protesters and police. When asked by others about the incident, she says she denied having been there, and suggested that she would never again wear the clothes she had on that day.

I [am] gonna burn those jeans and I gonna... My t-shirt, I put it in a drawer and I said: ‘No, I am not gonna wear you anymore!’ [giggles] because of that strike. And when the counsellors see [they asked]: ...‘Was that you there?’ And I said: ‘No, it wasn’t me. Maybe it’s somebody look like me, but I haven’t got ‘n pet [a cap] on my head. It wasn’t me, no.’ Ah-ah [no-no]... people can’t see me like that on the strikes.

Above all, however, the women I spoke to who had been actively involved in the protests expressed anger and frustration at experiencing violence and repression from the police, employers and other local elites, and understood taking part in stone-throwing as, in a sense, unavoidable acts of self-defence. Dene returned on another occasion to speak of her experiences on the day when she appeared on TV. It was the same day, she recalls, when a young child in the area was wounded in the face by a rubber bullet while playing by her house. While Dene and her fellow activists would usually speak with ease and excitement about the defiance they had shown in the protests, recalling the violence of that day was painful. Her
recollected of events indicates that she understands her own actions as shaped by police brutality:

You see that day when they shot ... that little girl ... It was ... *Kaos* [chaos]. The ... police ran out of bullets. And the police was throwing stones, and we was throwing stones ... And I am watching them catch one man ... and [soon after] they threw the man out of the Casspir¹³¹ ... and I see... yuh! He has got a lot of bullets sitting in his legs ... And then I called the people: ‘Come, come out, don’t run away from that!’ I swear, I was swearing there, I was crying ... And then I tell ... my brother-in-law: ‘Please take that patient to the – sports field.’ ... And my husband came and told: ‘[Dene], please man, calm down!’ And I said: ‘No, no, no, I want to go to the police station... because that [name of police] didn’t do the right thing ... Why he put the man into the Casspir and shot him full of *koeëls* [bullets] and throw him out? It’s not right!’ ... When I arrive there [at the police station] I tell Colonel [name]: ‘You people, all of you!’ ... And he said: ‘No [Dene]. You know, mos, we [local police officers] are not part of the strike...’ And I said: ‘No, you called them [police from elsewhere] ... to come in here and to help the farmers... And... now you are out of that thing.’ And he said: ‘Please calm down!’ ... [Names male union leaders] wasn’t speaking that time, it was only me.

As the discussion in this section has implied, competing framings of the farm worker strike as a moment when workers reclaimed – or lost – their dignity were in place during the post-strike moment. This was partly linked to different interpretations regarding what constitutes violence and if and how violent tactics may be justified. For some workers experiencing labour relations on farms as embedded in structural violence, racism and threats of direct violence, a violent response, such as stone-throwing, burning vineyards or occupying roads appeared proportionate and necessary in order to achieve radical change in (violent) social relations. It also became a way of reasserting their dignity. Others saw this as stepping beyond the rules of orderly and respectable engagement. The use of such violence was, however, primarily spoken of as an effective way of drawing attention to the strike demands (see also von Holdt, 2010; Langa and Kiguwa, 2013).

In the next section, I shall turn to discussing how a farmer I interviewed made sense of the use of violence – by workers, security companies, the police and protesters.

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¹³¹ Police vehicle.
A farmers’ perspective

Farm owners also expressed frustration with how the police handled the difficult and delicate matter of protecting people and property during the protests – albeit from a different perspective. A table grape farmer in De Doorns whom I interviewed spoke of acts of violence as solely being carried out at the hands of protesters – while blaming the police for failing to protect farm property from harm. I discuss his reflection on protest violence at some length below, as I suggest it illuminates some important aspects of power in post-colonial Western Cape. It further speaks to the both powerful and exposed position of farm owners, who, given the lack of resources for policing in rural areas, rely on farm watch groups, private security companies and their own power (see e.g. Davis, 2017).

The end of 2012 was a period of tension and fear among farmers in De Doorns, Mr Marais recalls, as wine stocks and other property worth millions of rand were set on fire. One evening early into the strike, employees living in a nearby township called to alert him that protesters were headed to his farm that same night or the next morning, and were threatening, he says, to set his pack shed alight.

My cousin was visiting here … He is a hunter … a bull hunter and he is a huge hunter … He went and put on his hunting clothes and … I phoned the security [company name] … and I asked them for protection. So they sent out four or six guys with shotguns … So that whole night, we stood [guard] on the koppie [small hill] here … We phoned the police and we said we heard we were gonna be attacked … Not once did they rock up, that whole night. Not once … So that next morning there were about 200 people coming over the … hill here … And then … they started lighting the bushes right next to the road … The front part of this march ran … onto the farm… and they started pulling out young vines. So then I just gave the orders, I said: ‘No … we must warn them, give a few warning shots’. So then … the security guys gave a few warning shots … and then only did the police … jump in and they threw some stun grenades and … basically drove the guys back.

Just as some strike participants I spoke to had concluded that the use of methods which could be seen as violent was the only way to get attention for their cause, Mr Marais suggested that the firing of warning shots pushed the police to intervene and prevent protestors from coming onto his farm, as it signalled that violent confrontation could ensue. He further claimed to have verbally confronted those pulling up his stocks, challenging them as though “playing a game” with them, he says. Throughout the strike, Mr Marais not only successfully protected his property – the few young vines were easily put back into the soil, and nothing of value was burnt by the road side – but he also protected (or prevented?) his on-farm employees from joining the
March. Emboldened by security staff with shotguns and a ‘big hunter’ armed with a rifle, he felt confident in his role as (patriarchal-paternalist) protector of his farm and his employees, who, he claims, were threatened with violence if they did not go out to the gate and join the protesters.

Through the whole thing we were just basically ... [a] bastion fort here ... because we had security ... The whole town was in fear ... that march that they had, they ran through town ... burned down shops... It was chaos. But because... I just took a stand here and ... try, let's see [laughs] ... And then – when my people actually said: ‘No, we must go to the gate’, I told them: ‘What? You’re going to the gate, why, for what?’ ‘No, because the people said we ... won’t get hurt if we [go and join them].’ ‘Well they first gotta get past me to hurt you, so you just stay ... you just work ... I’ll sort them [out] ... I'll get some security!’ [laughs]

The next day, as a bigger crowd marched towards the farm, the police intervened immediately, he says, and after that, no more attempts were made to target his farm. Through a demonstration of (white masculine) power – having successfully protected his property with arms – he thus contributed to putting a halt to attempts at shifting the balance of power towards the protesters. This illustrates how threats of direct (counter)violence would in some instances be regarded as permissible and condoned, notably if linked to the protection of private property, and carried out by white farm owners and their aides (see e.g. Schepers-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004:5). Landless black farm workers, on the other hand, were likely to be met with stun grenades, tear gas and rubber bullets from the police if attempting to occupy roads with their bodies, and defending such temporary seizure of the commons by using stones as their weapons.

Mr Marais’ firm understanding that none of his staff members wanted to join the strike, and that the off-farm workers who did march had been forced to do so, and had not gone of their own free will, was key to reconciling relations on the farm after the strike. He describes the relationship with and among his staff as excellent in the post-strike moment, better than before – since he immediately intervened to ease the tension he observed as people returned to work, thus re-establishing the pre-strike organisation of power on his farm.

I told the guys, no one needs to be kwaad [angry] for no one. Because the guys [who] marched with the march, they were forced to march. So we that protected the farm can’t be angry at them ... And the guys that were forced to be part of this ... can’t be angry at the guys that maintained the farm because ... the ones that stayed here and gave water to the plants, they made sure there is still a harvest for us ... to work. So don’t ask questions, just forgive each other and carry on. And within an hour that was sorted. The mood just changed on the farm and there we went. [Snaps
his fingers]

In the next section, I present an example of backlash in the post-strike moment, linked to threats of direct violence against labour activists.

Tshepo’s story: a wild-cat strike and violent responses

Relations on farms were not normalised so quickly everywhere in the post-strike moment. Seven months after Refilwe, Tshepo and Mpho spoke about dehumanisation of migrant labourers on the large table grape farm where they worked, as I wrote of in Chapter Four, I met again with Tshepo, who told me he was recently chased off the farm by management representatives on quads. When we spoke, he was jobless and staying in a nearby town – too afraid to ever return to the farm.

The union that Tshepo, Refilwe and Mpho were part of had embarked at the start of the previous season on an unprotected strike on the farm, when drastic salary deductions were introduced in response to the statutory minimum wage increase in 2013. Receiving their first fortnightly pay check of the season, they realised that the farm company had deducted the equivalent of a week’s pay for migrant workers’ transportation from their home areas to the farm – for some, this had meant standing in the back of a truck the whole night. As Refilwe explained to me, like many others, she had arrived without a cent in her pocket, desperately counting on her first meagre salary to get by and settle debts. Even if she had wanted to, she could not just pack her bags and go home when confronted with this set-back. As noted in Chapter Four, the prospect of earning money was the only reason she had returned to the farm at all, as her children and family members resided elsewhere, and seasonal work on the farm offered no fringe benefits besides a bed in the labour compound, nor any prospects of advancing on the job.

With the union not yet representing the 50+1 percent of workers required to force management to the negotiating table, the frustrated workers embarked on a wild-cat strike that lasted a few days. The company responded by clamping down hard on protesters, firing and evicting several hundred migrant workers, who were driven to a nearby town. Many ended up sleeping on the streets while looking for alternative work. Being a shop steward of the union initiating the strike, Tshepo was dismissed six months later. While the CCMA ordered the farm company to reinstate him, this never materialised, for reasons I explore below.

On the first day when Tshepo came back to the farm after the season started, nervous but determined to get his job back, he went to see the farm manager at his office. There, he recalls being instructed to come in and

\[132\] This section draws entirely on interviews with Tshepo and a union representative.
close the door behind him. As he sat down, the manager started delivering accusations and threats – claiming Tshepo had gone there to do politics and cause trouble instead of to work, and saying that he knew every detail of their meeting would be conveyed to the president of the union. “And he said: ‘I’m not afraid of him [the President]. If he was here … I would have, both of you, smash you!’”

A few minutes into the meeting, the manager allegedly stood up abruptly, took off his jacket and started moving around the large desk towards where Tshepo was seated. Tshepo described how he reacted with a strong sense of fear, convinced that he would be beaten up. He jumped from the chair and rushed out of the office, closing the door behind him to get a head start, and ran through a small gate into the vineyards, hiding among the vines while the manager and an assistant allegedly came after him on quad bikes. Despite being spotted, he eventually shook off his pursuers, sneaked out of the farm and hurried on foot towards the nearest town for safety.

While Tshepo had reported this incident to the police, accompanied by a union organiser, whenever we spoke during the year that followed, I was told that nothing had happened with the case as far as he knew. He said he would not risk returning to the farm again, nor to any nearby farm as he predicted that rumours would have spread and he would not be getting work, or be safe if he did. A threatening display of power by white managers, in a context where white masculinities have historically been associated with brutal racialised violence, left Tshepo fearing for his life, and in effect thus undermined the CCMA ruling which was meant to give him his job back.

Now, on the farm where Tshepo had worked, most of his union colleagues also lost their jobs during this period, including for taking part in the strike or for small mistakes that they suggested would have gone unnoticed had they not been shop stewards. The union, according to Tshepo and a former official, soon lost most of its members on the farm, and the work of following up on cases allegedly dragged on, further complicated by a conflict within the union. As Tshepo puts it, the workers had become deprived of the power necessary to openly challenge management.

And now I don’t have power any more – because [union] has lost … a case against [farm owner] and I don’t have… such a close relationship with them [the union] any more. They have just abandoned me, and I am alone.

Ironically, Tshepo claimed that he had worked hard to ensure that workers refrained from damaging property or using violence in other ways during the strike. Now he had been pushed out with means that, according to his recollection of events, appeared to be clear threats of direct violence, within a deeply unequal and structurally violent context. Without intervention from union leaders, he expected that nothing would come of the police case. In order to succeed in improving conditions on the farm, he suggested, the
migrant workers relied on a strong and present union acting as a collective ‘counter-power’, a power that may or may not derive from violent tactics. A demonstration of such power is perhaps also the only route to change available to migrant workers like Tshepo, who, as discussed in Chapter Four, described experiences of being apprehended as robots, zombies or slaves in the workplace, and were thus unlikely to succeed in negotiating favours or concessions from farm owners or managers within a paternalist framework (see also Ewert and Du Toit, 2005). One may also note how the employer during the post-strike moment had intensified structural violence in various ways, through the introduction of hefty deductions in response to the increased statutory minimum wage, as well as the firing and eviction of protesting workers – ignoring regulations as evictions should be preceded by a court order. Through openly refuting this violence, the migrant workers became an unwanted presence on the farm, as they no longer conformed to the key quality that farm owners reportedly sought in this category of workers: docility (Ulicki and Crush, 2000; Johnston, 2007).

Declining worker power and discourses of whiteness

With only a few days to go to the anniversary of the outbreak of the farm worker strike/rural uprising in De Doorns, around a thousand farm workers gathered on an air field a few minutes’ drive from the town centre in preparation for yet another march. This time however, the purpose and the crowd was different. Unlike last year, when De Doorns became the scene of violent clashes between police shooting rubber bullets and tear gas and demonstrating farm workers and other local residents hurling stones and occupying the nearby national road, the atmosphere this early afternoon was calm though perhaps wary. At the entrance of a farm just across the road, security upgrade work continued unabated, and the farmer fitting electrical wiring on the fence seemed determined to not look over his shoulder at the steady stream of farm workers entering the field. Most appeared to be coming straight from work, disembarking from farm trucks and buses and walking towards the small truck doubling as a podium, where representatives of the organisation Hexvallei Plaaswerkers Associasie (HPA) – coloured farm workers in senior positions – were preparing to commence the program. Above them hung a blue banner on which the words Jesus is Koning (Jesus is King) were written, flanked by two white doves. Some of the workers collected and put on white t-shirts identical to those worn by the organisers, carrying messages in Afrikaans calling for peace in the Western Cape – above an image of a white dove and a Bible quote from Zechariah 4:6,

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133 The farm worker strike and its aftermath were reportedly a very profitable period for South Africa’s booming security industry (Davis, 2012b; Kretzman, 2012)
'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit’. At the bottom was a black hand put up to say ‘Stop!’ – to intimidation, violence and – strikes.

For this event was not about celebrating the gains from farm workers’ collective action the previous year, which had resulted in minimum wages being pushed up by 52 percent. Instead, the HPA chairperson called it a freedom march, aimed at preventing renewed strike action – which should be understood against the HPA’s reading of the strike as a violent and chaotic spectacle in which farm workers were forced to take part. The spectators were addressed as decent, ordentlike, community members and encouraged to walk “in the right direction” and to stand up against a possible coming strike, for, as one person put it, “politics won’t take you to heaven.” Among the speakers was a white farmer and key supporter of the HPA, who in an interview a while later contrasted the (African) ‘ranness’ of the strike with the (white?) Christian ‘decency’ of this day’s march:

With the previous march [the farm worker strike] – in front was the sangomas [traditional healers] ... with the... what you call them, the muti’s [traditional medicine] ... and swaying and toordokter [‘witch doctor’] stuff ... And that’s ancestor spirits stuff. So we just said no – that is enough! ... Jesus is lord and we just invite him to be King again ... [to] be owner here again.

I observed the peace march together with Aunty Lily, Dene and a few other female activists who were involved in the previous year’s strike. They looked on with bodily composure and facial expressions signalling scepticism, standing among the crowd in their deviant t-shirts with images of raised fists and messages of workers’ power. Further to the back were leaders of the union BAWUSA, who were deeply involved in the community-initiated protests, attracting critique from commercial farmers but also from many workers. The main speaker clearly took note of who was in the crowd, calling one of the women with whom I had arrived her role model, while thanking BAWUSA for bringing in the 105 rand per day. The women activists quietly but firmly objected amongst themselves to some of what was being said, and after speaking to some participants, they claimed that many had been brought here by their employers, and had not come of their own free will (the meeting started in the early afternoon of a working day). Regardless of whether this was true or not, however, it would be unfair to call the march anything but a success. At the finale, over a thousand black African and coloured farm workers, and a handful of members of the white farming community, gathered outside the police station, where a
memorandum was handed over to a provincial government official, calling for an end to (non-structural) violence.

The contrast was stark with the poorly attended one-year strike commemoration organised two days later by BAWUSA. On that day, a few dozen local residents, union organisers and government representatives gathered at the Stofland sports field, which was the venue for well-attended mass meetings during the strike.\footnote{BAWUSA called for a reconvening of the commemoration two days later, on a Sunday. On that day, a larger crowd reportedly attended (I was not able to take part), while the action also drew opposition from members of another union.} In spite of the low turnout, speakers from BAWUSA claimed, based on a survey they had conducted, that workers were willing to resume the strike, call for a boycott, and – worryingly – remove all farm workers in the area who were not originally from De Doorns. The low turnout spoke another language, however, and despite many predictions of renewed protest action this season, it never materialised. Across the province, worker leaders I spoke to lamented what they saw as a decline in worker unity, emanating from victimisation and retrenchments or disillusionment with unions.

A year after the ‘farm worker strike’, then, it was possible to at least temporarily unite a large number of people in De Doorns around anti-strike and anti-politics messages, articulated as love for Jesus and peace, while the kind of collective worker power that had enabled the protests appeared to be on the decline. The strong symbolism in the white farmer’s reflection of how ‘ancestor spirit stuff’ had been ousted and Jesus restored to the throne, as King, reflected, in my reading, that power in the valley, which had temporarily been challenged by black African protesters, now rested securely once again in the hands of white capital. The heralding of white Christian notions of morality, decency and respectability became a powerful manifestation of the grip of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004). Over the years that followed however, worker resistance found new outlets in the Western Cape, albeit not in the form of a similar massive worker action, something I will briefly discuss in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion: silences, exclusions and violence continuums

In this chapter, I have explored the Western Cape ‘farm worker strike’ of 2012–2013 as a moment when some farm labourers’ patience to endure precarity, violence and dehumanisation in the commercial farmlands snapped – loudly disrupting the status quo (Ahmed, 2017). I have sought to advance two interconnected arguments: (a) while the ‘strike’ may be understood as an unexpected expression of collective resistance among (some) people who
had been kept apart on farms and in communities, attention to intersecting power relations allows us to complicate what transpired and illuminate silences, exclusions and divisions within the category of farm worker. Furthermore (b) to understand the messy and violent nature of the protests and their aftermath, we must consider the context within which they took place as being saturated with multiple forms of violence, to which people are differently exposed – structural, slow, direct and symbolic – a condition informed by post-colonial and post-apartheid legacies as well as the violence of global production.

Through approaching intersectionality as an ‘analytic sensibility’ which may be fruitfully deployed for studying “sameness and difference and its relation to power” (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013:795), it has been possible, I suggest, to bring forth aspects of this wide-spread rural unrest which have received little mention so far. Thinking with Crenshaw (1989, 1991), attention to intersecting axes of power threw light upon how the voices of black African migrants workers, particularly foreign migrants, recognised as having played leading roles at the onset of the protests, with time became marginalised and relegated to the discursive shadows, while the voices of more established categories of workers were magnified. This provided the impetus for attempting to write black African female workers hailing from other provinces or further afield in Africa back into the strike narrative as important, militant and knowledgeable actors.

Attention to intersecting power relations also enabled us to see the historical continuities between the vulnerability of female and (female and male) migrant workers to backlash in the form of retrenchment or reduced working hours during the post-strike moment (see also Kaur, 2017; Levine, 2014), and their historical position as secondary workers (Orton, Barrientos and McClanaghan, 2001). Moreover, it demonstrated how power hierarchies among farm workers and vis-à-vis employers played into contestations over who could purport to claim a farm worker identity and speak on behalf of others in the protests – a telling example being how some more established farm workers (and farmers) dismissed precariously positioned black African protesters as ‘new-comers’, ‘foreign elements’ or ‘violent’. The tension surfacing at times between different categories of workers should, however, be understood, as Kerr, Durrheim and Dixon (2017) suggest, as a product of these groups’ relationship towards white farmers, who on the one hand (together with the state) were the targets of the protests, yet remained largely untouchable and unavailable for dialogue.

Complex, interrelated power hierarchies also played into how violence was understood, drawn upon and experienced by different actors – and how this in turn relates to precarity and resistance. The differential distribution of precarity between categories of people, it has been suggested, is linked both to perception – informed by racist and sexist ideologies and colonality – and materiality, since those whose lives are not apprehended as (equally)
grievable and valuable in dominant discourse are more often exposed to injury, violence, hunger and premature death (Butler, 2009:25; see also Benson, 2008). I proposed that such processes may be seen as interlinked with a foreclosing of condoned avenues for resistance. While some established, primarily coloured, farm workers in secure positions experienced having access to ‘orderly’, institutionalised channels for making demands towards employers and the state, as discussed in Chapter Five, this appeared to be less attainable for other categories of workers who were regarded as unfamiliar (cf. della Porta, 1995). I would carefully suggest that such differences may to some extent be linked with employers’ ways of seeing (Benson, 2012), where people who lamented being treated as a zombie, a robot or an animal on farms were less likely to access spaces for (respectful) dialogue with management. Hence, messy forms of resistance, including wild-cat strikes that may or may not draw on a repertoire of violence, appeared to be regarded, by some, as the only available option – besides leaving work altogether and thus ‘un-becoming’ farm workers (Bolt, 2017; Kaur, 2017). Some also conceived of violent resistance tactics as the most efficient way of being heard (von Holdt, 2010), and as a vehicle towards restoring their dignity (Fanon, 2005 [1961]; von Holdt, 2012), while strike sceptics regarded the protests as a moment when people were deprived of their dignity.

The ‘farm worker strike’ also exposed how some forms of violence appeared to be condoned and seen as a right or duty in the Western Cape farmlands, while other acts taking place across a violence continuum were marked as unacceptable and undignified (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004:5). As discussed, farm owners hiring armed security or patrolling the streets carrying rifles were less likely to be labelled violent or arrested, while farm workers who marched and occupied roads to draw attention to their demands were pushed back by police using stun grenades, tear gas and rubber bullets. The structural violence in farming areas, which to some extent was intensified in the post-strike moment through wage deductions, a harder work pace, retrenchment and evictions, was also rarely named violence. This reveals that precarity among some groups of people continues to be normalised and seen as unavoidable, linked to power hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality.

Importantly, however, this analysis should not be read as an attempt to defend protester violence targeting replacement labour, foreign workers or local shop-keepers (cf. Mulinari, 2011). Instead, I have sought to contribute to deepening the understanding of the violent and chaotic aspects of the farm worker strike, reading the violence of resistance as a predictable consequence of the slow, structural, symbolic and direct forms of violence embedded in the commercial farmlands, as a space shaped by a neoliberal, post-colonial and post-apartheid present.
Chapter 7 | On feminised precarity and resistance in a neoliberal era

To paint a coherent picture of farm workers in the post-strike Western Cape would be an impossible task. As emerges in my ethnography, people’s understandings of, experiences from and attachments to farm work differ immensely based on their histories of (un)belonging, hiring arrangements and how they are positioned within power hierarchies linked to gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, class and other categories. The narratives which I have explored in this dissertation therefore make up mere fragments of highly variegated experiences. Taken together, however, I believe that they illuminate parts of an (incomplete) pattern of how work and life precarity is lived and resisted among differently positioned people labouring on Western Cape commercial farms. Because neoliberal policies were introduced earlier and in more extreme forms in Africa than in Euro-America, and people by necessity had to forge creative coping strategies, a country like South Africa may offer a privileged vantage point from which to explore precarious work, organising and resistance under neoliberalism, speaking perhaps to futures yet to unfold elsewhere (Chalfin, 2010; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012).

As I now set out to conclude this dissertation, raising my gaze beyond the local and the detailed, and weaving together key empirical findings with broader theoretical debates, I hope to contribute, in some small way, both to research on farm work in South Africa and to a global conversation on gender, precarity and resistance in a neoliberal era, drawing on what emerged from the narratives of some Western Cape farm workers.

This dissertation has sought, through an ethnographic study, to gain insight into how (some) farm labourers in the Western Cape understand and give meaning to work and life precarity and forms of organising and resistance – as well as to interlinkages between these phenomena – in the aftermath of unprecedented rural labour protests commonly referred to as the ‘farm worker strike’. More specifically, I have interrogated how precarity and resistance are entangled with, and expressed through, power structures linked to gender, class, race/ethnicity and nationality, and how such categories are shaped by, and contribute to shaping, work regimes on farms as well as which resistive strategies and positions are available. I have primarily drawn on the narratives of farm workers who were linked to labour or human rights organisations and/or took part in strikes or protests. My
analysis is informed by an understanding of working and living conditions in the Western Cape farmlands as being shaped by neoliberal globalisation processes, which have seen increased power and retention of value in the hands of large foreign retailers. What I have referred to as the post-strike moment functioned as the temporal and spatial delimitation of this study.

Below, I discuss my main empirical findings in relation to the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter One. This discussion is organised around three broad and interlinked thematic areas: intersectional readings of farm workers and the strike; the precarisation of labour and the power of gender; and finally precarity, violence and resistance. Thereafter, I reflect on the complexities, inequalities and interconnectedness of the global economy, drawing on eclectically selected examples of cross-border relations involving retailers, consumers and labour activists in Sweden and South Africa. These illustrate how global interconnection may contribute to reinforcing or challenging the status quo in the distribution of value, risk, precarity and violence along the value chains of deciduous fruit and wine (Tsing, 2005).

**Intersectional readings of farm workers and the strike**

Inspired by contestations surrounding the representation of farm workers in the post-strike moment, as well as by critical feminist analyses of the category of worker – historically laden with norms of masculinity and whiteness – I formulated a seemingly simple pair of questions shortly after beginning my field work, which proved to be productive for this research project: Who and what is a farm worker in the present-day Western Cape? Who may represent farm workers and in what ways? These questions were informed by feminist interrogations of the (masculinised) category of worker, and by an analytic sensibility to intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013) which, as I have shown in this dissertation, provided new perspectives on the ‘farm worker strike’ that had partly been absent in earlier academic deliberations (Ntsebeza, 2013; Wilderman, 2015; Visser and Ferrer, 2015; Webb, 2017). Paying attention to interlocking power relations linked to gender, race/ethnicity and nationality, I shall discuss below three overlapping aspects that these intersectionality-inspired queries brought to the surface with regard to the strike: silencing and erasure; claims of non-authenticity; and vulnerability to job losses.

When farm workers and other rural dwellers across the Western Cape embarked on a large-scale stay-away in November 2012, and drew attention to their cause by occupying roads and setting vineyards on fire, many people with insight into the sector expressed a sense of disbelief: an uprising of this scale and nature was considered unimaginable. The ‘farm worker strike’ thus actualised a mismatch between dominant representations of farm workers as
too dependent on, and fearful of, farmers to dare to engage in sustained open defiance and the militancy displayed by protesters (Eriksson, 2017).

This illustrated how understandings of Western Cape farm workers had not fully incorporated the changes of the previous decades, which had brought about deepened divides and diversification in the commercial farmlands through several parallel processes. The most important of these include: an increased casualisation and externalisation of labour, with a greater proportion of the (shrinking) workforce being female and migrant workers; the gradual, large-scale relocation of workers from on-farm housing to nearby townships; and a partial dismantling, or rearticulation, of traditional farm paternalism.

Nevertheless, unions and other farm worker organisations remained primarily the home for established groups: the permanently employed, many of whom resided on farms and were of coloured ethnicity – worker categories that up until fairly recently had also been the main focus of research in the province (Du Toit, 2005). Through their intimate but deeply unequal relations with farmers, and the tying of their housing to the work contract, on-farm workers had been considered unlikely to engage in sustained open protest (Du Toit, 1993; Klerck and Naidoo, 2003). The ‘strike’ produced new narratives, however, of farm workers and other rural poor as a potentially rebellious (or, in the eyes of some, dangerous) emerging class formation. This became evident through an intersectional analysis: since the experiences of some categories of people labouring on Western Cape farms were absent in dominant representations of farm workers, the strike was not predictable or made understandable within prevailing frameworks of interpretation.

One response to this mismatch was to question the authenticity of the protesters. Several employer representatives and established farm workers I met during fieldwork claimed that the protesters were not (real) farm workers. Making such statements, they drew attention to protesters’ divergent visible identities, work trajectories and histories of (un)belonging in commercial farming areas, as well as to their ‘violent’ – and thus ‘un-farm worker like’ – protest tactics (Eriksson, 2017). As this implies, how and by whom claims were made on behalf of the diverse collective of people labouring on farms was a contested issue. This points to one of several lines of division in the rural landscape: between what one manager called ‘traditional’ farm workers – established and more securely positioned – and ‘newcomers’ – the growing numbers of off-farm seasonal workers, often female, black African and migrants from other provinces or further afield in Africa. The main drivers of the ‘strike’, it is widely held, were the newcomers.

The immediate spark to the mass protests was notably a strike on a table grape farm in De Doorns where a reportedly nearly exclusively black/African female workforce protested attempts by the new management to
drastically reduce their salaries – until then among the highest in the valley. Several interlocutors further mentioned a subsequent strike on a local mushroom farm where undocumented migrants played leading roles, some of whom were later arrested and detained for lacking the required documentation. Seeing that these othered worker categories – foreign workers in particular – had successfully asserted their power and achieved substantial wage increments, some South African labourers, established yet residing off-farm, felt entitled to salaries of the same amounts or more. The question of who had participated in the preceding strikes thus appeared, I carefully suggested, to be one among several impulses for the mass protests.

My material further drew attention to the precarious negotiations of Zimbabwean workers in De Doorns and elsewhere during the wide-spread protests. Some spoke of daring neither to keep on working, nor to be at the forefront of the protests, fearing that discontent could easily be directed at them in spite of the important roles played by foreign migrants in the run-up to this event. This fear was linked to the violent expulsion of Zimbabweans from De Doorns in 2009: allegedly an attempt by South African labour brokers to put their Zimbabwean competitors out of business. Importantly, however, in spite of reports of tension and interpersonal conflict during 2012–2013, the anger was this time directed primarily at white farmers and the government.

The voices of foreign workers, and black African (female) migrants from other provinces, were gradually silenced as the strike proceeded, however. At the more extreme end: petitions written on behalf of ‘the striking workers’ included nationalistic demands like job preference for South Africans and, more subtly, female migrants were absent from TV programmes and workshops where experiences of the strike were discussed during my fieldwork. The gradual emergence of unions at the helm of the protests likely contributed to such shifts, as their constituencies are primarily traditional farm workers. Along with the call for a minimum wage of 150 rand per day, and access to housing, strike demands only relevant to workers residing on farms with their families were added – including for play parks and crèches – demands that were at times presented as especially relevant to ‘women’. On the other hand, concerns brought up by some female migrants I spoke to, notably of sexual harassment by foremen or team leaders, were absent. This revealed how foreign migrants, who some saw as having played leading and advisory roles in the protests from the outset (Christie, 2012) were gradually discursively excluded from the category of farm workers, while black African female migrants were positioned in a blind spot in representations of farm women (Crenshaw, 1989).

This speaks to broader global patterns within which grassroots struggles articulated as ‘worker struggles’ have tended to be made into men’s struggles by failing to pay attention to gender (Elson and Pearson, 1981), while the roles played by othered worker categories have often been marginalised as
protests grow and receive attention – or, as is at times the case with the category of women workers – included for specific purposes in historicising such events (Ross, 2013). An intersectional analytic sensibility, I argue, enables us to write black African women, including migrants from within South Africa or beyond, back into the strike narrative as important and militant actors.

As the debates concerning the authenticity of protesters indicate, the stigmatised and low-status identity of farm worker became meaningful to assert during the strike. Speaking as farm workers enabled protesters to make claims on employers and the state, drawing on the post-apartheid extension of legal protection to farm workers, and on the association between waged work, moral personhood and citizenship that I return to below (Barchiesi, 2011). Since people’s experiences differed profoundly depending on their histories of (un)belonging in the commercial farmlands and on hiring and living arrangements, to a large extent articulating with social categories of race/ethnicity, nationality and gender, the changes they envisioned (or not) and ideas on how to achieve these also differed. Different groups speaking as ‘farm workers’ during this period would thus at times hold opposing views, making the question of who could speak as ‘real’ farm workers a contested one.

In the post-strike moment, my material, as well as reports from organisations and other ethnographers (Kaur, 2017; Levine, 2014), indicated that female workers, together with foreign and domestic migrant workers (Visser and Ferrer, 2015) and people identified as actively involved in the protests, appeared to be particularly vulnerable to job losses or being put on short-time as some farm companies sought to recover the costs associated with the introduction of the new minimum wage. Coloured female farm workers’ historical position as secondary labourers was thus again actualised during this period, albeit in new ways. For those who had relocated to rural towns, one could see a re-positioning from that of a secondary on-farm worker – whose contract was attached to a permanent male worker – to a precariously but independently hired off-farm worker, to – for some – a disposable worker. This shift was not solely linked to the protests however, but was instead part of on-going processes of transformation in the rural landscape.

In Chapter Three, I analysed the narratives of women who had been pushed out of farms in recent years, and who understood this predicament as linked to unpaid care work – for instance, being absent from work when repeatedly accompanying a sick child to the hospital – or personal health problems. The narratives further revealed that the women were still in practice treated as part of a heterosexual nuclear family unit, vulnerable to retrenchment and/or eviction from farms if a male partner, the ‘real’ worker as it were, lost his job (and housing) (Greenberg, 2012). This indicates the incompatibility between increased expectations of work performance and the
association between women and unpaid care work, in a context of insufficient state support and a partial dismantling of earlier forms of farm paternalism based on a ‘mutual understanding’, and more wide-spread access to ‘additional benefits’, such as crèches or school transport for children (Swanepoel, 2017).

The forced relocation from farms associated with un-becoming farm dwellers and/or workers was for some an acute trauma linked to a disruption of familiar modes of belonging (Rutherford, 2008). In the words of one elderly woman, being told to vacate her house on the farm was “almost the same as a death sentence”. Thinking with James Ferguson (2013a), the shift from an on-farm life characterised by deep inequalities but where limited forms of support could be accessed, to a precarious off-farm life with no such protection was seen as a step down – from subjection to abjection as it were – when workers could no longer make claims on farmers within a paternalist framework. The move away from farms did not mean that the women stopped relating to the identity of farm worker, however, as this seemed to be linked perhaps primarily to histories of belonging and experiences of having been entangled in, and constrained by, life on a farm (cf. Hartnack, 2017).

Precarisation of labour and the power of gender

Labour regimes on commercial farms are an important arena within which farm worker identities take shape – and where, through the work process, farm labourers become gendered and racialised (Weeks, 2011). While such processes are by no means uniform – Western Cape farms may in some respects appear to be worlds apart depending on size, crop and management styles – in Chapter Four I have analysed recurring gendered and racialised discourses and tropes emerging in worker and management narratives, which speak to continuities and changes in work regimes on farms. I discussed two broad and interlinked discourses, one labelling women and other feminised labourers, notably Zimbabwean migrants, as ‘good workers’, both docile and industrious, and one constructing black African male workers as violent, dangerous and rough – qualities which could potentially be drawn upon in fast, heavy and competitive work (cf. Bolt, 2010).

Such notions appeared in different ways to inform hiring strategies. One farmer asserted that he would only allow female migrants to reside in his on-farm labour compound, a decision he based on fear of violence from ‘Xhosa men’. At another farm, a manager described how men from a remote rural locality were hired and housed separately on the farm in order to avoid the trouble he associated with ‘mixing’ workers, possibly alluding to collective action (see also Ewert and Hamman, 1996; Levine, 2013). Such discourses were reiterated by some farm workers too, who spoke of associations
between black masculinities and violence as a possible counter-power, allowing some men to reject certain tedious work tasks, while black African female (migrant) workers in this study felt pushed much harder than both men and coloured female co-workers. Importantly however, my aim has not been to try and determine which sub-category of workers was most disadvantaged – this is likely to have varied over time and between locations (see e.g. Ewert and Hamman, 1996; Williams, 2010) – but to illuminate how divisions and differentiation based on categories was experienced by precariously positioned workers, and seemingly drawn upon by employers in constructing and maintaining a desirable labour force; with skilled, cheap, docile and flexible workers (Mohanty, 2003; Peterson, 2003; Salzinger, 2003).

In line with previous research, I have described the interlocking categories of gender, race/ethnicity and nationality as powerful constructs in farm labour regimes (see e.g. Kritzinger and Vorster, 1996; Orton, Barrientos and McClenaghan, 2001). These power hierarchies appeared to a large degree to articulate with length and type of contract, hiring arrangements, what type (if any) of on-farm accommodation was made available and access to non-wage benefits as well as opportunities to advance to better paid positions. Notions such as ‘women’s work’ (‘light’, and requiring dexterity and diligence, often seasonal) and ‘men’s work’ (‘heavy’, ‘skilled’ more likely to be year round) continued to be intelligible to interlocutors even though, in practice, implementation differed, and women could be assigned both ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s’ work.

This speaks to what sociologist Leslie Salzinger (2003:25) has drawn attention to, namely that the centrality of gender in global production rests on a combination of an uncritical acceptance of gender as a key category for organising and dividing labour and a flexibility with regards to what the categories of masculine and feminine denote, allowing for tremendous local variation (see also Peterson and Runyan, 2010; Weeks, 2011). The power of such constructs derives from their resonance with both local gender ideologies and the interest of capital (Mies, 2014). As my material indicates, such ideologies were further informed by coloniality and interlinked with ideologies of race/ethnicity (Mohanty, 2003; Gutiérrez-Rodriguez, 2014).

On some farms, workers described how teams were formed along the lines of race/ethnicity and nationality, allowing managers, some claimed, to pitch different groups against each other in order to instil a spirit of inter-group competition and intra-group cohesion. In places like De Doorns, as noted above, tension was at times high between certain groups of ‘foreigners’ and ‘South Africans’. As Kerr, Durrheim and Dixon (2017) illuminate, such tension should be understood as constituted by the different groups’ relationships to white farmers, who had constructed Zimbabweans as preferred labourers and South Africans as lacking a work ethic, partly because they could access – very meagre – welfare provision. Racial (and
national) divisions could thus function not only as a way of extracting surplus labour but also as a ‘lightning rod’, redirecting the anger of marginalised South African labourers towards their foreign counterparts (Magubane, 2000:478).

As several analysts have noted, much of the theorisation of work and life precarity has failed to adequately incorporate insights from previous feminist research on women’s paid and unpaid labour (Fantone, 2007; Federici, 2006; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014; McRobbie, 2010; Peterson and Runyan, 2010). Founded upon an imaginary of loss – of a past characterised by access to a full-time stable job with decent conditions and access to social protection – a work relationship that most women and people of colour had never experienced, the theorisation of ‘precarious work’ and ‘precarity’ appeared to speak primarily to a shift affecting white men in early industrialised states, although some researchers have attempted to integrate aspects such as social location (see e.g. Vosko, 2010). Yet, women and non-white workers, including migrants, continue to be the categories of people most often relegated to these insecure positions and hiring arrangements. At the same time, as my material suggests, responsibility for reproducing the labour force and for the production of life more broadly (Federici, 2004, 2006; Mies, 2014) and personal health problems easily render these precariously positioned workers undesired and disposable.

A related term emerging from research on gender and globalisation is the feminisation of labour, which signals both the increased entry of women into the global labour force and a general shift towards more insecure and sub-standard conditions of employment previously primarily offered to women – and at times also increased demand for ‘feminised’ service and care work (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014; Peterson and Runyan, 2010; Standing, 1989). Feminisation, then, refers to a “general mode of production”, not solely to work undertaken by women (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014:197). Precarity has further been theorised as a condition that has transcended sociological definitions of precarious work, to include capital’s “capture of life beyond the workplace” and workers forging bonds of solidarity in reaction to such tendencies (see Barchiesi, 2012:2 for an overview).

In line with sociologist Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2014), I regard the concepts of the feminisation of labour, precarisation of labour and precarity as closely interlinked – seeing precarity as a feminised phenomenon (see also Peterson and Runyan, 2010). However, neither of these descriptors fit neatly with the situation I have studied. While attention to women’s historical position as secondary and not ‘real’ workers, and how this has shifted, should be made more central in analyses of precarity and precarious work, the term feminisation of labour, albeit successfully drawing attention to how femininity is invoked in the work process, would be strengthened by explicitly incorporating analytical attention to racism and coloniality (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014). For the notion of precarity to be
useful in the global south, Munck (2013:757) further argues that it should be analysed as interlinked with how the historical and contemporary dispossession of land and other resources from local communities has continued to generate new ‘surplus populations’. The precarity of black South African working (and non-working) classes today are further shaped not only by socio-economic deprivation but also, as Franco Barchiesi (2016:884) notes, by the deeper layers of state-sanctioned structural violence against black people during the 20th century, hinging on the repudiation of blackness as “a condition of existence marked by gratuitous violence and incapacitation” – imagined as redeemable only through waged labour for the benefit of white capital.

My analysis in this dissertation therefore points to a reading in which the notions of precarious work, precarity and feminisation are only comprehensible if understood as informed by the ‘longue durée’ effects of colonialism with its brutality and dispossessions, and associated gendered and racialised constructs, and by complex local dynamics and neoliberal trajectories (Mbembe, 2015). While these terms do not fit neatly into the context of the post-apartheid, (post-)paternalist Western Cape farmlands, they do draw attention to some important aspects of this study: of the resilience of gender constructs, the centrality of violence and how political decisions shape precarity today.

Although there is no clear cut line between how differently positioned workers describe their experiences at work, one may note that established coloured families residing permanently on farms are more likely to be seen as belonging, are known by name, and may for better or worse be incorporated as part of familial, yet deeply unequal, farm hierarchies. While (some) workers from this category also related experiences of farm owners and managers who humiliated them and undermined their dignity, they were at the same time to some extent seen as persons – and thus humanised. More recently arrived black/African workers, as well as some permanent migrants, on the other hand, remained unknown. In conversations with migrant workers, some lamented feeling treated as ‘nothing’, ‘not human’ or ‘animals’ – calling to mind Karl Marx’s projections of labour under capitalism bringing about alienation and estrangement not only from the commodity one produces and from the production process, but also a concomitant alienation from one’s co-workers and ultimately from oneself as producer, from one’s own human essence (Marx, 1944 in Fornäs, 2013:51). This was at times enhanced by a sensation of being under the control of powerful foremen, to whom (paternalist) employer responsibility appeared to have been fully delegated, with no possibility of bringing complaints directly to farmers or managers (see also Addison, 2014b; Bolt, 2016a; and Swanepoel, 2017).

Some black African female migrants spoke of how this made them vulnerable to dual forms of dehumanisation: being treated as a slave, a
zombie, a robot or a machine while at the same time subjected to sexual harassment and demands from team leaders or foremen who would not hesitate to make female migrant workers’ lives on the farm impossible should they reject such advances. Through ways of seeing informed by racist and sexist ideologies, some managers and employers thus appeared not to recognise the humanity in the faces of black African female migrants, who were rendered unfamiliar – or sexualised objects (Benson, 2008). In this way, the perpetuation of structural violence and subordination was normalised. Gender appeared to be one of the structures in which dehumanisation was lived – and contested – in other ways too. Some black African female workers, for instance, lamented that they were not treated as women on the farms, including as they carried out physically heavy work conceived of as ‘men’s work’ – tasks undertaken by men in previous work regimes. This lack of recognition of some female farm workers as women may be understood as one aspect of dehumanisation since, as Paulina de los Reyes (2013:80) notes, the possibility of apprehending gender is integral to apprehending the human (cf. Spillers, 1987).

In many places across the globe, the power of gender as an overarching construct appears to have become both stronger and more contested over the past few decades (Peterson and Runyan, 2010). This, it has been argued, speaks among other things to a will to re-imagine modern society as having moved beyond class (McRobbie, 2010). Gender, interlocked with other power hierarchies such as race/ethnicity and nationality/migration status, may, however, be thought of as a modality in which class is lived (Hall, 1980). When female farm workers express discontent with a breakdown of gender boundaries at work, this is perhaps a logical way of rejecting deteriorating conditions at work – where class conflict, as it were, is articulated through (an intersectional) gender.

Returning to the questions surrounding who is (not) recognised as a ‘real’ worker on farms, such queries may be understood as running much deeper that the worker identity per se. Racism and sexism, as discussed above, influence who becomes visible as a worker, and who can make demands on – and to some extent be respected by – employer representatives. Thinking with Judith Butler, these queries speak to painful topics regarding whose lives are made understandable within dominant epistemological frameworks, whose lives are read as grievable and who is apprehended as human in the workplace (Butler, 2004, 2009). The 2012–2013 ‘farm worker strike’, I suggest, indicated that attention to such complexities is necessary for understanding why and how the protest evolved.
Precarity, violence and resistance

I have argued that analyses of work and resistance must centrally take into account how violence in a variety of forms shapes how life and work in commercial farming areas is organised and how power inequalities are upheld and practised. Furthermore, violence and exposure to precarity are intimately linked – with precarity being understood as a politically induced condition of enhanced precariousness to which certain groups are exposed (Butler, 2009). The unequal distribution of precarity, Butler (2009:25) notes, is a question of both materiality and perception, since “those whose lives are not regarded as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death.” Disproportionate exposure to violence, including socio-economic deprivation, is thus informed by racism and sexism, as discussed in the section above, influencing what lives are perceived as real and liveable, and recognised as valuable and grievable (Butler, 2004, 2009). Violence, in the commercial farmlands as elsewhere, is further best thought of as a continuum, encompassing structural, slow, symbolic and direct forms of violence – where “the most violent acts are often the ones that are not recognised as violence at all” (Schepers-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004:5).

The violence embedded in the organisation of work was narrated in different ways by differently positioned workers. Worker narratives were replete with references to what I understand as structural violence and deprivation of life chances linked to poverty, including regular experiences of food shortages, and of slow violence with delayed effects, at times “driven inwards” into the body (Nixon, 2011:6); for instance through exposure to the ‘dop system’ and to pesticides without adequate protection. Farm worker lives were also shaped by the constant presence of interpersonal violence, including domestic violence and sexual harassment, and verbal abuse and at times threats of violence in the workplace.

Various techniques of monitoring and surveillance may also be understood as a form of violence – described by some workers as instilling fear of being subjected to harsh verbal rapprochement, wage deductions or losing one’s job should one be found not to comply with workplace expectations. In some narratives, the self-discipline linked to the presence of surveillance cameras was reminiscent of a panopticon: constant cognisance of one’s behaviour linked to the fear that someone might be watching. The installation of technology aimed at surveilling workers’ time and movement on farms, such as fingerprint readers, was at least partly a response to requirements linked to global private codes and standards, including those associated with Corporate Social Responsibility [CSR] regimes (Swanepoel, 2017). Concerns over outsiders inspecting conditions on farms were also at times translated into demands on farm workers linked to employer notions of
decency and respectability, with on-farm staff being instructed to clean up their ‘filthy’ yards ahead of visits from third-party assessors of ethical codes or tourists.

I have suggested that analytical attention to the violence embedded in work regimes and the social organisation of life in commercial farming areas is essential for understanding the forms and expressions that worker resistance may take. In this dissertation I have discussed what I see as two important strategies for openly resisting dehumanisation and the symbolic violence embedded in paternalist and neoliberal work regimes: ‘orderly’ forms of engagement with employers, which depended on positioning oneself as a person with knowledge of human and labour rights, and a resistance expressed through direct confrontation, exemplified through strikes and public protests.\footnote{While covert resistance through what James Scott (1990) refers to as ‘hidden transcripts’ is also strongly present, it has not been the focus of this dissertation.}

In Chapter Five, I explored how female farm workers involved in labour and other forms of community organising sought ways to disrupt symbolic forms of domination and violence, and in other ways resist the slow violence of poverty and paternalist legacies in the workplace. I noted a striking tendency among activists who were or had been part of popular education initiatives within trade unions or other organisations to emphasise that they knew their human and labour rights – often interpreted in a broad sense, going beyond a strict legal framework (cf. Morreira, 2013). I argued that, through presenting themselves as knowledgeable in this way, and through accentuating feminised aspects of care and responsibility in their activism, the women were able to position themselves as respectable moral beings, and in turn receive respect from co-workers, community members and (some) employer representatives. In the process, they countered negative stereotypes of (female) farm workers as uneducated, docile and complacent, and, I suggested, contributed to re-inscribing the category of farm worker with new qualities: knowledge, power and fearlessness. For some, the activist position, organisational spaces and a framework of rights partly appeared to constitute an alternative or parallel ‘mode of belonging’ to that of (post-)paternalist labour regimes (Rutherford, 2008).

A concept which runs through several chapters, and connects the empirical reflections on various forms of resistance, is dignity – a term I use in tying together worker narratives about struggles for respect, bodily integrity, and being treated like a human being. What I refer to as dignity emerges in narratives of both work and resistance, linked to the colonial notion of ‘dignity of labour’ and present-day workfare paradigms (Barchiesi, 2011) as well as dignity emanating from labour struggles. Drawing on the writings of, among others Dunbar Moodie (2010) and Franco Barchiesi (2011), I argued that activism was seen as a possible path for farm workers

\footnote{While covert resistance through what James Scott (1990) refers to as ‘hidden transcripts’ is also strongly present, it has not been the focus of this dissertation.}
to restore a sense of pride and dignity. In addition, I suggested that for female workers, dignity (of labour and activism) may be read as entangled with the gendered notion of respectability.

I noted that being involved in a struggle for a better future together with other women enabled some female farm workers to partially transcend the limiting norms linked to gendered respectability and to expose and contribute to disrupting the symbolic violence keeping women down. While, as I discussed in the previous section, some female workers lamented not being treated as women on farms, a union catering especially for women, Sikula Sonke, was, according to one member, a space where one could re-imagine “how to be a woman again.” Some resistive spaces were thus seen as enabling female workers to restore a sense of dignity and be perceived as respectable.

The respectable position of being a person who is aware of, and dares to stand up for, her rights and those of others was a precarious one however. Expressions recurring in several narratives were ‘orderly’ and ‘according to rules’, following the right procedures in negotiations. To some, it was important above all else to avoid the chaos and violence which they saw the farm worker strike as having brought about, and which did not fit with ideals of respectability and decency (Ross, 2010; Salo, 2003, 2009). Even when doing everything by the book, the kind of demands one made could still be read as a sign of unruliness by employers, however. Some female activists spoke of how they were labelled political, trouble-makers or clever (slim) when they drew attention to discrepancies between labour and human rights legislation and practices on farms. The more ‘orderly’ and, to employers, acceptable forms of organising thus operated within a circumscribed space, governed by various forms of violence.

While stressing the importance of knowing their rights, many farm workers still acknowledged the limitations of frameworks of rights – expressing frustration at the lack of meaningful changes in their lives after 1994. Thinking with Sarah Ahmed (2017), I suggested that the ‘farm worker strike’ be read as a moment in which some workers patience to endure the discrepancies between rights on paper and lived experiences of slow, symbolic and direct forms of violence ‘snapped’, loudly disrupting the status quo. A ‘snap’, Ahmed writes, might be perceived by those unaffected as a violent moment, when something irrevocably falls apart – just as when a twig is split in two pieces. Importantly though, “a snap would only be the beginning insofar as we did not notice the pressure on the twig” (Ahmed, 2017:188–189). Farm workers and other marginalised rural people had indeed been cognisant of their bodies having bent under pressure for centuries already, through premature deaths linked to poverty-related diseases, harsh working conditions and long-term exposure to pesticides, as well as direct forms of violence. Most powerholders, however, appeared to have failed to take seriously the sound of creaking wood.
One coloured on-farm female union member told me that her employer, enraged after workers organised a picket, had asked: “Why can’t we sit down at a table and talk like civil people?” As the narratives analysed in this dissertation suggest however, many people labouring on farms had never been regarded by employers as either civil or people/human – and had simply never had a chance to sit with them around a table as negotiating partners equal in dignity and rights. The possibility of expressing discontent – and being heard – within an orderly framework was, I suggested, to a large extent foreclosed, perhaps especially for the categories of workers whose humanity was not recognised by employers. Seeing that earlier attempts to bring their plight forward to policy makers and farmers had not led anywhere, some concluded that ‘violent’ forms of resistance were the answer – resorting to burning vineyards or occupying roads in order to get attention and have their demands taken seriously. Some also saw the more ‘violent’ resistive tactics as a way to momentarily, and forcefully, get respect. Protesting was spoken of as a source of pride, joy and empowerment, some referring to how proud it made them feel to stand up for their rights.

The ‘farm worker strike’ may thus be understood as a moment when some participants attempted to assert their dignity, through demonstrating that “we can’t tolerate these things anymore” or “we didn’t take it lying down” as two female farm workers put it. The choice of tactics was a matter of contention and othering which caused division within worker communities however, as many rejected what they saw as the promotion of chaos and violence – and instead saw this as a moment when people’s dignity was lost. Some on-farm workers in more secure positions were also upset that more recently arrived groups of farm workers did not consider the long-term consequences of their actions, which risked sweeping away the gains that established groups had fought hard over many years to secure. As noted above, these contestations informed the othering of strike participants.

While one may understand farm workers critical of the protests as having internalised the hegemonic value systems of local power holders: terming stone-throwing, the blocking of roads and setting vineyards on fire as acts of violence and immoral, while not describing poverty wages and exposure to chemicals without adequate protection as violence, it is important to recognise that these processes are complex. In news reports and popular discourse, expressions such as ‘strike violence’ seemed to primarily point to the actions of protesters who disrupted the status quo, while the killing and injuring of protesters by police, and the deployment of armed private security, was less likely to be called violence – nor was the refusal of employer organisations to accept the protesters as negotiation partners labelled violent.

As theorists of symbolic violence have suggested, while people who adopt the world-view imposed upon them by the dominant are complicit in this process, this happens neither through coercion nor consent, but through
an act of “cognition and of misrecognition that lies beyond – or beneath – the
controls of consciousness and will” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004:273).
This may explain how farm owners’ understandings of violence and the need
to restore (the pre-strike) order were to some extent given prominence,
although many competing media framings of the protests were in motion at
the time (Pointer, 2013). Furthermore, as noted above, during the period after
the strike, some employers appeared to have responded with enhanced
structural violence, through retrenchments and/or eviction and increased
deductions, in some places targeting those who took part in the protests,
while elsewhere already vulnerable worker categories, notably women
and/or migrants appeared to have been particularly exposed to job losseses or
reduced working hours.

To sum up, in this concluding discussion I have tried to show that work
and life precarity, violence and resistance are intimately linked in the
Western Cape farmlands – arguing that attention to multiple forms of
violence, including post-colonial and post-apartheid legacies and the
violence of neoliberal globalisation, is crucial in order to understand the
messy and violent feature of the ‘farm worker strike’. Structural, slow and
symbolic violence as well as (threats of) direct violence creates frustration
and anger among workers while at the same time foreclosing condoned
avenues for making one’s voices heard – perhaps particularly for categories
of people whose humanity is not recognised in the workplace. Experiences
of precarity and resistance, and exposure to violence, may further be
understood as lived through the categories of gender, race/ethnicity and
nationality.

While thus far in this chapter I have drawn on ethnographic accounts from
the Western Cape farmlands, discussing these vis-à-vis the theoretical
framework of the dissertation, in the following section I shall expand my
gaze in order to situate these findings within a global context, exemplified by
economic, discursive and activist connections between South Africa and
Sweden. Following Tsing (2005:4), I argue that consideration of such
“interconnection across difference” is necessary for this research project,
given that most of the deciduous fruit and wine produced in the Western
Cape is consumed abroad, where the bulk of the value is retained, and since
farm workers’ labour struggles also traverse borders and aspire to universal
values. In my elaborations below, I therefore draw inspiration from Tsing’s
(2005:4) proposal that neo-liberal globalisation be understood as
materialised through ‘friction’, the unequal, unstable and at times short-lived
“worldly encounters” providing the grip which brings the universals of
capitalism into motion, albeit not always in smooth and unhindered ways.
Global friction and interconnection with Sweden

I opened this dissertation by citing a 1983 poem entitled ‘Blodsdruvor’ (Blood grapes), which drew attention to the links between racialised violence against black workers under apartheid and the consumption of South African fruit in Sweden. At the time, massive civil society mobilisation in support of the ANC’s call to boycott the apartheid state and it’s white commercial farmers saw Sweden becoming the first country to ban imports of South African fruit and wine. The important role played by both civil society and the state in the global anti-apartheid movement is still central to Sweden’s ‘internationalist’ national identity (Thörn, 2010:116).

When the unprecedented ‘farm worker strike’ broke out in the Western Cape farmlands in 2012, earlier references to grapes as saturated with workers’ blood, and support for the demand in the Freedom charter that “The land shall be shared among those who work it” appeared distant. Media reporting in Sweden was modest, and no large-scale solidarity action took place.136 This is not surprising given the extensive political shifts in both South Africa and Sweden over the past few decades, with the former apartheid state having evolved into a multi-racial democracy, and both countries embracing neoliberal economic policy and discourse, which mystifies attempts to discuss racism and sexism as intrinsic to contemporary ways of organising labour under capitalism.137 As alluded to in Chapter One, trade, aid and individualistic consumption of ethically sourced products – not boycott, union solidarity or land occupation – were regarded, in line with such shifts, as viable routes to supporting black workers in democratic South Africa, particularly if packaged as aiding the empowerment of people gendered women.138

This speaks to how ‘friction’ between actors in Sweden and South Africa have been very differently expressed at different points in history, informed by social ties and political and economic trajectories. Around the year 1900, Swedish liberals and Social Democrats came out in support of the small Boer

136 Activists in the Ethical Wine Trade Campaign attempted to create awareness of the ‘strike’ and the links to Sweden as an important destination country, see below.
137 Sweden’s embracing of neoliberal economic principles and discourse has been studied via the far-reaching reforms of the public sector from the mid-1990s, rendering the education sector, for instance, one of the most capital-friendly and least regulated in the world (see e.g. Blomqvist, 2016; Lundahl et al, 2013). In South Africa, as discussed in Chapter Three, analysts have described the agricultural sector as one of the most liberalised in the world, related to post-1994 policy shifts.
138 In the late 1990s, Sweden entered into a widely criticised arms deal with the ANC government. South Africa bought 26 JAS Grippen military planes, while Sweden promised to compensate the new democracy through investments. The affair was dogged by corruption allegations, and while crime investigations have been closed, millions of Swedish crowns are left unaccounted for (see e.g. Resare, 2010). For a discussion on global corporations placing girls at the centre of CSR programmes, see e.g. Moeller, 2013 and Shain, 2013.
republics during the Anglo-Boer wars, informed, according to Thörn (2010:118), by a strong Swedish presence in the Cape colony, where one-fifth of the settlers were Scandinavians, and sympathy with what were envisioned as small unruly states opposing the British imperium. During the anti-apartheid struggles on the other hand, ties between activists in both countries and Sweden’s awkward position as an unaligned state with a tarnished reputation after World War II, shaped the country’s political approach, Thörn (2010:116-119) argues.

Below, I elaborate on a few examples of how Swedish actors involved in the retail of South African wine and deciduous fruit, and solidarity activists in the two countries may contribute to shaping farm worker realities in the present moment. Following post-colonial theory, I have selected examples that speak to some central aspects of globalisation in a neo-liberal era: materialised structural power inequalities along the value chains of agricultural export-produce, how post-colonial and neoliberal discourses contribute to legitimising these, and how this order is resisted by cross-border solidarity activists.

Systembolaget’s uneasy relation to power in the global economy

Six months after the ‘farm worker strike’ had ended with the introduction of a new minimum wage, Magdalena Gerger, Executive Director of the state-owned alcohol monopoly Systembolaget, was interviewed in a current affairs programme on Swedish Radio (Sveriges Radio, 2013). A short time into the programme, the reporter shifted topic from the monopoly’s work in Sweden to focus on conditions for farm workers in South Africa. The recent labour unrest, while sparsely reported in the Swedish media, had brought to the surface the dire economic situation and exposure to everyday violence that most farm workers face. Their predicaments had a bearing on the Swedish context, given that Sweden was the third top destination for South African wine by volume at the time – a connection highly visible in the Western Cape winelands, where Swedish flags were flying at the entrances to many farms and small towns (Greenberg, 2012). Systembolaget had recently started implementing a CSR programme and adopted an ethical code, which members of a transnational campaign, Rättvis vinhandel (Ethical Wine Trade), had criticised, partly because it did not demand living wages for farm workers.139

139 Systembolaget joined the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI) and adopted its code of conduct in 2012. The campaign Rättvis vinhandel was formed in late 2010 by labour and social justice organisations in Sweden, South Africa, Chile and Argentina. It sought to push the Nordic alcohol monopolies to take greater responsibility for working conditions on grape farms and wineries. See Chapter Two for a reflection on my positionality in relation to taking part in campaigning.
As a state-owned monopoly and one of the leading wine retailers globally, campaigners argued that Systembolaget was well placed to contribute to a fairer distribution of the value of the wine sold in its stores. A study commissioned by a campaign member had shown that up to 80 percent of the value of a South African bag-in-box wine remained in Sweden through alcohol tax, VAT and the monopoly’s mark-up costs, as well as a smaller share retained by the importing company (Greenberg, 2012).\textsuperscript{140} Labour costs on grape farms, the study estimated, amounted to only 2–4 percent of the value – and many farms struggled to survive and make a profit on the competitive international market. Furthermore, the predominately female workforce was systematically paid less for the same job compared to men (Greenberg, 2012).\textsuperscript{141}

Probed over whether the workers whom she had met during a recent visit to South Africa were content with their salaries, Magdalena Gerger’s response is telling of global power inequalities:

We are working with continuing to improve conditions and there we are pursuing the issue of a living wage ... Precisely through our initiative, and our driving force, I should say, they have introduced minimum wages ... They actually did that during the period when I was in South Africa myself ... so ... there is then an improvement. But we should also not forget ... that ... I am very humble before ... that South Africa is one of the high-risk countries that we in Sweden import from. Chile is another. So they have a history ... of ... They are new democracies and so forth so that ... even if it goes fast, there are a lot more things to do. (Sveriges Radio, 2013, my translation from Swedish)\textsuperscript{142}

In her reflection, Gerger makes two contradictory observations regarding Swedish influence on working conditions for South African farm workers. On the one hand, she incorrectly suggests that minimum wages for the sector were introduced in 2013 only, instead of in 2002, and that this was a result of Systembolaget’s CSR work.\textsuperscript{143} On the other hand, she alludes to the slow

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\textsuperscript{140} The import of alcohol was deregulated in 1994, and in 2012 over 600 private importing companies were eligible to sell to Systembolaget (Greenberg, 2012).

\textsuperscript{141} By way of comparison, table grape producers in De Doorns received 18 percent of the retail price in the UK in 2011 (26 percent if packhouses are included) (Barrientos and Visser, 2012:17)

\textsuperscript{142} Transcribed and translated from Swedish: ”Vi driver ju en fråga om att fortsatt förbättra villkoren och där driver vi ju en fråga om levnadslön ... Precis med hjälp av vårt initiativ, och vår drivkraft ska jag säga så har man infört minimilöner ... Det gjorde man faktiskt under den perioden när jag själv var i Sydafrika. Så att det sker ju en förbättring. Men vi ska inte glömma bort också [och] det ... är jag väldigt ödmjuk inför ... Sydafrika ... är ett av dom riskländer som vi i Sverige importerar från. Chile är ett annat. Så har dom ju en historik ... De är nya demokrater och så vidare så att ... även om det går fort så är det mycket mer att göra.”

\textsuperscript{143} A new sectoral determination was however announced by the Minister of Labour Mildred Ollifant in February 2013. As noted earlier, the new daily wage of R105 is widely believed to
progress towards a living wage and decent working conditions in ‘high-risk’ countries as unavoidable, given their histories of white minority rule and dictatorship. She thus succeeds, I suggest, in conveying an image of the alcohol monopoly as powerful enough to wield direct influence over policy decisions in countries like South Africa, while at the same time innocent in relation to global inequalities and the retention of apartheid-era wage levels in new and ‘risky’ democracies. This resonates with hegemonic neo-liberal discourse, which firmly rules out alternative ways of organising the economy, in this case through paying more for the wine provided that workers receive a living wage. The reference to South Africa as a presumably not yet mature democracy moreover echoes a familiar post-colonial discourse which locates othered people and countries at a lower stage of development within a presumed linear and universal historical time, oblivious of the long-term effects of colonialism, and the neo-colonial aspirations within the contemporary global economy (de los Reyes, 2011:18-19).

As noted in Chapter Three, a recent research review suggested that most Western Cape farm workers are worse off economically today compared to the mid-1970s, due to the removal of non-wage benefits and a rapid increase in food prices (Visser, 2016). This, in turn, has been linked to neo-liberal policy shifts locally, including deregulation and a dismantling of marketing boards, and a parallel concentration of power in the hands of global retailers, which producers have responded to through casualisation, externalisation and farm consolidation (see e.g. Bernstein, 2013; Visser and Ferrer, 2015).\footnote{Some researchers call claims that a majority of South African farmers can afford to pay higher wages ‘a fiction’, referring to data suggesting that 56 percent of producers have an annual turn-over of below 500,000 rand per year (Visser and Ferrer, 2015:214). Others point out that even more profitable farms in expanding sub-sectors have opted for casualisation (Devereux and Solomon, 2011; Greenberg, 2010).}

At the same time, however, most retailers have adopted codes of conduct throughout their supplier chains. While claiming in this way to be socially responsible, they do not cover the costs associated with implementation. In attempting to recover these extra expenses, many producers have opted for further downward pressure on labour (Barrientos, 2008; Swanepoel, 2017). Research has noted some improvements for South African farm workers linked to ethical codes, primarily in terms of workplace health and safety and compliance with minimum wages, while the impact has been negligible for empowering workers, achieving living wages or extending protection to workers in the most precarious positions (Barrientos and Visser, 2012; Greenberg, 2012; Swanepoel, 2017; Visser, 2016).
One may thus observe that CSR programmes continue to locate the responsibility for inadequate salaries, structural violence and lack of respect for workers’ right to organise solely within the post-colonial ‘contact zones’ where global production takes place (Pratt, 1991). In this way, attention is diverted away from how retailers, through price-squeezing, increased retention of value and control over production processes, participate in entrenching and exacerbating global inequalities (see Du Toit, 2002; De Neve, 2009; Dolan and Rayak, 2016). CSR regimes, it has been argued, may be understood as ‘a central tool through which post-colonial power inequalities are being maintained and reshaped, and often even intensified by dominant players in the global market’ (De Neve, 2009:64). Moreover, they contribute to discursively casting retailers and consumers in the West or global north as “knowledgeable, caring and disciplined, and their non-western suppliers as backward, uncaring and lacking self-control” – in spite of local producers, and eventually workers, carrying the costs of implementation (De Neve, 2009:64). The emphasis on neutrality between producers, an important principle for the alcohol monopoly, does not take into account how large state subsidies to the agricultural sector in wealthy European and North-American countries distorts such neutrality, leaving producers in the global south with few other options than to compete with low salaries.

Neoliberal subjects and the cult of female entrepreneurship

Consumers located in Euro-America have been the main targets of such CSR programmes – developed in response to the gap between reports on appalling labour conditions for women and other feminised workers in global production and demand for both cheap and ethically sourced goods. While South African wine and deciduous fruit sold in Sweden would mostly be marketed with images of breath-taking landscapes, devoid of people, some retailers did appeal to consumers as moral subjects who could make a difference in ordinary South African workers’ lives through opting for ‘the right product’ on the supermarket shelf, marketed as ethical or supportive of female entrepreneurship (Dolan and Rajak, 2016).

The construction of such a grip – or friction – between consumers in Sweden and female farm workers in South Africa resonates with contemporary neo-liberal globalisation discourse in several ways. Thinking with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2000), it suggests that, through the right kind of shopping, female middle-class consumers in rich parts of the world, the category historically associated with consumption for the household, can contribute to helping less fortunate female workers in the global south enter the realms of global financial capital, as entrepreneurs. Furthermore, it resonates with a contemporary neoliberal trope of productive femininities (Salzinger, 2003). This trope is familiar to the commercial farming sector in
South Africa, in which some farmers and managers, as discussed in Chapter Four, draw on (global corporate) discourses associating black/Southern femininity with productivity, docility, cheapness, availability and disposability – and specifically seek to hire female workers (see e.g. Mohanty, 2003; Salzinger, 2003; Wright, 2006). It also resonates with ideas that the route to liberation for marginalised women, presumably from traditional gender roles in families and communities, is through paid work for export production, regardless of whether the work is arduous, with few opportunities to advance on the job, and pays wages inadequate to feed one’s family (cf. Tornhill, 2013).

Supermarket chain ICA (2015a, 2015b) provided a telling example of such messaging during the post-strike moment, asserting on the label of its own brand of table grapes that it “makes South African women entrepreneurs.” A marketing text on ICA’s web page (2015a), explaining the set-up on a farm they source from, where a trust fund has been established and a designated area devoted to a majority-black company, is illustrative:

… At Newgro, the sprouting vines are ripe with a promise. Perhaps the smiles are somewhat broader there too, and the fingers slightly more nimble. Around 50 coloured women are beneficiaries of a fund that owns 40 percent of the land, and this in a country where a white minority still owns ninety percent of the land! (My translation from Swedish)\(^{145}\)

The text goes on to highlight the importance of job creation and the imparting of business skills in a context where unemployment levels are discouragingly high, before turning to what the initiative could potentially mean to the female participants.\(^{146}\)

\(\ldots\) Twenty years after apartheid, poverty in South Africa is rarely a question of putting food on the table, but rather concerns the possibility of real independence and supporting oneself – a life to be proud of!” (ICA, 2015a) (My translation from Swedish)\(^ {147}\)

Alluding to the trope of nimble fingers, the text constructs women as particularly suited to the tedious task of cutting out non-conforming grapes and, as is the case for some of the export to Europe, meticulously shaping the

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\(^{145}\) The original text in Swedish (ICA, 2015a) reads: ”På Newgro spirar vindruveplanterna löftesfyllt. Kanske är också leendena något bredare där och fingrarna aningen flinkare. Ett femtiotal färgade kvinnor är nämligen förmänsttagare i en fond som till fyrtio procent äger marken, och det i ett land där en vit minoritet fortfarande till nittio procent äger marken!”

\(^{146}\) I have not done field work in the area, or interacted with workers on this farm, and my analysis thus only concerns the advertisements as such.

\(^{147}\) The original text in Swedish (ICA, 2015a) reads: ”Tjugo år efter Apartheid handlar fattigdomen i Sydafrika nämligen sällan om mat för dagen, snarare om möjligheten till riktig självständighet och egen försörjning - ett liv att vara stolt över.”
bunches to resemble the continent of Africa. The female workers are further imagined as delivering these results with joy: through broad smiles expressing gratitude for their “adverse incorporation” (Du Toit, 2004) into the agricultural value chain. The hard farm labour is thus coupled with ‘emotional labour’ in the marketing texts and images, aimed at producing the desired state of mind among consumers in the global north (Hoschild, 2012:20; see also Dolan and Rajak, 2016). The emphasis on individual entrepreneurship linked to pride further resonates with both colonial and contemporary notions of dignity emanating from labour for black workers (Barchiesi, 2011). Importantly, it is white capital and the position as entrepreneur that will liberate coloured women into a life they can be proud of – likely away from or in spite of men of colour (Spivak, 2000).

What Swedish consumers of grapes saturated with successful entrepreneurship are not made aware of is that a large proportion of the South African working population does struggle to put food on the table, not least the seasonally employed female farm workers whom I have written about in this dissertation.\(^\text{148}\)

The interpellation of consumers as moral subjects and the construction of individual entrepreneurship as the way for female farm workers to leave poverty behind and liberate themselves from the burden of culture fits neatly with contemporary global notions of women as the ultimate neoliberal subjects (Walkerdine, 2003). In this discourse, women shoulder the responsibility for lifting themselves (or their less privileged sisters) out of poverty, while structural constraints emanating from colonialism and neoliberal regimes of inequality are constructed as normal and unalterable.

The figure of the grateful female farm worker was invoked in other Swedish contexts at the time as well. Unionised workers at Systembolaget, for instance, told me of how managers at an internal staff conference narrated encounters with South African female vineyard workers whom they described as overwhelmed with joy by how people on the other side of the world cared about them: moves presumably aimed at ensuring staff members’ whole-hearted commitment to the programme.

In this section, I have sought to illustrate how retailers in Sweden, even though their motives may be very well-intentioned, contribute through post-colonial and neo-liberal discourses to legitimate and consolidate global relations of dominance and subordination along the value chains of deciduous fruit and wine (De Neve, 2009). In this discourse, which interpellates consumers and shop attendants both in similar and different

\(^{148}\) A household survey in working-class areas surrounding the rural town of Ceres, where many seasonal farm workers reside, found that 70 percent of households reported experiencing periods of hunger during the year (Du Toit, 2005:29). In 2013, the Department of Social Development announced a crisis of poverty and malnutrition in De Doorns, prompting the distribution of emergency food aid (Knoetze, 2013).
ways, women workers in the global south are given a specific meaning (Mohanty, 2003).

Global worker solidarity and corporate ties

Global “interconnection across difference” (Tsing, 2005:4) is also drawn upon in attempts to alter global inequality regimes, creating friction between labour activists – to which similar friction in corporate circles would respond. In November 2012, shortly into the Western Cape ‘farm worker strike’, an unpretentious photograph taken in an empty store of the Swedish alcohol monopoly Systembolaget caught the attention of South African activists and was circulated on social media. It portrays three male cashiers in khaki green uniform shirts and ties, posing quietly by the tills and holding up cardboard signs with the messages ‘Living wage for S.A. farm workers’ and ‘R200’, the latter an unintended increase of the strike demand for 150 rand per day. No political symbols, no raised fists. On the conveyor belt are five bottles of South African wine.

The shop attendants, poet Emil Boss and two of his colleagues, were active in a local club of the Syndicalist union, and the photograph was intended as a solidarity greeting to the people producing the wine they sell, some of whom were likely to be on the streets protesting exploitative labour conditions. The photo also represented an opposing view to Systembolaget’s external communication message that staff were expected to convey; namely, that no wine on its shelves was affected by the strike – internally, this was explained by the fact that it had been bottled the previous year. Within a short time, the photograph attracted attention in corporate circles too, eventually reaching managers at Systembolaget. In his recent book of poetry, Emil Boss gives his version of what transpired:

We receive a call from the regional director. South African wine producers have contacted the head office and asked them to bring us under control.
We receive a warning. If we don’t change our attitude and behaviour we will be fired. (Boss, 2017:124, translated from Swedish by Olivia Olsen, 2018)

At the time, the union club had been part of the campaign ‘Rättvis vinhandel’, discussed above, for two years. Through reports and public lectures with South African farm worker leaders visiting Sweden, the campaign had pushed Systembolaget to abandon its earlier description of conditions on South African farms as generally unproblematic, to adopting campaign members’ more sombre analysis. The silencing of the protest

149 E-mail to the syndicalist union club.
action, however, signalled a departure from a more conciliatory approach towards the union club’s campaigning activities.

A few weeks after receiving the phone call from the regional director, Emil Boss and one of his union colleagues attended a campaign conference in Cape Town. Among the participants were labour and civil society activists from South Africa, Chile, Argentina and Sweden. When the Swedish unionists shared their recent experience, Systembolaget’s CSR work came under scrutiny. One union organiser said:

We think it is very hypocritical that they are assisting us with a problem when the same thing is happening in Systembolaget!

In addition to issuing statements in support of workers who had been fired after the ‘farm worker strike’, the conference also wrote a letter of support to the three shop attendants ahead of an upcoming disciplinary hearing.

The mobilisation of worker solidarity as well as corporate ties across borders intensified during the years that followed, illustrating how global friction can maintain as well as rearrange configurations of global culture and power (Tsing, 2005). In 2016, another period of labour unrest in the province’s commercial farming area became top news in the Nordic countries. This time, the conflict was isolated to one particular producer, where the majority of employees were members of the union CSAAWU, who embarked on a strike after wage negotiations ended in disunity. Although the conflict was local, actors in Sweden and other Nordic countries soon became highly involved as supporters or mediators. This strike was made possible by the worker defiance built up in 2012–2013, while strategies were informed by the union’s bitter experience of retrenchment, eviction and expensive defeats in labour courts during the post-strike moment. Unlike the last time, this strike was protected, meaning that workers could not easily be fired afterwards, at least not on paper. While local salary negotiations were the focus, the amount demanded, 8500 rand per month, had wider implications as a test case of how large agribusinesses would respond to demands for liveable wages. Grace, a black African female shop steward, general worker and sole breadwinner for her family explained in an interview the decision to demand a more than doubling of salaries:

I am living in a shack … without electricity, without a toilet … I have to buy the wire because I don’t get electricity to me150 … Some of the people there in that area they are going into the bush for their toilet. But we are working – so what is the use [of working]? … So that is why we want to improve, [have] a better life … More than working for 3,000 … at the end of the day … it’s just hand to mouth … At least we want to make changes, we want to make a difference.

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150 This refers to how Grace has to make use of an illegal electricity connection.
After workers embarked on the strike in August, CSAAWU called for a temporary international boycott, exposing low salaries, racial discrimination in the workplace and the curtailing of organisational rights. Several unions and organisations in the Nordic countries mobilised in support and the international labour federation IUF151 issued a petition in defence of striking workers. The winery was soon swamped with e-mails from people across the globe demanding that organisational rights be respected. A Danish TV documentary, ‘Bitter Grapes’, screened in several countries at the time gave further fuel to the conflict, documenting violations of labour rights and exposure to dangerous chemicals without adequate protection at this and other wine producers.

In the documentary, a white male top manager at the winery was caught on camera telling the film maker: “I don’t want to shake your filthy hand. You are a disgusting piece of rubbish.” This display of aggressive white masculinity, and workers’ testimonies of racial discrimination at work, contributed to erode what remained of hopeful reports in Sweden on the transformation of racial hierarchies in the new ‘rainbow nation’. Because state-owned Systembolaget was an important buyer of South African wine, having invested a lot in conveying an image of upholding social standards, the media coverage was intense, with daily updates on the conflict. This media interest was probably informed by the nostalgia surrounding Sweden’s role in the global anti-apartheid movement. As noted in Chapter One, union discourse again resembled that of the 1980s, with the deputy general secretary of CSAAWU, Karel Swart, urging people not to buy “blood wine” (Alestig, 2016).

The international pressure did not result in any substantive change in power relations however. When the parties finally reached an agreement after three months’ strike, salary increases were marginal – the greatest attainable gain for workers arguably being that no one would be fired.152 Still, it was celebrated as a victory by the union in terms of the mobilisation and demonstration of worker power – drawing on the same logic as that discussed in Chapter Five, where strikes in and of themselves are conceived of as a way for workers to empower themselves and restore their dignity (and perhaps also bolster the power of the union itself).

In Sweden, other processes continued in the corridors of power. A year later, in November 2017, the contract between the Swedish state and Systembolaget was rewritten, with explicit mention that international principles around sustainable business may be factored in during procurement, including working environment and conditions and human

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151 The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations
152 The international collaboration contributed to CSAAWU strengthening its position. In 2017, the union received a prize with a substantial cash award from a foundation linked to a Norwegian trade union federation.
rights concerns. Notably, however, this still locates the problem solely at the site of production, in the ‘contact zone’, and leaves power with the retailer, with no commitment to redistribute more of the value of the wine to farm workers.

Moreover, in 2017, Systembolaget seemed determined to get rid of the three union activists. In May that year, a newspaper published excerpts from notes of a meeting between labour consultants and Systembolaget’s Human Resources division, which included claims that the local union club’s members “camouflaged a political agenda” through union work – a discourse strikingly similar to what South African farm worker activists reported experiencing, as discussed in Chapter Five (Röstlund, 2017). A couple of months later, the shop where they worked was temporarily closed, and shortly thereafter Systembolaget gave notice of an intention to make the three workers redundant.

One may thus note that disputes with the alcohol monopoly, including in relation to international solidarity with farm workers in wine exporting countries, appear over time to have positioned the shop attendants as no longer desirable employees – a similar fate to that experienced by workers active in the 2012–2013 strike. Unlike their fellow unionists in South Africa, the shop attendants at Systembolaget negotiated a settlement with the company, where they offered to withdraw a pending case in labour court concerning the right to full-time employment (SAC, 2017). This is a striking example both of how workers are positioned very differently along the value chain of exported wine, and also of how threatening a global interconnection between labour activists is perceived to be.

The example further illustrates how labour organising relied on a universalising discourse of rights in order to reach out to consumers and policy makers. Through making demands on overseas retailers and exposing discrepancies between company claims to ethical sourcing practices and marginalised workers’ lived experiences, such labour activism may contribute to undermining the power of local producers, albeit, at the same time, it may bolster the new forms of disciplinary power represented by CSR-regimes (De Neve, 2009; Tsing, 2005). As Tsing (2005:9) cautions, while such cross-border protests importantly give voice to the frustrations and aspirations of precariously positioned farm workers, it also ironically “extends the reach of the forms of power they protest”.

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153 According to the previous agreement, only the quality of the product, special risks for adverse effects, customer demands and business considerations could be taken into account in Systembolaget’s highly competitive tendering process.

154 Another parallel with South Africa is that of the surveillance of workers, discussed in Chapter Four. In 2008, the union club critiqued how, through spot-checks, Systembolaget stopped employees on the streets outside shops, where they were searched in public by security staff, a measure aimed at reducing petty theft (Green, 2009).
Does this really matter, if some progress is made in relation to the immediate goal of such campaigning: achieving improvements for farm workers? Understandable as it is that unions in South Africa draw on global interconnection to increase their power locally, and utilise CSR regimes as a site of contestation, I suggest that critical consideration is called for when large retailers in the global north are appealed to for a remedy, unless this is coupled with a clear articulation of demands to redistribute more of the value of the produce to farm workers. As research on labour relations over the past several decades tells us: the deregulation of agriculture, an emphasis on export-production and an increased concentration of power and control in the hands of global retailers has seen increased rather than decreased socio-economic precariousness for the majority of farm workers in South Africa (Visser, 2016). While the precarity of feminised black farm workers is also informed by other factors, notably racism, sexism and migration regimes, northern retailers contribute to legitimising racialised and gendered inequalities, through price-squeeze and retention of value, and also through post-colonial and neoliberal discourses in advertising and intra-company communication as discussed above.

In his poem, former Systembolaget employee Emil Boss (2017) describes the intensified surveillance and increased pressure to be productive during the workday, in ways which bear a resemblance to the narratives of female farm workers in this dissertation. While such common experiences may be a departure point for solidarity, they also speak to the challenges to organising in spaces across the globe.

As I have sought to illuminate over the last few pages, global interconnections may, in the context of this study, contribute to either upholding or challenging the status quo in the distribution of value, risk, precarity and violence along the value chain of deciduous fruit and wine (Tsing, 2005). From this, it follows that conditions for farm workers in the Western Cape take shape against the backdrop of developments outside as much as inside the ‘contact zone’ that the commercial farmlands make up, not least the increased control and retention of value by global retailers. Their situation is further informed by a colonial and apartheid history as well as by processes linked to deregulation and neoliberalisation. In order to grasp, and possibly seek to challenge, the current order, it is therefore necessary to focus both on the local and the global, and begin from a reading of the present as a “time of entanglement” (Mbembe, 2015).
Sammanfattning på svenska

Prekära arbeten, feminisering och motstånd

*Lantarbetare under ’efterstrekstiden’ i Västra Kapprovinsen, Sydafrika*


De flesta som deltar i studien är antingen medlemmar i organisationer för lantarbetare, såsom fackföreningar, eller deltog i protesterna. Merparten är
kvinnor och/eller mer eller mindre nyanlända migranter boende utanför gårdarna. I min tolkning använder jag mig av postkolonial feministisk teori såväl som feministisk analys av nyliberal globalisering, och teorier kring prekära arbeten och osäkra liv (precarity) och våld. Jag beskriver Västra Kappovinsens kommersiella jordbruksområden som en ’kontaktzon’ (Pratt, 1991), präglad av djup ojämlikhet, med rötter i den koloniala historien och apartheidssystemet, vilka flätas in i nya globala former för exploatering.

Avhandlingens fyra empiriska kapitel diskuterar olika aspekter av arbete och motstånd. Kapitel tre bär titeln Vad och vem är lantarbetaren? och tar avstamp i ifrågasättandet av strejkdeltagarna som ’riktiga’ lantarbetare, vilket framkom under mitt fältarbete. Denna kritik visade på en av många klyftor mellan lantarbetare: den mellan etablerade och nya arbetarkategorier. De ’nya’ kategorier av arbetare som var drivande i protesterna och vars närvaro ökat under den senaste decennierna – migranter och/eller kvinnor boende utanför gårdarna och anlidade på osäkra kontrakt – utmanade rådande föreställningar om vem en lantarbetare är, såväl som föreställningar om kvinnor, och (vissa) migranter som fogliga.

Traditionellt har arbetet inom det kommersiella jordbruket i Västra Kappovinsen i hög grad utförts av färgade 155 familjer som bodde permanent på gårdarna, medan migrantarbetare, främst xhosa-talande från Östra Kappovinsen, har rekryterats under högsäsong, då de ofta bott i arbetarbaracker på gårdarna. Arbetsregimerna på gårdarna präglades under större delen av 1900-talet av traditionella former av paternalism: intima men djupt ojämlika relationer, där gårdarna i den rådande diskursen beskrevs som en familj, inom vilken den vita gårdssägarens ord var lag. Möjligheterna till motstånd var ytterst kringskurna, och de få som sökte sig till fackföringsstämplades som bräckmakare. Det paternalistiska systemet hade sina rötter i slaveriet, och cementerades under apartheidstiden, då arbetet kännetecknades av rasism, djup exploatering och våld – till exempel genom praktiken att betala delar av lönen i alkohol. En skiktning av arbetare grundad på kategorier som kön, ras/etnicitet och nationalitet användes för att motivera skillnader och skapa splittringar.

Sedan 1980-talet och framåt har det kommersiella jordbruket genomgått stora förändringar, kopplade till apartheidss fäll och stärkt rättsligt skydd för lantarbetare, avreglering av marknaden och globala återförsäljares starka position. För att möta en hårdande global konkurrens, kraftigt bantat statligt stöd till jordbrukssektorn och nya strängare lagar svarade många gårdssägare med att i hög grad ersätta fast anställda med säsongsvisa och tillfälligt

155 Apartheidregimen delade in befolkningen i fyra olika kategorier med olika rättigheter; vita, färgade, svarta afrikaner och asiater (främst indier). ’Färgade’ tillerkändes i det systemet fler rättigheter än svarta (afrikaner), och har beskrivits som en kreoliserad, rasifierad kulturell identitet – i vardagligt språkbruk ofta kallad en ’blandad’ etnisk grupp.
anställda, inte sällan inhyrda via bemanningsföretag. Många lantarbetare som tidigare bott i arbetarbostäder på gårdarna avhystes eller flyttade på eget bevåg till närliggande tätorter, eller sökte sig vidare till avlägsna städer. En mindre kärna av fast anställda har sedan dess i vissa (men långt ifrån alla) fall erbjudits förbättring, mer kvalificerade jobb och förmåner – och har på så vis knutits närmare arbetsgivarna, samtidigt som arbetet för de flesta präglas både av mer opersonliga relationer, och av stärkt makt hos exempelvis förmän eller andra överordnade.

Ifrågasättandet av strejkdeltagarna som ’riktiga’ arbetare anser jag vara kopplad till deras militans, som bröt mot traditionell paternalism, till hur de positionerades som främlingar och nykomlingar, till att många var kvinnor – en arbetarkategori som historiskt positionerats som sekundär – och deras avvikande identiteter: nationalitet, ras/etnicitet och (kopplat till dessa) kön. Detta innebar i sin tur en utmaning för lantarbetarorganisationer, som främst samlat etablerade arbetarkategorier, dels för forskningen, som i representationer av lantarbetare behöver göra denna diversifiering rättvisa.

I kapitel tre introducera jag några av de personer som ingår i studien och lyfter fram hur osäkerhet (precarity) tar sig uttryck och formas i relation till makthierarkier grundade på kön, ras/etnicitet och nationalitet. Etnografin illustrerar hur de ökade klyftorna mellan olika arbetare, där vissa erbjudits bättre positioner och villkor medan andras liv präglas av djup osäkerhet och fattigdom, medför att kategorier som ’lantarbetarkvinnor’ till viss del blir missvisande. Kapitlet lyfter även fram exempel på kvinnor som mist sina arbeten och/eller vräks från gårdar de senaste åren, kopplat till deras ansvar för det obetalda omsorgsarbetet, egen sjukdom och till att deras män (de ’riktiga’ arbetarna) förlorat sina jobb och därmed familjens bostad på gårdarna. Dessa exempel visar på tydliga genusbestämda tendenser av uteslutningarna från kategorin lantarbetare. I kapitlet visar jag även hur de i hög grad diversifierade omständigheterna på gårdarna skapar olika förhållningssätt till kategorin lantarbetare.

Kapitel fyra rör sig närmare arbetet i sig, och diskuterar hur lönsamma genusbestämda och rasifierade lantarbetare skapas genom arbetsprocessen och de discuterer den kringgårdas med. Skillnadsskapande mellan arbetare tar sig olika uttryck: mellan boende på gårdarna och utanför, mellan säsongsvisa och fast anställda, mellan migranter och de mer bofasta. Jag analyserar hur dessa skillnader ofta förefaller sammanfalla med kategorierna kön, ras/etnicitet och nationalitet. Utifrån intervjuer med arbetare, gårdssägare och mellanchefer diskuterar jag stereotyper kring fogliga, feminiserade arbetare, vilka ofta tillskrivs kvinnor och zimbabwiska migranter, samt stereotyper kring våldsamma svarta maskuliniteter, och hur dessa föreställningar inverkar på rekrytering, arbetsvillkor och boendeformer samt manöverutrymme under arbetet. Lantarbetare beskriver också hur ras/etnicitet och nationalitet i vissa fall används för att spela ut olika grupper mot varandra, med hjälp av prestationsbaserade löner. I slutet av kapitlet
diskuteras hur kategorier av arbetare som, i min tolkning, utsluts från föreställningar om ’riktiga lantarbetare’, inte görs igenkännbara som mänskliga på vissa gårdar. Arbetare som under apartheid klassificerades som svarta afrikaner beskriver hur de under efterrejstkrisen behandlas som ’robotar’, ’zombies’ eller ’maskiner’. Svarta kvinnor återger vidare hur de avhumaniseras dels genom att de inte behandlas som kvinnor, dels genom att de sexualiseras av förmän och blir straffade på olika sätt om de avvisar dessa närmanden.

Kapitel fem och sex undersöker öppna former för motstånd i ett sammanhang präglat av arvet från paternalism, en brutal rasistisk historia och nyliberala ojämlikhetsregimer. Två viktiga begrepp i kapitlen är värdighet (dignity) och respektabilitet (ordentlilikheid), vilka, tillsammans med den konkreta kampen för löner som går att leva på, ingår i olika motståndspraktiker. I kapitel fem undersöks särskilt kvinnors organisatoriska motstånd, och hur det, i min analys, möjliggör att (vissa) kvinnor vinner erkännande och möts med respekt i lokalsamhället och ibland även av arbetsgivare. En sådan feminint kodad respektabilitet förutsätter att vissa ideal kopplade till ansvarsänslighet och moderskapspraktiker (mothering) efterföljs, vilket gör det möjligt att bryta mot andra normer som kringskär vissa kvinnors liv, såsom att resa utanför närsamhället för att representera lantarbetare i olika forum.

En viktig strategi för att uppnå en respektabel motståndsposition är enligt min analys att erkänna som en person med kunskap om rättigheter – och mod att stå upp för sig själv och andra. Denna position är dock i högsta grad prekär eftersom kunskap om rättigheter kan leda till att en stämplas som ’politisk’ och därmed icke önskvärd som arbetare på vissa gårdar. Fortsatta upplevelser av rasism och exploatering på gårdarna krockar också med denna aktivistiska respektabilitet, vilket får vissa att lämna yrket helt och hållet, även där får alternativa försörjningsmöjligheter finns tillgängliga.

I kapitlen sex analyserar jag händelser under och efter lantarbetarstrjken med ett intersektionellt förhållningssätt, och genom att beakta hur livet i de kommersiella jordbruksområdena genomsyras av olika former av våld. Dessa två perspektiv sammanlänkas i slutet, då jag argumenterar för att våldet, osäkerheten och motståndet upplevs intersektionellt, genom ens lokaliserings inom överlappande maktaxlar av kön, ras/etnicitet och nationalitet. Jag framhäver den viktiga roll som spelades av kvinnor och (utländska) migranter främst i tidiga skeden av protesterna, och hur dessa kategorier av lantarbetare senare exkluderades, då organisationer främst bestående av mer etablerade grupper fick större inflytande. Föreställningar om utländska migranter som inte ’riktiga’ arbetare kan således förstås ha inverkat på hur protesterna utvecklades. Dock är det viktigt att understryka att (sydafrikanska) arbetares illska och frustration inte i första hand tog sig främlingsfientliga uttryck under protesterna, utan riktades primärt mot gårdsägare och staten.
Jag framhäver hur de aspekter av strejken som beskrivits som våldsamma – skadegörelse av utrustning på gårdarna, anlagda bränder, stenkastning mot såväl strejkbrytare som kravallpolis och plundring av butiker – måste förstås mot bakgrund av det strukturella, långsamma, symboliska och direkta våldet som präglar lantarbetares liv. Medias beskrivningar av strejken som våldsamm tog sällan i beaktande våld i dessa betydelser, eller ifrågasatte varför vissas kroppar oftare tämplades som våldsamma. Även om en del rapportering framhävde polisvåld – två av tre rapporterade dödsfall under strejken har länkats till skott från polisen – så beskrevs arbetsgivares vägran att förhandla med demonstranterna eller det faktum att privata säkerhetsföretag och andra bevapnade grupper av vita män patrullerade gatorna i vissa områden inte på samma vis som uttryck för våld.

Vissa lantarbetare framhöll hur protesterna blev en möjlighet att återupprätta den värdighet som arbetet berövat dem, medan andra istället ansåg att våldsamma motståndsformer undergrävde människors värdighet. I likhet med tidigare forskning kring våld under strejker i Sydafrika, så framhävde de jag intervjuade de mer spektakulära och/eller våldsamma formerna av motstånd som effektiva för att skapa uppmärksamhet för ens krav, och påpekade att tidigare försök att lyfta problemen i andra forum ignorerats. Dessa former av motstånd är troligen även en av få möjligheter att göra rösten hörd för dem vars mänsklighet inte fullt ut erkänns av arbetsgivare.

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