Tracking an Invisible Trek explores how farm conversions to wildlife utilization for trophy-hunting shape contemporary mobilities and shift power configurations in the commercial farming landscape of South Africa. Through this research, I seek to understand the experiences and positions of black farm dwellers in conversion processes to game farming, i.e. resident farm workers, tenants and their families who consider the Karoo as their home. Proponents of game farming associate the wildlife industry with tourism opportunities and economic growth. They often claim that game farms contribute to job creation and rural development. On the other hand, critics warn that game farms possibly have adverse impacts on processes of social transformation, agrarian labour markets, and land reform.

This ethnography contributes to the understanding and interpretation of these processes, as well as contemporary meanings of land ownership and hunting practices in post-apartheid South Africa. It aims to unfold how commercial farmers and farm dwellers in the Karoo re-configure power relations and their sense of belonging in the context of farm conversions to trophy-hunting activities.

The interpretive framework departs from a figurational perspective derived from the work of Norbert Elias. This approach to the sociology of power insists that in every empirical context interdependent individuals develop particular patterns of behaviour with each other over time, and that the actions of individuals can only be understood within the dynamics of the social configuration process that they are part of. More specifically, I employ and adapt Elias and Scotson’s notion of established and outsiders figurations to study the balance of powers on Karoo trophy-hunting farms. This approach requires a focus on the relational dynamics of farm conversions and this study therefore includes the perspectives and stories of farm dwellers, farmers, professional hunters, and state representatives who together shape social formation processes. I thus investigate how farm conversions are legitimised by commercial farmers and hunters through their perceptions of who belongs in what place, and what that place should look like. I explore the emotions and feelings farmers and farm dwellers associate with rural landscapes, and how these perceptions and
emotions shape farm dwellers’ decision-making and life trajectories. The emphasis on how power relations and notions of belonging are configured through perceptions and feelings offers additional insights into debates on agrarian change, nature conservation and rural development.

I found that South Africa’s power configuration is shifting as a result of post-apartheid reform policies and increasing market liberalization that produce significant contradictions in the nation’s transformation process. A profound aspect of this process is that farm dwellers and commercial farmers experience this as a threat to their sense of belonging and their future in democratic South Africa. Farm conversions are interpreted as a particular response to such perceptions of uncertainty and insecurity, contributing to an increasingly divided countryside. The kind of relations emerging out of this process are presented through four established and outsiders configuration dynamics that are at work in the Karoo.

The first dynamic concerns the multiple layers of established and outsiders configurations that shape local patterns and relations. An important aspect of this is that relations with the state shape relations in particular places. In the post-apartheid political context white commercial farmers are being repositioned as outsiders whose land ownership and privileged status are continuously questioned and debated, especially in the media. I argue that under these circumstances the self-acclaimed established, namely white commercial farmers, increase (social) distance to outsiders, namely black farm dwellers, and re-assert their established positions through racial and spatial constructions in the commercial farming landscape. In the game farming landscape physical boundaries are solidified with higher fences and electric wires; and social boundaries are reinforced through a persistent racial hierarchy repeatedly performed in the hunting game. Moreover, the closeness of farm labourers residing on farms is gradually disappearing, as a salient feature of this restructuring process on the Karoo trophy-hunting farms is the shedding of permanent labour.

The second figuration dynamic illuminates a discrepancy between the feelings game farmers have about their place in the post-apartheid society and their actual position on the land. The fear and loathe of the idea of land reform exists next to continuous investments in game and property to expand their business.
That farm conversions occur *despite* the contested status of its economic viability and sustainability suggests that these places are not just about economic land-use choices. Converting to game partly expresses a political choice to create a place where white farmers feel they belong and where they can re-assert their establishedness in the country. This process is supported by farmers’ global connections through the trophy-hunting industry consisting of like-minded souls that enable access to capital and investment opportunities in the Karoo.

The third established and outsiders dynamic provides insights into the ways farm conversions and power relations are legitimised through claims about belonging and nativeness in wilderness landscapes. Game farmers, who present themselves as custodians of nature, envision trophy-hunting landscapes as ‘original’ places for indigenous species and ‘pristine’ nature. In the process of conversion they erase traces of colonial occupation and dispossession as well as remnants of pre-colonial land use practices. Just like settlers during colonial occupation, settler descendants ironically recreate the image of Africa’s ‘empty land’ to legitimize postcolonial land transformations. The question of who belongs in this wilderness landscape presents another paradox. Black farm dwellers on the one hand are an integral part of the social order in the hunting game, perceived as natural talents for tracking and skinning activities. On the other hand they are portrayed as incapable of becoming independent ‘subsistence’ farmers. Just like national policy discourse, land ownership patterns and entitlements in the Karoo are made sense of through racial categories. To understand the position of farm dwellers in trophy hunting landscapes, I propose the term *incorporated outsiders* to show how the white farmers and the hunters, incorporate outsiders into their ideal social order that retains power imbalances.

Farm workers on hunting farms attribute different meanings to the wilderness landscape. Their narratives do not include ‘pristine’ landscapes. On the contrary, game farm workers and dwellers resent especially the presence of dangerous game when there are no fences to separate the animals from them, or when they work unarmed during trophy hunting activities. In this sense, belonging on the farm is mainly restricted to those who appreciate the aesthetics of its design and the emotions associated with this; adventure, pleasure, wilderness. Moreover, they are partly replaced by foreign labourers, notably
Zimbabwean men, who fit the native servant image, but only stay temporarily without claiming or demanding belonging in the Karoo. For the established they support the increasing distance between local established and outsiders, but their presence on the local labour market increases competition, violence and tensions among the rural working classes.

Farm dwellers’ mobile histories and presence as the labouring class in the Karoo have shaped interdependencies and mobility patterns in the commercial farming landscape. The meaning of this mobility is the fourth and last figuration dynamic that reveals the contours of farm dwellers’ *Invisible Great Trek*. I argue that their decisions should be interpreted as a response to changing interdependencies that makes their situations often more precarious. I found that the farm increasingly means a place of work and not home. They anticipate the disappearing job opportunities, and contribute to the increasing distance between established and outsiders by ultimately envisioning their homes off-farm. They create homes in the RDP housing projects extending rural townships where they often remain outsiders as well. The power configuration, shaped by long-term processes of land dispossession and racial segregation, is spatially imprinted on the *land* as well as the in *minds* of the rural population. Farm dwellers act primarily within the given landownership structure. Their claim to belonging in the Karoo is expressed through making the township near the riverbanks of the Great Fish River their home.

Through applying established and outsiders relations in a dynamic way multiple layers and internal stratifications emerged in the shifting and overlapping Karoo power configurations. In this thesis I illustrate how farm dwellers, through relations with farmers and the state, took part in processes of *outsidering* shaping their decisions, experiences and sense of belonging in the Karoo. Trophy-hunting landscapes confirm and reinforce the power of rural elites to determine the environment in which they can belong, at the cost of such possibilities for an increasingly impoverished working class.

What are the political implications of landscape transformations in 21st century Karoo Midlands? It will come to no surprise that I strongly suggest a critical stance towards the idea that game farming presents a win-win situation for nature conservation and rural development. It is highly questionable that (all sectors of) the wildlife industry will transform the countryside as long as it
divides the rural population spatially and racially, premised on asymmetric power relations on the farms. The paradoxes, contradictions and divisions presented in this ethnographic account deserve immediate attention from government and civil society organizations aiming to address farm dwellers’ needs and rights to belong in post-apartheid society. The *Invisible Great Trek* demands attention, visibility, before the tensions in the Karoo power configurations erupt in violent attempts to swing the balance of power to those who have worked the land throughout their mobile lives.