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Permeable Farm Fences: Transformation of Rural Interdependencies

The Karoo trophy-hunting farms are embedded in a commercial farming landscape where bonds between farmers and workers have been glued with institutions based on an authoritarian paternalism that formed specific interdependencies between farmers and farm workers. Beyond the realm of law enforcement by the state, life on the farms was governed by ‘farm laws’ premised on the idea that farmers were the best to judge what was good for the farm and for farm dwellers. This resulted in local understandings of interdependencies that established a rural social order in which everyone knew his or her place and where asymmetric power relations have been continuously contested. These ways of doing have been shaped in the context of colonialism and apartheid regimes that formally facilitated white commercial farmers’ needs by ensuring the availability of cheap black labour through various government laws that restricted black people’s mobilities and access to land. Until the 1990s farm workers were excluded from labour legislation or protection by trade unionism. Working conditions and service provision to farm workers have been arranged on the farms through personal bonds. This context has changed radically with South Africa’s political transformation. Through the introduction of labour legislation and minimum wages for farm workers the democratic state has opened the farm gate to reform the balance of powers on the commercial farms.

This chapter explores the post-apartheid institutional landscape transforming interdependencies between farmers and farm workers on Karoo farms today. It describes how local understandings of farm relations and ‘old’ ways of doing are re-interpreted in the ‘new South Africa’ by various actors that work in the commercial farming landscape. It starts with explaining how farmers have reorganised their businesses in response to political and economic
transformations in their environment. The re-organization of labour arrangements on farms has major consequences for the lives of farm workers. The persistence of informal financial arrangements keeps farm workers trapped in relations with farmers whose provisions of employment and support remained arbitrary and increasingly secure. Moreover, the position of women in these rural interdependency networks is described separately as their linkages to the farms depend on the employment of their spouse. The second part of the chapter describes several formal institutional arrangements linked to the Karoo commercial farming landscape. These are reflected in the work of a private labour consultant, labour inspectors from the department of labour, the police, and the local NGOs. Representatives of these institutions all access farms in different ways and relate to farmers and workers in different ways. The experiences of farm workers on trophy-hunting farms with formal institutions and local political structures reveal their precarious position within contemporary rural interdependencies.

Re-articulating interdependencies on the farm: the void after paternalism?

Research on paternalistic interdependencies on commercial farms in South Africa has been focused on the Western Cape Province where social relations in the agricultural sector were shaped by slavery and labour migration from the ‘native reserves’. These findings are informative for the Eastern Cape border region where similar interdependencies were shaped over the last centuries. The paternalistic interdependencies between farmers and workers are re-articulated under post-apartheid conditions and shape rural divisions and interdependencies that stand in stark contrast to the reform process envisioned by the democratic government.

In 1993 Du Toit writes that “increasing formalization” permeated the farm fences touching on different aspects of farm life on the Western Cape fruit and wine farms (Du Toit, 1993: 325). During that time he observed a “business revolution” that transformed the traditional, authoritarian paternalistic interactions on the farm into a world where management discourse started to define relations in terms of worker’s productivity, participation and training. This
transformation of discourse was mainly stimulated by representative bodies of farmers that experienced a crisis of profitability in the context of general agricultural change in the country. Du Toit describes how paternalism has been re-articulated instead of replaced. Within the management discourse workers still experience social tensions and the depersonalization of their relationship with the farmer/manager increases feelings of resentment as personal favours from the farmer become less obvious. Moreover, the particular allocation of responsibilities to some workers, and not others, aggravates social divisions on the farm (1993-329). In 2005, Ewert and Du Toit (2005) published an article that further describes the causes of deepening divides in the Western Cape countryside. Farmers, supported by their well-established lobby organizations, respond to governments’ attempts to regulate labour relations on the farm by restructuring their businesses. Importantly, they resorted to processes of casualization, externalization and contractualization. In a footnote the authors stipulate the meanings of these processes (ibid, 326):

‘Casualisation’ refers to a reduction in the size of the permanent labour force and often an inversion of the ratio of permanent to casual workers. ‘Contractualisation’ refers to re-employment under less favourable circumstances. ‘Externalisation’ refers to the rise of intermediaries like labour contractors and labour brokers.

The concerns about the trend away from permanent work consist of the widening gaps between employment and unemployment, livelihood consequences for rural populations dependent on farm labour incomes, and the problematic prospects for the development of labour unions (ibid, 331-332). The shifting interdependencies on the Karoo trophy-hunting farms illustrate how the re-arrangement of labour on the farms often puts farm workers in precarious situations.

*Trapped in informal financial arrangements*

Traditional paternalism assumes mutual obligations where white farmers have certain ‘social responsibilities’ towards black farm workers that alleviates their exploitation. Since the political transformation in 1994 academics have been suggesting farmers are moving away from this responsibility (Ewert & Du Toit,
2005:327) which then exacerbates the exploitation on the farms. This is possible because of the asymmetric nature of the power relations between workers and farmers where the latter ultimately decides the degree of ‘mutual benefits’ in the relationship. With the curtains of paternalism slowly opening on the farm theatre we now see what actually happens on stage. Contemporary relations are a blend of old ways of doing adapted to the economic and political climate of today. In 1993, Du Toit cautioned that “the discourse of management can bring with it the worst of both worlds” (p.329) as management strategies, and labour policies, are not just tools but practices shaped by and in local contexts.

In the Karoo context labour and living arrangements on the trophy-hunting farms are still organized according to the farmers’ will. It appears that farm workers deem the farmer’s way-of-doing legitimate. In discussing the way hunting tips are distributed Sam explicates\textsuperscript{115}:

S: We do get tips, but at the end of the year. Thus we look for them at the end of the year. That’s how we arranged it.

F: That is how you arranged it?

S: Yes, us workers.

F: How did you arrange this?

S: This is how we did it. When I came, that is how the law was (daï wet loop so)

F: So it was already arranged that way.

S: Yes, so I asked them about the tips, then they said no, wait until December because perhaps you will have problems with the children, Christmas presents and clothes or you want to buy things for the house, so then you can use the extra money. Thus I can say they are our bank.

When Sam came to work on Persieskraal a particular arrangement concerning the distribution of hunting tips was already in place and it complied with traditional functions farmers fulfilled to tie workers to their farms. Farmers still function as ‘bank’ for savings as well as loans. Subsequently, farmer and (permanent) worker often engage in a debt relationship. This practice on the

\textsuperscript{115} Interview 10 June 2009. Translated from Afrikaans.
farm originated in the 19th century when it was deployed to tie serfs to the will of the colonial master. And since that era of colonialization and dispossession the necessity of money income has increased. In the commodified world of the farm worker, capitalist consumerism thrives like everywhere. Minimum wages hardly cover the basic needs of farm-workers families so they are likely to pay for consumer goods in instalments or borrow money from the farmer to purchase goods in town. Farmers’ assumptions about workers’ inabilities to save money for certain expenditures are reproduced through such informal arrangements that make sense to workers who structurally earn too little money to cover their needs.

Expenditures that often come up in conversations with farm workers are costs related to funerals. The funeral ritual has been commodified to a great extent, starting with the numerous insurance businesses that mushroomed in the townships. Funeral policies partly cover the costs of a burial ceremony, but the family of the deceased still needs to contribute to pay for the coffin and the catering. All necessities for the ceremony cost money: food and drinks, transport and equipments such as the tent in front of the house to protect the visitors from sun or rain. A common observation in the vicinity of a funeral these days are attendants who, after sharing their bereavement, leave with food in a white plastic take-away box and possibly a cool drink or alcoholic brew. Ruth relied on the farmer to assist her during the time her brother passed away.116

I have to go to Sir and ask for money. If I go to a funeral Sir will give me. Like last week Monday, or this week. I asked Miss, I do not have money to go to town. Then Miss said we have to go to Sir and then Sir gave me the money. Thus, if you ask Sir something he will give you.

In order to claim such favours from the farmer the understanding is that “if you do not make any mistakes the boss will be good for you”. Farm workers’ debts make them more dependent on money income. Timothy articulates this interdependency clearly.117

116 Interview 14 August 2009.
117 Interview 19 January 2010.
I can say that most of the people who are staying there [on the farm] now because most of them have some instalments, they do not know where they are going, they have children. If they lose their work, where will they go? That is the main problem. It is not that they are staying there because it is nice or they get paid you see. It is because of they are having problems.

The lack of alternative sources of incomes in the area puts farm workers in a precarious situation by definition. The reliance on income, in combination with the still arbitrary manner income is allocated among workers, stifles workers’ resistance or organization as Paul\textsuperscript{118} exclaims:

If the people were united! Then they could strike. Among us, farm workers, there are people that receive more money, and those are not going to strike. We are not united and this is not going to improve. The situation is getting worse because there are farmers who are against the worker. There are farmers that pay 3000 and open a store on the farm, far from town.

The divisive workings of paternalism persist in the context of newly introduced labour legislation. Farm workers on remote farms still depend on farmers for transport, financial assistance and goods provided through farm stores. The divisions in the countryside between permanent workers, casuals, and the unemployed also feed into rising tensions among the local population torn by different interests ranging from job growth to wage growth to housing needs (Natrass & Seekings, 1997: 474). In the contemporary rural power configuration various kinds of interdependencies produce a landscape of difference.

\textit{Women on Karoo trophy-hunting farms}

Employed women on the farms have a different kind of position due to their presence in the private space of their employer and the close link between employment of their spouses that determines their access to the farms. The spatial distance between them and the farmer’s family is very small and therefore perhaps required a stricter emotional separation in their every day interaction.

Labour patterns in the agricultural economy of the Karoo are gendered. Most women living on Smith’s Hunting Safaris hunting farm enter as spouse of

\textsuperscript{118} Interview 14 January 2010. Translated from Afrikaans by author.
one of the male employees\textsuperscript{119}. Women arrive with their husbands and work as domestic servant or nanny, or live on the farm unemployed, performing household chores and possibly looking after children. This labour division differs from for example the Western Cape wine farming economy where women are seasonal workers harvesting or reaping grapes (Ewert & Hamman, 1999). On the trophy-hunting farms women do not work in the field; they are solely in positions of domestic worker and/or nanny and therefore operating inside the farm owner’s house.

Women are constantly present in the private sphere of the farmer’s household and have extensive knowledge of their employer’s family affairs. They have been recognized, discursively, as “part of the family” by white employers although a seminal study on the perceptions of black maids in South Africa showed an important bias in this assumption. Since no power or resource sharing was part of the relation, none of the maids felt part of the family (Cock, 1980:132). Their unavoidable and salaried penetration into the private realm of the farmer's family is accompanied by work attitudes that almost render them to be ‘invisible’ persons. Deference, dull uniforms, and silence shape their appearance towards those they serve. Separated spaces are created in the farmer’s house for maids to iron, wash and care for children. Meals are consumed separately. Mostly because of their \textit{closeness} to colonial masters, servants and nannies are boundary markers and mediators between the colonizer and the colonized. Coulored women in these positions are “ambiguously placed on the imperial divide” (McClintock, 1995:48). Despite segregated spaces, in order to do her work the domestic worker enters the bedrooms of the farmer’s house every day, she picks up dirty clothes and cleans away stains from colonial interiors; lofty sofas, glass tables, wooden chairs, soft carpets, silverware, chandeliers, book shelves, and picture frames. While domestic workers polish and rub the foundations and decorations of the game farmer's home they are observed by the lifeless eyes of mounted kudu, warthog, reedbuck and buffalo. Domestic workers hear telephone conversations, family discussions, and witness storms that rave through family life; waves of love, hurt, joy and sorrow. Women told me discretely about personal events within the farmers’ households

\textsuperscript{119} Contrary to Western Cape fruit and wine farms where the employment of women is a precondition for men to find employment (Ewert & Hamman, 1999).
indicating they had detailed knowledge of the family affairs. They knew that the *baas'* favourite dog has died, that the missus was expecting another baby, or that the farm secretary had a dentist appointment in town.

On a summer morning Happiness, Ruth/Nomandla and Mary/Thandeka are tidying up a bedroom in the Smiths’ house. They wear green and pink aprons and white caps on their heads. I sit on the floor cross-legged while Happiness scrubs the en-suite bathroom and the other two women make the bed after gently throwing one of the puppy dogs, which followed them with his clumsy puppy tread throughout the house, out of the window. They are chatting and telling me about the products they purchased with their December bonuses: a new cupboard, a couch, a cell phone and school uniforms for the children. Only the employed women on the farm receive bonuses ranging from 1,000 to 1,500 rand at the end of the year, the unemployed women residents receive no monetary benefits. In December the tips from hunting clients are also distributed among the workers by the farmer. In 2008 Ruth/Nomandla received 2,500 rand bonus from hunting tips. Mary/Thandeka received nothing because she had just started working. This year however they are both remunerated cash bonuses, for their labour in 2009, which they spent in town during the holidays. After the first week of holidays they returned to the farm with their children to spend the remainder of the festive season away from town where living costs are more expensive than on the farm.

When the bed is made Ruth/Nomandla walks towards me and in her stretched hand I see her new cell phone. She shows me its splendid colour screen. She announces that she gave her old phone to her husband. This gesture from wife to husband is possible due to a certain degree of financial autonomy. I ask whether it is possible to find a farm job without a husband on the farm. “Is

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120 Friday 8 January 2009 Field note.
121 The owner of a furniture factory supplying to a retail shop in Cradock told me that cup boards for black people (living in townships, on farms) are made of such quality that they last for about 5 years in houses where the furniture is damaged quickly due to bad conditions exposing the material to rain, wind and dust. The low quality products can be sold relatively cheap so that people with low incomes can afford it.
122 Interview 14 August 2009.
is a bit lonely” Ruth/Nomandla replied, “to be on the farm as a single woman”. “When the farmer hands out things like clothes or meat, you do not get any. So it is hard”. This suggests that women receive some paternalistic handouts indirectly because farmer offer them to the male workers. The women nuance the gendered practice of ‘gift-giving’ by explaining that when the farmer personally knows a woman because the ex-husband or ex-boyfriend used to work on the farm, women are approached directly. “They know Happiness’s man so that is why they called her” to come and work. She used to stay on another property of the farm owner together with her child and its father. After they split up the man returned to another farm in the area and Happiness was asked to work at Persieskraal.

The presence of a male spouse seems an informal precondition for working or living on the trophy-hunting farm. Such preconditions do not hold for men and there were no men living on the farm without being employed, as was the case for several women. The gendered labour recruitment patterns perpetuate women’s dependencies on men within the local economy. Consequently, women on the trophy-hunting farm might have a more vulnerable position when the tie to their spouse is broken due to separation, or his decease. Women then rely on the farmer’s willingness to employ them considering other employers will not be eager to employ a single woman, often responsible for the care of children as well. Their options to generate income, often in combination with raising children, are limited. The following story of Nonyaniso/Lady illustrates the kind of decisions women farm workers face after the loss of a husband.

In 1981 Lady (nicknamed Nonyaniso) left school as a young girl to go to work. As the eldest daughter she assisted her mother in supporting the family of five. They had already lost their father in 1975 and relied on her mother’s income of 40 rand a month that she earned as domestic worker in Cradock town. She found a job at a local shop and worked there in different jobs until the shop owner bought a farm in the locality in the late 1990s and requested her to be employed there. On the farm were sheep, goats and ostrich when she arrived, but soon the owners converted the place into a hunting farm. They brought in more wild animals and built a game lodge for overseas hunting clients. Lady

\footnote{124 Interview 26 July 2009.}
However worked in a garment workshop that was initiated on the farm as well and that provided labour for five people. She stayed on the farm during the week, left her child with her mother in town, and had to produce a hundred pieces of garment a week for 400 rand and help out in the hunting lodge in between working hours. Over time, she married the overseer of the workshop, who had come from another province and together they had two children. The family lived with five other worker families on the farm under poor circumstances. Their compound had 3 flushing toilets to share and 2 showers that never worked. In 2002 there was a fight on the compound in which her husband was involved. He was stabbed and died, leaving Lady with their children, one was still a baby. Lady’s explanation for the brutal act of violence was that the perpetrator was jealous of her husband who earned more money than he did. The case was taken to court, but due to lack of evidence by witnesses there was no arrest, nothing happened.

So I had to go carry on working because I was alone with the children, to have an income. The only thing they [farm owners] gave me is, as I remember today I have got that slip still, I think it is 2700 rand just to bury him and that was the last.

Ferdie was buried in town and Lady continued living on the farm, together with the man who robbed her of her husband. She received a monthly unemployment fund from the state for a while which in total amounted to 5.700 rand. The baby and child stayed with her mother who had moved to Port Elizabeth. That period on the farm was very difficult for her.

Ek was alleen, ek het nooit by hulle gekuier [I was alone, I never visited them] or something. It is just good morning and hello. And then I was just always on my own. Until Friday or Saturday when I come home and then Monday again it is again, I am just going to look them in the face and it is still the same people, that took my husband away, but I had to stay with them, because I had not got any alternative.

In 2006 the workshop closed down and the farm owners offered her casual jobs every now and then when there were curtains to be sown for the lodge or when they needed an extra hand in the kitchen. But Lady felt that she could not stay
without proper work opportunities on the farm. She moved with her children to the RDP house that she was allocated in 2000.

At least I got something I own cause one day, I will not live every day, one day maybe my children is going to grow up, we are not all of us lucky to have a husband and get married, you see, some of us are like struggling like me, while the others are better off. At least then I know ONE of my children at least can have a place to stay!

After almost 30 years labouring for the same family, Lady is left with a government house, debt and a child grand of 480 rand a month to support her two school-going children. She tried to get compensation from the farm owners through the Department of Labour but was referred to a local labour consultant who told her to sign a paper that granted her a once off 2000 rand compensation. The case was settled. The implicit paternalistic bond between her and the farmer ended when she stopped working on the farm. The next section delves deeper into the workings of formal institutions mediating rural interdependencies in post-apartheid South Africa.

The formal institutional landscape linked to the Karoo farms

The barbed wire farm fences, no matter how high or what degree of electrification, have become increasingly permeable. On the one hand because farmers are introducing wildlife on their lands and encourage the steady flow of departing farm workers and their families to move to a place beyond the fence. On the other hand formalized rules and regulations are trickling through from the outside, shifting interdependencies between farmers and workers and manners in which disputes are handled and labour contracts negotiated. The ‘farm laws’ from the ‘olden days’ are re-negotiated and re-articulated in the post-apartheid landscape through several local private and public institutions that mediate and interpret relations on the farms.

This section presents the activities of a private labour consultant working in the Karoo commercial farming landscape, the experiences of labour inspectors from the Department of Labour, the policing work of an inspector with 20 years of local experience in government security services, and finally the work of local NGOs supporting farm workers. People representing these institutions all access
the farms in different ways, and they relate to farmers and workers in different ways. The private labour consultant is invited and paid by farmers, the inspectors have to request an appointment or enforce entrance, the police inspector comes in through crime and security matters, and the work of NGOs is affected by their affiliations with the political structures in the locality.

**Privatizing the regulation of labour legislation**

The implementation of labour laws on commercial farms in the Karoo is partly facilitated through the work of a private labour consultant who is hired by local farmers to manage the legal aspects of labour relations on their farms. This ensures farmers that they can transform labour patterns within the legal framework of the state. In this section I describe how the labour consultant works.

William Kingston, a private labour consultant, describes his work in the following way “I solve disputes between employers and employees, the employers pay me so in the end I am on the employers’ side.” The middle-aged tubby man from Queenstown studied Law in the Eastern Cape but chose the opportunity to earn money and gain work experience over obtaining his degree. William worked five years in the Department of Labour in Cradock and began a career as private consultant during the first decade of the 21st century. He combines this business with other entrepreneurial projects and a family. As labour consultant he operates in an extensive geographical area (radius of 200 km) and had 140 clients during 2009. His clients, employers including many farmers, pay him an annual retainer and he visits the farms or firms when employers call him in to solve a dispute or to organize labour contracts. He also represents farmers in cases held by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA): “I go to fight there often”. I shadowed William one day to observe what he does on a working day. We went to a dairy farmer who had just employed Zimbabweans who had asked the farmer to explain to them the ins and outs of their contracts. The farmer then called Sam to help with the formalization and information provision regarding the terms and conditions of the labour arrangement.

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125 Meetings on 31 March and 8 May 2009.
At 9 am on that sunny Friday morning I step into William’s bakkie which he parked right in front of my house. He smiles at me generously and says “please, do not wear your seatbelt”. Then he spurts off with one hand on the steering wheel while bringing a can of Red Bull to his mouth with the other hand. “This is my second Red Bull already, because I am so babalas.” While he recalls the reasons for a drinking party the previous night I think of the questions I want to ask him about contemporary relations on the farms and his position in that minefield of distrust and power imbalances. The attempt to pose them at this early hour is not appreciated; “you remind me of my four-year old son with all your questions” is the agitated response. When we approach the dairy farm, luckily not far from town considering the state of the driver, William mentions that “usually when farm workers see me coming they already start thinking, who did something wrong?!” and he laughs as he parks the vehicle in front of the farm house. We wait inside the vehicle for the farmer and William explains to me that he often encounters farm workers he dismissed from the one farm, on another farm in the area again. He dismisses workers who appear at work drunk, or do not go to work at all. Without a second thought he pointed out during our first meeting a month before that the most disruptive force at work on farms is alcohol. When the farmer and his son come to greet us William asks “how are things going with the workers, any problems over the weekend?” The son replies that one of the workers was beaten with a shovel by another worker. “What did they fight about” William asks the young man. “They do not even know what they fight about, they just drink!” The farmer says that the newly arrived Zimbabwean workers are so ‘completely different’: friendly, educated and communicative. He informs William, sounding somewhat anxious, that these ‘educated’ Zimbabweans want to know how it works with “overtime and everything”. “No problem” assures the labour consultant, “call them out”.

Soon, four men and two women in typical blue farm overalls come walking towards us. “Let’s do it the African way!” William jokes to the group that gathers in the courtyard. Together with the farmer and his son, we are standing opposite the workers who lean against the vehicles parked around us. The procedure of the African-style assembly starts with William requesting permits from the

126 Afrikaans expression for hangover.
labourers. He explains to the group that without a valid work permit he cannot make a labour contract. And with their temporal permits he also cannot make permanent contracts as they have to renew their permits every six months. When he discovers they have been in Cradock for a couple of weeks already he starts enquiring teasingly after more personal matters: “do you speak Xhosa; do you have a South-African wife; do you guys drink?” Then, his attitude changes and he introduces himself in a more serious, formal, tone of voice.

I am your employer’s labour consultant. This means that he can call me when there is a problem and I will advise him what to do. This also means that I can assist you if you have a problem with your work.

William implies during his talk that he also acts in the workers’ interests in case they have a problem with the farmer. He then announces he is going to talk about the worker’s rights on the farm, as well as the rights of the farmer. This standardized part of the ‘conversation’ contains information regarding job description, working hours, wages, accommodation, unemployment fund, leave, illness, and labour disputes. The actively listening Zimbabweans interrupt regularly to ask questions for clarification or elaboration of a particular arrangement. This is a reconstruction that contains part of William Kingston’s talk:

**Labour consultant speech on farm workers rights and duties**

I will now tell you about the rights you have on the farm and the rights of Mr. X [farmer]. First of all you are all employed as general workers. You are no special employees like drivers or something. You can drive a tractor of course. This means that you do whatever is necessary on this farm, [farmer] can ask you to do anything and you do it.

Working hours. In South Africa a farm worker works 45 hours a week, 8 hours a day, lunchtime not included. On Saturday you work five hours. Now if you work longer this is overtime, 1.5 paid. But [farmer] can also tell you to come in later the following day to compensate for the overtime, but that is also times 1.5. So if you work an hour extra on Monday, you can start for example 1.5 hours later on Tuesday. On Sunday every hour is overtime. There are a lot of complicated rules about so many hours; it is easiest to just pay normal overtime.
Wages. What do you earn? 1500, O no [to the farmer] you should have discussed this with me, now you are getting yourself and me into trouble here!

FARMER: I am very happy with them.

Yes, but in south Africa a farm worker earns 1231 rand a month, based on 196 hours. Whatever [farmer] pays you more is an incentive. And he can deduct that incentive if you do something wrong. So of that 1500, about 269 rand is your bonus. You must receive a pay slip every month. Now, what can you see on this pay slip? [Farmer] is in his right to deduct maximum 10% of your wages for provisions he makes for you. For housing when it has water within 100 meters distance. Do you guys have water?

WORKER: Yes we have, but it is a bit far.

How far?

FARMER: 110 meter (laughing)!

Ok, well let’s not make a problem of that. The house must have windows and he must provide electricity. I am not saying he is deducting this from your salary, but I am informing you about the right he has to do it. This comes down to 150 rand a month. Do you guys get any food? What, milk two litres a day. What are your costs of that [farmer]? Ok, he can only deduct the 10% if he is giving you something that is worth more. Not when the milk for example is only worth 110 rand, unless he sells it to you.

The house belongs to [farmer], so when you leave the farm, the house is still his belonging. When you stop working here, you have the right to 30 days of free housing to vacate the premises. The contract says nothing about borrowing money from the farmer, but he has the right to demand it back once you leave the farm. And your uniforms also belong to the employer; I do not want to see you on Saturday night in that uniform in the tavern. Or see your girlfriend with it.

UDF, no he cannot deduct UDF for you because you are not claiming any (as non-South Africans). Please be careful, take safety into account when you are working. There is a funny understanding that if something happens to you the farmer will pay. This is not the case.
In between the explication of different aspects of labour laws applicable to farm workers the labour consultant explains to the foreign labourers “how things are done” and should be “understood” on the Karoo farms. Like in the sentence *there is a funny understanding that if something happens to you the farmer will pay*. William explicitly suggests that farmers do not have the responsibility to take care of their workers when something happens to them. By adding “funny” to the understanding he disregards the informal welfare arrangements that once existed on farms. In other instances he confirms the continuation of informal arrangements like when he mentions that *the contract says nothing about borrowing money from the farmer, but he has the right to demand it back once you leave the farm*. Here, he refers indirectly to the common practice of farmers lending money to workers. His interpretation of current relations on the farms illustrated the arbitrary nature of arrangements made between farmers and workers. Another striking part of the speech is the discussion on wages from the moment William learned what the workers earned. Despite the farmer’s attempt to justify his choice to pay the workers more than minimum wage standards William insists he should not do that. During this discussion the farmer looks a bit helpless. William ensures all farmers follow one particular remuneration model based on the idea that farmers need means to arbitrarily reward workers, and hold on to means to punish workers. This asserts farmers’ authority on the farm and assumes workers are subjects that need to be disciplined and controlled tightly. Towards the end of his talk the labour consultant tells the workers that in case they experience any complains or problems they should firstly approach the employer and if necessary they can request the employer to bring in William Kingston. He does not mention the case where workers actually have a problem with the farmer and he refuses to give the Zimbabweans his contact details directly. As a result the workers rely on the farmer for advice or mediation from William. Such arbitrary practices have long created divisions among workers and a culture of distrust on the farm. These institutions are re-articulated by the labour consultant through the vocabulary of the legal framework of the ‘new South Africa’.

After the speech about labour rights and duties William prepares the labour contracts. He gets his laptop together with a mobile printer and produces the labour contracts in the farmer’s small office situated in the corner of a cow shed.
One of the Zimbabweans asks William for job opportunities in the safari industry as he receives his contract. “No”, he answers quickly, “it’s more or less the same, but they get some tips that compensate for long working hours”. The farmer is satisfied with the procedure and hands his consultant cash money “for a bottle of whisky”. We drive off with all windows open to get rid of the flies and the strong smell of cow dung in the car.

On our way back to town I remark that the magazine ‘Farmer’s Weekly’ has published an article recently to advice farmers about how to deal with their workers’ debt problems. William says he does not read the magazine but that it is up to workers what they do with their money. There are no contractual arrangements regarding money lending between farmers and workers. But farmers are often involved in worker’s financial issues, I suggest. The consultant reluctantly admits that one of the game farmers in the area takes his workers to the stores in town at the end of each year to buy things for them, “because when they have nice things in the house, they will stay on the farm.” I also mention that farmers ‘save’ hunting tips for workers that they pay out at the end of the year. Is it legally correct to save money for workers and pay them out in December as bonuses? I receive a meaningful look and monotonous answer “it is up to workers what they do with their money, that’s it.” End of subject. The financial dependency trap that ties agricultural workers to farms over centuries is hard to transform and reconciled with the introduction of minimum wages and labour regulations.

Back in town we have lunch at a fast-food restaurant where William orders an ‘everything-you-can-have-for-breakfast’ while I attempt to have the labour consultant reflect on his position with respect to the relation between farmers and workers. His is convinced that through his consultation “both parties win something.” He reasons that if it was not for him, workers would be dismissed quicker and in more arbitrary ways by their employers. He knows of only one other private labour consultant with a similar practice operating in a neighbouring town “but he is white, which is a bad skin colour.” Farm workers do not trust that guy from the start. William’s advantage is that he speaks Xhosa and Afrikaans fluently; he taps from his own ‘Africaness’ to operate in the space that connects white employers and black workers. I openly assume that surely it must have felt conflicting at times to represent the interests of clients who use
his ability to act as cultural broker to secure their interests? Hesitantly at first, he
discloses he occasionally feels frustrated when employers do not want to admit
that they are wrong for example. He for example experienced that farmers asked
him to address them with ‘mister’ in front of their workers to show respect, “it
frustrates me, but what can I do?”

Halfway our lunch meal I share some observations from the procedure on
the dairy farm today. It concerns his attitude towards the farm workers’ wages
and his insistence that the farmer should not pay them more than the minimum
wage. “Now you go back to history my dear” is his agitated reply. During
another interview he already explained his view on the changing ‘bonds’ between
farmers and workers in this area. He claims that the new generation of farm
workers are no longer loyal employees; they earn cash wages and want a house in
town, less and less people are staying on farms. The “old” farmers used to pay
their workers in kind and “take care” of their needs which created long-term
commitments between employer and employee. Since 1993/1994 workers are no
longer attached to a farm where they have a furnished house with personal
belongings; “they easily pack their stuff and move on.” According to him there is
a decline farm workers’ ‘loyalty’ to their employers.

Farmers are never sure if workers return anymore so they need to have means
to ‘discipline’ them; they shouldn’t get too comfortable.

He gives an example of a group of Malawian workers who left the farm where
they were working and stole things from the houses they stayed in. William
emphasizes that “business is not build on trust”. The contemporary farm
business relies on labour relations shaped by “incentives” and “punishments”
and he helps to keep that mechanism in place. When we finish our food and
coffee the labour consultant invites me to a pub where we drink a beer and play
some pool. When I go home he remains in the bar drinking with another friend
parked at the bar. William accounts for the drinking by stating “what else is there
to do here, besides making babies?!”
**Government inspections on the farm**

The Department of Labour (DoL) is concerned with the regulation of labour conditions on farms. In Cradock the private labour consultant operating in the area worked at the department for five years before he started his private enterprise. There still seems to be a connection as farm workers report that the department refers them to the private consultant who settles cases much quicker, but not necessarily in the best interest of farm workers. The following case illustrates the corrupt procedure farm workers experience when they approach government institutions for assistance.

Lady/Nonyaniso who had worked on Aloe Safaris went to the Department of Labour to ask for help after she was dismissed by her employer after many years of residing and labouring on his farm. She wanted to start a CCMA case against the farmer to demand compensation for her loss of livelihood after so many years of loyal service.

Nonyaniso: Yes I went to the Department of Labour; there was a woman who asked me if I wanted to CCMA? Perhaps I would get something out of that. Then I got this other guy, William, I forgot his surname, then he helped me to get 2000 rand from the farmer. That time I had 2000 rand debt at the municipality.

Nomalanga: So you had to pay that.

N: So I had to pay.

Femke: So the money went... How did this CCMA meeting go? Did you meet with the *baas*?

N: Yes, he talked to him and he explained to me what the *baas* said and how we are settling the case, just sign for me here this check, that’s all he said.

NL: You were not in the same room?

N: Nothing...

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Instead of having an independent CCMA procedure Nonyaniso’s case was ‘settled’ by William Kingston. She was not part of the negotiations the consultant had with the farmer and had no clue what her rights were, or how to represent her case. This lack of information concerning procedures in case of labour disputes makes farm workers easy targets for corrupt practices. Nonyaniso says the attitude of farmers in the area make her feel unhappy.

N: Nobody will feel happy about it. You are just nothing! You can be used and thrown away.

F: You are dispensable.

N: That’s how farm workers are treated.

NL: And you know in South Africa we talk about rights for workers and democracy, do you feel that, those rights mean anything if you are a farm worker?

N: If you use it, make use of it, than it can work, but HERE in Cradock, no.

NL: Why not?

F: Why not?

N: Because if you go to the unemployment office, they phone your boss, they tell him to come in, and they give you time to come in, and then they talk, they talk, and then you come, they get nothing of your case.

More farm workers suggest that government works hand in hand with farmers in their locality. They suspect farmers of paying government officials and police officers to stay silent or ‘solve’ their problems with workers. They hardly see the point of going to the government offices in town as they do not trust it will improve their situation at all.

The labour inspectors at DoL visit farms occasionally to inspect if farm worker conditions comply with labour laws. Three labour inspectors reveal in an interview at the department why their procedures generally fail to regulate relations on farms or improve the situation for farm dwellers. The interview128

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128 Interview 18 January 2010.
takes place in the boardroom of the local office. A woman and two male colleagues, all young employees (in their thirties), entered the room with their law books under their arms. These books symbolically represent their bureaucratic approach to their jobs, they work according the rules in the book. Their narratives are about procedures and explanations of rules on the farms and in the department. They have been working as labour inspectors for 2, 3 or 4 years and find it “tiring”, unrewarding, challenging, and only one man mentions that he ultimately feels he is “making a difference” in post apartheid South Africa. They firstly lay out, on request, their tasks as inspectors; investigate cases, conduct inspections, facilitate information and advocacy sessions, work on special ministerial inquiries, and investigate accidents at the workplace. In 2009 there has been a Provincial investigation project into farm worker conditions that involved 6 teams in doing targeted inspections on farms for the ministry. The report apparently sits at the Provincial Office, but the inspectors have never seen a copy of it. Their work is not confined to the farms; most of their cases actually relate to domestic workers or businesses in town. One of the inspectors who used to work at the front desk in the department tells that farmers do visit the department to get information when they have problems with workers.

The most important bottleneck for the inspectors is getting access to the farms they want to inspect. Though they initially claim that in most cases it is not a problem, they also list a range of ways farmers avoid or resist inspections. They can only do an inspection when the farmer is present on the farms and since farmers often farm on multiple properties there it is likely that he is not present. Inspectors officially have to give notice to the farmer that they are planning to visit and sometimes the farmer sends workers out into the field so that the inspector cannot talk to them. One inspector says a farmer once came out with a dog and when he requested to please take the dog away, the farmer refused. Another problem the inspectors collectively experience is that they have to cover quite an extensive geographical area of which they have little knowledge in terms of the physical road network linking farm properties and social networks linking the farmers in the area. They sometimes get lost when they go out with the only road-proof vehicle that they have to share with the three of them; the long hours of driving cost them a lot of time that should be invested in farm inspections. Such circumstances the inspectors find demoralizing.
An important bureaucratic consequence of farm conversions to trophy-hunting operations is that the farm is now categorized as ‘hospitality’ industry. Farm workers on hunting farms are hospitality workers instead of agricultural workers. The inspectors point out that minimum wages differ significantly in both sectors. A hospitality worker earns (in 2010) at least 1843 rand a month, whereas an agricultural workers earns a minimum of 1231 rand. This is a considerable difference of 600 rand a month that game farmers are not willing to pay their labourers according to the inspectors. One man recalls he inspected one of the established hunting farms in the area where the manager argued they only owned plains game and that they ran an agricultural business. The farm owner was out of town. But the inspector assured that “I saw lions and zebra etcetera and there were no sheep there.” The inspector also saw a worker cleaning the yard, “the workers are not aware that they work on a hospitality farm”. The inspector mentioned they often send compliance orders on underpayment, but this does not seem to change much. Once a month they organize an information session about labour laws, but hardly anyone attends these occasions; “as if they do not want to know.”

“Employers are supposed to have a copy of worker’s rights” but many workers cannot read according to the inspectors who say they try to inform workers about rights during interviews on the farms. For such interviews they have to request the farmer to leave, otherwise the workers will not talk. “When the employer is there, workers do not talk.” One inspector guesses that: “I do not know they maybe do not want to lose their jobs.” With regards to the local profile of game farm workers they sketched a somewhat different picture than the image of an illiterate general farm worker. “It is the literate ones working there and they have more specified jobs like tracker and tour guide.” Furthermore the inspectors have the impression that foreign workers dominate the game farms and that wages are better, especially during hunting season. “Last year it declined a little due to the crisis.”

The inefficiency of the farm inspections are the result of the persistent power imbalance in the local commercial farming landscape. The position of the inspectors in the local power configuration contributes to the inefficiency of their inspections: they are not linked to the networks of either farmers or those
of farm workers. Government enforcement of paper laws do not have the same power as local understandings of authority in the Karoo.

Policing the farms

In this section I want to provide an ethnographic illustration of the way ‘violence’ and ‘security’ matters are perceived in the Karoo countryside, through the perspective of a police inspector who operates in the farming areas around Cradock. Scholars have noted that there are double standards in the way rural crime is talked about with an overrepresentation of attention for farm attacks on white commercial farmers and hardly any references to violence affecting farm workers (Manby, 2002). Whether the white farmers’ uncertainties and sense of insecurity are ‘realistic’ or not, they are perceived as real and therefore have real consequences. To protect themselves, farmers increasingly employ the services of private security companies, boom gates, and farm watch schemes. This section focuses on the way the police links to networks of farmers and workers and how matters of crime and security are framed in the farmers’ community.

His left shoulder is decorated with an insignia showing two golden stars and the words ‘police inspector’. The self confident appearance of inspector Van der Merwe is articulated through an impeccably clean and ironed blue shirt, and thoroughly polished black shoes. We meet on a Wednesday morning at 8 am at the police office in town and have a cup of coffee and a short interview in which he introduces his work practice. After that we go on patrol. Every week he patrols a certain farm area in a big police bakkie and speaks to the farmers and labourers, visits schools and churches, and engages in social development programmes. He has accurate mental maps of the immense farming area and knows all the distances and shortcuts. There are not too many serious crimes in this area compared to the plaasmoorde in other provinces; the police inspector only recalls one local farm attack in which the farmer was tied up and robbed from his stock. He remarks that people steal animals for food and they cannot be called criminals. It is part of their survival. The main problem with farm labourers, according to Van der Merwe, is the fighting. Through cell phones

129 Farm patrol with police inspector, field note 20 January 2010.
farm workers communicate with him and he assures me that “I have informers on every farm, so I know who is smuggling liquor and dagga\(^{130}\). Both farmers and police incentivize workers to report stock theft by promising rewards and other benefits that result from farmers’ approval.

As we start driving in the police van I probe the inspector on this informant structure and other security measures on the farms. The endless gravel roads wind through farmlands and the inspector points out workers’ houses from a distance. He calls the informant structure the *baasboy* system. Baasboys are often farm dwellers who are born on the farm and they have valuable knowledge about who commits crimes; “he knows everything”. Behind the baasboy there is always another informant, “these people are soft targets and I tell them: sleep with your gun.” In terms of security the inspector already mentioned in the office that boom gates have been introduced recently in the region. They close off big farm areas and increase the level of surveillance. The area contains numerous signs and objects that signal fear for crime and intruders. Some farmers resort to private security networks that have been founded because farmers assume a considerable threat (even genocide) against white farmers in South Africa. They organize defence networks visible through symbols displayed at farm entrances.

The meanings of road and gate signs like the “beware of dangerous animals” are also linked to feelings of insecurity among farmers. At Persieskraal a farm manager attached a sign to the main gate for the following reason:

> We are going to put those new signs up on the gates where people cross the farm to get to their farm. We are just worried because especially when these Xhosa people are drunk and they do not walk steady we are worried something happens… No, nothing has ever happened yet\(^{131}\).

Although no incidents happened farmers’ fears are advertised throughout the countryside. But what threatens them?

\(^{130}\) Dagga is the Afrikaans word for Cannabis.

\(^{131}\) 21 July 2009 Field note.
Photos: Security signs at gate entrances of Karoo farms
The female manager explains that when the farmer is away the ‘gardener’ is intentionally put to work around the house to protect his family members at the house. Moreover, the man is near in case something threatening would happen.\textsuperscript{132}

The farmer leaves him behind to protect us. He would not say but that is how it works. Because there have been some people with bad intentions that come back after they were fired. And if I am alone in the office I can scream for him.

The man she refers to is not a general farm worker. He has not been on the farm long and is not from Cradock though he is Xhosa-speaking and married to Nomandla who is from the area. In the place where he comes from people do not speak Afrikaans or English and neither did he. I often attempted to speak with him when he was watering the plants around the farmhouse of cutting wood for the farmer’s fireplace. We would greet and engage in small talk, but we never got further than that. Looking back, his outsider position in the power configuration of the farm made him reluctant to talk to me, or trust me. He always works around the mansion alone and serves as a human barrier between the farmer’s family, the farm workers and other outsiders. More security measures have been blended in the physical lay-out of the farm. The paths around the farmer’s house are covered with grinded stones so that no one can walk silently around the homestead; there is always the sound of cracking particles as the farm manager asserts.

Now with the grind I can hear them coming.

And then there are the farm dogs that always roam around the farmstead. They alarm as soon as they pick up an unfamiliar noise or smell. They are the farmer’s extended ears, eyes and nose. These loyal servants are the farmer’s best friend. A farm worker confirms:

I can say that many farmers, their dogs are much more important than us, as black people.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{132} 14 August 2009 Field note.
\textsuperscript{133} 19 January 2010. Interview ex-farm worker.
These examples illuminate how the whole farm lay-out is constructed in relation to the social tensions, fears and a lack of trust between white families and black workers.

These aspects are also evident in the ways farmers organize as a community. Inspector Van der Merwe explicates during the patrol how farmers’ associations link people in specific geographical areas together. “And they all have a list of what to do” in case of an emergency or an attack. “I always tell them: there are 220,000 policemen in this country to die for you.” He emphasizes that many farmers do the “right thing” like engaging in mentorship programs, “but they do not put it on paper” and he feels the media should give more positive attention to such initiatives. “The farmer is a father and a priest; he means everything to the farm workers. And it is his farm so I always tell people to listen to the farmer, perform well and do something extra, then they can uplift themselves.” Carefully, I mention that some farm workers told me some farmers beat them, and that it shows the asymmetric power relations between farmers and workers. But the violence is part of the paternalistic relations according to the police inspector. He feels that when a farmer gives a worker a hiding this is not a crime because “farm workers are like children, when they do something wrong they must get them back on track”. His reasoning was that farmers are educated and labourers are not so the farmer is there to help them. “But people do not help themselves; they misuse social grants by spending it on liquor.” He says he helps people getting their social grants and that he is involved in social development projects on the farms, even though it should not part of his job.

That Van der Merwe’s activities are also closely aligned with farmers’ networks became clear as part of the patrol routine turned out to be his report on crime issues at local farmers’ association meetings. We turn into a path leading to a homestead where already several bakkies are parked in the courtyard. We arrive as the meeting already started and about ten pair of eyes curiously look at us as we enter the living room of the host farmer. I quickly introduce myself and apologize for the interruption. Instantly, I receive a sakelys\textsuperscript{134} and minutes of the previous meeting three months ago. It turns out we missed the opening prayer. Van der Merwe and I are appointed seats in the circle. The group

\textsuperscript{134} agenda
resumes their discussion on *ongediertes*135. Apart from the secretary who writes down minutes at a table, all attendants are men and they speak in Afrikaans. The inspector took his police cap off and sat with a straight back and hands folded on his lap in a wooden chair. To prevent stock theft the farmers contemplate whether they would place a boom gate at the turnoff to the gravel road leading up to their farms. Funding from the *Landbou Unie* would cover 30,000 rand and the farmer’s contribution would end up 2,000 rand each. The farmer bringing the point forward emphasizes it would be “good for general security” as well. Then it is the inspectors’ turn to report on criminal activities and cases relevant for this particular audience. Stock theft is the number one concern for farmers, but the courts are behind on their administration and have insufficient capacity to deal with all the cases. Farmers ask eagerly whether arrested thieves were put behind bars and someone mentions that “*ek het die andere on nog nie in a ardvarkbolgeduw nie*”136. The inspector reports that one man came out of jail after two years and went back in for five years. And there has been an arrest of someone who made a business out of stock theft. He slaughtered the animals and sold the meat. A collective growl of disgust fills the living room. The inspector explains that the women’s league in town is pressing the courts to first deal with murder and rape cases, but that he had argued with them that stock theft concerned the livelihood of livestock farmers directly and should be taken seriously.

During and after the meeting the farmers express discontent with the increasing number of game farms and the expansion plans of the National Parks in their farming area. The general framing of the increase in game farming among them is that it threatens food security, agricultural employment, it drives up land prices, increases the predator population, and that it is detrimental to the environment. The farmers suggest organising resistance through representatives who work through the “right” channels. After the formal agenda is closed, coffee and sandwiches are offered to everybody. The chairperson who owns three farms comes to me and assures me he would never switch from sheep to game. “In the long term it is not profitable.” He says he had a big predator problem because his property borders a hunting farm. He talks about it with his

135 *vermin*

136 “I have not pushed the other guy in an porcupine hole yet”
neighbour who, “does not understand”. Then the inspector signals we are leaving.

Back on the road the inspector tells me he started in the police force 20 years ago. Born in North-West Africa (now Namibia) his family scattered all over to Namaqualand which is now part of the Northern Cape Province. He went to school in the Western Cape and worked for the security forces under the apartheid regime. “As a coloured cop I was not allowed to arrest a white person, I did not have a vehicle, there was no mobility for me in the organization and I still received the same salary after many years.” This loyalty came with a price. During the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s, when the township of Lingelihle became the symbol of resistance, he participated on the side of the apartheid regime. He states that he does not want to talk about those days. He mentions carefully that he lives with the stigma of being a former representative of the much despised security police; black people still fear and distrust him. “The difference is that we were the enemy of the people back then, but it turned around today, now we are working together”. While currently serving the post apartheid regime the police inspector still keeps several weapons in the police van to deal with farm workers “who do not want to listen”. He reaches behind our seats and shows me a flexible antenna and a heavy metal club and recalls how he one day shot rubber bullets at workers who threatened him with pangas.

Van der Merwe’s patrol procedures and stories about security, crime and control in the Karoo farming landscape reveals how landowners manage to appropriate the discourse related to crime in the area. Moreover, it seems the police officer serves the interests of the rural elite who fear the presence of the rural poor as well as the political and economic developments that change their environments.

Local NGOs and unions: farm workers’ disconnections.

Farm workers in the Cradock area are not affiliated to unions and generally do not know about the existence of NGOs concerned with their circumstances. Farm workers’ linkages to town consist of church affiliation and family members. Their irregular presence in the township de-linked them from the political struggle which disconnects them from contemporary political networks.
in town. In the politicized ANC landscape of post-apartheid Cradock farm workers remain outsiders disconnected from networks and institutions that could support and inform them in relation to tenure security, labour rights, and access to land.

The Advice Office in Cradock (CAO) aims to “assist vulnerable persons in Cradock to access social, labour and legal services in the furtherance of their basic human rights”. Farm workers are one of the vulnerable groups in the local population targeted by the CAO that was founded in Lingelihle during the height of the anti-apartheid struggle during the 1980s. The founding figures were politically aligned to the ANC that mobilised people to resist the violent and oppressive apartheid regime. Initially legal aid was provided through self-organization of activists and volunteers who operated secretly from a room in the house of political stalwart Canon Calata, a descendant of Reverend JA. Calata who during the 1950s engaged in activities to improve the situation for farm labourers around Cradock. The Advice Office developed legal strategies and responses to the detention and arrests of people from the local community. Xolani Umtu has been part of these activities during the 1980s and still is a key figure in the Office. In the past 20 years he witnessed dramatic changes in the political and legal context of his activities for the Advice Office. He explains that supporting farm workers is very difficult due to the inaccessibility of the farms and the fact that conditions for farm workers depend very much on the personality of the farmer.

Excerpt from history workshop Cradock Advice Office: talking about the 1980s

Xolani: [Farm workers] had very serious problems.

Interviewer: can you describe those?

Xolani: these were evictions. A simple dispute and the farmers were aware that their workers were not organised and we are still at the initial phase of or office.

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Field note 26 May 2009. History workshop Cradock Advice Office. Participants were members of the Cradock Advice Office as well as members from the Masizame Community Centre in which the office is housed.
To have been chucked out, some of them were old, so we need to organise lawyers like the Legal Resource Centre, it was very active then in Grahamstown.

Interviewer: and what did you do then if somebody came in?

Xolani: we write a statement and sent it to the lawyers back then, Legal Resource Centre. We were not that skillful then, for the negotiations, we were still young... we also referred cases to Black Sash.

Interviewer: are there any cases that come to mind that were particularly difficult or important at the time?

Xolani: in some instances, there were, we call them liberals; white farmers that could listen to us and we can talk a little bit with them you know maybe give the ex worker some money. But there were no laws were enforcing them maybe to pay them, but sort of question of mercy or you know question of trying to talk about the situation of the elderly person. Some, they were very arrogant.

Interviewer: would you go out to the farms?

Xolani: No! We could not, just maybe arrange and telephone, try have a meeting with them, they would not allow us to get in, really some of them. Had difficult times, very difficult times. You know because they were very angry about these changes, they did not like it.

When influx restrictions relaxed and reform policies were introduced by the post-apartheid government, farm workers flooded into the township and needed support with getting identification documents and social grants. The legal aid activism was formalized during the early 1990s when funds became available for the volunteers to participate in trainings on alternative conflict resolution, mediation and changing labour legislation in the country. The work of former activists is now shaped by the needs of citizens in a post-conflict society faced with colonial legacies.

One of these challenges is the absence of organization among workers outside factories and mines that were effectively mobilized in the struggle against the apartheid state (Beresford, 2009). Farm workers, domestic workers and nurses are not unionised. The Advice Office positions its work in the gaps in
civil society that have been exposed during the political transformation. Xolani describes:

And there were some new laws around labour laws, we started to act like trade unionists because there are no trade unionists in Cradock so we started moving our office. We moved to some new fields. It involved many things.

The activists no longer fight the ills of white minority rule but seek to contribute in the fight against HIV/AIDS, violence, poverty, and ongoing labour exploitation. The discourses on liberation and political struggle have been replaced by a vocabulary framed by the focus on human rights and democracy. In the Advice Office however, struggle discourse has not completely disappeared. Xolani once proposed to “spy” on the farms; this is how activists obtained information from the farms during the 1980s. Through school teachers and church members they would win information about the conditions on the farms.

Since 1992 the CAO is located in the Masizame Community Centre in Lingelihle that also houses a library and a crèche. The CAO is irregularly financed through project grants from international organizations (NGOs) or government departments. The small office consists of one big desk, a smaller table with a computer, a phone, some cabinets, a couple of chairs and some ANC decorations. A poster sticked to the wooden entrance door displays a philosophical principle guiding the work of the office: “the eternal truth of the democratic faith is that the solution always lies with the people”.

Outside the room there is a wooden bench for people to wait if they seek help from the office. Xolani usually occupies the big desk in the room and sometimes he is accompanied by other male volunteers from Lingelihle. The language of communication in the office generally is isiXhosa. In principle people can visit the office every working day of the week. According to Xolani it is mostly farm workers and domestic workers that frequent the office. He told me about a recent visit by a widow whose husband was attacked and killed by a wildebeest on a farm. She came to the office because the farmer still had not paid the compensation money that he promised her.
‘The world is flooded with laws and policies, councils and committees. It is tragic that most of these deal with the structures of society, rather than with the heart of society – the people. But the eternal truth of the democratic faith is that the solution always lies with the people.’

(adapted from Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 1946)

Poster on entrance door Cradock Advice Office

ANC symbols decorate interior Cradock Advice Office
This agreement was made in consultation with the private labour consultant who represented the farmer and did not want to talk to Xolani. Xolani mentions William Kingston and the CAO represent different groups, “he is on the side of the farmer”. When people come to the office at Masizame Xolani’s procedure consists of hearing the case, taking down the contact details of the visitor and then seek advice from his network to see what they can do about the situation.

One of his regular contacts is Sara from the Southern Cape Land Committee (SCLC) office in Graaff Reinet. SCLC is a Trust that used to be part of the National Land Committee; they are now one of the leading NGOs on land reform in the Karoo region working with communities to access land and to develop livelihoods. The head office is located in George and the local Graaff Reinet office is run by three people who work specifically with farm workers, emerging farmers and evictions. Sara supports farm workers to set up farm committees on the farms.

Setting up these farm committees is very important. We do not want to solve people’s problems; we want to enable them to do it themselves. They have to be empowered. We see a big change in the self-confidence of the workers and they are more aware of their rights. It is actually the duty of the Department of labour to do that. But these policies are just paper, they are not practiced.

Establishing farm committees is a process that takes years. Sara got involved with farm workers through a personal contact and she sat with farm workers in taverns and in the street to learn about their situation for a long period: “I had informal talks forever”. At some point she felt she could take the discussion to a more formal level where she started informing workers about their rights. Sara often finds the work frustrating as there are never enough resources to take up all the cases she encounters while working with the committees. According to her the situation for workers got worse with the introduction of the labour laws. Farmers who used to feel responsible for their workers now use the new legal frameworks to disregard these responsibilities. She perceives the conversions to

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139 Interview 27 March 2009.
140 Field note 12 February 2011.
game farming as a problem as there is no general decline in farm work according to her; retrenchments are related to conversions.

What farmers do is they unfairly dismiss people; they first keep the people, and they keep quiet and wait for a situation where they can dismiss people. The increase in minimum-wage has not really to do with it, because they first just keep them on, they just continue with that, nobody will notice. On many game farms people leave ‘voluntarily’, meaning they went quietly.

At the SCLC they do not deal with many cases related to game farming, but Sara is convinced this would change soon as the landscape showed signs of increasing conversions: properties for sale and emergence of high fences. She does not know where farm workers go when they leave the game farm. She mentions one farmer in the area who converted the farm, divided the livestock among the farm workers and built new houses for them on the farm and in the township. Ironically, it makes her suspicious as such arrangements are “very rare” and “almost too good to be true” in a landscape where power differences are very great.

The real problem is the constitution, as it is the highest law. As long as property rights are protected, land reform is not possible. The government can come up with many regulations, but whether these will be implemented and enforced depends on the power relations on the farms and they are still very unbalanced.

Sara experiences that it is hard to connect to farm workers in the Cradock region and establish farm committees there. She occasionally travels 120 kilometres from Graaff Reinet to Cradock to assist Xolani with specific farm worker cases. But the SCLC is not mobilising farm workers on the Cradock farms. And neither is the Cradock Advice Office.

There are significant differences between the two NGOs regarding their linkages to farm worker communities which affect their access possibilities to farms and the effectiveness of mobilisation efforts. The SCLC exclusively focuses on farm communities and land issues and operates in an area where the lingua franca is Afrikaans. The SCLC brochures are Afrikaans and Sara speaks Afrikaans with the members from the farm committees. The CAO focuses on vulnerable groups and human rights in general. At the Advice Office in Cradock
isiXhosa is the language of communication and material for other parties is produced in English as the office activists do not speak Afrikaans fluently and do not have personal experience with working on the farms. The Advice Office depends on people approaching them in the office to get information about the situation on the farms. The few visits with Xolani to the taverns and streets in town where farm workers come during their time off have not been very fruitful. His connections are mostly situated in Lingelihle and with people politically aligned with the ANC. This gives a strong impression that the Advice Office is not politically neutral. Most farm workers did not know the Cradock Advice Office or did not know they could go there for information or help. Timothy who worked a short while on Smith’s Hunting Safaris now resides in Lingelihle and states that “you need to have the right surname in Cradock” to get access to job opportunities or resources. He expresses disillusion with the ANC: “the only change I see is that we are suffering, more than we have suffered before”.

The unions in Cradock are closely aligned with the ANC reflecting the national tripartite alliance consisting of the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the Congress of South African Unions (COSATU) that has been formed during the transition to democracy. Despite the ANC’s embrace of neo-liberal policy frameworks and the marginalised role of the labour federation in policy debates, the alliance is still intact (see for example Beresford, 2009). In 2011, the room opposite the room where the CAO is based has become an ANC constituency office. During a visit, they are drafting invitations for a meeting in which members from the ANC, CAO and Cosatu want to mobilise domestic workers to join the union. At the top of the invitation letter the ANC banner figured prominently though the meeting would “not be political” according to one of the organizers. While a couple of men distribute the invitations to the churches in the townships the chairperson of the local Cosatu branch, Langa Roberts, expresses his frustration about the corrupt leadership structures in town. ANC members allocate management positions to their friends and disregard his input during party gatherings. The union leader framed

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141 Interview 19 January 2010.
142 Field notes 4 and 7 February 2011.
farm workers’ most salient concerns as transport, isolation, and alcohol. Moreover, “trade unions are seen as a threat whereas they are there to improve relations!” He also refers to the union’s relation to the churches and said that in the churches there is no political consciousness. The church might indeed encumber farm workers’ affiliation to trade unions as especially the Zionist services I attended emphasized the importance of conformation and obedience instead of observing rights of contemplating resistance. Church affiliations might further disconnect farm workers from institutions and ideas that aim to transform the power configuration in the countryside.

**Linkages and disconnections in post-apartheid’s institutional landscape**

The transformation of rural interdependencies in the Karoo’s commercial farming landscape is not facilitating the reform promises of the post-apartheid era to topple power relations in the countryside. As we have seen in this chapter, the established more or less succeed in preventing the balance of power to shift in the direction of farm dwellers. The established landowning class re-asserts its position through linkages to the institutional environment as well as the private sector. From this perspective farm workers’ disconnections to local political networks plays an important role in the process of outsidering and their marginal place in the Karoo.

The farm fences have become permeable through new labour legislation, but farmers respond by restructuring their businesses and their relations with farm workers. Labour arrangements move away from permanent work to more flexible and insecure arrangements that feed into rising tensions among the rural population and deepen existing divisions among the rural population competing for jobs and livelihoods. New labour legislation in practice is combined with local understandings of farmers’ and workers’ responsibilities that still trap workers in interdependencies that retain asymmetric power relations on farms. Moreover, farm workers both lack connections and resources to challenge or change their position. Because farm workers are not organized or mobilized they are incapable of articulating their concerns collectively or challenge the ways in
which issues of security and crime are expressed through local institutions. The inspectors at the local Department of Labour fail to effectively enforce labour legislation or support farm workers who distrust government officials and have negative experiences with the department. Another important disabling factor for farm workers’ mobilization is that they are disconnected from the local political structure, dominated by ANC networks formed during the anti-apartheid struggle that mostly took place in Cradock’s township Lingelihle. The only local NGO providing support is under resourced and affiliated with ANC politics. Land or tenure rights representation for farm workers only happens through its partner organization, the Southern Cape Land Committee, based in Graaff Reinet.

Commercial farmers have been considerably better in using formal institutions to their advantage. Farmers resort to the use of a private labour consultant who fits old ways of doing into formalized employment procedures. He relieves farmers of traditional paternalistic responsibilities and makes sure they operate within the framework of the law. Commercial farmers are well organized and embedded in formal institutional networks which enables them to express their concerns, their sense of insecurity and their perceptions of crime in relation to the police, the department of labour and the media. In this sense the post-apartheid state plays an ambivalent role in the transformation process of the countryside. Although it formulates reform aimed policies, the practical implementation taking place in local power configurations result in little transformation and much affirmation of power imbalances. Both in relation to farmers as well as in relation to the institutional environment farm dwellers remain outsiders. The permeable fences turn out to have become fragile structures that make the lives of farm dwellers more precarious.