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Producing permanence: employment, domesticity and the flexible future on a South African border farm

Maxim Bolt

Abstract

What does it mean to be ‘permanent’ in an increasingly flexible world of work? On the Zimbabwean–South African border, white farmers guard against risk by investing in portfolios of estates and emphasizing their mobility. But the farms rely on core black workforces of resident ‘general workers’, known as *mapermanent*. The lives of *mapermanent* embody temporal contradictions in South African agriculture. Work regimes depend on arrangements established through long-term residence in labour compounds, a stability threatened by employers’ pragmatism in a volatile sector. Here, short-term ‘permanence’ coexists with longer-term insecurity. Moreover, what I call *provisional permanence* is built on others’ transience: *mapermanent* draw on the domestic labour of temporary contract workers and the order enforcement of rotating border garrisons. Tensions between temporalities characterize workers’ assertions of ‘permanence’, and their limitations, in an economy of flexibility and shifting investments.

Keywords: commercial agriculture; migrant labour; time; flexible capitalism; Zimbabwe; South Africa.

Introduction

Go into a London supermarket at any time, and you will be faced with a choice of oranges and other citrus fruits. Perennially available, unexotic and the world’s ‘first fruit crop in international trade in terms of value’,¹ oranges are available all year round in UK supermarkets like Tesco and Sainsbury’s. This

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is possible only because southern hemisphere growers fill the off-season gap. Grootplaas Estates,² on South Africa's border with Zimbabwe, is one such grower. For its white Afrikaner farmer-owners – a partnership of an octogenarian patriarch, his two sons and his son-in-law – production follows a tight schedule. Buying agents send the crop to destinations across Europe and Asia. The last ship consignments, which arrive in Europe six weeks after fruit is picked, must clear customs during a specified import window, after which tariffs climb steeply. This tight schedule reflects the fact that Grootplaas' survival depends fundamentally on sales in an international market economy.

This global economy has become the realm of 'flexible accumulation', 'emphasis[ing] the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive and the contingent in modern life' (Harvey, 1990, p. 171), not only in urban industrial or corporate capitalism,³ but also in agriculture. 'Global' restructuring of work organization to ensure cheap, flexible labour has in turn generated the growth of the informal or 'underground' economy (see Castells & Henderson, 1987; Sassen-Koob, 1987), and led skilled workers to be redefined as unskilled to cut costs.⁴ Crucially for this paper, it also affects the self-understandings and strategies of business owners. Many, including Grootplaas' farmers, have come to regard a lack of permanence as something that guards them against risk in a liberalized economy. And on the estates, in the hinterland of global capitalism, black farm workers in their residential labour compounds negotiate the consequences of their employers' decisions.

On South Africa's northern border, agriculture is coming to be viewed by its practitioners as a series of strategic business investments, rather than as a necessarily rooted way of life. Farmers adapt to their own risks – both international and national – by de-emphasizing their long-term commitments and emphasizing their potential mobility. But key to the success of each estate is a resident black workforce bound by enduring social relationships. Apparently flexible global capitalism depends here on locally rooted arrangements. This paper explores the place of 'permanent' labour in a flexible economy. But, before turning to the lives of Grootplaas' workers, it is important to understand the circumstances and strategies of the border's farmers.

The farming business and the flexible future

South African farming has moved from arrangements labelled as 'paternalism' (see Addison, 2006; du Toit, 1993; van Onselen, 1992) towards a 'leaner', supplier model, in response to both international and national pressures. White farmers face not only a liberal buyer's market, but also the uncertainties of settler agriculture in the post-apartheid era, including land reform.⁵ Both encourage farmers on the Zimbabwean border to remain flexible, by avoiding attachment to their enterprises. Meanwhile, by employing a generically corporate style, farmers hope to avoid settler agriculture's negative historical

associations as a racist anachronism, and to present it as a business like any other. Flexibility represents both an attempt to efface farming's *past*, and a way to leave the *future* open. Obligations to workers are contractual and terminable, rather than open-ended and based on place and history.

Staying flexible means seeking new opportunities to develop land, stay mobile and distribute risk across different enterprises, crops and regions – to develop, in effect, a portfolio of investments. This outlook builds on both an existing pioneering ideal and a history of entrepreneurial mobility. The arrival of intensive crop farmers on the border was recent (late 1970s and 1980s), and motivated by a desire to leave the places where they had farmed previously. Since the late 1980s, the border farmers have increasingly adapted to markets, market risk and the politics of farming in South Africa. Most of the border estates had initially produced cotton for the domestic market. But landowners responded to liberalization, international competition and cuts in subsidies by turning to exports; their access to foreign exchange enabled them to weather the storm. In the 1990s, Grootplaas' huge cotton plantations gave way to citrus orchards. Other farmers opted to diversify rather than change crop altogether, splitting their land between cotton, citrus and sometimes vegetables. The mix of strategies is visible from the air, as the dark green rectangles of orchards jostle with round, pivot-irrigated fields along the Limpopo River. Grootplaas' neighbours have an especial advantage in cotton production: they own a gin, which enables them to process their crop and add value before they sell it, so cutting out a middleman and boosting profits. They now grow citrus for export, while remaining South Africa's largest cotton planter (so they claim). Moreover, they can sell their ginning services to other farmers in the area, offering them yet another source of income.

Farmers have long relied on portfolios of investments to guard against an uncertain future. These are diverse, and the dangers themselves have changed over time. One established strategy to mitigate the vagaries of agriculture is to run enterprises through separate umbrella holding and trading companies. These respectively own and manage a farmer's various portions of land along the border. The trading company leases the land from the holding company, so a bad crop scuppers the former, while leaving the latter and its estate intact. These family-run farms also use their companies to sidestep inheritance tax, since it is only the position of managing director that is passed down the generations. More recently, the threat of land claims gives the distinction between holding and trading companies new significance. The company that owns the estate and therefore participates in the land claim process does not own machinery or inputs, thus reportedly limiting the scope of negotiation. But, whatever the context, the explicit objective of such schemes is to 'spread the risk as far as possible', in the words of one farmer. Such sensitivity to risk has prepared the farmers well for recent uncertainty.

Indeed, some farmers' portfolios furnish them with options beyond farming on the border, an important asset today. One, for example, started a business packing fruit and vegetables in Messina (now Musina), the closest town, in

1987. As in the case of the cotton gin, mentioned above, this allows him to cut costs producing his own crops. But the business is now highly profitable in its own right, with 350 workers, and he spends a substantial proportion of his time in town, running it as a distinct enterprise. Moreover, he subsequently expanded to include a processing plant on the same premises (although it is a different company), drying fruit for domestic consumption and for export to the UK. These businesses offer him security as a source of income. In the context of land claims, they also offer a way to remain involved in agriculture and the farming community even if he loses his farm. Packsheds are central features of agricultural infrastructure, and are hubs in the organization of farming areas. Plans such as these offer flexibility for farmers, as the border estates become options among others.

The Grootplaas farmers, on whose estate this paper focuses, have been especially canny in providing for a flexible future. They began expanding their options with the purchase of land on the Mozambican border, a cold business calculation. The land was already claimed under South Africa's land reform programme, but they counted on an estimated ten-year delay on claims. Money could be made buying the estate cheaply, planting sugar cane (good for quick profit) and then selling at the government price were the claim to be successful.⁶ Koos, Grootplaas' founder, sent one of his sons to manage it, accompanied by a small number of senior workers. More recently, Grootplaas' owners leased land in Mozambique itself. There, according to Koos, civil war has left the country in an economic plight sufficiently severe to cause its government to welcome white farmers. As Koos sees it, southern African countries will now cycle between welcoming white farmers when they are desperate and resenting them when they are prosperous.⁷ For the youngest generation, yet further flexibility may be sought. Koos' grandson was sent to Belgium after university to work the other end of the supply chain and acquire 'skills' (although he soon decided to return and farm).

Such expansion has multiple causes: it is a way to plough profits back into the business to avoid tax, while opening up opportunities for family members. Nevertheless, it is also a response to new problems. Investments in different crops, businesses and places represent security. On the border, there is a wide spectrum of farmers' strategies, but what unites them is that estates are seen in terms of shrewd business strategy, rather than rooted settlement. The Grootplaas farmers have taken this principle even further than most, seeking investments well beyond the area, and even beyond South Africa, to mitigate risk.

Most recently, the border farmers' hard-headed business acumen has led them to commission a coal-prospecting project on the farms: if they have to sell, they can ensure a higher price from an Australian mining corporation that has expressed interest than they would receive from the South African state following a land claim. By leasing back the orchards, they would at least have an income, along with the security of liquid capital. This is a way to remain flexible, but the strategy is itself risky. Farmers have already begun entering such agreements, but they do not yet know the impact of the new mine on air

pollution. Coal dust may be detrimental to their crops. Yet the Grootplaas farmers would consider selling their land and trying their luck at leasing, for the right price – a price that would recognize all improvements to the farm, even those that are irrelevant to mining. Doing so holds out a tantalizing prospect: farming with minimal immobility. Ownership in this view comes to appear a handicap, rather than an asset. Indeed, one border farmer sees possible opportunity even in a successful land claim on his property, if his family is kept on to manage it with relatively free rein.

In such a climate, there are of course farmers who prefer to get out. One of Koos' sons has recently decided to sell his share in Grootplaas and buy a small guesthouse close by, for a quieter life. But most hope to stay in the sector. They see their estates in a much wider context, in which they hope to ensure the possibility of succeeding in agricultural enterprises *somewhere*, and are prepared to stay flexible to do so. The Grootplaas farmers' land in Mozambique was intended as a way out of South Africa altogether, if necessary, without leaving farming. Moreover, they were drawn to Mozambique by its relatively lax restrictions on moving wealth; in an uncertain future, the possibility of capital flight is attractive.

How does everyday production operate, in the midst of this instability? The border farms exhibit a strange tension. On the one hand, farmers consciously de-root themselves from the estates they cultivate, even though these are their homes. On the other hand, the border farmers' broader views have remarkably little impact on their day-to-day operations. However flexible their plans, success depends ultimately on deep commitment to particular projects, rooted in the land. Even as coal was prospected at Grootplaas, they began construction of a vast second dam for irrigation, sinking their profits back into the farm despite current uncertainty about the future. They constantly establish new arrangements with supermarkets and acquire funds to improve facilities in the labour compound. Farmers explain that, even in an uncertain environment, one has to keep expanding to survive: 'get big or get out'. Grootplaas' farmers are locked into capital reinvestment to stay competitive, as Castree (2009) argues of capitalism generally.

Diversification vies with deepening commitment. This tension appears especially acute in the farms' black workforces, whose members have neither the resources nor the easy mobility with which white farmers face the future. It is farmers' deepening commitment to their enterprises that permanent workers both rely on and reinforce, as they live and labour on the farms. Moreover, the everyday reproduction of these workforces underpins the estates' profitability, but relies on a far more stable conception of the future than that offered by a model of flux, flows and asset portfolios.

Flexibility and permanence

For South African farmers, a key way to remain flexible involves 'the intensification of the fragmentation of labour' (Bernstein, 2007, p. 45).

Building on a long-standing precedent in the form of a floating reserve of labour, especially near border areas, a recent response to market liberalization has been to use migrant workers ‘to construct a cheap and manageable workforce’ (Johnston, 2007, p. 520). The Zimbabwean border presents a striking example of this. Estates rely on large numbers of seasonal labourers who have climbed through the border fence in search of work, responding to Zimbabwe’s post-2000 political and economic crisis. Many are on their way to big cities such as Johannesburg, and new arrivals vary enormously in the length of time they remain on the farms, from days to months. Migrants’ desperation, their lack of documentation and the continual presence of military and police border patrols make for vulnerable workforces. Although farmers have been inconvenienced by deportation raids – because recruiting replacements brings added paperwork, and deportees tend to return demanding their jobs and wages – they also clearly benefit from workers’ vulnerability. Seasonal workers’ fear of police on the roads keeps them confined to labour compounds. In local horror stories, farmers even report their undocumented Zimbabwean workers, thereby avoiding paying for labour. This paper describes the border and its farms in a particularly acute period of the Zimbabwean crisis and an especially brutal period of recent South African border policing.⁸

A large, transient labour surplus is a malleable and cheap response to a harsh global market and to the uncertainty of agriculture in South Africa, with workers easily controlled because of their ‘grey’ legal status. White farmers, attempting to increase ‘efficiency’ in an environment of competitive neoliberalism, use their sovereignty over land and workers to secure the cheapest and most docile labour possible. ‘Undocumented migrants are attractive to farmers because they are easily accessible and disposable virtually on demand’, claims one study (Rutherford & Addison, 2007, p. 625; see also Human Rights Watch, 2006).

There are, however, important limitations to the shift towards neoliberal ‘flows’ and the acceleration of ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey, 1990). In agriculture, capital flows are not always as transient as they may seem. Current risks have indeed led farm owners to emphasize their flexibility rather than stressing rootedness in place. And seasonal labourers are themselves conveniently mobile. But, as mentioned above, farms continue to rely on core black workforces of permanently employed, resident ‘general workers’, who maintain all aspects of the estates throughout the year. Known as *mapermanent* (the permanent ones), it is their work and expertise that enable the farms to operate. Their work, in turn, depends on their positions *as settled residents*.

What constitutes permanence for these key workers? Answering this question reveals how the tensions felt by white farmers – flexibility versus rootedness – are displaced down the labour hierarchy. Farmers distance themselves from established norms of paternalist obligation, with their negative historical associations and their implications of local fixity. In the process, *mapermanent* become ever more important as patrons and benefactors

within the workforce, in what I call mediated paternalism (Bolt, 2011). White farmers' mobile strategies leave *mapermanent* vulnerable. But the successful operation of the farms depends on workers' settled lives in the immediate term. This illustrates a more general tension: between the kinds of stable social roles necessary for production – and workforce reproduction – and the vagaries of market-driven enterprises.

Mapermanent are defined, at one level, by their secure employment category. Their differences from Grootplaas' seasonal workforce signal the effects of casualization, in which the majority of workers become increasingly insecure, with the effect of serving the 'needs of capital'. The casualization of farm work in South Africa is one consequence of post-apartheid changes in agriculture, what Rutherford and Addison call a 'fundamental class project associated with the current phase of neo-liberal restructuring' (2007, p. 626). The result is a strong distinction between small, secure core workforces and floating labour reserves with few rights (Ewert & du Toit, 2005).

But distinctions between *mapermanent* and seasonal workers are not simply the transparent results of 'neoliberalism'. A focus on micro-dynamics in a resident workforce reveals how workers themselves create distinctions. Different positions in the workforce become resources that workers use to shape diverse aspects of life on the farm, at work and beyond. Understanding the work-related temporalities that shape labour regimes takes us beyond the simple point that casualization relies on core workforces, and beyond employment categories. It takes us into the relationships and forms of emplacement that determine sharply divergent modes of domestic life. At Grootplaas, *mapermanent* take advantage of their relative security among transient, often vulnerable, migrants. As workers, local notables and established residents, *mapermanent* offer an analytical point of entry into how the border farm populations structure a fragmented environment. Border farming on the Limpopo River crucially operates through the complex, highly personal hierarchies and organization that emerge among *mapermanent*, who have developed homes and lives on estates such as Grootplaas.

In what follows, I explore distinctions between *mapermanent* and seasonal workers at work itself, before tracing those differences into life in the labour compound outside work time. This reveals that the lives of *mapermanent* are ultimately distinguished by the kinds of relationships that they are able to forge because of their privileged positions. A range of forms of inequality are organized around the central place of *mapermanent* at Grootplaas. Their roles at work are inseparable from their positions as rooted residents, their seniority inseparable from their established domesticity. *Mapermanent* lie at the heart of contradictions in South African agriculture. Workplace embeddedness is necessary to capitalist production in the immediate term, and workers have no choice but to take permanence seriously. But this is an open-ended future, and what I call provisional permanence. Meanwhile, *mapermanent* themselves build their rootedness in part through relationships with transient migrants.

Mapermanent and seasonal recruits: the working context

Grootplaas employs around 140 *mapermanent*, mostly Zimbabwean men, to tend orchards, maintain irrigation and water-pump systems and carry out a range of other tasks throughout the year (there are a handful of permanent female domestic workers for the farm offices and the houses of white residents). The vast majority are in their 20s and 30s, with a handful older. They work according to irregular, task-based regimes with considerable autonomy, living on the farm, in some cases their entire working lives. The core of this population are TshiVenda-speakers who grew up in the border area, have a history of work on the farms, enjoy support from dense cross-border networks and cross into Zimbabwe regularly to visit kin. In the farm's earlier days, labour demands were met through the recruitment efforts of particular black workers from villages across the fence. Many workers – permanent and seasonal – still hail from these villages. Those from further afield – often ChiShona speakers – are more marginal, but their numbers increased massively as recent economic and political troubles north of the border led far more people from all over Zimbabwe to seek work in South Africa. Some of these *mapermanent* from further afield in Zimbabwe visit home only very rarely, a result not only of the distance and expense involved in travel, but also their commitment to established lives at Grootplaas itself. For all *mapermanent*, however, the significant investments they make in their lives at Grootplaas, described below, compete with the necessity to send money and goods to kin in Zimbabwe.

In April and June, Grootplaas employs around 450 seasonal workers – women in the packshed and a mostly male workforce of pickers in the orchards. Given high labour mobility and large-scale Zimbabwean displacement through the area, the farm's workforce is extremely varied in terms of patterns of movement and settlement. Many seasonal workers arrive as strangers on the farm, forming part of a flow of 'unknown people' through the area. Some transient migrants from Zimbabwe never previously expected to have to seek low-status agricultural employment. For them, their time as migrant farm labourers is categorically different from their previous lives, and they experience it as exile during a period of exceptional crisis at home (in 2006–8, this meant hyperinflation and political degeneration). Such crisis affects people of very different ages: although the majority of seasonal workers are in their 20s and 30s, a conspicuous minority are over 40, while others are in their teens. In 2007, many, across the age range, were engaging in farm labour for the first time. This sense of upheaval is all the more marked because of ways seasonal workers are sharply distinguished from *mapermanent* in the labour process.

Seasonal labour, tightly structured and intensive, comes as something of a shock to the inexperienced. Picking in the orchards is carried out in mostly all-male teams of 30. Group-calculated piece rates make for aggressive, pressurized environments in which slow workers represent a pay-cut for their

team-mates. Supervisors drive the work pace by continual shouting. But overseers, drawn from the ranks of the *mapermanent*, also step back from the picking teams, joke among themselves or with particular pickers and even consult newspapers for interesting stories. By choosing the extent to which they are engaged in the picking process at any particular moment, *mapermanent* underline their difference from seasonal recruits.

A similar distinction pertains in the packshed, an enormous, hangar-like room containing conveyor systems for washing, grading and packing. This mass of green-and-yellow-painted machinery is staffed by rows of women at their stations, in the *doeks* (headscarves) and aprons that fulfil hygiene requirements while conforming to a style worn generally by black women working for white employers in southern Africa. Graders check fruit for blemishes or green skins under fluorescent strip-lights. Packers each have a station continually supplied with fruit and cardboard boxes. Paid by the hour, the pace is set by the conveyors, which are so loud that conversing while working is difficult. Work is monotonous, regular and sometimes soporific, in comparison to the physical exhaustion of picking. But packshed hours often extend from the beginning of the working day around 7 am until past 10 pm, to process backlogs of trailers from the orchards. The graders, at least, have the advantage of sitting down; packers have to stand.

In the packshed, as in the orchards, most *mapermanent* carry out supervisory or administrative roles. Above the machinery is a system of gantries from where it is possible to observe all work with a considerable degree of precision. At the central point of the gantry system is the black personnel manager's office, where he and other permanent employees do administrative work. The black packshed manager wanders the gantries, keeping an eye on workers and machines, while the grading foreman and forewomen⁹ monitor the quality of work at closer range, often coming off the walkways to walk along the grading rows. Willem, Koos' son-in-law, regularly patrols the gantries, flouting his own packshed rules by smoking a cigarette. Distinctions within the packshed are further reflected in the often sharp separation between seasonal and permanent workers when they sit outside to eat their packed lunches.

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

The work of *mapermanent* comprises diverse tasks, carried out in small groups according to variable rhythms. They are a continually available source of adaptable labour, and everyone, regardless of particular skills, signs a contract simply as a 'general worker'. This is how Grootplaas manages with a relatively small permanent workforce. *Mapermanent* are divided into teams:

'Citrus' (tree maintenance), 'Irrigation' (pipes, etc.) and the generic 'Lands' (from which harvest-time picking-gang supervisors are drawn). But workers can be moved around to suit labour demands, and a worker's level of responsibility is more important than his job description. Work days vary greatly in length, and from worker to worker. The flip side to this is that employees may be called to work at all hours: to remove a log stuck in a pump in the Limpopo River late at night; to help fix a farmer's pick-up truck broken down in the game farm during recreational hunting; or to switch on an irrigation tap between beers on a Sunday afternoon.

It is not the contrast between harvest and non-harvest time that dictates the difference between this varied irregularity of permanent work and the relentless effort of seasonal work. Rather, such contrasts are a feature of employment category. As we have seen, many permanent employees occupy supervisory roles that allow or dictate variation in individual pace. Others from the core workforce – involved in irrigation, orchard maintenance, security or domestic work – remain largely unaffected by the harvest in their daily duties. Agricultural work regimes display similar contrasts to those found in industrial settings (see Parry, 1999). Core employees labour according to a variable 'task orientation' (Thompson, 1967), in which spikes in work are matched by long periods of rest. Seasonal labour, tightly coordinated at Grootplaas to process a huge volume of fruit within the tariff window of trade to Europe,¹⁰ contrasts sharply with the task orientation and personal autonomy of core employees.

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

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

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

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

The compound from a seasonal point of view

Seasonal workers' difference from *mapermanent* is made clear from the moment they arrive in the compound. They are allocated bare rooms in a thirty-block

grid known as the New Houses or a long barrack-building called the Hostel, their room-mates often chosen by an appointed permanent worker from the *mapermanent*-organized Housing Committee. Cells are overcrowded – the five hostel rooms hold 20 to 30 people each. They will have been uninhabited for the six months since the previous harvest and are sometimes rat-infested. Writing in chalk or charcoal on the walls and floors bears the cryptic history of previous occupants.

Both the New Houses and the Hostel are in a distinct area of the compound, a bare slope illuminated by a huge floodlight. This illumination, lack of vegetation and the New Houses' unobstructed grid layout means one can see straight from one end to the other down the rows of blocks. Much of the New Houses section is uninhabited outside the harvest, enabling women to retain rooms and operate *shebeens* (illegal beersellers) throughout the year. During the harvest, the New Houses become a bustle of people, cooking fires and, at the weekend, loud parties.

Residential separation is far from complete. Those *mapermanent* residents of the other areas who want to drink, party and find women, for example, frequent the New Houses. Because the *shebeens*, and most televisions recognized as being for public use, are in this area, it has the air of a free-for-all, in which loud music, gambling and publicly drunken behaviour are common. The New Houses and the Hostel are seen by many who live in the other parts of the compound as loud, dirty and a site of immorality. Unsurprisingly, some men who speak of the New Houses in this manner nevertheless go there for recreation. But these visitors can escape back to the relative tranquillity of their own residence. Their own areas of the compound, permanently occupied, are better kept and have been adapted into homes, taking the edge off the architectural uniformity of the buildings. Meanwhile, the spatial organization of the compound reflects a wider experience shared across much of the seasonal workforce: limited integration in social networks dominated by permanent residents.

There are, it must be said, differences among seasonal recruits' experiences of the compound. Arrivals with urban backgrounds, whose descent into farm employment because of hyperinflation and economic contraction at home is experienced as a form of degradation, see the compound as dirty, noisy and alienating. Those with contrasting backgrounds see particular advantages: those from rural areas appreciate in-room electricity and easily accessible boreholes for water; some of the young find opportunities for parties and sexual adventure. A crucial fault line in experiences of the compound is between established residents and new arrivals. This does not map exactly onto employment categories, however. Some (especially female) seasonal workers are the partners or relatives of permanent employees and inhabit the compound during non-harvest periods in various domestic arrangements. They are well known at Grootplaas, receive legal documentation most quickly because of their connections and have access to better housing. Contrasting experiences of permanence and seasonality and their spatial connotations,

therefore, are not simply reflections of the labour hierarchy. Such opposed and contrasting ways of living at Grootplaas are shaped by the complex web of relationships in the workforce.¹¹

Despite the different social positions of seasonal workers, what the majority share is adverse living conditions. Unlike better-established residents, seasonal arrivals have little ability to shape their environments. The unobscured grid of the New Houses area is easy terrain for border patrols to run down so-called 'illegals', almost all of whom cook outdoors on fires. At the beginning of the harvest, they often avoid their rooms altogether and sleep in the bush to evade deportation. Throughout the harvest, most seasonal workers, having arrived recently and with no investment in compound life, have few comforts in their rooms. Their short time at the farm and their insecurity discourage any significant attempts to adapt accommodation to create congenial living arrangements. Most pickers' rooms are bare, with cardboard on the floor to sleep on, some food, one or two spare garments and a piece of wire rigged up as a clothes line between two walls. In the overcrowded Hostel, residents complain of lice and sick people coughing in confined conditions. With little space inside, and no electric lighting, residents sit outside around fires when they are not sleeping. Soldiers regularly move through the groups with torches, checking their farm IDs. This cramped block, a clear target for border patrols, epitomizes seasonal workers' experience as distinct from permanent residents.

The way seasonal workers live in the compound is especially central to their experience of Grootplaas because their day-to-day existence is largely confined to this distinct area and to the workplace. Otherwise, they are hemmed in by vulnerability born of their undocumented status. The farm's border location leads to it being treated by the South African army and police as part of the 'border situation'. Similarly restrictive is the fact that many seasonal workers never receive work permits due to bureaucratic inefficiency in the South African Department of Home Affairs and the Zimbabwean border authorities. Harvest-time attracts enormous police attention, the large populations of undocumented Zimbabweans easy targets for deportation.¹² Police vehicles, often with army escort, move through the compound at unpredictable times, rounding people up. The afternoon after a weekend police raid, the compound would be deserted except for a few permanent employees drinking beer, its inhabitants hiding in the bush. Farmers negotiate with the police and army. They secure agreements that identity cards produced by the farms will serve as proof of the holders' pending 'legalization'. But it is some time before such *ad hoc* deals become known by, and take effect among, police on the ground. Although police attention tails off during the harvest, the undocumented remain vulnerable. Further, the farm identity cards are not assumed to offer protection off their respective farms. Even walking to and from work along the border road or through the orchards, seasonal workers risk being picked up by patrols until they have some recognized form of documentation. Always on the lookout, they tend to confine their movements to shuttling between work and compound.

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

Adaptation and rootedness among mapermanent

Mapermanent see Grootplaas as their home for their working lives. It is not that any of them intends to die and be buried at the farm. Retirement means returning to rural homes in Zimbabwe that have been gradually developed over the years, in the classic mould of regional labour migrants. However, they invest, socially and materially, in their lives at Grootplaas. Some have not been back to Zimbabwe for years.¹³

Mapermanent's sense of rootedness both reflects and is augmented by the fact that many have long personal histories of residence at Grootplaas and nearby farms. Indeed, the longest-standing residents remember previous white landowners. They can trace the boundaries between the old estates before they were consolidated by the current farmers. One such long-standing farm dweller is Marula, the foreman, who was born on an estate down the road where his father was a foreman. His many children were born and grew up at Grootplaas or on neighbouring farms. Some have moved away, but visit regularly. Marula's teenage daughter for example, who resides with her grandmother in Musina¹⁴ while she attends high school, spends most weekends with her father. For others, the border farms remain their places of domicile. Marula's youngest son, a toddler, lives with him and his wife. A boy of six years, born to a different mother, stays at her home on a nearby estate, but spends a lot of time in the Grootplaas compound. An adult son, Mpho, is a permanent worker at Grootplaas.

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

The memories of *mapermanent* are shared and maintained through names given to employers and the estates, each encoding a history. Willem is known as Mpothe, meaning 'hit'. One version of the nickname's meaning cites his history of violence towards workers, another his short temper with nosey police

during the apartheid days. Either way, his temperament is noted. The farmer who previously owned the Grootplaas land, Gert van Wyk, was known as *Re a tseba*, Northern Sotho for 'We know': he would often underline his command of the language by announcing this phrase to workers. Compounds and areas of farms are known by the names of present or past owners: 'Paul Compound', 'Shala [Charles] Compound' and 'KK' (Koos' initials). Grootplaas is still known as *KhaRudi*, after the son who left to operate the family estate on the Mozambican border but remains workers' favourite farmer. Other farmers and areas are known by names whose meaning has been lost, but which frame places and people in a language parallel to that of white landowners.¹⁵ *Mapermanent* assert rootedness on the farms through their own local historical consciousness.

Mapermanent further assert a sense of belonging that goes beyond their employment by adapting their accommodation in the compound, mirroring the homes to which they aspire in rural Zimbabwe. Established residents modify housing, accumulate furniture and other goods and plant gardens, investing in their lives on the border. They do so despite the fact that they live on an employer's land, and will have to leave if they resign from their jobs or are sacked. Such investment in precarious accommodation parallels accounts of other black-defined spaces in southern Africa. Residents of mine compounds built furniture to improve their bleak accommodation (Gordon, 1977), while inheritors of 'matchbox' housing in 1960s township areas like Soweto added flooring and ceilings, plastered walls and planted gardens (Ginsberg, 1996; see also Lee, 2005). In both cases, they did this in spite of the fact that they lacked any security of tenure and could be ejected at a moment's notice. Indeed, in Soweto, they did so precisely to assert a more enduring right to stay: an expression of rootedness both to other people and themselves. As at Grootplaas, continued residence depended on employment, itself at the discretion of white bosses. But at the farm, as in these other cases, adapting housing is an important way to achieve dignity, respectability and a domestic life beyond such precariousness. Indeed, it claims a wider engagement with the place than simply as a site of employment.

Mapermanent are provided with a room (or two-room house for the most senior workers), in less bleak, windswept surroundings than the New Houses, but without furniture. But over time they build a bed, often from wooden forklift truck pallets topped with a sponge mattress. They obtain or build shelving and often decorate it with lace, to store and display crockery and other effects. Such displays of accumulated goods mirror demonstrations of established domesticity in rural Zimbabwean houses. Practically all permanent residents have electric stoves in their rooms, making cooking straightforward and relatively quick. Seasonal workers, in contrast, have no option but to gather wood and light fires outside. Fridges are not uncommon and a minority of residents buy very large freezers to store beer and meat, which they later resell. The number of aerials towering above the brick blocks testifies to the wide ownership of televisions. Indeed, electrical goods are far easier to operate

in the compound than they would be in rural Zimbabwe, where many areas lack connection to power grids and appliances require car batteries.

Some adaptations demonstrate both domestic propriety and success. Most residents rig up a wire between two walls, and hang a piece of cloth next to their beds. This way, with their doors open, or a visitor inside, the bed area may remain out of sight. Screening off the bed allows residents to display their decorated shelves adorned with possessions, while distinguishing between degrees of privacy. Doing so follows the layout of homes in Zimbabwe, where houses are often built with multiple rooms, one a living room replete with decoration and display. In the compound, both decoration and bed-screening are important because much of the day is spent outdoors. People sit outside their houses, whose metal roofs make for stifling heat in the sun, and leave their doors open most of the time.

In their endeavours to adapt their housing, residents rely on one another. When one senior worker wanted a concrete step outside his house, to keep the rain away from his door, he enlisted the help of the farm's builders, who used spare cement from the new Hostel accommodation. Others look to those with access to workshop tools and the farm's heap of scrap metal. Metal poles, connected end to end, are used for the tall television aerials that are ubiquitous in the compound. Some projects, however, are more elaborate. One worker used spare moments across several shifts to complete a beautifully crafted, three-legged metal stool, an object of personal pride and a gift for his neighbour. Some adaptations of accommodation, therefore, deepen a sense of rootedness in the compound because they attest to the dense web of relationships among *mapermanent*.

Similar improvements are evident in the space outside the house. Residents build yards with brick and/or mud walls or plant hedges. Or they build *stoeps* (verandas) to demarcate the ground outside their doors, using concrete or bricks left over from the farm's building projects.¹⁶ A few have even planted trees. Most permanent male residents have vegetable gardens, either by their houses or on the edges of the compound. A source of relish for *sadza* or *vhuswa* (maize-meal porridge), they also underline the permanence of these residents in the farm's landscape. Just as everyone knows who lives where, so what appear to be large swathes of vegetable patch are in fact several well-marked gardens whose ownership is widely known. Such assertions of belonging among *mapermanent* rely on the fact that people know a great deal about one another: not only where someone lives, but also his or her occupation at the farm and a web of stories and rumours.

Mapermanent make homes out of their accommodation, adapting it and shaping their apparently rigid environment. Long-term residence makes their relationship with the farm one which involves a great deal more than mere labour. Transient seasonal workers, by contrast, are not around for long enough, live too precariously, and many have no wish to become better established. Instead, they are eager to move on and away from this inhospitable setting. These mobile, short-term workers would appear, from one point of

view, to be ideal as dispensable units of labour, their contracts clearly limited, their movements regulated and their relationship to the farm tenuous.

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

Rooting relationships

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

Shifting domesticity

Unlike seasonal recruits, *mapermanent* have their own housing, work permits and stable incomes. Apart from the immediate benefits, they are also consequently able to attract women as live-in partners. Women come to the farm to seek employment, either in the seasonal workforce or caring for the children of *mapermanent*. From the perspective of women, especially young women, influential men on the farms appear to have clear prospects in an otherwise desperate situation. From male *mapermanent*’s perspective, it is through relationships with women moving through the area that they can replicate homely domestic arrangements. Permanence, in the sense of rootedness, is asserted and experienced as congenial domesticity. Long-term male workers establish lives in ways that cohere with their gendered expectations, through attracting the labour of a floating population of young women. In some cases they establish farm-based ‘marriages’. The tension

between women's concerns about their material insecurity and men's concerns to create an agreeable home environment reflects the enormous inequality between them, in terms of access to income and accommodation. Like South African migrant hostels, Grootplaas' compound is highly gendered, with established men claiming the space as their own (see Ramphele, 1993). Many women's decisions to come to the farm relate to their existing roles as wives, daughters and mothers of young children; many in turn take on roles in relation to men in the compound, as sexual and domestic partners.¹⁷ But the case of Grootplaas reveals more than this. The very rootedness of permanent male residents is *constituted* by transient relationships with women, even as they reinforce the insecurity of these women.

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

But my initial impression of stable domestic life was mistaken, at least in the static form I had imagined. When Michael returned after Christmas 2006, he came without Purity, who stayed to look after their sick child in Zimbabwe and whom he would soon abandon in favour of a new, pregnant partner, Holly, whom he had met at the farm. The three young women did not re-establish themselves at Michael's after their Christmas visit home to Zimbabwe. One returned to the compound for a while but stayed with Michael's neighbour; she rarely came to Michael's yard. Suddenly Michael and I were living alone, eating far fewer cooked meals and more dry, white bread with soft drinks. For Michael, as for many permanent workers, 'household'-like structures depend on domestic arrangements that involve mobile women. Arrangements are as fleeting and impermanent as the presence of these women themselves.

Michael soon responded to the change, complaining that, with a long work day, he lacked time to cook. At his suggestion, we employed a young woman, as he had the previous year. She cooked, cleaned¹⁸ and washed clothes, in return for meals, shelter and pay. She soon moved on. Later, during the harvest, Michael's sister Pula and niece Lovely came to work. Pula needed an income to bring up her young son. She had cattle, but hyperinflation had meant that there was little point selling them. Lovely had passed four O-levels,¹⁹ and hoped to 'expand', to take more subjects. The money from farm work was for home-based education; Zimbabwe's school system was

disintegrating, as teachers' salaries became worthless and parents were unable to pay school fees. Michael ensured that they were employed at the farm. They meanwhile fulfilled all domestic duties after work, without pay, even when they acquired their own room, until they left after the harvest. By then Holly had given birth, was back on her feet and was keeping Michael's house again.

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

Such 'farm marriages' are far from simply domestic 'arrangements'. At their most stable, they are the basis of families, once again giving greater meaning to 'permanence' at the farm than simply steady employment. The relationship between Norman, the farm's senior driver, and Joyce, another permanent employee, is an example. Norman's wife at home is Sarah, who visits a few times a year. At the same time, he has a well-established, openly declared relationship with Joyce. Together they have a 5-year-old son. Although Norman keeps his own house, and it is here that Sarah stays when she visits, *he* usually stays at Joyce's. The couple have cultivated a comfortable homeliness, and have adapted her room with a sun-shelter outside the door and an old seat from a bus so that Norman and his friends can watch football on television there. Norman and Joyce represent, for their friends among the *mapermanent*, a point of domestic stability around which they congregate in their leisure time.

Cases like that of Norman and Joyce resemble a common practice in Zimbabwean townships and on farms, known in ChiShona as *mapoto* (see Barnes, 1999). *Mapoto* – literally 'pots' – describes domestic arrangements without formal marriage.²⁰ Women move in with men and receive everyday support from them – food and shelter especially – in return for domestic labour ('pots') and sex. Such arrangements developed as a response to situations where men had almost exclusive access to housing, but often lived far from their wives. Women in the arrangements bore the brunt of moral condemnation, having disrupted both patrilineal reproduction – as men and their families had no claim to the children – and notions of respectable propriety. At Grootplaas, male access to housing and their stable wages similarly shape women's options. But, unlike in those settings, the more settled of these relationships are not condemned, but rather seen as permanent within

the farm context. There are so few actual marriages at Grootplaas, in which both partners are present, that the better-established farm relationships are seen as positively respectable. In such cases, women stay at the farm all year round.

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

This perspective was impressed upon me by Margaret, the wife of a security guard.²¹ She had A-levels²² and qualifications in teaching and social work, and had been a teacher before coming to the farm. At Grootplaas, she had gathered information for a non-profit organization²³ about the lives of women, and she was keen that I hear of their situations. During the harvest, she accompanied me in conversations with young women, to whom I would otherwise have had little access. In the compound, we spoke to teenage girls as they babysat workers' children during the daytime. In the orchards, we spoke to female pickers, a minority grouped into separate teams from men. What became clear was how limited many women's options were, as they sought a means of sustenance.

Some young women come to the farm from close by across the border to look after children during the harvest. Female seasonal workers pay girls, sometimes as young as their early teens, to do this for a pittance (as little as R150²⁴ per month). Such girls may live with a relative, who decides how much they should have for themselves and how much they should remit. They may be the only source of cash for their parents. Other young women seek formal work but find only shelter with a permanent worker in return for cooking and cleaning. Although some women have connections to friends or relatives on the farms, regular sojourns at the farms should not necessarily be taken as a sign of attachment. Women are extremely vulnerable and often find themselves without redress in cases of physical and sexual violence. Among themselves, men speak of persuading them 'by force' to engage in sexual intercourse. Women may return more because of preference for the known over the unknown than out of any enduring rootedness.²⁵ While migrating southwards into South Africa remains a possibility, it is a radical

step in comparison to stints on the border farms a few kilometres from home.

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

Women's limited options and precarious lives on the border offer male *mapermanent* opportunities to live rooted lives characterized by congenial domesticity in the compound. Women are central to establishing and maintaining such domesticity. By seven when the sun warms the morning air, unwaged female residents are sweeping dust out of their rooms. Many have either already prepared packed lunches for waged men or will begin cooking for the midday meal in the late morning. Between these meals, they hand wash and hang clothes and wash dishes and pots. Afternoons offer a period of leisure, but around 4 pm they shower and then cook dinner in time for the end of the farm-working day at 5. All of this follows gendered notions of appropriate work that extend all the way into the farm's waged economy. The only women permanently employed at Grootplaas are domestic workers in white residents' houses. There are around 20 further women who remain on the farm throughout the year, working full-time only during the harvest but otherwise paid by the farmer for part-time casual work. One regular task in such waged employment is cleaning the compound, gathering rubbish and sweeping. Even waged employment on the farm, therefore, reflects assumptions about the femininity of domestic labour.²⁶

Understanding the different ways of living in the compound requires appreciating how men's place is made in part through female domestic work. Permanently employed men are better able to secure access to women for domestic arrangements than underpaid, transient seasonal workers. The latter reside in cramped, all-male rooms, outside which they cook for themselves on fires. Their experiences recall the much-maligned regional history of labour migrancy, with its restriction of movement and residence and the racialized

control of space. While young men and women in the seasonal workforce do establish sexual relationships, these are generally short-lived and not built upon domestic arrangements.

Relationships with women, many of whom are highly mobile, enable *mapermanent* to achieve living conditions that approximate those of home, in which women clean houses and clothes and prepare food. Workforce cohesion and embeddedness on southern African farms have historically relied on domestic arrangements within workforces (see, e.g., van Onselen, 1992; Waldman, 1996). Here, such arrangements depend on the fleeting appearance of women in male workers' houses.

Localizing the military

In similar vein, but in different register, Grootplaas residents build provisionally stable living arrangements in collusion with soldiers on border duty. As noted at the beginning of this paper, the border location suits farmers' attempts to mitigate their own risk, by furnishing them with a constant supply of flexible labour. But at the same time, soldiers establish connections with *mapermanent*, once again rooting the latter in place beyond their labour contracts. Soldiers do this despite their regular rotations between border garrisons, being kept at a distance by some residents and their inability to speak local languages. They are able to integrate to some degree because farm residents see them as a necessary fact of life, even speaking about them with sympathy as men alone on the border, assigned a thankless task. Soldiers, in turn, engage with farm residents in a sufficiently congenial manner to impede impersonal border regulation. It is common for farm residents to go to Zimbabwe for the afternoon to find *Chibhuku* ('traditional' beer, commercially produced in Zimbabwe) or to go through the fence at the army post to go fishing in the river. They just let the soldiers know when they intend to return.

Soldiers become provisional members of farm communities. One way their role in the border populations is made explicit is as keepers of the peace. On one occasion, for example, when thieves were found within the Grootplaas compound, residents handed them over to the soldiers after beating them. The soldiers are drawn into the settled lives of border farm dwellers: they are empathized with, co-opted into dispute resolution and offer a degree of everyday security. During the period of fieldwork, this fragile relationship was disrupted during the harvest when the army had to prove their worth by arresting large numbers of undocumented compound residents, often acting as escorts for the police. But residents continued to see soldiers as having better local understanding – including of the farms' informal employment card systems – and greater empathy than the police. One informant reported hearing soldiers tell people: 'we understand things are tough that side [Zimbabwe] and you have to come here, but please don't cut the fence – otherwise, we get in trouble for not doing our job and have to chase you'.

Soldiers and farm residents have to ‘get along and not get each other into trouble’, she concluded. The police, strangers known for aggressive behaviour during raids, received no such sympathy.

Many seasonal workers understandably view soldiers with greater trepidation than do more established residents. The provisional stability created on the farms, through everyday cooperation between workers and soldiers, leaves recent arrivals – undocumented and afraid of deportation – on the margins. *Mapermanent*, members of a small, indispensable workforce, have employment permits. But their easy familiarity with the farms means they are rarely even asked for papers. Seasonal workers often run as soon as they see the police or soldiers. They lack much of the everyday predictability that permanent workers are able to establish on the border.

The inequality between *mapermanent* and more marginal residents is clearest when soldiers are brought in to manage disputes. Like many other aspects of life at Grootplaas, the benefits accrue disproportionately to *mapermanent*. From the perspectives of many soldiers, permanently employed men are well established in the area, while they themselves are just visitors waiting to leave. *Mapermanent* act as gatekeepers to soldiers, buy beer for them and are often able to choose exactly which conflicts are mediated and how they are presented. This offers women and those without connections few options for redress. In one case, a woman had been attacked by a senior permanent male worker. The dispute was brought to the soldiers, represented as one between the culprit and the woman’s boyfriend. This was not seen as legitimate by compound women themselves. However, the two men were able to lend weight to their version of justice, by invoking the power of uniformed, armed state officials.²⁷

At one extreme, therefore, *mapermanent* enjoy secure, congenial circumstances. At the other, new seasonal recruits and women remain at the whims of farm and state authorities. This contrast is part of an all-pervading distinction between *mapermanent* and Grootplaas’ less rooted population of seasonal labourers and unwaged, mobile women. Standing behind this distinction are the arrangements through which the core permanent workforce is maintained and reproduced – a process of rooting that is intimately connected to the farm’s production itself.

Conclusion

For farmers, flexibility and adaptability are crucial. De-emphasizing rooted belonging, including that of workers, distances commercial farming from its past, casting farmers as businesspeople rather than relics of settler colonialism. And doing so enables farmers to negotiate an uncertain future. Many, responding to wider instability, attempt to negotiate relationships with their workers through a shift to the language of markets. Moreover, staying afloat increasingly means avoiding undue attachment to particular enterprises.

‘There’s nothing like sentiment, inheritance, things like that’, one farmer claimed, of agriculture in the region. ‘What you have to do is be flexible enough to see the opportunities’.

But workers see matters differently. This paper has uncovered the layers of embeddedness that characterize the border farms’ core workforces. While farmers attempt to define their employees as mere units of labour, *mapermanent* see the farms as home. Labour processes often rely on manifold personal, non-contractual relationships and obligations (see, e.g., Burawoy, 1979). And at Grootplaas, where farmers are moving towards narrower notions of contract-based employment, senior workers continue to operate according to established arrangements, or even intensify them. In doing so, they maintain forms of labour hierarchy that embed work in other aspects of life, creating a mediated paternalism. Indeed, from within the workforce, it becomes hard to perceive the flexible pragmatism of white farmers that ultimately sets the terms of farm life.

There is a sharp disjuncture between the embeddedness of everyday existence on the farms, and the instability of the future. Such instability is familiar ground for analysts of flexible capitalism. As Harvey argues, ‘the more flexible motion of capital emphasises the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent’ (1990, p. 171). This, in turn, shapes people’s stances towards the future. A world where social arrangements have little solidity leaves little room for long-term planning (Bauman, 2007). The result, Bauman contends, is ‘a readiness to change tactics and style at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret’ (2007, p. 4). Sennett (1998) goes further: the short-term nature of recent capitalism ‘corrodes’ people’s very character. They are induced to display traits that reflect the organization of production: ‘the capacity to let go of one’s past, the confidence to accept fragmentation’ (1998, p. 63). In other words, the disembedding of one’s own labour, of one’s capacity to secure a livelihood, must appear a virtue since it complies with the logic imposed by capitalism. In the picture that emerges from these authors, the ground constantly shifts; people must learn to shift with it.

But what this paper has shown is a rather more ambiguous engagement with the future: a *provisional permanence*. Workers have little choice but to see their immediate rootedness at the farm as real and the more distant future as the realm of conjecture. They continue to adapt accommodation, develop their homes and invest in relationships in the compound. And indeed farmers, for now, continue to commit to their projects on the farms, driven by the well-worn logic of capitalist expansion – this, even while the more enterprising spread their risk.

The issue is this: flexibility and short-term change are both responses to instability, but they are not the same thing. Rather than producing ephemerality *per se*, flexibility creates a temporal limbo, an open-ended period before change. This period, of unknown duration, demands analysis. At Grootplaas, workers and farmers plan in the short term as though the farm will

remain in operation forever. There is no other choice, whether because of a lack of options (workers) or because such an enterprise survives only through continual investment and competitive expansion (farmers). The difference is that farmers are planning on a larger scale, in the process limiting their attachment to estates. It is the fact that everyday life occurs at a remove from impending change that makes it hard for workers to see what might happen next.

This was made explicit during the farm's coal prospecting. In discussions in the compound, one worker, who had lived at the farm since before the present farmers bought it, assumed that residents would simply stay put and revert to subsistence agriculture. After all, this was not only a commercial enterprise; it was also a home. A female compound-dweller asserted a similar sense of the right to reside when she commented: 'If this mining comes here they are bound to look for other places for us because we have been staying here for a long time and we will not go anywhere. This is our home; they must build houses for us. Where will we go?' A different sense of continuity was suggested by an educated senior worker, who assumed his managerial skills could simply be transferred into the mining operation. It is not that workers cannot imagine leaving. Rather, they can only hope that what exists now will continue to exist.²⁸

The temporal logic of life in the compound is sharply at odds with that of the Grootplaas farmers' wider plans. In addressing their own insecurity, the latter come to view market-oriented agriculture in the image of restless, speculative capitalism. While negotiating intercontinental sales, they maintain flexibility through their investments and wage relations. But, whatever their strategies, farmers do not live in what Castells (1996) calls the 'space of flows', the 'timelessly' fast, globally connected world of recent capitalism. Their enterprises are rooted in places, characterized by enduring social, ethical and temporal arrangements that extend beyond work time. Indeed, even as Grootplaas' location on the border guarantees a supply of conveniently flexible, seasonal labour, *mapermanent* root themselves in relation to the border itself, through relationships with soldiers and other transient people. Permanence in the workforce transcends mere wage employment. *Mapermanent* fashion provisionally stable lives, even exploiting the instability surrounding them. As employers seek their own form of security, it is workers themselves who live out the contradiction.

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Notes

- 1 <http://www.unctad.org/infocomm/anglais/orange/market.htm> (accessed 4 December 2010).
- 2 Where I conducted 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork, between November 2006 and April 2008. I lived in the labour compound, in my own room, but as the satellite of Michael, a senior member of the black workforce. During the harvest, I worked as an unpaid member of a fruit-picking gang. Details of my residence in the compound are elaborated later in the paper. All names are pseudonyms.
- 3 Where the trend is usually noted. See Ortiz (2002).
- 4 See Blum (2000) for San Francisco shipyards.
- 5 During the period of my fieldwork, Grootplaas and the other border farms were gazetted for land reform, something that had been expected for years. This was not an eviction notice, but rather an announcement that a group of black South Africans had claimed the land. The process must be pursued by the Restitution Commission, and if necessary go through the Land Claims Court. It will in all probability take many years, and the outcome is unknown. The claimants have to prove, under the terms of land restitution, that their ancestors were forcibly removed in the period since 1913 (the year of the Land Act that first explicitly entrenched racialized land ownership in South Africa). In such a process, claimants and existing landowners mobilize experts to demonstrate or deny such displacement (see James, 2007).
- 6 Like many such claims, it remains unresolved.
- 7 Since the period of fieldwork, the farmers have abandoned this investment, not because of political difficulties, but because it was insufficiently profitable.
- 8 That is, 2006–8. The official dollarization of the Zimbabwean economy in 2009 (and the adoption of the South African rand alongside the US dollar) alleviated the problems of hyperinflation. But many Zimbabweans continue to rely heavily on access to employment in South Africa. Meanwhile, although 2009 saw a moratorium on deportations of Zimbabweans from South Africa, this ended in late 2011 (see IRIN, 2011; on changing border policing, see Rutherford, 2011).
- 9 These lower-level packshed supervisors – the foreman and forewomen – were not *mapermanent* in 2007, although the foreman was later recruited into the core workforce. Forewomen have well-established connections to Grootplaas and come year after year. One, for example, is the sister of the farm's senior driver. These women are therefore not among those discussed below who experience extreme alienation and vulnerability during their contracts.
- 10 During the northern hemisphere's summer months – citrus are winter fruits.
- 11 Elsewhere (Bolt, 2010), I describe how some male seasonal labourers are able to achieve a measure of stability through gendered camaraderie in work teams, which also connects them to their *mapermanent* supervisors. But even these seasonal men remain precarious, constrained by their accepted roles as transient labour. Some women are able to establish themselves far more effectively, using the accommodation of male partners or relatives as bases for informal business (see Bolt, 2012).

- 12 Although Zimbabweans without work permits run the risk of being deported at any time during the year, in practice the aggressive police raids begin only with the harvest.
- 13 Regarding migrants elsewhere in the region who, despite rarely visiting rural homes, nevertheless preserve an ideal of rural connection and retirement, see Bank (1999) on men in East London hostels.
- 14 Mentioned earlier, and formerly called Messina. A town 60km away, and the key urban centre in this border region of South Africa.
- 15 See van Onselen (1976) for similar practices in early twentieth-century Southern Rhodesia.
- 16 A few residents invest yet further in their compound accommodation. Marula, the foreman, as the longest-serving and most established black worker, has built an entire compound of his own. His home is in the centre of the larger compound, and he holds court there, with other senior men, to judge disagreements between residents.
- 17 As in the case described by Elder (2003).
- 18 Both Michael's house and the room into which I had by this point moved, in the New Houses.
- 19 Basic-level high school exams, the stage before A-level.
- 20 That is, ratified through *roora* (bridewealth), church wedding or state registry.
- 21 Before she moved to Johannesburg in 2007, with her husband, at the age of 47.
- 22 High school finals qualifications.
- 23 At which her cousin worked.
- 24 Approximately £10 at the time of fieldwork.
- 25 A similar predicament faces women migrating from Lesotho to South African farms. Ulicki and Crush report, of that case, that 'fear and loathing are everywhere, bitterness prevails' (2000, p. 76).
- 26 Despite the parallels between domestic work for wages and domestic work in relationships, the former is certainly regarded as employment, while I encountered no evidence that women see their live-in arrangements with *mapermanent* in an employment idiom. As openly remunerated work, the baby-sitting and cleaning described above is seen as employment of sorts.
- 27 It is important to note here that senior workers' impunity is tacitly guaranteed by the white farmers themselves. Though absent from discussions in the compound, farmers back their core employees by refusing to dismiss them in cases of abuse; such workers are seen as too important for production.
- 28 These discussions took place in 2008; during a return visit in 2011, farmers were still deciding on the best course of action, and workers were still waiting to discover the outcome.

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