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Artist Essay

A Visible Problem

SIMON GUSH 

(University of the Witwatersrand)

This essay was written as a companion to and in conversation with a series of three films: Land is in the Air, A Button Without a Hole and Working the Land (2019).¹ The films describe the ongoing legal dispute around the land claim in Salem, Eastern Cape, the 19th-century history of dispossession in Salem, and the contemporary obstacles faced by the community on the already restituted farms, respectively. In both my writing and in these films, I attempt to find an interdisciplinary ground between art and the social sciences. In this essay, I wanted to experiment stylistically, foregrounding readability and accessibility to a broad audience, while playing with filmic narrative devices, hard cuts, montages and shifting rhythms. I have tried here to tease out some of the relationships and tensions between work, identity and land dispossession through the representation of work. Starting with a photograph found in the archives of Museum Africa, Johannesburg, I have structured this essay as a series of ‘scenes’ to map the relationship of the imposition of colonial work ideologies onto territorial expansion and the dispossession of land. I use the Marxist concept of ‘primitive accumulation’, the creation of a labour force, and the production of a colonial conception of work in South Africa to expose the entanglement of land and work. I conceptualise the idea of the ‘frontier’ as not just a territorial space but as an ongoing space of contestation through which the changing relationship of work to identity and the possibility of ‘subjectivisation’ (following Jacques Rancière) can occur.

Keywords: work; land dispossession; photography; dance; frontiers

Artist Biography

Simon Gush is an artist and filmmaker living in Johannesburg. His research explores work (waged and unwaged), land and subjectivity. He was the Tierney Fellow for Photography, University of the Witwatersrand (2016), a fellow at the Institute for Creative Arts, University of Cape Town (2011), and is a laureate of the Hoger Instituut van Schone Kunsten, Gent, Belgium (2008). He completed a BA in Fine Art (2003) and an interdisciplinary MA in

1 S. Gush, Dir., *Land is in the Air* (2019), available at <https://vimeo.com/simongush/land>, retrieved 22 October 2024; S. Gush, Dir., *A Button Without a Hole* (2019), available at <https://vimeo.com/simongush/abutton>, retrieved 22 October 2024; S. Gush, Dir., *Working the Land* (2019), available at <https://vimeo.com/simongush/working>, retrieved 22 October 2024.

Sociology and Fine Art (2019) at the University of Witwatersrand, where he is currently a PhD candidate in Sociology and a researcher at the Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP/Wits). Solo shows include *How to Fix a Lift* (with Bridget Kenny), Stevenson, Cape Town (2022); *The Busiest Airline in Africa*, Stevenson, Johannesburg (2021); *S.G., 59 Joubert Street*, Johannesburg, Sala10, MuAC, Mexico City (2020); *Welcome to Frontier Country*, Stevenson, Cape Town (2019); *Al final del trabajo*, Ex Teresa Arte Actual, Mexico City (2018); *After Work*, Galerie Jette Rudolph, Berlin (2015); *9 O'Clock*, National Arts Festival, Grahamstown (2015); *Red*, Goethe-Institut, Johannesburg (2014); and *4 for Four*, S.M.A.K., Ghent (2010). Biennales include the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie, Ludwigshafen (2017); Dakar (2016); Bamako (2015, 2017); Montevideo (2014) and Lulea (2009). Group shows include *Every Leaf is an Eye*, Göteborgs Konsthall (2019); *African Métropolis: An Imaginary City*, Maxxi, Rome (2018); *Meditations on Place: Four Perspectives, Four African Cities*, Cleveland Museum of Art (2018); *Recent Histories – New African Photography and Video Art*, The Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm (2017); and *Afriques Capitales*, La Villette, Paris (2017). Film screenings include the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2018); ICA, London (2017); Tate Modern, London (2015); and film festivals such as Sharjah Film Platform 3 (2020), International Film Festival Rotterdam (2015), International Short Film Festival Oberhausen (2017) and Visions du Réel (2017).

Scene 1: Looking for Work

I was looking for images of the act of work in the archives of Museum Africa in Johannesburg. I was searching, in particular, for photos depicting mining underground. At the archives, I was handed nine folders containing photographs largely taken on the gold mines around Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand. A little to my surprise, three of the folders were labelled 'Zulu War Dances'. Initially, I set them aside as they seemed tangential to my project. But after I had finished with the other folders, I got curious. The folders contained images of miners in groups, dressed in forms of 'traditional' Zulu attire, performing for an audience. These images varied greatly in style and covered roughly a similar time span as the other folders: from around 1900 to 1970. Although the audiences depicted in the photos were overwhelmingly black and male – leading me to believe the performances were primarily for fellow workers – many of the images were immediately recognisable as having been taken with a 'colonial gaze'. They were distant, voyeuristic and ethnographic. Reinforcing this reading, also included in the folders were several printed invites to the performances produced by the mines, clearly targeted at members of the white management and colleagues.

I was not paying very close attention to the photos as I flipped through the folders, until I noticed an intriguing set of three small silvery photographs. They were undated and anonymous.² The photos were square, suggesting that they had been taken using a medium format camera, a technology that produces a larger negative than a standard 35mm camera for better reproductions. It is more expensive, cumbersome, and more commonly used by professionals, although nothing about these images suggested a professional eye. One of the images (Figure 1) showed a performance in action. Taken from the side (stage right), it captured a row of men, their legs, shields and sticks raised in the air. In the background, a mine headgear is visible. Seated, to the right of the image, is the audience in a grandstand and, on the left, behind the dancers and visible through their legs, are the drummers. The composition of the photograph is askew, tilted down to the left. The bottom third of the picture plane is taken up by a wall. Above the wall is a stretch of empty grass. Less than half of the image is occupied by the intended subject matter.

² I would estimate that they were from around the mid 20th century, circa 1950s or 1960s.



Figure 1. Author unknown, title unknown, undated. (Source: Courtesy of Museum Africa and the Bensusan Museum of Photography and Library, Johannesburg.)

Notably, the leader of the dancers has his back to the camera, which I would speculate is not a coincidence. This image conveyed a strong sense of nervousness on the part of the photographer (this was apparent in the other images but not as explicitly). Looking at the image, it appears that he had used the wall to help conceal his camera and waited for the man to turn his back, quickly lifting the camera when he was unseen to take the shot. The photographer used a large depth of field, keeping more of the picture plane in focus, facilitating this sneaky shot. The angle of the camera, looking up at the dancers, elevating them, depicts the dancers as powerful, and suggests a sense of awe from the photographer. Reading this image in terms of its composition and how its content speaks to its construction undercuts the authority that is often associated with authorship. The representation here becomes contested. It is as if, with his back turned, the dance leader has both refused and returned the gaze, making the photographer visible.

Scene 2: The Original Sin

In February 2018, the newly installed president of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, stated in parliament: ‘[I]and taking was the original sin, causing divisions and pain amongst most of our people’.³ Ramaphosa’s use of the phrase ‘original sin’, whether intentionally or not,

3 T. Head, ‘In a Nutshell: What Did Cyril Ramaphosa Say in His SONA Reply?’, *The South African*, February 2018, available at <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/cyril-ramaphosa-sona-reply-2018>, retrieved 1 December 2018.

references Karl Marx's *Capital*.⁴ Was Ramaphosa gesturing towards his radical political roots in the trade union movement? Undoubtedly, it was a response to increased pressure from the relatively new left-wing opposition, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), around the question of land, and to his own party's, the African National Congress (ANC), failure to adequately address the problems of restitution and redistribution.

Marx wrote

This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal élite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential. Never mind! Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work. Such insipid childishness is every day preached to us in the defence of property.⁵

Marx's sardonic retelling of the origin myth of economic inequality, a myth he likens to the role of the original sin in Christian theology, opens his chapter on primitive accumulation. The myth is an ideological mask that serves to cover the 'economic original sin': the history of dispossession. He continues by describing the actual processes that, prior to the advent of capitalism, produced the conditions that would make its development possible: the creation of a workforce, a proletariat, whose emergence was anchored in the dispossession of land.

In the history of primitive accumulation, all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capitalist class in the course of its formation; but this is true above all for those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour-market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians. *The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil* is the basis of the whole process.⁶

Ramaphosa's use of the phrase 'original sin' can be read in two ways. It concurs with the importance that Marx gives to land dispossession and conveys the violence and pain that it wrought. But it also suggests a causal relationship by giving to land dispossession the sole original historical weight. This ultimately disentangles land dispossession from the other concurrent processes, which I would argue are inseparable and simultaneously coproduced. As Marx suggests, land dispossession is part of the production of the conditions for capitalism and a proletariat (class); in turn, these are entangled in the production of gender and race. Work, in the context of settler-colonial capitalism, is *the* expression of this entanglement.

Work (and unemployment) and land (dispossession and reform, restitution, redistribution and tenure) are often separated within South African political discourse, with political parties who have taken on these issues most often identifying with one over the other. In the first democratic elections in 1994, the Pan African Congress (PAC) campaigned under the slogan '[t]he land first, all shall follow'.⁷ While the ANC election manifesto from 1994

4 K. Marx, *Capital: Volume I* (1867), trans. B. Fowkes (London, Penguin Random House, 1976, Kindle edition), p. 1008.

5 Marx, *Capital*, pp. 1008–9.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 1012–3, author's emphasis.

7 See a digital photograph of the main PAC poster during the 1994 campaign: Pan African Congress, 'The Land First, All Shall Follow', Documentation Centre for African Studies Poster Collection, UNISA Archives, 2019, available at <http://digilib.unisa.ac.za/digital/collection/p21049coll6/id/903/rec/26>, retrieved 1 March 2023.

contains a section on land reform, they prioritised jobs, as seen in their campaign slogans '[w]orking together for jobs, peace, freedom' and '[l]et's get SA working: jobs, jobs, jobs, a better life for all!', among many others focusing on work and workers' rights.⁸ It has been only in more recent election cycles that parties such as the EFF have given these issues co-billing under the slogan '[o]ur land and jobs now!'.⁹ However, this does not necessarily imply that these issues have been thought of as being linked.

Approaching these issues in a non-causal way (that is, land reform will help to create jobs or jobs will help to supplement land reform through the market) requires that we historicise this relationship, while keeping in mind unemployment as one of its present effects. Marx's image of 'lazy rascals' incapable of accumulating capital is resonant with the myths of the coloniser here. Throughout the colonial period, and still pervasive during the 20th century and apartheid era, the refusal of work or the lack of desire to produce a surplus was viewed as laziness – a racialised conceit applied liberally to the black population of South Africa, with which we might read new (although likely unintended) meaning into Marx's line, 'the latter sort had at last nothing to sell except their own skins'.¹⁰ The myths of 'lazy', 'idle' and 'shiftless' black African men were part of the justification for the dispossession of land. In the 19th century, this was so pervasive that it was even applied to white Dutch settler farmers by the British colonialists (although with slight differentiation in conception of what constituted laziness as practised by white people), when it was suggested that their land be taken and that they be replaced by the more 'productive' British.¹¹

Work, as Kathi Weeks argues, is more than just the primary form of income distribution; it is a means of social inclusion. It is constructed as our obligation as citizens and, through the wage, it often becomes the means by which we access the benefits of citizenship itself.¹² If we consider that, over the last 10 years, the unemployment rate has steadily increased from around 35 per cent to the current 42.6 per cent and that the majority of working-age South Africans (60.6 per cent) are not in waged employment and are, therefore, excluded from these benefits, then what is at stake is not only economic.¹³ From such a conception of work, I will track the kinds of subjectivities that colonial regimes tried to produce, as well as the resistance to and contestation of them (originating 'multifarious subjectivities steeped in the refusal of work', which, according to Franco Barchiesi, the

8 See the manifesto: African National Congress (ANC), '1994 National Elections Manifesto', available at <https://www.anc1912.org.za/manifestos-1994-national-elections-manifesto>, retrieved 22 October 2024. See also the digital images of the 1994 posters: ANC, 'Let's Get SA Working: Jobs, Jobs, Jobs: A Better Life for All!', Documentation Centre for African Studies Poster Collection, UNISA Archives, 2019, available at <http://digilibrary.unisa.ac.za/digital/collection/p21049coll6/id/728/rec/68>, retrieved 22 October 2024; ANC, 'Working Together for Jobs, Peace, Freedom', Documentation Centre for African Studies Poster Collection, UNISA Archives, 2019, available at <http://digilibrary.unisa.ac.za/digital/collection/p21049coll6/id/729/rec/19>, retrieved 1 March 2023.

9 This was the chief slogan that was used during the most recent national elections and on the cover of the 2019 election manifesto. See Economic Freedom Fighters, '2019 Election Manifesto: Our Land and Jobs Now! – Peoples' Manifesto and a Plan of Action', available at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019-EFF-MANIFESTO-FINAL.pdf>, retrieved 22 October 2024.

10 Marx, *Capital*, p. 1009.

11 J.M. Coetzee, 'Idleness in South Africa', in J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988), p. 28.

12 K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work. Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011, Kindle edition), loc. 159, 177.

13 The working-age population includes employed, unemployed and not economically active. See Statistics South Africa, 'Statistical Release P0211, Quarterly Labour Force Survey Quarter 4: 2022', Republic of South Africa, 2023, available at <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2022.pdf>, retrieved 22 October 2022.

post-apartheid state inherited), while keeping in mind land dispossession and the production of gender and race.¹⁴

Scene 3: The Gates of Misery

A period of accelerated dispossession of land in South Africa (1820–1913) began with the industrialisation of agriculture and was characterised by the expansion of industry and industrial wage relations with the discovery of diamonds in Kimberly and, later, gold in Johannesburg. Prior to this point, industry in South Africa was scarce. Most of the settler farms in the colonies were primarily pastoral and subsistence-based, but dependent on black labour. Between 1846 and 1847 the commissioner of the Colony of Natal, Henry Cloete, began a process of active dispossession of land with the deliberate intent of forcing into existence a surplus population that would have to work on the struggling sugar-cane farms in the region as their only option.¹⁵ In 1843, Britain had annexed the Colony of Natal, adding it to the Cape Colony that it had wrested from the Dutch 30 years earlier. Natal, unlike the Cape, was immediately identified for its productive value. The land was seen as fertile and sugar cane had been identified as a major cash crop (although a labour-intensive commodity).¹⁶ The British administration did not anticipate the supply of labour as a problem as they believed the local population would provide sufficient workers for the farms.

The Colony of Natal was located in the subtropical region on the east coast of South Africa. It was about half the size of the current province of KwaZulu-Natal, with the independent Zulu Kingdom to the north. Social upheaval caused many families to leave the Zulu Kingdom and migrate southwards into Natal. Because of these social and economic circumstances, they were available and initially disposed to work on the white settler farms.¹⁷ However, this was short-lived. It quickly became apparent that the Zulu workers were reluctant to work on the farms, due in large part to growing resistance to a new labour regime marked by the colonial misunderstanding of the local rhythms, structures and distribution of work. The initial willingness gave way to workers abandoning their contracts and jobs. Cloete responded with a plan which he believed would force local black labour back to work. He set in motion the constriction of land, forcing communities into small overcrowded barren areas that would be unable to sustain subsistence farming. He talked of ‘the gates of misery’ through which the locals would be forced to pass, so that they would ultimately leave these tiny barren locations in search of work.¹⁸

After the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879, the British annexed the Zulu Kingdom. They took the gold-rich Republic of Transvaal and the Orange Free State from the descendants of the Dutch settlers after the South African War of 1899–1902. Together with the Colonies of Natal and the Cape, these territories were joined to form the Union of South Africa in 1910. On 19 June 1913, the Land Act came into effect.¹⁹ It separated out black territories, restricting them eventually to 13 per cent of the land and barred black ownership outside these. Eighty-seven per cent of the land was reserved for ownership by the white colonial

14 F. Barchiesi, ‘Liberation of, Through, or from Work? Postcolonial Africa and the Problem with “Job Creation” in the Global Crisis’, *Interface: A Journal For and About Social Movements*, 4, 2 (November 2012), p. 245.

15 K.E. Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843–1900* (Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1993), p. 47.

16 Atkins, *The Moon is Dead!*, p. 84.

17 K.E. Atkins, ‘“K**** Time”: Preindustrial Temporal Concepts and Labour Discipline in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Natal’, *Journal of African History*, 29, 2 (1988), pp. 229–44.

18 Atkins, *The Moon is Dead!*, p. 47.

19 Originally known as the Native Land Act and later the Bantu Land Act.

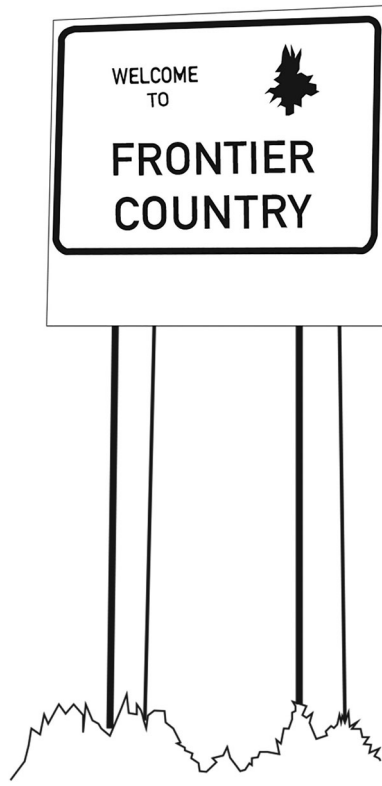


Figure 2. Simon Gush, *Signpost*, 2019. (Source: Courtesy of the artist and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Amsterdam.)

minority, fewer than 10 per cent of the population. Although all of its effects were not immediately felt, the Land Act ultimately contributed further to massive displacement and many black communities were forced off their land and into white areas in search of wage labour.²⁰

Scene 4: Welcome to Frontier Country

Around Makana Municipality there are several signs produced by the Eastern Cape Tourism board that state ‘Welcome to Frontier Country’ (Figure 2). In the late 18th century, this land formed the eastern edge of the Cape Colony. The Xhosa, who had been slowly expanding westward and had occupied much of the territory, and Dutch settlers (Afrikaners), who had been moving east, would come into conflict, resulting in several wars and ongoing attacks and skirmishes. In the early 19th century, the British, after taking ownership of the Cape Colony in 1814, would arrive with military and settlers to try to establish control in the area. Far from settling the conflict, the war between settlers and the Xhosa would continue for more than half a century. This conflict is at the root of why the Eastern Cape became known

20 The effects of the Land Act are complex, as William Beinart and Peter Delius show. While it did entrench the Bantustans as labour-sending areas, this was not necessarily its intention: W. Beinart and P. Delius, ‘The Historical Context and Legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 4 (2014), pp. 667–88.

as a frontier, a space of contested power.²¹ After taking ownership of the colony, the British worried about the lack of control of the area. Questioning the manliness of the Boers, they sent the military to push back the Xhosa to the Fish River.²² However, raids and attacks on farms and homesteads by the Xhosa continued and the Boer settlers ceded control of the territory as they fled back westward.²³

Yet, as Helen Bradford shows, much more than land was being contested in this space. Entangled in the fight over territory is the shaping of race and gender, as well as the meaning of work.²⁴ A frontier was being constituted along gender lines as ‘hegemonic masculinities’ were shifting. As Bradford notes, the ‘protection of patriarchal property’ had dominated Xhosa society in this area: ‘[h]aving shifted from martial towards pastoralist definitions of masculinity, men had chosen to protect their herds rather than fight over land’.²⁵ The border of the Fish River, which Xhosa men could not cross for risk of being killed, was open to Xhosa women.²⁶ Not only a dependence on agriculture, but also women’s critical role in it, contributed to turning them into the breadwinners.²⁷ Into this space flowed Christianity, further contesting masculine roles and divisions of labour.

While the dispossession of land removes a community from it or limits the possibility of their independent survival, as Ahmed Veriava suggests, Marx’s discussion of primitive accumulation is not limited to ‘forms of dispossession that separate people from their means of production, he also linked these processes to modes of subjection to sanctioned forms of life’.²⁸ The control of territory is not enough to establish power, governance and the successful creation of a workforce. Ideological imposition and forms of social and cultural dispossession are needed in tandem.

Anne Kelk Mager, in her discussion of the frontier of the Eastern Cape and the changing concept of work, demonstrates how Xhosa conceptions, which were divided into *ukusebenza* and *ukuphangela*, were not interchangeable with the colonial configuration of work ‘for their own and for the colonial benefit’.²⁹ *Ukusebenza* was women’s work largely performed around the homestead – weaving, making pots, cattle rearing, farming crops – while *ukuphangela* was men’s work of cattle raiding, leaving the homestead for the acquisition of wealth (cattle). The colonists used *ukusebenza* to mean ‘work’; however, the act of going to the colony and returning with wages was understood as *ukuphangela* by the Xhosa. The idea of *ukuphangela*, where power resided in the masculinist raiding party, was at odds with the

21 Power here should not be understood as simply military control, which was precarious, but also cultural in the form of the ‘humanitarian civilizing mission’. See A. Lester, ‘“Otherness” and the Frontiers of Empire: The Eastern Cape Colony, 1806–C.1850’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 24, 1 (1998), pp. 2–19.

22 H. Bradford, ‘Not a Nongqawuse Story: An Anti-Heroine in Historical Perspective’, in N. Gasa (ed.), *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2007), p. 67.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 66–7.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 43–90.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

26 Prior to the War of the Boundary Lines (1809–12), women (in addition to men) had found work in the Cape Colony. Following the conclusion of the war, men, who were the soldiers, were barred from crossing the border line. See Bradford, ‘Not a Nongqawuse Story’, p. 67. In January 1820, a proclamation by Colonel Cuyler prohibited the hiring of itinerant Xhosa as they encouraged relatives or fellow Xhosa to join them while the colony attempted to maintain the frontier divide. See J. Wells, ‘Resistance and Survival: Demolishing Myths of Disappearing People, Minor Chiefs and Non-Existent Boundaries in the Early 19th Century Zuurveld of the Cape Colony’, *New Contree*, 84, 29 (2020), pp. 1–29.

27 Bradford, ‘Not a Nongqawuse Story’, p. 68.

28 A. Veriava, ‘The Two Economies, Primitive Accumulation, and the Government of the State: Or, Reflecting on the Politics of the Governed from South Africa’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 39, 1 (2019), p. 26.

29 A.K. Mager, ‘Tracking the Concept of “Work” on the North-Eastern Cape Frontier, South Africa’, in A. Fleisch and R. Stephens (eds), *Doing Conceptual History in Africa* (Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2016), pp. 76–7.

servitude that underscored the function of the black (male) worker in the colonial conception. Over time, these words would become interchangeable as, through the dispossession of land, possibilities of life outside the wage were continuously further curtailed. However, the idea of work remained imbued with *ukuphangela* and resistant to the disciplinary functions of work.³⁰

Returning to the Colony of Natal, Cloete's plans did not produce the desired result. As Keletso Atkins argues, this problem of insufficient labour would continue to dominate colonial discussions in the region throughout the 19th century.³¹ Atkins narrates how the colonial farmers' arrogance and cultural indifference was a defining factor in this failure to recruit workers. The settlers misrecognised the work ethic of the local population and were unable to conceive of a mutually beneficial compromise.³² For example, in the Zulu division of labour according to age, younger men would perform certain tasks that older men would not. The settlers, oblivious to this, would regularly attempt to assign older men menial tasks, such as collecting firewood, and would become incensed when these tasks were not completed, assuming a reluctance to work.

Understandings of time became a further point of contention. There was no concept of a year (12 months) among the Zulu; rather, there were two seasons. The settler farmers would negotiate contracts using the Zulu word *uNyaka*, thinking that it was referring to the calendar year, when it denoted only 'the rainy or field work season' comprising six lunar months.³³ Consequently, workers would up and leave halfway through the year, to the frustration and anger of the farmers. The use of the lunar calendar further exacerbated things, with workers demanding pay after about 28 days rather than at the end of the month.³⁴ This again became a source of anger for the farmers. The settlers' unwillingness to shift from an effective cultural norm was instead translated into a rhetoric of the lack of ability of the local population to modernise and predictably resulted in claims of contract breaking and laziness.³⁵

Atkins described a revealing incident. It took place in Pietermaritzburg, located in the central region of the then Natal colony, in the late 19th century. In town, there was a system to signal the start of the workday, where a gun would fire at eight o'clock every morning, a time that would have coincidentally been close enough to the sunrise and the start of the workday for the local workers. However, when this gunshot signal was later changed to nine o'clock it clashed with the workday rhythms of the labour force. The workers, clearly frustrated by the new time, set about enacting a form of resistance. Each day a representative would arrive at work at the original hour and the manager would be forced to send him away saying each time 'come by and by when the gun fires'. Seemingly in jest, the workers named the gun '*ubai-n-bai*', a name that stuck throughout the region. The anecdote was relayed by a colonial administrator seemingly unaware that the joke was on them.³⁶ The implementation of a new work regime, even if ultimately taken up by the workers, does not necessarily mean acceptance. Their eventual compliance is not the same as conversion and the frontier of contestation remains. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing suggests, frontiers are sites

30 Mager, 'Tracking the Concept of "Work"', p. 85.

31 Atkins, *The Moon is Dead!*, p. 1.

32 I use work ethic to refer to the normalised construction of work by a given society: what constitutes work and what is excluded, divisions of labour; what work is appropriate for who, as well as the value judgements associated with work in general or forms of work in particular.

33 Atkins, "'K**** Time'", p. 233.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

that ‘predict and perform their own reversals, forming productive confusion and becoming models for other frontiers’.³⁷

Scene 5: Below the Cost of Reproduction

Section 25 (7) of the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution states: ‘[a] person or community dispossessed of property after 19 June 1913 as a result of past racially discriminatory laws or practices is entitled, to the extent provided by an Act of Parliament, either to restitution of that property or to equitable redress’.³⁸ The 1913 Land Act holds an outsized symbolic importance in South Africa and is often mistakenly referred to as the start of the dispossession of land.³⁹ The prevalence of this idea has been compounded by its use as the cut-off date for land restitution within the Bill of Rights. However, the role that it played is much more complex. As much of the dispossession of land had already taken place in the 19th century, there are two consequences that are interesting in this context. The Land Act functioned to stop any reversal of dispossession by successful black farmers buying back white-owned land. Importantly, it also stopped further dispossession by colonists. The freezing of dispossession was necessary as its further acceleration would have disrupted the migrant labour system and its reproduction. Although the maintenance of reproductive sites was not the original intention of the Act, it was an important consequence that would define the internal migrant labour system on which the South Africa economy would depend.

Marx points out that the basis for accumulation in capitalism is unpaid labour.

Capital, therefore, is not only the command over labour, as Adam Smith thought. It is essentially the command over unpaid labour. All surplus-value, whatever particular form (profit, interest or rent) it may subsequently crystallise into, is in substance the materialisation of unpaid labour-time. The secret of the self-valorisation of capital resolves itself into the fact that it has at its disposal a definite quantity of the unpaid labour of other people.⁴⁰

This is true not only of the time in which the worker produces value that exceeds the value of his labour power (the basis of profit). Unpaid labour must be understood to include social reproduction. This is the work of maintaining life, of family and care, of social and biological reproduction, the care of bodies broken by capitalism, and importantly socialisation and subjectivation. Most workers and their families are dependent on a combination of wages and unpaid and mostly gendered domestic labour. In changing relation to work regime and time period, unpaid labour is not always carried entirely by the ‘domestic’ sphere as the state ‘subsidises’ some of this care in the form of schools, hospitals, social grants and other state-run institutions. The cost of reproduction is reflected in the level at which wages are set within this balance. One of the internal contradictions of capitalism is that it is dependent on unpaid labour and, at the same time, destabilised by the constant expansion of accumulation through low wages that are barely able to sustain it.⁴¹

37 A.L. Tsing, ‘Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38, 48 (2003), p. 5102.

38 Republic of South Africa, ‘The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996)’, available at <https://www.justice.gov.za/constitution/SACConstitution-web-eng.pdf>, retrieved 22 October 2024, p. 10.

39 For further discussion see the Part-Special Issue, ‘Reflections on the 1913 Land Act and its Legacies, 1913–2013’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 4 (2014).

40 Marx, *Capital*, pp. 787–8.

41 N. Fraser, ‘Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism’, in T. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London, Pluto Press, 2017, Kindle edition), p. 22.

The creation of separate, supposedly independent sites by the Land Act, in which the black population would theoretically be located, formalised the geographical separation of reproductive labour from productive labour. In 1972, Harold Wolpe published the seminal text 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa' on the entanglement of capitalism and segregation.⁴² He examined how the territorial expansion of settler-colonial capitalism, the dispossession and displacement of local communities and their replacement by settlers ran counter to the need for sites of reproduction. He argued that the 1913 Land Act slowed the expansion of capitalism and froze land dispossession. Further, the location of the household in these territories, far away from the worksite, created the conditions for wages to be set at a rate below the cost of reproduction, by allowing for small-scale farming and fragile economies on the margins of white capital to subsidise this cost, shifting onto the site of reproduction the responsibility to cover the shortfall. However, these fragile economies would never be enough to remove the dependence of reproduction on labour migration for survival. Thus, the segregated 'homelands' created through the Land Act became inextricably entangled in the production of a precarious balance of cheap labour. Wolpe's cheap-labour thesis foregrounds the role of migration in this process and, according to Ben Scully and Edward Webster, provides a key methodological guide in 'the importance of the interface between the capitalist sector and non-wage economic activities or, more simply, between production and reproduction'.⁴³

Scene 6: Work Never Arrived

Land is, of course, never just land. It is the basis of community, identity and life for the people who live in it. The colonial production of work begins with the expansion of settler-colonial capitalism. In South Africa, the early colonial project was centred around the control of the Cape, the southernmost tip of Africa, as a strategic point in the shipping route between Europe and India. This colony served the mercantile capitalist system, in service and maintenance of which work was undertaken. Land under colonial control was perceived to be underutilised for the production of surplus. Towards the middle of the 19th century, the situation began to shift, particularly within the British colonial system. The governors of Natal and the Cape Colony, Henry Cloete and George Grey respectively, wished to direct the economies of their colonies towards the production of surplus.⁴⁴ Prior to the jolt of industrialisation permitted by the discovery of diamonds and then gold, surplus production was envisaged through the transformation of settler farms from subsistence-based to capitalist. Both governors understood the dispossession of land as key and acted accordingly. Expansion and dispossession of territory was carried out to enable the opening of land as the site for these farms. Importantly, and specifically in relation to the production of work, the dispossession of land was needed to undermine the independence and

42 H. Wolpe, 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid', *Economy and Society*, 1, 4 (1972), pp. 425–56.

43 B. Scully and E. Webster, 'The Countryside and Capitalism: Rethinking the Cheap Labour Thesis in Post-Apartheid South Africa', in J. Reynolds, B. Fine and R. van Niekerk (eds), *Race, Class and the Post-Apartheid Democratic State* (Pietermaritzburg, UKZN Press, 2019), p. 33. Wolpe, in response to a critique of his work, frames this relationship of reproduction to production, agrarian to wage labour as a 'necessary structural condition of the migrant labour system', although I would argue that it would be better described as a defining characteristic. H. Wolpe, 'A Comment on "The Poverty of Neo-Marxism"', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4, 2 (1978), p. 244, original emphasis. Martin Legassick's work similarly builds on this Marxist reading of migration, focusing his analysis on race and capitalism. See M. Legassick, 'South Africa: Forced Labour, Industrialization and Racial Differentiation', in R. Harris (ed.), *The Political Economy of Africa* (New York, Halsted, 1975), pp. 247–51.

44 J. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–7* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1989), p. 219.

subsistence of the communities and to force them into work. It is significant that the British had abolished slavery in 1830, not long before this push to transform the colonial economy for which they required other forms of unpaid or cheap labour.

However, the dispossession of land was not enough. To produce a workforce, there needed to be an ideological imposition. Work is not just productivity; it is an activity that is socially constructed. The place and value of work must be naturalised for it to be reproduced. I will use the concept of a 'work ethic' to name the way work is constructed and naturalised within society and the ideological production of work. As Max Weber argues, the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism in Europe, and the resulting changes in work ethic, were a key factor in the success of such ideological production. The centring of work, or the idea of work as a 'calling' that has value in and of itself, 'began to dominate worldly morality' and 'did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order'.⁴⁵ Capitalist expansion in South Africa needed the implementation of a new work ethic that would be more conducive to its functioning. The pre-existing one did not necessarily induce the participation in the required wage labour. For example, the Zulu work ethic reversed the relation of work to status, where status, commonly expressed through age, determined the work, rather than work conferring status. Thus, the incentive to work in forms of labour outside one's status was severely lacking.⁴⁶

Grey, with a mandate of 'civilising' the local black population in the Cape Colony and with ambitions to transform the economy, produced public-works projects and funded missionary-run schools providing training in technical and work-directed fields.⁴⁷ In the Colony of Natal, missionary schools actively taught ideas about the value of labour that would be more conducive to the success of labour contracts.⁴⁸ It would be too simplistic to suggest that the forms of work ethic enforced in the colonial setting exactly mirrored Protestant work ethic as described by Weber. However, the moralising (in colonial terms, 'civilising') force of work that he articulates was key. In Jeff Peires's account, there is an implication that the public pretence of civilising was a cover and flimsy justification for naked economic ambition.⁴⁹ Rather, it seems congruent to read the process of violent dispossession, re-education and inducement to labour inherent to the so-called economic transformation as the colonial process of civilising itself. The production of work is not then the creation of jobs or limited to the creation of a surplus population in need of a wage for survival, but it is the production of new sets of work relations combined with the rearticulation and centring of work as having moral value. Work is produced in combination with other coercive strategies such as taxation, which is also framed in moral terms of public good and duty.

A process of diagrammatic mapping of the colonial production of work is suggestive as a way of producing a framework for thinking through some of these relationships. This mapping is not a full representation; it is rather akin to what Fredric Jameson has called cognitive mapping, a mapping of space, ideology and history.⁵⁰ Through it, I seek to trace the colonial territorial production of work and overlay it with the colonial ideological

45 While the origins of work ethic in the reformation have been contested, particularly as it relates to the South African context (for example, Coetzee, 'Idleness in South Africa'), what is important here is the moral and disciplinary force of work. M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London, Routledge, 1905, Kindle edition), loc. 1708.

46 Atkins, *The Moon is Dead!*, p. 56.

47 T. Ngcukaitobi, *The Land is Ours: South Africa's First Black Lawyers and the Birth of Constitutionalism* (Cape Town, Penguin Books, 2018, Kindle edition), loc. 234.

48 Atkins, *The Moon is Dead!*, p. 83.

49 Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*, p. 219.

50 F. Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 347–60.

the colonial territorial production of work

“...nothing to sell except their own skins.”
Karl Marx

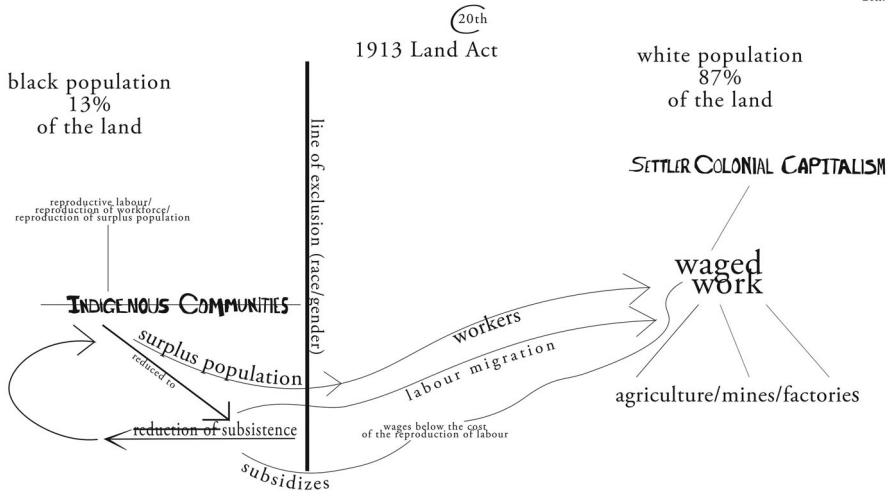


Figure 3. Simon Gush, *Frontier I*, 2019. (Source: Courtesy of the artist and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Amsterdam.)

production of work. Although territorial and ideological should not be read as interchangeable, they are tethered. In this tethered relation, the contradictory identities and categories that are produced open the site and, I would argue, the frontier in which ‘political subjectivisation’ can occur.⁵¹ Jacques Rancière describes subjectivisation as ‘the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other ... a process of subjectivization is a process of disidentification or declassification’.⁵² Using the example of the proletariat, he states:

a subject is an outsider or, more, an in-between. Proletarians was the name given to people who are together inasmuch as they are between: between several names, statuses, and identities; between humanity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial; between the status of a man of tools and the status of a speaking and thinking being. Political subjectivization is the enactment of equality – or the handling of a wrong – by people who are together to the extent that they are between. It is a crossing of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names that link the name of a group or class to the name of no group or no class, a being to a nonbeing or a not-yet-being.⁵³

To help map these divisions and categories, I will also utilise Vivian Zihlerl’s terms, the female, the prior and the racial.⁵⁴ These are cuts that exclude what is not ‘white, male and modern’ from a colonial-capitalist system of value.⁵⁵ Precisely because gender, race and modernity are not essential or binary, their implicit or explicit application produces contestation and contradiction, a space of neither outside nor inside.

With territorial expansion, a frontier zone is formed at the edges (Figure 3). What is created in this process is not a mere line that marks the outer limits of the settler-colonial territory/authority and the beginning of the ‘indigenous’ territory/authority. It was in these

51 J. Rancière, ‘Politics, Identification and Subjectivization’, *October*, 61 (Summer 1992), pp. 58–64.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

53 *Ibid.*

54 V. Zihlerl, ‘The Fourfold Articulation’, *e-flux Journal*, 81 (April 2017), available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126968/the-fourfold-articulation>, retrieved December 2019.

55 *Ibid.*

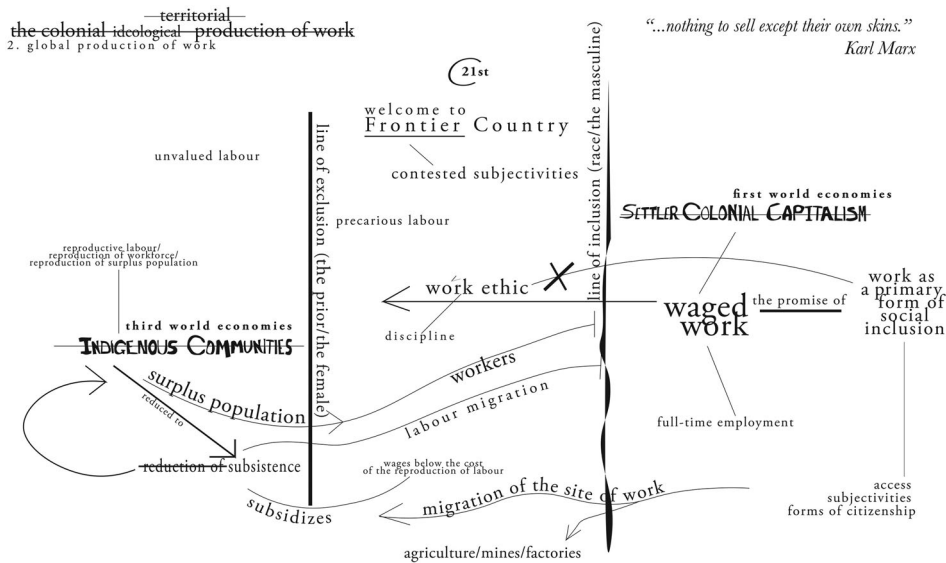


Figure 4. Simon Gush, *Frontier 2*, 2019. (Source: Courtesy of the artist and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Amsterdam.)

edges, rather than the actual lines of the border, that the colonial powers attempted to exert and naturalise their authority through expansion and occupation. Grey described the frontier as ‘where natives would be won by exertions to Christianity, trained in agriculture and in simple arts’, and where the black population would become ‘accustomed to our laws and aware of their advantages, attached to us from a sense of benefits received, respecting us for our strength and generosity’.⁵⁶ However, in the space of the frontier, where forms of authority remain contested and responsive, this process is always incomplete. The frontier is an open field where the laws and practices of one form of social organising do not yet have legitimacy over another.

Through the 1913 Land Act, these geographic or territorial zones of contested authority are effectively solidified. Importantly, this also means that the maintenance of territorial exclusion is formalised as an outside that, rather than a space for further territorial expansion, is constitutive and supplementary to the system of wage labour. The system of labour migration, particularly for the mines, and the separation of the site of reproduction of the workforce from the worksite are thus sedimented (Figure 4). The freezing of territorial expansion does not mean the end of the expansion of authority; rather, the latter is enacted through other forms of dispossession. In the territorial mapping of the production of work, the lines of exclusion between settler-colonial capitalism and indigenous communities are based on race and gender. Black men constitute most of the labour migration moving from the reserves to the worksite and back. The gendered division is an essential part of the separation of the site of reproductive labour from the worksite and is necessary to the particular form of capitalism demanded by high-cost mining and industry in South Africa. Families were forced to stay in the reserves and depended on the wages of these men to survive, but also on local economies, reproductive labour and often subsistence agriculture.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ngcukaitobi, *The Land is Ours*, loc. 243.

⁵⁷ Belinda Bozzoli convincingly argues that an analysis focused solely on the capitalist dimension of the gendered nature of migrant labour is inadequate and that, while the gendered division of labour might

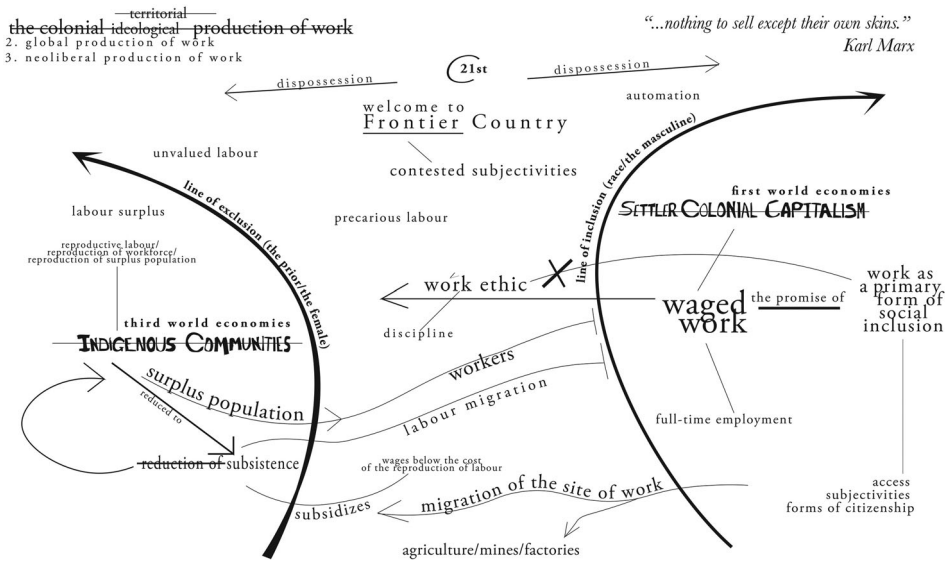


Figure 5. Simon Gush, *Frontier 3*, 2019. (Source: Courtesy of the artist and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Amsterdam.)

Shifting to the ideological mapping, this same line of exclusion is drawn along the categories of the female, the prior and the racial, which I will elaborate (Figure 5). As previously discussed, territorial dispossession is not enough to force people into work, as work itself must be produced within a different system of value. The meaning of work changes, as well as what it promises. The wage is simply not enough. Work must be centred and valued in itself. It takes on a moral force. Regarding the category of the female, work was divided along gender lines within Xhosa and Zulu society: men's work was raiding, herding cattle and soldiering, while women's work included the cultivation of crops. The creation of a male workforce on the farms required the rearticulation of the gender divisions of work. The relationship of gender to the lines of exclusion is complex in that it is contingent on its intersection with race.⁵⁸ Full inclusion remains only within the domain of white men. The female operates across the space of the frontier. The labour of women within the workforce is divided along racialised lines. White women's labour is excluded but, through race, it is offered some forms of inclusion, a slightly different configuration of the frontier, while black women's labour would almost always be completely excluded from the frontier and have no promise of inclusion. Forms of labour completely outside the system of value, such as reproductive labour, are excluded from the frontier as feminised, regardless of race, and as pertaining to the prior.

The line of exclusion along the prior means that part of the inducement to work is the promise of social inclusion. The promise of access to forms of citizenship through work is linked to a certain perception of modernity. Through the migration of workers towards wage labour, they would become 'modern men' in the colonial image and 'civilised' in colonial terms, with the promise of citizenship, however, always held out but never fulfilled under colonialism. The prior, constructed as ahistorical and atemporal culture in contrast to

perform certain capitalist functions, attention needs to be paid to patriarchal oppression. B. Bozzoli, 'Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9, 2 (1983), pp. 139–71.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

western modernity, must be constantly reproduced as a line of exclusion in relation to the ongoing changes in the societies on which it acts. It needs to be constantly rearticulated so that, despite societies not being static, these remain perceived as ahistorical. Nonetheless, the interventions of authority and capital, as well as the ongoing changes that occur in all societies, undercut the construction of this space of exclusion and turned it into a malleable line.⁵⁹

Beyond the female and the prior, the racial remains a major line of exclusion for black workers. The inclusion that work promises to all black men who enter the labour force remains foreclosed in practice. Through the racial, black male workers are denied access to the forms of citizenship that the ideological construction of work promises as its rewards. Race/gender (masculine) becomes the basis of a social exclusion under the guise of inclusion. A space is opened between these several lines, between the construction of 'indigeneity' and wage work, between the prior/female and the racial/masculine. This space is occupied by black male workers upon whom settler-colonial capitalism attempts to enforce a work ethic, without the possibility of its social benefits. This is the space of ideological imposition without closure, without the actual fulfilment of a promised future. However, as discussed previously, this imposition is never uncontested.

I would like to propose that this is also a frontier space.⁶⁰ The territorial expansion of colonialism parallels the ideological expansion: where the control of land is contested, so too is the control over identity and the production of subjectivity. This is not a line where one authority ends and another begins: rather than border, it is a terrain. If this wide frontier is the space in which authority is under contestation, where competing modes of power struggle for dominance, the ideological imposition of work is where the naturalisation of subjectivities is contested. Within this space, work ethic or work as a primary form of social inclusion is not therefore a given. The degree of its partial efficacy changes and is always contingent, while the outside in this formation remains constitutive of an inside. However, as a space for the production of subjects, it is always antagonistic.⁶¹ What is important about the frontier in this framework is that it is a way to attempt to make visible how the ideological framing of work leaves a gap. The negotiation of inclusion and exclusion within this contested terrain, much like the battles and incursions back and forth across the physical space of the frontier, opens up the possibility for contestation.

Scene 7: Look for the Markers of Resistance and Listen to the Silence of Refusal

The mines around Johannesburg have depended on cheap migrant labour as the source of their workforce. From an early stage, this labour was recruited both from within South Africa and from neighbouring countries. The Chamber of Mines, an organisation formed by the mine owners, was established within a few years of the discovery of gold with the dual purpose of managing and recruiting workers and lobbying government around policy, especially policies directly relating to or affecting the supply of labour.⁶² The maintenance of the migrant system meant that workers would be given short contracts of varying length,

59 S. Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, PM Press, 2019, Kindle edition), p. 154.

60 Here I differ slightly from Zihelr in my construction of the frontier. Zihelr emphasises the frontier in terms of a point of contact, whereas I view it as the terrain of contestation.

61 Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, p. 154.

62 R. First, *Black Gold – The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant* (New York, Harvester Press, 1983), p. xxiii.

but usually of around 18 to 24 months, after which they would be expected to return 'home'. The films *Pondo Story* and *Matsele* are just two examples among many of the propaganda that was produced to lure potential workers to the mines.⁶³ In both stories, the mines offer the lead characters a way out from the poverty of their home life. They are recruited for work and, during their contracts, are able to earn enough money so that, upon their return, their lives can be dramatically uplifted.

In *Pondo Story*, the lead character is from Pondoland in the north-eastern part of the Eastern Cape, a traditionally significant labour-sending area that would, under apartheid, be subsumed into the 'homeland' of the Transkei as part of the racial division of land. The lead, while enjoying the rigour of work, yearns for his home. When he returns, he is able to pay *lobola* (the bride price for his wife), begin his new life and start a family. Significantly, when he is on the mines, he says that '[o]n some Sundays, we dance', but he is depicted watching instead of dancing. In *Matsele*, the eponymous lead (unusually for the genre, he has a name) is from Lesotho. His family are struggling as the soil has become unproductive through overgrazing and bad farming methods. Matsele leaves for the gold mines and, when he returns, he is wealthy and women show him lots of attention. On his return, he is a changed man: gone is his traditional blanket, the aesthetic device used by the filmmakers to distinguish him, and he now wears a suit. However, he finds his family still struggling with the land. His father has asked a *sangoma* to solve the problem of the arid soil, but Matsele sees this as futile. He goes on a new mission in search of the white agricultural officers located far away, who will teach him the modern and correct farming methods. When he returns, he is able to transform his family's fortune. Now he can marry and start a family. These are explicit examples of the narrative of how the work on the mines can transform and sustain subsistence and reproduction. However, both films pay little attention to life on the mines, outside the act of work.

The men leaving for work on the mines would be housed in compounds and hostels during their stays. Work consumed most of their time and living and sleeping conditions were notoriously bad. The men did have breaks, but only limited amounts of time understood as necessary for them to recover. Such free time and leisure are always a problem for an authority that is excessively concerned with work and control. From the perspective of management, the question of what to do with this leisure time was framed as a moral one. They feared that, if men were left to their own devices, they would indulge in excessive drinking, crime and the frequenting of sex workers.⁶⁴ As Goolam Vahed suggests, 'sport and recreation were used as an antidote to protest and militancy, and a means of instilling appropriate discipline amongst Africans'.⁶⁵ Management was particularly invested in the idea that sport and leisure would reinforce good values around work, enhancing work performance.⁶⁶

Returning to the image with which this essay began, the workers' dance emerges uneasily. This dance is known as *ingoma* (sometimes *ngoma*). *Ingoma* dances exist throughout southern Africa. While they seem to have been especially popular with Zulu migrant workers, many migrant workers from different geographies participated. At least

63 *Pondo Story* was directed by R. Getteman and produced by the Chamber of Mines and African Film Productions (1948). *Matsele*, as it appears in the opening credits, or *The Story of Matsele*, as it is often referred to, was directed by L. Lewis and produced by the National Veld Trust (1946).

64 G. Vahed, 'Control of African Leisure Time in Durban in the 1930s', *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 18, 1 (1998), p. 69.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

66 In contrast to the racist and gendered stereotypes that underscored the thinking of management on the mines, gender, sexuality, labour division, masculinity and manhood within the mining hostels were a far more complex shifting 'frontier'. See T.D. Moodie with V. Ndatshe and B. Sibuye, 'Migrancy and Male Sexuality on the South African Gold Mines', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 2 (1988), pp. 228–56.

three major forms of *ingoma* dance were popular on worksites, *isishameni*, *umzansi* and *isiBhaca*, among many others, as well as several sub-styles and forms.⁶⁷ The *ingoma* dances are sometimes referred to as traditional or, alternatively, neo-traditional. Without delving into the problems of the notion of tradition as a static category, it is noteworthy that the dances are adaptations. Prior to their use as a form of leisure in worksites, they would have been tied to specific contexts. Most have their origins in regimental dances performed by soldiers, while others were convened for ceremonies such as weddings. Their use on the mines was a recontextualisation, with resultant shifts in choreography and meaning, and they continued changing as new dances were formed out of older ones (such as gumboot dancing, which emerged out of an *isiBhaca* dance and would later often play a part in anti-apartheid resistance theatre productions).⁶⁸

The colonial managers initially saw the dances as 'tribal', 'aggressive' and 'unchristian'.⁶⁹ Vahed shows how early colonial reactions to the dances were hostile and permission to perform was often refused.⁷⁰ Whether the mine managers were directly aware of it or not, their fears emerged in some of the lyrics accompanying the dances, which speak to resistance: 'Who has taken our country from us? / Come out! Let us fight! / The Land is ours!'.⁷¹ Yet, at the same time, some of the mines began to change their strategy and sought to recuperate the dances rather than try to curtail them. They built facilities and held officially sanctioned competitions, believing that the activity could foster useful skills, such as teamwork.⁷² This further allowed mines to use the dances as a means of reinforcing ethnic identity, delineating the dancers along the prior. The condemning and sanctioning of the dances by the mines speak to the way in which the dances invoked both idleness and leisure. J.M. Coetzee tracks the trajectory of the ideas of laziness and idleness in South Africa.⁷³ While acknowledging the moral denouncement of idleness that, linked to the issue of labour, would dominate 19th-century discourse, he identifies another trajectory that is based on a rudimentary 'ethnographic discourse' of race.⁷⁴ The colonial position was that '[idleness] is not custom but absence of custom, not recreation but absence of recreation', thus linked to a static, empty and unchanging prior.⁷⁵ The mine managers were unable to settle the contradiction between the racist framing of an ahistorical subject as idle and the entitlement to leisure of the progressive modern worker; that is, idleness was thought of as the amoral activity of the prior in contrast to the leisure of the modern. The black workers' free-time activities were not understood as leisure, while at the same time leisure was needed to guard against idleness in the time away from work. This mirrored the contradiction of the positioning of work itself as an ennobling moral force, whereby the upliftment that work would provide was both necessary and impossible for black workers, framed as simultaneously inside and outside modernity. However, the dances by no means represented an unbreakable static tie to a singular identity but were, rather, identity in motion, in the making, as mine workers negotiated the precarious terrain in which they found themselves: between Zulu and worker, home and the city, work and rest/leisure, the industrial and the prior, the modern and the 'traditional', subjection and resistance. Envisaged as frontier, the dances can be read as an act of political subjectivisation. Through

67 V. Erlmann, "'Horses in the Race Course": The Domestication of Ingoma Dancing in South Africa, 1929–39', *Popular Music*, 8, 3 (1989), p. 260.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

69 Vahed, 'Control of African Leisure Time in Durban', pp. 92–4.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

71 *Ibid.*

72 *Ibid.*, pp. 90–8.

73 Coetzee, 'Idleness in South Africa'.

74 *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 22, 27.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

the performance of the mutable identity of 'Zulu-ness' and of the 'Zulu worker', such a configuration of identity is exposed as impossible for the colonial system. Paraphrasing Rancière, it raises the question and the challenge: do 'Zulu workers' belong to the category of workers?⁷⁶

Scene 8: Looking at Work

Despite the ongoing centrality of work, jobs in South Africa remain scarce.⁷⁷ In this context, access to the social inclusion that is maybe provided by work remains out of reach for most people. James Ferguson examines the effects of a programme of social grants in surplus populations and what he calls 'distributive labour'.⁷⁸ He argues that, given the decline in demand for industrial labour, we can no longer consider unemployed people as a labour reserve. The reserve vastly exceeds demand, which delinks reproductive labour from value production, countering traditional Marxist and feminist readings of this relationship.⁷⁹ Therefore, it is important to rethink these critiques, to emphasise the problem of unemployment and income distribution, and consider the role and the potential of social grants.⁸⁰

However, while the labour reserve does greatly exceed demand, my own experience in interviewing communities experiencing high unemployment on restituted farms in Salem, Eastern Cape, pointed to the ongoing entanglement of waged and unwaged labour. Formal and informal, productive and reproductive work, as well as social grants and remittances were all linked through what seemed closer to a network for the exchange of work.⁸¹ For example, grandparents raise their grandchildren while the parents search for work elsewhere, and income often comprises social grants combined with money sent back home. Rather than being completely excluded from capitalism, these are spaces on the margins of capitalism that are still subject to forms of accumulation akin to what Tsing calls 'peri-capitalist sites', or an expanding frontier.⁸² In discussing how we might rethink these spaces, Barchiesi argues that, 'contrary to normative rationality, critical analysis has to recognize the complexities of emancipative, progressive discourse as characterized by the indissoluble

76 Rancière asks '[d]o French workers belong to the category of Frenchmen?' to show that, through the meditation on a particular identification, the gap in equality is enacted.

For they allow these subjects not only to specify a logical gap that in turn discloses a social bias, but also to articulate this gap as a relation, the nonplace as a place, the place for a polemical construction. The construction of such cases of equality is not the act of an identity, nor is it the demonstration of the values specific to a group. It is a process of subjectivization. (Rancière, 'Politics, Identification and Subjectivization', p. 60)

77 At the end of 2022, the expanded unemployment rate (job seekers and discouraged job seekers) stood at 42.6 per cent, while the absorption rate (percentage of total working age population considered employed) was 39.4 per cent. See Statistics South Africa, 'Statistical Release P0211'.

78 J. Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2015, Kindle edition).

79 Ferguson states:

Under such circumstances, it has become more and more difficult to argue that the value produced at the region's industrial centres is generated by the suffering of those at its periphery; instead, the suffering of the poor and marginalized appears as functionally isolated from a production system that simply no longer has any use for them. (Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish*, p. 11)

80 Natasha Thandiwe Vally provides an excellent analysis of the realities of the current social grants distribution systems and its problems and shortcomings. The importance of these grants should not be understated; however, as Vally shows, the actual forms of distribution are not neutral and 'the technologies themselves create politics, subjectivities, and sentience'. N.T. Vally, 'Insecurity in South African Social Security: An Examination of Social Grant Deductions, Cancellations, and Waiting', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42, 5 (2016), p. 970.

81 Gush, *Working the Land*.

82 A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, Kindle edition), p. 63.

knot of liberation and subjection and the simultaneous enabling and foreclosing of possibilities'.⁸³ As a concept for thinking the relationship between work, land and dispossession, as well as a way of contesting identities, the frontier seems able to map the space in which subjectivisation can occur.

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83 F. Barchiesi, 'Liberation of, Through, or from Work?', p. 248.