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Between Enslavement and Liberation. Narratives of Belonging from Two Farm Workers in Rural South Africa

Abstract More than two decades after the genesis of South Africa's aspirational democracy in 1994, deep-seated forms of inequality still exist. These are explored in the narratives of two farm workers who tell of events and experiences in their everyday lives. In probing the everyday, we turn the spotlight on phenomena, events, and experiences that are simultaneously familiar yet perplexing, taken-for-granted yet questionable, tangible yet elusive. As a backdrop to the sociology of the everyday, key ideas from three social theorists—Randall Collins, Jeffrey Alexander, and Vanessa May—guide our interpretation of excerpts from the farm workers' narratives. The farm workers' stories are also juxtaposed with reflections on the socio-political, economic, and emotional contexts of slavery and serfdom.

Keywords Interpretive Sociology of the Everyday; Narratives of Belonging; Farm Workers in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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The Everyday as a Window on Social Reality

In the surge of transformation following the iconic leadership of Nelson Mandela, South Africans reached eagerly for the freedoms of a long-awaited democracy. But, many were left behind, trapped in old, solidified structures of inequality. This phenomenon is uncovered in the narratives of two farm workers who have never moved from the farms where they were born and where they spent their lives in one rural district in the Eastern Cape Province. We turn our gaze towards the small-scale issues of the everyday and use as a point of departure: “the level of the everyday life of people

amongst other people, together with them, side by side with them, in cooperation, competition, conflict, or struggle with them, in love or hatred, but never alone, in isolation” (Sztompka 2008:24).

The everyday is a sphere of natural, spontaneous experience. It is best interpreted in terms of continual creations where reality is constituted by individuals who actively contribute to the establishment of their social structures. We propose that the everyday is one of the best starting points for understanding the relationship between self and society—between individual experience and broader social reality. By focusing on the close, personal, familiar of the everyday, we aim to unwrap the structure and effect of society in its larger formations.

We also aim to access deeper nuances of the experience of *belonging* by focusing on personal reflections of individuals on their everyday experience. Following Yuval-Davis (2006), we draw a distinction between belonging as a discursive resource that is, on the one hand, closely related to identity, claims of social inclusion, and a political experience—and on the other hand, place-belongingness.

Three Theories for Engaging with the Everyday

Key ideas of three social theorists—Randall Collins, Jeffrey Alexander, and Vanessa May—guide our interpretive sociology of the everyday. Each of them offers distinct ways of thinking about and analyzing the everyday experience of ordinary people living ordinary lives.

Randall Collins and Microsociology

Randall Collins (2004) refers to his work as radical microsociology. A prominent aspect of radical microsociology is that it takes cognizance of and departs from the only directly observable reality in the constitution of social reality, namely, the individual. For Collins, any macro-phenomenon such as society only exists in as far as it emerges from a composite series of micro-experiences. The basic micro-unit of analysis is the encounter, which is a shared conversational reality revolving around negotiation and exchange of resources. Collins proposes the concept of *ritual interaction chains* to capture how empirical reality is shaped through and embodies an endless chain of personal experiences, forms of interaction, bargaining, agreement, or/and resistance. From this standpoint the individual experience of reality is a pivotal point for analyzing the social.

Jeffrey Alexander and the Construction of Cultural Trauma

In his book, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012), Jeffrey Alexander investigates social suffering by addressing exploitation, violence, war, massacres, and ethnic and racial strife. What makes his approach different is that, whilst remaining sensitive to the materiality and pragmatics of social suffering, he rejects materialist and pragmatic approaches for one that is situated in a cultural sociology. He connects personal-symbolic-emotional representations—such as belonging—to collective processes that center on meaning-making. Alexander acknowledges that individual suffering, rejection, othering, and marginalization are of great

human, moral, and intellectual importance and that the cultural construction of a collective trauma, such as the experience of apartheid, is fuelled by individual experiences. His focus is, however, on the threat of suffering on the collective identity rather than on the individual identity. Traumas become collective if and when they are conceived as wounds to the social identity. The important question is not *Who did this to me?*, but *What group did this to us?* The construction of shared cultural trauma does not happen automatically, it depends on collective processes of cultural interpretation. One of these processes (apart from rituals, commemorations, and meetings) is storytelling.

Vanessa May and the Sociology of Personal Life

Vanessa May, in her edited volume *Sociology of Personal Life* (2011a), emphasizes the relationship between the self (the fluid personal sphere of the present, including factors such as family life and home, going to work, taking part in financial transactions, engaging in friendships, and experiencing power) and society (the more fixed social structures of the past). Our sense of self is relational because we construct it in relationship with others and in relation to others. Thus, the self and society are mutually constitutive. May (2011b:368) sees belonging as crucial aspect of being a person and defines it as “a sense of ease with oneself and one’s surroundings.” Belonging implies that one has created a sense of identification with one’s social, relational, and material surroundings (Miller 2003).

On the epistemological level these three ways of looking at the everyday contribute three discernible

elements to our analysis. Randall Collins contributes the notion of ritual interaction chains, which are formed through personal experience and embedded in negotiation, exchange of resources, and shared conversational reality. Jeffrey Alexander links personal-symbolic-emotional representations, such as belonging, to collective processes of meaning-making. He focuses on how suffering and trauma impact on collective identity rather than individual identity. Like Collins and Alexander, Vanessa May also recognizes the mutually constitutive relationship between self and society. May’s particular focus is on the fluid personal sphere of the present in relationship to the more fixed social structures of the past. She sees belonging as a sense of ease between a person and his or her world.

The South African Social Structure: The Context for the Two Life Stories

Our proposal that the meaning, nature, and impact of the everyday are revealed through individual experience of and reflection on belonging leads us to participants—Abraham Wessels and Henry Jooste.¹ To interpret their narratives, we need to contextualize them in a brief overview of South African social structure.

The two research participants come from the complex reality of post-democratic South Africa. It is two decades since South Africa transformed itself from an internationally labeled arch-pariah to a political “miracle” (Waldmeir 1997) of the late 20th century. This was, of course, the transformation from

¹ Pseudonyms.

the universally condemned apartheid state to the triumphant victory of democracy; from brutal oppression and grave injustices to worldwide optimism about the prospect of a “new humanity” (see: Cornell and Panfilio 2010).

But, the euphoria surrounding the transformative revolution and the elimination of inequality gradually gave way to the realization that the gap between rich and poor in South Africa is widening. A report published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (Leibbrandt et al. 2010) says that income inequality in South Africa gradually increased between 1993 (the year before the country’s widely acclaimed dawn of democracy) and 2008.² Nowadays the income inequality levels in the country are among the highest in the world.³ The correlation between race and poverty remains strong and wealth remains distributed along racial lines: Africans are poorer than Coloreds, who are poorer than Indians, who are poorer than Whites (Leibbrandt et al. 2010).

The ANC came to power with a radical agenda and an overwhelming mandate to redress historical inequities. But, shortly after coming into power, the new ANC government was accused of opting for policy of little initial change with the promise of cautious acceleration at some time in the future. This was partly due to a cautious, lawyerly belief in reconciliation and partly due to a significant cho-

² The report uses national survey data from 1993, 2000, and 2008.

³ The RSA is regarded as currently having the highest pre-tax Gini coefficient in the world.

rus from an influential White press propagating the need to retain business confidence. When workers claimed higher wages and threatened with strike action, the fear was expressed—even by the then newly elected President Nelson Mandela—that investors’ confidence would be damaged. Due to this caution the pressing land issue was dealt with by a cumbersome system of tribunals. And the budget failed to allocate enough to do justice to the ANC’s ambitious Reconstruction and Development Programme.

Following shortly after the brave, successful resistance to apartheid, there appeared to be a fear that any error could lead to a path of collapse so often found in the rest of Africa. Already in the first year of democracy this attitude towards governance and restitution, action and caution, revolution and order led to the use of the phrase “slave mentality” among critics of the ANC. In an article in *The Guardian*, Jonathan Steele (1994:18) calls this “an inordinate desire to be accepted and legitimized by showing the movement can conform to the old establishment’s rules.” In essence, this view concurs with Frantz Fanon’s argument in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1968) that White racism damaged the Black person’s pride to such an extent that the victim’s only unquantifiable aspiration was to be accepted by the White society. The phrase “slave mentality” provides an important connection to the broad context within which the narratives of belonging of Abraham Wessels and Henry Jooste are situated.

Many analysts agree that in contemporary South Africa the political victory of the ending of apartheid corresponds to Black political empowerment. The

reality is, however, that although at the ballot box an African nationalist organization (the ANC) was elected, the mass of Black South Africans remain disenfranchised in the broader sense of the word. Nigel Gibson (2011:114) calls it “the inadequacies of political emancipation.” He connects this situation with a quotation from Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963):

Now it must be said that the masses show themselves totally incapable of appreciating the long way they have come. The peasant who goes on scratching out a living from the soil, and the unemployed man who never finds employment do not manage, in spite of public holidays and flags, new and brightly-coloured though they may be, to convince themselves that anything has really changed in their lives. [p. 136]

Not only did Black political empowerment not spread to the masses in the sense of an all-encompassing emancipation, it is also true that post-apartheid South Africa failed to address economic inequality. Much of the talk about structural change in the economy has been limited to espousing the merits of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). This was subsequently changed to Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BB-BEE) (Andreasson 2010:219) when government recognized that only a small Black capitalist class benefitted from BEE. Sadly this is also true for the newer BBBEE. The new economic trend among many leaders of the erstwhile liberation movement was to buy into national and multinational corporate capitalism. Because “the quality of life of the poorer 50 percent deteriorated consider-

ably in the post-apartheid period” (Terreblanche 2003:28) this “co-option” led to them being seen as working hand-in-glove with an exploitative capitalist force of domination.

Decades ago Frantz Fanon (1968:165) criticizes the nationalist project and national liberation when he proclaims that “the single party is the modern form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.” Although he said this a quarter of a century before the ANC came into power, it is remarkably applicable to the ANC. The dominance of a neoliberal paradigm shortly before the ANC came into power and a gradual move away from the Freedom Charter were “ethical shift[s] away from ideas of the social and public good” (Gibson 2011:77).

Forms of Enslavement and Institutionalized Oppression

Slavery is the most explicit form of unfreedom: a slave is the property of another. In the 21st century, there is general condemnation of slavery and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has, since its inception in 1956, been fighting to uphold and maintain the universal abolition of slavery, the prevention of any new slave trade, as well as the recurrence of any practices or embedded institutions that smack of or seem similar to slavery (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.). Though it is widely assumed that in most Western countries there is very little left of the dark past of institutionalized slave trade and labor, the modern world gets occasionally reminded of its existence and practice.

Forced labor can also be regarded as enslavement. On December 16, 2013 the United Kingdom Home Secretary, Theresa May, promised to get tougher on the slave drivers responsible for forcing thousands into servitude in the UK. She estimated the number of slaves to be more than 10,000 and proclaimed: “most people think slavery finished years and years ago, but sadly so many people in our country are slaves” (May 2013). The African continent, next to Asia and the Pacific, is particularly tarnished by large numbers of slaves and forced laborers. The organization Anti-Slavery (n.d.) defines forced labor as “any work or services which people are forced to do against their will under the threat of some form of punishment” and estimates that 3.7 million people in Africa are subjected to slavery, forced labor, or debt bondage. The presence of forced labor in the global economy implicates a huge proportion of the world’s population by their purchases or consumption.

Another widely occurring practice, bordering on slavery, is *debt bondage*. Debt bondage occurs when someone works for a lender to pay off a debt. The person pledges his/her personal services (or those of someone under his/her control, such as a child) as security for a debt, but these services are often not well-defined or delineated. Debt bondage is similar to slavery because the debt is often indefinite and permanent and sometimes even handed down as debt slavery to following generations (cf. *bonded labor* [Anti-Slavery n.d.]).

The line becomes finer in those cases where *individuals are given to others*, without the right to refuse. Where a woman is given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or livestock or in kind to

her parents (or other guardians), similar dimensions of exchange are found to cases of debt bondage. The effects of the indebtedness result sometimes even in the right to transfer a wife to another person or to exploit a child or a youth in as far as using this child or youth as a source of labor (Woolman and Bishop 2007:596-597).

One of the commonly occurring forms of bondage in existence at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries is the condition of *serfdom*. This specific (and often subtle) form of unfreedom is tightly woven into the life stories of Abraham Wessels and Henry Jooste and into their experience of belonging. Serfdom refers back to feudal times when agricultural workers were tied to working on a particular estate. Serfdom comes into being and becomes institutionalized over an extended period of time. The resultant condition, custom, or agreement emerges from processes of “intersubjective sedimentation” (Berger and Luckmann 1967:85-86), a concept that captures the gradual geographical processes of the layering of the earth’s crust. These gradual processes occur via normative systems that are built up through communal experiences and consciousness around work, life, dependency, responsibility, and freedom. Through observations, words, and deeds—in other words, through routine and repetitive everyday processes—serfdom takes on an objective reality. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s (1967:85-86) phrase “objectivated and objectified sedimentations” are applicable to the process and to the embodiment of serfdom.

An elementary definition of a slave reads: “a person who is the legal property of another and is forced

to obey them” (OUP 2002). Although a serf is not the legal property of another, he/she finds him/herself bound by law, custom, agreement, or lack of viable alternatives to live and labor on land belonging to the other person. In the erstwhile apartheid dispensation, another factor contributed to this immobility: apartheid legislation (particularly the Group Areas Act) allocated the right to live in a particular geographical area to members of a particular racial group and designed measures to control influx and arrest the free movement of people. Even before this, in the early days of colonization, the situation of living and laboring on someone else’s land has become a part of the life-world of large numbers of South Africans—both master and servant. The extended period during which social position, bargaining power, privileges, and duties were objectified and sedimented lead to clearly crystallized social patterns and sanctioned behaviors. The result is that both master and servant became structurally bound by the practices associated with serfdom. The serf may appear to be free to change her/his status, thus her/his labor seems to be performed voluntarily: it may even appear as if an acceptable exchange for the labor was negotiated. But, the structural reality of serfs renders them powerless because they occupy a social position that does not allow them to change their conditions. The serf’s lived experiences are often severely constrained by the social conventions that result from deeply ingrained social patterns, practices, and accepted behaviors. But, the possibilities to break out of the bondage and often abject conditions are limited by social structures in South Africa, particularly those formed in the period after World War II.

Almost 60 years ago, in 1956, The United Nations’ Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and the Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery proclaimed in Article 1: “The parties commit to abolish and abandon debt bondage, serfdom, servile marriage and child servitude” (see: <http://treaties.un.org>). South Africa has not formally ratified this convention, but in articles 232 and 233 of this country’s constitution it is stated that South Africa’s process of constitutional interpretation will be informed by the international community’s accepted guidelines:

Art. 232. Customary international law is law in the Republic unless it is inconsistent with the Constitution or an act of Parliament.

Art. 233. When interpreting any legislation, every court must prefer any reasonable interpretation of the legislation that is consistent with international law over any alternative interpretation that is inconsistent with international law. [Department of Justice and Constitutional Development 2009: 139-140]

So emphatic is *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* about the principle of freedom, integrity, and security of the individual that no sooner than setting out the Founding Provisions of the state, its constitution, citizenship, relational symbols, and languages it moves to the *Bill of Rights*. This section spells out the equality of everyone before the law, human dignity, and that everyone has the right to live. Article 13 clearly and unequivocally reads:

No one may be subjected to slavery, servitude or forced labour. [Department of Justice and Constitutional Development 2009:8].

By allocating this issue such a prominent position high up on the list of a total of 243 articles (some with multiple sub-sections) that make up *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, the legislators clearly expressed their intention to consolidate and affirm the democratic values of human freedom, equality, and dignity. There is no doubt about the condemnation of practices of slavery, servitude, or forced labor, but there is less clarity on what the law can do to root them out.

The Narrators

In a similar fashion as Charles van Onselen (1996) reflects on apartheid era in South Africa by looking at the life story of a single Black patriarch in his book *The Seed is Mine*, this article aims to illustrate the experiences of two individuals and show how they look back on a life of inclusion and exclusion, freedom and oppression, exploitation and equality, power and powerlessness. The spotlight is on Abraham Wessels and Henry Jooste, two participants who have much in common. They are formally classified as “Colored”⁴ and their home language is Afrikaans. Both had very little formal schooling yet are well-respected in their community. Both are very active members of their church; Abraham often participates in sermons. Both men lost their wives a number of years prior to our conversations. Significantly, from their childhood

⁴ An official category for people of mixed race.

both men are still living on the same farms where they grew up and gradually became drawn into the world of work as farm laborers. At the time of the interviews Abraham Wessels was 68 years old, and Henry Jooste was 70. Compared to many other South Africans, Abraham is not very poor. With the assistance of his employer—whose father employed Abraham initially—he obtained a *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP) house in the nearby town. These houses are given to historically disadvantaged South Africans who qualify for them through a means-based test. Abraham rents the house out and earns an additional income from that. He also owns a small truck (in South Africa referred to as a *bakkie*). Henry, on the other hand, does not own any fixed property and appears to be less financially secure. Abraham and Henry live on neighboring farms in the Graaff Reinet district, a rural area in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

Our lengthy discussions with Abraham and Henry were conducted respectively during 2004/2005 (ten years after South Africa’s democracy) and 2014 (twenty years thereafter). They were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Key issues of interest for the researchers are: What light does Abraham and Henry’s stories shed on participation within their social lifeworld, on their perceptions regarding their right to live in a world that is meaningful to them as individuals? What do their narratives tell us about their aspirations, visions of transformation, and their capacity to move in a direction that they define as desirable? What do their stories tell us about belonging? Belonging is multi-dimensional (Antonsich 2010:664-669). Accordingly,

the discussions with Abraham and Henry touched on many elements associated with belonging. By telling us about their *everyday* experiences, they revealed perceptions on and experiences of their status in their community, their emotional attachments, and their affiliation with place, groups, and culture.

Dimensions of Belonging

Several themes or dimensions of belonging were distilled from the series of conversations with the two farm workers. To illustrate these, we selected and present quotes that emerge repeatedly in the narratives and are thus representative of—rather than an exception to—the lives that Abraham and Henry live and narrate.

Identity

During our interview sessions we asked Abraham and Henry to tell us what they would say if somebody asked them: *Who is Abraham Wessels?* or *Who is Henry Jooste?* We expected that they would quite easily elaborate on themselves as individuals—on their expectations, their existential positions, their personal trajectories, and on what they regard as their personal qualities. But, neither of them reveals much in terms of a personal, intimate assessment of themselves. They also do not express sentiments or views on their personalities, nor any deeply individual preferences and convictions. Although both are members of South African society, they reveal very little that indicates a deep-seated sense of belonging or identity at this wider relational level. In both cases, their responses reveal

a strong correlation between their views of themselves and their ability to live in peace with other people.

Abraham Wessels

It is essential, in Abraham's worldview, to be closely connected to others:

I am...and my attitude towards every other human, Colored, and also Bantu, and also White man...is to live in peace. One cannot live on one's own, you have to have a family.

For Abraham, intersubjective emotional bonds are formed through talking, and this shared conversational reality (Collins 2004) builds and shapes the central values of his world—loving relationships and an embodiment of peace:

Because I'll...even if we can't, we have to make a family. When you talk, you'll be building yourself a family. Even if somebody comes here and I don't know him, we have to talk to each other to make a family. When you talk, you are building for yourself a family. When you talk, there is life and there is love.

As I say to you, Mister, I feel like living in peace with everyone. It is all that I feel to do. To remain like this. And there is no other way.

For Abraham, essentially a serf, his whole working life has been spent as a farm worker on one farm; there has clearly not been room for much choice in the more mundane sense of the word. Choices that are within his power have to do with his atti-

tude and the choices he makes in this regard create a space for the peace he so desires:

It depends on how you organize your life. It is just, I always say so, you need to let your love shine. Your humility must shine. Your patience must shine like a light.

Love, humility, and patience—all injunctions of Christianity—are engaged by Abraham to situate himself in relationship to his world. His belief that these qualities will attract others to him and form a community around him illustrates what May (2011a) means when she says that a sense of self is relational—it is constructed in relationship with others and in relation to others. The bonds so formed create community and thus also shape social structures in Abraham's everyday life:

I will tell you, Mister, it is just as I said: only humility and patience, and also love. Because if I am like this, I draw others to me. And they will create a community with me. Yes, I will draw him closer.

Abraham's narrative points to a complex and intricate interweaving of his choice of love, humility, and patience as right ways to be in the world—and his understanding that these qualities will guarantee almost endless reciprocity of goodwill from his employer, to the extent that it will be extended to Abraham's children even after his death. His very assumption that his children will *need* such reciprocity points to the repetitive, intergenerational aspects of serfdom. Or, to follow Berger and Luckmann (1967:85-86), to the "intersubjective sedimentation" of a social condition via normative systems

built up over long periods of time through shared experiences and consciousness around work, life, dependency, responsibility, and freedom:

Now, when I'm no longer there, and my children would come [to his current employer] to, say, ask for a piece of bread, then the master will say: "Yes, your dad was patient, he was humble and he was somebody who always continued. Come, let me give you a piece of bread."

Many aspects of Abraham's sense of belonging have to do with conforming and the resultant "sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings" (May 2011b:368). His experience also reflects something of Alexander's (2012) idea that personal-symbolic-emotional representations, such as belonging, shape relationships at the collective level. We argue that fitting in is key to survival in communities of serfdom:

I mean, you don't know where you fit and where you will be happy. Because each group has its own politics. Now you need to try to fit in, in order to be a happy man.

Particularly for Abraham, who wants to live in peace and be happy, interrupting the *status quo* is not an option. The act of fitting in appears to be even more important to him, perhaps, than the actualities of what he has to fit into. This resonates with the idea of being enslaved, of having no real choice but to accept, so that the greatest merit is to be had in accepting graciously. And the next link in this ritual interaction chain (Collins 1981:985; Coetzee 2001:129) is to be accepted in turn:

At each end, when I arrive, then I will feel completely happy. There's nothing wrong. Then it feels as if...shall I say to remain in the stream. I need to stay close to the stream. Now, to neglect or to turn off, will be to no avail. I need to stay inside.

Henry Jooste

In Henry's narratives, one can also see the workings of ritual interaction chains (Collins 2004), formed through personal experience and embedded in negotiation, exchange of resources, and a shared conversational reality. Like Abraham, Henry also speaks of the importance of extending love to others, but this love is more focused on, and manifests in, material help. His good reputation and position in his community pivots on helping as a material manifestation of love:

Yes, you have to love the other person, Mister.

My character, yes, Mister. I have to love them and they have to talk well about me because I have to help them and they have to help me also. Yes, you need to help the other one. Yes, and one day when I'm no longer there, they must say: "The uncle who helped us so much is now gone."

That is how I want to be remembered: that I helped others.

There is much in Henry's narratives to suggest that poverty overshadows his self-image. His identity is grounded, literally, in a consciousness and experience of immobility—the plight of the serf. He communicates a very poignant passivity, almost helplessness, in the face of poverty:

Suffer, Mister, suffer... Pure suffering... That is how my life is.

Yes, Mister, because I have nothing. Even now, I am only here, where I had always been.

Place and Space

A significant focus of our series of interviews was to establish Abraham and Henry's views on the respective places where they live. Do they experience a sense of belonging to the space where they have lived their whole life? Do these experiences play a role in how they define their identities?

Yuval-Davis (2006) draws a distinction between belonging as a discursive resource that is, on the one hand, closely related to identity, claims of social inclusion, and a political experience, and on the other hand—place-belongingness. In the previous section, we explored the more discursive aspects of Abraham and Henry's identity formation and showed how they regard their personal qualities and ways of being in the world as leading to their social inclusion—their belonging. The latter concept—place-belongingness—refers to a sentiment of attachment to a particular physical place and of feeling at home there. In a phenomenological sense, "home" is a symbolic space of familiarity, emotional attachment, and security (Hooks 2009:213). Abraham and Henry live in farm cottages which are small yet decent and functional. They seem to have little attachment to these places. And significantly, neither of them refers to the farm where he has spent a lifetime—where he grew up and labored his entire working life—as a place

where he feels at home. If anything, both participants experience and portray feelings of strangeness, of not really being part of the place and space that they have occupied for so many years (Rumford 2013).

Abraham Wessels

A constant influence of Calvinistic dogma runs through Abraham's narratives, which is understandable given that he is very involved in his church. In the series of interviews, he emphasizes *earth* as being his temporary home. In effect, by assiduously deflecting any probes on his thoughts and feelings of being at home in his cottage and on the farm, he creates an eloquent silence around place-connectedness:

Mister, I will say just as the Word says: you don't have a place on earth. Your place is in heaven or it is under the earth. That is how they've always made the saying. Your place is not on earth. Your place is under the earth or it is in heaven. Now, as long as we are still here, it is our place. On earth. But still, we need to be discharged from the earth. We need to depart. Yes, Mister, we will not stay here forever. Then I have to go to the last little house [the grave]. The last place where I have to go.

There is a sense of rootedness in Abraham's narratives, but it remains in the realm of relationships. People are his places and his sense of belonging resides in them:

Now, as long as I can continue, Mister, I will continue. I feel now that I can continue. Yes, I also feel

happy. Still happy with myself and with the master, and with the people around me. I simply continue.

Abraham has already spoken of the grave as a last home-on-earth. Even in this regard his connection to the land has to do with people. His forbearers are buried on the farm so his link to the land is ancestral:

Mister, I always feel still happy. Where I am now, I still feel happy, otherwise I will not be able to. Because as the life is, we need to be happy where we are. And have to go with the flow. Here we grew up. Here they also died. My father and mother. And buried. Now I simply stay here.

Even though Abraham owns an RDP house in the township, he never speaks of it as a home: it is merely a resource for extra income. The idea of place-connectedness being related to ownership of land or property does not arise in his narratives: it is as if a lifetime of serfdom precludes this.

Henry Jooste

A means-test would no doubt qualify Henry for an RDP house, but he has never acquired one. As discussed in the earlier section on *The South African Social Structure*, the government's provision of housing for previously disadvantaged population groups has failed to reach a substantial proportion of the people who need homes. Unlike Abraham, Henry's words suggest that if he did have an RDP house, he would think of it as his home; as we interpret it, lack of ownership is clearly an issue that shapes Henry's perceptions and experience of place-connectedness:

No, this is not my permanent home. See, your permanent home is in town. Then you have a claim to a house, your own house. But, this house I can't give to my children. Because that is how I meant it: I want to work for my children. If I pass on, I want my children to be under a roof. You do the same, don't you, Mister? You won't leave your child just like that, without anything. Your child needs a house—in town. Of this house I was merely told: "This is your place." But, it is not my place. It doesn't belong to me. My child can't stay here.

The fact that Henry's child cannot stay (meaning, live permanently) on the farm echoes old restrictions during apartheid when the movement and residence of people of color were restricted by law and enforced by policing. Ironically, such restrictions find renewal because of the land restitution policies of post-apartheid transformation—which has seen many farm workers claim rights to land because of living and laboring on it for decades. Nowadays some farmers move laborers off their farms rather than risk any claims being leveraged by farm workers because they are born on the farm or resided there for an extended period of time. The power still lies in the hands of those who own the land, which are predominantly the Whites. In this regard, Henry is as powerless and dependent as any serf:

Sometimes it works like that [living in the new South Africa], sometimes it doesn't. I'm still under the White man. If he says that I must go, then I must go. When he comes in here and says: "You need to pack up!" then I have to, I have no choice. I have to leave and go and board in Graaff-Reinet. Knock together a *blikhokkie* [literally: a small cage of corru-

gated iron in someone's backyard or in an informal settlement], and move in there.

Jeffrey Alexander (2012) reminds us that events in the history of South Africa, particularly the experience of apartheid, constitute an example of a collective trauma that supersedes individual experiences. It can be argued that the trauma of disenfranchisement and of second-class citizenship is reproduced and reinforced for a whole segment of South Africans who failed to share in the benefits that accompanied democracy, and following every election thereafter. Collective processes of cultural interpretation (Alexander 2012) among poor South Africans have resulted in a critical mass of people who doubt the point of voting and who are angry at being powerless to bring about positive change. Henry's narratives reflect these collective traumas. He remains sunk in poverty, perennially a serf without a place to call his own; worse, he anticipates that these conditions will continue relentlessly down through successive generations:

I cannot leave my child just like that, empty. Now he has to struggle and he will ask: "Gee, old man! Check out how my dad worked with me." I don't have a house, I don't have a roof over my head. That isn't fair. I want my own house. Look how we voted here. For what are we voting? For nothing.

The meetings with both research participants took place on the farms where they grew up and lived their entire lives. They pointed out to us where they were from, where they moved to when the occasional relocation had to take place, and where important events took place. In all their narratives, the so-

cio-spatial traits of exclusion are clearly described. It is also written in the landscape where the big homestead of the farmer owner contrasts clearly with the small cottages of the workers. One cannot but to realize that belonging is a phenomenological experience of attachment and rootedness. On the other hand, aspects of belonging can also be conferred. Belonging is established through processes of negotiation and can be rejected, even violated, in ongoing struggles between rival cultures, between "us" and "them."

Religion

Coinciding with his view that a person's true and ultimate place is not on earth, Abraham is of the opinion that religion constitutes a way in which the individual negotiates everyday reality and ameliorates suffering.

Abraham Wessels

With all respect Abraham's dedication to Christian teachings, and the spiritual enlightenment shining in his narratives, it would be remiss if as researchers we did not point out that the Calvinistic principles, ethics, sanctioned behaviors, and even the promises of reward that underlie Abraham's narratives may perpetuate servitude:

It is thus like this: if we become one, then there is an opportunity of grace for us. One family. Then there's again an opportunity of grace. And we see each other and we know each other and we move together. Only on Sunday, at church, did I say: "If we look at the bees, they work." They work. They work together. Then I told them [there at church]: "If we look at the

bees, they work. The Lord wants us to work together. So that our deeds can be known." Yes, Mister, no, Mister! But, it can. If only we talk.

Once again, Abraham's narratives illustrate the potential of a shared conversational reality (Collins 2004) to bring about change: for Abraham, words become deeds, and the end reward of words-as-deeds is a gently negotiated reconciliation:

Talking can heal everything. Talking heals everything. Talking is a success. Talking is something very good because it always leads to a solution. But, if one isn't talking, nothing will be solved. Now, if you spoke and you move a little to one side, then you see: no, it did change.

When asked *Should a Christian suffer?* Abraham offers a direct reply. His answer promotes the view that religion provides the most efficient medium to the individual to counter all forms of harm and injustice whether these are biological, personal, collective, or institutional in nature:

Mister, no. Except if someone walks away from the Lord. But, if he has the Lord, he cannot [suffer]. Because the Lord adds. He gives to us. He helps us if, perhaps, we're in trouble. He does all for us. If I ask him in my prayers, then he solves everything.

Henry Jooste

Henry also abides by the belief in an omnipotent God:

Religion is very important. If you believe the Lord, Mister, then the Lord will give you everything—and he gives you grace as well.

But, Henry is clearer than Abraham on the link between being a Christian and suffering:

If you don't do the right thing, the Lord will make that you suffer. A person has to suffer.

This poses a dilemma: since Henry suffers, he must have done something wrong. But, Henry's suffering is an everyday reality in his life and it is very much connected to his state of poverty—it cannot be argued that he brings it on himself. On the one hand, Henry laments the structural inequalities he experiences, but on the other hand he accepts that “the Lord will make that you suffer” and that because of the institutional suppression there was no other way to go. This pernicious form of unfreedom brings us to the next theme in the narratives.

Experiencing Suppression

In keeping with their views on identity and place-belongingness, both participants experience a strong sense of a boundary between themselves and their employers. Deeply embedded discourses and practices separate them from the farm owners. Both Abraham and Henry refer to their employer as “master” and both have experienced a lifetime of being subordinates in the workplace, of belonging to a mixed (and sometimes referred to as an inferior) race (“Colored”), and of being members of a disenfranchised racial group. Not being part of “them” and not feeling a sense of ownership of place lead to the absence of a feeling of belonging, as well as to a sense of being inferior.

Abraham Wessels

When asked if he feels suppressed as a member of the Colored population group,⁵ Abraham answers in the affirmative. He then quickly brings an age-old and religiously-based argument to justify his suppression. His argument is not unlike the one perpetuating the caste system in India, which sanctions—almost guarantees—the moral rightness of servitude:

Yes, Mister, actually. But, as I look at my case, I see: we continue like this. If the Lord made us in such a way that we were all the same height, nobody would have wanted to work under someone else. And no one would have helped anyone else. Now the Lord has to change this matter in this way. So, if I can, I must now help. Now I have to help my master so that he can get ahead—like working with the sheep and those things. Now if we were all the same height, something like this wouldn't work. Now the Lord knew well, he had good knowledge.

We notice, also, the slippage of meaning between the phrases “work under someone else” and “helped anyone else.” What is in fact work is reformulated by Abraham as giving help. It is an evocative revelation of his position as a serf that he accepts this role, and moreover accepts it as corresponding to a good moral order of life. It shows how the perpetuation of inequity and inequalities are constructed

⁵ Historically the “Colored” population has been discriminated against for being neither Black nor White and thus not fitting in anywhere. To some readers this may seem a disrespectful or politically incorrect question. South Africans are more likely to openly discuss racial tensions than to tread carefully around them. Perhaps this is a response to the often-enforced silence that apartheid brought about?

through intersubjective sedimentation (Berger and Luckmann 1967:85-86) of meanings and practices that slowly but surely shape a shared social reality.

Abraham accepts that his labor should result in his employer flourishing while he literally and figuratively “stays in the same place,” to borrow from an earlier quote. It is almost as if he volunteers himself for suppression:

There has to be [a system of] let me do the work. And I also say so: I agree one hundred percent. There has to be let me do the work. Then it can...then it works. Each one feels...I feel: it is good that the Lord made it available.

It is an indictment of post-apartheid South Africa that our multiracial society is still a racial one. And that wealth remains distributed along racial lines. In his statement below, Abraham's remark reflects something of the sentiment of many so-called “Colored” people regarding the relative positioning in society of one population group in relation to another, a hierarchy which is seen by some as being heralded in by the ANC:

The Colored, Mister, it is like I said...And if you look, the Colored is still a little below. Then the Bantu are still a little above. If you look carefully, you will see: he saw to it. He saw to it that he is now a little above. He took care that he can be above.

Around the period when a formal and legal status was conferred on apartheid, Frantz Fanon (1968:61-81) wrote in his book published in French in 1952 under the title *Peau Noire, Masques Blanc* (*Black Skin,*

White Masks) on the so-called dependency complex of colonized people. He launched an attack on a view of his time that feelings of inferiority among members of an oppressed part of society could be found even before colonization. For Fanon, a society is either racist or not racist. The racism coinciding with colonization is no different from any other form of racism. All forms of exploitation, irrespective if coinciding with colonization, are equally the same—and need to be rejected. Perhaps Fanon is correct when concluding that many people who find themselves in racist societies suffer from inferiority feelings. They suffer from these feelings because the societies in which they find themselves enhance these feelings of inferiority—not because they are inherently inferior (Fanon 1968:74).

Over the three long sessions during which we spoke to Abraham we see the workings of inferiority institutionalized in language. In the first session, he referred 40 times to his employer, the land owner, as “my master” (*My Baas* in the Afrikaans language) and no fewer than 172 further times did he address the first author of this article as “master” (*Baas*) even though no employment relationship existed between him and the first author. On a further 51 occasions he addressed the first author as “my great master” (*My Grootbaas*). At the end of this first session the first author put it to Abraham that his calling him “master / great master” caused embarrassment and he requested him kindly to refrain from doing so. Nine months later during our second session he consistently addressed the first author as “mister” (*Meneer*). Henry only addressed the first author as “mister” (*Meneer*), which reflects something of his more critical attitude towards old apartheid norms.

Henry Jooste

Like Abraham, Henry also conveys the impression that he accepts the inferior positioning and resultant subordination of one population group vis-à-vis another. And again his narrative shows how the power that accompanies race and wealth is strongly reinforced through language:

I still call [the boss] master and *Seur* [the boss's father and original boss] and *Miesies* [the boss's wife]. Yes, we did say master [*Baas*] and great master [*Grootbaas*] and small master [*Kleinbaas*]. That we heard from our parents. I think [we speak to them in this manner] because of the suffering. You had to call the White owner *Seur* because he was the highest. Then you had a foreman, master [*Baas*], a White foreman. I also had to say to him *Baas, Baas Sarel*. But, for the owner of the farm it was *Seur*.

Henry's narrative tells of more direct forms of suppression that are historically institutionalized through unfair treatment and exploitation:

Yes, we did get paid. But, that time, how can I say, I almost don't know what we were paid. And if you asked about the pay, the *Seur* got angry. Then he would say: "No, why do you want to know?" Today workers know. My children know. But, my father went to "pay" for me [received payment]. When he died, that is when I went to "pay" for myself. But no, it wasn't even worth the while.

One of the worst aspects of this for Henry is his sense of having colluded with this exploitation, although in reality there was little that he or his community

could do. So again, the (misguided) idea emerges of being personally responsible for suffering and therefore deserving it. Drawing on Alexander (2012), we argue that practices and languages of oppression associated with serfdom became a threat to collective identity in as far as they damaged the psyche—the communal sense of self-worth—of whole communities of people who live and labor as serfs. According to Alexander (2012), collective trauma occurs when negative experiences inflicted by one group on another are conceived as wounds to social identity. From Henry's narrative it would seem that there is an alternative standpoint—one that links to Fanon's (1968:74, 61-81) insights—whereby the victims of collective trauma think: "We did this to ourselves":

How can I say? We gave our life up, just like that. We went out and worked almost for nothing. Yes, you can say that we worked almost for nothing.

We would complain, but not to the man [owner]. We complained amongst each other. We would not go to the man, we were afraid. The man can chase me away. Where will I find work? If the man chases you away, where are you to find work?

Yes, we felt that we were going backwards and the man was going forward. But you worked just for free. It did bother people. But, people were afraid. Where would you find a new master?

There is a symbolic collective closing of the ranks against the owner, but in fact the community is powerless in the absence of any viable alternatives. Their fear of retribution and of losing what security they have are very real threats to unskilled laborers

in a country with such high unemployment levels. But, apart from this, Henry is also trapped in the mindset of serfdom: he does not conceive of a solution other than finding "a new master":

If I went to another farm, that farmer would phone my previous master and would ask him: "What kind of a boy was he?" Then the previous master would say: "No, he was such a boy or he was such a boy." Then the farmer would come back and say: "No, man, I did look for a man, but I found one." Then you had to go and try to get another master. And you would go along until one day when you would maybe find a master.

Again the language use tells us a lot about race and belonging. To call a man a "boy" harks back to an old and racial practice among some Whites during the apartheid days; it is very insulting as it insinuates that the employee is not an adult. In Henry's narrative—his meaning-making of an imaginary scenario—the employer does not repeat this insult to the farm worker's face. Instead, the employer replaces the insulting diminutive "boy" with the word "man." His rendition of the imaginary conversation between the two White bosses reveals how Henry perceives the existence of an underhand, almost secret, form of racism.

Unlike Abraham, who is far more complacent in the face of having to labor for all his life without reaping much in the way of material rewards, Henry is more vehement about this injustice of his situation.

Gee whiz, we couldn't keep animals, nothing. We didn't have an income; it was only the pay, those few

Rands and then it was finished. You were only, how can I put it, you were only alive. You needed to live for your stomach and for your children.

Yes, the Brown man [Colored] helped the White man. How many times did I have to help him with everything—looking after his cattle, everything.

Yes, that time it was not living together. The White man stayed on his own. He was on his own, and you were only a helper, you could say. Yes, I was only a helper. Because if he wanted to send me up that mountain, then I had to go! I can't say no. Because if I say no, then I had to go to the road.

Notwithstanding the lack of freedom and the difficulties of his situation, Henry does not seem to be able to imagine a world where he is not accountable to another. Perhaps his fatalism functions as a form of reassurance for him?

But, what can you do? You need to work. You can't simply sit. There will always be someone that will look over you.

The media is saturated with examples of unrest, riots, resistance, and protests of large numbers of the South African society. Similar to other parts of Africa and several Western countries, it is the younger generation that has a greater sense of equity and is more inclined to resist domination and deprivation. Abraham and Henry's stories reflect the disposition of a small group of South Africans who accept, or at least endure, a life of suffering and suppression. Nonetheless, their stories should not be ignored or moved to the background.

Existential Suffering

As we see from the largest parts of his narratives, Abraham does not see himself as an outright suppressed and exploited human who experiences existential suffering. He lives in peace with himself, his employer, and his fellow people. He also lives in peace with his concrete reality. Henry is more explicit when describing his life as a life of suffering.

Abraham Wessels

When looking back over his life, one period of existential suffering stands out for Abraham: the period of his substance (alcohol) addiction:

Mister, that was when I was still in-the-world. At that point I still grabbed the world. I had to be in the world and it needed to be only good. But, it wasn't good for me. I came across dark days. I suffered a lot. That was when I still took the drink.

The abuse of alcohol became for Abraham a personal enslavement and, as we interpret it, a double dose of slavery in his everyday life. The abuse of alcohol among farm workers in South Africa is commonplace. It has serious implications for other aspects of social life, such as violence in interpersonal relationships, and fetal alcohol syndrome (Gossage et al. 2014). Fortunately, Abraham gave up alcohol:

Mister, that was what was with me: the drinking. And that was a bad time in life. It destroys you. But, further life was not so dark. But, the drinking. It creates something terrible. Yes, I stayed in the world. But, I had to come [out of it].

Then me and my wife came to a decision. I then said: "Man, we can't continue. We can't. We'll have to decide to go off this road." Mister, I suffered a lot! I had dark days. I had difficult times. I was looking at the trap [mouth] of the bag.

By using the expression "I was looking at the trap [mouth] of the bag" Abraham refers to the abuse of cheap wine packaged in an aluminum foil bag inside a box. He perceives this incident that coincided mainly with his and his wife's act of volition as the lowest point of his life. The fact that he found himself for the largest part of his life as part of a social and political dispensation that ascribed to him and his family a range of fundamental restrictions seems to be of lesser importance.

Abraham's decision to quit drinking is uniquely personal one, but, as May (2011a; 2011b) reminds us, the self and society are mutually constitutive. Progress towards a better society can be created by the continuous affirmation of meaning and by the decisions made by individuals to create a meaningful life (see the work of François Perroux 1983).

Henry Jooste

I will describe my life as difficult. And it is even difficult until today.

Yes, look at my children, I can give them nothing. I can't even tell them that when I am dead, there will be a house. They have to suffer like a tortoise. When the small tortoise is hatched, he has to go his own way. When I look back at my life, it is a life of suffering.

Henry's metaphor holds another meaning pertinent to his lifeworld: a tortoise carries its home on its back. What he is born with is all that he has—his only inheritance.

Concluding Insights

At best Abraham and Henry's narratives reveal a small part of their deeper experiences and the selection presented here opens only a tiny window on their lives. As the narratives reveal, individual everyday experience often oscillates between solidarity and division, freedom and oppression, power and powerlessness, capital and poverty, exploitation and equality. They also show how belonging is constructed at the individual and societal levels.

Interpretation of the narratives connects to a basic assumption of critical theory: that a person can become more than what he/she is at a given moment. This issue of "increased humanness" (Coetzee 2001:122) is related to the emancipatory intention to aid the development of the communicative capacity in society (Habermas 1984; 1987). It is the duty of the social scientist to remind members of society continuously that they find themselves in a social reality that can become different/better than their present reality. Becoming a better society is described by Marc Olshan (1983:17) as: "the well-coordinated series of changes, sudden or gradual, whereby a given population **and all of its components** [our emphasis] move from a phase of life perceived as less human to one perceived as more human."

A free society creates conditions for the actualization of each individual's full potential (person-

hood). In terms of this description, South Africa has not yet reached full freedom. Freedom implies a focus on the significance of individuals' capacities to achieve the kind of lives they have reason to value. It is not just a matter of subjective well-being and the means to a good life should not merely be available in theory. In this regard, Thomas Wells (n.d.) is correct when stating in his contribution to the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (on the issue of "Sen's Capabilities Approach"): "A person's capacity to live a good life is defined in terms of the set of valuable 'beings and doings' like being in good health or having loving relationships towards others to which they have real access." But, it goes further: the capacity to lead a good life also coincides with access to the most basic needs of social justice, humanity, and respect.

In the concluding remarks of his book on Frantz Fanon and how Fanon's work can influence the relationship between intellectuals and grassroots movements, Nigel Gibson (2011) draws a distinction between "pragmatic liberals" and "fundamentally anti-systemic dialecticians." He continues: "The former consider the poor as a sociological fact to be studied; the latter consider work with a poor people's movement as a process and a praxis" (Gibson 2011:215). In terms of the latter perspective, the intellectual activity can (and should) play a role towards stimulating the reflexive capacity for producing consciousness of action (cf. Guibernau 2013:16). The research on which this article is based is not participatory action research that aims to accompany the participants in the research process towards active critical involvement and resistance against their situation. On the other hand,

this research does not merely reflect an objective account of a phenomenon within the South African society. We trust that this research can assist in creating a deeper understanding with regards to inequality and inadequate participation in as far

as some members of the South African society are concerned. Whatever the primary focus, research needs to continuously contribute to the decolonization of the mind—both of the researcher and of the researched.

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