

## The Underside of Formality: Navigating Documents in a Migrant Labour Force

Maxim Bolt

University of Birmingham

*Documents are central to the infrastructure through which formal workforces are constituted and measured. This paper examines both in terms of their social productivity, and the everyday forms of circulation they precipitate. It develops Jane Guyer's exploration of formality as a patchwork of plural 'formalizations', whose fixity and rule-boundedness are uneven. And it explores the materiality and the pragmatics of paperwork in the context of this unevenness. The paper focuses on the margins of South Africa, a country usually depicted in terms of its robust formal sector. On the border with Zimbabwe, thousands of farm workers are employed on permanent and seasonal contracts. While white farmers engage regularly with state and corporate agencies, black workers' lives are shaped by cross-border mobility, and dislocation born of the Zimbabwean crisis. Connections to officialdom are fragments of formality. But documentation also offers possibilities for navigating a transient world of strangers. Workers learn to hop between documents, mobilising hierarchical relationships as they convert gradually from less to more durable forms of official identity. In the shifting sands of crisis and insecurity, employees attempt to gain traction through circuits of paperwork and the constellation of fixed points that official and semi-official documents appear to represent. It is this navigation through diverse social relationships that underlies the infrastructure of formality.*

### Introduction

Stack after stack of pallets, each piled high with crates of oranges, await the trucks that will take them from the farm of Grootplaas, located on South Africa's border with Zimbabwe, to the port of Durban on South Africa's Indian Ocean coast. From there, ships will take them to countries across Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Different crate designs signal different agents, buyers, and brands. The logos of British supermarkets and American citrus providers jostle with those of Capespan fruit agents and the local Limpopo Valley trade name. Michael, Grootplaas's personnel manager and packshed administrator, moves between the pallets, dressed in a white coat and armed with a clipboard. Key to his role is producing the labels that detail each pallet's journey. As they sit next to the loading bay, the pallets of oranges evoke industrial-scale production, global connections, and the clinical formality of factories in the fields. Certainly, this is a long way from the old stereotypes of South African farms as quasi-feudal, anachronistic backwaters.

At the very centre of the packshed's network of conveyor belts, and the gantries overlooking them, is Michael's harvest-time office. Visible to all, it is a statement about the importance of paperwork in the work of the farm. Alongside the export labels and documents lie Grootplaas's personnel records, for which Michael is also responsible as personnel manager. These follow Michael in a bank of filing cabinets, as his work moves seasonally between the packshed and the farm's workshop. The contents tell one version of work and life on the border farms. Applications for employment, contracts, South African documents for 'normalisation' (regularisation), and records of dismissal all speak in a corporate register — 'thank you for your interest in our company', the application for employment declares. But, among these documents, Zimbabwean departure permits signed by thumbprint speak of another reality — of migrant workers fleeing the estate, even without their official identification.

Working on the border farms involves constantly relating to official and semi-official documents and institutionalised arrangements. This is what we expect of formal employment. But what exactly is the nature of formality here? Substantial intellectual energy has been invested in understanding informality (e.g. Hart 1973; MacGaffey 1991; Roitman 2004; Meagher 2010). Yet, if the idea of a real economy beyond official measurement has been well explored, the 'formal sector' and the techniques that rend it 'real' have more often been taken for granted.

On South Africa's border farms, formal employment incorporates migrants into social arrangements that organise space and time. Labour hierarchies bring round-the-clock authority that extends into the residential labour compound. They shape the possibilities for basing informal trade and smuggling in the compound — even acquiring formal employment as a means to anchor existing business activities. Work routines and attachment to the farms mitigate the extreme transience of the border itself (see Bolt 2012, 2015). This paper trace how broader economic lives in a migrant labour setting intersect with the contracts, permits and inspections that sustain an official register of 'labour

relations’. Jane Guyer (2004) has usefully explored ‘formalities’ in the plural, suggesting a more fragmented picture than an overarching notion of ‘the formal’. Here my aim is to begin to unpick what is actual formal in formal employment itself. How does formality – given that it is not actually a thing – emerge as an effect of social relations in and beyond a work force?

### **Formality, ‘the economy’, and economic lives**

Such an approach has broader implications in economic anthropology and sociology. In important recent analyses, ‘the economic’ is produced as an object of expertise, and through infrastructures of distributed human and non-human agency (see Caliskan and Callon 2009 and 2010, for a survey of the field). This perspective emphasises regulation and measurement, and their categories and effects – a useful starting point for considering formality. But in doing so, it provokes questions about economic lives more broadly. How do people’s attempts to make a living weave in and out of the infrastructures and the frames of reference that constitute ‘the economy’ as object?

This has particular significance in South Africa. Formal logics of state and capital have a bureaucratic reach and an imaginative hold that are striking in the region. Studies consequently integrate life on the ground with a relatively coherent infrastructure of public and private institutions (see e.g. James 2014; von Schnitzler 2014; Ferguson 2015). There are enormous benefits to this sensitivity—not least, an ability to keep scale in play. Yet analytical terms that constitute ‘the economy’ as object can betray a bias to formal regulatory rhetoric (Guyer 2014). In debates about the fate of formal work (e.g. Seekings and Nattrass 2005; Callebert 2014), what emerges is a world in which formality is a ‘sector’, and in which workers’ livelihoods might plausibly be addressed in the universalist, material/structural idiom of a ‘standard of living’ (Guyer 2014: 149). South Africa can appear less messy, more structurally determined, more sharply categorized.

The view from the margins is instructive. On South Africa's border with Zimbabwe, beyond the packshed with its labelled, bar-coded crates and its conveyor belts for grading and boxing fruit, formality is not so much a uniform mode of employment and life, as a diverse mosaic of connections to officialdom. State institutions 'see' (Scott 1999) Grootplaas through spotlights such as inspections, permits, and employment contracts. Navigating these spotlights takes skill on the part of Grootplaas's white farmers. They learn how to present the farm while continuing to operate according to their own rules. In the process, state and farm institutions interlock, together shaping workers' lives while sustaining the reality of the categories 'personnel' and 'labour relations'.

Meanwhile Grootplaas's black workers also navigate the terrain of formality. Worker committees foreground idioms of due process, yet they are co-opted into existing, personalised hierarchies. And, crucially, a range of more or less official documents is key to workers' lives, strategies, and self-understandings. Many migrants arrive with little other than their Zimbabwean identity cards and sheaves of qualification certificates, whose power comes from the presumed durability of their meaning and value through time. Once employed, different identity documents attaching workers to the farm enable new conditions for life. For workers as much as for their employers, using documents takes adeptness: deciding when to reveal them; taking them beyond the purposes for which they were originally intended; converting between different forms of official and semi-official identity. Between the two extremes archived in Grootplaas's filing cabinets — corporate personnel records and abandoned identity cards and papers — is a world in which workers negotiate their everyday lives and their possibilities for the future.

Recent scholarship has explored the place of documents in governing people and space, and in the ways people 'acquiesce to, contest, or use this governance' (Hull 2012: 1) In what Matthew Hull describes as the 'political economy of paper', documents are 'graphic artifacts [whose] 'circulation ... creates associations among people that often differ from formal organisational structures' (ibid: 18).

His particular focus is on bureaucracies. But, whether in offices or on remote border estates, such associations have far-reaching consequences. For Ferraris (2013), documents are formalised ‘traces’ – ‘inscriptions’ that attest in officially recognised ways to people’s past acts and current status (ibid: 253-4). Publicly acknowledged ‘traces’ take on particular significance, in a place where migrants attempt to achieve a degree of stability amidst transience. Papers are crucial to farm workers’ attempts to shape their circumstances. What I present here, then, is a story about brokering formality through social relations, in which official and semi-official paperwork becomes the focal point for negotiation because of its apparent fixity of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Taken together, these perspectives invite a view of formal production and employment that foregrounds *specific* connections between workers, between workers and employers, and between the workplace and state officials. It examines people’s attempts to control and stabilise the meanings of such connections, through particular objects and processes. On the margins of an African economy in which ‘the formal’ appears structurally more dominant (Guyer 2014) and looms larger in people’s imaginations (Barchiesi 2011) than in most places on the continent, workers and employers nevertheless encounter formalities (in the plural) as a constellation of points through which to navigate.

### **Fragmented formality on South Africa’s margins**

Grootplaas is one of a string of family-run crop estates, located on the southern bank of the Limpopo River, which marks South Africa’s border with Zimbabwe. Many of these farms are large and high-profile. Grootplaas itself employs 140 permanent workers, and 460 seasonal workers during the picking season. The farm reached one million crates of citrus in 2007, during my fieldwork, and its oranges and grapefruits were being sold in British and other EU supermarkets, as well as in the Middle East and East Asia.

Tied into global supply chains, Grootplaas is regulated through both state and non-state inspections. The Department of Labour, for example, visits the border farms for periodic evaluations of working conditions. GLOBALG.A.P (formerly EUREPGAP), a standards agency that certifies produce for European markets, surveys hygiene conditions as well as ‘worker welfare’. Some supermarkets have their own, even stricter investigation processes. It is during all of these, of course, that the filing cabinets of worker records become important, as they stand for proper procedure on the farm.

This appears to be indicative of a South Africa of far-reaching formality, in which the economy is dominated by regulated international linkages, oversight is the basis of a pervasive infrastructure, and life in the workforce has different rules from life outside. Scholarship on wage labour in southern Africa has long explored the implications of inclusion in export-oriented enclaves (e.g. Gluckman 1961; Moodie with Ndatshé 1994). But the official linkages with Grootplaas are spotlights, and limited ones at best. Especially at its margins, South Africa has historically been characterised by limited state capacity, and a high degree of institutional blindness and incoherence (Bolt 2015; MacDonald 2012). Today, ‘the people’ remain largely illegible to bureaucrats responsible for governing the right to settle in the country (Hoag 2010). On South Africa’s farms, assumptions persist that white landowners have a kind of sovereign, paternalist authority over their territory and ‘their people’, further complicating what it means for estates like Grootplaas to come under state purview (see e.g. Rutherford 2008). Even in a post-apartheid era of minimum wages, required work conditions, and stipulated access to housing, determining what exactly is formal in farm employment is no simple matter.

During inspections, workers do not speak up in cases where conditions are considered dangerous, out of fear of repercussions with their employers. Private dissatisfaction, for example about the risks of burning the packaging from chemical fertiliser without protective masks, does not translate into public complaint. Meanwhile, attention to life in the labour compound outside work time is cursory at best. An inspection is announced, the moment arrives, few workers even encounter the

assessment, and then it is all over. Otherwise, as a Human Rights Watch report (2006) found, shortly before my fieldwork, legal frameworks relating to living conditions are enforced in partial and selective ways on the border's estates.

Not all of this patchiness favours employers. The farmers feel their own incorporation into state infrastructures to be selective and incomplete. They pay tax. But their electricity comes directly from the national provider, Eskom, via their own substation. Their water comes from boreholes and the river. They gather and burn their own waste. And they grade their own dirt roads, even those that are marked on the map as public thoroughfares. Some farmers build small schools for workers' children, but the publicly employed teachers that staff them only sometimes appear. During my fieldwork, a Department of Health mobile clinic began coming to the farms, but its visits were rare and infrequent. The farms draw few resources from the municipality, and a whole range of state employees are conspicuously absent. With undigitised personnel records and extremely slow internet connections, the farms often feel a long way away from state infrastructures. Different state institutions stand for particular kinds of regulation, with different interplays of attention and absence. But they generally manifest themselves through a kind of scaling, encompassing effect – their power to arrive virtually unannounced, or even not to arrive at all (see Ferguson and Gupta 2002).

In this fragmented picture, the army and the police are stark exceptions to a general rule of state neglect. For workers and farmers, much everyday interaction with state employees means negotiating their presence. In the wake of the Zimbabwean crisis and the hyperinflation that accompanied it, an extraordinarily diverse migrant population – in terms of regional, ethnic and class-based origin – has sought unskilled farm employment in recent years, under conditions of extreme vulnerability (Rutherford and Addison, 2007; Rutherford, 2008). This led to a flurry of hostile media reporting, as well as popular xenophobia throughout South Africa (see Morreira 2010). On the border during the period of fieldwork, it translated into a regime of frequent, aggressive police deportation raids.<sup>2</sup> Fearing

discovery, seasonal workers would often avoid their rooms altogether, instead braving freezing, winter nights hidden in dry riverbeds. For farmers, all of this made for docile working populations (see Human Rights Watch 2006). On the other hand, the paperwork required to replace deported workers was a considerable inconvenience, especially since deportees generally returned to their jobs within days, after climbing back through the border fence. As for the police, their aggressive presence was only matched by their absence when it came to keeping the peace.

This description of transience and vulnerability sounds exceptional. But farmers in northern South Africa have long relied on cross-border migrants who faced crisis at home (Werbner 1991; Bolt in press 2015) and coercive, highly exploitative conditions as they sought work (van Onselen 1976; Bradford 1993; Murray 1995). Today, farmers across the country – and especially near borders – respond to market liberalisation by capitalising on a floating reserve of migrant labour (Johnston 2007). The experiences of farm workers on the Limpopo River represent not so much an exception as an extreme case of a wider historical and contemporary trend.

Yet even this coercive dimension of state attention is localised in important ways. Farmers regularly meet police and army chiefs to negotiate how their workers might be left alone by border patrols. As I discuss later in the paper, one result is that the farms produce their own ID cards, part of a longer story of ill-defined accommodations between ‘formal’ regulation and farmers’ government of their own workforces. Meanwhile, farm workers have themselves localised the army presence. During the harvest, soldiers escort police raids onto the farms. But even in that part of the year, the same soldiers, lonely in their garrisons, also spend weekends at the farm compounds’ *shebeens* (illegal bars), looking for beer and company. At one point, soldiers even assembled a football team, so that they could compete in the tournament held between the teams of the different farm workforces. Workers in turn draw on soldiers, with their apparently incontestable official positions and uniforms, to mediate disputes in the labour force and underwrite everyday vigilante justice. While soldiers’ connections to



the workforces are multi-faceted, their connection to their commander is more attenuated. Concrete indicators of soldiers' on-the-ground performance are limited to holes cut in the border fence by would-be migrants, bullets fired on border duty, and people detained. Between these are the complex realities of actually serving in a border garrison. The soldiers' situations foreground the tenuous connections to officialdom beyond the area, and the ways these intersect with, and are mobilised within, on-farm arrangements.

Spotlights of official attention are disconnected and multiple, and each is a point of partial regulation at best. What requires more sustained attention, therefore, are the points of connection, and the brokering of particular relationships within and beyond the workforce, that generate a sense of formality. These often revolve around particular official and semi-official documents, with their apparent authority. The next section takes a particular focus on their uses by workers, in negotiating everyday recognition, security, and legitimacy in the workforce. I begin with the contract itself.

### **Formality from the contract outwards**

The farm's contracts represent a juxtaposition of formal categorisation and fixity, on the one hand, and half-hearted and flexible execution, on the other. They demand a description under 'position of employee', and some specification of where on the estate the recruit will work. Hours of work and daily pay are specified. Three lines for completion by hand at the foot of the page — 'on behalf of employer', 'date', 'employee' — suggests a parallel symmetry in the employment situation. But, within this rubric, matters are left as vague as possible. Most employees are simply 'farm hands'. The workplace of those not based in the packshed is usually 'lands', the estate's vast hectares of orchards, and even this is subject to transfer as required. And the contract may not actually be signed by the employee at all.

As for hours and pay, the form of the contract gives the impression that clock time predominates across the farm (see Thompson 1967). While the packshed, run around its conveyor belts, somewhat conforms to this model (if one turns a blind eye to periods of unpaid ‘preparation time’), picking in the orchards is actually remunerated through team-based piece rates. Workers are paid for the number of trailers their team have filled per month, divided by the number of pickers in their group (usually thirty). Days of work have broadly similar lengths (ten hours rather than the eight hours that appears on the contract), but even this varies according to whether there is a backlog at the packshed or whether, conversely, there is a rush to finish a particular batch. Far from the abstract regularity implied by the contract, then, workers’ actual experiences of work revolve around the rhythms of gang labour. Pace is maintained by calls from supervisors and other colleagues (see Bolt 2010). Workers are aware of how fast they are working largely in relation to neighbouring teams, as supervisors chalk tallies onto the backs of trailers and compete aggressively with one another. Indeed, the value of labour comes to be experienced through praise and admonishment, collective effort and rivalry.

By the end of each month, workers are unable to tell whether their pay reflects their labour at all. Rather, payday is experienced by seasonal workers as a ritual affirming the formality of the contract. One at a time, they ‘sign’ for pay with a thumbprint, at a table outside the office, in return for a paper packet adorned with dot-matrix typescript. This announces employee and remuneration details, but workers can only check the contents against the number on the outside. Individualised, abstracted, and calculated out of sight in the farm offices, it appears to have little to do with the last month’s exertions. All of this, of course, is useful for employers. The fact that workers cannot pick fast enough to make up their theoretical daily rate (the national minimum wage) does not bring any risk of added state scrutiny. Reportedly, the South African state’s loss of test farms since apartheid means that it cannot investigate how quickly farm work can reasonably be accomplished. Farmers must simply ensure that they set their piece-rates at the same levels as one another, in conversation with lawyers.

Much of the contract has only a tenuous relationship with recruits' lives on the farm or before arrival. But it does have a place in a chain of documentation. Understanding this chain is crucial to understanding how workers live through and around paperwork – their claims to formal identities of various kinds. Anthropologists have recently highlighted the ways bureaucratic documents are grist to the mill of everyday negotiation and manipulation, and how they actively shape the networks that result (see e.g. Riles 2006; Hull 2012, 2012a). Useful here is Elizabeth Hull's insight that 'material certificates, documents and ... aesthetics ... are essential' to an institution's appeal to formality (2012: 172). Yet, as Reeves (2013) has shown in relation to labour migrants in Moscow, the use of official and semi-official documents depends on mobilising them in convincing performances. It is important to extend these insights into analyses of workforces, if we are to examine critically what is formal inside formal employment. In a workforce like Grootplaas, documents work as fragmentary badges of formality – as putative connections to officialdom. Yet this is far from simple. Formality appears to emerge from documents, because of people's investment in ensuring or defending their authority and efficacy. But these documents are in fact focal points in the relationships through which the legitimacy of formality comes to be experienced. To all this, we need to add another dimension – how workers convert between documents, and in the process create a degree of unity from this fragmentary picture.

Arriving on the border farms means braving the Limpopo River and climbing through the double razor-wire fence. The Limpopo River itself presents risks: from drowning or crocodile attacks when it is in flood, to abuse, assault, or rape by *magumaguma* – gangs that operate along the border – or by South African soldiers (see SPT 2004). Migrants' experience of transience is one of temporal fragmentation and spatial insecurity (see Vigh 2008). And, for many who have travelled a long way, the border is a place where they are total strangers. The white game farmer who trains soldiers to track 'border jumpers' routinely finds the bodies of exhausted, dehydrated migrants under trees in the bush,

empty water bottles still in hand. More generally, some long-distance migrants float through the border area like ghosts, taking water and occasionally some unfinished maize-meal porridge from doorways.

Guyer (2004) points out that formality often appears to people in Africa through the apparent fixity of more or less official documents. This has particular implications amidst the transience of the Zimbabwean-South African border. In this world of enduring dislocation, migrants' documents – as socially recognised 'inscriptions' of people's histories (Ferraris 2013) – represent a particular kind of stability. Zimbabwean national identity cards — durable metal plates — bear their owners' personal information, including area of origin. Sheaves of certificates bearing histories of qualifications — school and even university grades, courses taken alongside employment in administration or IT, proof of training from public health NGOs — are carefully protected, ready to be revealed and mobilised at the right moment. Countermanding the footloose experience of migration, then, are groups of objects whose meaning once appeared unimpeachable. In their capacity to connect past lives to future possibilities, such formal (official and semi-official) documents belong to a wider category of prize possessions among migrants. Lists of contact numbers in South Africa (see Hall 2013) cast previous relationships as chances for shelter and employment. Photo albums recall happier days and comfortable families, acting both as memories and as assertions of former status.

While the aura of official documents comes from the apparent stability of their meaning, acquiring work and gaining traction on the border means mobilising these documents in specific interactions. The meaning of identity cards appears obvious, but it is precisely the way they stand for their owners that enables them to become points of apparent fixity around which workers and job-seekers negotiate their positions. Officially, the recruitment of seasonal workers happens in the open — an official process in which a senior worker stands on a low wall and collects the cards from throngs of outstretched hands. But the real significance of identity cards' centrality in recruitment emerges off-stage. The arrangement, that if a senior figure takes one's card one will be given work, is quickly

learned by new arrivals. The risks of giving up one's card should not be underestimated; workers' cards are periodically misplaced, and they find themselves in the strange limbo of being on the farm's books but at risk of losing any officially recognised identity. As we will see below, once migrants acquire alternative badges of officialdom, a few are willing to abandon their Zimbabwean cards altogether.

Those who do secure a job enter the world of farm paperwork. The first stage is a formal 'application for employment', whose discursive register is conspicuously removed from the racialised world of South African agriculture, and stark subordination by both white farmers and black foreman and supervisors. On the one hand, the closing statement on the form reads 'Thank you for your interest shown in our company'. On the other, recruits' fingerprints are then taken and they line up for photographs, during which they are exposed to objectification and humiliation by management – on one occasion, the white secretary loudly complained about the smell of their bodies. Information is sought. After asking for the 'applicant's' title, home address, nationality, place and date of birth, marital status, and children's particulars, the application form demands an assessment of linguistic ability in Afrikaans, English and other languages, and requests references. But little is corroborated. Linguistic ability is largely determined by self-assessment. And when I was shown through the personnel records, I found only two references from previous employers, both simply describing the worker's departure as a matter of 'seeking greener pastures'.

This, then, is the moment when the contract appears. We have already seen how little it bears resemblance to the world beyond the filing cabinet where it is stored. But the contract does have three clear external referents: the recruit's ID document number; whether he or she has submitted copies of 'school, academic, apprenticeship (completed) or any other educational qualifications'; and the employee number allocated by the farm, which then takes on its own life. We have already seen how central a recruit's ID card is to his or her experience of getting a job. The same may be said of certificates, and some skill is similarly involved in mobilising them. They need presenting quietly, and

to the right people. One seasonal worker, a former teacher, had A-levels, a Bachelors degree, and a postgraduate diploma. Announcing his background to Michael, the highly educated personnel manager, initially secured a clerical job. But a soured relationship with him – borne of a sense of competition – soon led to demotion back to picking. Michael himself had kept his certificates a secret, and then taken them straight to the farmer, not to a fellow worker.

The third external referent on the contract, the farm ID number, points forward into employment; it takes on a life of its own after recruitment. That is because it is the basis of a worker's farm ID card. Responding to huge delays in processing seasonal workers, farms make laminated employment cards and issue them to workers. Ad-hoc agreements between farmers, police, and army mean that patrols generally accept the cards from workers so long as they remain on the estates. These, then, are recognised documents attesting to sponsorship by white farmers, which protect black workers and offer them some degree of security, in a world where farmers are understood to have some sovereignty over their land. Moving around on the border road, or elsewhere off the estates, is more dangerous. Yet the provisional security afforded by proof of connection to the farms is so valuable for diverse livelihood strategies that a market in forged employment cards developed in the Zimbabwean border town of Beitbridge.

The understanding on which farm ID cards are built has its own history. In the 1990s, the farms on the Limpopo were considered part of a 'special employment zone' in the vicinity of the border, in which the usual bureaucratic processes could be bypassed. Special permits allowed Zimbabweans to enter South Africa if they were linked to a specific farmer, and the South African border authorities even established an 'informal' border post at a garrison by the farms so that farmers could pick up recruits literally on the edge of their estates (see Lincoln and Maririke 2000). Even so, it was understood that many workers would cross illegally and expect regularisation on the farms themselves. While the special employment zone has long been discontinued, and farmers' corporate permits for

workers are the same as elsewhere in the country, this understanding continues. Seasonal recruits are always regularised after they start work, they bear the risks, but their existence is also always negotiable, sometimes tacitly legitimated and sometimes requiring more explicit negotiation.

The historical resonance of farm IDs – the fact that migrants’ engagement with space depends on privately issued proof of attachment to white landowners – is not lost on workers. For newcomers, the cards stand for racialised agricultural arrangements that seem peculiarly anachronistic. For veteran workers, these arrangements are simply a continuation of what came before. In any case, the cards’ material form underlines the power relations for which they stand. As a ‘graphic genre’ (Hull 2012: 15), these documents are distinguished by the fact that they stand for the private authority of farmers and their families, yet they are in effect semi-official. Each is homemade, cut from a piece of paper prepared on a home computer. And on each, a cartoon-style, Clipart image of a fruit tree – the farm’s logo – dominates. The farm punches a star-shaped hole into the edge of the rough lamination for each month of employment, confirming for any patrol that the bearer has been working continuously on the estate since the card’s stated date of issue. Such an extension of private power over workforces has long characterised white agriculture in the region, in what Rutherford (2001) has called ‘domestic government’.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, at this point workers begin to be treated as officially legitimate. Yet this is uneven – it has to be negotiated and renegotiated. Moreover, whereas permanent workers’ demeanours mean that they are rarely even checked for documents, seasonal workers’ palpable nervousness means that they are constant objects of suspicion. And, given the market in forged cards, farm ID cards may not be enough to prevent arrest if workers flee when the police arrive. It does not help that, unlike the pieces of paper that workers carry once they have been fully regularised, farm IDs bear no photographs. The cards are ambiguous: *semi*-official (at least in the way they are treated by representatives of the state), *usually* accepted, *probably* issued by a farmer, but forged with relative ease.

Gradually, workers receive work permits from Home Affairs. This process is itself mediated – in this case by Michael, the personnel manager. Faced with large numbers of workers who need permits, Michael can exercise a degree of choice in whose he processes, and when. Especially during the harvest, when there are hundreds of recruits and many never receive legal documents, handling paperwork confers a great deal of power. Who is processed depends on connections. Michael can afford to neglect some arrivals, or even use his influence to demand favours or build dependencies. In other cases, attempting to do so brings the wrath of other senior workers. In fact, Michael was assaulted in his office, precisely for attempting to deny paperwork to a female seasonal worker with powerful kin. As for those who are selected, Michael takes groups of ten or fifteen to the border post in a pick-up truck, commandeering the farm's senior driver. There, each has to be furnished with Zimbabwean travel documents. During the period of fieldwork, this was an Emergency Travel Document (a photocopied sheet of paper, in place of a passport<sup>4</sup>), to which their photograph would be stapled. The South African authorities would then affix a small, blue short-term visa to the back. Over time, as it disintegrated and became softer and darker, this sheet of paper was often adorned with stamps and further adhesive visas, depending on work and movement. But, for those migrants who had one, an 'ETD' became a basic record of formal employment. Alongside the work permit itself, the ETD's photograph, blue visa sticker, and stamps were together crucial for negotiating encounters with border patrols.

Here too, then, processes of brokering and attempts to shape social relations are key as workers build personal histories through documentation. Meanwhile, work permits transcend their apparently obvious purpose. Whereas they attach a worker to a particular employer, for a fixed period, many workers see these documents as passports to more open-ended mobility. These are unambiguously state documents, and police on the roads are assumed not to be able to check immediately whether the permits of absconded workers have been cancelled. So many seasonal workers head for Johannesburg,



armed now not only with their certificates and contact numbers, but with pieces of paper – a permit and a visa-adorned travel document – that appear to legitimate them in terms that are less personalised and less localised than the farm ID cards.

The possibilities for conversion are most starkly visible among workers who become permanent. A number of permanent workers appear as South African citizens in the records. Many of these were in fact Zimbabwean-born, but they acquired South African identity documents while working on the border farms. How this is done is of course difficult to determine, since the subject is sensitive. But rumours are suggestive. One way, I was told, is to find a South African who will stand as a foster parent for a fee. A letter from an employer confirming long-term service offers the simplest (and a legal) way to acquire a South African ID (although not citizenship). But apparently many workers are hesitant about approaching the South African Department of Home Affairs in this manner — perhaps the result of farm workers' marginalisation beyond the farms, however influential they are inside workforces. Instead, employers in the area have been known to turn a blind eye and confirm their workers' South African credentials. Given that it is in their interests to have stable core workforces, it is perhaps not surprising that they are seen as willing to do so and even as actively supportive of such efforts.

However workers gain their South African identity documents, their successful use requires finesse. Some workers take different names, to avoid any suspicion at roadblocks of their being Zimbabwean. But in that case, they need to be able speak the language their name suggests. Others, who do not change their names, need to be ready to pay off officials. Meanwhile, there are difficult decisions about how far to go in seeking South African documentation. Acquiring a South African ID on the basis of long-term residence certainly feels more stable than living on renewable six-month work permits.<sup>5</sup> But once that decision has been taken, it is difficult to upgrade to citizenship — one exists in the database as a Zimbabwean. One senior worker was instead holding out for a passport, and

therefore used a fraudulent ID document, in which he was a South African, even though he was entitled to one as a long-term Zimbabwean worker. He decided to use a South African Venda name, but he was caught out by police on the road, because of his limited knowledge of South African Venda places and language. The farmer was called, he was let out of prison, but he was back to square one with his documentation. Months later, I was told that he now faced problems using his South African documents. The (real) spelling of his Ndebele name marked him out as a non-South African (South African Ndebele and Zulu names are similar to Zimbabwean Ndebele names, but are sometimes spelt differently), and he was left paying regular bribes. Documents' apparent fixity of meaning gives them a powerful allure. But, even as the ultimate goal of regularisation as a South African citizen comes within reach, these documents remain subject to processes of everyday negotiation. They are focuses in the framing of relations with officialdom, but not ones that determine outcomes in any simple way.

## **Conclusion**

What we have seen here is a long way from the usual reification of 'formality' as a form of employment or a sector. Rather, we have a multiplicity of regulatory lenses, with different purposes and different effects. Different engagements with state officials – Home Affairs in issuing permits, soldiers and police in controlling movement and settlement – shape workers' day-to-day existence. Even the issuers of Zimbabwean ID cards and school certificates play their parts here, remotely.

The fragmentary mosaic of multiple formalities reflects the equally fragmentary nature of 'the state', as a series of overlapping agencies and institutions (see Abrams 1988). The view from South Africa's margins renders these fragmentary formalities especially visible. Far from constituting a thick system of regularities, official spotlights and bureaucratic infrastructures are limited. The networks created by documents are sparse, reflecting this fractured reality. For workers, using them means negotiating with farmers, work supervisors and others, adding to the multiplicity.

Nevertheless, for workers, documents together make up a register of formality that opens up possibilities. Indeed, formality emerges from attempts to connect up the diversity of documents and official encounters. Workers learn to convert between different documents, using them like stepping-stones. The goal is to realise an identity that carries weight with an increasing range of state officials. From below, the unity of formality is the result of a chain of encounters, with documents as their focus, which together hold out tantalising but often elusive promise.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> This account is based on 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork (November 2006 to April 2008), during which I lived in Grootplaas's labour compound. During the citrus harvest, I also worked (not for pay) in a picking team in the orchards and, more briefly, grading fruit in the packshed. While much of farm life on the border has remained unchanged since 2008, and I therefore write in the present tense to avoid an undue sense of distance, I draw attention to relevant changes in the text and footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> In 2009, the deportation of Zimbabweans was suspended. But, coinciding with the end of a program to register undocumented Zimbabweans en-masse (the Zimbabwe Documentation Project), which only reached a minority of Zimbabweans in South Africa, deportations recommenced in late 2011.

<sup>3</sup> It also, doubtless, offers a relatively easy way to forge workable documents in Beitbridge. It is worth noting that, while forgery offers perspectives on ordinary people's engagements with the state (see e.g. Ismail 2010), this case is unusual precisely because of the mediating role of employers and their own documents.

<sup>4</sup> ETDs were developed to streamline the documentation of Zimbabwean farm workers, because of a shortage of passports. Access to Zimbabwean passports has since improved.

<sup>5</sup> During the Zimbabwe Documentation Project (see footnote 4), some permanent workers were able to acquire four-year South African visas. But this depended on being physically present at the farm when Home Affairs officials visited – and many workers were not – underlying the contingent nature of access to documents.