Journal of Contemporary African Studies

ISSN: 0258-9001 (Print) 1469-9397 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjca20

Gender, resilience and resistance: South Africa's Hleketani Community Garden

Elizabeth Vibert

To cite this article: Elizabeth Vibert (2016) Gender, resilience and resistance: South Africa's Hleketani Community Garden, Journal of Contemporary African Studies, 34:2, 252-267, DOI: 10.1080/02589001.2016.1202508

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2016.1202508

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN STUDIES, 2016
VOL. 34, NO. 2, 252–267
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2016.1202508

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Gender, resilience and resistance: South Africa's Hleketani Community Garden

Elizabeth Vibert

Department of History, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article explores local struggles and social solidarity among women farmers at a small farming cooperative: Hleketani Community Garden, in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Such farmers are rarely discussed when exploring sites of resistance to neo-liberal capitalism. These women have had success in reducing poverty and increasing positive health outcomes for their families and community, in an era dominated by agricultural forms (industrial and commercial) that have generally failed to benefit small communities and farmers. The research demonstrates the potential of small-scale collaborative food farming to support personal and broader social resilience, and draws attention to the kinds of structural barriers that continue to militate against small-scale farmers – especially women – achieving a decent life. Poverty reduction, improvements in health, and community building are among the benefits delivered by this community initiative. Lack of access to resources, policy frameworks antithetical to small-scale agriculture, and worsening climate change are among the greatest challenges.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 17 November 2015
Accepted 11 February 2016

KEYWORDS
Gender; resilience; co-operative farming; social solidarity

Recalling her household's extensive vegetable garden in the 1950s and 1960s, Florah Mashele explains how she raised her children 'by ploughing and crushing'. The 86-year-old acts out the crushing of maize and groundnuts in full-body gestures and becomes animated when describing the nutritious diet. 'We were ploughing – *we were not buying food*', she says pointedly. Vegetables raised included cowpeas, peanuts, sorghum, pumpkins, and dried beans in addition to maize. Mrs Mashele also lists numerous indigenous plants that she cultivated in her plot or gathered nearby:

> We were eating fresh food from the garden, which was ploughed by our own hands. The kids now, even a five-year-old child can be old because of the food that is not fresh from the gardens … Back then we were changing the meals every day: today it's meat, tomorrow it's vegetables, the other day it's squash, the other day *tihove* [a mix of nuts, beans, and maize meal]. We were very strong and fit. The children were very healthy.[1]

Though Mrs Mashele speaks in the past tense, today she is a member of a cooperative producer group that serves many of the values she articulates here. Hleketani Community

CONTACT Elizabeth Vibert evibert@uvic.ca

Garden, a women's cooperative vegetable farm in South Africa, has been providing nutritious, diverse local produce for farmers' households and vulnerable people in the wider community for more than 20 years. This article considers Hleketani Garden as a case study in social economy – a collaborative, grassroots enterprise 'with a social remit', whose purposes go beyond material benefits to generating communities of cooperation and mutual security (Amin, Cameron, and Hudson 2002; Kawano, Masterson, and Teller-Ellsberg 2010; Smith 2005, 276). Such initiatives, including cooperatives and an array of other community-generated activities, are proliferating across the globe in an era of increasingly precarious livelihoods, soaring inequalities, and ecological devastation (Rodima-Taylor and Bahre 2014). My research demonstrates the potential of small-scale collaborative food farming like that at Hleketani to support personal and broader social resilience, and draws attention to the kinds of structural barriers that continue to militate against small-scale farmers – especially women – achieving a decent life. Poverty reduction, improvements in health, and community building are among the benefits delivered by this community initiative. Lack of access to resources, policy frameworks antithetical to small-scale agriculture, and worsening climate change are among the challenges.

Recent scholarship has pointed to a wide range of mutual help arrangements that seek to navigate the tensions between self-interest and social concern, attending both to 'the economic' and 'the social' in resource distribution (Gudeman 2008; Hart, Laville, and Cattani 2010). Hleketani is a cooperative work group; two dozen women pool their labour to produce nutritious food for their households and the broader community, and to generate irregular income for farmers. The women belong to other mutual help groups, in particular, savings clubs for end-of-year food and other purchases. Mutualist food farming similarly creates space for social and political collaboration and softens the edges of livelihoods often described as 'survivalist'. While this term is problematic for the way it denigrates the humble heroics involved in the daily struggle to keep farm and household afloat, it reminds us that such mutualist activity is often a matter of necessity rather than of choice, and is not in itself a solution (Benson 2015; Mosoetsa 2011). A farm like Hleketani is a small step on the path towards meaningful social change.

Introducing Hleketani Community Garden

Starting from the premise 'one finger cannot feed us', several dozen women in the village of Jomela,[2] in northeastern Limpopo Province, came together to establish Hleketani Garden in 1992. A food crisis was unfolding. Not only was South Africa caught up in the economic and political turmoil of the transition to majority rule; much of Southern Africa was also in the grip of an historic drought. Many poor households in Jomela, a village of about 3500, suffered from malnutrition. Farmer Daina Mahlaule, now 65, recalls that 'there was a lot of disease. Kids were suffering from *kwashi* and other diseases that were related to eating'. *Kwashi*, from kwashiorkor (severe protein malnutrition), is the local catchall term for varied forms of under-nutrition (Crais 2011). The women at Hleketani Garden offer differing accounts of how this crisis led to the founding of the farm. Some give credit to a regional healthcare group that encouraged women in these villages to grow more vegetables to combat hunger and disease, while others foreground the role of the women themselves, as when Sara Mookamedi states 'a lot of people had nothing to eat and we decided to make the garden to help the people with food'.

Whatever its genesis, the garden was a novel enterprise grounded in women's determination to meet deepening challenges of hunger, poverty, and unemployment in their households and beyond. By a number of measures the experiment has been successful. In the words of Mamayila Mkhawana, the farm 'chased *kwashi* out of our families'. Daina Mahlaule extends the nutritional benefits beyond households: 'Our people are being saved, their lives are being saved. There is no more *kwashi* because of this farm'. This overstatement (in light of nutrition statistics below) speaks to the depth of the women's belief in their farm. Currently there are 27 women members, comprising the most committed among the original farmers, daughters who have replaced ageing mothers, and a small number of newer members. As I argue below, the age of the current members – all older than 45 and most over 60 – is significant. However, as I also suggest, the model of collaborative farming as employment generator, income supplement, source of nutritious food, and builder of intergenerational community holds promise for younger women as well – particularly rural young women who, at present, have few prospects for remunerative work.

Hleketani Garden is run on cooperative principles. It is governed by a constitution, and farmers collaborate in work teams, make decisions by consensus, market produce collectively, and share any surplus income. In commercial terms, the farm has had only modest success: in a good year farmers sell enough produce to cover the farm's expenses and earn a small annual stipend, lately in the range of US$60–120 per farmer. At the household level, however, the farm has had a very substantial impact on food and nutritional security (FSNWG 2015; IFPRI 2015). Farmers take home 'seconds' (blemished vegetables) several times each week, food that is also critical to household finances. Other villagers benefit from locally available and affordable fresh produce – the nearest supermarkets are 30 kms away – and some earn a small income through resale. Equally important are benefits generally overlooked in debates about the relative merits of small-scale agriculture *versus* industrial-scale commercial agriculture (Bernstein 2014; McMichael 2014). The name of the farm speaks to its broader vision: *hleketani* means 'thinking' in the xiTsonga language. Farmers say that they chose the name because careful thought was needed to establish the farm on a good footing and because, as Mrs Mookamedi puts it, 'everything women do is in thinking'. Over the years the farm has served as a space for community building across generations and for securing and elaborating rural women's social identities, in a context where rural women remain one of the constituencies most likely to live with crushing impoverishment (Claassens and Ngubane 2008).

The decision to farm as a team, rather than on individual sections, was in a large part pragmatic. By 1992, the Department of Agriculture of the 'homeland' of Gazankulu (which originally governed the area) had been supporting community gardens in the region for several years, prioritising group projects. Community gardens have long been a favoured state intervention in black African agriculture (Aliber and Hart 2009). The department provided a borehole well, and after 1994 the provincial department followed up with two more. The *hosi*, the local customary leader, leased to the group a 6-ha plot of communal territory on the edge of the village, where the women had identified an abundant source of groundwater (Claassens and Cousins 2008). The group holds this land by permit, for which they pay the *hosi* R35 (less than US$3) per hectare per year. Over the years, provincial agriculture extension workers have taught the women to grow exotic vegetables and have facilitated their access to inputs, from agrochemicals (occasionally)

to funds for infrastructure and training.[3] Agriculture officials became particularly attentive when Hleketani Garden won a regional agriculture prize in 2005. A solar-powered pump, tractor, and storage structures followed. Mphephu Mtsenga points to this era as the farm's glory days, 'when we started to see that we were about to conquer poverty'.

Collaboration in work groups for tasks like collecting water or preparing food for funerals is customary practice (Junod 1913). However, the farmers insist that it is an innovation for women to come together to grow food beyond their kin groups. As Mrs Mahlaule puts it, '[i]t is not the traditional rule or the law or someone who forced us to come here and work. It's we who gave ourselves as a gift to the community'. Such mutual self-help groups, rooted as they may be in customary values, are not vestiges of a disappearing way of life; rather, they are pragmatic adjustments to challenging circumstances. James (2015) explores the proliferation of such groups in South Africa since the coming of democracy in 1994. Eschewing the view that such associations are transitional or a 'middle rung' on the ladder to economic modernity, she shows how they operate at the dynamic intersection of 'formal' capitalist and 'informal', often mutualist domains (also Callebert 2014; Hull and James 2012). The women's farm is one such instance. While the farm is formally a commercial enterprise, in the sense that produce goes first to sales, its commitments prioritise social impacts over profits or other commercial considerations.

The farmers' goal of conquering poverty by employing and empowering women and providing sustainable food for their households has been thwarted in several ways in recent years. Electricity costs to operate the three pumps have more than doubled since 2008 (Parsons, Krugell, and Keeton 2015). The farmers now protest that 'we are working for Eskom' (the national electrical utility). In addition to deepening drought, discussed below, the most immediate obstacle facing the farm is a growing problem of theft. Most of the women ascribe the worsening problem to youth unemployment. When young people go looking for work, Sara Mookamedi says,

> they're always told there are no jobs. What comes into their mind is that 'we need something – so we have to go and steal' … It's like when you see someone who's eating and you are hungry: you wait for the minute the person leaves the food, and you go and steal the food in order to eat.

Small-scale theft had been an irritant over the years, but from late 2013 until early 2015, the garden was left at a near standstill after being stripped of its irrigation infrastructure and electrical transformer.[4] Informal external donations replaced the pumps, but the farmers then endured months of delay before Eskom replaced the transformer. A nighttime security guard, not previously a priority, now ranks second only to electricity on the list of monthly expenditures. In May 2015, the women finally resumed selling vegetables.

Memories of dispossession

South Africa's particular history of colonialism, including apartheid, produced a bifurcated geography that relegated poor people, who were overwhelmingly black, to impoverished urban townships and 'ethnic homelands' (today known as communal areas) far from urban opportunities, while a core economy was dominated by a small number of powerful corporations (Bernstein 2015; Marais 2011). Colonialism resulted in exceptionally high rates of

landlessness and rural poverty. A collective memory of dispossession stretches back more than 350 years to the arrival of the Dutch East India Company. Wrenching land loss during the colonial era climaxed in the nineteenth-century land wars. The expansive white supremacy of the twentieth century saw 87% of the country's land mass come under the control of the roughly 15% of the population deemed white, with forcible removals of some 3.5 million people, and their relocation, along with millions more, to racially segregated settlements and 'homelands'. These processes underwrote the drastic decline of African peasant agriculture.

This backdrop to the women's recollections of dispossession is what Walker (2008) calls the 'master narrative' of this country's troubled history. Walker notes that this narrative, while broadly accurate, oversimplifies the 'unruly multiplicity of actual land dispossessions' (2008, 37). Hleketani farmers' histories of land loss constitute one instance of such unruly multiplicity. Many of the farmers characterise their households' relocation to the village of Jomela in the early 1970s as akin to forced removal. As part of apartheid-era efforts at social and spatial engineering, thousands of households in northeastern Limpopo had been required to resettle in their assigned 'ethnic' space (Gazankulu for those identified as Tsonga/Shangaan, Venda for Venda, and Lebowa for Northern Sotho). The movement from extensive farms to 'the lines', as people evocatively call the structured villages (in reference to their grid structure), was not actually part of forced removals but of so-called rural betterment planning (Harries 1989; Hay 2014). Betterment – which introduced dams and other infrastructure projects and aimed, for instance, to conserve soils and trees to ensure reserves could support the segregated African population – was infused with the belief that black people inhabited a backward and wasteful subsistence economy.

Solutions included orderly settlements, reductions in livestock, and agricultural education. Residential, grazing, and arable areas were brought under the authority of white officials empowered to allocate land, regulate its use, and penalise infractions. Chiefs found themselves instruments of policies 'determined by logic and priorities external to the society, and which most rural residents saw as profoundly invasive and destructive' (Delius 2008, 228). 'I lost everything I knew, the trees and the land', Dinah Baloyi says of displacement to the village. Mrs Baloyi remembers how her rural household 'had to cook with a *big* pot' to accommodate the produce of their vast garden. 'At the countryside we had space for sorghum, we had space for maize, we had space for squashes. … Now the space of ploughing is very small'; her village plot accommodates only maize and groundnuts. While many acknowledge certain benefits of villagisation – access to schools and health care, for instance – the emphasis women place on overcrowding flags resettlement as a pivotal moment of change in their lives. Mphephu Mtsenga is blunt: 'Even our chickens don't have the space to move. Because when the chicken says it's moving, it's going next door'. The women's accounts of removal to the formal village in the early 1970s are expressed in a nostalgic lexicon of former bounty and wrenching loss. Land holdings in the former homelands are indeed very small, an estimated 850 m^2 on average, and the arable portion smaller still (Aliber and Hart 2009; Feynes and Meyer 2003; Cousins and Claassens 2015). Water was always a limiting factor, and growing demand and neglected infrastructure make water a critical concern today. Most home plots rely on summer rains, which climate change has rendered increasingly unpredictable. Overgrazing, erosion, and other effects of overcrowding further diminish agricultural potential.

The contrast between their relatively secure lives in the countryside and the hardships of the village may be overdrawn in the remembering, but accuracy is not the point. Positive recollections of life before 'the lines' are instrumental to the women's resilience as farmers today. Prior to the move, the farmers recount that land was the basis of household security. (Remittances from male migrants and the women's own contributions from their urban sojourns and farm labour also played key roles.) Households had countryside plots ample enough to provide a highly varied diet across the year, encompassing customary rain-fed crops and diverse wild foods. Food shortfalls occurred from time to time, but these were generally associated with drought. Resettlement in the formal village in the early 1970s is recalled as a moment of sharp disjuncture, after which food insecurity became a fact of life (Harries 1989; Hay 2014). The sense that rural life as farmers suited their younger selves and their female elders so well helps motivate these women to persevere, even as their material and social contexts become less supportive of farming.

Communal farming in a neo-liberal era

The dismal performance of black agriculture has continued since 1994. This has been attributed in part to the 'double barrelled exclusion' of smallholder farmers who were first marginalised by colonialism and apartheid, and are now shunted aside by domestic politics and the global integration of food markets (Chikazunga and Paradza 2013). The state's avid embrace of neo-liberal economic strategies has further entrenched inequality, as has been the case in other parts of the world (Marais 2011; Piketty 2014). South Africa offers an extreme case of the joint processes of 'jobless de-agrarianisation' and de-industrialisation prevalent across the Global South (du Toit and Neves 2007; Hunter 2011; ILO 2015). As many as four million people still engage in home-based agriculture, primarily as an extra source of food; more than two-thirds of these are women (Aliber and Hart 2009; Bernstein 2015). The country's former 'homelands' are particularly impoverished. More than one-third of the population continues to live in these areas, where data from the 2011 census indicate poverty – as measured by a 'multiple deprivation index' assessing material possessions, human capital, and service access – is rampant (du Toit and Neves 2007; Noble, Zembe, and Wright 2014; Statistics South Africa 2014).

Hleketani Community Garden sits near the centre of the former Gazankulu 'homeland', an area with among the bleakest statistics in the country. Fifty-eight per cent of people are unemployed (expanded definition); figures are higher still for women and for those under 30. Seventy-seven per cent experience 'living environment deprivation', meaning they have inadequate water, sanitation, housing, and/or electricity; the same percentage falls below the government's poverty line of R485 per capita per month (about US$1.25 per day) and female-headed households are most likely to be poor (Noble, Zembe, and Wright 2014; Statistics South Africa 2014). Although small-scale farming – farming less than 20 ha mainly with non-mechanised technologies and house-based, non-wage labour (Bienabe and Vermeulen 2008) – is an essential element of the mixed livelihoods of rural households, it has been seriously undermined by chronic unemployment since the 1970s. The poorest households can rarely afford production-boosting investments such as irrigation or additional labour (Aliber and Hart 2009; Crais 2011; Statistics South Africa 2013).

Statistics on food security and nutrition starkly illuminate the disparities. South Africa ranks in the upper half of countries in GDP per capita and is a net exporter of food, yet sits among the 20 worst countries in the world for rates of under-nutrition and childhood stunting. Government figures indicate that 22% of the population has 'inadequate or severely inadequate access to food', the vast majority of whom are black (du Toit and Loate 2014). Emphasis on large-scale and capital-intensive food crop production has played a major role in the perpetuation of rural poverty and poor nutrition by 'under-min[ing] the livelihood opportunities for large numbers of poor South Africans who find themselves landless, unemployed, and marginalised' (du Toit and Loate 2014, 3).

However, it is important to note that South Africa's rapid economic liberalisation was underwritten by government efforts at redistribution. A massive system of social grants now distributes R155 billion (US$12 billion) annually to some 16 million people. The extent of dependence on pensions, child support grants, disability, and other social grants cannot be overstated (James 2015). For most of the women at Hleketani farm, grants are their households' main source of regular income. Those older than 60 describe how their lives changed when they began receiving the pension, the most generous of the grants (about US$112 per month), while those with school-age children rely on child support grants (US$26 per month per child) for regular infusions of cash income. Grants such as these often support numerous non-earning household members; as farmer Rosina Masengu puts it, 'I don't know where I would be without the child grant'. Interviews indicate that once social grants and other income are shared among the 4–12 people in each household associated with Hleketani Community Garden, most live below the lower poverty line.

At the same time, rural households provide some refuge from the violent history of land dispossession, stubborn divisions of class and race, proliferating poverty, and food insecurity. Marginalised in abstract structural terms, and buffeted by pressures from the wider economy, these households experience the economy in ways that are both oppressive and supportive (Hart, Laville, and Cattani 2010). Keeping such insights in view, I focus below on the ways rural women have sought to soften, mediate, and resist challenges such as unemployment, lack of access to credit and other resources, and gendered violence. Activities of social solidarity like those at Hleketani farm have been vital to their efforts.

'Conquering poverty' and securing health

By the early 2000s, a decade after its founding, Hleketani Garden was flourishing to the point that farmers say they were feeding 'the whole of Tzaneen', referring to the large regional district where Jomela is found. Farmers' reflections on the improvements in their household finances and general well-being since the return to productive farming in 2015 highlight the material and social benefits of the farm. While conquering poverty remains elusive, the farm's impact on household economies is substantial. Alice Kgamedi's household, like those of most of her co-workers, is completely reliant on Hleketani for vegetables. Mrs Kgamedi lives with an adult daughter who works as a security guard in the nearby town, three unemployed adult sons, and two young granddaughters. The daughter's salary provides staple foods, centred on *mugayi* (maize meal) along with meat two or three times a week. There is nothing left in her paycheque for vegetables; these come from

the farm. Mrs Kgamedi generates a small cash income from making doughnuts she sells around the village early each morning (R20 or US$1.50 per day). That income is quickly consumed by contributions to her savings group (for bulk food purchases at year's end), funeral insurance, and assisting with her grandchildren's and sons' needs. During the farm shut down, she says, 'we had no money to buy vegetables'. Sara Mookamedi, who receives a pension, explains that take-home vegetables free up cash for other uses. '[When] the farm is working very well, I don't buy tomatoes and vegetables; I get seconds from the farm. … The kids take the money I was going to use for tomatoes and pay school costs'. Infusions of free vegetables also release funds to buy water, something the Mookamedi household must do two or three times a week when the municipal supply falls short. Vegetables thus function as a crucial income supplement; when the farm is not producing, households must choose to divert scarce cash to vegetables or do without.

Beyond material rewards, all the women cite social, physical, and mental well-being as significant outcomes of their work at the farm. In the words of Mijaji Ndlovu, 73,

> [t]he reason I look so good is because I work here at the farm, even though I get the pension. I can't sit down the whole day. My body has pains when I sit the whole day without working. … My body feels well when I am at work.

'Sitting at home' is the phrase farmers use, derisively, to describe the alternative to working at the farm. Mrs Mookamedi explains the mental health benefits. 'We always make funny jokes, talk [about] whatever keeps my mind busy. But when you're sitting at home you've got no one to talk to, no jokes. You're always sleeping'. Maria Risiba, 80, expands on the thought: Hleketani farm 'is a better place than home, because we are always laughing, we love each other, and there is a lot of fun. … It is a good family'.

Community health benefits have been significant. Since the coming of the vegetable farm the children in its orbit are 'fresh', as Mrs Kgamedi puts it. In Mrs Mahlaule's words, 'Our people are being saved'. Produce is routinely set aside for people in need. Mrs Mtsenga explains:

> [W]hen there is a funeral here at Jomela village, we take tomatoes, onions and other crops and donate to the funerals. That's what the farm is giving to the community. We donate for people who are taking treatment – tomatoes, onions, spinach. We depend on the list [from] the care-givers. They supply us with the names. We give them [vegetables] each week. We have to count: today it's tomatoes, tomorrow it's onions, the day after tomorrow it's spinach. We keep on taking spinach to them, for their body.

'Treatment' most often refers to anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment for HIV/AIDS, for which immune-boosting nutritious food is key to effective treatment. Once they receive a request from community carers, Hleketani farmers generally provide the ARV patient with a weekly vegetable basket for several months until their health stabilises.

Indigenous vegetables form an important part of the farm's produce for home use and its contribution to village health. Maria Risiba intersperses indigenous plants with exotics when she lists what she receives from the garden in a good season: 'We get vegetables, *guxe*, *mixiji*, *gumbu-gumbu* [indigenous foods], mustard spinach, Swiss chard, onions [exotics], all the vegetables, even cabbage, from the farm'. Older people particularly value indigenous vegetables, although Mrs Risiba admits her grandchildren have lost the taste for these foods and prefer to rely on 'food from the fridge', of which she is very suspicious. The potential role of indigenous and traditional vegetables in local food

security was highlighted by the drought of 2015, a drought widely described as 'epic' and certainly the worst since the farm's founding (Essa 2015; World Bank 2012; SADEA 2013; Watts et al. 2015). In the previous two growing seasons (2013–2014 and 2014–2015), stripped of irrigation infrastructure and faced with erratic rains, the women had turned to their secret weapon, their reserve of saved seeds. These were carefully selected over the years for their resilience to local conditions. Packed away in ash at the end of each harvest, these seeds are normally saved for home gardens; however, in the last two years the women have covered the farm's 6-ha field in drought-resistant varieties of maize and groundnuts. They reaped a reasonable harvest in 2014 after some well-timed rainfall. Indigenous greens were planted around the staples; these produced when little else did in bone-dry 2015. Nothing will grow in total drought, of course, so the 2015–2016 growing season would have been a disaster but for the resumption of irrigation. Careful management of water-conserving drip irrigation has made a crop of marketable produce possible – tomatoes, spinach, and onions from hybrid seed, as well as pumpkin leaves from heritage seed. Extreme heat has limited output, but at least there is a crop. Collaborative farming drawing on the ecological knowledge of long-time farmers, enabled by investment in sustainable methods and technologies, has the potential to provide essential insulation from some of the worst effects of climate change.

Ploughing: cultivating personal and social resilience

The fenced perimeter of Hleketani Garden defines a physical community. When farmers enter in the morning they find a place of refuge from abusive husbands, out-of-work adult children, or other stresses at home. At the same time, the women see the farm as a linchpin of the broader village 'community'. For Mrs Masengu, the farm is part of village identity. 'People around Jomela are always saying "we are very proud of our farm". Also the people who live in Johannesburg: when they came home they were proud to see their home village with a big farm'. Many of the farmers emphasise their efforts are aimed first and foremost at the community. For Florah Mashele, '[t]he reason I'm still working here is not for the sake of [financial] benefit or the sake of my health. It's for the community. We are supporting a very big community'. This rhetoric of community service, the gendered respectability that flows from this role, and the sense that they are able to feed the 'big community' are fundamental to the women's identities and resilience as farmers.

Intergenerational support is an important feature of the social landscape at Hleketani. Rose Nukeri, 45, is the youngest farmer, and she explains that she gains courage from the older women. 'These *kokwani* [grannies] that are here, I find them very helpful. They teach me how to live on my own … what you can do to be a successful person in life. They are models'. Josephine Mathebula credits her older colleagues with maintaining the collegiality of the farm. The cultural requirement of respect for elders acts as an ordering mechanism, she explains, defusing the competitiveness and self-interest she sees as rife among women her own age. A farm without older women, she says, 'won't even last for ten years, there will always be disagreements'. Older women 'know our tradition very well, they've got good hearts, they can think in advance'. The older women's resilience in the face of loss of husbands, deaths of children, and the demands of raising AIDS-affected grandchildren instils hope among their younger colleagues.

At the centre of Hleketani women's labouring identities is the activity they call ploughing, *ku rima*. Ploughing refers to cultivation in all its phases, from hand- or animal-tilling of the soil to harvesting crops, and also conjures women's symbolic role as reproducers of the family (Gengenbach 1998; Moore and Vaughan 1994). The link between ploughing and motherhood is revealed in the recurring linguistic slippage between raising children and raising crops. When Sophy Ngobeni tells me that young women today do not know how to work like her generation, the phrase is 'they don't know how to feed the kids'. Describing her own work ethic, Mrs Ngobeni says, 'I'm like a bird that goes far to look for soft seeds for the babies'. Like her colleagues, she describes a work day that begins at four in the morning with prayers and 'home chores', followed by getting grandchildren off to school and coming to the farm for several hours of weeding, watering, harvesting, or planting. Told her day sounds gruelling, Mrs Ngobeni protests that 'there are no good things coming out of sleep'.

In the women's telling, work in the village is a gendered sphere where, framed by men's absence as labour migrants or their unreliability, women form the stable core (Hunter 2011). Their analysis is informed by gendered struggles over household resources dating from the apartheid and colonial eras. Male labour migrants with rural families, many of whom had more than one house to support in polygynous homesteads, typically directed their income to long-term investments such as cattle and ancestral rituals, while women focused on the daily and recurring costs of running households. As those costs climbed during economic downturns in the 1970s and 1980s, women's and men's interests increasingly diverged. The result today is the widespread, if not universal, view that women are the guardians of the domestic domain, thrifty, provident, and responsible, while men, if present at all, 'eat' money by squandering it. In the words of Mrs Mahlaule, '[h]is money is his money. He can go and drink beers … But my money is for the family'. Men's inability to fulfil requirements for long-term investment and household support has been a major contributor to the crisis of masculinity lamented in the popular press and scholarship on South Africa today (James 2015; Mosoetsa 2011; Geyer and Geyer 2015).

Symbolically rich as the concept of ploughing may be, and central as it is to the identities of older women, it does not encompass the diversity and mobility that has long characterised rural women's economic activities (Bozzoli 1991; Potts 2000). These women are farmers, small-scale entrepreneurs, and micro-managers of complex and diverse household economies. Diversity of livelihoods and sources of income is not only a hedge against poverty, but allows people to manage risk and remain in rural locales. A short list of their income-generating activities includes producing and selling clay bricks, clothing, crafts, vegetables, and snack foods; housecleaning, hairdressing, food catering, collecting and selling firewood and water; and the use of home-grown credit and savings clubs. Their rural labours and ingenuity contribute in myriad ways to the economic security and well-being of urban members of these dispersed households as well, an argument I take up elsewhere (Vibert, Forthcoming).

For some of the younger women, the farm was initially seen as a place of last resort. Rose Nukeri accompanied her husband to Johannesburg when he landed a job in the late 1980s, part of the rush to urban areas as pass laws were dismantled (Bozzoli 1991). Ten years later, she reluctantly joined the farm after she returned to the village following her husband's death and could find only occasional work as a seasonal farm labourer. 'I got tired of "no"', the pernicious word scrawled on the slips of paper handed out by labour

brokers at the gates of the big commercial farms each morning. She explains: 'Few slips say "yes"', meaning one has work for the day. 'More say "no" … I decided to go and stay at [Hleketani] farm because there is no "yes" and "no"'. Rejecting the indignities of the hiring lotteries at the big farms, Mrs Nukeri took the place of her ageing mother at Hleketani Garden, which offered shelter when the core economy offered none. Evelyn Nkuna's story is similar. Before coming to Hleketani in 1996, she says, 'I've tried everything, and there was nothing coming out of what I've tried'. Mrs Nkuna's experience has a chilling resonance for younger women today. She had worked hard to get an education, one of the first women in Jomela to attend school in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A young mother, she went on to a local college to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher, but lacked funds to continue. Farming became her fall-back when other opportunities failed to materialise. In fact, she found her mother's commitment to the farm an inspiration. With no alternative, 'I told my mother to go home and I will work for her … I decided to come here, to keep me busy'.

Through their daily, monthly, and seasonal activities, working collaboratively and pooling scarce resources, the women of Hleketani Garden have managed to re-inhabit the social identity of productive farmers. It is an identity they will not willingly give up. 'We couldn't sit peacefully at home when we thought about the farm', Mphephu Mtsenga says, reflecting on the recent shut down. 'We as women, we decided to get up and start working'. Sara Mookamedi elaborates: 'We have never felt powerless'. Collaboration has been essential to maintaining this resilience. Farmers do most of the work themselves, although over the years they have called on husbands and other family members to help with construction and other tasks. Collaboration made state resources available, as discussed above. More prosaically, collaboration means more hoes in the ground and more pockets to pick for the occasional small cash infusions that keep fences in repair and the tractor running. Collaboration allows risk taking, such as the decision to invest in drip irrigation and, more recently, security services. In short, collaborative farming provides a platform for the continuation of ploughing as an identity-securing activity for older women at the same time as it provides social, health, and material benefits to the women, their households, and their community.

Tensions and challenges

A history of land loss, overcrowding, and state neglect of rural areas has created seemingly endless hurdles for small-scale farmers like those at Hleketani. The scourge of HIV/AIDS, which farmer Sara Mookamedi describes as having struck 'the grandmothers, the women, the girls and the kids' of Jomela, has damaged women's productive potential. A recent influential study by the World Bank found that one of the main obstacles to increased productivity by women farmers across the global South is their difficulty in mobilising extra labour, which is certainly a hurdle when younger women are ill or deceased (World Bank and One 2014). Market access is another major hurdle. A supermarket in the nearby town has expressed interest in buying the women's spinach, onions, and tomatoes, but the farmers only occasionally have access to the necessary vehicle. The most reliable market is local people coming to buy – villagers who purchase for home use, local women who re-sell at the roadside, and 'bakkie traders' who fill their pick-up trucks and sell the produce at villages and townships further afield. Because the farm is distant

from main transportation routes, bakkie traders insist on bargain prices for the women's produce, a source of ongoing tension between farmers and buyers and, at times, among the farmers themselves.

The structure of the farm provides its own challenges. Self-confidence flowing from their status as productive farmers infuses the women's accounts of why they protect the farm as a female space. As Daina Mahlaule explains:

> Some men would like to come and join us. But according to what I know … they will come and destroy our farm, our friendship, our community. This is my thought and the other ladies' thought – that if ever we let the men get in, they could try to take the authority or pull us back.

The concern about men underscores a point made by several other women – that this farm, running for over 20 years, has become a community unto itself. But what kind of community? With a core group of founding farmers still in place and all the women having been involved for more than a decade, the farm is a community forged over years of shared experience. Like most communities, however, it is made through exclusion as well as inclusion, coercion as well as cohesion. In part because of habits of longevity, the women draw tight boundaries around membership, making it possible to join only by getting the 'ticket' of a departing farmer. Their principal wealth is in people and they guard it cautiously (Guyer 2014). The selection process is not well defined, but relies on an existing farmer vouching for a newcomer. While they are secure with each other, the women are slow to trust newcomers. The many scarcities that characterise life in the village, and the thefts and violence these sometimes spawn, undermine the trust that might allow for inclusion of new members. Mrs Mahlaule's concern about men might be extended to outsiders more generally. Boundary-marking around membership creates jealousy among outsiders that the farmers accept as a fact of life (James 2015). Moreover, the group is marked by internal hierarchies. A seven-member board is at the centre of decision-making. Large-group discussions ensue when any major decision is required. Consensus building is often the work of many hours, and translator Basani Ngobeni, who has helped facilitate difficult discussions, notes that at times agreement is impossible and the matter has to be dropped. A small number of farm members are rarely present and tend to be reticent in interviews. These women are occasionally labelled 'lazy', although colleagues allow they may be facing illness or other pressures. Generalised economic insecurity means the farm's activities are often rooted in necessity more than choice – that social and economic action is never 'wide open to individual ingenuity' (Hull and James 2012).

Rosina Masengu expresses frustration at the slow progress of the farm. Her goals are more explicitly profit-oriented, and less mutualist, than those of her colleagues. 'I have another vision of the farm', she says. 'My dream is to see the big trucks from Spar, Pick N Pay, Fruit and Veg, from Johannesburg City Market, coming here to buy tomatoes, spinach, beetroot and other crops'. Yet this commercial vision is leavened by concern about social obligations. If her colleagues would all work equally hard, the flourishing farm could support regular wages and attract young women 'in very big numbers'.

> The reason why young people don't show interest in farming is because we are lazy to work. If we work hard and come back home with … some money each month, I think [the young women] should like to join us … But because we are very lazy we are closing the doors. We

> are not showing them how work can help you or can benefit you. If we were working hard and going home with something, we could attract them.

In Mrs Masengu's analysis, older women have a responsibility to model productive farming for girls and young women, as their elders did for them. Her vision is guided by middle-class aspiration (despite the fact her own social position falls far short): if only her colleagues worked hard like her, they would raise themselves to the status of the securely waged – the status younger women seek. In general, the women do not accept that farming itself has fallen from favour with youth; their own attachment to the activity may make it hard to imagine such a thing. Rather, they see young women's lack of interest as flowing from the poverty facing so many farmers, and from the yearning of younger people for 'a salary'.

Experiences at an externally funded youth farm in a nearby village provide further insight. The youth farm was established in 2011 as an employment generator for young people. Few of those selected to participate, however, had any intention of becoming farmers. They joined for the wage, which many planned to invest in training for other careers. Mahlatse Sekwela, now 25, recalls that she thought gardening was for older people, 'like everyone says'. 'All I wanted', she remembers, 'was to wear some high heels, look nice, do my manicure and makeup, and then go to the office'. The practice of farming changed her mind:

> I really thought [farming] was not for me, 'cause oh, it was very tiring. … I just told myself ok, this is a job … just so I can get money at the end of the month. But now I think it's my thing! … At first I didn't know anything about farming … Now little crops, they're like little babies for me. … I started to see this not as my job, but as something that I love.

Ms Sekwela's transformation, of course, was facilitated by a monthly wage. A much-loved teacher at the agricultural college made the commercial case starkly. 'Soil is not dirt', he told them, 'it's money'. Mrs Masengu and other farmers predict a similar response among young women in Jomela if ever the farm is able to provide a wage. Mijaji Ndlovu captures the view of many. Allowing that her children do not work as hard as they might, Mrs Ndlovu insists that the chance to work will give rise to the industrious habits she so values. 'If they get an opportunity', she says, 'they will grab it with two hands'.

Conclusion

Research by organisations ranging from the World Bank to grassroots producer groups demonstrates that much of the untapped potential in agriculture today lies with small-scale farmers in the Global South (World Bank and One 2014; Oxfam International 2011). Women, whose prospects as farmers have been constrained by global and local policy and unequal access to resources, hold particular promise. A farm like Hleketani Community Garden, which is neither entirely beholden to the commercial realm nor cut off from it, serves values such as poverty reduction, health promotion, and social solidarity among older women and their households. With appropriate support, in future the farm may offer opportunities for secure wages, enabling the next generation to convert soil into money in environmentally sustainable ways. If the experience of the past two decades is any indication, commercial values and communitarian values will continue to co-exist, and at times clash, as farmers strive to achieve a sustainable way of life.

Notes

1. Interview with Florah Mashele, Jomela village, 9 May 2013. All unattributed comments are drawn from interviews and conversations with farmers at Hleketani Community Garden, in Jomela between May 2012 and May 2015. I interviewed each of the 27 farmers individually (most numerous times) and held group conversations with distinct age cohorts. I also interviewed family members, the local headman, the *hosi* (customary leader), and youth farmers in a nearby village to gain a deeper understanding of the roles of this farm. Most interviews were translated by Basani Ngobeni.
2. Note that the name Jomela is a pseudonym.
3. Extension workers focus on conventional methods such as synthetic fertilisers. Farmers can rarely afford such inputs so the farm relies on many agro-ecological practices.
4. During the shut down, farmers planted maize and other rain-fed crops; lack of rain in 2015 meant no crop.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without research assistant and interpreter Basani Ngobeni. Thanks are owed to Lynne Marks, Todd Hatfield, Christine Welsh, Chris Fox, the editors, and the inspiring women of Hleketani Garden.

Funding

This work received funding from the SSHRC Internal Research Grants program and the British Columbia Arts Council.

Notes on contributor

Elizabeth Vibert is Associate Professor and historian of colonialism and poverty at the University of Victoria. Her current research focuses on rural women's life histories, diverse livelihoods, and household economies in South Africa. She is writing a book and making a documentary about the farm discussed here. She is the director of UVic's Colonial Legacies Field School in South Africa.

References

Aliber, M., and T. G. B. Hart. 2009. "Should Subsistence Agriculture be Supported as a Strategy to Address Rural Food Insecurity?" *Agrekon* 48 (4): 434–458.

Amin, Ash, Angus Cameron, and Ray Hudson. 2002. *Placing the Social Economy*. London: Routledge.

Benson, Koni. 2015. "A 'Political War of Words and Bullets': Defining and Defying Sides of Struggle for Housing in Crossroads, South Africa." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41 (2): 367–387.

Bernstein, Henry. 2014. "Food Sovereignty via the 'Peasant Way': A Sceptical View." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41 (6): 1031–1063.

Bernstein, Henry. 2015. "Commercial Farming and Agribusiness in South Africa since 1994." In *Land Divided, Land Restored*, edited by Ben Cousins, and Cherryl Walker. Johannesburg: Jacana.

Bienabe, Estelle, and Hester Vermeulen. 2008. "New Trends in Supermarket Procurement Systems in South Africa." Regoverning Markets Series. International Institute for Environment and Development.

Bozzoli, Belinda. 1991. *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Migrancy, and Life Strategy in South Africa, 1900–1983*. London: James Currey.

Callebert, Ralph. 2014. "Transcending Dual Economies: Reflections on 'Popular Economies in South Africa'." *Africa* 84 (1): 119–134.

Chikazunga, Davison, and Gaynor Paradza. 2013. "Smallholder Farming: A Panacea for Employment Creation and Enterprise Development in South Africa?" PLAAS Working Paper 27. Institute for Poverty, Land, and Agrarian Studies, September.
Claassens, Aninka, and Ben Cousins, eds. 2008. *Land, Power and Custom: Controversies Generated by South Africa's Communal Land Rights Act*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
Claassens, Aninka, and Sizani Ngubane. 2008. "Women, Land and Power: The Impact of the Communal Land Rights Act." In *Land, Power and Custom*, edited by Aninka Claassens, and Ben Cousins, 154–183.Cape Town: UCT Press.
Cousins, Ben, and Aninka Claassens, eds. 2015. *Land Divided, Land Restored: Land Reform in South Africa for the 21st Century*. Auckland Park, SA: Jacanda.
Crais, Clifton. 2011. *Poverty, War, and Violence in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Delius, Peter. 2008. "Contested Terrain: Land Rights and Chiefly Power in Historical Perspective." In *Land, Power and Custom*, edited by Aninka Claassens, and Ben Cousins, 211–237. Cape Town: UCT Press.
du Toit, Andries, and Lesego Loate. 2014. "Food and Nutritional Security in South Africa: An Agro-Food Systems Perspective." South Africa Network on Inequality Fact Sheet.
du Toit, Andries, and D. Neves. 2007. "In Search of South Africa's Second Economy." *Africanus* 37 (2): 145–174.
Essa, A. 2015. "South Africa in Midst of Epic Drought." *Mail and Guardian*, November 5.
Feynes, T., and N. Meyer. 2003. "Structure and Production in South African Agriculture." In *The Challenge of Change: Agriculture, Land, and the South African Economy*, edited by L. Nieuwoudt, and J. Groenewald. Durban: University of Natal Press.
FSNWG. 2015. "Food Security and Nutrition Working Group – Southern Africa Report." Issue 2, June 15. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/fnswg_update_issue2_june2015_0.pdf.
Gengenbach, Heidi. 1998. "'I'll Bury You in the Border!': Women's Land Struggles in Post-War Facazisse, Mozambique." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24 (1): 7–36.
Geyer, H. S. Jr. and H. S. Geyer Sr. 2015. "Disaggregated Population Migration Trends in South Africa Between 1996 and 2011: a Differential Urbanisation Approach." *Urban Forum* 26: 1–13.
Gudeman, S. 2008. *The Anthropology of Economy: Community, Market, and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Guyer, Jane. 2014. "Gains and Losses in the Margins of Time: From West and Equatorial History to Present-Day South Africa, and Back." *Africa* 84 (1): 146–150.
Harries, Patrick. 1989. "Exclusion, Classification and Internal Colonialism: The Emergence of Ethnicity Among the Tsonga-Speakers of South Africa." In *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, edited by Leroy Vail, 82–117. London: James Currey.
Hart, Keith, Jean-Louis Laville, and Antonio David Cattani, eds. 2010. *The Human Economy: A Citizen's Guide*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Hay, Michelle. 2014. "A Tangled Past: Land Settlement, Removals and Restitution in Letaba District, 1900 – 2013." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40 (4): 745–760.
Hull, Elizabeth, and Deborah James. 2012. "Introduction: Popular Economies in South Africa." *Special Issue of Africa* 82 (1): 1–19.
Hunter, Mark. 2011. "Beneath the 'Zunami': Jacob Zuma and the Gendered Politics of Social Reproduction in South Africa." *Antipode* 43 (4): 1102–1126.
IFPRI. 2015. "International Food Policy Research Institute, Global Nutrition Report 2015: Actions and Accountability to Advance Nutrition and Sustainable Development." Washington, DC.
ILO. 2015. *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2015*. Geneva: ILO.
James, Deborah. 2015. *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Junod, Henri. 1913. *The Life of a South African Tribe. Vol. 2. The Psychic Life*. Neuchatel: Attinger.
Kawano, Emily, Tom Masterson, and Jonathan Teller-Ellsberg, eds. 2010. *Solidarity Economy I: Building Alternatives for People and the Planet*. Amherst, MA: Center for Popular Economics.
Marais, Hein. 2011. *South Africa Pushed to the Limit*. London: Zed.
McMichael, Philip. 2014. "Historicizing Food Sovereignty." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41 (6): 933–957.
Moore, Henrietta, and Megan Vaughan. 1994. *Cutting down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Change in the Northern Province of Zambia*. New York: Heinemann.

Mosoetsa, Sarah. 2011. *Eating From One Pot: The Dynamics of Survival in Poor South African Households*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
Noble, Michael, Wanga Zembe, and Gemma Wright. 2014. "Poverty may have Declined, but Deprivation and Poverty are Still Worst in the Former Homelands." Econ 3×3, May. http://www.econ3x3.org/article/poverty-may-have-declined.
Oxfam. 2011. *Growing a Better Future: Food Justice in a Resource-Constrained World*. London: Oxfam International.
Parsons, Raymond, Waldo Krugell, and Gavin Keeton. 2015. "Eskom's Further Submission for a Tariff Increase." Joint Submission to National Energy Regulator of South Africa, June.
Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Potts, Deborah. 2000. "Worker-peasants and Farmer-housewives in Africa: The Debate about 'Committed' Farmers, Access to Land and Agricultural Production." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26 (4): 807–832.
Rodima-Taylor, Daivi, and Erik Bahre. 2014. "Introduction: Mutual Help in an Era of Uncertainty." *Africa* 84 (4): 507–509.
Smith, Graham. 2005. "Green Citizenship and the Social Economy." *Environmental Politics* 14 (2): 273–289.
South Africa DEA (Department of Environmental Affairs). 2013. *Long-Term Adaptation Scenarios Flagship Research Programme (LTAS) for South Africa. Climate Trends and Scenarios for South Africa*. Pretoria: DEA.
Statistics South Africa. 2013. "Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 4, 2013." http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2013.pdf
Statistics South Africa. 2014. "Poverty Trends in South Africa: An Examination of Absolute Poverty between 2006 and 2011." Pretoria: Statistics South Africa. http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-06/Report-03-10-06March2014.pdf
Vibert, Elizabeth. Forthcoming "Micro-Managing: Women's Household Economics in Rural Limpopo, South Africa." Manuscript in preparation.
Walker, Cherryl. 2008. *Landmarked: Land Claims and Land Restitution in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jacana.
Watts, Nick, W. N. Adger, Paolo Agnolucci, Jason Blackstock, Peter Byass, Wenjia Cai, Sarah Chaytor, et al. 2015. "Health and Climate Change: Policy Responses to Protect Public Health." *The Lancet*386 (10006): 1861–1914.
World Bank. 2012. *Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4° Warmer World Must be Avoided*. Washington: World Bank.
World Bank and One. 2014. *Levelling the Field: Improving Opportunities for Women Farmers in Africa*. Washington: World Bank.