Denunciations of dependence

Race, gender, and the double bind of domestic work in the Eastern Cape

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Abstract: This article focuses on workers in a South African township who enter into relationships of hierarchical dependence due to a lack of alternatives in the context of high unemployment and neoliberal fiscal restraint. The relationships are characterized by a double bind: workers seek relations of dependence in order to be recognized as persons, yet within these relations they are often denied such recognition, which reproduces experiences of infantilization, paternalism, and dehumanization associated with the past. The article explores how racialized and gendered meanings condition how men and women navigate relationships of hierarchical dependence, what they can expect to get from them and how these bonds can potentially be drawn on in efforts to escape them.

Keywords: colonialism, dependence, domestic work, gender, paternalism, racism

In the influential article “Declarations of Dependence,” James Ferguson (2013) suggests that in Western liberal political theory and politics, dependence has been framed as equal to a life in bondage and chains and that independence as relational disentanglement is framed as a condition for freedom. Ferguson’s contribution has been important in bringing attention to how dependency is not universally framed as a vice and in bringing long-standing anthropological insights about human interdependence into a critique of vilifications of “dependency.” In making this argument, however, Ferguson simultaneously makes the case that contemporary black South Africans seek out hierarchical dependencies in search of a kind of belonging that he compares with the pre-

colonial Ngoni kingdom, where “it was actually the existence of possibilities for hierarchical affiliation that created the most important forms of free choice” (Ferguson 2013: 226). He describes how people pursued incorporation into a violent regime in search of belonging and graded personhood in a “political logic that was broadly characteristic of most precolonial southern African societies” (Ferguson 2013: 226). Ferguson compares such hierarchical dependencies with the age of capitalist expansion where, he argues, ranked labor relationships provided sources of recognition and belonging. Observing people in contemporary South Africa who virtually beg people for employment, he argues that they seek out similar hierarchical relationships in the present.

Several scholars have pointed out how this account downplays the role of colonial, global, and regional entanglements in creating the inequalities that lead toward particular geographies of dependence (e.g., Bolt 2013; Kenny 2018; Shah 2013; White 2013). This is surprising in many respects, as much of Ferguson's previous work has dealt with how arguments based on region-based cultural continuity risk overlooking the role of colonial and global entanglements in creating the inequalities that lead toward ascriptions of dependence. By downplaying the significance of such political economic factors, while also tracing continuity between forms of hierarchical dependence across such qualitatively divergent regimes (White 2013), Ferguson's account risks portraying South Africans as culturally predetermined to seek subordination. This appears enigmatic in a region where the black consciousness movement identified to break the chains of servitude and dependence engendered by colonialism as the main tenet of liberation (Biko 1987: 69). Also, if we take Ferguson's claim at face value, it should follow that Southern Africans find fulfillment and recognition within relations of hierarchical dependence.

Based on 14 months of fieldwork among domestic workers employed in hierarchical labor relationships in a household economy in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, this article contests this claim. Focusing rather on the characteristics and meanings of different forms of dependence (Bolt 2013; Shah 2013), I argue that people often consider themselves forced into these employment relationships, which are often seen as producing kinds of dependence that are demeaning and that they would like to avoid. While people may seek recognition of personhood *by means of* relations of hierarchical dependence, they deny that the relationships *per se* are sources of fulfillment. The fact that certain people seek such relations relates to the decline in other kinds of wage labor, rather than to a cultural predisposition to seek out the more explicit kinds of dependence that employment in this context tends to entail. On the contrary, people denounce hierarchical dependency re-

lations due to how they often feel that they are denied recognition of their full personhood within these and the racialized intersubjectivity that such bonds reproduce.

Dependency works differently and means different things to different people in different contexts (Bolt 2013: 244). Consequently, the dynamics of incorporation and how far people want to be incorporated into relations of dependence vary. By paying attention to the specificities of relations and declarations of dependence, it becomes apparent that they may in fact express aspirations for growth (Englund 2013) and even for escaping these same hierarchical dependencies.

However, by including not just women's but also men's largely overlooked positions in domestic labor, it becomes evident that the dynamics of incorporation are gendered. Gender conditions the kinds of relationships that the actors imagine they can and are willing to transact through these dependencies and how they express their agency. Central to this is the appeal to idioms of kinship and gift exchange, implying that the relationship is framed as one of mutual and enduring obligation (Mauss 2002) versus idioms of wage labor and commodity exchange aspiring to depersonalized and finalized transactions. People use or refuse the idea of kinship and gift exchange as means of creating relationships of dependence that go beyond or are limited by the idea of wage labor.

The place

Situated in the Eastern Cape Province, the township in Endlini was established when the nearby town required labor due to a rising resident and tourist population in the democratic era.¹ Most people migrated to the township after the end of apartheid from the former Ciskei "homeland" and from white-owned farms where they had been indentured laborers. Inhabitants in the township, who are predominantly black, isiXhosa-speakers, mostly work in the adjacent, small, majority-white town.

The economy of the area is largely structured by kinship: work is primarily for private households or family run businesses, such as hotels, restaurants, maintenance, and construction companies in town. Women work mostly as domestic workers in private homes and as cleaners and cooks for companies, while men work as gardeners, builders, and in service professions. Work is often precarious and unemployment is high. Salaries typically range between 80 and 250 rand per day (the equivalent of approximately 5.20 to 16.25 US dollars). There is no active trade union in the area, which unionists attributed to the difficulty of setting these up in areas dominated by household labor and the intimate entanglements it entails between employers and employees.

The township is a postapartheid manifestation. Yet, the spatial layout of the densely populated township, comprising mostly of shacks with some low-cost housing, providing labor to the adjacent suburban town of houses and villas, reflect the continuation of a racialized and historically constituted relationship of inequality. The social geography of the township also reflects the high unemployment rates in South Africa, currently at 40 percent (Hunter 2019). The decline in access to traditional, low-skilled men's jobs such as mining (see Ferguson 2015; Seekings and Nattrass 2005) has led to an increase in job searches by men in these household economies.

Contested dependence

The colonial project in South Africa ascribed dependence to various groups along fault lines of race and gender, which shaped and justified colonial expansion. Kenny (2018) suggests that the "labor relation" has been a site of struggle over personhood in South Africa (see also Barchiesi 2011, 2016). This struggle, I argue, is also waged in idioms of dependence where relations and ascriptions of dependence have been ways to position self and others and legitimate hierarchies.

Settler colonialism has emphasized the "dependence" of both women and black people,

portraying them as passive, childlike and incompetent (Cock 1989: 12; see also Fanon 2008). "The white man's burden" denoted a native in need of civilization (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997), thus "dependent" on "the civilizer." This was attended by a project of dispossession, which produced an economic dependency among Africans. Briefly summarized; dispossession of resources, land and livestock, denial of economic and civil rights, and introduction of taxes and money forced Africans into dependency on wage labor and servitude on settler-controlled mines and farms, which ensured colonial wealth (Beinart 2001; Plaatje 1916; Wolpe 1995). While downplaying its own dependence, the colonial capitalist system's access to cheap labor depended on production and reproduction in the rural homestead (Meillassoux 1972; Wolpe 1995).

The dialectics between production and ascriptions of dependence were thus essential to colonialism and remain central to the political economy in the years following the collapse of the apartheid system. In Endlini, contestations over hierarchies and personhood were often articulated as struggles over who depended on whom in the contemporary political economy.

Whereas people in the township told me that nowadays they had freedom (*inkululeko*) and rights (*amalungelo*), they also described an experience of continuity with the past where they continued to live at the mercy of white employers. Several of my interlocutors voiced how the continuation of a division of labor in which "black hands do the dirty work" (Jansen 2019: 3) reproduced the attitudes of a racialized and hierarchical subjectivity. Nobomi asked rhetorically, "How will they ever see us as equals, when we go and tidy up after them all the time?" This association of blackness with manual labor (Kenny 2018) and whiteness as above this kind of work is entrenched in the racialized and dominant division of labor. Fed up with this, Nolundi quit her job for white people and eventually managed to start up her own small business because, she said, she could no longer work for whites due to this hierarchical subjectivity: "They will never put a black person to do

a job that is higher up than a white person. They will always make sure the white person is above. That can never change.” Noting how there was a “secret line” with her employer, she related how this had come out when the employer shouted at her.

Whereas recognition of adult personhood was premised on an act of speaking to one another, shouting was associated with what adults do to children. Mazwi quit his job after several such episodes with his employer: “You know, it is about respect, about treating each other with respect. They don’t have it. They talk to us as if we are children, as if I am a three-year-old. I am not a three-year-old. . . . They treat us as if we are slaves.”

The experience of being treated like children invoked the colonial coupling of black people with dependency and immaturity. Whereas adult personhood indeed relied on and acknowledged interdependence with others, children were not complete persons: they “depended” (*kuxhomekeke*), in a vertical and hierarchical sense, on adults for morals and survival. Seniority is considered the most significant marker of authority and hierarchy among isiXhosa-speakers (Maseko 2018), therefore being reduced to children was, clearly, hugely demeaning.

This infantilization, with its emphasis on workers’ dependence, also concealed the dependence of the employers on workers’ labor power. This was most strongly articulated by a prevalent discourse situationally drawn on about how black people were occasionally “treated like dogs” (*izinja*) by whites. It implied that black people contributed and were used for their labor power but were not subsequently recognized for their humanity and as persons. Rather, they would be treated “like dogs,” which in isiXhosa implied being treated like pariah citizens.

My interlocutors in the township, however, rather emphasized the dependence of white employers both by how they needed black workers to get anything done and by how black people were seen to sustain and fund the former’s lifestyle and wealth. Fana illustrated this mechanism of exploitation when we were looking at

a golf course : “It’s the black people who have built that golf course. The white man is standing there . . . next to the black man, watching him while he is working. So, the black man is building the place, it’s his work. . . . But at the end of the day, who is benefiting from that work? Who is getting all the money for that work? It’s that white man standing there watching the black man.”

Fana emphasized that these were also class dynamics and that in contemporary South Africa black people may take these positions in the division of labor and in relation to capital. While the laborers did the work, the employer made the money off that work.

The discourse on power, *amandla*, visualized these exploitative relations. *Amndla*, power, moves across bodily, economic, political, and religious spheres. While eating after a funeral, one woman told the group that she was paid 60 rand (approx. 3.5 US dollars) for a whole day’s work. Everyone present seemed revolted. Thuli who sat next to me said: “They want our power” (*bafuna amandla ethu*). This discourse brought out the connections between wealth and dispossession: *amandla* was not endless. It served as a vernacular idiom “to condemn work and domestic arrangements that hide in their paternalism unacceptable degrees of exploitation” (Englund 2013: 248). As a form of cannibalism, such employers fed on other people’s life chances (Nyamnjoh 2018), hindering workers’ self-determination and rejecting their personhood.

People who did not want to work for white people referred to such exploitation and denigration to explain why they instead preferred more impersonal wage labor. This was not merely because of meager salaries but also because these relationships reproduced experiences of being reduced to children and not being recognized as full persons.

The double bind of dependence

Whereas the initial and forced entry into wage labor disrupted the making of persons and life

worlds (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987), the predicament of unemployment now creates barriers to the fulfillment of these. While the labor relationships were associated with a denial of full personhood, people also needed the work in order to be recognized as persons. This produced a “double bind” (Bateson 2000) in which the recognition of personhood through maintaining relationships to others also forced people to enter the hierarchical relations of dependence that they associated with infantilization, dehumanization, and a denial of their full personhood.

As the source of income, work is clearly crucial for survival and remains vital for people’s ability to create themselves as persons and to establish themselves in households and kin relations through the ability to provide and “to bring others into being,” whereas its opposite, stasis and inability to act, means social death (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). For instance, unemployment and the lack of income pose significant challenges to men in their quest to attain manhood by paying *lobola*, bridewealth, for marriage and the importance of provisioning for kin as safeguarding household membership and status (Hunter, 2010). Women’s gendered personhood and motherhood, in particular, has been tied to the ability to provide for children, where much labor goes into securing children’s futures, especially through education (Hunter 2014, 2015).

A distributive politics (Ferguson 2015) is indeed taking place in Endlini township, but state grants are small in sum and limited in reach, and the redistributive politics between kin and friends in the township stretch thin the already meager salaries of those who work. In this context, “the job” itself retains significant social value as opposed to the stasis of unemployment and “sitting at home” (Kenny 2018: 187) but also as a site to which a distributive politics could potentially be extended. Rather than wanting to stay within these relations of dependence, many wanted to use that structure of dependence to escape it. However, the possibilities within these relationships were different

on the basis of their gender. I turn to this dynamic next.

Women on the inside

In Endlini, women entered the inside of houses and looked after children, pets and possessions, which situated them in key positions in these homes. Historically, women’s domestic work has often not been seen as employment due to its extension of women’s seemingly “natural” roles. Being located in the private household, it has been considered a continuation of kinship rather than a contractual obligation (Ally 2009: 3). In South Africa this has also situated domestic work as an institution of ultra-exploitation (Cock 1989: 8) in which the idiom of kinship—that she is “like a part of the family” (Jansen 2019), a daughterly dependent to be looked after and safeguarded by maternal figures—has been observed to disguise exploitative working conditions.

The persistent prevalence of domestic work in contemporary South Africa expresses the legacies of and continuities with the past but also the attempts at transformation in the present through their reclassification from “servants” to “workers” with “labor rights.” However, like Shireen Ally (2009) argues, due to its intimate character, domestic labor is not easily absorbed into employment relationship guided by rights, and women often entered into relationships with employers where they negotiated their working conditions through personal relationships. The intimacy implied in women’s domestic work and the idiom of kinship and a status as “dependent” could also be drawn on to press claims in order to release the potential of the inequality that characterized the relationship.

Most of my female interlocutors aimed to stop working for white employers or to equip their children so that they would not have to. They were clear that the only way to enable independence was by ensuring an education for their children so they could access better work (see Hunter, 2014, 2015, 2019). However, for

many, a white employer was their hope to access what they were excluded from, thus they needed to draw on these relationships. By maintaining a well-functioning relationship with a “good” employer, the labor relationships could imply “distributive labor” (Ferguson 2015: 97) where things and services moved from employer to employee.

One such example was Nobomi. When she broke her leg a few years earlier, her boss called her while she was in hospital wondering why she was not at work. She told her that she had bumped into a chest of drawers in her shack and fell. “I fell because I didn’t have space to walk around in that small shack”, she told me. This made Casey, her boss, realize that she did not live in good conditions, so she decided to build her a house. Nobomi still worked for Casey. Her salary was 1800 rand (120 US dollars) a month. Through a combination of her salary, rental income from the house, and children’s grants from the government, she was now able to pay for her youngest grandchild to go to a privately run school, where kids learned English. This, as all my interlocutors emphasized, was key for a child to ever get a decent job where they would not have to work for whites.

While the continued effects of apartheid planning and contemporary liberalization locate poverty at the spatial margins of middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, domestic work is undeniably a way through which middle- and upper-class South Africans relate to the inequalities that the country’s history has produced. When Nobomi told her boss that she broke her leg because of her small house, she appealed to the inequality within their relationship and a sense of obligation within a gift economy.

However, many expressed that they preferred to be in more impersonal wage labor relationships where they did not have to appeal to idioms of kinship and obligations associated with a gift economy. Nomothile had worked for the same family for fifteen years, looking after their children, cooking for the family and cleaning the house. She had asked her employers if they could pay for her daughter to go to a good

school: “They told me they would pay but that I would get a low salary in the future.” Now, Nomothile made 1500 rand per month (approx. 95 US dollars), which did not cover her household expenses. Thus, she was in a relation of obligation to her employers, implicitly returning the gift of education by continuing to work for them for a low salary. Because she had a low income, she also had to turn to them for financial support. This, she described, made her dependent on their approval in order to fulfill her obligations as mother and kin. One day, she was waiting for her employers to decide whether they would give her financial assistance for an ancestral ceremony that she was organizing. Nomothile was frustrated because her dependence on them required that they would endorse her priorities, which they often did not.

She [the employer] is thinking that “if you work for me, it is up to me what you want to do with the money.” They ask me what I want to do, like a baby. So, I go to them and say ‘I want to do this and this’ [Nomothile speaks in a squeaky voice, smiles innocently, and makes herself small]. And then they say “WHY? WHY?”

Nomothile noted that they were in control because they were in a position to evaluate whether what she needed money for was vital enough. Typically, an ancestral ceremony, which to her was an existential obligation and about situating herself and her family as persons within a lineage and community, was unintelligible to her employers who found it “wasteful.” She then noted that she would like to control this herself: “She tells me that I must tell her what she must buy. But I am shy. I can’t tell her all the things I need. It’s not my money, it’s her money. Just give the person the money she needs to buy her own things.”

Here, she rejected the idea of gifting and kinship and rather emphasized her role as a wage laborer to whom they should—and could—pay a living salary, which again would enable her to make her own decisions. Nomothile made

a declaration of independence on the basis of owning her own person and wanting to control her own money but expressed that, while she wanted independence, she was forced into negotiating dependence.

It is central to recognize the role-play involved when women entered into infantilized positions in relation to employers. My interlocutors made it clear that these were roles that they took out of necessity in precarious situations: "I got wrinkles because I had to smile so much," remembered Zihle of her former working relationship. I often noticed the significant change in some women's posture and tone: As we entered the yards of the employers, the loud, firm voices used in the township and even on the way to work changed to become soft and carefully spoken as some women visibly entered the "public transcript" (Scott 1990) of their interaction.

Many women expressed discomfort with the infantilization and control that they were subjected to through such relations of gift exchange. However, the intimacy of the relationship and their role as women, associated with "dependence" became a potential resource to draw on, to press claims, and thus a way to exert agency. Hence, their declarations of dependence contained aspirations for growth (Englund 2013: 249) and even aspirations to escape these forms of dependence.

This dynamic often played out differently for men. While women were inclined to be referred to through kin-like idioms by employers and to draw on gift exchange, men were less so.

Men on the outside

While men had previously migrated for work in industry (see Mayer and Mayer 1971) or to the mines (see Moodie and Ndatshe 1994), the decline in industrial wage labor meant that, for many, this was no longer an option. Domestic economies represented alternative forms of labor. Men I spoke to often looked back on the days when they worked in the mines and indus-

try with affection. They contrasted the past with the contemporary situation, which they felt threatened their personal independence due to lack of income and the kind of work they could now access.

Domestic labor in white homes and workers' physical location in space were strictly gendered. Men worked primarily as gardeners, maintenance workers, and construction workers. These inside/outside boundaries of the house and how they overlapped with the gendered division of labor were constituted through colonial policies that had increasingly pushed men to the outside.

In colonial South Africa, men worked as domestic workers inside houses, referred to as "house boys." Men were replaced by women as their labor was required on the mines and there was increasing fear of "the black peril" among whites in the context of rape scares in the 1930s (Ally 2009: 32–34; Onselen 1982). The current location of men on the outside, thus, has ties to colonial fear and criminalization and to the history of wage labor.

Whereas their location on the outside expressed a long-standing criminalization, men's masculine positions were at the same time shielded and maintained through this location on the outside and away from a domestic domain associated with women (see Morrell 1998: 623). However, the division of labor and location in space also paradoxically put them in structurally infantilized and feminized positions within these sites. Whereas men had historically come to incorporate the experience of industrial wage labor into understandings of manhood (Morrell 1998: 623), men expressed that their positions and sense of manhood were typically threatened within a domestic household economy.

Formerly a mineworker, Themba was now a gardener for a family: "They say garden boy, but I am a man, not a boy," he stated. Sometimes he would clean the windows of the house, but only on the outside. "Women work inside. White people don't want men inside . . . because they think the men steal," he stated. He made it clear that he had no interest in going inside. He

asked me rhetorically, “Why would I want to go inside?”

His account situated himself on the outside as a result of white employers’ fear of black men. Also, noting how he was referred to by the infantilizing term “boy,” he distanced himself from these employers. A prevalent theme in the region’s colonial labor history is the use of the term “boys” for black men. The use of this belittling term captured “the inferiority projected onto the adult man and invoked the metaphor of generational struggle as the ‘boy’ tried to achieve manhood” (Morrell 1998: 630). Themba pointed out and denounced the infantilization within this space. He also questioned why he would even want to go inside, suggesting that it was a “dead” space for him, not a place where he could or would create anything, in stark contrast to the relationships that women often created inside the house. His account hints at how the structural relationships between women and men in these household spaces shifted the gendered connotations of dependence between the domestic worker and the gardener by their relation to the white household.

For instance, in one household where I worked with Nolwazi, she would always bring food outside to the garage for the gardener, Michael, while we would eat ours inside. He never came inside unless there was something specific he needed to do there. Their employer, Mrs. Brown, would often talk to Nolwazi about Michael, whereas the former would often shout directly at Michael and complain about his lack of ability to communicate and take instructions. Nolwazi often carried messages from the employer to Michael in isiXhosa, thus mediating between inside and outside. In the employer’s absence, Nolwazi would give him his cash payments outside and she would hold the employer’s dogs back as they barked when he came to work. In a hierarchy of trust within this household, Nolwazi was thus situated above Michael—a hierarchy that was also projected onto their respective positioning, labor, and movement in space. She typically held a com-

paratively firmer and more stable position and related more closely to authority than he did. At the same time, she mediated a relationship between the employer and him.

Historically, oratory and the ability to convince and to control the terms of the debate was crucial for a man’s abilities to build social relations to ensure personhood (Comaroff and Roberts 1981; McAllister 2006). Women and children were (at least in theory) to be represented as dependents (Kenny 2018: 160). In the context of labor politics among retail workers in Johannesburg, Bridget Kenny (2018: 159–161) argues that permanent employment is associated with adulthood, denoting the status to engage managers through meaningful communication compared to casuals who are referred to as children (*abantwana*) who must be represented. Similarly, women often held more stable and permanent positions within these sites and related more directly to authority, also on behalf of men.

Consequently, in one sense, a man’s position and movement within the employer’s household was highly situated according to his gender as a man. On the other hand, he was, paradoxically, not only structurally infantilized but also feminized as a “dependent” within this space.

It was within this tension, I argue, that men entered into these spaces where they were structurally denied access to but were also more inclined to reject a kinship and gift idiom altogether. In the township, it was widely recognized that men in particular did not like to work for white people. They preferred to work for others in the township, run businesses like taxi services, or work for the government.

Despite having been unemployed for almost ten years, Thembinkosi preferred to depend on his girlfriend rather than to take a job for a white employer. While he talked about his daily domestic chores in his girlfriend’s house as work (*sebenza*) and a part of modern manhood, he also expressed frustration. He wanted to marry his girlfriend but did not have the money to pay bridewealth, *lobola*, which also made him a less attractive prospective husband by its indication

that he would not be able to contribute to the household (see Hunter 2010). Whereas Them-binkosi's case shows how him refusing to work for whites and being unemployed became a threat to his gendered personhood, its opposite could also be detrimental to one's sense of self and socially recognized manhood.

One such example was Billy who had lost his job in mining a few years ago. He was now drinking heavily and begging for money and piece work in town. He described it as having lost control over his life. In the township people felt sorry for him, but he was known as a man who had lost his dignity by his unrestrained declarations of dependence on whites. Some even referred to him as "not a man." One man commented that he was "waiting for his white master to give him something." In this context, such declarations of dependence served to undermine rather than constitute manhood, incorporation, and a sense of belonging, and, in fact, contributed to "social death" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Thus, it was a fine balance between the refutation of gendered personhood implied with both the rejection of work, on the one hand, as exemplified by Them-binkosi, and overt declarations of dependence on the other, as exemplified by Billy.

In sum, for men and women the kinds of relationships that they imagined that they could transact from employers were different on the basis of their gender. The gendered division of labor in the households put women in positions closer to employers than men due to the division of labor locating them inside the houses and, mostly, in frequent and direct encounters with the members of the households. Employers were more comfortable attempting to shape their relationships with women in kin-like idioms that also constructed those women as dependents in a more overt manner. Whereas notions of womanhood were more open to and flexible for women to leverage their positions and relations with employers, men typically experienced their positions and sense of manhood as more threatened in this context.

Conclusion: Against hierarchical dependence

In the socio-economic landscape of postapartheid South Africa, people might appear to seek out hierarchical relations of dependence with white employers. Yet, those embedded within relations of subservient dependency, in fact, articulate multiple critiques of such relationships. While people are forced to engage in an economy of hierarchical dependence, they often denounce these bonds and work hard to escape them.

However, the relations between employers and employees in a household economy take on a pressing relevance in the context of high unemployment and neoliberal fiscal restraint, where the burden of dealing with social problems are largely delegated to private efforts (White 2001: 474). As the only solution for many people, such hierarchical dependencies consequently persist. The workings of South Africa's political economy produce and ascribe dependence in gendered ways, affecting how women and men experience, represent, and navigate such relationships and how their quests for independence from these relationships materialize.

These observations contest James Ferguson's (2013) representation of South Africans as seeking subordination as a personal preference. Focusing ethnographically on how people critique relations of hierarchical dependence makes problematic a centering of "dependence" as the key relationship embodying personhood and social ties characteristic of Southern African societies. Quests for and claims to dependence and independence shift, and various dependencies are clearly exposed to evaluation.

A perspective that privileges dependence as an uncontested moral value for black South Africans may implicitly link, as Keir Martin (2020: 8) argues, an "imagined 'we' to independence much as 'they' are to dependence." The denunciations of dependence and even declarations of independence expressed by interlocutors in this article complicates such an implicit typology and demonstrate that even if a Western liberal

idea of “possessive individualism” (Macpherson 1964) is not universal, neither is it unimaginable or indeed undesirable on cultural grounds for many black, South African workers. These particular vertical dependencies emerge not due to a cultural disposition to seek them out; they emerge as a result of a political economy and practices that produce inequality.

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Notes

As a white, female researcher, I take critiques about knowledge production and representation and its relevance for the argument of this article seriously. Like all research, it was produced through my situated engagement, determined by my positionality (Haraway 1988). I discuss this issue at greater lengths elsewhere but have to limit the discussion here due to spatial constraints.

1. Personal and place names have been changed to protect people's anonymity.

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