Sarah Ives
Department of Anthropology
Stanford University

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Tea Stories: Cultivating Value on the Margins in South Africa's Western Cape

> There are bigger political things happening, and people get sidetracked [by] conspiracies of who benefited and this and that (local community organizer).
>
> There are animosities and sympathies in rooibos on a personal level (local resident).

During the last hundred years, rooibos tea has moved from an indigenous drink to an iconic national beverage to a globalized commodity. As its economic value has risen, rooibos's meaning has changed from a wild plant to a culturally significant product against which residents measure their claims to belonging in the region. Based on more than one year of ethnographic research in the rooibos-growing region of the Western Cape, I explore how the social dramas of rooibos farming are entangled with political, economic, and environmental struggles over land, labor, and cultural belonging in South Africa and in a globalizing world.

In a small farming community, rumors were an everyday part of social and business interactions. Narratives of Shakespearean-style betrayals, public fights, political graft, and corporate greed informed gossip exchanged among farmers, farm workers, and other residents. Battles over rooibos became so heated in one religious community that congregants refused to share a communion cup. When I started my research, people repeatedly warned me that "rooibos is a minefield" and "rooibos is run by a mafia." I soon realized, however, that these discussions were typically not about the crop itself, but rather about the personal, political, and racial feuds that surrounded it. "What's the story about the tea?" one farmer asked. "There is always stories…always gossiping and wondering."

Francis Nyamnjoh (2006) has described the "growing preoccupation with belonging" in Africa – and in the world – as a consequence of neoliberal globalization. With the majority of land still in the hands of white South Africans, and neoliberal reforms leaving nearly half the population without work, cultural identity has taken on increasing prominence as a political rallying point and a means of survival. By bringing together scholarship on race, neoliberalism, and political economy, I demonstrate how mobilizations around cultural ownership merge with more established social science concepts, including those of labor relations. Detailed

ethnographic work contributes nuance to contestations over what, exactly, this concept of cultural ownership means in the context of two groups who do not fit easily into the category of 'indigenous': Afrikaans farmers who espoused a kind of white African indigeneity and 'coloured' farmers, a group often denied nativity to anywhere. These emotionally charged discussions of cultural ownership – whether the tea belonged to coloured farmers or to Afrikaans farmers or even to South Africa as a whole – were intimately tied to the region's historical structures of inequality, to dispossessions of land, and later to the tight controls of apartheid and the uncertainties of a post-apartheid future. Against this backdrop, it was clear to me that for rooibos farmers there was much more at stake in the plant's many rumors than merely a recounting of facts or the creation of a story palatable for consumers. A number of people asked me which "version" of rooibos's history I had heard so that they could set me straight.

In this paper, I explore these "tea stories." Specifically, I address how the stories, meanings, and rumors surrounding rooibos tea were entangled with political and economic struggles over labor, livelihoods, and belonging. I conclude my paper by describing these *politicized* ideas of cultural ownership through a discussion of three topics that incited many rumors: the 2011 municipal elections, the increased presence of migrant workers, and the connections between religion and greed. I want to emphasize that the truth or falisty of these narratives is not my main concern here. Rather, I take seriously the ways in which the gossip impacted local residents' worldviews and had concrete effects on the region, the farmers, the workers, and the industry as whole. As other scholars of rumor have argued, regardless of verfication, stories and their ideological contexts – whether historical transition, social dislocation, or power hierarchies – can create intimacy or disunity, cause violence, or even foster hope (Stewart and Strathern 2004; White 2000). Narratives, Liisa Malkki asserts (1995), are not just the recounting of facts. They can be politically and symbolically powerful, cumbersome, threatening, and/or irrelevant to the formation of a local and national consciousness.

Locating Neoliberalism

In this context, I explore how the historical specificities of rooibos industry narratives highlight the ways in which the transition to a more neoliberal form of agriculture is never straightforward (Bernstein 1996; Hart 2002). The rooibos industry provides a regionally specific lens through which to address how the macro-economic, globalizing processes of neoliberalism interweave with fights over a distinctly ecological notion of cultural belonging and indigeneity. In using the term neoliberalism, I am cognizant of the varied definitions employed by scholars (Chalfin 2004; Ferguson 2006; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Hart 2007; Harvey 2005). Following

James Ferguson (2010), I refer to neoliberalism as a macroeconomic doctrine that includes a valorization of privatization at the expense of the state, a fetishism of the free market, a desire to eliminate tariffs, and, finally, an enterprise model of the state take would allow the state to "run like a business" (Ferguson 2010: 179; see also Peck 2008).

At first glance, the rooibos industry appears to follow the classic narrative of neoliberal economic transition: after decades of state subsidies and pricing controls under apartheid, the industry privatized in the early 1990s. Privatization led in part to the consolidation of land and wealth in the hands of a few and to rising economic inequality. Concurrently, the region saw an increase in the presence of global agribusiness as the end of apartheid marked the opening of barriers to international trade. Changing economic and political policies also resulted in the rise of public-private partnerships within the industry, and nongovernmental organizations began taking over roles previously controlled by the government, including many social services. Concomitantly, the area has also seen a rise in the commodification of an "indigenous" ethnicity, as the rooibos industry and rooibos-related tourism increasingly turned to cultural marketing.

Yet, this rendering of the rooibos industry's history would miss how neoliberal policies interact with the local social, political, and agrarian landscape. I argue that rooibos's "tea stories" show what happens when the idea of neoliberalism comes into contact with a government whose implementation of and desire for neoliberal reforms is haphazard and with an agricultural product whose farmers' refuse to call a "commodity" because it acted as an everyday, inalienable part of their existence. Hardly a case of pure market fundamentalism, discourses of post-apartheid hope and excitement about new farming practices and about the potential for economic expansion ran alongside heated discussions of blame for the changes to the landscape and the community: blame the farmers, blame the outsiders, blame the government, blame the workers, blame the major corporations, blame nature, blame international certifiers, and so on. Through a selection of rooibos rumors, I consider how farm owners, workers, and community members negotiated, made sense of, and attempted to control a shifting agrarian landscape.

Background: The Rooibos Miracle

"Rooibos is the fabric of society," rooibos farmer.

"Rooibos land is high sentiment, low potential," a tea producer said as we walked through his dusty fields. He explained the deep attachment people have for the plant and the land, with its nutrient-poor soil and low rainfall. Rooibos can now be found in trendy cafés as far afield as Hollywood, Munich, and Beijing. In the industry, some people described the tea as "Mandela-

like," implying that, like Nelson Mandela, it could bring prosperity and hope to the region. Marketers variously implied that rooibos can heal the racially divided nation, the depleted environment, and the unhealthy body. This overburdened beverage was rife with semiotic possibilities. Rooibos will supposedly help you lose weight, gain weight, control diabetes, promote longevity, make skin more youthful, prevent cancer, help colicky babies, promote sleep, and so on.

Tea has served as a particularly power-laden sign in the fight over colonial and post-colonial representation. The history of tea consumption, Piya Chatterjee (2001) has argued, is the history of the domestication of the exotic. Tea is an alluring commodity because its distance from the familiar gradually transformed into the symbol of a quotidian, English, definition of civility and taste, the measure of civilization. In fact, hidden in this shift from the 'strange' to the 'familiar,' Chatterjee asserts, is the very history of empire: "the mappings of exoticism, the continuous struggles over symbol and sign, and the cultural cartographies of conquest" (Chatterjee 2001: 21). Rooibos's 'miracle-like' qualities seemingly left it open to any kind of signification. One marketing narrative describes the tea with dramatic language: "If South Africa had to name a national drink, it would certainly be Rooibos tea. This golden-red brew discovered by the Khoisan and popularised by Benjamin Ginsberg is a flavour as indigenous as licking the sweat from a Kudu's snout." This description of South Africa focuses on its ancient past, but also the role of Europeans in re-discovering and popularizing the country's assets for a modern, global audience. In fact, the world's largest 'flavor' company, Givaudan, selected rooibos as one of the flavors "to watch" in its 2007 annual forecast. Thus, the description of South Africa as a nation skips from ancient history to the immediate present and future, to South Africa as a 'place to watch.'

"Rooibos: it's more than just a tea," states the headline of an article about the many wonders that rooibos contains (Skade 2012). The "Magical properties of rooibos," reads another article. "We know about its good properties, so if we can look more into those good properties, it would not only improve our health, but the economy too" (Ndongeni 2012). "What's interesting is that in tough times people drink more tea," a tea executive told me. "It's cheap. It makes people feel comfortable. Tea and make-up, both those things go up…tea makes people feel good." The picture rooibos marketers' painted about the rooibos miracle, however, was more complicated when viewed in the specific context of the rooibos-growing region's social and economic relations of production.

Demographic and Ecological Exceptionalism

About 5,000 people work at rooibos farms and processing plants, and in 2011 rooibos was a $70 million-dollar industry. Despite this economic growth, the tea's cultivation still occurs mostly in the region where it also grows wild: the mountainous areas of the Western Cape. Farmers often told me that rooibos developed its current valuable form because of its 'proper' environment and its 'proper' local stewards: farmers whose families had lived in the area for generations. While the tea had become a global commodity, in the growing region, people and plants came together in an imagined culturally and geographically rooted world.

Significantly, the demographics of the rooibos-growing region are dramatically different from the rest of the country. The region is classified as 80% coloured, 15% white, 5% black, and less than 1% Asian. The national population is classified as 79% black, 9% coloured, 9% white, and 2.5% Asian (South African Government 2012). In the rooibos-growing area, white and coloured residents often invoked a distinct *demographic exceptionalism* in which they saw themselves as part of a unique "haven" and not necessarily part of South Africa as a whole.

In addition to a demographic exceptionalism, farmers also invoked a distinctly *ecological exceptionalism* in relation to rooibos and the fynbos landscape in which it thrives. Both coloured and Afrikaans community members repeatedly asserted that rooibos's economic and symbolic value stems in large part from its regional specificity. Rooibos is good *because* it is endemic. In this context, I argue that the story of rooibos is not just a story about producers and consumers, but also about the 'crop' itself: a natural, indigenous plant and global commodity with particular qualities that make it valuable and intensely political. When farmers discussed price volatility in the area's other major agricultural industries – citrus, grapes, and sheep – they described currency exchange rates or trade agreements. When discussing the tea market, however, a farmer said, "With rooibos, everything is personal." At the same time, many of the area's residents unwaveringly accepted the idea of nature as apolitical (but moral) and a realm unaffected by human interference, despite the fact that rooibos is heavily cultivated. It is this apparent contradiction that becomes so central to social relations in the region: rooibos is unquestionably indigenous, its naturalness is supposedly outside of politics; yet, rooibos's naturalness is the source of its economic and cultural value and engenders its very politicization as compared to other crops.

“Rooibos is Not a Commodity”

> South Africa is the monopoly producer of the tea, but unlike in many other industries it has been unable to extract a price advantage from this fact. Willem Engelbrecht, director for cultivation research and producer affairs at the South African Rooibos Council, told journalists on a media trip to the region that the tea, pegged against prices for black tea, was distinctly undervalued for a product that grew nowhere else in the country – or the world (“A Treasure Traded as a Commodity,” Donnelly 2012).

When rooibos farmers explained the tea’s “value” to me, they typically spoke not of price, but of an intrinsic significance of the plant and the tea that existed outside of “market economics.” Being “undervalued,” as Willem Engelbrecht described to journalists, was not just about rooibos’s being pegged to the price of black tea, but also about consumers, traders, and marketers failing to understand the tea’s “specialness.” In fact, most farmers – white and coloured alike – claimed to be distinctly anti-capitalist and therefore anxious about the uncertainties of a neoliberalizing agrarian market economy and how it might impact the relations between rooibos, farmers, and the ecosystem. “Plants and humanity,” one farmer told me. “I don’t see ecosystems as separate.” Farmers’ “anti-capitalist” declarations retained their force *despite* the fact that the globalizing agrarian market was the very thing that gave rooibos’s marginal land its economic value by transforming rooibos from a local product into a niche international commodity. Yet, when farmers would tell me, “We don’t want rooibos to become a commodity,” they implied their own – partial – resistance to classic politico-economic concepts. Rooibos, people told me again and again, was not a commodity; it was a “miracle.”

Rooibos Rumors:

To ground my argument, I explore the themes of changing political and economic governance through industry rumors circulating between 2010 and 2011, at a time when municipal elections led to an increased politicization of the region and the ANC won back the formerly DA-dominated local government. Despite this politicization, many in the region remained disillusioned. “I can’t see any benefits in politics. Here in Clanwilliam, when someone is elected, he doesn’t worry about the community anymore,” Arendt,[1] a coloured resident, told me in the days leading up to the 2011 municipal elections. I asked him if he planned to vote, and he shrugged: “I don’t know.” Numerous scholars have written about the disillusionment following the hope of the post-apartheid “miracle of transition” (Chari 2002; Hart 2007; Kagwanja 2008; Lawuyi 1998; Meskell 2012). Economic inequality and unemployment remained high after the

[1] All names have been changed to protect informants’ anonymity.

official end of apartheid in 1994 (Worby et al. 2008). While arguably the political arena has become more representative of the country's population (at least racially, if not economically), many South Africans became disenchanted with the government's potential for enacting and/or enforcing substantive transformative policies. Arendt too was left frustrated: "The politicians say they are democratic, but they are really just a bunch of capitalists." To Arendt, the idea of capitalism and democracy were held up in diametric opposition. One could not be both democratic and capitalist at the same time. This belief likely stemmed in part from the antiapartheid struggle's socialist underpinnings. Yet, the rumors that linked politicians, corruption, and capitalism spoke more immediately to government's inability (or unwillingness) to enact change in the rooibos-growing region.

Perhaps in response to this lack of fundamental post-apartheid change, in 2011 the rooibos-growing Cederberg became the first municipality in the history of South Africa to have a mayor representing the PAC. For many people, the result was shocking. The party, largely black, operated under the platform of African nationalism, socialism, and continental unity, a platform seemingly incongruous with local white and coloured declarations of Western Cape exceptionalism and the concerns over increasing black migration to the region that I will discuss further below. While closer examination of the results reveals a more complicated alignment of events (the PAC did not win a majority, but gained the position as a condition for allying with the ANC), the election was nevertheless politically significant, as it marked a reversal of recent political results, in which the Democratic Alliance had won the majority of council seats.

Local people interpreted these events in different ways depending on their social locations. One conclusion white farmers drew was that the ANC must have bussed black people to the area because coloured workers voting for the ANC would be a betrayal – not "our people," many farmers said. This rumor formed a site where political change, economic uncertainty, and shifting national and global agriculture trends came together. One moment a white rooibos farmer told me that he bussed in his workers from the Eastern Cape, and the next moment he complained that the ANC bussed people in from the Eastern Cape in order to win votes. The increasing informalization of agricultural labor and the deregulation and associated consolidation of rooibos farming *combined* with a loss of political control and with a change in the town's social relationships.

One white commercial farmer even asserted that the ANC threatened workers into voting for them, and that threats were the reason the ANC won:

> One of my workers told us that. They tell us a lot of things… There was a BBC reporter here, and he said to a farmer how racist you are. But the reporters should live on a farm and see. They kill you. People from Europe or the outside don't

> understand…But…The Western Cape is like a different country. We are family. We help each other. We have some blacks on the farm and they are fine. Most are coloured and speak Afrikaans…The whole world is against you. They don't see that farmers really help people on farms. The SABC comes here and stirs people up, and says the farmers should give you a better house, but you give them a nice house, and they destroy it. There are animals in the house, a pig in the bathtub. They drink and break windows… There are new laws that if people don't work for you, you can't make them leave. What other employer gives a house? You have to give water, electricity, and you can't get them out. The black people, seasonal workers, smuggle drugs... The sad thing is the permanent workers, the coloureds, buy alcohol for twice as much from black people as they would in town. They give their clothes to the black people to get drugs and alcohol. We give them nice work clothes and Sunday clothes, and they give them away. It's sad because it's very nice people and they are family.

The farmer refused to believe that "his" workers might want to change the "natural" hierarchical relationship between white and coloured. Black people, the ANC, and even the media came under fire for destroying his social world, while he framed himself as a benevolent, paternalistic caretaker. In this context, the increasing presence of black migrants in the region spawned a new series of rooibos rumors.

Alien Invaders: Black Migrants and the Power of Rumor

"The aliens is killing us," Jan, a coloured rooibos farmer, said one day as he walked across the small plot of land that he leases from his church. He pointed to the Australian Port Jackson trees and other invasive species spilling into his crop land. While Jan was speaking of plants, he might just as easily have been discussing people – referring to the wave of migration that had increased in the area since the end of apartheid-era pass laws and had altered local demographics. We started talking about rooibos and his desire to have a farm of his own. He looked me in the eye and said firmly, "Sarah, I don't want to be racist, but the Zulus, the Xhosa, they had their land, and the white people had their land too." Most of the area's residents, whether they identify as white Afrikaans or coloured, agreed that rooibos was indigenous and that black people, whether Zulu, Xhosa, or Zimbabwean, were 'alien.' The idea of the 'alien' worker spawned a series of both rumors and silences about the social, political, and economic relations in the region.

According to the beliefs still espoused by many in the rooibos-growing region and embedded in popular culture during the apartheid era, coloured people were weak and degraded, while black people were "virile" and "vigorous," their fertility and fecundity posing a serious threat to the white and coloured populations (Dubow 1995). White and even coloured residents of

the rooibos-growing area often reflected these beliefs. One white rooibos farmer explained that he preferred coloured workers because he wanted to protect them. "Black workers are a problem," he said. "They stay and kick out the coloured people." South Africa has emerged as a particularly prominent place through which to engage with themes of the foreign as dangerous. In the last 15 years, the spread of xenophobia in South Africa has received much attention from scholars and other cultural commentators, with articles about it regularly appearing in journals and local newspapers (see, for example, Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Comaroff and Kim 2009; Geschiere 2011; Western 2001; Worby et al. 2008).[2]

While much of South Africa was embroiled in violence against people from other countries, the "xenophobia" of the rooibos-growing area and who could claim to rightfully "belong" in the region took on a decidedly different discursive tone and spatial scale. Though residents were concerned about the presence of immigrants from other African countries, their primary anxieties centered on other South Africans, black people from areas outside the ecologically and demographically unique region of rooibos country, a place construed by many in the area as the last haven against the presence of black South Africans. In fact, one of the experiences that surprised me most during my fieldwork was the fact that some coloured residents did not feel that apartheid played a role in the rooibos-growing area. "We couldn't see apartheid here. The problems were more in the towns or cities, not here," a coloured farmer told me. "But what about the pass system?" I asked. "Did you have to carry passes that restricted your movement?" The farmer's wife quickly jumped in: "Yes, and the kids had to go all the way to Malmsbury for high school." Despite my attempts to probe further, the conversation quickly turned back to nostalgia. "I miss growing up on the farm," the wife reminisced about the commercial farm where her father had worked. "Now there are Xhosa people there." This constellation of anxiety and nostalgia expressed themselves in rumors of violence in the area.

The timing and the specifics of the incident residents described most often varied depending on who told me the story, but most people agreed that an attack occurred in 2005 between the Sesotho and the isiXhosa. A Xhosa migrant explained to me:

> It was a communication issue. One Xhosa boy was in love with a Sotho girl. There was an argument between the girl and the boy. The brothers of the boy came over and got mad. It was really just a language issue. The conflict started there. The Sotho

[2] During the sweep of xenophobic attacks in 2008, almost a third of those attacked were actually black South Africans. As a result how the violence should be properly named became a site of contention. Was it political xenophobia or criminal activity? Or, as former president Thabo Mbeki charged, were criminals merely using the guise of xenophobia as a divert mask to justify their contempt for the law. Whatever the cause, most observers asserted that these victims were attacked because of mistaken identity – their darker skin or different spoken languages made people believe that they were from countries like Zimbabwe. (Worby et al. 2008).

> people assaulted the boy. The Xhosa people came back, and the violence started from there. We were forced to segregate the community by means of Xhosa on one side and Sotho on the other side in Khayalithsa. Houses were burned.

Whether the narrative was retold as a love story or a labor issue, a struggle among different black migrants or between the coloured and black community, the story had salience in the community. I heard a number of different versions of this story, in which the 'ethnic groups' involved and the cause and outcome of the fighting varied. I never learned what happened to the couple in question – or even if they actually existed – but the story had an afterlife in continued rumors of "xenophobia" between migrants and local coloured people and between different migrant groups. Significantly, the local residents, whether white or coloured, described the "xenophobia" as between fellow citizens, where one group was stylized as *more* foreign than the other.

"You must be extra careful on the weekends, Sarah," a coloured farmer told me as I waved goodbye after a Friday morning interview. "Outsiders come on the weekends, and we don't know them." Throughout our interview, he kept talking about all the "strange people" who had started coming to the rooibos-growing region: black workers, "weird" tourists, unknown coloured workers with tattoos, and dark-skinned people selling homemade reed brooms on the streets. While most people agreed that isiXhosa and Sesotho made up the largest percentage of migrants and that Zimbabweans made up the largest numbers of immigrants, no official statistics existed because many of the migrants were undocumented and many of the immigrants were in the area illegally.

When not staying in the dormitories provided at some commercial farms, migrants were mostly confined to an informal settlement above the "coloured section" of town, an area almost completely hidden from view. This area, I was told, had become a "no-go zone" for "respectable" coloured people and unsafe for white people unless they were driving through in their trucks, scanning the streets for migrants hoping to get work for the day. The literal separation of white, coloured, and black led to many rumors about what, exactly, might be happening in the informal settlement: Prostitution? Drug rings? Political plots? The spatial layout of the community resulted in rumors *and* silences, creating a landscape of denial. I asked one coloured residents about the crime and the rumored gangs. "This is in the informal settlements, not here in the middle where we are," she replied. Jonas, an Afrikaans farmer, gave me his assessment: "Around or just after the time of transition we started to have problems with xenophobia in the coloured community. I worry… There has never been a problem between white and coloured. It's between coloured and black." This distancing allowed white people to displace their anxieties and justify their roles in local racial politics by framing themselves as innocent bystanders.

Each new migration led to new rumors and new uncertainties. A local coloured activist explained to me her version of xenophobic fights as surges that followed waves of different migrants: "First it was between the coloureds and the Xhosa; then it was between the Sotho and the Xhosa, and on and on." Her explanation, however, was strikingly different from that of the love story that others had told me. "The reason is the farmers…capital says that it is still too expensive. What is a Zimbabwean working for? … Zimbabweans are cheaper labor, better educated, higher skilled. You get two for the price of zero. It is not easy to fight for the rights of these people." She simultaneously blamed the farmers, under the guise of 'capital,' and the Zimbabweans.

Because of the region's different crop harvest seasons (rooibos in the summer; citrus in the winter), migrants could be 'seasonal' workers all year long, a fact that hindered financial stability and labor organizing and often infuriated coloured residents. "They don't want to employ local people," one unemployed coloured resident and former farm worker told me. "The black people work for lower wages, and they can't complain because they are far from home. They give the workers food but at expensive rates. Housing is in bad condition. There is no electricity or windows." I asked a coloured community worker about the contradiction between the claims of labor scarcity and the simultaneous unemployment in the area. He responded, "Look, if I was a business person, I would also employ people from Lesotho – South Africans know you can go to court, they know the labor laws, the minimum wage, overtime." Another coloured community member complained that migrants placed a social burden upon the community. "Migrants are in and out. Or they come to the area during the season and stay here, and that causes problems too because there are periods when there is no employment."

Most of the migrants with whom I spoke certainly did not feel welcome. Many longed to be somewhere else but could not afford transport home or could not find jobs elsewhere. Daniel, a black South African sharing a shack in an informal settlement with a few other migrants, spoke of the racism that he experienced from both the white and coloured communities. "They see you as different. They assume you are from Zimbabwe or Malawi, but not South Africa," he explained. In local discourse, it was the black people who were not allowed to be South African; they were denied a place in the country. Yet many local residents reframed this denial and the plight of seasonal workers through rumors about certain "cultural attributes."

"You get a much better quality of worker from other places," another farmer told me. I was told in detail about the essentialized qualities of each "tribe." "On the farm, we have 40 permanent workers, all coloured, and 60-80 extra laborers, all black," he explained me. He continued, "The Xhosa are particularly strong, but lazy. The Sothos and the Tswana are nice, but

the Xhosas give them trouble." This evaluation shifted slightly from farmer to farmer. Another white commercial farmer told me, "Black people are much better workers. The Sotho are good workers. Guys from Zimbabwe are harder workers. They have education and are willing to work for half the price. The Sotho are not drinking. They are always on time. The Xhosas are not reliable." Every farmer seemed to have his own preference, choosing workers based on their perceived cultural identities.

"Culture makes a difference," yet another white farmer said. He explained how black people were easier to manage and had a cheaper standard of living than coloured people. In his eyes, capitalism and competitive advantage were re-coded through a discourse of culture (Nyamnjoh 2006). "The seasonal workers are black people. They will go and buy milk, maize. They don't buy like the local people. They eat different things like pap. Their food is cheaper because of their culture. To them, it's not porridge. Just look at what different cultures buy at Spar." I tried his 'ethnographic suggestion,' walking the aisles at Spar, the local grocery store, but I could not determine a purchasing pattern based on skin tone (it was not always easy for me to differentiate between black, coloured, and white people, unless I heard people speaking, the pigmentations were often too similar to my 'untrained' American eye, an alien myself).

Because I was American, people often laughed at my "cultural differences" or remarked at my "cultural similarities." Because I was a *white* American, no one ever challenged my legal right to be in the rooibos-growing area. Yet, many of the foreign workers are considered 'illegal' (although many people remarked that Home Affairs rarely came to the remote farms due to understaffing and lack of political will). Talking with an official, I probed further about the issue of illegality. To work legally, he said, "You must have a valid passport from your country and then you must have a letter of appointment that says you can work. The farmers have to advertise in national advertisement so that South Africans can apply first." He described the idea of geographical preference, an emphasis on localness. "They have to apply to the department that they need x number of seasonal workers and x amount from x country. They must give information and reason why they are not hiring South Africans and how many South Africans are employed on the farm. For example, if you want a tractor driver, you must prove that you cannot find anyone to do it," the official continued. "But the argument of the farmer is that the coloured people are lazy. They say, it's not their fault, it's the coloured people. Coloured people are lazy." Even issues of legality and illegality were reframed through the lens of race-based rumors.

Black migrants reputedly disrupted the politics, the labor relations, and the safety of the rooibos-growing community. Yet, there have always been migrations to the region – these migrations are visible in the ancient rock art that dots the landscape and the tales of and

monuments to settlers moving in and out of the area in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Despite these visual reminders, the flare-ups over migrants continued. The naturalizing of place-based belonging and literal partitions between racial groups showed the weight and impact of apartheid's control over people and its colonization of subjectivities. In fact, the layout of separate black informal settlements in the rooibos-growing area occurred *after* the end of apartheid-era laws.

People Are Worshipping a New God, and that New God Is Rooibos

> I am freed from the market of sin. I am free (rooibos farmer).

When discussing the rooibos industry today, white and coloured farmers alike more often than not used two words: greed and corruption. "People got greedy when they started making money with rooibos," an Afrikaans farmer told me. "They started acting funny – wearing certain clothes and driving certain cars." The gradual transition from the apartheid government to a democratically elected post-apartheid government brought with it the lessening of apartheid-era economic sanctions. In the mid-1990s opening markets combined with the burgeoning popularity of 'alternative' or 'exotic' healthy foods and beverages. In this context, new rumors fomented that connected themes or religion and greed.

"Who among the rooibos tea farmers are really benefiting?" Michael asked me, his eyes gleaming with passion. "It is not the poor. Today no one has an equal opportunity to land." Michael, a community organizer from Cape Town, used the rhetoric he had learned as a comrade in the struggle against apartheid. He had been involved in a number of legal and political actions that tried to benefit the coloured rooibos farming community living on Moravian church land. He leaned farther across the table: "There are elites, and not in the Marxist sense, but their status, their role in the community…it dates back 100 years with capitalism and a market-driven approach…there is no more petty production, but everything is at a capitalist scale. There is further differentiation. All are resource poor, and the rooibos price determines so much." He shifted back in his chair and paused for a moment, perhaps for emphasis. "It is becoming Moravian Pty, Ltd." Michael believed that both the major rooibos corporations and the Moravian Church were the epitome of post-apartheid capitalism and that both represented a betrayal of the comrades who had fought for a socialist state.

Before and during the apartheid era, one of the main areas where coloured farmers maintained some degree of independence was mission land. On church-owned land, coloured farmers did not labor for Afrikaans farmers, but rather for the church, for the community, and for

God. As long as they remained members of the church, coloured farmers could stay on the land. A town of about 3,000 people in mountains accessible only by a heavily rutted dirt road, Wupperthal was founded in the 1800s by German missionaries, who incorporated Khoisan families that lived in the area.[3] When the colonial government officially abolished slavery in the region in the mid-1800s, the population of the mission station grew as many freed slaves moved from nearby white-owned farms and converted to Christianity. In Wupperthal, German missionaries came to bring "upliftment" and to "civilize" the population.[4] While the missionaries had long since left or become incorporated into the local population, the church's role in the area continued to be complex and contradictory, a fact that takes on critical importance in the rooibos story because of the church's central place in coloured rooibos farming.

The early missionaries in the rooibos-growing area focused on creating an agricultural community with small trade in *veldskoene,* or bush shoes. At the same time, these mission stations served as labor reserves for the surrounding farms, providing cheap, seasonal labor. One community activist described Wupperthal as a buffer against apartheid, "as much as you can romanticize it…you can see how agriculture has been systematically destroyed in mission stations to provide a labor pool for surrounding areas." Yet, the Moravian Church also had a radical history during the apartheid struggle, taking part in the Council of Churches with Desmond Tutu.[5] The mission station and its inhabitants, then, had conflicting relationships with local white farmers and with the rooibos industry. On the one hand, the mission station provided land and livelihoods for coloured people that allowed them with some independence from the labor regime of the apartheid-era farming system. On the other hand, the church retained control over the land and eventually over the region's rooibos: when residents in the area began a rooibos cooperative, they had to get permission from the church, and the church owned the tea court and the land in which the tea grew.

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[3] The actual population of Wupperthal fluctuates dramatically due to seasonal work and young adults, particularly men, that migrant to the cities for jobs. There are approximately 420 households in the 30,000ha area of Wupperthal and its associated smaller outstations. During much of the year, the area is filled primarily with older people and children. Many people in the community hope that rooibos will create jobs for people in the town so they do not need to migrate for work.

[4] According to Nigel Penn (2006), missionaries contributed to the social and economic transformation of the Khoisan, "making them more dependent on the culture and commodities of the colony. They also had a political role to play, seeking to enhance the state's control over the turbulent frontier regions" (Penn 2006: 23). The Khoisan were open to Christianity, he continues, because the social fabric of their societies had been torn apart by years of commando raids, enslavement, and disease. This "cultural and psychic trauma" was fertile ground for Christianity, "especially when its spiritual securities were coupled with prospects of a more stable political order" (Penn 2006: 251).

[5] The South African Council of Churches was founded in its current form in 1968. Active during the apartheid resistance the goal of the Council is "to express the never-changing Gospel in the changing scene of South Africa through the years of apartheid, transition and democracy" (South African Council of Churches 2012).

In this context, during my fieldwork, rumors about and among the Moravian community took on operatic proportions, with tales of family betrayals, fights in the streets, lawsuits, and people refusing to share communion cups with those whom had allegedly wronged them. When referring to a small-scale rooibos cooperative operating on church land, one Moravian told me, "People are worshipping the new God, and the new God is rooibos." The presence of both the church and rooibos physically dominated the small town. The processing plant was located just behind the church, and I could smell the sweet fragrance of drying rooibos from the pews. Small rooibos fields grew in front of houses and up into the mountains, and a tiny shop sold rooibos beauty products down the street.

Needing a place to talk that would shield us from the ever-present sun, Jacob, a Wupperthal resident, and I sat in the church. He firmly believed that the increased value of rooibos was destroying the community. "There were many inside struggles because of rooibos," he began. "There were personal problems and money. Money because there is no economy here, no industry, and everyone needs money. They say, 'I don't care how I get it.'" He shook his head and looked around the church. "Will there be peace? This is what we hope for…it is sometimes heartbreaking. We are supposed to be brothers and sisters. They all come together in the church. But they walk away from the church without taking communion because there are people that don't want to greet each other."

Falling from Eden

These rooibos stories were often augmented with the notion that some people were ruining the region's heritage with their greed. Jan, a coloured farmer who lived on Moravian land, narrated a history of avarice that he felt coincided with a distortion of religious faith and a changing political and economic situation. "In 1991 [the town] was still a complete, complete backwater. It was still donkey carts," he explained, describing the mode of transportation many farmers used to negotiate the poorly maintained dirt roads on Moravian land. "Within the space of 1991 to 1995, suddenly there were *bakkies* [pick-up trucks]. It coincided with South African political and economic changes and money and rooibos… It definitely changed, the economy, and it's not just deregulation but also the lack of sanctions. With the deregulation, the first people to break away were pariahs." Money and rooibos – instead of emerging as a tea of salvation, rooibos was labeled a tea of temptation.

The idea that rooibos's increased economic value had led to a fall from Eden crossed racial boundaries. The biophysical aspects of the tea played an important role in its history, as the land where rooibos thrives is sandy and receives little rainfall. Before rooibos's increased

commodity value, many farmers struggled with wheat, sheep, and other crops. Lucas, an Afrikaans farmer, described what he saw as the transition many of these previously "humble" farmers went through: "Prices went up…in 2000. Then a lot of farmers made a lot of money. Poor farmers got rich very quickly. When the price went down, they had to maintain that standard of living, the Mercedes and John Deer."

Tales of a previously austere and authentic farming community undone by the corruption that accompanies sudden wealth were common. Abe, an Afrikaans farmer who lived far up in the mountains, had a reputation in the rooibos industry for being an "overly aggressive" evangelist. One of his neighbors gave me his phone number, but only after his wife had told him not to. "You really think she should talk to Abe?" his wife had asked. They exchanged looks. "Well, I suppose she should." I was curious and a little apprehensive when I pulled my car in front of his modest farmhouse surrounded by acres and acres of rooibos land. His wife opened the door, and I sat in his living room waiting for him to come in from the fields. All around the room were copies of bibles, prayer books, and religious pamphlets.

When he finally greeted me, Abe began our conversation by asking if I were a Christian. "I was raised in the church," I explained. Not wanting to go into my own uncertain thoughts about religion, I changed the subject quickly to his rooibos farming. He narrated his tale as though it were a morality play: "I was a greedy man. I invested in townhouses in Cape Town, Joburg, and all over. My father told me, 'You must stay in farming.' I said, 'No, you must diversify.' My goal was to get rich." He paused his story and stared at me briefly. "On my way there, my life was transformed by God… you need discipline. You are sinners," he looked at me again, and I felt myself shrink under his gaze, uncertain if he were saying that *I* was a sinner, or if rich farmers were sinners, or if the distinction even mattered in his eyes. He told me that the Dutch Reformed Church was satanic and proceeded to talk on and on about Sodomites and lust. I stopped taking notes, tried to avoid his piercing eyes, and frantically thought about how I could turn the conversation back to rooibos. "Where do you sell your tea?" I asked, out of context. He told me that he did not sell his tea to the new processor that had opened up in his town. "I don't sell there. I don't want to arrive in Hell. Satan is the ruler of the earth…I tell my [workers], 'Eventually God will give up.' I won't sell my tea to that plant. My life must be an example to the world."

An hour passed, and I was unable to interrupt again with a rooibos-related question. I decided to leave, and Abe continued proselytizing as he walked me to my car, as I shut my car door, and even as I closed my car window and drove away. Certainly, his narrative was largely due to his eccentric character – Abe was notorious for preaching about Satan. It was also in part

indicative of the increased presence of evangelical and apostolic churches in the region. Many white commercial farmers and coloured workers and farmers were beginning to leave the more traditional churches in the area, saying that they wanted a closer connection to God, to encounter God personally and individually through their bodies and their emotions. A number of scholars have explored the connections between religion, neoliberalism, and new "spiritual economies" (see, for example, Rudnyckyj 2010). For the purposes of this discussion, however, I emphasize how Abe's proselytizing marked a continuation of the relations between spirituality, rooibos, and ideas of a pure, moral connection with the plant. In Abe's mind, the corruption in rooibos stemmed from farmers' losing sight of what matters: an ecological, affective, and spiritual belonging with the ecosystem.

Conclusions:

"There are bigger political things happening, and people get sidetracked [by] conspiracies of who benefited and this and that," a local community organizer told me. This organizer labeled himself an ardent comrade in the fight against global capitalism. He felt that the gossip in the region was distracting people from the real struggle: how to stop neoliberal policies from undermining efforts to combat centuries of white hegemony. He espoused a macro approach to the political economy of the region, insisting that there were "*bigger* things happening." Through my description of various rooibos rumors, however, I argue that for local residents, conspiracies represented more than just a distraction from larger political and economic issues. By connecting gossip with the discourse of neoliberalism, I demonstrated how the rumors surrounding the tea do not just provide the context of the industry but were also constitutive of it.

"What are the major issues in the rooibos industry today?" a moderator asked a group of farmers, marketers, and industry personnel sitting on folding chairs in the massive metal barn owned by a commercial rooibos producer. We were participating in "Rooibos Biodiversity Day," the largest rooibos-industry meeting that I attended during my time in the region, with well over a hundred people in attendance. The day started with a few scheduled talks about economic and environmental sustainability and biodiversity. After the lunch break, however, the mood changed dramatically when farmers began to express their concerns about the industry more generally. Frantically scribbling on an outsized piece of paper on an easel at the front of the room, the moderator began to make a list of "*Kwessies,*" or "issues," as farmers responded to her question: "distrust," "market and price," "climate," "competition," "quality," "strengthening producer

representation," "levies," and "fear of change." I wrote the answers down in the Afrikaans spoken by the farmers, careful to double-check my English translations later when I reflected on the day.

Throughout my time in the rooibos-growing region, expressions of generalized anxiety lurked behind nearly every interview, every meeting, and every social event. "Maybe," Willie, an Afrikaans farmer, said to me once, "there are so many rumors due to that everyone is a bit nervous. They are trying to make money as quickly as possible because they don't know how long it will last. It is emotional." When I probed further about these farmer apprehensions, conversations took a number of different directions: we spoke about people's concerns about the ANC government and "corrupt fat cats." The belief that the government undermined rooibos – the quintessential South African product – made any corruption of government practices all the more objectionable. Farmers described worries that global agribusinesses would buy rooibos land or that land redistribution would unsettle the sanctity of private property. People discussed dramatic conspiracies regarding local and international competitors, regarding a unified nonwhite community, and even regarding the impact that rooibos's "cultural marketing" might have on Afrikaans and coloured farmers' claims to belonging in the region. Others worried about the impact of HIV/AIDS, drugs, and violence.

Many scholars, such as Steven Robins (2008), describe the daily uncertainty experienced by poor, marginalized South Africans in the post-apartheid, neoliberal country. The anxiety and uncertainty in the rooibos-growing area crossed class and racial borders in complicated ways, with different stakes and different potential consequences. Residents of the region felt the looming presence of the world descending upon their 'unique rural haven.' They saw 'Africa' moving in through the influx of black migrant labor. They saw 'Europe' moving in from the increased presence of wealthy English-speaking South Africans and white foreigners. They also saw rooibos moving out, as climate change threatened to shift the growing region. These anxieties came together through the feeling that something – whether it was the climate, the government, the market, or the changing demographics – would betray them in the future. Underlying these rooibos rumors was the fact that all the 'noise' over which "tea story" was the correct version muted other perceived threats to the area: the structural and physical violence against the coloured community, the fears about farming in an increasingly global and neoliberal agricultural commodity market, the uncertainties about the place of white and coloured people in the post-apartheid future, and the concerns that climate change might alter the local ecosystem.

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