Introduction: Making a Life on the Urban Periphery

I first visit Zandspruit in July 2011, a week after a string of protests that shake the community. The protestors' main gripe is the lack of service delivery and the inaction of their local ward councillor, whom they hold responsible for their deplorable living conditions and the missing basic services. On this July morning, I park my car at the petrol station opposite the settlement and phone Lawrence,[1] who has agreed to meet me. Lawrence is a community development worker, a public servant deployed in communities ostensibly to help residents access government services. But Lawrence is stuck in a meeting and cannot meet me as planned. 'Sello is coming,' he says over the phone. 'He knows everything around here.'[2] The phone cuts. Five minutes later, a short, broad-shouldered man sporting white Superga trainers, a Nike shirt, and a large diamond earring in his left ear approaches me. This is Sello.

Standing next to my car, I explain to Sello that I am here to understand what motivates young people's involvement in the protests that are becoming a frequent occurrence in townships and informal settlements across South Africa. Sello, not particularly enthusiastic but without hesitation, agrees to show me around. 'Let's go to my place first,' he says, remarking that I will soon comprehend why people are on the streets. We cross the main road and walk along a sidewalk dotted with car repair shops, makeshift hair salons, and a variety of small stalls peddling everything from cellphone chargers to cigarettes and brightly

coloured fruit stacked in plastic bowls. We pass by the local primary school, the clinic, and a massive dumpsite with waste piled three metres high. At a T-junction we veer right up a dirt path. Sello's shack sits at the fork of two more footpaths that lead into a maze of narrow alleys between densely packed shacks in the settlement's most crowded and under-serviced area. His shack is painted red with Vodacom signage on one side and pictures of various hairstyles on the other. It is divided into the living space he shares with his girlfriend and the area where he runs a barbershop.

On that day, and in the weeks and months that follow, I spend time with Sello and the mix of friends, neighbours, and occasional customers who gather at the barbershop to exchange gossip and discuss local politics. Sello never readily divulges how he makes his money. On some occasions, he refers to himself as unemployed; on others, he claims he is 'hustling' or 'working in politics'. It is only after observing the ebb and flow of people at his shack – often a site of lengthy negotiations and disputes over payments – that I start to grasp the various sources of Sello's income and understand why almost everyone I meet in Zandspruit knows him. Sello operates as a local *mashonisa* (unregistered loan shark) and plays a prominent role in the informal governance structures that patrol the streets at night. I later learn that he played a significant role in orchestrating the recent protests, something I was unaware of when we initially met. Sello's barbershop is not primarily a commercial enterprise. It serves as a nexus for social networks and a legitimate income source, shielding him from potential allegations of corruption from his political adversaries. He makes money through various means, including managing informal land transactions, mediating disputes between landlords and tenants, and lending money to local residents at a hefty 50 per cent interest rate, regardless of the loan size. 'There is a lot of money revolving around here,' he tells me, 'but it requires a sharp mind to see it and to take advantage of it.'

Sello's barbershop, and the interactions that took place there, sparked my interest in people's everyday economic strategies amid

widespread wagelessness and increasing inequality. It was here that I began to reckon with the dynamics of incorporation within the formal labour market and observed the connections between those earning money as security guards, gardeners, and domestic workers outside the settlement and those, like Sello, generating income within it. This exploration of the complex connections between wage and non-wage economic activities, and their entanglement within the sociopolitical dynamics of the settlement, forms the foundation of this book.

Making a Life explores the interplay of young men's everyday life-making strategies amid widespread joblessness and the making and remaking of Zandspruit, a sprawling informal settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg, South Africa (see figure 0.1). It draws on research I conducted there between 2011 and 2023. In 2015, I returned to Zandspruit with a focus on understanding how young men without wage employment make a living. Initially, my inquiries centred on individual men's work histories and economic decisions. I aimed to grasp the factors shaping their choices and trajectories and, more specifically, their decision to engage in, or reject, the available low-wage jobs. Over time, it became evident that comprehending men's economic endeavours and their evolution over time not only challenges a narrow emphasis on wage employment but also necessitates a broader perspective that sees men's livelihoods as only one aspect of what it means to make a life. This is because making a living is not simply about securing sustenance and shelter. A living is also a life. It encompasses forms of social connection, identity, and belonging; claims to place; and the pursuit of dignity and recognition. This book takes the different domains of men's lives – their livelihoods, identities, aspirations, and political practices – and their relationship to each other as the building blocks for understanding Zandspruit as a multifaceted sociopolitical terrain.

Making a Life combines a relational understanding of urban space,[3] shaped by everyday practices and contested social relations, with an anthropological approach to the economy. It takes a distinctive route by prioritising distribution over production and emphasising how men's

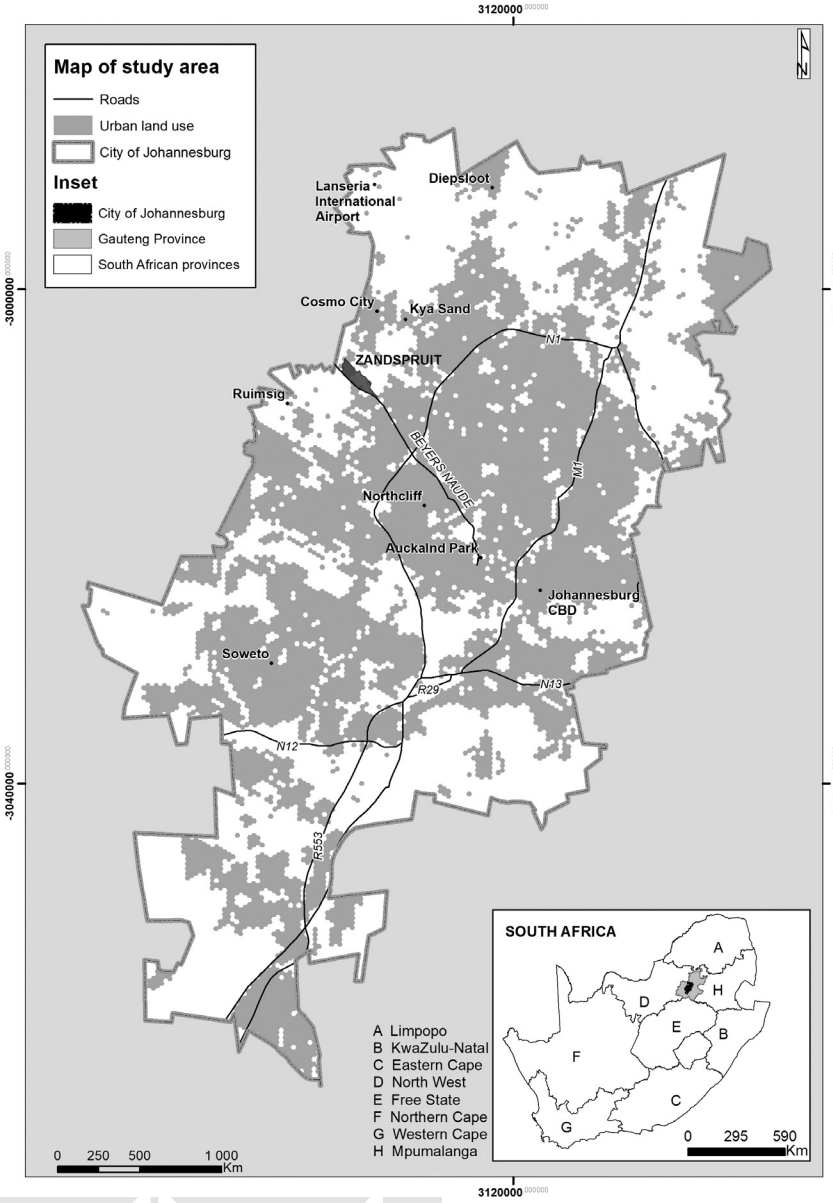

Figure 0.1: Map of Gauteng province showing Zandspruit in relation to central Johannesburg and Soweto. © Samkelisiwe Khanyile

embeddedness or outsiderness within the settlement mediates their economic strategies and work-related decisions. This approach unveils the intricate link between men's everyday choices and practices and the emerging sociopolitical order in the settlement. It sheds light on the politics of belonging in Zandspruit and provides fresh perspective on the processes shaping social differentiation on the urban margins.

Sello's barbershop not only offered insight into residents' everyday life-making strategies and the sociopolitical dynamics of the settlement. It also provided a convergence of individuals – spanning neighbours, local leaders, clients, girlfriends, family, and peers – that allowed me to forge personal connections and gain the confidence to navigate the area independently. I will always be indebted to Sello for that. The relational networks discussed in this book, often tied to specific spaces such as Sello's barbershop, represent an invisible form of 'infrastructure' that produces and reproduces the settlement.[4] These networks of relations not only form the core focus of this book, providing insights into the distribution of resources and the generation of social inequalities within the community, but also inform its methodology.

The book examines the fundamental components of men's efforts to establish a life in the settlement. This reveals the multifaceted sociopolitical complexity of informal settlements and sheds light on Zandspruit as an integrated entity. These core components are, first, the varied ways men secure a *livelihood* that unsettle the formal/informal divide and challenge economic dualism; second, the distinctions in local *citizenship* marked by having rooted connections and a political claim to belonging; third, men's *aspirations* and their embrace of momentary forms of enjoyment and pleasure amid the challenges of everyday life; and fourth, the significant role of collective action and *political agency*. This approach debunks the notion of these areas as mere repositories for 'surplus humanity', as suggested by Mike Davis,[5] and questions the increasingly prevalent perspective that romanticises the adaptive survival strategies of the urban poor.[6]

Everyday life making: Studying livelihoods within lives

With South Africa's official unemployment rate of 33 per cent and an expanded rate of 43 per cent, soaring to over 60 per cent for individuals aged 15 to 34, mass joblessness is frequently labelled the country's most pressing crisis.[7] Politicians and commentators frequently depict young people excluded from wage employment as inactive, aimless, and alienated from mainstream society. This perpetuates the notion of a 'lost generation'.[8] The prevailing narrative expresses widespread concerns that the consequences of unemployment are detrimental not only to individuals but also to communities and society at large.

For instance, at the 2016 Economic Indaba, hosted by Gauteng province, David Makhura, then premier of Gauteng, labelled growing youth unemployment a 'ticking time bomb' and suggested it be declared a 'state of emergency'.[9] 'Drugs are destroying the next generation of South African workers and leaders, and crime is destroying the fabric of the existing society, reversing the gains of democracy,' said Makhura. Four years earlier, in 2012, Zwelinzima Vavi, then general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), warned about the consequences of growing unemployment. 'This is a crisis,' he said. 'If we look at lots of our cities, they are all surrounded by a ring of fire,'[10] he added, referring to the steady rise in protests on the outskirts of many urban centres. Media coverage of these political struggles regularly focuses on the figure of the unemployed man who is portrayed as aimless, disillusioned, and available for direct action. This portrayal reinforces the assumption that those without wage employment are disconnected from society and inevitably on a path towards political unrest. This book challenges this framing by highlighting how young men without wage employment are not idle or disconnected from society. Instead, their engagement in political action is integral to their everyday struggles to make a life in a context of structural precarity and profound inequality.

The moral panic surrounding youth unemployment is not new or unique to South Africa.[11] The official concern with 'idle youth' was

prevalent among colonial regimes and during apartheid and frequently used to justify various control and disciplining measures.[12] The apartheid pass laws, for instance, designed to push black South Africans into the labour force or force them out of cities, were motivated by concerns about idleness, particularly among young men in townships, and the underutilisation of urban labour, which undermined the government's urban labour preference policy.[13]

The prevailing narrative, laden with moral panic and condemnation, fails to tell us much about the everyday lives and economic endeavours of young men in places like Zandspruit. Instead of portraying the social world as it *is*, it focuses on what is absent, specifically the lack of wage employment. Moreover, journalists and scholars often present contemporary unemployment as a relatively recent problem, emerging primarily in the post-apartheid period, and overlook its historical roots. Historical data shows that South Africa's shift from labour shortages to widespread unemployment dates back to the recession of the mid-1970s,[14] preceding the economic liberalisation and financialisation of the 1990s. The establishment of the Bantustans, apartheid-era territories demarcated for black South Africans according to ethnic groups,[15] essentially created warehouses for a growing surplus population whose labour the apartheid economy no longer required.[16]

South Africa exemplifies global trends in which growing numbers of young people are considered 'surplus people' in a macroeconomic context. These individuals are capable of labour that global capitalism does not require for economic growth, which can occur without an expansion of formal employment.[17] Scholars attribute the acceleration of surplus populations to a multifaceted process marked by 'simultaneous monetisation, de-agrarianisation and de-industrialisation'.[18] The result is a growing exodus of people from agrarian rural livelihoods to urban centres, with limited opportunities for integration into wage employment. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of informal economic practices characteristic of contemporary urban Africa,[19] a trend observed in South Africa despite its relatively small informal economy.[20]

The increasing scarcity and insecurity of wage employment has come to symbolise a generation of young people unable to attain the means to transition into adulthood – a predicament Alcinda Honwana describes as 'waithood'.[21] Other scholars characterise young people in conditions of economic uncertainty as being stuck in a state of 'limbo' or 'timepass'.[22] The consequence of exclusion from wage work is particularly challenging for young men who struggle to meet the societal expectations of respectable manhood, long associated with building a home and providing financially for family and dependants.[23] Unlike men, women's femininity is not questioned because of their inability to provide for their family, although they also face challenges in attaining the markers of adulthood.

A global literature has emerged to challenge the notion that young people are indiscriminately and indefinitely deprived of agency and personal maturation.[24] These studies emphasise the unviability of unemployment for most young people, who instead carve out alternative economic opportunities outside of wage employment.[25] This viewpoint highlights the futility of the notion of 'waithood' and emphasises young people's diverse economic strategies in what Tatiana Thieme calls the 'hustle economy'.[26] It also brings attention to young people's adaption of social relationships and the reconfiguration, albeit provisionally, of gendered norms and ideals.[27]

While encompassing diverse perspectives and experiences, including those of both men and women, this book focuses on the experiences of young black South African men. This methodological choice, discussed in detail below, shapes but also imposes a limit on my analysis of life making in Zandspruit. During the writing of this book, I grappled with the question of how to ethically portray the everyday lives of black men under conditions of structural precarity. This challenge is shaped not only by me as a white woman (something I discuss in greater detail shortly) but also by the imperative to do sufficient justice to the macroeconomic forces and the positioning of men like Sello within global capital relations. *Making a Life* recognises the legacies

of racial dispossession and the enduring influence of racial capitalism on the social contexts, experiences, and prospects of the black men it examines while refraining from reducing their strategies for creating lives to mere acts of survival or resistance.[28] While recognising that mass unemployment severely limits the prospects of life and life making, this book underscores that these limits prompt – even necessitate – the emergence of new socio-economic collaborations and practices. This requires a holistic understanding that views livelihood as only one aspect of what it means to make a life. In addition, it necessitates a conceptual framework that sees men's economic strategies not as separate from but as closely integrated into the fabric of their lives and the socio-political dynamics of Zandspruit. For this reason, the interplay between men's everyday practices and the production of the informal settlement takes centre stage in this book.

My approach to examining men's livelihoods within a broader framework of life making takes its cue from Henrik Vigh, who urges us to see social contexts, particularly those marked by chronic instability and economic adversity, not as an exceptional occurrence but rather as the prevailing backdrop, or what Vigh calls the 'frame of action', against which everyday life unfolds.[29] My focus on everyday life making considers everyday practice as a dynamic social process. This perspective not only regards men's pursuit of livelihood as intertwined with their endeavours to establish connection and belonging in the city but also encompasses their aspirations for improved lives. It highlights the dynamic interplay between men's capacity to make lives under conditions of material insecurity and the shaping, maintenance, and contestation of the social spaces they occupy.

This resonates with Vigh's notion of 'social navigation' that sees agency as a dynamic process that is neither predetermined by one's social position or social context nor entirely independent of it. Social navigation, likened to everyday practice, is defined as the 'attempted construction, plotting, and actualisation of a social trajectory not on a defined and demarcated stable ground, but in a moving and fluctuating

sociopolitical environment'.[30] I view men's life-making strategies not merely as survival tactics or a form of resistance but as a dynamic interaction rooted in time and place. This perspective emphasises the provisional character of men's individual and collective modes of living and offers insight into a global literature on how we understand life making in a time of mass wagelessness.

Urban informal settlements: Labour reservoir for and shield against capitalist economy

The post-apartheid era has seen a huge growth in South Africa's urban population. In 1994, the year of the first democratic elections, 54 per cent of South Africa's population lived in cities. By 2021, this figure had increased to 67 per cent, with projections indicating an increase to 74 per cent by 2035.[31] From as early as the 1970s, the apartheid government struggled to implement its influx laws by which it sought to enforce racial segregation and control the urban labour force. This was the consequence of the collapse of subsistence agriculture in the Bantustans, a decline in urban employment, and escalating opposition to apartheid.[32]

The dismantling of the apartheid influx controls in the mid-1980s, coupled with the anticipation of a 'better life for all' brought about by democracy, led to an increase in the migration of people into the greater Johannesburg metropolitan region. Most of these migrants wound up in existing or newly formed informal settlements on the edge of the city. Between 1996 and 2004, the number of informal settlements in South Africa's largest cities grew by about 30 per cent.[33] In 1990, there were an estimated 47 informal settlements in Gauteng province. By 2006, this number skyrocketed to around 200.[34] Today, almost one in five residents of South African cities live in shacks, some in backyard structures within established townships but the majority in informal settlements established through unauthorised land occupation.[35]

Zandspruit exemplifies this trend. It began in the early 1990s as a small squatting community on private agricultural land on the edge of

Johannesburg's northern suburbs. Some of the oldest residents were long-standing labourers or tenants on surrounding (white-owned) farms who were evicted during the tumultuous transition to democracy. By the turn of the millennium, several neighbouring plots had been occupied by people migrating to the city from rural South Africa and the broader African continent. In 2011, when the last census was undertaken, Zandspruit's population was estimated to be 30,000. It is now estimated to be over 50,000.

Only 25 per cent of Zandspruit's residents were born in Gauteng province: over half migrated from South Africa's other eight provinces, and 19 per cent are immigrants from other African countries.[36] The population is entirely black African and particularly youthful – 55 per cent of Zandspruit residents are classified as youth (age 15 to 34).[37] Most live in rudimentary shacks and lack access to water, electricity, and sanitation, services that were a key component of the 1994 government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and the electoral promise by the African National Congress (ANC) of a 'better life for all'.

A burgeoning urban population residing in informal settlements without adequate housing or employment is symbolic of the post-apartheid government's failure to deal with urban housing and employment needs. Often situated far from urban centres, informal settlements are commonly regarded as 'abandoned zones' or 'dumping grounds', places for those considered more or less cast out of society.[38] Their distance from the centre is marked by limited economic opportunities and the long commutes required for inhabitants to reach possible employment. However, Zandspruit's strategic proximity to new economic hubs that have recently grown nearby has made it a sought-after destination, providing urban migrants with essential access to both accommodation and livelihoods, especially amid a shrinking and unstable job market.

Today, Zandspruit is enveloped in a rapidly urbanising and industrialising corner of Johannesburg. Its expansion has also occurred amid rising inequality, highlighted by its proximity to upscale golf estates and affluent areas. It exemplifies what Owen Crankshaw calls

the 'post-Fordist spatial order' of Johannesburg, influenced by the shift from an industrial to a service-based economy concentrated in the north of the city.[39] Its proximity to work opportunities in nearby shopping malls, townhouse complexes, warehouses, and commercial hubs makes it a destination of choice for old and new migrants wanting a foothold in the urban labour market. This also distinguishes it from the older apartheid-era townships and informal settlements in the south of Johannesburg that are now situated even further from work opportunities.

Making a Life aims to draw connections between people's embeddedness within, or outsiderness from, the social and political life of the settlement and their incorporation, or lack thereof, in the formal labour market and local economy. The book avoids viewing Zandspruit as a ghetto of exclusion and hardship where people are trapped in low-wage jobs with few, if any, prospects of progression or mobility or, more optimistically, as a space of opportunity and improvisation.[40] Rather, it conceptualises Zandspruit as a multifaceted socio-economic terrain where differently positioned individuals are making lives as best they can in a highly unequal society. The book challenges the bifurcated lens that sees settlements as places of either exclusion or opportunity, showcasing how both narratives fail to capture the social differentiation within the settlement as well as the fragile interdependence between those with and those without wages. It shows how Zandspruit functions as a reservoir of labour for industries reliant on low-wage workers and, to use Karl Polanyi's language,[41] acts as a protective buffer against the market to shield some residents from exploitative labour practices and inadequate wages.

Challenging dualism and recentring distribution

Making a Life focuses on the distribution of money within a single settlement and the interface between those in low-wage employment and those, like Sello, who leverage a network of non-market relations in the

local economy. In centring distribution and exchange as opposed to production, this book continues a strong South African legacy of viewing wage work in the capitalist sector and non-wage economic activities as part of the same economy rather than as two separate worlds. In the 1970s, scholars with a Marxist orientation challenged the notion of a dualist economy in which the realm of production (working) is separate from that of reproduction (living). Notably, Harold Wolpe argued that the rural subsistence economy in the Bantustans, including women's household labour, was not separate from but essential to the production of the capitalist system, subsidising part of the costs of labour reproduction and thus allowing a system of 'cheap labour' to dominate.[42] Exploring the distribution of resources within place-bound relational configurations opens up an ethnographic enquiry that asks: How is money circulated and redistributed, to whom, and by what means? What circuits of exchange and relations of economic interdependence are people part of? These questions take us to the heart of people's social networks, interactions, and bonds of mutual reliance that offer a more nuanced understanding of people's livelihoods and Zandspruit's political economy.

Despite this legacy, dualist thinking persists in South Africa's academic and policy discourses. For example, in the early 2000s, then president Thabo Mbeki promulgated the 'two economies' thesis, which sees the poor as trapped in a 'second economy' structurally disconnected from the 'first' or mainstream economy. The thesis understands poverty as a function of exclusion from the formal labour market rather than the exploitative terms under which many participate in it. Thus, poverty alleviation requires including in the formal workforce those who are unemployed and those trapped in the second (informal) economy, rather than regulating the formal economy to ensure fairer incorporation.[43] In recent years, the Gauteng provincial government's Township Economy Revitalisation Strategy, by which it wants to revitalise township economies in the hope of turning the unemployed into entrepreneurs, has adopted a similar approach. The strategy slips into a dualistic frame in

its attempts to 'integrate' the township economy (which it often conflates with the informal economy) into the mainstream economy and foster successful black entrepreneurs who transition from operating in the informal economy to running successful businesses in the so-called formal economy.[44] A similar dualist logic is apparent in Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass's concept of an 'underclass' (which I discuss further in later chapters), by which they refer to individuals permanently excluded from wage employment in post-apartheid South Africa.[45]

In the last decade, scholarly critiques of economic dualism have acknowledged that the formal (capitalist) and informal (non-capitalist) economies are distinct yet not entirely autonomous spheres of economic activity.[46] However, little attention has been paid to understanding how the formal and informal economies mutually constitute each other within informal settlements. There has also been limited focus on understanding how formal and informal modes of livelihood intersect with, and reproduce, economic and social differences. Existing scholarship analysing the linkages between the formal and informal economies has predominantly centred on specific groups of workers who combine wage labour with informal entrepreneurialism;[47] backward and forward linkages in specific sectors;[48] or household links between a geographically separated rural subsistence economy and an urban capitalist economy.[49]

The intellectual challenge of seeing the realms of production (working) and reproduction (living) not as two different spheres but as a unitary whole is central to Karl Polanyi's concept of embeddedness and his substantivist approach to the economy. This approach not only regards the economy as an integral part of society but also acknowledges the importance of non-market forms of exchange, including reciprocity and redistribution, alongside market-based transactions.

In his seminal work, *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi famously argued that the transition from pre-market economies to market-driven economies involved the disembedding of economic activities from social relations.[50] However, this separation was more of an idealistic

pursuit than an actual state of affairs, driven by the ambition to commodify labour, land, and money. Polanyi argued that this disembedding of the market economy from society led to a 'double movement' where people sought to re-embed the economy through social regulations and protective measures. Polanyi also used the concept of embeddedness in a more dynamic, albeit contradictory, way.[51] This interpretation considers all economic activities, including wage labour, as enmeshed in social relations and institutions, challenging a neoclassical notion of a separate, self-regulating economy.[52]

In focusing on the interface of diverse economic activities and the distribution of money within place-bound relational networks, this book pays particular attention to the specific social relations and social structures that organise various economic activities. It also illustrates how men's varied embeddedness within the community mediates their economic strategies and work-related decisions, and the circulation and flow of resources within the settlement as a whole.

This approach aligns with the 'Total Social Organization of Labour' articulated by Miriam Glucksmann, a perspective that considers all economic endeavours as 'simultaneously embedded and structurally differentiated'.[53] It also corresponds with a range of recent writings in economic anthropology that urge us to resist duality and embrace plurality. Jane Guyer, for instance, questions the stark opposition often drawn between the market and local forms of exchange and instead calls on us to explore 'popular economies' entangled with different logics and forms, but not in a dichotomous manner.[54] Likewise, Stephen Gudeman urges us to examine the 'dialectical relationship' between mutuality and the market, emphasising that all economies comprise elements of both and that the realm of contractual and impersonal exchanges relies on various forms of mutuality.[55] In his book *Give a Man a Fish*, James Ferguson coins the term 'distributive labour' to muddle the persistent dichotomy between productive and non-productive work.[56] He draws attention to the social labour involved in cultivating and maintaining social relations that are critical to people's moneymaking strategies outside of wage

work. In showing how men's efforts to secure a livelihood are closely tied up with specific relational networks and sites of sociality – such as a car-wash stand and a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) (see chapter 2) – this book is also a response to Keith Hart's reflections on the concept of the informal economy, where he prompts us to focus less on people's sources of money, or what they *do*, and more on the social relations and forms that organise so-called informal activities.[57]

Stratified urban citizenship

Making a Life challenges the depiction of informal settlements as homogeneous spaces characterised by undifferentiated suffering, unbelonging, and disconnection from broader labour struggles. This book not only highlights the internal differentiation among Zandspruit residents. It also complicates the idea of a discernible underclass at the bottom of the social ladder and the notion that citizenship in a place like Zandspruit is essentially 'suspended'.[58]

In their influential book *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa*, Seekings and Nattrass argue that the post-apartheid period has seen the emergence of a distinct underclass which faces systematic disadvantages in accessing employment.[59] They identify the shifts in the labour market in the 1970s, where the demand for low-skilled workers stagnated and then declined, as a key turning point in South Africa's 'distributional regime'.[60] Undoubtedly, widespread unemployment, coupled with a decline in agrarian activity in the former Bantustans, has exacerbated the situation of the poor and jobless in the post-apartheid era, leaving rural residents in particular permanently locked out of wage employment. Yet these general patterns mask important dynamics.

The livelihoods of most young people in Zandspruit – and definitely the young men we meet in the chapters of this book – are characterised by movements in and out of wage work interspersed with other moneymaking activities and forms of economic interdependence. The multifaceted nature of their livelihoods defies a sharp division between

those engaged in wage work and those excluded from it. Seekings and Nattrass acknowledge the diversity among the unemployed, noting differences in skills, social connections, and financial capital that are critical to finding steady wage employment.[61] However, their emphasis on wage work overlooks the complexity and diversity of most urban dwellers' livelihoods and the significance (and appeal) of livelihood strategies beyond or on the margins of wage employment.[62] Equally important, but also neglected in their analysis, are forms of social differentiation in urban contexts linked less to people's access to wages and more to highly localised forms of belonging, social connection, and claims to property. These not only provide an important buffer of support in the absence of wage employment but also shape access to more lucrative niches within the informal economy.

In chapters 2 and 3 I show how men with relatively dense local networks and property (especially rent-free accommodation) exercise greater choice in the labour market, leading them to opt for alternative moneymaking strategies over low-wage jobs. This runs counter to prevailing scholarly understandings of the formal labour market, which suggest that people with stronger urban social ties have a better chance of securing wage employment.[63] While this book does not dispute the importance of social connections in securing wage employment, it highlights the diverse ways young people's economic choices are mediated by their social position and connections within a specific sociopolitical terrain. It reveals how someone's embeddedness or outsiderness in Zandspruit intersects with differences in education, cultural capital, and identity to shape economic decisions and trajectories, where wage employment is just one, and not always the preferred, livelihood option.

Making a Life draws particular attention to the social cleavage within the community between established residents and those who claim to be 'insiders' against a range of people categorised as 'outsiders' who make up a more temporary group of residents. The term 'insiders' and 'outsiders' are words people in Zandspruit use to distinguish

long-standing from newer residents. I use this distinction analytically to reveal how a person's place within the history of Zandspruit, and their unequal embeddedness in highly localised social relations, shape how property rights and tenure arrangements work in practice and, as a result, how wages circulate through the local economy. Sello's ability to lay claim to the wages of others through rent, fees, and interest rests on his insider status. It is not coincidental that most immigrants in Zandspruit, especially men from other African countries employed in some of the lowest-paying jobs, also make up an easily exploitable 'tenant class' within the shack housing market.[64] The point here is that the residents of Zandspruit are neither uniformly poor nor do they have the same claim to land, tenure, and citizenship in a local sense. The settlement is a space of intense differentiation: a site of relative stability, belonging, and privilege for some and precarity, exclusion, and transience for others.

Throughout the book I show how the distinction between insiders and outsiders intersects with other stratifications including employment status, gender, nationality, the landlord-tenant hierarchy, and the distinction between qualifiers and non-qualifiers created by the government's housing registration programme. The book challenges an understanding of social stratification that reads people's class position (and interests) directly from people's access to wages or relationship to the capitalist economy. Instead, it underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to understanding social stratification in South African informal settlements and comparable areas in the global South. This approach should extend beyond work and livelihoods, incorporating an examination of the social relations structuring land and housing ownership, particularly the privileges and power of landlords who wield monopoly power within the shack housing market. Furthermore, the book emphasises the importance of integrating an analysis of property ownership and rental arrangements in informal settlements with the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in both wage and non-wage economic activities.[65]

Relationships as method: Ten years in Zandspruit

Ethnographic research is a deeply affective and relational process. This book incorporates over ten years of research in Zandspruit, combining my initial fieldwork in 2011, which focused on local protests,[66] with an extended fieldwork period from 2015 to 2016 that revolved around how young people navigate economic uncertainty.

During my second stint of fieldwork, spanning ten months, I rented a back room in the neighbouring community of Cosmo City, where the government has built thousands of subsidised houses. This physical proximity not only yielded important information about the economic and social linkages between the two communities (discussed in chapter 1) but also made it easier for me to participate in the everyday life-worlds of young men and in diverse aspects of Zandspruit's social life, including attending church services and political meetings, hanging out on street corners, visiting popular drinking spots, and celebrating birthdays in people's homes.

I often encountered astonishment and at times suspicion from residents as to why a white woman with relative wealth (evidenced by my car) would choose to spend her time in Zandspruit. While my identity created distance, it also sparked curiosity and openness, with residents frequently pulling me aside to ask what I was doing there, whether I was scared, what I thought of life in the settlement, and what I would do for the community. I made a particular effort always to explain my purpose for being there.

I conducted the research on my own and did not use an assistant (except for the survey and mapping exercise) or interpreter, despite not having mastered Sepedi, isiZulu, Tshivenda, or Setswana in the way I would have liked to.[67] Consequently, all the interviews I conducted were done in English. While the young people I spent most of my time with were well spoken in English, my failure to understand anecdotes, jokes, and tangential comments – especially in informal conversations – did at times constrain my understanding. That said, working alone had the

advantage of allowing me to build up relationships and trust on my own terms.

I spent the first two months of my fieldwork in 2015 conducting a survey with 100 young people and a mapping exercise of the local economy that included semi-structured interviews with 40 local enterprise owners. This data unveiled the full range of available economic options and the various factors shaping people's decisions. Furthermore, it brought to light significant patterns and disparities among social groups, particularly concerning people's residential status, nationality, and gender, which I delve into in chapters 1 and 3. These exercises also provided me with crucial fragments and details of individual lives that I subsequently revisited during in-depth interviews with 37 young people, each of whom I interviewed between two and four times, and group discussions I facilitated in collaboration with a youth-run community organisation.

Most of the time I spent in Zandspruit was during the week from approximately 9:00 a.m. till 6:00 p.m. This had a direct bearing on the research I conducted, which fundamentally revolved around the experiences of young black South African men without regular wage employment. The people who worked in the surrounding suburbs and industrial hubs had usually left by 6:00 a.m. By the time I arrived in Zandspruit, it was populated by those without wage work, those who generated an income from *within* the settlement, and those who are involved in the work of homemaking and child-rearing.

The focus on young black South African men was the intention of my investigation from the outset. It was reinforced by the relationships I built in 2011 that were overwhelmingly with men who had a long-standing connection to the settlement and who, like Sello, were not engaged in wage employment. Men were also more visible in the specific social spaces where I spent sustained periods of time – spaces that included a car-wash stand, the office of a youth-run organisation, a roadside job-seeking site, and various drinking spots and street corners – and they invariably had more time on their hands than women.

Young women, in contrast, if they were not at work, were more likely to be tied up in household and care responsibilities. It was also difficult to spend long periods of time with immigrants who spent most of the day outside of the settlement (either working or looking for work) and were less active in political meetings and community events.

Throughout the research and writing process of this book, I wrestled with the impact of my identity and social position as a white woman on my findings. I had to confront my complicity in racial ignorance and privilege, which not only enabled this research but also allowed me to step away from the lived realities and conditions that I aim to illuminate here. A persistent question, as noted earlier, was how to ethically depict life making within deeply constraining circumstances. I also grappled with the ethical imperative to not expose to harm the men I write about while simultaneously presenting an account that does not overlook contradiction, multiplicity, and conflict. All names have been changed, except for those of well-known politicians and business owners who are easily identifiable; in some cases, identifying details have been altered to protect the identities of my interlocutors.

As a white female researcher, establishing relationships with black men of similar age raised difficult issues. While my race and gender often worked in my favour, as interlocutors were interested in interacting with me and were willing to share personal aspects of their lives, at the same time it limited my insertion within their lives and social relationships and, in some instances, constrained my understanding. It also sometimes involved managing difficult relationships and rumours of sexual interest. An unforeseen consequence of the good rapport I built with many men my age, in some cases over a number of years, is that it set limits on the same kind of casual, everyday interactions I had with the women in these men's lives (especially their girlfriends). These women were often suspicious of my intentions and, as I came to understand, begrudged the access to men's time and spaces that my race and gender identity enabled. For example, my participation within the hypermasculine space of the car-wash stand (even if only for short

periods and never completely) was aided by the privileges and power of being a white woman in a black community. While not the primary focus of this book, I got to know several women at the youth-run NGO and developed relationships with the girlfriends and mothers of some of my key interlocutors.

My insertion or establishment within the relational networks at specific sites like the car-wash stand or Sello's barbershop was never complete and, like all relationships, was subject to negotiation, misunderstandings, and moments of suspicion and disappointment. However, despite the acknowledgement that I was conducting research, genuine friendships and meaningful relationships did gradually develop. These relationships not only allowed for more open discussions and instances of mutual enjoyment, fostering the reciprocal exchanges that sustain all human connections. I made a point of not paying people for their assistance (aside from the survey and mapping exercise), opting instead to reciprocate through small gestures like buying beers, aiding in the drafting of a curriculum vitae (CV) or funding proposal, using my car to drive someone to the shops or to get their driver's licence renewed, and so on. I went with two of my interlocutors to visit their families in their home villages in North West province, a four-hour journey from Johannesburg. Since my fieldwork in 2015–2016, I have stayed in contact with several of my interlocutors. I returned to Zandspruit for shorter visits between 2019 and 2023, which I reflect upon in the concluding chapter.

Much like Sello's livelihood was not given and my understanding of it remained inconclusive, the lives of men in Zandspruit are not a static 'thing' to be studied but a lived experience that is 'always in the making'.[68] This book does not aim to be a complete or representative account of Zandspruit or young black men. Instead, it acknowledges that Zandspruit can only be understood within the context of the social forces and relations that shape its social fabric. In other words, this book is not a study *of* Zandspruit; it takes place *within* it. Similarly, I do not regard my interlocutors as representative of all young black men.

The individuals whose lives, choices, and thoughts are depicted in the following pages are shaped by a specific time and place, underscoring the provisional nature of both my interpretations and those of my interlocutors. This highlights the 'intersubjective' dimension of this research and a writing process shaped by dynamic exchange and interaction among different perspectives and experiences, something that Donna Haraway calls the 'situatedness of knowledge'.[69]

Throughout the research process I actively sought to bring initial analyses and thoughts into conversations to elicit my interlocutors' reactions. All of these insights, directly or indirectly, informed my writing. In June 2024, I organised a workshop to share the main arguments of this book and solicit my interlocutors' feedback. The exchanges that we had were immensely useful in helping to clarify and elaborate my arguments. While I take responsibility for the arguments, I want to recognise the insights and contributions of my interlocutors, without whom this book would not exist.

Since my first arrival in Zandspruit, the personal circumstances of my interlocutors have changed, as have their collective attempts to forge lives in the settlement's existing conditions. However, despite these changes, many aspects of their lives remain unchanged. Throughout the book I note shifts in the wider context, and in the concluding chapter I reflect on a recent visit to Zandspruit. I write mostly in the present tense to convey the immediacy of what I describe and to underscore that the daily realities of the men that animate these pages are not consigned to the past. The challenge of writing this book has been to capture the inconclusiveness of these men's lives and of the life of the settlement while maintaining a coherent narrative.

How the book is organised

The book is organised around distinct yet interconnected spheres of men's lives – livelihoods, identities, aspirations, and political practices. These elements collectively reveal the interplay of men's everyday

life-making strategies and the ongoing making and remaking of the settlement.

The history and development of the settlement is explored in chapter 1, emphasising the link between its expansion and its proximity to a rapidly developing and urbanising corner of the city. One motivation for this chapter is to give the reader a more tangible sense of the socio-economic life of the settlement. Another aim is to underscore the dynamic linkages between the formal (wage) and informal (wageless) economy in Zandspruit's redistributive economy. The chapter concludes by delving into the social differentiation among residents in terms of insider and outsider status, further fractured along the lines of employment status, nationality, and gender. Ultimately, this chapter lays the foundation for conceptualising Zandspruit as a differentiated yet unevenly integrated economic terrain, paving the way for further exploration in later chapters.

The three chapters that follow focus on men's livelihood and economic strategies. Chapter 2 explores some of the economic strategies young men pursue outside of wage work. It offers an ethnographic sketch of a car-wash stand where men 'hustle a living' via a multitude of informal moneymaking activities, and of the Zandspruit Youth Forum (ZYF), a youth-run organisation that generates 'brokering' opportunities by connecting local community initiatives with resources from NGOs and government entities. The chapter closely examines the relational networks that structure and organise hustling and brokering activities to reveal how these economic strategies are never only a source of livelihood but also encompass forms of sociality and place making.

Chapter 3 examines the forms of local differentiation, especially between insiders and outsiders, that shape men's economic choices and trajectories. It follows the lives of three men: an insider who grew up in Zandspruit, a local outsider from Limpopo province, and a foreign outsider from Zimbabwe. The latter two moved to the settlement as adults in search of work and a better life. I show how differences in young men's place-based social ties and access to property constitute a distinct

form of inequality in Zandspruit: these differences have a strong bearing on men's relative exposure to, or shelter from, low-wage jobs and on their potential to access the more profitable niches in the township economy.

Chapter 4 explores men's experiences in wage employment and the reasons behind their voluntary departure from such work or their refusal to accept available but low-paying jobs. It provides a glimpse into my interlocutors' work histories, illustrating the nature of unstable and irregular jobs found in nearby shopping malls, industrial areas, and suburbs. The chapter then examines the intricate factors that lead some young men to reject or avoid low-wage jobs. It argues that young men's withdrawal from low-wage jobs is never simply a matter of insufficient pay or even deplorable working conditions. Rather it has to do with the absence of meaningful progression, encounters with workplace racism and racial disparities, and the social demands linked to wage employment. The chapter emphasises that men's refusal of low-paying jobs is not solely a form of resistance but also a demonstration of their aspiration for an improved quality of life.

Chapter 5 details young men's aspirations to 'afford'. This is closely tied to a movement out of Zandspruit and the purchase of specific goods and property. The chapter examines how young men negotiate their desire for social mobility within present circumstances and widening inequality. It shows how men's experience of affording is mostly limited to moments of consumption in the present. While young men embrace these instances of affording as a welcome interruption from the daily struggle of getting by, these occasions remain insufficient and incapable of substituting for the trajectory of improvement these young men desire. They simply punctuate the present and reinforce young men's aspiration to 'live' rather than merely 'survive'. They highlight the inherent tension between men's efforts to establish connections and belonging in Zandspruit and their desire for a life outside of the settlement.

Chapter 6 turns to young men's participation in local political protests. These demonstrations, often characterised by short-lived bursts of

activity rather than sustained organisation, relate to the day-to-day life of the settlement and young men's pursuit of a better life. The chapter offers an analysis of the motivations and rationale of several protest brokers who organised the 2011 protests and enforced a work stay-away. I show how protests serve as a critical platform through which men claim insider status and shape the distribution of resources within the community. I also underscore how resentments, particularly towards immigrant outsiders, born in the workplace find their way into local protests. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the post-2011 protests. It shows how recent mobilisations are less about making demands on the state and more about defending forms of self-construction and do-it-yourself provision amid state neglect and abandonment.

The book's conclusion reflects on the future of the settlement and men's lives in an unequal socio-economic system where the state offers minimal protection from economic precarity. It emphasises the importance of keeping the social, political, and economic dynamics of people's lives and the spaces they inhabit within a single analytical frame.