

Abjection and Resistance on the Zambian Copperbelt

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JOE SUTCLIFFE, MAR 29 2012

Within current discourses on the failure of development in Africa, it is easy to forget that in 1969, Zambia had a higher GDP than nations such as Malaysia, Brazil and South Korea (Ferguson 1999) and even a decade later, Zambia was still considered a middle income country. This stands in stark contrast to today, where Zambia sits near the bottom of the World Bank's developing countries index and an estimated 68% of households do not have sufficient income to cover basic needs (Ferguson 1999). This report will begin by providing a brief background to how this situation came about, in the form of a history of the political economy of Zambia, and will trace Ferguson's (1999) term 'abjection' into the contemporary Copperbelt. An analysis of mineworker resistance activity within the union movement will also be offered, before an exploration of the context of power under which mineworker resistance now takes place. This resistance will be analysed by utilising current empirical knowledge from the Copperbelt. The theoretical divide between small, invisible strategies of 'exit' and collective, organised strategies of 'voice' (Lindell 2010a) will be questioned, alongside issues of livelihood necessity, mineworker homogeneity and the nature of dominant power. In light of these debates, a conclusion will be offered which suggests a spectrum of resistance activity and, in an attempt to navigate these complex webs of identities and interests, highlights the need to consider the intent and meanings given to these activities by mineworkers themselves.

Abjection: A Brief History of the Political Economy of Zambia

Copper is of historic importance for Zambia. It has long remained the country's primary export and the health of the Zambian economy as a whole is considered to rest largely on the state of the Copper market. The Copperbelt province, situated just south of the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, is the epicentre of Zambia's copper mining industry, a tract of mineral rich land which through expansive urbanisation and industrialisation came to exemplify the promise of a modern Zambia.

Gaining independence in 1964 under the leadership of Kenneth Kaunda and the United National Independence Party (UNIP), Zambia slowly moved towards the nationalisation of core industries, including the crucial mining industry, and by 1973 a one-party state had been established. Despite Kaunda's inability to prevent the repatriation of mining profits to the ex-colonial powers caused by the sale of all minerals on the London Metal Exchange (Fraser 2010), prospects appeared to remain good for Zambia, with high growth rates compounding a widespread domestic belief in Zambia's progressive modernisation. The nationalised mines, merged into the single ZCCM in 1982, provided mineworkers and their families with housing, education, health and social facilities alongside salaries and pensions. ZCCM has been described as being at 'the heart of the social and economic development of the Copperbelt' (Gewald and Soeters 2010, p. 162), and Fraser suggests that the wealth created by the Copperbelt meant 'Zambians saw themselves as active participants in the production of global wealth and in global cultural and political trends' (2010, p. 8).

However, a precipitous decline followed from the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, marked by deteriorating terms of trade on the all important copper market and a government debt crisis in Zambia (Ferguson 1999). This crisis effectively forced the Zambian government into the arms of the World Bank and the IMF. Structural Adjustment was initially enforced sporadically by Kaunda, before the rise of Frederick Chiluba and the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD), with the backing of the powerful Zambian Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), saw the dawn of a new era of Zambian political economy. Under the watchful eye of the IMF and the World Bank, the 1990s saw a

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sharp reduction in government spending, privatisation of their assets and liberalisation of the economy. After much opposition from the ZCTU and indecision from the government, ZCCM was broken down and sold in a series of deals epitomised by their questionable legality (Larmer 2005) and power asymmetry between mining companies and the IFI's on the one hand and the Zambian government on the other. The disastrous social and economic effects of structural adjustment have been well documented (Fraser and Lungu 2007), including the mass retrenchment of miners on the Copperbelt and a drastic rise in poverty levels across Zambia.

James Ferguson's term 'abjection' (1999, p. 236) provides a useful tool for understanding the impact of structural adjustment on the Copperbelt, particularly amongst mineworkers. The rich surplus gained from copper extraction and the relative cosmopolitanism of many of the mineworkers meant that many perceived their lives through the lens of the inevitable progress that modernisation was thought to offer and felt a sense of connection to the modern. But the decline in living standards and rise in poverty levels which accompanied structural adjustment have been experienced by those on the Copperbelt as an expulsion from the progress of modernisation, even as the fraudulent nature of that modernisation has become apparent. Their lives now appear set within a world of hierarchy, with 'non-serialized statuses' of modern and backwards, 'separated from each other by exclusionary walls, not developmental stairways' (Ferguson 2007, pp. 188-189). Mineworkers, and indeed many other Zambians, have felt themselves being actively expelled and disconnected from a process of modernisation which was always fraudulent, but offered developmental promises which were keenly felt. Abjection therefore does not mean a lack of connection to the market, but an active process of disconnection which occurs within capitalism itself. As such, abjection can be understood as the process by which mineworkers have been 'thrown aside, expelled or discarded' during the economic liberalisation and privatisation of the Copperbelt, leading to a sense of 'debasement and humiliation' (Ferguson 1999, p. 236), as well as a very real sense of anger and betrayal.

Following Ferguson's research in the late-1990s, further rounds of retrenchment, a huge growth in the informal economy and the casualisation of labour have all impacted upon the mineworkers, those previously at the forefront of Zambia's 'modernisation'. Larmer notes that the fortunes of the mining industry have not always correlated with the prosperity of Zambians (2010a) and even the surge in the copper price seen during the mid-2000s, and its relatively fast recovery after the global financial crisis of 2008, do not appear to have offered any respite for the mineworkers. There has certainly been no decline in poverty levels, which remain horrifically high, and there is no suggestion of a decline to pre-structural adjustment figures. It appears that for the time being, there is no end in sight to the continuing processes of abjection on the Zambian Copperbelt.

Resistance and Informality

The processes of abjection certainly appear to be in force on the Copperbelt. However, this should not be considered a monolithic process. As in all top-down forces, the particular structures of abjection on the Copperbelt are continuing sites of resistance and contestation.

Much of Zambia's recent history can be understood through the lens of competing perspectives on the way that copper can act as a developmental tool; specifically where and to whom the economic benefits of its extraction should accrue (Larmer 2010a). The Copperbelt mineworkers have historically held a strong 'consciousness of their unwarranted exploitation, the inequitable distribution of the revenue generated by their hazardous labour, and the importance of this labour in the strategically important copper mining industry and, through it, national development' (Larmer 2006, p. 295). This consciousness has driven union activity, from providing the leading voice of opposition to UNIP (Larmer 2010a) to proffering powerful support to the MMD (Larmer 2006). The mineworkers have never been a homogenous group – divisions between leaders and the rank-and-file have long existed – but this has never stifled the power of the unions. This is largely through the strong organisational skills and collective consciousness of the rank-and-file members, who have taken action to defend their interests even without support of the union leaders, and are credited with ensuring that those leaders are not completely subsumed into state power (Larmer 2006).

This consciousness of their role in the economy, and the fight to gain from the surplus of their labour, remains evidenced amongst mineworkers on the Copperbelt today. Strike action and protest has continued (Editorial Zambia Daily Mail 2011; Chisala and Mwale 2011), even through the boom period 2004-2008, as mineworkers continue to

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feel the forces of abjection which provide few benefits or developmental prospects for themselves whilst accruing steep profits for mining companies.

However, while resistance on the Copperbelt appears axiomatic, and strikes remain commonplace, the processes of abjection have radically altered the local power context. Resistance among mineworkers must be understood within the new context in which power operates. Abjection has led to three interrelated trends which have strongly impacted upon the power context of the Copperbelt, and thus, the nature of contemporary resistance amongst mineworkers:

1. Informal Livelihoods

Informality is a term used with regards to 'economic activities that lie beyond or circumvent state regulation' (Lindell 2010c, p. 5). The growth of the informal sector is a ubiquitous phenomenon across Africa. The enforcement of structural adjustment and continuing neoliberal policies have seen a decline in formal sector employment and increasing numbers of urban Africans turning to self-employment in the informal economy. This process is evident on the Copperbelt, where the mass retrenchment of mineworkers following the privatisation of ZCCM has meant that informal economic activity has become increasingly important for people's livelihoods. Whilst not synonymous with the livelihoods of the poor (Lindell 2010c), informality has become hugely important for understanding the realities, and resistance capacities, of many mineworkers. Current studies of informal activity on the Copperbelt suggest that many mineworkers may be engaging in forms of home-based manufacturing, petty urban trading and subsistence agriculture (Heideinreich 2007; Kazimbaya-Senkwe 2004; Limpitlaw and Smithen 2003) as either their entire means of provision or as an additional form of livelihood to formal sector employment.

2. Casualisation

Informalisation has not only seen the growth of informal livelihoods on the Copperbelt, but also the casualisation of labour within traditional spheres of formal employment. Following the sale of ZCCM, 'companies took advantage of weak unions and non-enforcement of employment laws' (Fraser 2010, p. 14) in order to casualise much of the workforce. Mineworkers now tend to be offered casual positions, such as 'day jobs and fixed term contract jobs with no pension and no security' (Lee 2010, p. 131) and often on lower wages than previously (Fraser and Lungu 2007). This is particularly pertinent with regards to the Copperbelt, as these casualised positions offer none of the educational, health and social services of the parastatal ZCCM (Fraser 2010), and the inability of the central state to adopt these responsibilities means that many mineworkers struggle to achieve sustainable livelihoods in the formal sector. The World Labour Organisation (WLO) has recently adapted its understanding of informal workers to include those working under casualised contracts (Barchiesi 2010). With many casualised workers engaging in informal sector activity in order to ensure a more secure livelihood and compensate for low wages, there now appears to be no clear division between formal and informal livelihoods on the Copperbelt.

3. De-unionisation

Mass retrenchment and the encroachment of informality through the casualisation of labour have led directly into a third change in the power context of the Copperbelt: de-unionisation. The number of active mineworkers on the Copperbelt dropped from 56582 in 1991 to 19145 in 2001 (Fraser and Lungu 2007, p. 21), and casualisation means many of those remaining are de-unionised, with companies strongly resisting attempts at re-unionisation of the workforce or formalisation of their labour (Fraser and Lungu 2007). Kenny argues that the revised Industrial and Labour Relations act, which allowed companies to evade the social responsibilities of ZCCM and instigate the casualisation of labour, has 'curtailed union activity to the point where trade union rights are violated' (2000, pp. 72-73) and he describes the current influence of the trade union movement at the policy making level as merely 'symbolic' (2000, p. 81).

Traditionally a powerful force in Zambian politics and a major centre of resistance against the lack of re-distributive gains from mineral extraction (Rakner 2003), the trade union movement has suffered a serious decline in influence over the past two decades. The gap in formal organisation created by de-unionisation means that much resistance on the Copperbelt now occurs outside these formal structures. These three interrelated trends of informal livelihoods,

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casualisation of labour and de-unionisation must therefore be understood to collectively point to an encroaching process and status of informality on the Copperbelt.

Understanding Resistance on the Copperbelt

How can we attempt to understand resistance to abjection from the historically strong and relatively cohesive rank-and-file mineworkers in the context of informality on the Copperbelt? Lindell (2010a) has argued that interpretations of resistance amongst informal actors have generally focussed either on everyday, quiet and invisible forms of resistance or on more overt collective organisation. These can be understood as the politics of exit and the politics of voice (Lindell 2010c). A critical review of the current literature regarding both of these typologies of resistance will be utilised. When intertwined with current empirical knowledge of resistance on the Copperbelt, this critical review can be used to illustrate the most informative way of attempting to understand resistance to abjection amongst informalised mineworkers on the contemporary Copperbelt.

A. Politics of Exit

Informal Livelihoods and Resistance

First of all, it is necessary to consider whether a capacity for resistance can be evidenced amongst informalised mineworkers, who are often extremely poor and rely upon informal economic activity for their livelihoods. While the adaptive ability of the poor within the context of informality and poverty has often been highlighted, these activities are commonly seen only as survival mechanisms, with necessity overriding any other capacity for action.

However, this perception has been questioned by scholarship suggesting that informal actors do have a capacity for resistance and that to suggest otherwise would be to deny informal workers political agency. Particularly post-structuralist scholars (Escobar 2004) have considered the very hybrid and adaptive nature of those living in poverty as entailing a form of resistance, as it epitomises the attempts of the poor to take control of and improve their lives in the face of the powers of abjection which attempt to exclude them from such gains. As such, the global poor reveal emancipatory 'practices of social, economic and ecological difference that are useful for thinking about alternative local and regional worlds' (Escobar 2004, p. 210).

However, Ferguson is correct to criticise those who interpret abjection and poverty as a form of liberation, as to do so is to ignore the 'unglamorous realities of actually existing poverty' (1999, p. 249). Resistance is happening within a process of abjection, the reality of abjection itself is to be deplored as much as the resistance is to be expounded. Furthermore, in equating poverty with liberation, post-structuralist scholars can be accused of perceiving everything as a form of resistance activity (Sharp *et al.* 2000). In abandoning questions of intent and the meaning given to resistance by actors themselves, Bayat has accused those utilising such a perspective of 'conceptual perplexity' (2000, p. 553).

Insight into these issues is provided by Kazimbaya-Senkwe's research (2004) into home-based manufacturing on the Copperbelt, which includes an interview with an ex-mineworker who is manufacturing from home. The ex-mineworker relies upon this informal economic activity for his livelihood, yet in his interview he also made it clear that he had chosen to continue with this form of livelihood due to disenchantment with formal sector employment and the lack of viable livelihood it offered. This ex-mineworker thus engaged with the informal economy both out of necessity and through a conscious choice to reject the formal sector. As such, his activity holds a definite resistance capacity in rejecting the forces of abjection and attempting to pursue the betterment of his own position. As Barchiesi argues: 'informality and precarious employment are not only conditions of disempowerment, but also indicate workers' quests for emancipative alternatives to waged work' (2010, p. 77).

This case study reveals the need to understand how informal economic activity may act as both a livelihood necessity and as a form of resistance, as well as evidencing the need to consider the intent and meanings attributed to these activities by the actors themselves as a means for understanding this duopoly.

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'Weapons of the Weak' and the 'Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary' on the Copperbelt

Scholars such as James Scott and Asef Bayat have offered analyses along these lines, in their work on the 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1986) and the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat 1997, p. 57). These resistance strategies can be understood as those of exit and invisibility (Lindell 2010c) in that the actors attempt to circumvent or avoid dominating power while acting discreetly or invisibly to achieve certain gains for their livelihoods and standard of living. Resistance activity remains connected to livelihoods, but reveals its resistance capacity through these actions holding an active intent towards gains.

James Scott originally explored these ideas with regards to peasants, using the term 'infrapolitics' (Scott 2005) as a way of understanding discreet forms of resistance which utilise invisibility as a strategy, but are nevertheless hugely important for understanding the way the poor attempt to resist dominating power and achieve gains. Scott points to 'footdragging, dissimulation, false-compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth' (1986, p. 6) amongst peasants as evidence of this resistance activities. In studies of the Middle East and North Africa, Asef Bayat has expanded upon Scott's earlier work, including more detailed analyses on the urban poor, highlighting: 'non-collective but prolonged direct action by individuals and families to acquire the basic necessities of their lives in a quiet and unassuming illegal fashion' (2000, p. 536). Bayat (1997) argues that while collective and more overt forms of resistance are possible amongst the urban poor, they are essentially defensive in that they mobilise only when their incrementally bought gains are threatened, and they lack the 'organizational power of disruption' (1997, p. 58).

With the informalisation and de-unionisation of the Copperbelt, this understanding of quiet and invisible resistance appears particularly pertinent. Street vending is very common on the Copperbelt, and vendors are argued to epitomise the weapons of the weak (Bayat 1997) by slowly encroaching upon public spaces and forging a livelihood through illegal means, with unified action remaining largely sporadic and without strong collective organisation. Equally, Steckley and Muleba (2001) show how subsistence agriculture amongst informalised mineworkers is typically carried out illegally on state or privately owned land. Indeed, with the sale of ZCCM many former mineworkers have refused to move from homes and land they regard as their own, despite formal ownership passing to private companies who did not agree to take on ZCCM's social responsibilities (Palmer 2000). These forms of resistance have been met with strong state action, including the eviction of some ex-mineworkers and violent police crackdowns on street vendors (Lusaka Times 2011). Nevertheless, resistance continues, and the silent encroachment of retrenched mineworkers to retain the use of their land in particular provides a strong indication of the politics of exit as it is taking place on the Copperbelt.

Working Class Consciousness? A Critique of Scott.

However, Scott in particular has been criticised for portraying resistance actors as holding a homogenous, working class consciousness (Mittelman and Chin 2005). A strong collective consciousness among the rank-and-file Copperbelt miners has long been noted (Larmer 2006), but the casualisation and diversification of labour relations which has occurred under the neoliberal processes of abjection mean that the interests of mineworkers are far from uniform or homogenous. Lindell (2010b) asserts that there is a multiplicity of class relations within the informal economy and the interests of those pursuing informal livelihoods through home-based manufacturing and/or subsistence agriculture often do not coincide with those of casualised workers still employed in the formal sector.

Furthermore, during the privatisation of ZCCM, individual companies were allowed to negotiate separate agreements with different sections of the mining operation, meaning that workers in different divisions within the mines are often employed on different terms and wage levels, with the same being true between workers of the same division but in different mines (Negi 2011). Despite a history of collective action, informalisation, casualisation of labour and de-unionisation have threatened collective worker consciousness even at the grassroots level. Strikes in one section of a mine are now commonly not supported by those working under different contractual obligations in other parts of the company (Negi 2011).

Therefore, while the politics of exit certainly seems to be in force on the Copperbelt, the need to consider the

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heterogeneous nature of mineworkers as a group must be retained. The growth of the informal economy and the casualisation of labour means that mineworkers are now navigating a complex web of relations and interests which often do not neatly coincide collectively. The agency of informalised mineworkers on the Copperbelt must therefore be retained, but without recourse to a homogenising analysis of flat 'mineworker's resistance' against abjection, which may obfuscate more complex and illuminating resistance activity.

B. Politics of Voice

Collective Action on the Informal Copperbelt

However, within the politics of exit framework, the processes of informalisation and de-unionisation on the Copperbelt would be expected to evidence a reversion to invisible forms of resistance as formal, collective organisation is lost and livelihoods become insecure. However, Lindell argues that 'individual everyday actions are not the only kind of political practices in which informal actors engage, or even their preferred mode of politics' (2010c, p. 2). Empirical evidence for Lindell's argument is revealed by Meagher (2010), who discusses the role played by three manufacturing clusters in Nigeria. These clusters have utilised 'complex informal supply, production and marketing networks to support their rapid expansion' (Meagher 2010, p. 49), hold elections for executives and various levels of representation and reveal both a desire and a capacity for 'collective mobilization and expression' (Meagher 2010, p. 63).

Indeed, despite the continuation of the politics of exit on the Copperbelt discussed above, contemporary evidence suggests that new forms of voice and collective organisation have emerged in the wake of de-unionisation. The Buyantashi Retrenched Miners Multipurpose Cooperative have gained considerable recent media coverage on the Copperbelt – evidently not a sign of the resistance of exit – through planning to demonstrate against Barclays Bank over their refusal to refund retrenchment benefits (FlavaFM 2011). The same cooperative have also lobbied the government to train ex-mineworkers in new skills which will enable them to gain alternative livelihoods (Kachemba 2011). Furthermore, umbrella organisations such as the FMWAZ, the informal association of former miners (Heidenreich 2007) reveal that informal organisations are not limited to small local groups, but have formed into large national organisations. The Zambian Cross-Borders Association, whose members include those trading across the border between the Copperbelt and Democratic Republic of Congo, shows how some of these informal groups even have transnational scope (Nchito and Tranberg-Hansen 2010). It appears that, whilst playing an important role in rehabilitating agency into debates about the informal poor, scholars such as Scott and Bayat may have limited the resistance capacity of these actors to invisible and exit options, and neglected the extent to which informal actors can organise effectively and express a collective political will that is not simply defensive in nature.

As has been shown, these informal organisations are hugely diverse, encompassing a vast range of sizes and organisational structures, from highly informal manufacturing groups based on personal association to grassroots organisations linked to large NGOs (Ng'ombe 2007). Many informal organisations lack real voice, and collective resistance amongst informal actors faces many problems, both internal and external, but this should not detract from the very real resistance capacity these organisations can, and in some cases do, entail (Meagher 2010). The organisational power and collective political voice of some of these groups on the Copperbelt means that even the ZCTU, who previously paid scant regard to the informal sector, is now attempting to engage with and ingratiate these informal organisations as affiliates (Heidenreich 2007). It seems apparent that any understanding of resistance to abjection on the Copperbelt must seek to consider the collective politics of voice alongside resistance through strategies of exit.

Formal/Informal Divide: De-centralised Power

The accommodating stance of the unions towards informal organisations reveals a broaching of the formal/informal divide, but also contains interesting questions on the nature of power within the contemporary Copperbelt. With the union movement attempting to forge bonds with the informal organisations, the historic disagreements between union leaders and the rank-and-file have surfaced again. Larmer (2005) reveals that it is a commonly held perception among the miners that union leaders were complicit in the break-up and sale of ZCCM, with Mineworkers Union of

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Zambia (MUZ) leaders proving unable to visit the Copperbelt town of Luanshya for fear of attack from disenchanted current and former miners. With this level of discontent within union ranks, and the decreasing power of the union movement, it cannot even be assumed that informal organisations will be willing to align themselves with the union movement. This possibility chimes with current research on social movements, suggesting that a dichotomous perception between resisters and dominant power often obfuscates more complex realities (Larmer 2010b).

The mistake of Scott in essentialising the working class in his framework has been discussed, but the not ill-conceived suspicion of the mineworkers towards union leaders reveals that a homogenous perception of the dominant power must also be questioned. If union leaders are considered complicit in the projection of dominant power, then while abjection may well be a neoliberal hegemony enforced through the IFIs and the institutions of the state, it also asserts itself through diverse, non-centralised means. Foucault's understanding of the 'capillaries of power' (Sharp *et al.* 2000), whereby dominating power is witnessed even within everyday social relations, is particularly useful in this regard. This does not mean abjection is an all-encompassing, totalising power on the Copperbelt, but simply that it asserts itself in a dispersed fashion, meaning it may well be perceived by mineworkers in an equally diverse fashion. It appears that the complex realities of resistance amongst informalised mineworkers not only brings the exit and voice divide into disrepute, but also reveals the inadequacy of portraying a simplified domination-resistance dichotomy.

C. Conclusion

As Lindell states: 'informal actors can be said to bear multiple and fragmented identities – rather than single and coherent ones- that may sometimes be difficult to reconcile' (2010c, p. 14). This statement rings true in the case of the Copperbelt mineworkers, especially when considering their realities include both the necessities of livelihood and resistance, and appear to broach the divide between exit and voice. They may well take part in invisible resistance activity and informal organisation simultaneously, yet there is also no need to presume an inevitable movement from invisible to collective forms of resistance, or indeed the inevitable existence of resistance amongst all actors. The realities of resistance are therefore complex and variegated, revealing the need to perceive resistance activity not as individual categories of exit and voice, but as a spectrum of activity (Lindell 2010a), from individual forms of everyday resistance, exit and invisibility, to collective struggles of protest and voice. Attempts must therefore be made to understand the different contours of resistance activity navigated by mineworkers, and how these potentially interact with each other.

The preceding discussions on resistance through exit and voice have also revealed the particularly disparate nature of identities and interests on the Copperbelt which invalidates both perceiving resistance or dominating power as homogenous, and understanding the relationship between these as a uniform binary. In light of these arguments, it appears necessary to reaffirm the idea that research into resistance on the Copperbelt must highlight the need to consider the realities of resistance as perceived by the actors themselves. Just as this was evidenced to be key in understanding the relationship between livelihoods and resistance, so too does it hold the possibilities for understanding resistance strategies within the volatile realities of the Copperbelt. Indeed, Larmer (2010b) has highlighted the dangers of outside observers leveraging their own expectations onto resistance activities, often constructing a 'singular counter-hegemonic force' (2010b, p. 260) where none exists. It is necessary 'to focus instead on the myriad day-to-day struggles for change that are Africa's true story of struggle' (Larmer 2010b, p. 260), and to perceive these struggles as much as possible through the meanings and understandings attributed to them by the actors themselves.

Mineworkers on the Copperbelt are now navigating a complex web of resistance activity which incorporates and straddles the invisible and the collective, and is informed by a diverse range of power contexts, relations and interests. Only through concentrating on these myriad struggles of the Copperbelt mineworkers can their resistance to abjection and the false promises of neoliberal modernity be better understood, and the continued presence of resistance to neoliberal domination in Zambia reaffirmed.

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