

The Father, his Land, Children: A Focus on Media Coverage of Farm Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore media accounts of farm killings, paying attention to public discourses of race, class, land ownership and violence. Using archival data of news reports of farm killings from 1998 until 2020, we utilize a discourse analysis to write a history of the present that explores farm violence as a symbolic act. Our data consist of 55 news articles published in English language newspapers, between 8 and 16 every five years, including 1998, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020. Using this data, we argue that farm murders in South Africa between 1998 and 2020 are fundamentally tied to the unspoken contested meaning of land. It is precisely the farm as the site of this violence that provides the ever-shifting meanings attached to these acts.

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Introduction

The term “farm murders” is a complex and contested term in South African discourse. It is used informally to “denote violent crime against mainly white commercial farmers (including the killing of this group and members of their families) (Clack/ Minnaar 2018: 108). However, apart from a short period of time between 2001 and 2006 (when it was instituted as a separate sub-category in official crime statistics), South African law does not legally recognize the term “farm murders” as a distinct crime category. “A murder is a murder,” argue the authors, “and using the term ‘farm’ before it simply denotes where it occurs” (Clack/ Minnaar 2018: 108). From this angle, farm murders are crimes that happen to take place on farms, and are prosecuted accordingly. Criminologists, however, admit that these cases fall under an area of study termed “rural crimes” that are carried out quite differently from “urban crimes”, due to the low population size and density and the relative isolation in which they occur (Coomber et al. 2014: 117). This narrative contends that farm murders are in fact distinct from other murders, but that the difference is attributable to the differential opportunities available in a rural setting. In South Africa, rural crime encompasses three categories: farm attacks, livestock theft and conservation crime (including poaching).

The South African criminal justice system has struggled to navigate these semantic complexities. Before 1997, farm attacks, or rural crimes more generally, were reported under their specific crime codes (for example, robbery, assault or murder). In 1998, the year that our study commences, farm attacks were labelled a priority crime and reported on separately until 2006 when an embargo was placed on separate farm attack statistics, later removed in 2014. This bureaucratic incoherence, along with an insistent public discourse, has ensured that farm attacks are firmly embedded in the public imaginary; although the contestation around the phenomenon itself has been deployed as a political resource over the past two decades.

In this paper, we argue that farm murders in South Africa are fundamentally tied to the unspoken contested meaning of land. It is precisely the farm as the site of this violence that provides the ever-shifting meanings attached to these acts. Farms are material representations of three interlocking ideological systems: the political, the economic and the racial. As political artefacts, they are huge stretches of land: in a country such as South Africa where land dispossession is the basis of historic and continuing inequalities, the meaning of land is palpable and immediate. As economic vectors, they play a crucial role in South Africa’s agricultural sector; critical to food production and, on a broader scale, to the country’s economic value and activity. In terms of race: South Africa’s history of

apartheid has configured land ownership and dispossession along racial lines, so that inequality in South Africa, so deeply rooted in land dispossession, is overwhelmingly racially organized. As we will show in our present analysis, these three ideological systems are expressed and instantiated in the social relations between farm owner and farm labourers, which we argue are the missing link in the discourse surrounding farm murders.

The relationship between farm owner and farm worker is deeply complex. Politically, it is a relationship between coloniser and colonised, centred on land dispossession and its multiple meanings. Economically, it is a relationship between the owner of the means of production and his wage labourers, a relationship rooted in exploitation and alienated labour that is multiplied by the contestation surrounding land ownership. Racially, it is a paternalistic relationship based on a long history of state-mandated discrimination and oppression. Du Toit (1993: 320) describes this paternalism as more than merely the economic relations, the dependence on the farmer and the isolation from the outside world, but also “a specific way of understanding these relations, a particular interpretation of this dependence.” Working on a farm entails becoming “part of the family”, with farm owners describing their role as “occupying the place of the father”. The paternalistic relationship is legitimated through race, where “to be coloured... is to be childlike, unable to take responsibility for yourself, dependent on white masters for protection” (Du Toit 1993: 322). This is reflected in the absence of contractual obligations and the institutionalization of the “gift relationship” that implies a father’s benevolence toward his child. The paternalism of the farmer is reflected in his role as a provider, not only to his family and farm, but to the nation as a whole, through his provision of the very resources that enable the survival of the population.

The paternal characteristic of the farmer-labourer relationship is based on a colonial and patriarchal heritage that affirms the “master’s absolute and despotic power over the child, his servant” (Du Toit 1994: 379). The nature of this relationship is foundational to our critical analysis of farm murders, since it suggests a precarious benevolence marred by a constant threat of violence and annihilation. What has not yet been explored about paternalism is the vulnerability of the farmer, a ‘father’ who needs to use violence to protect ‘his’ land and children. As Manby (2002: 90) notes, “Violence has been built into the fabric of white control of the land in South Africa from the start”, and is thus formative to the relationship between farm owners and their labourers. Although this paternalistic relationship has been partially theorised as, for example, “a system of labour-repression in which extra-economical devices were employed to ensure an adequate and docile labour force... the explanatory load which ‘paternalism’

is asked to carry in each case varies significantly and that the implicit or explicit link to violence is often difficult to establish” (Van Onselen 1992: 129). This suggests the need for nuanced analysis that explores the unique characteristic of paternalism inherent in the relationship between farmers and workers. In this article we argue that farm murders are a performative moment in which these three ideological systems are captured and collapsed, thus serving as a useful analytic entry point to the detailed and empirical study of this paternalistic relationship.

Data and Method

We use a discourse analysis to study media portrayals of farm murders between 1998 and 2020. We use the year 1998 as a starting point since it represents the beginning of South Africa’s transition to democracy, when matters of land and dispossession became significant objects of inquiry. By tracking media portrayals of farm violence to the present, we encapsulate five election cycles that represent five political moments in South Africa’s democratic process, culminating with the start of Covid-19 and the biopolitical impact of this global pandemic on our object of study.

Our data consist of 55 news articles published in English language newspapers, between eight and sixteen every five years, including 1998, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020. Using the South African Media Database,¹ which contains records of every South African news report in a major newspaper outlet from 1978 until the present, we performed a search containing the word “farm murder”. With over 130,000 results, we refined our search using the names of political parties relevant to that period of time including the Pan African Congress (PAC), African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA), and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). We selected approximately 10 articles from each period of time, creating a data corpus of 55 articles written in English from local South African newspapers during that time. Here, it has to be mentioned that South Africa has eleven official languages and that English is only the sixth most spoken language at home, after Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Northern Sotho and Setswana (Conway-Smith 2010). We chose to focus on English-language newspapers, however, because English is widely used as the second language in urban areas by the government, the media, and business. When looking at the newspapers, we chose to focus on the English-language newspapers because they dominate the print media landscape, with 22 daily newspapers and 25

¹ <https://discover.sabinet.co.za/> [Last access: 21 June 2023].

weekly newspapers being printed in English. News reports that are considered to be of national importance, such as farm murders, are often reported in local languages, translated into English and reprinted in the dominant English-language newspapers.

“The Wrath of the Boere is Understandable”

(“Where there’s a will” 1998)

South Africa’s economy is heavily dependent on the agrarian sector. Farmers trade on the economic importance of their work, constructing themselves as crucial economic players whose labour is tangible – feeding South Africa. The farming community positions threats to the stability of farming activities as affecting all South Africans, identifying themselves as partners to a larger national project whose other side (government) is not holding up its end and is allowing farmers to be systematically targeted and killed. Using this logic, the farming community makes invisible the matters of land, labour and race fundamental to the farm itself, a rhetorical gesture that situates them as victims of a weak government beholden to political forces beyond their control and subject to a targeted program of annihilation of which they are deeply undeserving. This narrative legitimizes any violence engaged in by farmers as a form of self-defence that is necessitated by government’s unwillingness to provide protection for their activities. These claims are supported by the use of crime statistics (Comaroff 2006), portrayals of extra-lethal violence (Holmes 2020) and the mobilization of civil organizations including AfriForum, AgriSA and the Farmers Union. This narrative erases the violence that is formative of the relations of production between farm owners and their workers, with Du Toit (1994: 377) noting that the “transition to capitalism in the countryside perpetuated and indeed depended upon coercive and authoritarian social practices”, that “modernisation and exploitation... are two sides of the same coin”.

The erasure of the inherently exploitative relation between farmer and labourer in this narrative is no oversight. Farmers need labourers in order for their farms to be productive (“Judge Visser said farmers needed labourers and the labourers needed the work” [De Lange 2003]), and in this sense the economy functions largely through the invisible labour of farm workers. When farm workers turn on their employers this is no random or senseless act, and certainly not a crime that merely happens to take place on a farm. Rather it is the continuation of a violence always already being enacted by the farmer upon his workers. This violence is rooted in a deep anxiety that is at the heart of the relationship, with the employer masquerading as father and his employees, despite their age,

belittled as children. Paternalism is thus the illusory mechanism that elides the violent nature of the relationship. The father in most cases uses violence to “correct” any issues which might emerge on the farm, even a legitimate employer-employee dispute which might involve working conditions. Through violence, employer and employee grimly act the part of father and child, with benevolence taking the place of sound labour relations and the illusion of family maintained to conceal the exploitative and transactional reality. Farm murders are borne of a family culture of violence, with the “children” learning from their “fathers”. This is indicated in the Human Rights Watch (2011) report, titled *Ripe with Abuse*, which described the farm as a space that is brutal to those that work the land, with the potential to create a situation where the violated might resort to violence. What makes this more difficult is that attempts to have institutionalised relations between employer and employee are thwarted on the farms, despite the existence of the Labour Relations Act in South Africa that recognises the right of employers and employees to belong to an association to represent their rights. This crisis is reflected in the union density for farmworkers being 3 per cent which suggests that farmworkers lack an associational voice.

Our analysis suggests that news media systematically draw on the narrative of the economically productive farmer (for example “farmers are the lifeline of the country” in reporting farm murders [Stuart 2001]). A common practice is a report of a farm murder incident, followed by a detailed breakdown of the prevalence of farm murders in the country and an analysis of the wider economic impact of these occurrences. The discursive accomplishment is twofold: an affirmation of the phenomenon known as farm murders, supported by statistical evidence; followed by a clear description of the fallout accruing to every citizen in the country. Such reports include phrases such as “500 people are affected by the loss of a single farmer” (Marx 2004), or “with each farm murder, the wider economic body also inevitably suffers” (“Weight of Farm Murders,” 2007). Articles from 1998 to 2020 suggest that the thrust of this argument remains unchanged, with regular reports detailing the economic value of a single farmer. In fact, a report on the 2020 protest in Senekal quoted one farmer as saying that that “(President) Ramaphosa knows that the food he eats every day comes from the farmers” (Tlhabye 2020) – a rhetorical comment on the government’s absolute dependence on the labour of farmers and an affirmation of the farmer’s role as a father, a provider, beyond the president himself, in taking care of the citizens of the country.

The farming community insists that, as threat to food security, and thus to the integrity of the body politic, farm murders must be classified and treated as a special category of crime. This was captured in a news report from 2013, in

which farmers position themselves as a vulnerable population: “I’m not saying this as a white farmer - I’m saying this as a South African; farm violence is a unique crime, like rhino poaching and violence against women and children” (Swanepoel 2013). The comparison to rhinos, poached for their horns and undeserving of the violence inflicted on them, positioned farmers as valuable State assets as well as a near-extinct population, deserving of extra protection. By drawing this comparison, farmers positioned themselves rhetorically as deserving of the same government protection awarded to all precious and vulnerable populations.

Observations such as “Our farmers are being needlessly killed by these terrorists” (Tlhabye 2020) are an excellent example of the erasure that is at the core of the farming community’s narrative. The phrase “our farmers” draws on knowledge that farming activity benefits the country as a whole, while the phrase “needlessly killed” discursively affirms the baselessness of the violence being enacted against farmers, while omitting an entire history predicated on violent and coercive labour relations. Finally the word “terrorists” blatantly describes those enacting the violence as not only criminal but acting against the national interests, which includes the State. The tentative suggestion that farm attacks could be partially attributable to poor working conditions, racism and illegal evictions by farmers is shot down definitively. For example, in response to this suggestion, South African Agricultural Union (SAAU) president in 1998 noted that “Some politicians are creating a climate that a farmer is a prime target because he owns land and allegedly ill-treats his labour force. That simply is not true” (Chandler/ Cresswell 1998). While the public discourse by white farmers valorises the contribution of the “labour power” of the farmer, it mutes the contribution of the labour power of the workers and the violence they endure. Thus, it is important to “follow them both into the hidden abode of production [the farm]” (Marx 2013: 119).

1998: “Izwe Lethu” (“Our Land”)

(“Farmers have done no harm”, 1998)

In 1998 South Africa was navigating the start of a new democracy. While the African National Congress (ANC) was in power, the Pan African Congress (PAC), a left-wing contender in the recent elections, was nevertheless politically significant, driving many of the debates around land ownership and restitution. For example, the PAC explicitly acknowledged that attacks on farms and farmers were a crucial strategy in Operation Great Storm, which strove to right the wrongs of land dispossession enacted during apartheid.

News reports during this time portrayed farm murders as aggregated incidents that were part of a “war” (Msomi 1998) being waged upon farmers. The attacks were described in militaristic terms, as “orchestrated campaigns” (Cooper 1998) being enacted with “military precision” (Cooper 1998; Where there’s a will, 1998) by “terrorists” (Where there’s a will, 1998). Although motive was not explicitly topicalized in these reports, brief comments noted that “nothing was stolen” (Stuart 1998), pre-emptively implying that these incidents were not motivated by robbery. Furthermore, reports that “slogans linking the PAC to the brutal assault were left on the crime scene” (Chandler/ Cresswell 1998) drove an explicitly political agenda denied by the military wing of the PAC – the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA). The presence of a “third force” (Chandler/ Cresswell 1998) was introduced, with the party leader, Dr Stanley Mogoba, attributing these accusations to “political intrigue by forces who hated and feared the party” (Pretorius et al. 1998). The rhetoric of a “third force” was a discursive tool implicating the previous apartheid’s government in acts of sabotage designed to threaten the integrity of the new democratic Republic. Ironically, however, the PAC’s recognition of the strategic value of farm attacks was crucial to the formation of farm murders as a distinct social phenomenon in the coming years.

The reports produced farm murders as a concerning but logical response to white land ownership post-apartheid, providing them a history, trajectory and logic of their own. Reports of individual instances of farm murders were used as concrete examples of the general prevalence of the phenomenon. In these reports, perpetrators were not mentioned, or were briefly mentioned as “outsiders” to the farm, and the focus was on those who died, with descriptions including full names and ages. Since many farm owners are elderly, their old age, suggesting infirmity and vulnerability, is often treated as a warrant for their heightened victim status. In these reports, while the method of death was noted briefly (for example, “beaten to death with a steel bar” [Pretorius et al. 1998]), its description was restrained, in contrast to the gruesome narratives that began to appear in later years. Motive in these reports was omitted or briefly attended to (for example, “nothing was stolen”), confirming a taken for granted political agenda obviating the need for an examination of cause or motive. The relationship between the farm owner and the perpetrators was non-existent, with most of these attacks situating the act as political, a large-scale “war” playing out on the ground between interchangeable victims and perpetrators who were pawns in a larger game.

Media portrayals thus centred on the formation of a political threat to the precarious stability of the ANC, and the (continued) presence of a “swart

gevaar" ("black danger", or the looming threat of black violence/resistance) counterpoised against the civility of the ANC's nation building project which emphasised non-racialism. These acts were attributed to a black "other" who was not cooperative with the mutual democratic goals of the new Republic, or, more alarmingly, to a sinister force attempting to sabotage the fragile young democracy in the making and the radical outlook of the PAC was positioned as a danger in this period. Yet, interestingly the skewed pattern of land ownership which remained largely at the hands of the white society was not discussed as perilous to the non-racial national project.

2001-2005: "[T]here is no Crime such as a 'Farm Attack'" (Russell 2003)

In the years before the next election cycle, the South African Human Rights Commission undertook an investigation into the phenomenon of farm murders, which concluded with the finding that "there is no crime such as a 'farm attack'" (Russell 2003) – since there was no evidence to support the assertion that the attacks were politically or racially motivated. This strategy, designed to neutralize the attributed meaning and significance of the attacks and their emphasis on a particular target population, was "greeted with doubt" (Russell 2003) by the farming community. A report by SAPS, released at the same time, analysed declining numbers of farm murders and noted that "Unfortunately, the extremely brutal and senseless nature of other crimes, such as rape, assault during these robberies has created a persistent incorrect perception among farmers that these are actually terror attacks aimed at driving them from their land" (Farm murders dropped 2003). The news report headline, "Farm murders drop by 15.5%", however, simultaneously reinforced the presence of the phenomenon while reporting on its nonexistence, reflecting a deeper incoherence in the national discourse about the legitimacy of farm attacks.

At the same time, media began linking farm attacks to current events in Zimbabwe, calling Mbeki (then-president) a "Mugabe in sheep's clothing" (Rundle 2002), a metaphor that suggested the country was being led by a dictator, masquerading as a seemingly harmless president, who supported the political aspirations of a neighbouring country. This commentary reiterated an anti-white rhetoric, with claims that the government was "trying to drive whites out of the country" (Rundle 2002), and explicitly alluding to "a bleak picture of the future of the country" (Russell 2003). This discursively tied the future of land ownership to the future of the country as a whole, with the implication that threats to (white) land ownership meant a precarious and uncertain future for white South Africans, a strategy utilized until today in populist political rhetoric.

During this time, some important linkages and disruptions were formed. First, the PAC disappeared from the rhetoric surrounding farm murders, with a concomitant rise in the visibility of relational violence between individual actors. This suggested a move away from overarching political narratives to explain farm violence toward a micro-theoretical and more nuanced position exploring the interpersonal dynamics of these attacks.

The police's Crime Information Analysis Centre (CIAC) collected data on farm attacks, noting that not all crimes that took part on farms had been reported and therefore the data on farm attacks were not properly recorded. As such, the numbers collected between 1991 and 2001 were not completely accurate and should be viewed and interpreted with caution (Wilkinson 2017). The inaccuracies in record keeping are tied to the absence of the crime category "farm attacks" or "farm killings", with police registering these events as, for example, murder, rape and robbery together with similar crimes in urban areas (as is still the case). As such, the location of the violent enactment has always been erased from statistical records, despite (we argue) its foundational relevance to it. Since an increase in farm murders had the potential to suggest that the ANC's nation-building project was failing, Wilkinson (2017) notes that many farm owners have used the absence of accurate statistics as evidence for foul play by the ruling party. The lack of statistical evidence for the phenomenon, according to many in the farming community, is due not to incompetence or even political incoherence, but is rather attributable to a governmental attempt to minimize what has been wrongfully (or perhaps hyperbolically) termed a "white genocide". As such, many farmers argue that current statistics do not accurately reflect the situation on the ground, and that this (politically motivated) inaccuracy precludes the State from protecting white farmers post-1994. Nevertheless, various statistics do suggest that farm killings are not a genocide. For example the 2019 statics show that 21,022 people were murdered in South Africa from April 1 2018 to 31 March 2019, and only 47 of those were farm murders in 41 incidents (Mabuza/ Makinana 2019). As a fraction of the percentage of national murder statistics, farm murders cannot rationally be termed a genocide; yet as a spectacle of violence that visibly targets a specific population, they are conceived as a deliberate political act.

2008-2010: "Dubul'ibhunu" ("Shoot the Boer") (Mbanjwa/ Peters, 2010)

The next political period was characterized by three significant events around which reports of farm violence cohered. The first was the killing of Eugene Terre'blanche leader of the *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* meaning Afrikaner

Resistance Movement (AWB), a racist right wing movement on his farm, by two of his workers. The second was the gradual emergence of Julius Malema² into the public imaginary as a new political threat whose hate speech rhetoric was aggravating the phenomenon of farm murders. The third was a farm killing in the Midlands in which a white female farmer and her two black employees were brutally murdered, an event which blurred the racial divisions and created a unification of purpose between civil activists and government to stop farm attacks.

Terre'blanche's embodiment of many of the problematic traits attributed to white farmers meant that his death ran the risk of defining the meaning, the stakes and the symbolic value of farm attacks as a phenomenon (Pretorius 2014). Defining his death as a political or racial act would cement racial divides and affirm existing stereotypes, deepening the divide then being attributed to Julius Malema and his 'hate speech slogan' and his power in influencing mass behaviour. By situating it as an interpersonal wage dispute, the media traded on a readily available account for these types of murders, positioning it not as an instantiation of a pervasive and archetypal tension, but rather as a private misunderstanding between a farmer and his workers. The potential for this murder to become a symbolic moment was cauterized, with one media commentator and a member of the Young Communist League which is in a political alliance with the ANC describing it as "A bad employer was killed by his k##### for refusing to pay them... Period!" (Manamela 2010).

At the same time, Julius Malema was called out for his public use of the phrase "dubul'ibhunu", and accused of being an "accessory to the wiping out of farmers in South Africa" and creating "an atmosphere in which reckless thoughts and actions flourish" (Mbanjwa & Peters, 2010). The ANC was sanctioned for failing to "castigate" Malema, while Gwede Mantashe's defence of Malema was described as "alarming". Describing Malema, then-head of the ANCYL, as "exhorting the murder of farmers" (Mbanjwa/ Peters 2010) positioned him as a threat to the farming community as well as a potential cause of violent attacks. The ANC's lack of a firm stand against Malema situated them as weak and ineffectual, but potentially dangerous: allies in name, but not in action.

In the above two cases we see a commonality regarding farm murders in that both involved the disturbance by an external influence of intact social relations in the countryside. Nevertheless, Terre'blanche's murder had the potential to be interpreted as either a racial act or as a wage dispute. Although many media

² Julius Malema was the ANC Youth League president and was later expelled from the organisation, forming the Economic Freedom Fighters party in 2013.

outlets reported it as a wage dispute, there was a lingering "third-force" narrative which viewed the killing as political. In this case, the political was not located within a conscious worker's killing of a racist employer, but rather in the figure of a political rabble-rouser in the form of Julius Malema, and linked to the ANC and its failure to ensure the legitimacy of the nation-building project. The case in the Midlands moves contradistinction to such a narrative by erasing race as a motivating factor and thereby eliding the nature of social relations on the farm.

The "Midlands Murder" (Peters 2010) on Sherwood Farm was an incident in which a white female farm owner and her two black employees were gruesomely murdered. The high visibility of black bodies being tortured alongside white ones, and the lack of racial discernment on the part of the perpetrators, suggested in the public imagination that farm murders were a threat to all in the farming community, regardless of race or status. The resulting protest in which the Farmers Union was joined by the ANC outside the magistrate's court was a significant moment where the political and racial lines were erased and the human tragedy was foregrounded. The introduction of Operation Hlasela (Peters 2010) which situated farm murders as a priority crime was welcomed as evidence that the government was finally recognizing and supporting the struggle of the farmers.

2011-2017: "Farm Murders Should Not be Viewed as Distinct from any other Violent Crime." (Christie 2012)

This period saw a resurgence in generalized rhetoric about farm murders as a phenomenon in South Africa. President Zuma's comment, "that farm murders should not be viewed as distinct from any other violent crime" (Christie 2012), reignited the ongoing debate about the definition and meaning of farm murders and whether they were sufficiently definable as crimes that happened to take place on farms or whether there was any evidence that they were racially motivated. The word "genocide" emerged in public discourse, while media commentators strove to display nuance, objectivity and level-headedness in their approach to the subject. Comments such as, "I think we should talk about violence in farming communities as opposed to attacks on farmers" (Christie 2012) suggested the introduction of a more complex narrative than the polarized and reductionist victim/perpetrator matrix of the previous decade. The suggestions that farmers were accountable in some way for the phenomenon being played out, that farm murders were not merely reactive to historic land disputes, and that there was a systemic flaw in these relations of production were matters articulated during this time.

The narratives of ‘white genocide’ and ‘failed state’ were mobilized during this time to stage a protest, known as Black Monday, on the 30th October 2017. The protest saw farmers from different provinces in South Africa demanding protection from the state and with placards written in Afrikaans showing slogans like “*genoeg is genoeg*”³ (enough is enough). This was a protest that was directed at the failure of the black-led state to protect the white farmers. Therefore, the death of white farmers was not positioned by the protesters as a crime but rather as a political problem: to be precise, a failure of the state. The desire for a return to the previous apartheid state was seen in how some of those farmers carried the old apartheid flag⁴ (in use from 1928-1994) that includes a symbol of the Union Jack, the Orange Free State and the South African Republic emblems. The flag of the past was brought to the present, to remind the white farming community of what the Afrikaner farmer had lost – protection. As the Nelson Mandela Foundation spokesperson, Luzuko Koti, argued during the ruling:

“The gratuitous displays of the old flag express a desire for black people to be relegated to labour reserves, a pining for the killing, the torture, the abductions, a melancholia for the discrimination, the death squads, the curfews and the horrific atrocities committed under the flag.” (Karrim/ Ngqakamba 2019)

At the same time this past symbol, as it emerges in the present, can also be seen as a symbol of threat to those in the present. That is to say, the protestors were using the flag to threaten the present moment of a past where they had a state that could protect them against blacks. When the flag is used in the present it is to remind black people of the terror that the white farmer is capable of. That is why the Equality Court⁵ on the 21st of August 2019 ruled that any gratuitous display of the flag be deemed as hate speech. The judge indicated that the flag represents the injustices of the past and the suppression of the democratic values of South Africa (Karrim/ Ngqakamba 2019).

2020: “Farm Murders Not a Priority Crime”

In 2020 another prototypical incident defined public discourse around farm killings and imbued them with political and racial significance. Brendin Horner,

³ <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/farm-murders-breakdown>

⁴ <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/blackmonday-apartheid-flags-protest/>

⁵ <https://www.news24.com/News24/apartheid-flag-ruling-gratuitous-display-constitutes-hate-speech-20190821>

a white farm manager, was murdered in Senekal, with media reports featuring gratuitous descriptions of his death. Farmers around the country organized a protest again, with one farmer describing the threat as something “we feel [it] on our skin every day” (“Protest against farm murders” 2020). The EFF, led by Julius Malema, arrived in Senekal, ostensibly to “protect state property from looting and sabotage” (Maliba 2020) after the farmers had overturned a police farm. However, a stand-off ensued and the peaceful protest quickly turned aggressive.

The discussion about farm murders, which had begun to reach some level of nuance, quickly degenerated into an oversimplified “us versus them” rhetoric. While the EFF reminded protesters that “apartheid did not end in 1994” (Sidimba 2020), the victim’s family said that “it was not a fight between black and white but rather between criminals and law-abiding citizens” (Kgosana 2020). EFF’s Julius Malema re-centred the illegitimacy of the term “farm murders”, announcing that “there is no such thing as farm murders” and that “we need to tackle crime as a whole” (Moloko 2020), suggesting that farmers are concerned only about crimes that impact them directly rather than concerned about the welfare of the country. An EFF spokeswoman described the debate about farm murders as “a scam to deflect attention” (Moloko 2020) from larger issues affecting the entire country, noting that “this debate on farm attacks that seeks to project whites as victims, blacks as perpetrators, could not be justified” (Moloko 2020); while the Minister of Police Bheki Cele’s removal of farm killings from the list of priority crimes (“Farm murders not a priority crime” 2020) signalled a new era less sympathetic to the concerns of the white farm owner.

The level-5 lockdown in March 2020, at the start of the pandemic, reduced the numbers of farm attacks for a short period of time. However, the numbers rose rapidly as the country returned to normal, with farmers lamenting the short peace and the return to violence and fear. The pandemic itself was used as an explanatory mechanism for rising and falling rates of farm violence, incorporated into existing discourses as a biopolitical mechanism for potential change.

Farm Attacks: A Potential Annihilation of the Father

It is interesting to note that, in reports of farm murders, there has been little if any comment on the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, aside from consistent acknowledgements that the perpetrator was an “employee of the farm”. Essentially this rewrites the paternalistic relationship that is inherent in farm labour as merely an employer-employee arrangement, which underwrites the senselessness ascribed to the act of murder. What is concealed in these

words, “an employee of the farm”, is an entire set of relations within which both victim and perpetrator were embedded: a political relation between (white) coloniser and (black) colonised; (white) land owner and (black) land dispossessed wage labourer; (white) “father” and (black) “child”. The paternalism that hides the exploitative nature of the true relationship is always accompanied by violence, or its threat: it is the only way that the illusion of benevolence can be maintained. When this violence is turned back upon the farmer (father), the illusion is ruptured, reducing the child to the status he has always already held: a worker on the farm.

A marked shift in reporting style after 2002 saw the inclusion of detailed and graphic accounts of murders with descriptive flourishes (“blood-spattered bedroom” [Hills 2002], “suffocated in his own vomit” [De Lange 2003]) narrating a spectacle of extra-lethal violence. Caroline Holmes’s (2020: 3) analysis argues that these descriptions are utilized by the farming community as a basis for a “pervasive sense of threat ... creating a political opportunity on which self-identified victims capitalize”, and she notes that these extended narratives “become points of continual reference for activists because of the emotional draw of spectacles of extra-lethal violence, which allows for activists to curate a sense of victimhood among a potential target audience, both reflecting and creating an environment of increased interracial tension”, while “the relative rarity of such violence is overcome through continual reference”. Of course, one of the rhetorical strategies for the continued insistence of the existence of farm murders themselves is repeated, gratuitous descriptions of singular events couched “within a larger framework of farm murders”. We build on Holmes’ analysis by recognizing the rhetorical construction of the phenomenon of farm violence, but arguing that these reports also emphasize the individual perpetrators and victims of these incidents while concealing the relational complexity so fundamental to an understanding of the murders themselves.

One case involved the murder of Pieter and Martina Olivier, tomato farmers living in Bronkhorstspuit, who were killed by “Piet Manyisa, 21” who was “one of their workers” (De Lange 2003b). *The Citizen’s* report of the incident was titled “Guilty of Killing his Employer” (De Lange 2003a). In his defense, Manyisa claimed that “he had never worked for the Oliviers”, an assertion that was rejected by the court due to contradictory evidence (De Lange 2003a). The only other reference, in this news report, to the nature of this relationship, was an assertion that Manyisa had “bitten the hand that fed him” (De Lange 2003a). Coupled with the consistent references to the employer-employee relationship, this metaphor implies that Manyisa had been the recipient of benevolence and kindness by the couple and had in turn harmed them (and in the process,

harmed himself). This is an instantiation of the very narrative that farmers rely on in their approach to farm murders. Farmers are those who provide food, in a very material way, and attacks against them are unprovoked and harm the attackers (and, more generally, the population) as well as the farmers themselves. This discursive arrangement precludes any fault or accountability on the part of the victims who were described merely as “employers”.

The perpetrator, on the other hand, was described as a “young Mozambican” and an “orphan who had not benefited from parental guidance and control” (De Lange 2003b). He was further identified as uneducated, “having never attended school” (De Lange 2003b). By infantilizing him as, in essence, a child who did not know better, this narrative is a gesture to the paternalistic relation with his employer. However, his description as an “orphan” with no “parental guidance” is a negation of the parent role attributable to the farmer. This discursive paradox is at the heart of the relationship between farmer and labourer, describing a worker conceived of as a child in his working relationship with the farmer, who is nevertheless simultaneously not belonging to the family in any meaningful sense. This paradox was further narrated by the judge, who explained that, on farms, the relationship between the farmer and his employees “was very much the same as that of a big family”. The judge explained to the perpetrator that “They trust each other and look after each other. They do not attack each other. That harmonious relationship is disturbed by crimes such as these” (De Lange 2003b).

Aside from sounding like he was addressing a young child, the judge’s words were a powerful illustration of the illusion at the heart of paternalistic relations on the farm. By describing a characteristically exploitative relationship as “harmonious”, the judge reaffirmed the illusory nature of a “big family” and blamed the perpetrator for “disturbing” this harmony. The description of the gratuitously violent death for the husband (“dumped in a ditch in the veld, where he eventually suffocated in his own vomit”) and sexual violation of the wife (“repeatedly and severely assaulted by the gang of robbers”) (De Lange 2003b), however, suggests that Manyisa did not find the relationship “harmonious” and sought to reject the illusion being ascribed to the relationship between himself and his employers.

In another case, a report described the “murder of Stephanus Anton Wener (62), who had been severely beaten and left sitting in the midday sun on a garden chair with a pool of blood at his feet. His body was covered with black shade netting and a deep gash was found in the back of his head”. The report also stated that “the men were alleged to have been employed by the victim” and that

they had “fled with clothing, a cell phone, a camera, tape recorder and two firearms” (Thompson 2002). The only reference to the relationship between victim and perpetrators was that they had been his employees, while the description of the haphazard collection of stolen items implies a primary motive apart from robbery. This is supported by the graphic description of the body and the extent of the victim’s injuries, which implies a deeply conflictual relationship that is all but erased through the wording of the article.

A third report from this time describes a murder of a couple on their farm. The victims are described as “retired school teacher Olive May Lourens, 79” and “her husband, 78-year-old retired school psychologist, Dr Cor Johannes Petrus Lourens”. The perpetrators were described as “Ben Ncube, 24, Johannes Soke, 19, and Colin Selemane 19”, with Ncube further described as someone “who the Lourens couple have known since childhood” (Roestoff 2005). Reference to the victims, including their old age and their former respectable occupations is accompanied by a description of their deaths as “gruesome”, including a discovery of Olive, who was found with her “hands and feet bound with electrical cord”, confirming that “she had been strangled” to death, while the “decomposed body of her husband” had been found close to the farmhouse. The description of the relationship between the victim and perpetrator implied an intimate and long-standing relationship with a young boy who had grown up on the farm, and is powerfully contrasted with the brutality of the murders which Ncube was described as having “masterminded” (Roestoff 2005). By providing these details Ncube is portrayed as an almost-member of the family who cruelly betrayed two parent figures on whose farm he was brought up and colluded with ‘outsiders’. There is no further description of this relationship or of potential motive on Ncube’s part. The absence of further details about the relationship elide the possibility of a rational motive for this act while simultaneously situating Ncube as an ungrateful and irrational individual.

The Midlands Murder, a case in which a white female farm owner and her two black employees were killed, received large amounts of media coverage, partially due to the fact that the perpetrators seemingly did not differentiate their victims along lines of race or status. The victims were described in the *Daily News* as “Lorraine Karg, her domestic worker, Hilda Linyane, and gardener, Zakhewa Mhlongo”. The perpetrators were “Nhlanhla Dladla, 22, Velaphi Magubane, 21, and Mswe Magubane, 21... A fourth suspect, Colin Maphalala, 31, who had worked on the Karg's farm before the murders, was shot dead by police in an alleged escape attempt” (Peters 2010). *The Mail & Guardian’s* report focused on of the courtroom proceedings of this case, providing detailed descriptions of the attack, including that the attackers had “severed the carotid artery and jugular

vein” and that they had killed the victims “in the way one would slaughter a goat”. Nevertheless, the perpetrators were described as seemingly “morphologically incapable of causing such damage – too little by far, their skinniness accentuated by messy, uncut hair. They seemed unsuited to physical labour generally, and yet both had worked on Sherwood Farm” (“Story of an African farm murder” 2012). Importantly, the perpetrators had previously been employed on the farm, although no mention was made of possible motive. Further, these details emphasized the youth and physical immaturity of the perpetrators, contrasting their childlike appearance with graphic descriptions of the murders they had committed. In court, suggestions that the workers had been severely underpaid were refuted, with the legal counsel commenting that “in cases where there has been a violent attack, it is not uncommon for the defence to try and depict the farmer as a brute”. In other words, the implication that there was a relational component to the attack was made visible through the description of the perpetrators as employees of the farm, while simultaneously erased through the refutation of any employee-based motive for the attack.

The Sunday Tribune’s report of Eugene Terre’blanche’s death tells a slightly different story, providing a single reference to the nature of the relationship between victim and perpetrators. The report describes Terre’blanche as having been “hacked to death”, with his body “badly mutilated” (“AWB leader” 2010). However, the perpetrators were described as “two of his farm workers”, with the motive described as an “altercation over farm wages”. The relationship between the suspects and victim is glossed as an employer-employee relationship, at odds with the graphic description of Terre’blanche’s death. A closer inspection, however, reveals an additional detail about the relationship, with the suspects alleging that “they were threatened by Terre’blanche” (“AWB leader” 2010). This rare allusion to a behaviour by the farmer that may have contributed or elicited to his death is perhaps the only acknowledgement of the racist and discriminatory behaviour for which Terre’blanche was infamous. It is certainly not expressed as a matter of course when describing farm attacks.

A further detail is that Terre’blanche “was apparently sleeping when he was killed with a panga” (“Terre’blanche murdered” 2010). It is difficult to imagine violently attacking a person while they are asleep. However, it is also telling about the degree of intimidation and fear he may have wielded that his workers were only able to confront him when he was not conscious. This fear goes far beyond the rational, as two youths with weapons can easily overpower an elderly man. It describes a deeper fear that is embedded in them that precludes any confrontation or threat to the father.

Conclusion

In this article, we employed discourse analysis to examine media portrayals of farm murders in post-apartheid South Africa between 1998 and 2020. In all of the cases mentioned above, the farm owners were murdered by employees who lived on their farm. Though this detail is acknowledged in the reports, it is minimized to the point of disappearance, with the “spectacle of violence” increasing the hypervisibility of the victims. On a larger canvas we have argued that what is at stake in the erasure of the relationship between the farmer and worker is the meaning of the murder and, ultimately, the reproduction of the violent relations that characterize labour production on the farm. We have demonstrated that despite the implicit mention of social relations on the farms which highlight briefly the question of working conditions (through the wage), such relations are still positioned within an outlook of paternalism. This indicates that, even within public institutions such as the courts, the language of paternalism is still present, with the farm viewed as a large family and the farmer a benevolent paterfamilias. This may offer some insight into the language used in reporting farm murders, specifically the infantilization of the farmworker, the depictions of extra-lethal violence, the hyper-visibility of the victims and the allusions to the farm as a ‘big family’.

In these cases, the death of a farmer means an attack upon a father, which implies a perilous fatherless future in this big family, the farm. The farm employee is not merely an employee; he is a child whose docile behaviour is coerced through extra-economical devices, including a violence disguised as benevolence. This violence inheres in the deep anxiety that the illusion of a family will rupture and reveal the exploitation that is a necessary but an impossible requirement for economic production in post-apartheid South Africa.

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