

The Fact of Anti-Blackness in South African Farms

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Abstract

This article uses the 2020 protest by a group of white farmers in Senekal as an entry point to the continuing anti-Black racist violence in South Africa's white-owned farms. It argues that the key demand by the white farmers reflected the living violent history of white farmers, particularly as articulated in the country's farmlands. The article contends that the history of white racial violence that produced the current racial disparities of land ownership in South Africa is, to an extent, kept alive by the ongoing exploitative and racist practices that have become a defining feature of white farming practices in South Africa. These exploitative and racist practices are well documented in the research on post-1994 white farms. As was the case in the past, anti-Black racist violence in contemporary South Africa relies on the narrative that historically constructed Blacks as subhuman and therefore were regarded as deserving of exploitation and unfair treatment. Blacks in this narrative are cast as not worthy of being treated with dignity and hence the dominant theme of this narrative portray Black life as insignificant, meaningless and disposable.

Keywords

Racial violence, anti-Black violence, whiteness, farm attacks, human worth

Introduction

On the morning of 6 October 2020, a group of white farmers 'stormed' the Senekal magistrate courthouse in the Free State (Pijoos, 2020). That day, the same group violently overturned and burned a police vehicle outside the same courthouse. The group only had one clear demand, and this was for the state to hand over the two Black men who were suspects in a murder case of a white farmer (see Pijoos and Daniels, 2020). In a sense, the demand seemed incongruous. But, as argued below, the demand was in line with the historical violent politics of white farmers in South Africa. The white violence in Senekal, in other words, signified a 'racial history' (Omi and Winant, 2015: 137) of whiteness that continues to interfere, shape and is entangled with the now. The Senekal racist incident confirms theoretical and historical observations that in the face of death,

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white racism, as further discussed below, constantly renews itself by adapting to new political environments (see HoSang, 2010). The question at the centre of this article is what do the actions of the white group in Senekal signify or tell us about whiteness and anti-Black violence in the country's farmlands. Importantly, the article points out that the actions and the rhetoric of the white farmers in Senekal need to be understood as part of the long-standing anti-Black racist violence that emerged from the 18th-century Cape of Good Hope and continues to find life in post-1994 South Africa's farmlands.

Whiteness in this article is first 'understood as an ideologically supported social positionality, a social location' that has over the years worked to benefit primarily whites (Steyn, 2003: 11). It is a 'a social fact . . . with all-to-real consequences' (Lipsitz, 2006: vii) for both its beneficiaries and those it disadvantages. Its primary beneficiaries are privileged beyond the economic or class dimension (Steyn, 2003). As a result, whiteness has in the past meant that whites have political rights to control, dominate and exercise power over Black bodies (Harris, 1993). The global white domination over Black bodies has often gone hand in hand with what Maldonado-Torres (2008: xii) refers to as 'a selective suspension' of ethics. In practice, what this has meant in racialised societies is that ethics, fairness and justice in the polity are part of the privileges that are almost exclusively reserved for whites (Mills, 1997).

As an antithesis of white, the Black body, in the 'white racial frame', is a disposable object that falls outside the paradigm of ethics and justice (Feagin, 2013; Mills, 1997; Yancy, 2017). In other words, the Black body has historically been denied what Pfeifer (2004) refers to as due process. Thus, the seemingly bizarre white demand of the Black bodies needs to be first understood within this historic racial frame that is at once about domination over othered criminalised bodies, while it is about who is entitled to due process in a polity that was initially founded to benefit whites (see Lake and Reynolds, 2008; Yancy, 2017). The global suspension of due process for the Black bodies needs to be linked to what Mbembe (2003: 17) refers to as the 'politics of death'. This is a form of politics whereby some take it upon themselves to decide who 'may live and who must die' (Mbembe, 2003: 11). The argument I am making in this article is that the Senekal racist incident evinced how white farmers, in various and interconnected modes, sought to reenact a racial past whereby white men took it upon themselves to decide which Black may live and which must die in the country's farmlands (see Evans, 2009; Higginson, 2015). Such a decision is rooted in the white racial ideology that has over the years constructed the Black body as an object that lacks human worth and is, consequently, expandable (Yancy, 2017).

Furthermore, the Senekal farmers seemingly knew that they can damage state property, as was the case that day, with little to no violent response from the police because white bodies carry 'significant social value' (Smith McKoy, 2001: 4). That white bodies carry more value is due, in part, to what Steyn (2001: 3 & xxvii) refers to as the colonial 'narrative of whiteness' that has historically constructed whites as superior masters 'in relation to their colonial other'. This white narrative has largely translated into a social reality whereby the worthiness and value of being white is systematically entrenched, 'taken as common sense' and as the 'natural order of things' (Steyn, 2001: xxvii & 16). In the narrative, whites are entitled to a special treatment that is almost only reserved for white people in the polity (Steyn, 2001). One of these racial special treatments is that of viewing whites as embodying virtue, civilisation and non-violence (Smith McKoy, 2001).

As discussed above, while the historic 'narrative of whiteness' protects and privileges white bodies, it, on the other hand, denigrates, criminalises and dehumanises Black bodies. Against this discursive backdrop, it seems unlikely that the police would have reacted in the same way had it been a group of armed Black bodies who stormed the magistrate courthouse, overturned and burned a police vehicle outside the court. In fact, recent history showed the police force enthusiastic in killing Black people during the Marikana demonstration/protest. During #FeesMustFall, a

largely Black student movement that protested high university fees from 2015 to 2017, the police used water cannons, teargas and rubber bullets against the Black students. The students in the #FeesMustFall came up with a strategy to install white students in the forefront of their demonstrations in order to deter police violence and police brutality that police seem to instinctively resort to when dealing with Black protesters in post-1994 South Africa. I want to suggest that the South African police response to Black protesters is informed by the institutionalised 'culture of violence' (Evans, 2009; Manganyi and du Toit, 1990; Marks and Andersson, 1990) against Black bodies in South Africa. White settlers perfected that anti-Black racist violence during the Frontier wars throughout the 19th century, and the apartheid state legalised it and metered it out via apartheid police and apartheid military. Even the colonial archive unashamedly confirms this history of anti-Black violence (Majavu, in press). The legacy of this racist history shapes how police respond to Black protesters. As a result, in post-apartheid South Africa, popular social justice demands by Blacks over housing, water, decolonisation of education, and free education have often been met with violence from the state in the form of police (see Pithouse, 2016). And in many of these instances, the response has not only been violent, but has been lethal. Even an unarmed Black, as was the case with Andries Tatane in 2011 and Nqobile Nzuza in 2013, is deemed a danger to be shot and killed (Pithouse, 2016).

The differential treatment of a group of violent whites and a Black protest in post-apartheid South Africa reflects the white racial narrative that continues to shape how racialised bodies are viewed; which ones are valued and which are not; which ones pose inherent danger and which ones do not; which ones signify criminality and which ones are associated with innocence; and which ones to die outside due process and which ones must be protected. The demarcation of worthy and unworthy bodies is not only limited to the living. It is also at play in how the violent death of the worthy and unworthy is mourned or grieved and not mourned or not grieved publicly (Butler, 2004) and also in how the violence on the body of the worthy is narrated. This is to say that the body is central to the racial process of deciding which life is worthy and which one is not (Yancy, 2017). Racism, after all, overwhelmingly functions through 'racially marked bodies' (Omi and Winant, 2015: 145). And hence it should not be surprising that racial 'despotism operated on the racial body, assaulting it, and profiling it' (Omi and Winant, 2015: 145). As Fanon (2008 [1967]: 82) argues, the weight of racism is all the more 'crushing' on the body of its targets. In a racist world, Blacks are damned in and through their racially marked bodies.

In sum, this article therefore uses Senekal as an entry point to the discussion of an ongoing anti-Black violence in South African farms. It contends that the violent public performance of the white farmers in Senekal signifies the largely unseen but widespread intersecting anti-Black violence that continues to play out in the country's farmlands.

Theorising the racial demarcation of the worthy and the unworthy

It is important to acknowledge that this article borrows the idea of worthy and unworthy people from the work of Herman and Chomsky (1988). In their now classic book, *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky point out that the news media treats victims differently. The ones who are politically considered to be 'worthy victims' are discussed differently from the ones who are deemed to be unworthy. The worthy victims get the media attention that they deserve as human beings, while the unworthy ones are not afforded the same attention. The media reporting of the worthy victims, they further argue, is humanised and intended to generate widespread sympathy (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). The reporting of the unworthy victim, on the other hand, 'merit only slight detail, minimal humanisation, and little context that will excite and enrage' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 35).

Herman and Chomsky (1988), however, use the concepts in a slightly different context than the one used here. While Herman and Chomsky (1988: 35) refer to ‘unworthy victims’ and ‘worthy victims’ mainly in terms of the news media coverage, this article, on the other hand, extends the ‘highly political dichotomisation’ to worthy life and unworthy life. This extension is, as will be demonstrated shortly, based on the reality that the ‘evidence of worth’ (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 37) in an anti-Black society is measured through what Feagin (2013) refers to as the white racial frame. Consequently, through this frame, the life of Blacks has historically been deemed not to matter, and hence unworthy; while, on the other hand, whites have historically been valued and recognised as people who actually matter, hence worthy. The death of the worthy is followed by a public display of grief for all to sympathise with the loss of a life of a human being who mattered (Butler, 2004). In our context, this public display of grief is seen in how the death of whites in farms, as discussed below, is named, mourned and memorialised (see Holmes, 2020) while the death of blacks in farms is seemingly rendered invisible and consequently not worth to be grieved publicly.

The notion of worthiness is embedded to the one that gave us the idea of who is a full person and who falls outside the realm of personhood (see Mills, 1998). In other words, the idea of worthiness is ‘racial[ly] demarcated’ (Mills, 1998: 72). The worthy life is privileged, valued, protected and treated with human dignity (Mills, 1998). The worthy life gets the treatment of a full person; while the one who is racially marked as unworthy is perpetually treated as having fallen short of full personhood (Mills, 1998). Racial politics apply different set of morality, values and justice to the worthy and the unworthy life. Part of the privileges of the worthy is that of being entitled to due process, an entitlement that is not always extended to the racial unworthy. As the next section demonstrates, the racial divide of which bodies matter and which ones do not matter in post-apartheid South Africa are, in one sense, rooted in the country’s racial history.

A brief history of white racial violence in the country’s farmlands

The oppression of Blacks in South Africa has never been exclusively limited to cheap labour (Crais, 1991, 2011). Rather, more accurately, Blacks in South Africa have historically been at the receiving end of intersecting modes of white racial violence (Crais, 2011). The political project of preserving white privilege has over the years entailed using both state (structural and direct violence) and interpersonal violence against Blacks (Evans, 2009; Higginson, 2015). One was official and carried out by the racial state, while the other was carried out by white individuals (Higginson, 2015). Although the state largely monopolised violence, whites in their individual capacity were known for inflicting violence against Blacks. According to Evans (2009: 2), the most unofficial racial violence against Blacks ‘was particularly high in the white rural areas and the gold mining industry’. In the 1920s, white-owned farms became one of the foremost dangerous places of working while Black (Evans, 2009). This was because of individual whites resorting ‘to violence and terror to control and punish African farm labor’ (Evans, 2009: 10).

Violence has historically been ‘an integral part of the relationship between’ (van Onselen, 1992: 129) the white farm owner and the Blacks in the farms. Whites in South African farms have used violence to reinforce and complement the institutional white racial order (Murray, 1989). Unlike the state-sanctioned racial violence, the racial violence in the farms was not governed by ‘rules, protocols or illusions of justice and mercy’ (Murray, 1989: 107). Rather on top of the existing state-sanctioned white racial order, whites in the farms imposed their ‘racial etiquette’ that was reinforced by various forms of violent terror (Evans, 2009: 113; Strobel, 2003). Without any clear rules Blacks could, at any point in time, be at the receiving end of white ‘unprovoked vigilantism’ (Murray, 1989: 117) for no apparent reason other than being Black in a farm. According to

Murray (1989: 121), for instance, in 1924, a Black woman was once shot at by a white male teenager ‘while she was in a stooping position gathering firewood’. Davies (1990: 31) mentions the “‘routine” violence that became prevalent on so many farms’. At various historical points, it almost became normal for whites to randomly shoot Blacks in farms, hence Murray (1989: 109) can speak of ‘a series of “shooting” episodes’ and of ‘a “reign of terror”’ in the white-owned farms between 1918 and 1924. So frequent were these ‘shooting episodes’ that at one point ‘violence of this sort had reached epidemic proportions’ in the middle of 1918 (Murray, 1989: 110). Evans (2009) is careful to point out, however, that the shooting episodes of Blacks in farms continued well beyond 1924.

I contend that the performance of violence by white farmers in Senekal in 2020 ought to be understood against this historical backdrop. The history of South Africa is full of racist events like the Senekal affair to the extent that it could be argued that white farmers who were behind the Senekal affair were inspired and energised by this history. In fact, what happened in Senekal closely resembles what happened at Umvoti on 1 March 1928. According to Bradford (1984: 128) in this year and month, a group of ‘incensed whites armed with shotguns twice stormed the prison’ in an effort to get their hands on the accused Black man Zabuloni Gwaza. Both the 1928 and the 2020 white group relied on their racial entitlement and privilege to decide who deserves to be killed outside due process and who does not. This white entitlement is tied to the notion that Blacks, in the white racial frame, are perpetual subordinates of whites and therefore unworthy to be treated like whites, the ultimate human beings. In post-apartheid South Africa, white farmers such as the ones in Senekal are part of the white collective that is seemingly working at keeping alive the racial demarcation of which life is worthy and which is unworthy.

Whiteness as a racial trajectory

The fact that what Steyn (2001) refers to as the white narrative largely continues to inform social relations does not necessarily mean that to be white in South Africa today is the same as what it meant to be white in the country, say 30 or plus years ago (i.e. see Boersema, 2022). As Steyn (2001) reminds us, the idea of what it means to be white is one that mutates over time, as opposed to being a permanently fixed identity. The ability to move with time also tells us that racism is not the exclusive domain of a racial state because through its various mutations the racial ideology takes a life of its own among the non-state actors as well (Omi and Winant, 2015). The ability of racism to exist without a racist state partly reflect and helps us understand that racial politics are dynamic, perpetually shifting, and, along the way, adopting to different epochs (Omi and Winant, 2015). In their racial formation theory, Omi and Winant (2015: 148) correctly espouse the view that ‘[r]acial politics should be understood in terms of *trajectories*’ [emphasis in the original text].

The fact that the racial ideology travels with time has led the likes of Hill Collins (2004) and Bonilla-Silva (2022) to speak of ‘new racism’. Bonilla-Silva (2022), one of the foremost scholars who has written about this new racism, argues that racism of our time tends to be masked and articulated as though it is not racist. However, similar to the old, the new racism discourse is about maintaining the racial hierarchy that privileges whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). This is also the case in post-apartheid South Africa (see Boersema, 2022; Steyn, 2004). Boersema (2022: 12) points out that the white racist discourse in post-apartheid South Africa, similar to white racism in other parts of the world, ‘has also changed its character over time’.

This change has seemingly necessitated an adaptation of a somewhat new ‘white talk’ (see Steyn, 2003, 2004) that serves to ‘deny, mask and minimize the existence of white privilege’ (Boersema, 2022: 24). To mask the continuing white privilege, whites purposefully deploy populist discourse that depict them as the ‘new victims of today’s racism’ (Boersema, 2022: 102).

According to Steyn (2004: 158), white victimhood in post-apartheid South Africa is often articulated 'to try to compete with the Black African for the powerful position of victim'. The idea that whites are victims is part of framing whites as existing 'outside racialised structures and power relations' that continue to favour them (Phipps, 2021: 85). The white victimhood narrative, however, is not matched by reality or facts (Boersema, 2022). Rather the mythical claim of victimhood needs to be understood as part of the 'white narrative' that has historically framed whites as vulnerable and benevolent beings alongside an inherently guilty and criminal Black (Phipps, 2021). This historical connection, as Omi and Winant (2015) remind us, in part reflects that the ideological bond between the old and the new racism is not always broken. Whites, old or new racism notwithstanding, remain privileged people who need protection from the criminal Blacks.

This unbroken bond is also noticeable in the social fact that emotions and tears of whites seemingly carry more value than those of the racial unworthy (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Phipps, 2021). Consequently, Bonilla-Silva (2019: 7) speaks of a 'racialized emotional hierarchy'. In this hierarchy, emotions of those who are racially worthy are assumed to be legitimate, evoke sympathy and concern compared to those who are deemed to be unworthy (Phipps, 2021; Bonilla-Silva, 2019). The 'racialised emotional hierarchy' in South Africa is often at play across the social sphere, but perhaps more so when it comes to crime that affects whites and particularly 'become more evident in the trope of the threatened white farmer' (Boersema, 2022: 122; also see Holmes, 2020). As further discussed below, violent crime that affects whites in farms not only gets widespread attention, but it is narrated so as to generate sympathy for the supposedly worthy victims (Holmes, 2020). This 'racialised emotional hierarchy' is also noticeable in how the violence that is directed against the worthy in the country's farmlands is narrated.

Privileging white victimhood and the racial emotional hierarchy in SA farms

While there is currently no comprehensive academic literature on the violence of the white group of Senekal, there are several writings on the violence in South African farms. Most of this literature, at least in the recent past, seems mostly skewed towards analysing the violence where whites on farms are the victims. The focus on violence where whites are the victims, of course, is inseparable from the white racial demarcation of worthy and unworthy discussed above. The focus on whites as victims of violence in the farmlands ultimately draws our emotions and sympathies to the victim who is white, while the Black victims of anti-Black violence is rendered invisible. This literature, in simple terms, compounds the historic racialised emotional hierarchy that privileges the welfare of whites above everyone else in the polity. For instance, Johnny Steinberg (2002) wrote an entire book on factors that supposedly led to the killing of a white farmer in KwaZulu Natal's Midlands. While the killer is never found for the murder in question, Steinberg, however, argues that the killer is among the disgruntled Blacks in the farmlands. Steinberg's Blacks are transformed into dishonest people who communicate best with violence and other criminal means. I agree with Walker (2003: 96) that Steinberg's work successfully reinforces 'widely held stereotypes'. And one of those stereotypes is that of Blacks as serial cold-blooded killers of whites in South African farms.

In her PhD research, Barb Pearce (2016) continues on a similar trajectory but on a broader scale. Like Steinberg, her argument is that 'farm attacks', to an extent, emerge from Blacks' resentment over land ownership. In both Steinberg's and Pearce's work, Blacks are, apart from seemingly being on trial, expected to provide motives for cold-blooded murder of whites in South African farms. Almost similar to the two works mentioned above, the paper by Daniella Rafaely and uMbuso weNkosi (2023) is aimed at explaining the violence on white farmers as primary

stemming from a labour dispute between white farmers and Black farmworkers. The disgruntled farmworkers are then represented as resolving their labour-related issues through bloody violence.

While this literature has its uses, such as broadly arguing against looking at the violence outside a particular political contexts, it however has limitations. Focusing on the violence whereby white farmers are the victims, for an example, partly reflects the view that violence on whites warrants attention seemingly well above that of violence directed at Blacks on farms. This, it should be obvious, reflects the persisting ideology of whiteness that has historically positioned the life and lived experiences of whites above that of Black people. And analysing the violence on farms largely as a labour or class issue is to fall under the old trap of reducing white racism to class oppression (see Crais, 1991; Majavu, 2023).

The prevalence of whiteness in the discourse on farm violence is also noticeable in the way that violence experienced by whites on farms is discursively phrased and labelled as ‘farm attacks’. ‘Farm attacks’ is in the proverbial scare quotes because I wish to highlight the fact that the labelling forms part of the political weaponry to safeguard racial hierarchies in the farmlands. To begin with, to speak of ‘farm attacks’ or ‘farm murders’ is to insinuate that the violence experienced by whites in farms is different from the everyday crime that affects most Blacks in the country (Holmes, 2020). A report by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC, 2015: 13) points out that concepts such as ‘farm attacks’ suggest that crime on whites in farms is more important and special than other crimes, including crime experienced by Black farmers. In fact, these labels are intended to make us believe that crime experienced by whites on farms is racially motivated, and consequently part of terrorist attack on whites – the terrorists of this narrative are supposedly the vengeful Blacks (Manby, 2002). Steyn (2019: 59) correctly points out that the idea behind such concepts is to suggest that ‘a low-intensity white genocide is afoot’ in post-apartheid South Africa. This political dogma is amplified and hyped by the media to give the impression that it is widespread despite the fact that there is little to no evidence to suggest that crime experienced by whites in farms is racially motivated (Clack and Minnaar, 2018; Holmes, 2020; Manby, 2002; Rafaely and weNkosi, 2023). Ultimately, concepts such as ‘farm attacks’ are a rehash of the whiteness script that once framed the world as an orbit that is made up of humans whose life matter and the barbarians who did not matter. In the script, Blacks are constructed as savages that need to be tamed in order to protect the virtuous and benevolent whites. Yesterday’s supposed savages are today constructed as cold-blooded terrorists.

The terrorist attack and or genocide narrative is not necessarily intended to end violent crime in the country, rather the idea is to ensure that whites are not affected by crime. After all, whites speak of crime from the standpoint of whiteness (Falkof, 2024; Kynoch, 2013). From this standpoint, they view and interpret crime in racial terms whereby they, as whites, are innocent victims from the historic Black danger (Kynoch, 2013). One, in fact, can argue that from the white racial standpoint, the concern is not about crime in general; rather the concern is that whites are victims of crime in post-apartheid South Africa. These are people who are longing for a racial time when whites were protected by the state (Heleta, 2017; Rafaely and weNkosi, 2023); a time when horrific violence was exclusively for Blacks. These whites, to paraphrase Steyn (2001), believe that crime should not be experienced by whites (also see Marx Knoetze, 2020). In other words, these are whites who believe that their racial privilege extends and entitles them to not experience crime and violence that is experienced daily by most Blacks.

The fact that Black South Africans experience more crime and violence at a far high rate than whites is not taken into consideration by the white genocide propagandist. It is not taken into consideration because whiteness has historically chosen to see the world only through the lenses of whites, whereby the experience of whites become standard (Steyn, 2001). It is a world view that is

rooted in the idea of a white person as the ultimate person, whose life matters; while that of a Black is that of a savage and whose life matters less if at all.

The changing and shifting aspect of racism has led into a reality whereby whites have found a way of articulating racism without seeming to be racist through the discourse of crime in post-apartheid South Africa (Kynoch, 2013). It is indeed part of the new racism to articulate racism without seeming racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Bonilla-Silva (2022: 4) also refers to this phenomenon as ‘colourblind racism’ that enables whites to ‘safeguard their racial interests without sounding “racist”’.

The point that this article makes is that the ‘farm attack’ discourse is at the forefront of articulating this colourblind racism. As already mentioned, special privileges reserved almost exclusively for whites is central to whiteness. This is why white farmers in post-apartheid South Africa consistently demand that crimes faced by them be regarded as a priority crime (Heleta, 2017). In other words, the whiteness narrative seeks to compel us to see the violence in the farms from the lenses of the supposedly vulnerable whites who ostensibly matter well above the unworthy.

Post-apartheid anti-Black violence in South African farms

It would be inaccurate, of course, to argue that the group of white farmers made their key demand by solely relying on the history of anti-Black violence in the country’s farmlands. The farmers, rather, demanded that the two Black bodies be released to them because some white farmers in post-apartheid South Africa, as will be demonstrated shortly, have successfully managed to ensure that the racial violence of the past is intertwined with the current epoch. As was the case in the past, this violence seemingly demarcates which life matters as that of a human being and which life does not matter hence does not count as that of a human. The Senekal farmers, to put it differently, seemingly wanted to do to the two Black bodies what some whites on farms have consistently done to Blacks on farms. And that is the deployment of whiteness’s intersecting modes of anti-Black violence on the Black body. Although they are operationalised differently, these modes are all centred on the whiteness idea that has historically framed the Black ‘as a savage beast, a primitive and uncivilized animal’ (Yancy, 2017: 62) that needs to be controlled by whites.

The whiteness idea that Blacks are lesser, if at all, human beings has, across time and space, often been articulated through positioning Blacks as wild animals (see Jahoda, 1999). This animalisation of people has over time been used as part of the justification for the white racial violence against Blacks. In post-apartheid South Africa, Blacks in farms have at times been shot at on the basis that the shooter, often a white male farmer, thought he was shooting a wild animal. It is a rationale that some white farmers in post-apartheid South Africa have successfully relied on in courts in order to avoid being charged for murder (de Robillard and Lipschitz, 2017). It was in 2011 when Sipho Mbatha was shot twice in the forehead by a farmer who later claimed that he thought he was shooting at a dog (Memela, 2011; Mhlathi, 2020). In separate cases in 2014, two unnamed Black men were shot, with one dying, by white farmers who each thought that they were shooting at baboons (News24, 2014). In 2017, Jan Railo, then a 23-year-old farm worker, was shot in the face and killed allegedly because he was mistaken for, of all things, a warthog (Canca, 2017). The animalisation of Blacks is not only reserved for Blacks who are living. Black in farms are animalised in life as well as in death. A case in point is that of Adam Pieterse who was assaulted and murdered by a white farmer in 2015 (News24, 2018). Pieterse’s decomposed body was found 3 weeks later ‘not only in a place where sick and dead animals are buried . . . [but he too was] was buried like an animal’ (News24, 2018: np).

Thinking and seeing Blacks not as human beings but as wild animals is not necessarily new (see Fanon, 2008 [1967]). To see them not as human is to see everything about Blacks other than the

humanity, the dignity and the being of the person who is being assaulted or killed (Yancy, 2017). After all, in the 'enduring epistemic orders of whiteness' (Yancy, 2017: xxxii), the Black body has historically been constructed as that of an animal rather than a body of a human being. The white denial of the humanity of Blacks is entangled with seeing Black people but deliberately choosing to recognise them not as human beings, but rather as dangerous animals that are disposable and consequently killable (Yancy, 2017). To see Blacks, through the whiteness lens, is to see 'savages, brutes' (Fanon, 2008 [1967]: 88). They have been historically constructed as people who are 'not regarded as humans', hence are not 'grievable' (Butler, 2004: 33 & xiv).

The animalisation of a people is not the only mode of violence that whiteness deploys. There is also the anti-Black extra-legal violence that has historically masqueraded itself as justice. In its post-1994 act, this violence is, at heart, connected to the old white racial frame of viewing Blacks as 'always stealing' from white farmers (see Murray, 1989). These are Blacks who ostensibly need to be taught a violent lesson by whites. In South African farms, this white lesson has historically been taught through a 'Combination of violence, vigilantism and terror' (Murray, 1989: 109). It is a combination that has seemingly stood the test of time. For instance, in 2001, white rugby players in a farm violently killed and hid the body of Tshepo Matloga, then 19 years old, in a dam full of crocodiles (McGreal, 2001). The postmortem on his body, according to the weekly Mail & Guardian (2001: np) 'showed he died of a fractured skull and broken ribs, believed to have been inflicted during an assault'. Matloga was killed, along with his dogs, for 'looking for hares to eat or to sell' (McGreal, 2001: np). In 2018, Matlhomola Mosweu, 15 years old at the time, died under 'peculiar circumstances' (de Vos, 2020: np) after he was last seen alive in a baakie/pickup truck with two white farmers who claimed to have 'arrested' him 'for allegedly stealing sunflowers worth about R60' (de Vos, 2020: np). In 2020, another Black teenager was shot in the lower abdomen for allegedly wanting to steal corn; the farmers who shot and assaulted him further dumped him on the side of the road. Unlike Mosweu, the teenager, who is not named in several of the newspaper reports, survived the violence (Ethridge, 2020; Grobler, 2020).

'Shooting the native' or the use of guns, however, is not the only violent means of enforcing white justice in the country's farmlands. It has never been the only way (see Evans, 2009). In several cases, white farmers have seemingly invented several modes of violence to administer white justice on the Black body. Some of these modes include assaulting and then forcing living Blacks onto coffins in the name of justice, Victor Mlotshwa had a cruel racial experience of being one such victim (see Mashaba, 2017); at times white farmers set their vicious dogs on Blacks, as the recent racial incident in Groblersdal demonstrates (Chabalala, 2024). Another seemingly prevalent form is the use of vehicles as weapons to assault, and simultaneously as concealment tools for the assaulted Black body. Jotham Mandlazi, a farm worker, was one such victim in 2004 when his boss, a white farmer, dragged him with his car to the point that the farmer's baakie/pickup-truck ran over Mandlazi's head crushing his skull to death (Mhlabane, 2004). Mandlazi 'crime' was failing to report for duty the previous day. In 2018, Shimmy Mosienyane was run over by a farmer who had ostensibly made it clear that 'he didn't want kaffirs on his farm' (Kemp, 2018: np). In 2023, Good Mayenda was also run over with a bakkie/pickup-truck by a white farmer who has a penchant for violence for simply asking for his salary (Engelbrecht, 2022; Vuso, 2023). Unlike Mandlazi, fortunately both Mosienyane and Mayenda lived to tell their violent encounters with white justice.

Vehicles in the country's farmlands, as already noted, often play more than one role in the racial violence: they serve as weapons of assault, as discussed above, and, second, they are also instrumental in acts of concealing the assaulted bodies of people who ostensibly never mattered. The body of Dumisani Phakathi was one of these bodies before he was found by patrolling police on the back of a bakkie/pickup-truck that was driven by two white male farmers who now face a murder charge (Montsho, 2023). Had it not been for the police, Phakathi's concealed dead body would

have, in all likelihoods, disappeared like the many other Blacks who disappeared after being last seen in white-owned farms such as Tebogo Ndlovu who disappeared in 2017 (Montsho, 2023).

The devaluation of the Black body is not a phenomenon that necessarily resides only on white farmers as individuals. Rather, the episteme of whiteness ensures that the idea of the Black body as a signifier of a lesser human is embedded within the society at large (Yancy, 2017). Bell hooks (1992), in one of her essays, argues that the racist perception of devaluing Black bodies is a phenomenon that is normalised in society. Its normalisation also means that Blacks are also aware that a Black body carries less social weight in a racist society. In the country's farmlands, the idea of Blacks as mattering less is perhaps at worst when white farmers commit their racist violent acts in the presence of and together with Blacks. A recent case in point is the involvement of William Musora with Zachariah Johannes Olivier and Rudolph de Wet who are accused of killing Maria Makgato and Kudzai Ndlovu. After being shot at, the bodies of Makgato and Ndlovu were then 'fed to pigs' (Wick, 2024). In other words, all the role players in the farmlands know which bodies can be punished almost with impunity and which ones cannot be violated. For instance, Bolt (2016: 915) points out that even Blacks who are employed in senior positions in white-owned farms are 'kept in their racially defined place'. In other words, having Blacks looking after Blacks does not necessarily end the racialised hierarchy in farms (Bolt, 2016).

Invisible violence of being

White racial hierarchies in the country's farmlands have historically been sustained through both direct violence and structural violence (Evans, 2009). The performance of whiteness as direct violence includes the physical assaults and the racial killings, as discussed above. Performed as structural violence, on the other hand, whiteness does not necessarily rely on white fists, guns and powered vehicles to violently devalue the Black body in the country's farms. It is worth noting that these two forms of violence, direct and indirect, work in unison and/or complement each other to uphold the white racial order in the country's farms. Much like the shooting of Blacks, the everyday indirect systematic white violence in the farms can and has outlived the white racist state that sustained it for centuries. For an example, despite the post-1994 introduction of laws and rights that are meant to protect Blacks in farms, farm workers continue to be denied some of these rights by white farmers (Devereux, 2020). This is partly because farms, at times, operate differently from many other worker–employer relations (Pahle, 2015). The difference lies, to an extent, in the reality that farms in South Africa are, on one hand, private properties, and, on the other hand, are places of work.

As an owner of the private property, a farmer can seemingly refuse labour or union organisers from entering the farm (Pahle, 2015). The idea of a farm as a private property, beyond denying union organisers' entrance, is also problematic in other levels as well (see Nkosi, 2018). To begin with, 'Private property negates equality' (Nkosi, 2018: 273). Furthermore, the idea of private property seeks to detach the said 'property' from the white violent political history that made the South African farms what they are today. It is, to put it differently, an attempt to ideologically dissociate the current white owners from the structural horrors that gave birth to what we now refer to as farms. To refer to farms as private properties is to say 'private' owners exist outside the institutional and systematic racial frame that violently dispossessed Blacks in order to benefit whites as a collective. This ahistorical and supposedly apolitical frame is an attempt to mask the fact that South Africans farms are a significant component of the country's racial history.

The fact of the matter, however, is that private ownership of farmlands in the country is a direct result of the past. This is the past where land from Africans was violently expropriated by white settlers. For instance, Platzky and Walker (1985: 70) correctly point out that 'One of the first things that Jan van Riebeeck did after he arrived at the Cape in 1652 . . . was drive out the local Khoi

(Hottentot) cattle from their grazing land'. The racist driving out of Africans and their livestock from the land started with Jan van Riebeeck, but it did not end with him, rather successive white governments continued on his anti-Black legacy (i.e. see Bundy, 1979; Platzky and Walker, 1985). Who can forget the centuries of anti-Black 'bloody frontier wars' and the 'more violent conquest by the British troops' (Crais, 1991: 256; also see Majavu, in press).

Perhaps, it should go without saying that one of the outcomes from dispossessing the racialised other is that land becomes a property than can be privately owned by the civilised. In other words, the idea of privately owning land has and is a crucial component of the white racial discourse (Bhandar, 2018). Racialised private ownership is interlinked with 'the power to exclude' and 'a near-total control over the object of ownership' (Bhandar, 2018: 7 & 20). For instance, Beinart and Hughes (2007: 16) point out that 'In parts of the British Empire, land was not only appropriated from indigenous people, but racially based legislation restricted them to reserves or limited their capacity to purchase in areas that had been privatized'. In South Africa, the racialised private ownership property has historically 'helped to secure white privilege while at the same time politically and economically marginalising millions of [B]lack South Africans, inexorably reducing many of them to homelessness and poverty' (van der Walt, 2009: 2). Bundy (1979) demonstrates that the violent expropriation cumulatively contributed to the systematic underdevelopment of Blacks. The expropriation of land does not merely end with whites claiming ownership of the farmlands, but the life, well-being and general welfare of Blacks is violently disrupted (Bundy, 1979).

It can be argued that the status of a farm as a private property ostensibly leads farm owners to, in some cases, deny enshrined rights to the workers. A 2011 Human Rights Watch (2011: 4) report entitled *Ripe with abuse*, for instance, details 'exploitative conditions and human rights abuses' faced by many farm workers. Some of the rights that are denied to many farm workers, according to the report, are constitutionally recognised, such as sick leave, maternity leave and the right to join a labour organisation (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Furthermore, the report also highlights the denial of human dignity that some workers are faced with at the farms, such as: a farm worker who 'has lived in a former pig stall with his wife and children' for 10 years (p. 46); a 'former farm-worker who worked on a farm for approximately 20 years until he was declared disabled in 2010, lives with his wife in a former outhouse (also referred to as a toilet)' (p. 47); and the failure of farms to provide workers 'with toilets, hand washing facilities, or drinking water while working' (p. 62). The denial of these rights is linked to the whiteness idea of a Black on a farm as a nonperson who is not entitled to be treated with the dignity and respect that is for human beings. In the absence of human treatment, Blacks in farms are treated and made to feel as 'nothings' (Kaur, 2022). The working and living conditions of Blacks in farms is best understood as part of the living history of 'actively perform[ing] as, lesser beings' (Kaur, 2022: 229).

Conclusion

Violence in South African farms is unlikely to end without addressing the continuing racial inequalities in the country. One of these efforts is that of addressing the land ownership racial disparities in the country. In other words, more strides need to be made to ensure that Blacks, who constitute over 90% of the country's population, own more of the land. Furthermore, while farmers need to comply with the laws of the country, government and the state needs to ensure and enforce 'compliance, and trade unions must do more to hold both farmers and government accountable' (Devereux, 2020: 401).

The argument that this article advances is that what we witnessed on 6 October 2020 in Senekal was a performance of whiteness that told us about the past as well as the current state of violent anti-Black racism in South Africa's farmlands. The group of white farmers, in a sense, put on a

performance that was partly mourning an institutionalised violent anti-Black racial past. This is the violent history that produced the racial landownership disparities that continue to persist in post-1994 South Africa. It is a past that constructed the racial identities of whites as those who belong, and hence owners of the land. The formation of whites as people who belong and own the land went with that of an identity of a thieving and dangerous Black who does not belong to the country's farmlands. It is important to reiterate that both the identity of those who belong and those who do not belong was constructed through violence.

Some white farmers, such as the group we saw in Senekal, have sustained the country's farmlands as theatres of anti-Black violence. To these farmers, Black bodies, as was the case in the past, are unworthy and consequently must be punished outside due process. The point that this article makes is that the white violence that played out in Senekal was not necessarily a once off ahistorical event by a group of people who were concerned about justice. Rather, the group of white farmers was a contemporary representation of how whiteness has historically criminalised Black bodies in the country's farmlands. An already criminalised Black body is unworthy and therefore does not deserve to be treated like the body of a person who matters. In other words, the group of white farmers of Senekal were reenacting a racial history that white farmers have stubbornly kept alive, albeit modified. In our time, the anti-Black violence can and is articulated in a language that masks the privileged and protected as vulnerable victims who are, in more ways than one, waiting for the historic constructed bloodthirsty barbarians.

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