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## **The Good Farmer: Morality, Expertise, and Articulations of Whiteness in Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** In Zimbabwe, land has always been a visible index of racial domination and oppression. Following independence in 1980, the redistribution of white property to black farmers emerged as one of the most contentious battlegrounds for refiguring citizenship and nationhood. This article explores how white farmers in a small community in western Zimbabwe fought to establish claims to belonging as they faced the threat of imminent land reform at the turn of the millennium. Drawing upon Tania Li's concept of articulation (2000), I suggest that farmers constructed themselves both as moral subjects who cared for the environment, and skilled subjects with the technical know-how to safeguard and maximise the country's resources. In the absence of claims to indigeneity, farmers attempted to offset their own compromised morality by invoking the language of expertise. By examining this intersection between morality and expertise, I argue that white farmers in Zimbabwe brought together logics typically imagined to be distinct as a strategy to claim moral belonging while obscuring the historical and political factors that threatened to void those same claims.

**Keywords:** Morality; Expertise; Whiteness; Articulation; Zimbabwe

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In the pre-dawn hours of November 14, 2017, Zimbabwe's military seized control of the national broadcasting network and announced in a televised address that it had taken President Robert Mugabe and his wife Grace into custody and placed them under house arrest.<sup>2</sup> The military declared that this was not a coup, but rather an intervention dubbed 'Operation Restore Legacy' that would remove the root cause of the nation's political, social, and economic collapse. Mugabe was presented with an ultimatum: step down from office or be impeached. In Harare, tens of thousands of anti-Mugabe protestors flooded the streets, chanting and waving placards demanding the president's resignation. Mugabe kept the nation in suspense, but finally capitulated on November 21<sup>st</sup> once Parliament had initiated official impeachment proceedings. Upon the announcement that Mugabe had agreed to step down to allow for a smooth transition of power, the country erupted in euphoric celebration. People danced and sang in the streets, men prostrated themselves on the ground in joy, and children climbed onto the army tanks that occupied the capital to shake hands with smiling soldiers from the Zimbabwe Defence Forces.

This marked the end of an era for Zimbabwe. For 37 years since the country's independence in 1980, Mugabe had been the only head of state the nation had ever known. Once a celebrated liberation war hero and figure of untarnished moral authority, Mugabe's rule would come to be equated with ethnic genocide, political violence against the opposition party, and the destruction of the national economy. But perhaps the most controversial aspect of Mugabe's regime—and the one that gained the most global visibility—centred on the issue of land redistribution. The expropriation of white commercial farms in the early 2000s signalled the refiguration of citizenship and nationhood, but also became one of the key factors that was understood as leading to the economy's downfall. Before the country's independence in 1980, the minority white population monopolised over 60% of the most agriculturally productive and desirable land in the country. For the first ten years after independence, the security of this white property was guaranteed by law. When very few farmers stepped forward to offer their properties as 'willing sellers' despite the government's hopes, a series of legislative measures were drafted during the 1990s to exert increasing pressure on white Zimbabweans. This culminated at the end of the decade in a constitutional referendum that proposed to legalise the seizure of white property without compensation. What the government failed to anticipate, however, was that the majority of citizens would vote *against* this referendum in a national election in February 2000.

Rather than indexing national support for white Zimbabweans, the defeat of the constitutional referendum came from opposition to other clauses that proposed to expand the executive powers of the presidential office. In defiance against the election results, liberation 'war veterans' immediately swept across the country and occupied thousands of white commercial farms in subsequent months. The 'war veteran' label was a misnomer, for many of the individuals who occupied these farms were in fact too young to have participated in the liberation war. Despite this, the fiction of 'war vets' served to enhance the moral legitimacy

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<sup>2</sup> The military's actions came one week after Mugabe fired Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was widely recognised as one of Mugabe's most likely successors. Mnangagwa's main political rival was Grace Mugabe, the president's wife, who was also in line to become her husband's successor. Mnangagwa returned to Zimbabwe soon after the military takeover and was sworn in as president on November 24, 2017.

of the land invasions. Even though the nation's courts declared these invasions constitutionally illegal, they continued to expand until all but two hundred of the nation's 4,500 white commercial farms were occupied. Commercial agriculture, once the most important source of national revenue, came to a standstill.<sup>3</sup> Two dozen white farmers were killed, thousands more were evicted from their properties, and hundreds of thousands of farmworkers lost their jobs and were displaced.

Tucked away in the western corner of the country, a small white farming community in a valley called Mlilo went unnoticed for over a year after the land invasions began.<sup>4</sup> Because of its distance from the capital and the poor quality of its soils, few people seemed interested in occupying the valley's farms. The arrival of the war vets was inevitable, however, and by June 2001, Mlilo's landscape had been transformed. The distinctive markers of occupation could be seen everywhere. Thatched houses sprang up throughout the bush, white triangles designated new bus stops along the main road, and tree trunks were painted with the brightly coloured initials of new occupants.

In July 2001, Jon, a prominent farmer in the community, offered to take me to the area on his property that was occupied.<sup>5</sup> We drove a few kilometers from his house and drew up slowly alongside the war vets' encampment. Although anxieties were high, there had been no open conflict or violence in the valley up to this point. With his sun-blotched skin, bulky frame, and dark sunglasses, Jon was immediately recognisable as a white farmer. Despite the tension in the air, he greeted the new occupants cheerfully and asked with genuine interest, 'So! What are you guys planning to do with this here land?' We spent the next several minutes tagging alongside individuals who showed us their newly acquired land and described in earnest how they planned to develop it. Once the government constructed the borehole that had been promised to supply water for their new farms, they explained, they would irrigate the land and grow crops, and eventually build a school for their children and shops for the families who lived there. Their excitement was unmistakable.

Back in his vehicle, Jon stated what he considered to be self-evident: boreholes were expensive to build and even more expensive to maintain, and the government would never build a single one for the newly settled farmers in the valley. Even with a hypothetical borehole and the water that it would provide, he insisted, the soil was too poor for any form of intensive cultivation. I knew Jon had initiated the encounter to highlight how little knowledge these new residents had of the local topography, and how haphazard and ultimately doomed the land redistribution project was. He, along with the other farmers in the valley, held that these new occupants came from distant places, with little understanding of local conditions. As a result, they saw these invasions as engineered by strangers and elites outside the boundaries of the local economy, ultimately discrediting their claims to legitimate and meaningful reform. In their eyes, the new occupants' lack of preparation and skill only served to underscore their own morality and expertise, affirming their belonging in this landscape.

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<sup>3</sup> The primary crop in Zimbabwe is tobacco, which was also the country's top source of revenue before the land invasions disrupted the agricultural economy.

<sup>4</sup> The name 'Mlilo' is used as a pseudonym in order to conceal the identity of the community.

<sup>5</sup> Properties in Mlilo typically ranged between 30,000 and 100,000 hectares.

## Land in Black and White

In Zimbabwe, land has always been constructed in moral terms. Because Rhodesia was one of the few territories on the continent charted for permanent European settlement, the minority white population laid claim to the richest and most temperate lands in the country. In 1930, the Land Apportionment Act reserved 49.1 million acres as exclusive ‘European Areas’, in contrast to 7.4 million acres designated as ‘Native Purchase Areas’ where Africans could buy land (Phimister 1988).<sup>6</sup> Land has always been a visible index of racial domination and oppression; few things come close in terms of charged, symbolic meaning. Land as a material resource thus is undivorceable from land as a moral idiom. Connection to the land, knowledge and skill in working it, and claims to it as a basis of autonomy and self-determination are always framed in moral terms. To examine land’s ‘moral horizons’ (Stead and Dominy, this issue) therefore provides a productive lens for understanding its stakes in Zimbabwe. For rural white farmers who attempt to direct the production and circulation of moral discourse in Zimbabwe, land is the ultimate linchpin that holds the key to history, identity, and belonging.

This article argues that despite their unpopular presence, white farmers in Zimbabwe have been surprisingly successful in winning sympathy both within and outside the country by balancing articulations of moral virtue with assertions of technical expertise. These forms of rhetoric have long been mobilised by white farmers, both in constructing themselves as moral subjects who care for the environment, and skilled subjects with the technical know-how to safeguard and maximise output from the country’s resources. They deploy both of these discursive strategies—the moral and the technical—to emplace themselves within volatile and precarious post-Independence landscapes. In the postcolony, where white settlers are seen as out of place (Douglas 1966) and posing a threat to national narratives, morality cannot stand on its own. Instead, various registers of morality must be supplemented by the language of technocratic management, a field where whiteness becomes distinctly legible. These threads are woven together to construct an image of the experienced, skilled farmer who is understood as personifying responsible stewardship and rational productivity. This image is an enduring one that retains its hegemonic hold long after independence, and especially in relation to land.

Zimbabwe’s land redistribution project has been linked by both national and global critics to economic collapse and political corruption. However, for many people in Zimbabwe, the fast-track land reform program signified the achievement of the long-awaited goal of empowerment following the country’s independence. Prosper Matondi (2012) notes the deep irony in which the very same qualities of the land invasions and subsequent fast-track land reform program that were perceived negatively by the outside—chaos, violence, underutilised land, food insecurity, and a pariah state, along with very specific racial dynamics—recall a historical image that most people failed to recognise in political terms. The distinction between white agriculture as modern, efficient, and highly productive, as opposed to black agriculture as economically illogical and environmentally destructive, was a principle that long underpinned colonial ideology (Matondi 2012; Palmer 1977; Schmidt 1992). The

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<sup>6</sup> An additional 26.1 million acres were left intact as the ‘African Reserves’.

argument mobilised by contemporary white farmers in response to land redistribution reproduced the very same logic that had been used to justify vast inequities in land before independence. The fact that this logic managed to evade recognition as an enduring trope indexes how successful white farmers have been in the production and circulation of moral discourse even after 1980.

My approach to this production and circulation resonates with Tania Li's (2000) concept of articulation. For the Lindu in Indonesia, articulating indigenous identity is a creative act, opening up new political possibilities unavailable to 'ordinary' villagers. Li's understanding of articulation is useful because she illustrates the 'historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning' (Li 2000, 151) that both preclude and enable new strategies of subject formation. Like the Lindu, white farmers are engaged in contingent articulations, highlighting the qualities that make whiteness, as opposed to indigeneity, recognizable in existing fields of power. At the same time, there is a crucial difference between the Lindu in Indonesia and white farmers in Zimbabwe. For the latter, the impossibility of claims to indigeneity complicates articulations of morality, rendering morality inherently problematic. In the absence of indigeneity, white farmers attempt to offset this compromised morality by emphasizing their technical expertise. Thus, these two logics—the moral and the technical—are not merely twinned; rather, farmers call upon the technocratic to make whiteness *more moral*. Such moral-technocratic articulations arise from white farmers' paradoxical position as insider-outsiders in Zimbabwe.

In the recent turn to a critical moral anthropology, Didier Fassin suggests that moral questions are 'embedded in the substance of the social' (2012, 4) and as a consequence, moral codes cannot be isolated from political, religious, economic, and social issues. Looking closely at this 'substance of the social' in white farming worlds enables us to consider the co-construction of the moral realm on the one hand, and the expert realm on the other. In focusing on this intersection between morality and expertise, this article brings together two things that are typically imagined as distinct. Whereas moral acts and values transcend the individual and are understood by all as common sense (Fassin 2012), expertise produces a social discourse that is exclusionary and opaque to all but a few (see Dumit 2004; Mitchell 2002; Rapp 1999; Traweek 1988). By bridging these seemingly-divergent spheres, white farmers attempt to gain a foothold in a national terrain fraught with competing moral claims. In a post-independence context that stretches the idea of the imagined community (Anderson 1992) to nearly impossible limits, where fictions of fraternity and horizontal comradeship have never held, strategies that address different scales have an obvious utility. In the decades following independence, white farmers' moral-technocratic articulations have succeeded in perpetuating the idea of the good farmer at certain moments, and have failed to produce their intended effect at others. Drawing from my fieldwork on the eve of the land invasions, between 1999 and 2001—a moment of prolonged uncertainty when farmers still clung to the hope that such articulations might yet yield a future in their favour—the following sections explore the relation between land, morality, and expertise more closely. In order to attend to the 'substance of the social' that simultaneously opens up and constrains possibilities of articulation for white farmers, I turn back to Mlilo in western Zimbabwe.

### **History, Hardship, and Earned Belonging**

At the turn of the millennium, the small farming community of Mlilo was composed of two-dozen extended families, including some that had called this valley home for generations.<sup>7</sup> Following a gradual transition in land use from cattle ranching to wildlife tourism throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Mlilo was at the height of its economic success with a flourishing industry in wildlife tourism. Even as their commercial enterprises prospered, however, their political situation and land tenure became increasingly tenuous. As a result, the articulation of moral belonging was a project that farmers attended to unceasingly (Suzuki 2017). Their dilemma resonated with those of many African whites spanning across the eastern and southern subcontinent. From Kenya and Tanzania to Botswana and South Africa, settlers who chose to stay following independence had to hone and perfect their arguments for belonging once the political tides turned against them (see Rutherford 2001; Steyn 2001; Uusihakala 2008; Hughes 2010; Pilosoff 2012; Schroeder 2012; Gressier 2015; McIntosh 2016). This rhetorical skill was elevated to an art form to smooth over contradictions and assertions often deeply out of alignment with the rest of the world's realities.

As I have argued elsewhere (Suzuki 2017), in order to assert moral claims to their lands, many individuals in Mlilo emphasised struggle and hardship in narrating their life histories. They rose above adverse circumstances, they argued, by virtue of discipline and perseverance. Klaas, an Afrikaans farmer who had grown up in a family of seven children, grumbled to me one afternoon, 'My sons don't know what hard work *is*. I got my first pair of shoes when I was 16 years old, and three of my brothers wore those same shoes before me'. He sat back in his chair, and began telling me the story of his parents, who had a farm in the Orange Free State in South Africa where they grew crops and raised livestock. Klaas's father lost everything in the Great Depression of 1931 and 1932. Taking all of their worldly possessions, the family trekked for seven days to the nearest railway station, where his father got a job working on the railways for £12 a month. They moved into a small cottage and grew cabbages and raised dairy cows and chickens. Klaas recounted how he and his brothers rose at 4 am every morning, without fail, to feed and take care of the farm animals. The family was always poor and survived from month to month on the single small income, but they had plenty to eat from what they harvested. As a teenager, Klaas emigrated to Rhodesia and worked as a mechanic for ten years before he could afford to buy land in Mlilo. 'But I paid for it. No one gave it to me. I saved my money and I paid for it myself. And now they want to take it away from me. I'm asking you, is that fair?' Klaas's account provided testament to individual hardship as he attempted to distance himself from a presumed category of unearned wealth and privilege. To Klaas, the logic of his argument was self-evident based on a worldview in which hard work and individual achievement are sacred, and thus unassailable.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of such narratives as a source of currency for rural white Zimbabweans. These stories relied upon foregrounding individual histories as a basis for earned belonging. Such uses of history appear elsewhere for settlers facing similar dilemmas: Janet McIntosh (2015) suggests that white Kenyans capitalised upon the concept of autochthony to argue that their bloodlines extended back across generations of colonial

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<sup>7</sup> All families in Mlilo were forced to leave their properties under police surveillance in 2002.

settlement in Kenya. From the white Kenyan perspective, this generational time-depth established an entitlement to the land equal to the legitimacy of indigenous claims. In Hurungwe of northern Zimbabwe, on the other hand, Blair Rutherford (2001) illustrates how white commercial farmers offered a repertoire of ‘pioneer stories’ in which they ventured forth into a landscape of ‘wildness’, and through blood, sweat, and toil succeeded in converting the region into agriculturally productive land.

There was a striking similarity in the pioneer stories of white farmers in Mlilo, who routinely recalled their efforts in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to transform the valley into the site of a successful cattle ranching industry. Because of its proximity to Hwange, the country’s largest national park, this region was seen as the most intractable of wild landscapes. Here, wildness took the form of lions, leopards, cheetahs, wild dogs, and hyenas, which posed serious threats for cattle and ran counter to the ‘civilizing project’ as a whole (Mutwira 1989). Narratives of this time were interlaced with the language of hardship, but also with an undercurrent of longing, as men recounted how they spent endless nights guarding their livestock from predators. White Rhodesian nationalism at this time emphasised qualities of ruggedness and resourcefulness, drawn from a particular reimagining of the pioneers who migrated northward from South Africa at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to conquer the wilderness. By blurring these temporalities, such stories asserted entitlement to the land through courage, tenacity, and resourcefulness.

It is significant that land was a constant counterpoint in such narratives, and hard work was framed in relation to transforming the landscape. If these stories resonated with their audiences, they relied upon long and deep ways of seeing. White African literature, for example, conspired to create a ‘dream topography’ (Coeztee 1988) that refigured the landscape as a ‘vast, empty, silent space’, and literally wrote blacks out of history altogether (Hughes 2006, 270). Colonial settlers in South Africa saw an unfamiliar, foreign space and set out to create a place for themselves in the landscape through perception and representation (Dubow 2009). Such cultural appropriations of nature in turn enabled the formation of South African nationhood during the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Foster 2008). In a more contemporary setting, white Batswana in the Okavango hold a ‘collective obsession with the natural environment’, telling jokes and stories of adventure, risk, and encounters with endemic species as a way to perform their connection to place (Gressier 2015, 5). For many white settlers, then, landscape becomes the primary vehicle for defining the self, and the site where the deepest meanings reside.

### **Shadows of Moral Authority**

Beyond invoking connections to the land, farmers in Mlilo used other strategies to construct moral authority within their communities. McIntosh (2015) writes that by articulating affective ties with their domestic staff—relationships characterised by expectations of care for workers and their families—white Kenyans attempted to create networks of ‘kinship’ with the black Kenyans to whom they felt closest. Despite similarities in economic position and racial privilege, her informants saw themselves as morally superior to Euro-American expatriates in Kenya because of the closeness they shared with their workers, as well as

knowledge of their personal lives and needs. Significantly, McIntosh (2015) notes that rarely did domestic workers articulate such affection for their employers; this was typically a one-directionally imagined affective relationship.

Farmers in Mlilo also took an interest in their workers' lives (Suzuki 2017). Charlie, who lived on the southwestern edge of the valley, described how his youngest employee, Jealous, had come to work for him a year and a half ago. When Jealous's mother died in Zambia, his grandmother travelled to Lusaka and brought him home to her village near Mlilo. Charlie admitted that Jealous was by far the 'cleverest' of his workers, quick to learn and immensely skilled with his hands. He explained, however, that one day soon after Jealous began working for him, the sister-in-law of the former traditional chief paid a visit to the house to inform him that Jealous was a 'gangster' who beat up his grandmother. 'So I took the first two pay checks that Jealous made here and gave them to his grandmother directly', Charlie explained. 'I told him it's a fine for beating up his grandmother'. When I asked how Jealous had reacted to this news, Charlie responded, 'He didn't say nothing. He knows that if he complains, he'll lose his job, and he'll be just like those other unemployed guys, wandering around in the communal areas there'.

The actions that Charlie undertook in deciding to 'fine' Jealous for wrongdoings committed in his own home reveal breathtaking presumption on Charlie's part. His approach reproduced colonial patriarchy in assuming the right to dispense justice not only within the boundaries of his own property, but also in a sphere extending well beyond them. In this instance, Charlie most likely believed he was protecting the powerless by compensating Jealous's grandmother for abuse she purportedly suffered at the hands of her grandson. In this way, farmers became participants in complex webs of local moral economies, wielding power by virtue of their economic wealth. Moreover, the most salient point for Charlie in telling this story was his claim that members of the neighbouring black community actually expected and invited these kinds of interventions. While Charlie readily acknowledged that other farmers who were deemed unjust in their practices towards black farmers were subject to censure, he underscored that individuals like himself were recognised as figures of moral authority. Thus, within rural areas, some white farmers acted as ghostly shadows of colonial authority, dispensing alternate forms of justice in their own residual spheres of power. Rutherford locates such practices as a form of 'domestic government', or the 'gendered, raced, and classed configuration of power and hierarchical social relations that promoted the rule of farmers over state officials', and presumed paternalistic ties between white farmers, their employees, and their families (2017, 16).

However carefully constructed and faithfully iterated, claims of entitlement to the land that were based on sacrifice, hard work, and participation within local communities would never fully stand on their own given white farmers' compromised morality. Such articulations therefore had to be augmented by another equally important set of claims: environmental care and expertise.

### **Becoming Conservationist**

For the greater part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mlilo was comprised of vast properties of land devoted to cattle ranching. In the 1970s, however, the valley became the first site in the country to engage in a form of land use known as wildlife production. Throughout the 1980s, they experimented and refined its practice, resulting in a complete transformation through which wildlife came to eclipse cattle as the central form of property and medium of accumulation. By the 1990s, hundreds of tourists, hunters, scientists, and conservationists were traveling to this destination each year, drawn to an economy that revolved principally around wildlife. As wildlife tourism grew to become the second highest foreign income generating industry in the country in the 1990s, farmers embraced wildlife production for the new wealth and visibility it bought to the valley, in contrast to the previous era of cattle ranching in which people struggled simply to break even.

This story has a hidden dimension, however, that involves a necessary reversal in farmers' attitudes toward wildlife. When the community was first founded, farmers lost hundreds of head of cattle each year to predators from Hwange National Park despite their efforts to deter these animals. Moreover, their livestock was equally susceptible to diseases contracted from wild species like buffalo when they shared grazing spaces. Thus, in a process very similar to the one Jane Carruthers (1995) excavates from lesser known histories that preceded the making of Kruger National Park, the first decades of settlement in Mlilo entailed aggressive campaigns of wildlife extermination to eradicate whole categories of predators, as well as grazers that were seen as potential vectors of contagious disease. Just as Transvaal pioneers considered it 'immoral and unpatriotic not to exterminate wildlife' (Carruthers 1995, 11), hatred and suspicion of wildlife became part of farmers' habitus in Mlilo.

With the advent of wildlife production, however, such attitudes had to undergo a dramatic conversion. Wildlife was transformed from a loathsome presence into one that was actively sought on people's properties. Farmers learned to embody a new conservationist identity in which they performed an ethic of care and admiration for animals. As I have shown elsewhere (Suzuki 2001), for most members of the community, the shift to wildlife production came not from an ethical decision, but from a principally economic rationale. As a result, many people continued to feel a deep-seated ambivalence as they gradually came to terms with the changing place of wildlife in their lives. Outwardly, however, a new role in the figure of the conservationist was one that farmers played to convincing effect. The stakes of this transformation became particularly urgent in 1990, once it became clear that for the first time since independence, the security of tenure for white farmers on their own properties had come under serious threat. At this time, farmers began to publicly reframe their economic endeavours in increasingly apolitical and moral terms. In short, it served their interests to reinvent themselves as long-standing and dedicated environmentalists working both for nature and nation.

A recurrent theme among farmers highlighted what they saw as the state's failures in order to amplify their own articulated commitment to conservation. Many individuals recounted how, when the Hwange National Park administration ran out of funding in 1992 during one of the worst droughts of the century, they worked tirelessly to maintain their water pans even when

every single source of water in Hwange had dried up. Farmers held that during those months, thousands of animals made their way into Mlilo from the national park to find water, and the national park's wildlife would have perished had it not been for their hard work. By playing up their own role in conservation, farmers strategically portrayed themselves as working in the interest of the animals that fell victim to an ineffectual state. Cataloguing and reciting the state's failures thus became a key component in constructing their own moral authority. If farmers were able to reinvent their public faces with relative ease despite their private ambivalence about wildlife, it was largely because of the citationality of narratives from the past (Braun 2003). While the form of ranching may have changed, in local worldviews, the successful management of wildlife was equally predicated on the ability to discipline and control nature. Ideas of maintaining and managing nature have long been associated with values such as wisdom, knowledge, industry, and God-like authority (Thomas 1983). Thus, the moralising position farmers assumed was a comfortably familiar one. Given this symmetry, it was simple for them to cast aside the original economic logic of wildlife production and step into a familiar narrative that provided testament to the superior morality of whites.

Because they aligned with global conservation paradigms, white farmers' moral claims frequently had the effect of eclipsing other ontological worldviews in relation to land and place. It is important to recognise such alternative frameworks, however, to reveal what white narratives erased. In contrast to relationships with nature based on the logic of discipline and management, Clapperton Mavhunga describes moral connections between indigenous people and environment in Zimbabwe as arising from what he terms an 'African epistemology of nature' (2014). For the Shona, the most senior ancestral spirit, or *mhondoro*, governed both human and animal realms, and took the form of a lion. Thus, to encounter a real lion was to encounter the clan spirit (Mavhunga 2014). Such intimate connections were illegible from the view of Western understandings of nature, and thus were made invisible. Recognising such frameworks based on alternative epistemologies of nature enables us to push back against the monopoly that dominant discourses such as those circulated by white farmers typically hold.

### **Expert Belonging**

To secure the moral argument, white farmers mobilised their ultimate weapon: claims of expert knowledge. As previously mentioned, when Zimbabwe won its independence in 1980, the new government guaranteed the security of white property for a ten-year period. This law, which was packaged neatly under the ideology of national reconciliation, belied the stark reality of the country's dependence on white Rhodesian expertise in commercial agriculture. Despite serving as a constant reminder of the colonial past for the newly fledged nation-state, the continued presence of white Rhodesians was necessary because they held a monopoly over expert knowledge that formerly was ensured through systematic racial discrimination in terms of education, technical training, and opportunities for skilled employment.

In the agrarian sector, this expertise ranged from procuring maximum output from tobacco crops to engineering the very topography of the landscape itself. David Hughes (2006) describes the work of farmers in Zimbabwe who effected a 'hydrological revolution' through

the creation of dams and large-scale, mechanised irrigation on their properties. They embraced dams as an unparalleled agricultural improvement that was seen to enhance natural waterways, rather than destroy local ecosystems. Dams and reservoirs conveniently demonstrated the efficacy of white landownership and functioned as a powerful symbol of farmers' technical mastery and productivity. The brilliance of dams, therefore, was that they 'not only legitimated [whites'] discredited minority but also admitted it into the moral center of Zimbabwe' (Hughes 2006, 283).

In Mlilo, where wildlife was the key resource to be multiplied and replenished, this expert knowledge took various forms, including importing animals from auctions in Zimbabwe and South Africa, quarantining them before release, growing different types of vegetation to entice animals to stay on one's property, repairing borehole engines, clearing poisonous plants, tracking wildlife and knowing their patterns of movement, determining the optimum balance of sustainable numbers and species, and maintaining dirt roads to ensure smooth passage for safari vehicles. In short, successful wildlife production required constant surveillance, attention to detail as well as a bird's eye view, and the ability to plan long term for species types and numbers to maximise, but not exceed, the sustainability threshold of a property's ecosystem. Under the bureaucratic structure of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management, moreover, wildlife producers in Mlilo were enrolled as 'stakeholders' and partners in conservation. Many international donor agencies would not agree to release funding aid for Hwange National Park without the assurance of participation by these stakeholders. In farmers' eyes, such measures legitimised their position as experts and recognised their role in safeguarding sustainability and conservation efforts.

Following the eviction of Mlilo's farmers in 2002, the ruling party's political and military leaders seized the most lucrative properties in the valley and began running safari operations of their own. Similar transformations occurred in the handful of wildlife production areas throughout the country. News eventually surfaced that the number of animals being sold to hunting clients under these new owners significantly surpassed previous quotas, and charges of environmental *irresponsibility* and *absence* of expertise were reported by the media.<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy that these critiques were voiced not only by exiled white farmers, but also by President Mugabe himself. He reprimanded army generals who had taken over properties in southeastern Zimbabwe for 'double-dipping' when they already had multiple farms in other parts of the country.<sup>9</sup> The Department of National Parks refused to issue hunting quotas to them, and the ruling party politburo directed twenty-five of the party's top-ranking officials to surrender their newly acquired properties. In this case, the perceived lack of morality on the part of elite black farmers who were seen as acting out of self-interest rather than for the nation threatened to derail the moral project of land redistribution as a whole. Whereas white farmers' claims to sustainability had once carried weight, black farmers' motives were regarded with suspicion, and thus the imagined opposition between the two appeared once again.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Mugabe blasts army generals'. September 21, 2012. *Zimbabwe Independent*.

<sup>9</sup> This came as a surprise to many because Mugabe had long been a proponent for the 'indigenization' of the wildlife sector, which entailed the transfer of wildlife resources into black ownership.

How does an argument based on environmental sustainability and expert knowledge work to reinforce the claims of white settlers, even when their presence is deeply objectionable? By invoking the language of expertise, white farmers attempted to escape the political. Peter Brosius (1999) illustrates such processes of depoliticisation in his discussion of the Eastern Penan anti-logging campaign in Malaysia. Countering the critiques of environmentalists from the Global North who rallied to support Eastern Penan anti-logging protests in Sarawak, the Malaysian government developed its own rhetoric of sustainable forest management and succeeded in promoting a more positive, responsible image for the country without scaling back on its logging industry. This shifted the contours of the debate to a focus on the technocratic apparatus that promised to ensure sustainable timber extraction. The charged moral debates over the fate of the Eastern Penan people dissipated and eventually disappeared altogether. Regimes of environmental governance thus ‘insinuate and naturalise a discourse that excludes moral or political imperatives in favor of...technoscientific forms of institutionally created and validated intervention’ (Brosius 1999, 38). Such technocratic discourses have a decontextualizing, depoliticising effect that parallels the ‘anti-politics machine’ identified by James Ferguson (1994) in the development industry in Lesotho.

My argument builds on Brosius’s analysis but also departs from it. The situation in Zimbabwe differs from the depoliticisation of a transnational project such as the one between Northern environmentalists and Eastern Penan hunter-gatherers, because of the settler racial context *within* the boundaries of the postcolony. White farmers in Zimbabwe shifted the debate surrounding their citizenship and belonging from the political terrain, where their morality was seen as inherently problematic, to the technocratic domain by invoking the language of expertise. Moral discourses based on intensely localized understandings of place fail to attach correctly at the national level. To overcome this problem of the local, farmers scaled up to the technical, thus transcending locality. Framed as rational, economically sound, long-term decision-making, the argument for expert belonging has the potential to drain complicated moral and political debates of their power. In the Zimbabwean context, farmers argued that they should be permitted inclusion in the nation-state because their economic productivity and sustainability were ostensibly beyond question. In their minds, this argument was a convincing one because of the historically embedded meanings of whiteness that gave such articulations their potency.

### **Articulating Whiteness**

In July 2015, the Zimbabwean state announced a new development in its land policies: provincial leaders were charged with identifying white farmers who should be allowed to remain on their properties with legal tenure based on their ‘strategic economic importance’.<sup>10</sup> Individual farmers who were seen as holding the greatest expertise and were poised to make the most significant contributions to restoring Zimbabwe’s economy would be awarded this privilege. This change came only twelve months after Mugabe had decreed that whites would never be permitted to own land in Zimbabwe again, and that the few remaining farmers must

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Zimbabwe to hand back land to some white farmers’. July 13, 2015. *The Telegraph*; ‘Crisis’ hit Zimbabwe wants white farmers back’. July 16, 2015. *News 24*.

leave the country immediately.<sup>11</sup> Even more surprising was Minister of Finance Patrick Chinamasa's announcement that a new initiative to compensate white farmers who had lost their properties during the land reform program was under consideration. According to Chinamasa, it was the country's 'obligation under the constitution of Zimbabwe' to compensate white farmers, and these payments would be funded by charging indigenous farmers who had benefited from the land seizures a small rental fee per acre for their new farms.<sup>12</sup>

It is noteworthy that the government did not frame these developments in moral terms, but presented them as economic and constitutional imperatives. In December 2017, however, the new president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, reinstated for the first time the property of a white farmer who had been evicted under the land reform program. This was hailed as symbolic of a new regime distinguished from the past, as revealed in the words of the presidential advisor: 'Land reform is over. Now we want inclusiveness. All citizens who had a claim to land by birthright, we want them to feel they belong and we want them to build a new country because this economy is shattered'.<sup>13</sup> While this position may have indexed a pragmatic realignment on the part of the state, the language is marked by a shift from the economic and legal register to that of nation-building, citizenship, and belonging irrespective of race. Although many observers are sceptical of Mnangagwa's capacity to effect true change, these developments also point to a degree of success on the part of white Zimbabweans in projecting themselves as skilled farmers with expertise that promises to transcend politics and restore order to the rural economy.

As this article has demonstrated, such success was possible because white Zimbabweans struck a subtle balance between articulations of moral virtue and claims of technocratic expertise. This reproduced an enduring image of the good farmer whose claims to belonging were derived not from the politically fraught terrain of race and citizenship, but from an emphasis on individual achievement and rugged perseverance in the absence of social and historical context. In Mlilo, people told stories of courage and conquest, of combating wild predators and taming wild landscapes. Wealth and class mobility were earned as opposed to inherited on the basis of skin colour. In white farmers' eyes, local black communities recognised them as figures of authority and respect by drawing them into webs of local moral economy. When wildlife conservation and ecotourism became ascendant in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, moreover, farmers reinvented themselves as conservationists who embodied unwavering commitment to protecting the region's wildlife species. In conjunction with such moral discourses, white Zimbabweans were equally adept at promoting their skill and knowledge in environmental management. By highlighting the scientific and technical aspects of wildlife production, they attempted to forge a role for themselves as indispensable experts within the nation, in order to evacuate the stigma of whiteness.

By focusing on such articulations during the period immediately preceding land reform in Zimbabwe, I suggest that white farmers in Mlilo brought together logics typically imagined

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<sup>11</sup> In 2014, there were approximately 300 white farmers—compared to 6,000 in 1980—who remained in the country. Most had moved to cities, but a small number managed to retain a fraction of their former properties.

<sup>12</sup> 'Zimbabwe to hand back land to some white farmers'. July 13, 2015. *The Telegraph*.

<sup>13</sup> 'New regime in Zimbabwe hands back to land to evicted white farmer'. December 7, 2017. *The Telegraph*.

to be distinct to claim moral belonging while simultaneously obscuring the historical and political factors that threatened to void those same claims. As Victoria Stead and Michèle Dominy note in the introduction to this special issue, ‘moral and political questions are fundamentally entwined’ (2018, page number to be determined). The challenge for white farmers lay in *disaggregating* these entwined questions because one inevitably compromised the other. Farmers thus fled the political and attempted to offset their deficient morality by constructing an expert realm, which enabled a shift to a scale greater than the political. Such moral-technocratic articulations did not translate into white farmers’ ability to stay on their properties against the tide of land reform, but might one day result in their ability to return.

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