

Victimhood for an Audience:
Portrayals of Extra-Lethal Violence and their Utility for Self-Identified Victims

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Abstract:

Under what circumstances do cases of extreme violence become politically useful for self-defined victim populations? Drawing on Fujii's work on extra-lethal violence and utilizing the case of farm murders in South Africa, this paper argues that there is a political utility in violence not only for perpetrating populations, but also for self-identified victims and their sympathizers. Organizations representing those who perceive themselves to be connected to the victims of such violence—white, mostly rural, and largely conservative South Africans—stand to benefit from focusing on the brutality of such violence. Such groups leverage key cases of violence through continual reference to them, to activate threat perceptions among sympathetic audiences. The result is a mosaic of trauma that belies the statistical reality of declining crime rates, relative security of white landowners, and corresponding infrequency of such incidents. These findings have implications for the behaviors of right-wing groups elsewhere, especially around issues of immigration.

A photo of a smiling red-haired toddler, Willemien Potgeiter, was posted on Twitter on 28 March 2018 by Ian Cameron, the head of Community Safety of Afriform.¹ Marked by the hashtag #FarmAttack, the tweet accompanying her picture tells the gruesome story of how she and her parents were killed on their farm outside of Lindley, a small town in the eastern Free State in South Africa “just a few yrs (sic) ago.” Details of her wounds, which were extensive and in excess of simple lethality, are included in the tweet (Cameron, 2018), which refers to the killing of the Potgeiter family in early December 2010. The same incident was referenced in a floor statement during a plenary session of the South African Parliament by P.J. Groenewald, a parliamentarian of the Vryheidsfront Plus (Freedom Front Plus, henceforth VF+), a right-wing Afrikaans party on 14 March 2017 (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2017, p. 8:02). Groenewald characterized the incident as “not normal criminality” saying that the family, and Willemien in particular, had been “tortured to death.” A 2018 book, published by the Deputy CEO of Afriform is dedicated to the memory of Willemien, and includes her picture as well as a detailed recounting of the incident.²

The murders, planned and perpetrated by young, black, SeSotho-speaking men against a white, Afrikaans-speaking, farm-owning family, made front-page news for months in South Africa, in part because of the brutality of the violence inflicted on the family, and the tragic death of two-year-old Willemien. Five of the six defendants were convicted of charges related to the murders in June 2011, while the sixth was convicted on a lesser charge of robbery with

¹ Afriform is a civil rights organization that aims to protect “the rights of minorities” with specific reference to Afrikaners. It was founded in the mid-2000’s and has engaged in campaigns to protect Afrikaans language, property rights, and Afrikaner heritage and has taken the South African government to court over hate speech claims in 2013 (“About: Afriform,” n.d.).

² (Roets, 2018) It also references Ephesians 6:12, which says “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (NIV).

aggravating circumstances (“5 guilty of Lindley farm murder,” 2011). Two of the convicted perpetrators received multiple life sentences, an additional perpetrator received a single life sentence, and the last two were each sentenced to 30 years in prison, while the perpetrator convicted only on robbery charges was sentenced to serve 7 years (SAPA, 2011b). At sentencing, the judge described the murders as “gruesome, barbaric and detestable,” and argued that “the brutality of the attack makes all the mitigating arguments insignificant” when meting out maximum sentences to the perpetrators (SAPA, 2011a).

While the murder of the Potgeiter family is, of course, horrific, there is no clear reason why the event has come up with such frequency in the years since. References in parliament and on Twitter have not corresponded with anniversaries of the incident, or with the conviction of the perpetrators of this violence. These references do not pertain to any ongoing legal battle, or any updates on the case itself. Indeed, the responsibility of the state, in terms of investigation, prosecution, and meting out of punishment, was fulfilled within a year of the violence. Despite the lack of obvious motivation for bringing up the incident, within 24 hours, the March 2018 tweet had been liked 119 times, and re-tweeted 288 times.

Why do such events become a point of continual reference in periods unrelated to their relevance as news stories? Under what conditions do such references retain significance across time, and for what kinds of causes? The answer to these questions lies in the political incentives and opportunities afforded by the emotional draw of such cases, which defines and reifies a sense of victimhood. In the case of the Potgeiter murders, the level of spectacle and brutality involved in the killing is central to explaining the ways the case is invoked, and the causes for which the story is deployed.

The extant literature in Political Science on issues surrounding extra-lethal violence often focuses on the motives of the perpetrators, including in disciplining civilian populations (Kalyvas, 1999), as mass spectacles of violence that bond perpetrators, or as singular display of power (Fujii, 2013). The violence, then has utility for perpetrators not because of its lethality (if the object is to kill), but because it has effects on the behavior of both perpetrators (bonding and empowering) and victims (disciplining and socializing).

What is often missing from such accounts is the ways that self-defined victim populations draw on the extra-lethality of violence in order to achieve their own political ends, like in-group cohesion and constituency engagement. This paper is an attempt to bridge the literatures on both extra-lethal violence and the dynamics of threat perception, both moral and racial, and mobilization in order to understand the ways in which ethno-racial entrepreneurs can utilize incidents of violence to achieve political goals. Using the case of “Farm Murders” in South Africa, this paper argues that while extra-lethal violence may have a disciplining and in-group bonding effect among perpetrating populations, such effects may also be seen in populations who see themselves as targeted by such violence.

The paper will set out to define the utility of extra-lethal violence as a framing device in understanding the phenomenon of farm attacks and farm murders in South Africa. From there, it will examine the debate over how to define farm murders, and to understand their frequency in South Africa, both in terms of crime rates and absolute estimates of crime incidence. This section of the paper will call into question the uniqueness of farm murders in the context of South Africa’s violent crime problems, and suggest that far from being a targeted population, South Africans engaged in farming are, on average, less likely to be targeted than the general population. The next two sections will then examine the utility of threat perception in mobilizing

populations in support of causes. The penultimate section looks at media coverage of farm attacks, both in terms of the coverage related to the crime rate experienced, and in terms of the tone and character of the discussion. In examining the particular cases brought up by key figures speaking about farm violence, like MPs and activists, this section also traces the ways in which the oft-cited cases of farm murders have resulted in swift justice for convicted perpetrators, and questions the further responsibility of the state in these matters. The data being used are somewhat eclectic, and are compiled in an attempt to capture the wide-ranging messaging of these organizations. While these data do not directly measure the perceived threat in the target populations, the surge in support for these organizations, and the temporal correlation between the messaging and the rise in membership and media coverage indicates that these messages are reaching sympathetic audiences. The conclusion suggests that these insights can also be brought to bear on a variety of contemporary cases, such as issues of violence committed by economic migrants and refugees in Europe as well as undocumented immigrants in the US.

Extra-Lethal Violence

Extra-lethal violence, defined by Fujii as “physical acts committed face-to-face that transgress shared norms and beliefs about appropriate treatment of the living as well as the dead,”(2013, p. 411) is politically useful. It helps to bind perpetrating populations through the participation in or observance of transgressive acts while also disciplining victimized populations through fear. This form of violence is used in the context of a variety of different perpetrator-bonding activities, from collective revelry to singular performance. The audience of such violence is invariably both the perpetrator and victim populations, but the performativity is on the side of the perpetrators, and serves to unite them and harden their resolve.

Such violence can involve either physical injury or psychologically injurious activities, like being forced to watch while family members are hurt or killed. The effects of such violence go above and beyond simple lethality, and serve as an extravagant display of power. In bonding perpetrators and disciplining victims, these acts of violation are a multi-faceted performance and resource that can be expressive or instrumental (Fujii, 2013, p. 411).

But violence also has the capacity to serve as a bonding tool for self-identified victims of such acts. Cross-national analysis suggests that victims of crime are often politically mobilized in the wake of their experience (Bateson, 2012), large-scale violence lends itself to in-group cooperation among victims via enhanced norms (Bauer et al., 2016), and that communally-framed violence hardens negative attitudes toward out-groups (Beber, Roessler, & Scacco, 2014). Extra-lethal violence, then, has the capacity to serve many of these same functions, with the added dimension of sensationalizing the victimhood experience. Certainly, the violence perpetrated in the course of attacks on farm owners in South Africa is well-documented, and often focuses on the “brutality” of the crimes, especially when discussed by parties advocating for farmers. News media, both mainstream and partisan, recount the details of extra-lethal violence involved in some of these attacks, including prolonged sexual assault, torture, and post-lethal acts of violence and mutilation inflicted on specific victims (“British expat ‘tortured and killed,’” 2017; Evans, 2017; Saunderson-Meyer, 2017).

Plaasmoorde (Farm Murders): Definitions and Debates

Conceptualizing farm murders as a discrete kind of crime in South Africa is highly contentious. Defined by Human Rights Watch as “assaults and murders of the owners and managers of commercial farms and their families,” farm murders have distinctly racial and class

casts, with the assumed victims of this violence being white and relatively prosperous, while the perpetrators are assumed to be poor, black men (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Often, such attacks are also characterized by extra lethal and indiscriminate violence, particularly against whole families, including women, children and the elderly (Haefele, 1998; Strydom & Schutte, 2005). What remains controversial, however, is the extent to which these attacks represent a unique phenomenon, as violence motivated by racial and class resentments against white landowners, or if they are simply part of the larger environment of violent crime within South Africa (South African Human Rights Commission, 2014).

Crime rates in South Africa have remained remarkably high in comparison to both world averages and Southern African averages at least since the advent of multiracial democracy (Seedat, Van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla, & Ratele, 2009), and likely before that, although apartheid-era statistics are notoriously unreliable (Singh, 2016). Rural areas in South Africa experience at least as much violent crime per capita as urban areas, with the largely rural provinces of the Eastern Cape, Free State, and the Northern Cape reporting crime rates on par with more urban provinces, like Gauteng (Statistics South Africa, 2017b). Some evidence from the Institute for Race Relations points to murder and sexual assault rates actually being higher per capita in rural areas than in urban areas (“Murder rates highest in rural areas,” 2011).³

The perceived threat of crime is also very high, with many South Africans reporting increased subjective feelings of threat from criminal activities in the last five years, even while some areas of violent crime have decreased (Chingwete, 2017; Statistics South Africa, 2017a). Perceived threat from crime has a direct impact on South Africans’ evaluations of their own life

³ In part, the phenomenon of rural crime is made worse because of the inaccessibility of law enforcement personnel in rural areas, the high value of assets, and relative poverty of rural areas (South African Police Service, 2011).

satisfaction, as well as their evaluations of governmental performance and legitimacy (Møller, 2005). Crime statistics, in the context of media coverage of specific crimes, are perceived as collective and individually important, as they “circulate and are mediated...reduc[ing] a mass of faceless incidents, disturbing things that happened elsewhere, into the object of first-person affect: fascination, revulsion, pain”(Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006, p. 211). All citizens are therefore framed as potential victims in the context of perceived rampant crime. Farm murders particularly are a source of discontent with the government and law enforcement for white South Africans (Steyn, 2004, p. 157). For white South Africans especially, the problem of crime is central to the racial othering of the majority population, and further, to the formation and bolstering of racist tropes regarding their own victimhood and purported genocidal campaigns against them (Steyn, 2004; Steyn & Foster, 2008; Verwey & Quayle, 2012).

Racialized rates of crime have fluctuated significantly throughout the last ten years. In the most recent Victims of Crime survey, white-headed households are marginally more likely to experience crime in general—though they experience lower levels of house burglary, assault or robbery—than households headed by other population groups (Statistics South Africa, 2017b). Over time, crime in general disproportionately affects poor, black South Africans, and this bias is magnified when looking at violent crimes (Silber & Geffen, 2009).

Yet, advocates for farmers characterize the phenomenon of farm attacks as a targeted campaign of violence against white landowners, with some going so far as to call these symptomatic of genocide (Steyn, 2004; Verwey & Quayle, 2012). This characterization, of a overall high level of violent crime, in terms of a particularized and racialized threat, are strategic framings of the problem at hand, both rhetorically and statistically. In an October 2017 plenary session of parliament, MPs from the VF+ and other conservative political parties in South Africa

cited statistics which purported to show that farm murders occurred at a rate of 97 per 100,000 people involved in farming, which is almost three times the national average of 34.1 per 100,000 in the total population (Abdulla, 2017). Afriforum, a civil rights organization that engages in activism on behalf of Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, independently released statistics one week later which claimed the rate was 156 commercial farmers killed per 100,000, or 4.5 times the national average (“Farmers 4.5 times more at risk of being murdered – AfriForum,” 2017).

These statistics have been called into question methodologically and substantively, in large part because of the conceptual difficulty of defining the “farm” population, as well as “farm murders” as a class of crime. The definitional flexibility of the targeted population, which could include a population of up to 11 million South Africans living in households involved in agriculture in some way, could indicate a rate as low as 0.4 per 100,000 (Wilkinson, 2017). The same flexibility can be used to frame statistics regarding the crime of “farm attacks.” If all attacks on farm owners and their dependents are compared to specifically house robberies of non-agriculturally associated households, the rate of attacks on farm-owning families is nearly 8 times higher, while if comparing based on specifically on the rates of murder and violent assault, the rate is roughly comparable for commercial farmers and the general population (Cronje, Holborn, & Sethlatswe, 2012).

A 2007 survey of commercial farmers puts the population of South Africa directly involved in commercial farming and those who are residents of commercial farms at 818,503 (Statistics South Africa, 2010; Wilkinson, 2017). If this is considered the “farming population,” then the rate of farm murders falls significantly below the rate for the population as a whole (see

Fig 1). The same disparity holds true for the comparison of farm attacks, and the rate of contact crimes (attempted murder, assault and robbery) in the general population (Fig 2).⁴



Figure 1 - Murder Rates

⁴ Data on farm murders and attacks was not available from state sources in 2007/2008, 2008/2009 or 2009/2010. (Institute for Security Studies, 2013; South African Police Service, 2017, 2018)

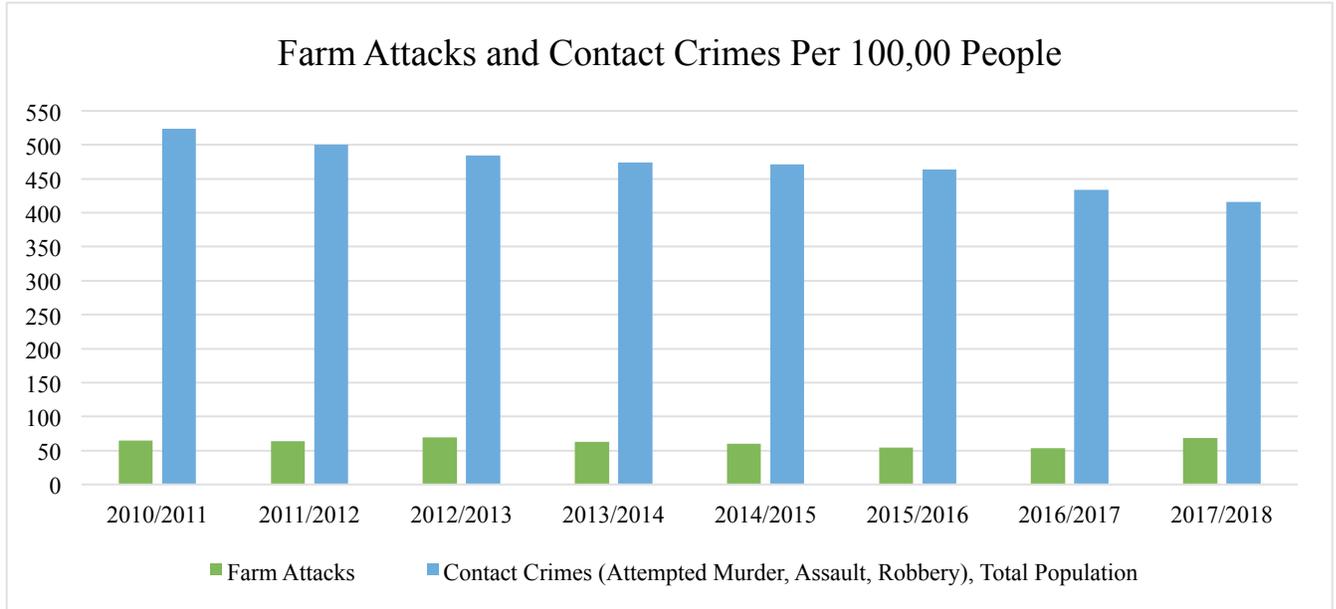


Figure 2 - Farm Attacks and Contact Crimes per 100,000 People

Despite the inconsistencies, the statistical interpretation offered in parliament has been picked up by other right wing activists, groups and political parties in South Africa and abroad, and has coalesced into a “popular narrative that South Africa’s white farming minority is under siege” (Abdulla, 2017). This narrative is amplified by the interconnection of the farming community, and the ways in which the information about the attacks is spread, such that:

As victims speak to other people of the same ethical, religious and political beliefs, feelings of anxiety and fear are projected into the community and leads to a variety of long-term psychological changes and problems for both the primary and secondary victims. In this manner, a number of significant other people are influenced and traumatised by each attack (Strydom & Schutte, 2005, p. 117).

The sharing and multiplication of these accounts of violence, and the framing of these crime statistics is, at least in part, because of the utility of these narratives for the political elites who are actively spreading them. Their emotional resonance, as well as the shocking nature of the violence they purport to represent, is a positive recruitment tool and political resource for groups representing populations that are framed as targets of such actions.

Threat Perception and Identity

Perceived threat of violence is a powerful political motivator. When successfully framed as collective, threat can help to overcome collective action barriers to individual participation in conflict (Shesterinina, 2016). Threat perception can activate pre-dispositions to authoritarianism (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Fordham, 1998), shape policy attitudes toward immigration and foreign policy (McLaren, 2003), and affect media consumers' ability to interpret factual information (Gadarian, 2010). Perceived threat also shapes individuals' perceptions of the passage of time and their understanding of when events occur (Bar-Haim, Kerem, Lamy, & Zakay, 2010; Tipples, 2011).

The emotional content of threat is a unique political phenomenon because it is, by nature, future-oriented and vague. Threat is “what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined...It is not just that it is not: it is not in a way that is never over. We can never be done with it...Threat is not real in spite of its nonexistence. It is superlatively real, because of it” (Massumi, 2010, p. 53). As such, the motivations to action that are galvanized by this affective political orientation are durable, multi-faceted and emotional (Eriksen, 2002). The messaging around violence against white farmers in South Africa seems to hit at the nexus of a number of different potential kinds of threats that are both politically salient and mobilizing. Entrepreneurs are articulating threats to morality and racial purity through the strategic reframing of (often) materially-motivated and widespread violent crime into a targeted, ideologically-motivated series of attacks on white farmers.

The moral foundations of conservatism have been the source of significant scholarly debate, but a diverse array of scholarship—experimental, survey-based and observational—has

emerged which argues that conservative and right-leaning voters draw from different information than their left-leaning counterparts in making political decisions. Whether it is in deference to implicitly valuable hierarchy, as with Lakoff's work on moral politics (2010), or because of a variety of moral emotions around ingroup loyalty, purity, and respect, as in Haidt and Graham's work on moral emotions (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt, Graham, & Joseph, 2009), conservative audiences seem to be uniquely attuned to violations of these codes. In the case of farm murders, which are often framed in terms of families of victims, especially with regard to women and children as victims, and involve power imbalances between employers and employees, the moral implications of this violence are manifold for conservative audiences. Feelings of disgust intensify moral and political judgements for these same audiences (Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, & Haidt, 2012; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). The extra-lethality of the violence, as depicted and referenced by these leaders, falls at the nexus of disgust, morality, authority-deference, and purity, and as such is uniquely threatening to the largely conservative audiences of white, Afrikaans-speakers who are the intended audience.

The invocation of ingroup loyalty is especially powerful in the case of farm violence in South Africa because of the racial dynamics of the crimes. Many schools of social psychology also recognize the ways that threat can activate social identities and foster in-group cohesion. Threat can give rise also to group identities and out-group hostility, especially in contexts of survival threats (Brewer, 2007), and group defense is often a key factor in articulating group identity (Brewer & Caporeal, 2006). Whether the threat is material or symbolic, it can serve to bind a community together (Stephan & Stephan, 2017). The unique claims of race, imbued with hierarchy and superiority, make ingroup claims of threat particularly salient to powerful groups (Fredrickson, 2015). The focus on the "barbarism" and "inhumanity" of the violence (two terms

that come up often in the description of key cases) resonates powerfully both as a moral call, but also as a dog whistle advancing notions of racial superiority and group position. The uniqueness of the power-relations between relatively powerful (in terms of class and racial status) victim populations and perpetrators also amplifies the salience of in-group messaging, both material and symbolic (Scheepers, Spears, Doosje, & Manstead, 2006). The audiences who have latched on to this message, both in South Africa and around the world, attest to the success of such signaling.

The focus on white, land-owning, commercial farmers, as victims of a unique kind of crime is the result of a concerted campaign by white South African advocacy groups (Gedye, 2018). This narrative, originating in South Africa, has spread to right-wing opinion shapers and their audiences in Australia (Goldman, 2018), the UK (Wilson, 2018), and the US (de Greef & Karasz, 2018), as well as throughout Western Europe. No less than three documentaries have been released in 2018 alone about the issue of farm violence, and all feature representatives from either the Suidlanders, Afriforum or both. The documentaries produced by Canadian (Lauren Southern, 2018), Swedish (Palaestra Media, 2018), and British (Rebel Media, 2018) alt-right media have garnered thousands of dollars in crowd-funding, and millions of views on video sharing platforms, like YouTube and Vimeo. Representatives of activist groups from South Africa have been interviewed on a variety of right-leaning and alt-right outlets, including InfoWars, Breitbart News, and the American Renaissance, and the New American. An appearance on US-based FOX News by Afriforum representatives on the issue of violence against white farmers resulted in President Trump tweeting his support for the cause (Stanley-Becker, 2018). The similarities between the social and political contexts in which this narrative has taken root are striking. In all of these cases, dominant white racial audiences are mobilizing

around stories of violence against perceived members of their group, as a way to protect their racial status.

The translation of relatively rare violence into a campaign of identity-driven barbarism heightens the potential perceived threat. By reframing opportunistic criminal activity, these groups make individual farm murders into a larger and more pervasive threat, and particular cases are transmuted from criminality to ethnic targeting (Horowitz, 2001) and nationalist violence (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998). In raising the stakes of individual cases, and drawing on both moral and racial threats, groups promoting the uniqueness of violence against white South African farmers seem to have struck an emotionally resonant chord.

Brutality has an Audience

Extra-lethal violence, as a performative and extravagant form of political behavior, has a potential to activate threat perception not only under conditions of wide-spread violence, but also in relatively isolated incidents. In Fujii's and Kalyvas' formulations of the concept, these episodes of violence are displays of power for consumption of audiences, both perpetrators and victims. The case of the violence against farmers in South Africa demonstrates that the audience for messages about extra-lethal violence can be shaped by those aligned with perpetrators of violence, as well as those aligned with the victims. These messages are selectively amplified by groups claiming victimhood through publicity and recall, and the threat that this violence invokes becomes more pervasive. Indeed, preliminary evidence suggests that the Afrikaans-medium media tend to cover farm violence more frequently and using more extreme terms than English-language media (Jansen, 2017). This media coverage creates a feedback loop, which both reflects

and shapes public opinion on the issue (Scheufele, 1999), and signals both the public and elite importance assigned to relatively rare episodes of violence.

The increased coverage in Afrikaans media over time is not correlated with an increase in the absolute number of farm murders. Between 2013 and 2018, even with a growing population, the absolute number of farm murders declined somewhat. English-language media articles from News24, the largest news conglomerate in South Africa, declined over that same time frame. But in both activist media, specifically the Afriforum-hosted sites of MarulaMedia and AfriforumNuus, and in the Afrikaans press, stories about farm murders became more frequent, even as the incidents themselves did not. At the same time, self-reported membership in Afriforum grew by more than 160% (Fig. 4).

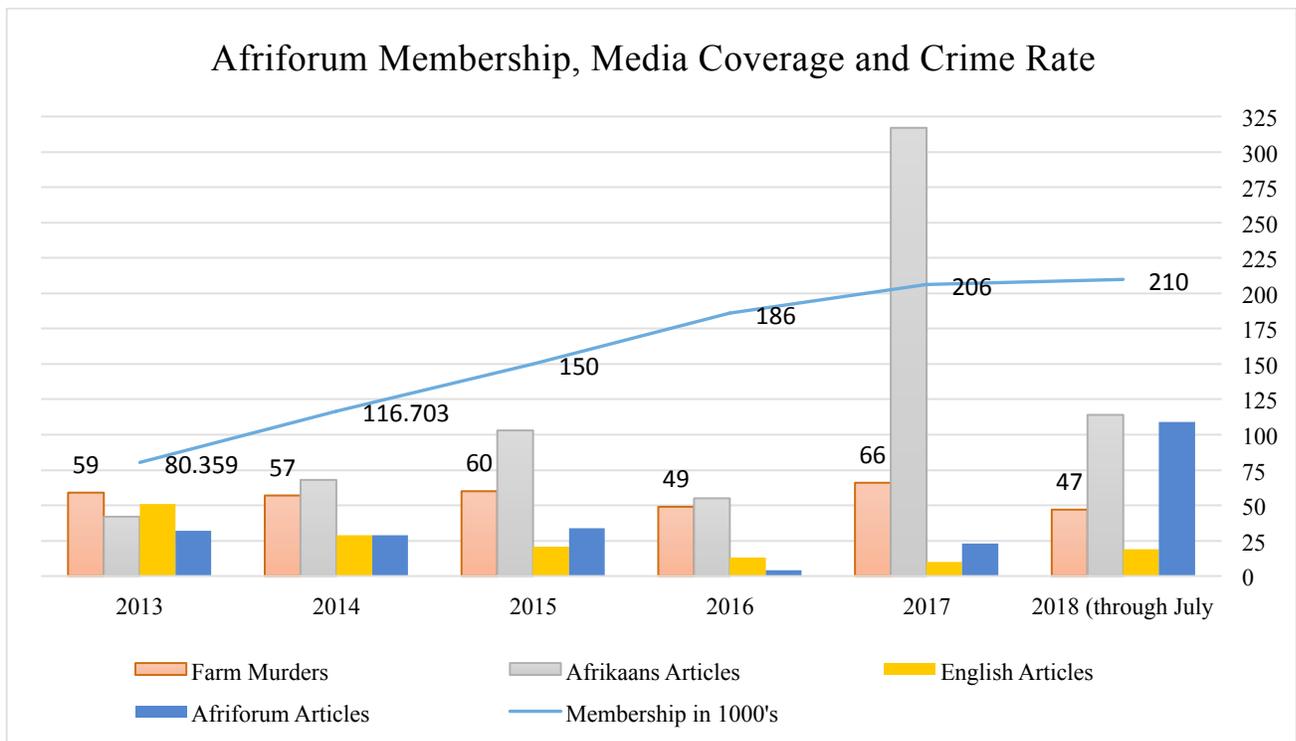


Figure 3 - Media and Membership⁵

⁵ The spike in Afrikaans media mentions of the term “plaasmoorde” came almost entirely from coverage of the November “Black Monday” protests in late October of 2017. The protests,

Sensational Violence and Selective Amplification by Groups

Because the violence itself is sensational, it is more likely to capture the imagination, and the attention, of audiences, through traditional media, social media or word of mouth. In the South African case, we can see that in fact, the activist organizations, like Afriform and the Suidlanders, as well as right-wing political parties, are deeply invested in playing up the extra-lethality of farm violence because of the political utility of activating threat perceptions in terms of mobilizing and engaging potential constituencies. Members of these groups often speak specifically in terms of “brutality” when addressing the need for public attention to be brought to the issue.

In the speech referenced in the introduction, a member of parliament supporting the white right-wing party the Freedom Front Plus, characterized farm murders in a floor speech on the issue by saying

I say that it is not normal criminality if you look at the Lindley farmers, where Wilmiën, a two-year old toddler, a father and a mother were brutally murdered. When asked by state prosecutor Jannie Botha, on his impressions of Potgieter’s body, then the coroner said that the deceased had been tortured to death.⁶ I say it is not normal criminality if you look for instance at the Swanepoel family in...Bloemfontein, where the investigation officer, Kobus Coetzee, told the court that the couple were tied to a single bed and tortured for hours. Then took turns to rape Rienie while her husband was forced to watch.⁷ I say it is not normal criminality if you look for instance at the Schutte family at Richmond, Kwazulu-Natal. It says Mrs. Schutte’s head was crushed with a heavy object, and all three victims were set on fire.⁸ I say it is not normal criminality if you look at Dan Knight, also from Kwazulu-Natal, where it says that his partner Buchner, were attacked in their home by a gang of five men. Knight was beaten to death with

specifically calling for government intervention to prevent farm murders, were held throughout the country and resulted in several major motorways being blocked (Jordaan, 2017).

⁶ Conviction (SAPA, 2011b). This case was also referenced by Afriform in videos.

⁷ Trial (“Murdered farm couple tortured for hours, court hears,” 2015). This case was also referenced by Afriform in videos.

⁸ Guilty Plea (Regchand, 2014). This case was also referenced by Afriform in videos.

hammers while Buchner was forced to watch.⁹ I say it is not normal criminality if you look at the recent case of Nicci Simpson when the perpetrators used a plastic bag, where for instance they cut her arms, broke her ribs, her knee, and even used an electric drill, to drill holes in her feet.¹⁰ That is not normal criminality. I also say it is not normal criminality for instance if you look the farmer murdered near Parys, where the murderers actually took out his testicals, boiled them, cook them and then ate it.¹¹ That is the shocking picture and the inconvenient truth of farm murders. And I say again, it is the inconvenient truth of farm murders. And we cannot continue to do like this, and therefore I ask a moment of silence of all those peoples murdered on our farms (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2017).

The murders referenced by the MP, which took place over the course of more than a decade, all resulted in police investigations and the conviction of perpetrators. A similar tone is struck in the introduction of a book by AfriForum deputy CEO (Roets, 2018), in which there are graphic descriptions of murders spanning 15 years, which include descriptions of torture and killing of white farmers. Again, in each of the cases, there is a documented state response in the form of relatively quick justice being served through trial and punishment of convicted perpetrators.¹² In another report, released in June 2014, Roets and co-author Lorraine Claassen also engage with a variety of case studies of extra-lethal violence, some of which are also referenced in the book and the floor speech (Roets & Claassen, 2014). AfriForum videos in 2018 also reference all of the cases that were included in the MP's speech, often multiple times.

Indeed, this recitation of particular incidents of violence, including the 2010 murder of the Potgeiter family, is central to the strategy of the groups that are amplifying this issue. The

⁹ Conviction (SAPA, 2014). This case was also referenced by AfriForum in videos.

¹⁰ Police Investigation ("Farm attack: Elderly woman tortured with drill," 2017) This case was also referenced by AfriForum in videos.

¹¹ Unsubstantiated claim, but likely this case from 2016, where a farmer claimed to have been attacked, and set off a panic button. His neighbors joined together in a vigilante group who killed two black men in response (Pijoos, 2016).

¹² For Redelinghuys farm murder ("Redelinghuys murder-one suspect caught," 2017), for Grobler farm attack (Wet, 2018), for Erasmus farm attack (Muller, 2017), for Swart/Greyling farm attack (Hlatshwayo, 2005), for van de Heever farm attack ("Tzaneen farm killers get life," 2002), for Cross farm murder (Smillie, 2006).

Word Cloud below (Figure 5), which is compiled from transcriptions all of the videos posted by Afriforum on their own website and their YouTube channel¹³ in 2018, demonstrates how often representatives of the organization drop the names of particular victims.¹⁴ When the word NAME was used in place of an individual victim's given name, it was the 9th most often used word overall. The tweet in March was not an isolated occurrence, but rather part of a grander strategy of constantly re-naming and reminding the audience of the victims of crime in the past, and collapsing the timeline of threat so that the violence is happening always and everywhere. The experience of watching these videos, then, is one in which the names of victims become part of a single, seamless trauma.

¹³ YouTube has become a central part of the dissemination of white nationalist messages across the world (Moser, 2017), and has also been central to public relations of Afriforum and the Suidlanders, especially in the last two years (Bueckert, 2018).

¹⁴ The year 2018 was selected because it is when both international and domestic constituencies seemed to turn their attention to the issue, and when it became central to the platforms of groups like Afriforum, as well as being referenced with greater frequency in parliament.

Leaders of agricultural unions are also quick to point out the idea of brutality when trying to shore up support. The President of the World Organization of Farmers (Wêreldorganisasie vir Boere, WVB), Dr. Theo de Jager, said in an interview in late 2017, just after his tour of the UK for his group,

There is a very clear lack of awareness everywhere in the world about the number of farm murders in our country - especially the number of murders and their brutality...No one has so many farm attacks like South Africa. Not even Zimbabwe. Farmers in the northeastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo are equally nervous about violence. The majority of farmers there are women who are raped when they are attacked, but violence and brutality are not nearly as bad as in South Africa. In other countries, the abduction of humans, farmers' children and young women is predominant, like in Somalia and Nigeria. But again, it's not nearly on the scale of South Africa. The attacks there are mostly in times when political wars prevail. But in South Africa, farmers are attacked and killed in peacetime...All we know is that the brutality of our attacks is abnormal (Toit, 2017).

The tour, which included mentions in *The Daily Mail* and *The Belfast Telegraph*, was meant as a recruiting tool for the organization, which seeks to represent South African farmers' interests worldwide.

Other media produced by activist firms echo the same words and similar tactics, like the fictionalized account of farm murders presented in the film "Treurgrond" or "Land of Sorrow," produced by Valhalla Productions and funded by Afriforum and the Transvaal Agricultural Union, among others ("treurgrond » Sponsors," n.d.). Starring a hard-nosed female detective who specializes in investigating farm murders, the movie depicts life in an ideal rural area, with a farmer and his wife living on a prosperous and socially responsible farm. In training her assistant, the lead detective on a case of a farm murder at the outset of the film says:

What really gets me is how they always find more gruesome ways every time to commit these murders. What happened to a good old-fashioned stabbing or single gunshot? No, they have to torture the people. The bastards think they are very creative...I have seen 30 farm murders this year alone, Sergeant. We've only reached September now. And this is just in this area. If I had to mourn after every farm murder, I would have been in a mental institution long ago. This is our job.

In another scene, in which the lead detective glibly tells a man she has met at a bar about her profession, she recounts that two community members have been killed, and then without recognizing the horror on her acquaintance's face, continues by saying they were "[murdered] Amongst other things...they were tortured first. Betty's hands were cut off...and her ankles. Have you [ever] seen a body without hands and feet? Quite strange, I must say. Blood everywhere you look. It always amazes me how much blood seeps from a body...blood seeps from a body...almost got my tongue twisted on that one" (Roodt, 2017). This glib reference to the murders portrayed, a staple of the police investigative drama, shows simultaneously the horror and the quotidian nature of the horror through the eyes of a career professional. As such, her account both calmly delivers what the supposedly family-friendly film cannot show, and reinforces the narrative that such things happen constantly.

Yet, as discussed above, the idea that such attacks are as common as this fictionalized account says is largely unsupportable. When they do happen, as is depicted in the film, they are almost always investigated and brought to trial. These trials often result in punishment for convicted perpetrators.

In-Group Support and Resonance of Messages

The success of the approaches taken by these organizations is evident not only at the organizational level, but also in terms of individual support. As discussed above, both Afriforum and the Suidlanders have been featured in right-wing and alt-right news outlets, as well as in documentaries extensively in the course of the last 18 months. The movie *Treurgrond* was quite popular, as the 7th most profitable domestic movie in South Africa for 2015 (Staff, 2016), and winning awards at film festivals in Amsterdam and Milan, in addition to South African film

competitions (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). Their social media support, in terms of subscribers and views on YouTube, has also increased by substantial measures in the last 18 months: nearly doubling for Afriforum, and growing by more than 800% for the Suidlanders channel, according to tracking service SocialBlade. These views, of both fictional and promotional materials suggest that the messages of these groups are being viewed, by both paying and non-paying audiences, in large numbers.

The paid membership numbers of each of these groups have grown substantially, with Afriforum's self-reported membership growing by 40% between 2015 and 2018 ("AfriForum now 210 000 members strong," 2018; "Project 200,000," n.d.). With reported membership of 210,000 as of July 2018, membership in the group is now equivalent to about 5% of the total white population of South Africa, or 8% of the white, Afrikaans-speaking population. Self-reported membership numbers for the Suidlanders put their membership at 130,000 (Pretoria News, 2018), or almost 3% of the total white population, or about 5% of the total white, Afrikaans-speaking population. The fact that their numbers have grown substantially, even in the face of declining incidences of rural violence, suggests that significant proportions of their target audiences are receiving and approving of the messages that they are disseminating.

Aside from passive support through media consumption, groups have mobilized supporters into protests around South Africa. Afriforum-supported protests on the issue of farm murders, like the Black Monday protests in October 2017, have drawn thousands into the streets (Jordaan, 2017). While certainly not representative of the totality of white, Afrikaans-speakers, these groups do command substantial loyalties in such communities and claim, in many ways, to speak on behalf of the whole (van der Westhuizen, 2018).

There is also individual evidence to support the idea that these groups are gaining traction and inspiring support, especially within the Afrikaans community. In interviews conducted by the author in 2013 in South Africa,¹⁵ the loyalties of many in the Afrikaans-speaking community to groups like Suidlanders and Afriforum were already evident. In response to the question “Who speaks on your behalf in politics?” many Afrikaans-speakers, from across the political spectrum, noted that it was Afriforum’s role in bringing to light the issue of farm murders that made them feel represented in the public sphere. One middle-aged woman, when asked the question responded that while she votes for center-right political parties, Afriforum is the group that really represents her interests “...Especially with the farmers and the brutality that is going on there. They stand up for those things. It is important for our community.” Another, middle-aged man responded that he eschews politics all together,¹⁶ but that “Afriforum is fighting for the rights of Afrikaners... I support them, fully. They are fighting for all underdogs. They fight for everyone who is overlooked, like farmers.” In a different interview, a young women also brought up feeling represented by Afriforum, especially as related to farm attacks, by saying,

I do not know if you know about all the farm murders that are going around. You hear about one every week, almost...I drive by the lampposts in the morning with the paper titles, and I see “another farmer murdered” and I can literally feel myself tense up because I wonder “When is it going to be my family?”...if you read a bit deeper about farm murders, you will see that it is the worst murders in the country as well. They do not just kill them. They torture them to death. They burn their eyes out. It is so horrible what they do. So, there must be something else. There is an extra sense of hate that is in those crimes. But someone is standing up for us. Or they are trying.

This young woman, in emphasizing both the prevalence and the violence involved in farm attacks is directly reflecting Afriforum’s strategies and invoking the community in her use of “us” as a victimized community.

¹⁵ As part of a larger, forthcoming project. [REDACTED]

¹⁶ A common response to questions about politics, please see Holmes, “The Politics of ‘Non-Political’ Activism in Democratic South Africa.” for more information.

This combination of sources, which points not directly to the resonance of the threat messaging, but an increase in support and viewership of these organizations messages, when paired with anecdotal evidence, lends credence to the underlying theory. Bucking both the empirical trend of declining crime rates and the demographic reality that farmers are, in most statistical framings, not more likely to be victimized by violent crime than the population as a whole, the strategy of selective recall and emphasis on violence has allowed groups like Afriforum and the Suidlanders to garner support around the issue of farm murders and white victimization in the absence of a verifiable crisis.

Conclusion

The specific details of individual farm murder cases are graphic and shocking. When invoked in a cascade, as activists often do, the torrent of violent images and stories is difficult to process. This emotional overload has been a tactic used by activist groups to evoke threat perception and garner support by emphasizing the extraletality of farm violence in South Africa. The shocking nature of the violence has become the central plank of the international effort by South African groups to publicize their campaign and to portray themselves as victims of unique and pervasive violence. However, both the claim of the uniqueness of the violence and of its pervasiveness are largely unsupportable. Statistically, farming populations in South Africa seem to be largely safer than the population as a whole.

But such strategies are employed in a variety of different contexts. President Trump has repeatedly called for government expenditures, on a “border wall” and other immigration deterrents by invoking the names of particular victims of violent crime perpetrated by undocumented immigrants, as he did in the 2018 State of the Union Address (“State of the

Union,” 2018). These invocations, as with their counterparts in South Africa, while shocking do not seem to be evidence of larger trends, as undocumented immigrants to the US are statistically less likely to commit crime than other population groups (Flagg, 2018; “Illegal Immigration Does Not Increase Violent Crime, 4 Studies Show,” 2018; Ingram, 2018). Similar accusations are made against migrants in Europe in the service of anti-immigration figures from local officials to prime ministers (“Confusion over immigration and crime is roiling European politics,” 2018). This strategy has been particularly electorally successful for right-wing parties, like *Alternative für Deutschland*, who have held rallies in the name of particular victims of crime perpetrated by migrants (“Are migrants driving crime in Germany?,” 2018). The constant flagging of these incidents of violence seems to serve a similar end in all cases: solidifying a base of support through threat perception.

By focusing on sensational cases of violence, even in the absence of evidence that such violence is a trend, the groups advocating this narrative have been able to gain support, even while the crimes they tout are becoming relatively less common. The emotional draw of their victim narrative, contextualized in extra-lethal violence, is a political advantage, and by signaling imminent threat to their domestic and international audiences, they have shaped the conversation around the issue.

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