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Black Belonging, White Belonging: Primitive Accumulation in South Africa's Private Nature Reserves

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Abstract: Evictions have been shown to be a mechanism of primitive accumulation in nature conservation. This paper adds an historical analysis to the discussion on primitive accumulation in conservation by exploring the seemingly innocuous mechanism of White belonging to land in South Africa's private nature reserves. Contemporary articulations of White belonging are replete with stories and images of White male "pioneers" from the colonial era who, upon arrival in "empty lands", were able to create economies out of nothing. Such representations of history on private nature reserve websites and other promotional material invisibilise Black belonging and legitimise private conservation. By illuminating the inconsistencies in the empty lands narrative and the legacies of three championed conservation pioneers from the 19th century, this paper argues that White belonging is a mechanism of primitive accumulation, while Black belonging continues to be expressed in various ways in contemporary South Africa.

Keywords: primitive accumulation, White belonging, Black belonging, conservation, nature reserves, South Africa

Introduction

In Southern Africa, primitive accumulation entailed "the state driven process whereby 'unlimited' supplies of cheap labor for capitalist producers were created through the dispossession of African rural communities" (Arrighi et al. 2010:421). Especially in South Africa, mining and farming have been implicated in the processes that resulted in the expropriation of land from Black communities and the creation of surplus labour (Wolpe 1972). However, as this paper shows, contemporary conservation initiatives such as private nature reserves are reproduced through similar tactics of primitive accumulation. How exactly these mechanisms are reproduced and the implications thereof continues to warrant critical reflection.

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Scholars linking conservation to enclosures of land (Büscher 2009; Kelly 2011; Koot et al. 2022; Lunstrum 2016; Lunstrum and Ybarra 2018; Milgroom and Spierenburg 2008; Neumann 2004; Ramutsindela 2015; Wieckardt et al. 2020) have demonstrated that conservation reproduces private forms of property that reinforce primitive accumulation. Furthermore, evictions (DeMotts 2017; Sinthumule 2008) and lack of transparency and legitimacy have been implicated in primitive accumulation (Kicheleri et al. 2021). These processes are captured by Kelly (2011) who explores the mechanisms of primitive accumulation that have been central in the creation of protected areas. She argues that "the creation and maintenance of these areas is a violent, ongoing process that changes not only economic relations, but social and environmental relations as well" (Kelly 2011:684). Building on the literatures that explore evictions in conservations areas (Ramutsindela 2002; Sinthumule 2018), we contribute new insights from private nature reserves in the South African Lowveld (see Figure 1), where we show how contemporary articulations of White belonging, and the "invisibilisation" of Black histories and belonging (see also Dlamini 2020) in these articulations, perpetuate and intensify primitive accumulation.

We add an historical analysis to the production of conservation spaces by exploring a more muted, seemingly innocuous mechanism of primitive accumulation, namely belonging. While primitive accumulation is an ongoing process of *separating* the producer from the means of subsistence (De Angelis 2001), belonging "is

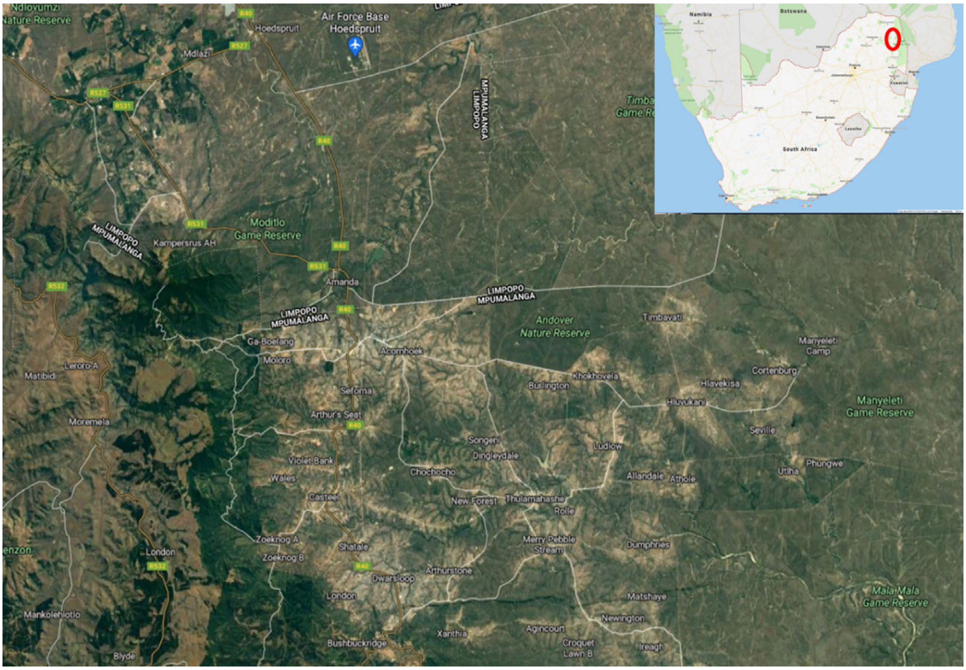
Ndlovumzi Nature Reserve
Hoedspruit
Air Force Base Hoedspruit
Mdlazi
MPUMALANGA LIMPOPO
Timbavati Game Reserve
Namibia
Botswana
Eswatini
Lesotho
South Africa
Moditlo Game Reserve
Kampersrus AH
LIMPOPO MPUMALANGA
Amanda
Andover Nature Reserve
Timbavati
Manyeleti Camp
Ga-Boelang
Moloro
Acornhoek
Matibidi
Leroro-A
Khokhovela
Cortenburg
Hlavekisa
Buslington
Seloma
Hluvukani
Manyeleti Game Reserve
Moremela
Arthur's Seat
Songeni
Dingleydale
Ludlow
Seville
Violet Bank
Chochocho
Utha
Phungwe
Wales
Allandale
Athole
Casteel
New Forest
Thulamahashe
Rolle
Zoeknog A
Zoeknog B
Shatale
Merry Pebble Stream
Dumphries
enzon
London
Dwarsloop
Arthurstone
Mala Mala Game Reserve
Mankolehlotlo
Matshaye
Newington
Agincourt
Xanthia
Bushbuckridge
Croquet Lawn B
Ireagh
Blyde

Figure 1: Map of the Lowveld Hoedspruit (north), Bushbuckridge (south) and Kruger National Park (east) (source: Google Maps) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

about emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home'" (Yuval-Davis 2006:197). By putting primitive accumulation in conversation with belonging, this paper argues that White belonging to land in the Lowveld is one of the mechanisms that maintains the separation of Black people from the means of subsistence. However, Black belonging continues to be reinscribed through archival texts and oral histories.

In the conservation sector, White belonging over land and nature is articulated through historical narratives presented on websites and in annual reports and magazines. This way of articulating history consistently legitimises conservation land use to the detriment of other interests. As Koot et al. (2019:347) note, belonging can be used "in processes of exclusion that are shaped, more often than not, by dynamics of neoliberal capitalism". We recognise the heterogeneity of descent, class and political affiliation of White people which will invariably result in diverse ways of belonging through land and nature. This paper, however, concentrates specifically on White belonging which emerged out of the typical Southern African style "settler farm", where Black people's and White settlers' lives intertwine on the newly surveyed land (Du Toit 1993; Rutherford 2002; Suzman 2000; Sylvain 2001; van Onselen 1990, 1992). The conditions that led to farm occupations and the racialised paternalistic social relations that developed in these spaces gave rise to different experiences and memories that continue to have an effect today beyond farms (Koot 2016; Sylvain 2001).

The paper is based on 18 months of fieldwork conducted by the first author between 2016 and 2019 in South Africa's Lowveld region between Hoedspruit Town and Bushbuckridge (see Figure 1). During this time, she conducted four oral histories and 150 interviews with Mapulana elders, conservation managers, labourers, and government officials. In addition, she collected archival data from the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria and the Moletele Tribal Council. We remain cognisant that data in national archives is not collected or stored by the subjugated group (Nimako and Willemsen 2011). However, correspondence between White farmers and local officials in the early 1900s has proven instrumental in exposing land acquisition processes and the expulsion of Black people. The second author also conducted ethnographic research in the area for five months between September 2015 and September 2019. He conducted 87 semi-structured interviews, mostly in the tourism sector but also with other interviewees active in nature conservation.

Together we collected historical narratives about private nature reserves on their websites[1] and from promotional materials such as magazines.[2] Critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2013; van Dijk 1993) proved important to gain more insights into these narratives. CDA contains an analytical focus "on the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance … by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality" (van Dijk 1993:249–250) and is thus highly relevant in an analysis of a post-apartheid context in which racial and socio-economic inequality still thrive (Alexander 2003; Bond 2014; Mpofu-Walsh 2021).

In what follows, we first discuss belonging as a mechanism of primitive accumulation, after which the paper outlines how private nature reserves present their history on websites and in other promotional material. This history spans the period from the middle of the 19th century through to the end of apartheid in 1994 and is plagued with claims of "empty land" and White male pioneers. Next, we use archival data and life histories to illuminate Black belonging, thereby highlighting the inconsistencies in the empty land narratives that have become normalised in contemporary conservation. In addition, we highlight erasures in the pedestalisation of three conservation heroes to further underscore Black belonging. We conclude by discussing the implications this analysis has for equitable access to land in South Africa.

Primitive Accumulation and Belonging

Primitive accumulation was conceptualised by Marx in response to the ahistorical treatment of capital at the time, which sought to obscure the violence necessary for the transformation of pre-capitalist modes of production (Roberts 2008). It entails "suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative, Indigenous, forms of production and consumption…" (Harvey 2003:145). Furthermore, primitive accumulation denotes an inherently *continuous process* (De Angelis 2001) that is based on privatisation and commodification of land and labour (Moyo et al. 2012). It encloses "land, bodies, social structures, or ideas" (Kelly 2011:685) and is a crucial part of capitalism's expansion (Sassen 2010).

Primitive accumulation thus denotes transformations in the means of production, alienation of labour (De Angelis 2001; Hiraldo 2018), and changes in relations of social reproduction along gender, class, and racial lines (Federici 2004; Roberts 2008). This paper focuses on colonialism's and apartheid's primitive accumulation in the conservation of biodiversity. Along with critical race scholars we recognise that "race is made of the social and political meanings assigned to it" (Gilmore 2008:74). That said, even though biological racial differences are a social construct, race still deeply matters because humans are social beings assigning a large variety of values to race and subsequently acting on these (Gqola 2021). In South Africa, the materiality of race was epitomised by the colonial and apartheid ideology of White supremacy which crafted a society in which people of colour were othered and their humanity was for a large part denied (Mbembe 2017). Under these ideologies, the valuation of people based on racial differences predominantly informed how ownership over and the management of resources such as land, water, and mineral rights were distributed. Thus, "settler colonialism and racial capitalism are co-constitutive of environmental politics" (Van Sant et al. 2021:631).

Commenting on colonialism more broadly, Bhandar (2018:8) notes that "prevailing ideas about racial superiority were forged through nascent capitalist ideologies that rendered race contingent on specific forms of labor and property relations". Similarly, in contemporary societies, race, class, gender, and privatisation are constitutive of each other (Samson 2010). Echoing this, Safransky (2017:1086) suggests that property entails more than putting up fences; it is also "intimately involved in the creation and ordering of racialised bodies, the formation of political subjectivities, our sense of belonging in relationship to one another, and whose lives are valued and whose are not". Thus, property rights over land and wildlife are crucial for understanding how belonging is negotiated.

White belonging in particular, we argue, is crucial for primitive accumulation in South Africa's Lowveld. Here, belonging denotes:

> … to have a sense of connection; it implies familiarity, comfort and ease, alongside feelings of inclusion, acceptance and safety. The way people belong to place is often informed by political strategies, conscious and unconscious, through which access to various rights and resources are sought and contested. (Koot et al. 2019:346)

Notions of belonging often create clear ethnic demarcations between different groups in relation to the defence of land or home, and they can arouse strong emotions and political manipulation (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). It raises questions about who acquires resources, how they are acquired and how this access is maintained. Based on different modes of belonging (e.g. social practices, institutional arrangements, or routinised discourses) people claim resources and rights to become incorporated in a particular geographical and/or social environment in some instances, initiating the separation so crucial in primitive accumulation.

In Southern Africa, belonging has most clearly been articulated in relation to land and the natural environment by Indigenous groups and settlers (Gressier 2015; Hughes 2010; Koot 2015; Koot et al. 2019). These articulations emerge out of a history of colonial dispossession and settlement, making land and nature sites of continued contestations in the region. This historical embedding of belonging in colonialism, culminating in the apartheid regime, make for a clear demarcation between White and Black belonging, although it is important to understand there are many nuances included in these "ideal types". Nonetheless, belonging often proves to have strong racial ties and implications. Belonging is therefore clearly political since it is about collective identities that can be used to exclude others (Gressier 2015; Koot et al. 2019). Hughes (2006) suggests that White belonging is primarily done through empty land narratives that rendered Black people invisible and Whites as conquerors and creators of economies "out of nothing". In contrast to such empty land narratives, Black belonging to land and place has been claimed through traditional authorities, grave sites and old homesteads (e.g. Mujere 2011). In the next section we unpack these dynamics in the Lowveld, South Africa, by paying attention to transformations in land use and the alienation of labour which are central to primitive accumulation and are at the heart of contemporary conservation.

Primitive Conservation

The private nature reserves discussed in this section are located in South Africa's Lowveld (see Figure 1). Collectively, they span approximately 180,000 ha of bushveld (Derham et al. 2016) and they lie close to a small town, Hoedspruit (see Figure 2). Importantly, some share an unfenced border with Kruger National Park and cater mainly for the high-end tourism market. South of these reserves is the Bushbuckridge municipality, which is home to the former Bantustans, areas that were earmarked for exclusive Black occupation during apartheid. To build up to our argument that White belonging to land is a mechanism of primitive accumulation we first outline the historical narratives used by some of these private nature reserves.

Representation of History by Private Nature Reserves (19th Century–1994)

Over 200 early Iron Age sites in South Africa point to a long presence of Black Africans before the advent of colonialism (Cezula and Modise 2020). However, some private nature reserves today continue to elide this history. For instance, according to the Kapama private game reserve Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment:

> [t]he very first official land owner of the farm Hoedspruit was Dawid Johannes Joubert. He arrived in the lowveld in 1844 and settled in the area between the Blyde River and what is now known as the Zandspruit River. In 1848 on the 5th May, he took the opportunity to register the farm for the first time at the land office … (Coetzee 2019:45)

This quote also appears, verbatim, on the official Hoedspruit town page[3] and the Timbavati private nature reserve (Timbavati PNR) states that:

> [h]uman incursion into this part of the Lowveld has always been temporary and brief, from the stone age down to the early 20th century. Large tracts of land in the northern part of the Lowveld were never permanently settled by people. The lands now comprising the Timbavati were barely touched and are still only sparsely inhabited.[4]

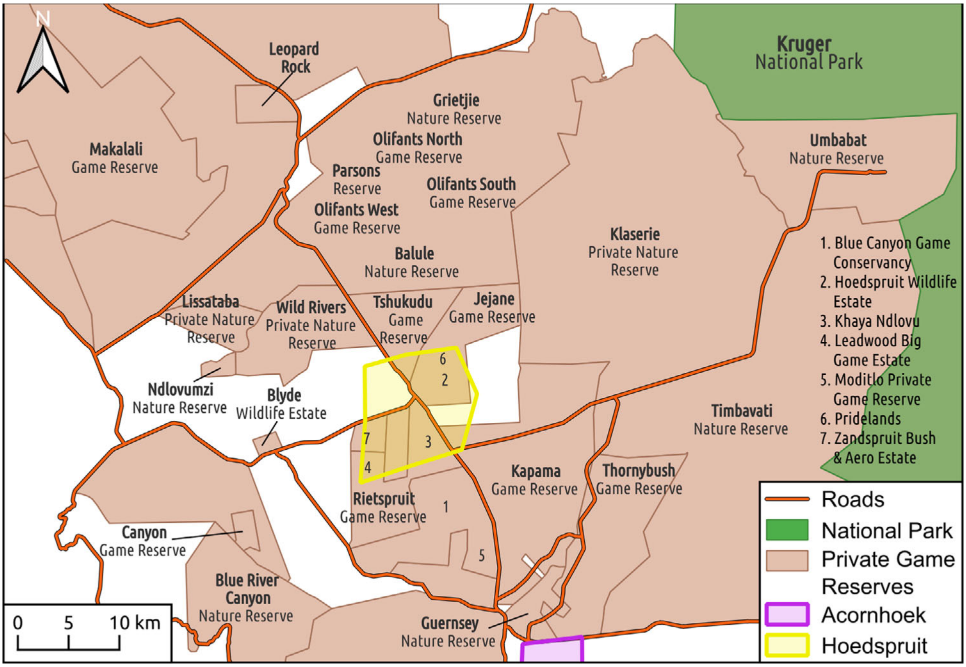
N
Leopard Rock
Kruger National Park
Grietjie Nature Reserve
Olifants North Game Reserve
Makalali Game Reserve
Parsons Reserve
Olifants South Game Reserve
Umbabat Nature Reserve
Olifants West Game Reserve
Balule Nature Reserve
Klaserie Private Nature Reserve
1. Blue Canyon Game Conservancy
2. Hoedspruit Wildlife Estate
3. Khaya Ndlovu
4. Leadwood Big Game Estate
5. Moditlo Private Game Reserve
6. Pridelands
7. Zandspruit Bush & Aero Estate
Lissataba Private Nature Reserve
Wild Rivers Private Nature Reserve
Tshukudu Game Reserve
Jejane Game Reserve
6
2
Ndlovumzi Nature Reserve
Blyde Wildlife Estate
7
3
4
Timbavati Nature Reserve
Kapama Game Reserve
Thornybush Game Reserve
Rietspruit Game Reserve
1
Canyon Game Reserve
5
Blue River Canyon Nature Reserve
Guernsey Nature Reserve
0 5 10 km
Roads
National Park
Private Game Reserves
Acornhoek
Hoedspruit

Figure 2: Map of Hoedspruit and surrounding nature reserves (source: authors) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Likewise, the Klaserie private nature reserve (Klaserie PNR) states that in 1938 when the first hunting camp in present day Klaserie PNR was built "the Bushveld farms had nothing on them".[5] Other reserves in the area, while not evoking notions of emptiness, nonetheless present a "sanitised" history of the region that begins on arbitrary dates. This includes Umbabat private nature reserve (Umbabat PNR) which states that in 1939 a farm was purchased "from South African Townships, Mining and Finance Company" (Umbabat PNR 2019). Similarly, Thornybush game reserve starts its account of history in 1955, when it was "fenced and becomes one of the first private nature reserves in the Greater Kruger Park".[6] Read together, the empty land narratives from multiple private nature reserves offer a coherent master narrative. This master narrative reveals a connection with the land that asserts White belonging in the Lowveld, in the sense that the connection started with White settlers as if there were hardly any Black groups living there. In that way this contemporary use of the empty lands narrative can be regarded as a political claim because belonging can be "mobilized as a key resource in the local politics of place. Claims to belong … are also used to appeal to apparently fundamental and shared place values" (Stratford 2009:797), for example, claims based on values to legitimise and maintain privatised land and wildlife.

This White belonging further pivots on the adventures of "heroic" White pioneers who have played a central role in the preservation of wildlife and the hardships they endured to conquer and transform these empty spaces into world class, nature-based tourism destinations. These "White saviours of nature" (Abidin et al. 2020), often middle-aged men (and sometimes women), are presented to the reader as visionary, innovative, courageous, and adventurous. The first of these "pioneers", who has a strong presence in the contemporary presentation of the region's history is John Edmund Delacoer Travers (1876–1954) who is named by Klaserie PNR as one of the "unknown legends of the Lowveld" in an article with the same title.[7] Travers, born in South Africa to English parents, served in the Steinaecker's Horse, a volunteer unit that operated during the Anglo-Boer War. Later he became an agent of the Transvaal Estates & Development Company, "the single greatest extractor of rent in cash in the eastern Transvaal … most of whose 6,000 shareholders resided in Britain" (Krikler 1990:172). According to the Klaserie PNR, Travers used to collect "rental on a commission basis from Shangaan squatters living on the farms owned by the company … through [his work] he came to know the area and the local people like the back of his hand".[8] In the 1920s, Travers would start citrus and cattle farming on Glenlyden and Madrid farms respectively. Together with his wife he is remembered fondly as hospitable. Travers, in particular, is memorised by the Klaserie PNR as "a lover of animals and a protector of wildlife".[9]

The second and third pioneers are Percy Wood "Pump" Willis (1876–1959) and Ernest Wittingstall (1884–1976), whose histories are strongly interconnected. According to the Klaserie PNR website, Willis "was the first to settle permanently in the Bushbuckridge and Acornhoek area after also serving in the Steinaecker's Horse".[10] Willis and Wittingstall operated under the name Messers Willis & Coy, an agent of the Transvaal Consolidated Land and Exploration Co. Ltd (TCL). TCL was a land and speculation company that owned tracts of land in the Lowveld. It was in the business of surveying farms and setting up new irrigation schemes for White settlers (Mather 1995). As a result of this programme, Willis & Coy owned 18,000 morgen (15,420.6 ha) in the Lowveld and 16 trading posts. According to Klaserie PNR, around 1914 Willis and Whittingstall "used to hunt the whole area to the Olifants River and on ground belonging to the mining concerns. There was no one there, as it was just bare ground, and used to camp on the farms … in the present Klaserie Private Nature Reserve".[11]

The pair are regarded by the Klaserie PNR as "pioneers in the formation of the Klaserie". Moreover:

> … after a life-time of hunting, he [Willis] left his rifle in favour of a camera, eventually to become one of the best known wildlife photographers in South Africa. Some of his photographs are published in Stevenson-Hamilton's [the first warden of Kruger National Park] book: *South African Eden*. He also became a valued honorary Game Ranger, and his opinions on wildlife were greatly respected. He also was able to use his pen in support of Stevenson-Hamilton against the many detractors of fauna and flora preservation, whose attacks never ceased until the Sanctuary was finally declared a National Park in 1926.[12]

These historical narratives about White male pioneers point to how White belonging is *currently* constituted in the Lowveld. That is, by focusing on the conservation exploits of these men and their participation in conservation, contemporary White conservationist normalise their disproportionate hold on land and present conservation as historically ordained.

Overall, the empty lands narratives and the valorisation of White men echo similar observations elsewhere in Africa (Hughes 2006, 2010; Neumann 1998) where land and nature as well as some key figures are central in the construction of White belonging (Gressier 2015; Koot 2015), and Whiteness that reproduces itself through contemporary knowledge and the construction of a particular history (Green et al. 2007). Furthermore, while making a crucial distinction between the marginal land and unused land, Exner et al. (2015) note that the latter has been used to justify conservation areas and ultimately increase state revenue through taxes. This selective use of history and memories resonates with what Fletcher (2012:423) calls "imperialist amnesia", which is:

> … a tendency on the part of "agents of postcolonialism" to either ignore the history of colonial domination in their accounts or to present a sanitised version of colonialism from which evidence of exploitation, persecution, subjugation and genocide has been effectively effaced.

The type of imperialist amnesia evoked by White conservationists in the Lowveld justifies contemporary White land ownership while simultaneously invisibilisng Black belonging and maintaining primitive accumulation. Such selective representations of memory "are frequently called upon to support the specific kind of conquest and domination associated with colonialism" (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004:350). Importantly, long after colonialism, settlers must *keep* asserting their belonging to the land (Hughes 2010), through media such as promotional material, websites, and magazines.

Not So Empty? Illuminating the Separation from the 19th Century

Claims that there was no one in the Lowveld emerged partly from erroneous 19th century maps of Southern Africa which depicted the interior as uninhabited (Etherington 2004, 2011). These maps were used strategically to construct the empty land narrative that was ultimately used to deny Indigenous people land rights (Marks 1980). In addition to the maps, surveyors superimposed the system of the farm onto the landscape, giving little thought to the people who lived in those spaces at the time and naming these lands after European cities and countries (see Table 1). This process fundamentally transformed *naha* (Sepulana[13] for land) into farms. *Naha* had been a place where Mapulana of Chief Moletele Chiloane—after whom the community and the tribal council[14] is named—lived for over 30 years and practised their preferred livelihoods.

Commenting on similar processes, Said (2000:181) argues that colonising agents invented spaces that paid little attention to the "actuality of the geography and its inhabitants". Nonetheless, the Moletele Tribal Council's account of history not only asserts the names Mapulana gave to their land; it also documents the rivers, places and mountains that Mapulana called theirs (Table 1), clearly articulating a long historical connection and belonging to the land. This included *Motsoeding*, now part of the world famous Blyderivierspoort Nature Reserve, which houses the third largest canyon in the world and *Kgapama* which is now part of Kapama private game reserve. Furthermore, in interviews elders often used Sepulana place names to explain their history. The persistence of old names through archival text and life histories can be regarded as articulations of belonging. We begin with the archive.

In their international promotional book published in 1926, the South African Railways and Harbours Administration noted: "often when purchasing a farm a settler will find a certain number of squatters residing on the property acquired … the presence of these squatters will be of great value to the newcomer"

Table 1: List of some of the place names in Sepulana (*currently claimed by the Moletele community under the Restitution of Land Rights Act, Act No. 22 of 1994)[15]

Name of place in Sepulana	Farm name	Present use/location
Motsoeding	Blyderivierspoort 595 KT*	Blyde River Canyon Nature Reserve Aventura Swadini Resort
Matekeng	Glenlyden 424 KT*	Recreational park
Matlebeshane	Bedford 419 KT*	Kampersrus town
Mosehleng	Scotia 248 KT*	Restituted to the Moletele Community
Kgapama	Moria 83 KU*	Portions of which are Kapama game reserve while others are Moditlo wildlife estate
Motsoding	Driehoek 417 KT*	Irrigation farms Tourism resorts
Motlatsedi	Klaserie River	Flows between Thornybush and Kapama Passes through Klaserie nature reserves
Thaba ya Moholoholo	Mariepskop Mountain	Located in the Blyde River Canyon Nature Reserve

(SARHA 1926:88). This scenario unfolded in the Lowveld in 1920, when “European” farmers purchased four adjoining farms for cattle and irrigation farming. In a letter from the Sub-Native Commissioner of Graskop to the Native Commissioner of Lydenburg, dated September 1920,[16] the former communicates the desires of the European farmers. The buyers, one of which was Travers whom we discussed in the previous section, wanted to evict Mapulana because some were elderly and had livestock while many others were regarded as superfluous labour (see Table 2).

Regarding these newly acquired farms (see Figure 3), the Sub-Native Commissioner observed that:

> The Natives affected are ... Bapulana [sic]. They owe tribal allegiance to chief Sitlare and Makgatlishe Alia Mlitele, the latter himself a resident upon Bedford. Since the establishment of the Setlari [sic] and Makgatlishe tribal sections between 30 and 40 years ago the four farms mentioned and surrounding farms have been occupied by the Natives and regarded as their tribal country. There is therefore considerable dissatisfaction that they should now be called upon to remove in view of their having refused to perform farm labour.[17]

Assertions by private nature reserves that the Lowveld was empty and that the lands were barely touched contradicts the statement by the colonial Sub-Native commissioner who explicitly states that the Mapulana people had been living in this area for at least 40 years before the settlers arrived. This statement is essential for dispelling claims by nature reserves that the Lowveld was never occupied permanently. Before these four farms were awarded to the Transvaal Estates & Development Company and later sold to Travers and others, Mapulana people had been able to live free of servitude, ploughing the land and keeping livestock without the imposition of grazing and dipping fees.

As a result of these developments, Mapulana labour tenants’[18] and evictees’ relationships with their land—including all its material endowments that are essential for reproduction—became mediated institutionally by the apartheid state and (mostly) supportive White farmers. Coupled with ploughing and livestock restrictions, labour tenants’ social reproduction was undermined whereas those who were evicted were completely separated from their means of subsistence. These transformations show that the state was central in the orchestration of primitive accumulation in the Lowveld (Wolpe 1972).

Table 2: Demographics of the four farms purchased in 1920 (*currently claimed by the Moletele community)

Farm name	Number of families	Number of cattle	Number of goats and sheep	Purchased by
Madrid 372*	20	150	500	Travers
Glenlyden 371*	70	500	2500	Travers
Eden 370*	50	250	1500	Edgar
Bedford 366*	40	250	1500	Hore, Evans, Burnham

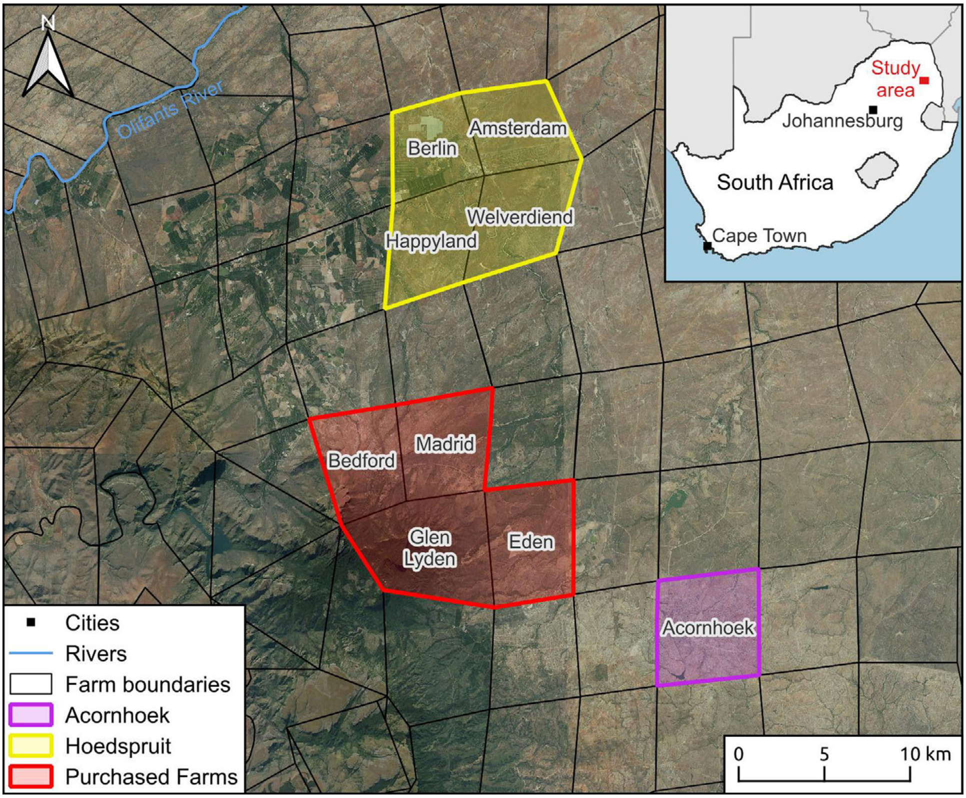
N
Olifants River
Berlin
Amsterdam
Welverdiend
Happyland
Bedford
Madrid
Glen Lyden
Eden
Acornhoek
Study area
Johannesburg
South Africa
Cape Town
Cities
Rivers
Farm boundaries
Acornhoek
Hoedspruit
Purchased Farms
0
5
10 km

Figure 3: Map of purchased farms (red) in relation to Hoedspruit (yellow) and Acornhoek (purple) in the then Pilgrim Rest district (source: authors) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In addition to archival records, oral histories from elders also speak of a historical presence of Mapulana in the Lowveld. While most Mapulana remembered evictions commencing in the 1960s, a few elders had recollection of the early days when the European farmers arrived. For instance, Pule, a Mapulana elder born in 1935 in Bedford (see Figure 3) to parents who had become labour tenants, remembers that:

> … when the White people arrived, my parents said, they were told to stop tending their fields and animals and work on the farm for three months without pay. After working on Bedford for a while I got my *trekpass*[19] and went to seek work in Pretoria. When I returned in 1970, they had moved them to Scotia [adjoining farm]. The headmen told the White farmers that I had run away so they forced me to herd cattle in my suit and tie. I hated it and left for Johannesburg again.[20]

Due to exploitative labour conditions at the farms, fraught with paternalistic social relations, many people, especially men, had to choose between labour tenancy and seeking opportunities elsewhere. However, push factors such as harsh conditions in mining hostels and the pull of family ties on (now) White-owned farms forced men like Pule to return, if only for a little while. Pule finally built his home in Acornhoek but continued to work in Johannesburg. This echoes Hiraldo's (2018) observation that even after initial separation labourers continue to experience alienation as they attempt to secure subsistence in other sectors such as mining. Furthermore, as Pule's case shows, primitive accumulation is spatially nomadic, stalking the labourer from one region and sector to another. Moreover, it demonstrates that belonging for Mapulana is not just about land and resources but entails their attachment to family and community, even as the community was constantly being reconfigured as a result of the evictions.

Expropriation and privatisation of the aforementioned farms transformed the "processes and geographies of social reproduction" (Roberts 2008:544), while reinforcing a gendered and racialised division of labour, an issue we expand on below. Some men could work and live (temporarily) 500 km away in Johannesburg whereas most women were home bound. Moreover, the social reproduction sphere had to expand in order for families to be able to maintain themselves, not to mention the disruption in family and community ties that occurred when others were evicted.

The dominant narratives that purport the Lowveld was empty when men such as Travers arrived also gloss over a history of resistance and defiance against White farmers and the state. For instance, Chief Aneas Chiloane, the chief of Mapulana from the early 1950s, was regarded as troublesome by colonial state commissioners (Ritchken 1995). From his tribal council located on Bedford farm (Niehaus 2002), Aneas "continued to challenge the legitimacy of the White settlers and vehemently opposed their oppressive practices. As a result of his actions, he was resented by many of the White settlers in the area" (Davis 2014:95). A close relative remembers that Aneas was eventually "put in prison because he was defiant, he did not want to move to areas set aside for Black people only, his dream was to move Mapulana back onto their land".[21] After his release from prison, Aneas was eventually murdered, allegedly by a family member, and soon after the last residents of Bedford were evicted.[22] Aneas' defiance, the protests of men like Pule who left the farm and the refusal by some families to be evicted remind us that primitive accumulation is often met with resistance (De Angelis 2001).

Apart from the four farms mentioned above, another well-documented case relates to six farms that were purchased by the Lands Department in the late 1930s.[23] However, there were 2,240 people living on these farms that the Department wanted to lease out to White settlers. The Lands Department noted that, because the soils were not good, the lessee would not need many labourers and therefore recommended for the Mapulana people to be settled elsewhere.[24]

By 1941,[25] 19 families had explicitly refused to move. Matters came to a head when it was revealed that a White farmer had supported the families in their protest against the Native Affairs office. The farm owner, having a large farm, most of which he did not plough, was earning a decent income by collecting grazing and dipping fees from Mapulana, one of whom had at least 100 cattle. This practice of keeping so-called unproductive labour just to collect rent was called "farming natives"[26] which the Land Department shunned because it was considered a waste of productive land (see Mather 1995).

The six farms have since been consolidated into one farm, bearing the name Guernsey 81KU, portions of which are part of today's Kapama and Thornybush nature reserves. Both private reserves were quoted in the previous section espousing the empty land narratives. In 2010 a group of Mapulana lodged a land claim on 65 portions (out of 149 in total) of Guernsey 81KU. Earlier in 2003 they also claimed 78,791 ha of land in the Lowveld (Lahiff et al. 2012), some of these farms have already been restituted to the community (Davis 2014). The claims were lodged under the Restitution of Land Rights Act 1994, which provides previously disposed communities the opportunity to have their lands restored back to them.

These different narratives demonstrate contrasting articulations of White and Black belonging. White belonging to privatised land and nature, expressed through historical narratives discussed in the previous section, ignores the primitive accumulation discussed in this section. Conversely, Black belonging by Mapulana, expressed through their continued use of their place names and their claims on land, subverts the attempted erasure of their historical presence. Furthermore, an intimate knowledge of the landscape including where graves, springs and old battle fields are located prove Mapulana's historical attachment to land. In the next section we explore this Black belonging further.

Conservation Pioneers Alienating Labour

So far we have shown erasures in the empty lands narratives by discussing the separation of Mapulana from their means of subsistence, and the implications thereof. In this section we consider the three conservation pioneers we introduced earlier, by discussing how nature reserves have presented them in relation to archival data and life histories.

Travers

As mentioned earlier, Travers is remembered by the Klaserie PNR as an unknown legend of the Lowveld. As an agent of the Transvaal Estates & Development Company he used to collect rent from "squatters" who were in actual fact Black people who had been stripped of their land (rights) and transformed into rent payers. Much of this rent ended up in the UK where most of the companies' shareholders resided, exposing that Black peoples' "surplus labour, transformed into cash, found its way to Britain [which] is a measure of the ability of even a far-flung bourgeoisie to be predatory upon people far from proletarian in status" (Krikler 1990:174). The spatiality of primitive accumulation suggests that primitive accumulation in one place can set the stage for accumulation in another region (De Angelis 2001), such that livelihood restrictions on newly White-owned farms and the imposition of renting and dipping fees facilitated the accumulation of capital in mining towns and on commercial farms.

In 1920 Travers purchased two farms, Glenlyden and Madrid (see Table 1), where he farmed citrus and bred cattle. These farms had 90 Mapulana families living on them and more than 3,500 livestock. Correspondence between Travers and the Native Commissioner[27] reveals that, while Travers wanted some labour to work on his farm, he also wanted the rest to be evicted unless they would pay rent. However, Travers noted that it would be unjust to evict elderly people because they had livestock and could not be used for labour. He thus proposed retaining them on a rent paying basis. In the end, some Mapulana were retained on Glenlyden and Madrid[28] as labour tenants, others were evicted, and again others stayed on rent-paying terms.[29] The labour tenants' terms of employment were three months of work in exchange for lodging. Thus, while remembered as a legend and lover of animals by one of the most renowned private nature reserves in the Lowveld, Travers was also central in the eviction of Mapulana, the exploitation and alienation of their labour, and the implementation of a highly exploitative rent system. According to Ritchken (1995), Travers was able to persuade the Moletele chieftainship to accede to labour tenancy because the latter did not want his people to lose the connection with their ancestral land. Such alliances between private property landlords and chiefs were common practice, because the chiefs—in exchange for their subjects' labour—were allowed to allocate land and preside over judicial cases (Ritchken 1995). This relationship enabled chiefs to continue to rule their people, albeit with major restrictions, while White farmers were guaranteed a labour force. When tensions arose in the 1960s, a close relative remembers how chief Aneas threatened to leave the farms and take everyone along,[30] which would have seriously disrupted the farm's economy.

The Moletele Tribal Council's account of this period states that Travers put "men and widows and unmarried women to work on Glenlyden without pay".[31] Furthermore, "all men, women, young girls and boys (upon their graduation from initiation schools) were taken to the farm of Mr Travers to provide free labour" (Moletele Communal Property Association, cited in Davis 2014:93). Modise remembers that "if they found that you are going to school, they would kick you out. There used to be a school, they razed it down".[32] The school in question was probably a Swiss mission school on an adjoining farm. It was allegedly destroyed because it kept children away from working on the farms. The privatisation of land and Travers' control over Black lives extended beyond the production "sphere"; by keeping Mapulana children out of school he secured the next generation of workers with nothing but their labour power to sell.

Travers' collection of red duiker (a small antelope), purported to have been the largest outside of the Kruger National Park,[33] might be highly pedestalised by contemporary conservation lovers, but such achievements do not absolve him from the fact that he operated his farm in slave-like conditions by forcing Black men and women into labour while collecting rent from others and denying children a decent education in order to exploit their labour. This reveals a commercial agricultural economy that marked Black people, including children, as exploitable, and that "the violence of abstraction that transformed land more fully into a commodity over the course of a long transition ... has a counterpart in racial thinking that figured entire populations in a hierarchy of value with Whiteness at its apex" (Bhandar 2018:8). From this we can deduce that Travers' current pedestalisation in conservation allows White conservationists to legitimise their connection to land and wildlife by writing out of history the violence he meted against Black people. Contemporary White belonging thus seems to exclude colonial and apartheid histories while disregarding Black belonging. Of course, it is possible that contemporary Whites who articulate such narratives simply do not, or marginally, know about Black ways to belong to the land. As we suggested above, the politics of belonging happens consciously and unconsciously.

Willis & Coy

This exclusion of violent histories and Black belonging through articulations of White belonging, is also visible in the case of Percy Willis and Ernest Wittingstall who are, just as Travers, celebrated as pioneers of nature conservation. The pair operated under the name Willis & Coy. In 1927, the government transferred 11 farms to the Transvaal Consolidated Land and Exploration Co. Ltd (TCL) in exchange for farms in present day Kruger National Park[34] (see also Ramutsindela 2002). Of the 11 farms, ten were located within the released area for exclusive Black occupation. In addition to this, TCL acquired nine more farms from the Acornhoek Cotton Syndicate, including present day Acornhoek. As agents of TCL, Willis & Coy, were awarded all these farms, some of which had Black people living on them. They wanted to continue collecting rent on commission:

> … at a rate of 2 pounds per annum per adult native with one wife, 10/- [0.5 pound] per annum for each additional wife. 1 per annum for each unmarried male adult, and 1 pound per annum for every unattached widow. With grazing fee per annum of 3/-, 1/- and 6d [penny] in respect of large, medium, and small stock.[35]

"Farming natives" was a lucrative business that enabled agents of TCL and others (e.g. Travers) to collect rent and gain access to labour. Consequently, these organisations would accommodate evicted people on some of their farms, charge them rent while simultaneously using their free labour on their other productive farms. Just like on Travers' farms, people who were considered useless were summarily evicted. Willis and Wittingstall were in a good position because not only could they sell farms to others, but they were also farmers themselves which gave them access to copious amounts of Black labour. According to the Klaserie PNR, they used to farm with cattle, citrus, cotton, and tobacco.[36]

Living conditions on TCL farms were difficult. The Secretary of Native Affairs himself noted that TCL's terms of residence were more onerous than those charged by the state. To put it into perspective, TCL charged two pounds for one adult male and a wife excluding grazing fees, while the state charged 30 shillings for a male including grazing rights for ten large and 20 small mammals. The only way Mapulana could afford these newly imposed fees was by participating in the economy as labourers. In addition to expensive rents, as more people were being evicted to make space for aspiring White commercial farmers in the Lowveld, the farms released for Black occupation, including Acornhoek, were becoming overcrowded. This prompted restrictions on the number of livestock Black people could keep and the ploughing area (Niehaus 1993). Conversely, Willis and Wittingstall, along with other White ex-soldiers, could develop commercial farms and amass the surplus labour of Black people. These men, who have been key in the formation of the Klaserie PNR, controlled swathes of land, imposed harsh living conditions for Black people, and were involved in many evictions of Mapulana people in the Lowveld.

In this context, the Crookes brothers[37] bought the first farm in present day Klaserie PNR from Willis and Wittingstall in 1936. When they were not out hunting in the Lowveld, the Crookes ran a successful sugar mill in KwaZulu Natal. In their absence, Willis and Wittingstall would take care of the farm. Given that the pair had unlimited access to Black labour, it is unsurprising that in 1938 the first camp in present day Klaserie PNR was "built under his [Willis] and Whittingstall's supervision, using mainly female labour".[38] Another camp was built in 1951, and Whittingstall "organised some locals to build the new wattle and daub huts juts as … Willis had done … years before".[39] In general, this is how Black people feature in the history of conservation in the Lowveld, as unnamed local labourers and as "some locals". Their belonging, as people who connected to the land, through familiarity and cultural and social ties, was excluded from the narrative that is centred around similar issues but only in relation to White belonging.

Similarly, in the Umbabat PNR, which shares an un-fenced border with Klaserie PNR and Kruger National Park, an unknown author remembers that around the early 1940s "it took three days to cut the road 20 miles in the direction of the Olifants River, using a squad of natives and a compass lent to them" (Umbabat PNR 2019). Again, Black belonging is disregarded and Black people are reduced to "a squad of natives". Later in the story, while discussing the construction of a house in Umbabat PNR by a woman named Vi and her husband, the author states that:

> [i]t took Vi and the natives a year to make the cement blocks on the banks of the Tsiri River. Sand from the river was used and cement was brought in by any farmer who wished to exchange it for kraal manure—a five-ton load of manure for carting in 100 bags of cement. The blocks were transported to the house site in a two wheeled donkey cart and sand and stones were brought up the hill using a wood sleight [sic] drawn by a donkey. African women carried pebbles in bowls on their heads to mix with the concrete … The house was finally completed in 1958, built almost entirely by Vi and her labourers. (Umbabat PNR 2019)

The female labour mentioned could not have been White women because according to the Klaserie PNR, the 1950s were also "the first time that women began to visit the camps. Before, amenities were so basic that it was not deemed suitable for the fairer folk".[40] In contrast, the conditions were deemed good enough for Black women to work on site. These narratives, while demonstrating a historical Black presence in the Lowveld, raise more questions than they answer: Who were these African women? What led them to work in present day Klaserie and Umbabat PNR? Where did they live? And what has changed in contemporary labour conditions? While Willis and Wittingstall were just *two* men who supervised construction, and Vi just *one* woman, there is a drove of unnamed Black men and women—who built camps, houses and carried pebbles—whose names and biographies are unaccounted for when Klaserie PNR lists its pioneers and when

Umbabat narrates its history. This is where we depart from Neumann (2017) who cautions that an historical analysis of conservation landscapes would reveal that primitive accumulation *leads to* the production of conservation spaces instead of conservation being an act of primitive accumulation. At least in the case of some farms in the Klaserie and Umbabat PNR conservation *did* generate the primitive accumulation of capital by exploiting Black labour away from other activities that Black people might have otherwise engaged in uncoerced. Furthermore, in line with the broader racist ideology of the time, conservation's primitive accumulation facilitated by Willis and Wittingstall reproduced a racialised and gendered division of labour.

Another Mapulana elder, Thabang, adds to giving us a sense of what life was like under Willis and Wittingstall. Thabang was born in 1929 on Bedford, a farm adjoining Travers' farm (see previous section), but his family soon left due to the labour tenancy arrangement. He remembers that:

> … in 1940 we arrived here [Acornhoek], there was no farming here, just a wholesale shop. The Whites made you pay 25c, when you had chickens you paid with eggs … Willis in particular, who was owner of Acornhoek farm, confiscated cattle from Mapulana and started selling it … [Later] they kicked us off and sent us to Nelspruit to work the farm of H. Hall and Sons. He had a big farm. They had cabbage, veggies, everything.[41]

Many interviewees claim that during evictions Black people were also stripped of their livestock. This primitive accumulation emphasises the sheer "accumulation of labor-power 'dead labor' in the form of stolen goods, and 'living labor' in the form of human beings made available for exploitation" (Federici 2004:64).

In the 1940s, Hall and Sons owned at least eight farms in the Nelspruit area (130 km away from Acornhoek). They had disputes with Black people over rent, child labour, and forced labour tenancy (Thornton 2002). From Thabang's account and earlier excerpts from the Klaserie PNR it is clear that Willis and Wittingstall in their capacity as TCL agents were also labour brokers and thus key in maintaining an exploitative labour regime. Just like Travers, this duo colluded with the colonial and apartheid state to strip Black people, including Mapulana, of their land, livestock, and autonomy. We now move to the conclusion by reflecting on White belonging as an important mechanism behind the reproduction and maintenance of primitive accumulation in conservation.

Conclusion

Kelly (2011) argued that analysing the creation *and* maintenance of protected areas through the primitive accumulation lens would shed light on the political economy of conservation. This paper showed how contemporary representations of history by private nature reserves in the Lowveld reveal imperialist amnesia by invisibilising Black belonging to land. We illuminated some of these erasures by documenting state sanctioned, private industry spearheaded, and White farmer actuated expulsions from lands that were expropriated for commercial agriculture and later transformed into private nature reserves. In some reserves, such as the

Klaserie PNR, conservation is implicated directly in the original primitive accumulation.

The erasure of Black belonging is not unique to the private nature reserves we discussed in this paper. In the Lowvelds MalaMala game reserve, Alasow (2020) documents a history of Black presence dating back to the 1830s, whereas the game reserve website[42] narrates the history from the 1920s onwards and features land transactions between Whites and the TCL. Curiously, the webpage also documents a "Historic Land Claim Transaction", however, from the website alone it remains unclear why a land claim was initially lodged. Similarly, Brooks (2005) traces how the rebranding of the Hluhluwe game reserve, KwaZulu Natal, into a "wild', "natural" space undermined older historical geographies. Race, as we have shown, is often intertwined in the construction of these "wild" spaces (Brahinsky et al. 2014).

The empty lands narratives and the pedestalisation of White male pioneers shows that "colonial practices around national parks [including adjacent private nature reserves] did not necessarily end with the end of formal colonialism. Instead, they continued into the post-colonial period" (Ramutsindela 2004:2). Some of these practices include the assertion of White belonging and the simultaneous disavowal of Black belonging in nature conservation across South Africa. Consequently, we argue that White belonging can function as a mechanism of primitive accumulation because it has material implications for Black peoples claim and ultimate ownership of land and wildlife.

Take for instance land claims in some of the nature reserves we mentioned earlier. Even in the event that some of these claims are legitimate, these farms are unlikely to ever be restituted to the Mapulana due to the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding between the Minister of Agriculture and Land Affairs and the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (Mollett and Kepe 2018). This agreement essentially states that land claimed in protected areas will not be restituted. White belonging can thus work in tandem with and inform political mechanisms to maintain and drive primitive accumulation. This echoes Bhandar's (2018) observation that property logics based on private ownership over land are often inherently racialised, protected, and enforced.

In addition to land hoarding, conservation continues to generate primitive accumulation by alienating Black labour in articulations of White belonging. This is achieved through the exploitation of low-wage conservation labourers, some of whom are the descendants of evicted Mapulana. In addition, Thakholi (2021) shows that today conservation siphons unpaid reproductive labour occurring in labourers' homes and communities while paying labourers barely enough to maintain themselves. Therefore, claims about empty lands and heroic pioneers in some of these nature reserves obscure often abhorrent labour conditions and persisting racialised and gendered divisions of labour.

Though currently subjugated by White belonging, Black belonging to land continues to find expression in various ways in contemporary South Africa including through the use of old place names, the claiming of land (see also Ramutsindela 2002), memories of resistance, and accessing burial sites in now privately owned farms. All these, coupled with the hotly debated calls for "expropriation of land without compensation" (Akinola 2020), demonstrate that primitive accumulation is constantly met with opposition.

Endnotes

[1] Timbavati PNR: https://timbavati.co.za/our-history/ (last accessed 26 February 2021). Klaserie PNR: https://www.klaseriereserve.co.za/about.html (last accessed 26 February 2021). Umbabat PNR: http://umbabat.com/overview/history/ (last accessed 26 February 2021). Thornybush Game Reserve: https://www.thornybush.com/about-us/thornybush-story/ (last accessed 26 February 2021).

[2] Klaserie Chronicle, Anniversary Edition, Winter 2019 (hereafter Klaserie Chronicle, 2019).

[3] "Hoedspruit History: A Short History of the Town, the Reserves, and the Origin of Many of the Names in the Area": https://www.hoedspruit.co.za/history-of-hoedspruit#HistoricalActivities (last accessed 26 February 2021).

[4] Timbavati PNR: https://timbavati.co.za/our-history/ (last accessed 26 February 2021).

[5] Klaserie PNR: https://www.klaseriereserve.co.za/about.html (last accessed 26 February 2021).

[6] Thornybush Game Reserve: https://www.thornybush.com/about-us/thornybush-story/ (last accessed 26 February 2021).

[7] Klaserie Chronicle, March 2016; "Unknown Legends of the Lowveld: John Edmund Delacoer Travers 1876-1954" (hereafter as Klaserie Chronicle, 2016).

[8] Klaserie Chronicle, 2016.

[9] Klaserie Chronicle, 2016.

[10] Klaserie PNR: https://www.klaseriereserve.co.za/about.html (last accessed 26 February 2021).

[11] Klaserie PNR: https://www.klaseriereserve.co.za/about.html (last accessed 26 February 2021).

[12] Klaserie Chronicle, 2019.

[13] Mapulana speak Sepulana.

[14] "Tribal council" refers to a constitutionally recognised traditional leadership body.

[15] Staatkoerant (Gazette), 1 August 2008, No. 31287, Notice 911 of 2008; Staatkoerant, 29 January 2010, No. 32839, Notice 57 of 2010.

[16] Letters of the Sub-Native Commissioner Graskop Pilgrim Rest. Natives on Sunlight No. 283. File No. 74/323. National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria, 1920-1941 (hereafter cited as Letters, Sub-Native Commissioner Graskop).

[17] Letters, Sub-Native Commissioner Graskop.

[18] Labour tenants had to work for three months without wages in exchange for lodging on White farms.

[19] During apartheid, this was a document issued by a farmer to an evicted labour tenant to travel from one place to another. If someone was found without a trekpass, (s)he could be arrested.

[20] Interview with a Mapulana elder, 27 April 2018, Acornhoek.

[21] Interview with close relative, 14 February 2017, Acornhoek.

[22] Interview with Mapulana elder, 1 February 2017, Acornhoek.

[23] Letters, Sub-Native Commissioner Graskop, 25 November 1939.

[24] Letters, Sub-Native Commissioner Graskop, 26 April 1940.

[25] Letters, Sub-Native Commissioner Graskop, 6 February 1941.

[26] Letters, Sub-Native Commissioner Graskop, 23 August 1920.

[27] Letters, Sub-Native Commissioner Graskop, 6 September 1920.

[28] Today, Glenlyden and Madrid are claimed by the Moletele community.

[29] Letters, Sub-Native Commissioner Graskop, 25 November 1939.

[30] Interview with close relative, 14 February 2017, Acornhoek.

[31] Litaba tsa Kgoshi Moletele; sourced from the Moletele Tribal Council collection, undated, Acornhoek, South Africa.

[32] Interview with Mapulana elder, Modise, 31 July 2018, Acornhoek.

[33] Klaserie Chronicle, 2016.

[34] Letters of the Natives Affairs Department. File No. 80/323. Natives on the properties of the Transvaal Consolidation land and exploration Coy. National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria, 1922-1935 (hereafter cited as Letters, Natives Affairs Department).

[35] Letters, Natives Affairs Department.

[36] Klaserie PNR: https://www.klaseriereserve.co.za/about.html (last accessed 26 February 2021).

[37] The Crookes brothers bought the first farm that makes up present day Klaserie PNR.

[38] Klaserie PNR: https://www.klaseriereserve.co.za/about.html (last accessed 26 February 2021).

[39] Klaserie Chronicle, June 2014; "An Old Timer Remembers the New Beginning" (hereafter as Klaserie Chronicle, 2014).

[40] Klaserie Chronicle, 2014.

[41] Interview with Mapulana elder, Thabang, 27 April 2018.

[42] MalaMala Game Reserve: https://www.malamala.com/about/history-of-malamala (last accessed 11 November 2022).

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