

Drifting Rhinos and Fluid Properties: The Turn to Wildlife Production in Western Zimbabwe

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This paper presents and analyzes a number of tensions that arose in the shift from extensive livestock production to wildlife ranching and tourism in a dispersed community of white farmers in western Zimbabwe. It sketches the broader context of that shift and considers some of its effects, including those on the small (black) farmers of neighbouring Communal Areas. The tensions highlighted and manifested between the ranchers of Mlilo include the necessary movement from a characteristic view of wildlife as 'vermin', destructive of the conditions for livestock (and crop) production, to an appreciation that they are an exploitable and valuable resource ('ecological capital'); and how inherited views and practices concerning the boundaries of private landed property are subverted by the demands of wildlife ranching.

Keywords: wildlife ranching; white farmers; fluid property

INTRODUCTION

The end of the millennium for Zimbabwe marked not only the end of the nation's first two decades of Independence, but also its entrance into a political crisis of unprecedented scale. The controversial land invasions which initially unleashed the storm in February 2000 infused a new element into the crisis in November, as local and international presses headlined reports on the decimation of wildlife by war veterans across the country.¹ In the Save Valley Conservancy of the south-east, over 3000 animals had fallen prey to the hands of land invaders in a short period of two months. Game scouts who attempted to subdue these poaching activities suffered abductions and beatings, tourists were forced out of their camps

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¹ 'Armed Poachers Wreak Havoc in Mat North', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 5 January 2001; 'Land Invasions Put Game in Danger', *Sunday Times*, 26 November 2000; 'Zim's Wildlife Falls Prey to Politics', *Mail & Guardian*, 3 November 2000.

by militant war veterans and mopani forests were burned to the ground to make way for cultivation. Ironically, less than two decades ago, the state declared this 340,000 ha region unsuitable for resettlement due to the poor quality of its soils, and readily supported the initiative to transform the area into one of the most successful conservancies on the continent.² Now, however, the government has designated the white commercial properties that constitute the Save Valley as land eligible for immediate takeover and settlement by black farmers. In response to escalating alarm and pressures concerning the fate of the region's wildlife, the governor of the province accused conservancy owners and workers of conspiring to frame war veterans by slaughtering the animals themselves, in order to 'tarnish the name of Zimbabwe and the president'.³

Wildlife thus clearly becomes a key site for defining the state's accountability, wisdom and morality. Outside observers reacted quickly to this development, as in the case of Germany, which threatened to withdraw \$Z1 billion in grants allocated for the clearance of unrecovered landmines from the liberation war unless threats to the Save Conservancy ceased.⁴ The level of international interest stirred by the events in this remote area demonstrates a predictably unreflexive moral outrage against the massacre of animals, which are unfailingly naturalized as non-agentive, apolitical subjects of a global sovereignty. Even more significantly, however, the dramatic response reveals the changing interface between Zimbabwe's national agrarian economy and the neo-liberal global economy in which it operates on increasing planes of intersection. A defining moment of reconfiguration in this relationship occurred in 1997, when the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) voted to legalize the sale of Zimbabwe's surplus ivory stocks to Japan.⁵ With this ruling, the world's governments officially acknowledged the effectiveness of Zimbabwe's wildlife management strategies and reinstated a right of resource stewardship yet unexercised by most developing countries. In this sense, the decision fundamentally challenged the modern geopolitics of power between northern and southern hemispheres, representing a remarkable triumph for the nation. Recently, however, with growing evidence of an overwhelming agenda enforced by the state at any cost, this hard-won recognition is rapidly being withdrawn by global observers.⁶

For the state, the discourse on wildlife centring around its symbolic value and sustainable management constitutes a wellspring of vibrant tension and contradiction. Animals in Zimbabwe continually figure in a shifting and often contradictory spectrum of representation and meaning. They are variously constructed as

² Endangered species in this area include black and white rhino, wild dogs, Liechtenstein's hartebeest, aardwolves and pangolins. The Save also supports the most successful rhino breeding program in Africa, boasting a 10 per cent yearly growth rate (Du Toit 1999).

³ *Mail & Guardian*, 3 November 2000.

⁴ 'Invasions Could Cost Zimbabwe \$1b in Grants', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 8 December 2000.

⁵ This agreement also included Botswana and Namibia as supplier countries. The decision caused great controversy because environmentalists and conservationists feared that any kind of trade in elephant ivory, however closely monitored, would result in an upsurge of black market sales, hurting elephant populations in countries where conservation has failed to achieve positive results as in Zimbabwe.

⁶ 'Zimbabwe Sees its Eco-Image Fade', *MSNBC*, 5 October 2000.

elemental to national heritage; resources conveying hard currency; objects of deeply embedded colonial fantasies; eradicable vermin; and crop and livestock raiders who spell ruin for rural farmers each year. These contesting images co-exist at any given moment, engendered by diverse interests that refract tensions between the capital and the rural periphery, white and black Zimbabweans, and tourist and non-tourist enterprises across the nation. Given such conflicting interpretations, policies towards wildlife remain fluid and inconsistent, constantly under revision as different factions of the state attempt to accommodate or sublimate these changeable images to best serve their evolving agendas. Wildlife resides near the top of the list of political priorities at certain times, and tumbles in rank during other periods, as the current Save scenario clearly illustrates.

Drawing upon ethnographic data gathered in western Zimbabwe, this article investigates the transformative role of the symbolic and material economy of wildlife in a conservancy lying adjacent to Hwange National Park.⁷ Historically an area comprised of vast properties devoted to cattle ranching, Mlilo is unique as a site where white commercial farmers reimagined their environment 25 years ago, and pioneered the concept of wildlife production.⁸ Over the next two decades, they continued to experiment and refine its practice, effecting a gradual metamorphosis through which wildlife property has almost entirely eclipsed cattle as the central form of property and medium of accumulation. Today, these farmers are deeply invested in ongoing constructions of wildlife in popular culture and national discourse, because their very livelihoods depend upon the assumption that wildlife is a crucial key for the nation's prosperity.

Through a series of narratives relayed by residents of Mlilo, this article attempts to illuminate the process of transformation from cattle ranching to wildlife ranching regimes, focusing upon the conflicts and tensions that materialized at different turns. A historical reading of wildlife production, as well as an understanding of its contemporary nature, are essential in grasping the dynamics of wildlife as a shifting symbol – its iconic power, its paradoxical meanings, and the mechanisms by which certain images come to be privileged above others amidst multiple interpretations. Moreover, with the ever-expanding shift towards wildlife almost everywhere in the country, game ranching constitutes a critical element in the new agrarian politics of Zimbabwe, giving rise to sites of immense wealth and capital investment as in the Save, and bringing into alignment new forms of political conflict and social differentiation.

⁷ Hwange is Zimbabwe's largest and oldest national park. Named after the prominent Chief Hwange, both Hwange Town and the national park were mispronounced and misspelled as 'Wankie' by the colonial and settler governments before Independence.

⁸ Although they no longer function as farms in the true sense of the word, people continue to refer to their properties in this way as part of the continuing legacy of the label 'white commercial farms'. In this article, I will use the terms 'farmers', 'ranchers', 'wildlife producers' and 'wildlife ranchers' interchangeably to discuss the Mlilo community. It is important to note, however, the distinction between 'game farmers' and 'game ranchers', with the former operating on smaller properties of 3000 acres or less within Natural Regions I, II and III, or agriculturally productive lands. In contrast, 'game ranchers', who provide the focus of this article, reside on much larger properties confined to Natural Regions IV and V, or arid lands with nutrient-deficient soils.

As Hughes demonstrates in this special issue, eco-tourism enterprises in eastern Zimbabwe served to destabilize the tenure of black farmers on communal lands, which had been carefully demarcated under the colonial order to provide a minimal agricultural base for disempowered social groups. Initiatives such as CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) thus rendered these boundaries permeable, often to the detriment of communal farmers' interests. The aim of this article lies in investigating the similarly unwitting effects brought by the eco-tourism and wildlife industry in the white commercial lands on the other side of these borders. The metamorphoses occurring at Mlilo's localized site accrue significance, moreover, because they are complexly intertwined with transformations taking place on a national scale. As the private wildlife industry began to flourish in Mlilo during the mid-1990s, accompanying shifts occurred in the state's perceptions of wildlife as a resource of infinitely more potential than the collection of park entrance fees with comparatively low returns.⁹ Accordingly, the shifting regional political economy of wildlife is continually re-created through dialogue with diverse wildlife practices unfolding at local levels.

A second objective of this article engages two angles of interest concerning the theoretical literature on definitions of property. In order to succeed, wildlife ranching must rely on the conceptualization of animals as fluid, unanchored communal property, which in turn poses an irreconcilable opposition to deeply ingrained Western ideas of private ownership. Furthermore, the creation of a conservancy requires the dismantling of fences between individual estates to allow the uninterrupted movement of wildlife, thus blurring the boundaries of land as discrete private properties and giving rise to new social conflicts. Ironically, therefore, farmers find themselves in a perplexing dilemma where modern, cutting-edge wildlife production techniques are predicated upon the configuration of property as *communal*, a system historically associated with black Zimbabweans, and denigrated as illogical and ultimately doomed. Despite this inherent contradiction, which often results in antagonism in the fabric of the community, I propose that wildlife ranching has become the predominant form of production in Mlilo because it enables these farmers to refashion their identities with the aim of legitimizing their continued presence in an increasingly hostile post-colonial terrain. Through interactions with biologists, international donors, politicians and tourists, wildlife production affords farmers the opportunity to interface with the global arena *vis-à-vis* the emotionally and morally charged domain of conservation. From this relatively apoliticized angle, people insert themselves into both national and international debates concerning citizenship and human rights, strategically invoking their self-articulated roles as conservationists working in the interests of the nation as a whole.

⁹ During this time, the fact that Zimbabwe was a member of CITES precluded its practice of culling surplus animals, which had functioned as the country's primary source of sustainable utilization revenue in the past. The state's gaze therefore turned to the possibilities of sport hunting, for which many private wildlife ranchers had already established successful precedence.

Moreover, wildlife ranching enables its practitioners to reinvent themselves as good citizens, rather than white ones. While, during the past decade, academics have posed questions concerning the construction of 'whiteness' in the politics of race (Blee 1991; Wellman 1993; Dyer 1997; Hartigan 1999) as well as the unique cultural worlds of settlers under colonial administrations (Ware 1992; McClintock 1995; Cooper and Stoler 1997), the study of white communities in Africa remains relatively unexplored. Moreover, while a handful of existing works have provided illuminating analyses of white settlers in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa (Crapanzano 1985; Godwin and Hancock 1993; Goodwin and Schiff 1995; McCulloch 2000), with the exception of a study on Zimbabwe's new elite by Weiss (1994), there is a noticeable absence of studies taking up more contemporary issues of positionality and identity among whites in post-colonial Zimbabwe. The final goal of this article, then, is to contribute to a deeper understanding of white minorities through a focus on how white Zimbabweans create their social worlds.

The consideration of how whites conceptualize their identities in the midst of an overwhelming black majority, particularly in isolated places such as Mlilo, holds critical significance for the theoretical field of the politics of identity. Perhaps more importantly, however, the study of white Zimbabwean society proves imperative because whites continue to remain central in the country's post-colonial public arenas. Despite their diminishing numbers, they clearly retain considerable influence over the economic welfare of the nation, particularly through their dominance in the commercial agricultural sector of a primarily agrarian national economy (Von Blanckenburg 1994). It is striking that the presence of whites continues to be perceived as so strong that many educated black Zimbabweans imagine the number of whites in the country as surpassing one million, when in reality they fall far short of 100,000. The image of whites has perhaps become the single most controversial site of representation in the nation during the past five years, with the government propagandizing one platform which identifies whites as 'enemies of the state', and the whites themselves claiming sympathetic allegiance to a wrongfully hostile nation. Most black Zimbabweans locate reality as falling somewhere between the two ends of this spectrum. Thus, amidst contesting representations vying for dominance, deeper reflection into the social lives of Zimbabwean whites, who have remained comparatively mystified thus far, will provide insight into the dynamics of politics and race that spin their web around the contemporary nation-state.

FOSTERING FANTASY AND CONJURING ILLUSION

Mlilo lies between Bulawayo and Victoria Falls, along a road that draws a blunt dagger across the western part of Zimbabwe and cuts it in half. The landscape extending towards each horizon is an unbroken world of yellow ochre, with the exception of several weeks each November when the first rains begin to fall and the whole world seems washed in palest green. The air is captivating for its stillness and emptiness, woven with crumbling dust and brittle sunlight, and mesmerizes the mind with the illusion that time has stopped. But then, rounding

a bend in the pathway, one comes across a sudden group of kudu staring transfixed, or an elephant making its quiet way towards a water pan recessed in its spatial memory, and the nature of bewitchment changes.

This enframed snapshot captures how most outsiders encounter Mlilo. Tourists, hunters and volunteer wild dog researchers – hundreds of visitors journey to this destination each year, drawn to an economy that revolves principally around wildlife. For them, Mlilo presents an isolated haven, where lion lore gains currency with each telling, and signs painted with ‘Strictly No Walking, Danger, Wild Animals’ confine people to luxury bush camp perimeters. The local residents who run the lodges and hunting safaris actively cultivate this representation because it fulfils a universal fantasy of what it means to vacation in Africa. Yet the reality is quite different. Mlilo lies deeply imbedded in a larger political economy encompassing the area, one which involves the four black communal land areas that share its borders, and the national park which lies adjacent to its western boundary. Commuter buses stop hourly en route to Victoria Falls, and people walk freely back and forth in the ‘bush’ between their communal area homes and the lodges and farmhouses at which they work. Lion attacks have been known to happen, but only rarely, and always as the exception.

The physical landscape of Mlilo is best captured through the metaphor of a major river, which represents the Bulawayo–Victoria Falls Road, from which dozens of tributary rivers in the form of rough dirt roads branch off and pool into individual properties. In width, Mlilo covers an expanse of 80 km, ranging from north to south, while lengthwise, the area’s 20 km distance is marked on its eastern and western boundaries by veterinary grids.¹⁰ Aside from these grid markers, very little on the surface distinguishes the area from its adjacent regions, with one place blending seamlessly into the next. Despite this outward continuity, in the neighbouring communal areas exterior appearances quickly melt away to reveal dense land settlements just a couple of kilometres in from the road. In Mlilo, on the other hand, one must negotiate 15–20 km of rough paths often accessible only by 4 × 4 vehicles to reach the first house. The properties themselves are startlingly vast, typically ranging from 30,000 to 60,000 acres in area, although such numbers tend to defy the spatial imagination.

On these properties, slender trees triumph over the landscape for the most part, punctuated by occasional water pans, vleis and stretches of uninterrupted grassland.¹¹ The overwhelming impression is of tranquillity and emptiness, broken only by fleeting glimpses of zebra, sable antelope and giraffe, among other species, a factor which has made wildlife ranching particularly vulnerable to its representation

¹⁰ The colonial government designed and constructed veterinary grids to curtail the wanderings of errant cattle, while continuing to allow automobile and pedestrian traffic. A typical grid consists of a depression in the road, bridged by slim metal rods that make it impossible for a cow to cross with its narrow hooves. Its primary purpose is to prevent the transfer of bovine foot and mouth disease between cattle-ranching areas, as well as between cattle and wildlife.

¹¹ Vleis are favourite congregation spots for animals due to their rich soils and flora. The detailed workings of their ecological systems in dryland contexts remain a mystery; however, vleis have received recent recognition as ‘key resources’ critical to the sustainability of dryland agro-pastoral regimes (Scoones and Cousins 1993).

as a less legitimate form of land use.¹² Farmers who survey their properties on a daily basis from behind the steering wheels of dusty Land Rovers measure water levels in the pans religiously, check up on the growth of buffalo grass and decipher spoor to determine the amount of wildlife traffic on different sections of their farms. Their lands span across such immense spaces that it is impossible, even by vehicle, to cover a whole property in a single day. To make up for it, however, farmers tended to stand on a convenient grassy knoll and declare, for instance, 'Everything from here to that river belongs to me', accompanied by a generous sweep of the arm across the landscape. Such statements always revealed a remarkable lack of reflexivity, with people's faces conveying only a naturalized belief in the right of ownership, without any doubts over the stark contrast between these lands and the crowded communal areas that surround them.

The Purveyors of Illusion

At first, the social landscape of Mlilo proves confusing to piece together, simply because people are difficult to find. With most families living in the centre of their properties rather than along boundaries closer to the main road, people run into each other infrequently, and social gatherings are rare. Days and weeks go by while people see only family members residing on the same ranch, and other people who live 45 minutes away from the community's tiny post office will come in no more than once a week to collect their mail. When asked the approximate population of Mlilo, farmers will reply somewhere around the order of 100. The question is received, however, with the implicit assumption that one is referring only to white Zimbabweans, when in reality the black workers and their families who also live on these properties easily double the total population of the community.¹³ Their residence remains more tenuous, as old workers leave and others are hired according to the seasonality of farm work.

The creation of new lodges and safari outfits always spur a flurry of employment, which relies upon the outlying communal areas as ready sources of inexpensive, non-skilled labour. In the domestic realm, each household typically has a staff of at least two house workers, who take orders from the 'madam' of the family, and fulfil cooking, cleaning, laundry and childcare duties.¹⁴ Along equally gendered lines, the *baas* surrounds himself with an entourage of four or five male workers who assist him in the workshop, repairing vehicles and engines, and accompany him on routine rounds around the property in the maintenance of

¹² Since the post-colonial government passed the Land Acquisition Act in 1992 (Moyo 2000), the purported logic for determining which white commercial farms should be 'designated' for resettlement existed in identifying properties that were of low productivity. Game ranches, with their unending stretches of seemingly unoccupied land, as well as the farmers' inability to pin down the concrete results of production in numerical terms, were especially susceptible under this system of designation.

¹³ Workers and their families live in white-washed 'compounds' that stand within walking distance of the main homestead, but are tucked far enough away to remain out of sight.

¹⁴ House workers can be men as well as women; for example, one finds more male cooks than female because men have better access to training when it comes to preparing Western dishes. At the same time, however, men who fulfil these domestic capacities consider them part of the professional nature of their jobs, and are usually reluctant to perform the same functions within their own homes.

boreholes and fences.¹⁵ In addition, each family also employs a number of people who form anti-poaching patrols, and these groups surface from the bush once or twice a month to report their findings.¹⁶ Workers thus have a pervasive presence in Mlilo, but in the eyes of the people who employ them, they are publicly invisible as true members of the community. After spending time with them, however, it is difficult to imagine white farmers being able to function in their everyday lives without their workers in constant attendance. In fact, this lifestyle, specifically coined the 'Rhodesian way of life', is one in which white settlers had an absolute sense of entitlement to domestic workers (Godwin and Hancock 1993, 8–9). This in turn proved pivotal in the engineering of a white Rhodesian identity, with the colonial government reinforcing this image alongside the idea that nowhere else in the world could people so easily afford domestic help. These constructs formed key elements in the campaign not only to convince people to immigrate to Southern Rhodesia, but also to persuade whites who were already there to remain. As in other colonial contexts (Ware 1992), therefore, moving to Rhodesia appealingly coincided with the ability to jump levels in social class hierarchies.

Today, what is envisioned as the core community of Mlilo revolves around the two dozen white Zimbabwean families who own land in the area. While a few are relative newcomers to the region, most of these families have resided in Mlilo for over 50 years, some dating from as far back as the early 1900s.¹⁷ In addition to these landowners, a surprising number of other white Zimbabweans have moved into the area since its new engagement with wildlife. These include people who lease land from farmers and set up their own lodges and bush camps; professional hunters who purchase hunting concessions and bring their clients in search of trophy animals; and other young people who sometimes relocate from as far away as South Africa to work in various capacities in the wildlife business.¹⁸ Some of these new residents are urbanites who profess a love for the bush, and others come here simply to tap into the latest cash goldmine, represented by the tourism industry.¹⁹

¹⁵ 'Baas' is the Afrikaans word for 'boss', or male head of the household. The term is used as a title of address by workers in households of both English and Afrikaner descent.

¹⁶ Although everyone agrees on the necessity of maintaining anti-poaching squads, the fact that communication between employers and employees is relatively infrequent often leaves farmers in the dark when it comes to knowing the actual activities and movements of patrols. One rancher discovered, for example, that a worker whom he had widely acknowledged to be his right-hand man had been operating a lucrative black market in bushmeat – i.e. wildlife taken illegally from the rancher's property – for many months, with the cooperation of his anti-poaching squad.

¹⁷ As one might expect, tensions exist between the old-timers and the newcomers, who claim that they find it very difficult to gain acceptance among the long-established families.

¹⁸ Typical positions include wildlife guides who take visitors out on game drives, secretaries and accountants for the more affluent wildlife producers, auto mechanics who maintain the game drive vehicles, photographers and videographers for hunting safaris, bush camp managers and advertising staff.

¹⁹ In recent years, the tourism industry revolving around wildlife has expanded to become the second highest income-generating business in the country, preceded only by tobacco exports. More significantly, wildlife enterprises have become the top source of foreign exchange, a form of currency that is extremely precious at the moment. Many reports show, however, that the recent political uncertainties in Zimbabwe have caused a dramatic drop in tourism revenues, demonstrating a decrease of up to 70 per cent when compared with recent years (*Mail & Guardian*, 3 November 2000).

In the majority of contexts, the public face of Mlilo revolves around men, with women operating primarily in the domestic realm, reflective of a larger conservative trend in rural white Zimbabwean society. The political domain, consisting of monthly meetings of the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU) and Intensive Conservation Association (ICA), is ministered almost exclusively by cigar-smoking men, while women focus their energies on serving as unofficial secretaries for family-run businesses, home-schooling younger children and driving older children to and from boarding schools in Bulawayo. An unexpected majority of sons choose to remain on the farm after completing their educations, building separate houses and dividing up the businesses established by their parents, which in turn leads to frequent intra-family conflict.²⁰ Surprisingly, many men find their wives abroad during the course of trade apprenticeships and travels, in countries such as South Africa, Britain and Australia, and succeed in persuading them to move to Mlilo. Aside from bypassing the problem of an ever-diminishing pool of single white Zimbabweans, this represents a strategic move for people who hope to retain open doors in friendlier countries given the political developments in Zimbabwe during the past decade. During this most recent crisis of land invasions and illegal occupations, many women have chosen to move back to their home countries with children in tow, leaving their husbands behind to defend their farms.

Animal-Based Economies

While Mlilo's contemporary economy revolves around wildlife, its actual animating agent is located in the fetishized Western fantasy of 'Wild Africa'. Many scholars have focused on this ideological construct that drove colonial desires and imperialist inclinations (Anderson and Grove 1987; MacKenzie 1988; Adams and McShane 1992), and the spectacle that Neumann (1995, 1998) has termed 'the Edenic myth complex' continues to fuel Western imaginaries in conceptualizing Africa today. In his discussion on the relationship between photography and taxidermy, Ryan argues that 'hunting with a camera', just like hunting with a rifle, was 'implicated in broader movements to create and preserve a vision of African nature as a timeless domain for white European and American men' (2000, 218). Like other areas of the world where species tourism has blossomed, the success of the wildlife industry in Mlilo hinges upon the ability to re-create this vision to convincing effect.

²⁰ For young men who grew up in the bush, the skills required by the wildlife industry – tracking, hunting, knowledge of local flora and fauna, and equipment maintenance and repair – come naturally and, as a result, they regard the family business as providing opportunities just as promising as any other business sector in the country. On the other hand, daughters more commonly leave their homes when they marry, or choose to pursue alternative careers, although there are some exceptions. Given the generally conservative attitudes, as well as the Afrikaner cultural tradition through which only sons are entitled to inherit property, women tend to face a much more difficult time compared to their brothers if they choose to remain on the farms where they spent their childhood.

In principle, the economy consists of two dimensions: photographic safaris and hunting safaris. The luxury bush camps and lodges which abound in Mlilo cater to foreign tourists who delight in the prospect of rustic accommodation, often in tents or small rondavels with no electricity and an alarming profusion of insects, where they can lie at night and ponder the alien yelps and cries that emanate from the darkness. During the day, armed with guidebooks, video cameras and binoculars, they take part in 'game drives' within Hwange National Park and the Mlilo Conservancy.²¹ Although most of these camps charge exorbitant rates that place them firmly beyond the budgets of many Americans and Europeans, the main source of profit in Mlilo comes from the hunting side of the industry.²² Safari companies run by enterprising farmers in Mlilo find their market in an exceptionally wealthy clientele from the US, Australia, Germany, India and Japan, among many other countries. Clients must have advanced experience in shooting, and the physical endurance to withstand hunts ranging from 10 days to 3 weeks. During this time, people typically pay a flat rate of US\$1000 or more per day for the hunt, which includes the services of trackers, 4 × 4 vehicles, a professional hunter and sometimes a videographer. When a client successfully shoots an animal, trophy fees range from US\$800 for smaller species, such as impala and warhogs, to US\$20,000 or more for elephants, leopards and lions.²³ The two regimes of photographic and hunting safaris sometimes come into conflict, for the last thing an individual on a game drive expects to see is an animal fleeing from hunters in dogged pursuit. Despite the subtle parallels between hunting and photographic tourism, the two areas of engagement remain distinct and oppositional in the minds of their participants, who approach nature consumption from very different perspectives. The properties of Mlilo, however, are usually large enough to avoid direct confrontations, so long as hunters and wildlife guides coordinate beforehand to avoid spatial overlap between their respective parties.

A recent article in *The New Yorker* provocatively describes the development of a similar wildlife industry in Texas, on ranches that import exotic species from Asia and Africa for entrepreneurial sport hunting. The author reports that most of the hunting clients there are doctors, lawyers and businessmen who lack the time, and sometimes the necessary skill, to go on a 'true' safari (Bilger 2001, 76–7). In Texas, they can fly in for a single day or weekend and depart with just the trophy heads, while the game meat is donated to organizations such as 'Hunters for the Hungry'. The appeal here clearly lies in the expedience of hunting exotic

²¹ Many lodges and camps provide 'sightings lists' with the names of all local species, which guests can check off during the course of the day as they come across new animals and birds. The parallels between this practice and the historical fixation with hunting and scientific taxidermy are striking.

²² The majority of hunting is done with rifles, but some guests opt for compound bow hunting.

²³ A client's wish list of species – usually no more than four animals per hunt – is negotiated with the safari outfit prior to his or her arrival in Zimbabwe. This constitutes an essential step in the process because each property has different hunting quotas issued by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management each year. The most popular companies often have their yearly quotas 'sold out' well in advance of the beginning of the hunting season.

animals in convenient contexts, but Bilger makes the wry observation that, ‘in the hills of central Texas, an oryx looks like an evolutionary mistake – a cow at a costume party – and must feel just as conspicuous’ (2001, 74). In contrast, the thick, glossy brochures of safari companies in Mlilo draw heavily upon the mythology and imagined romance of legendary ‘Great White Hunters’ (Cartmill 1993, 137), invoking expeditions undertaken by Frederick Courteney Selous in the very same locations, and liberally quoting from diary passages that extol the region’s beauty.²⁴ In short, they sell a packaged fantasy of ‘*in situ* species tourism’ (Desmond 1999, 186–92) which remains impossible to replicate anywhere else in the world. Thus, the prosperity of Mlilo’s economy depends upon the ability to convince tourists of the unassailable authenticity of its natural wild setting. In the following section, we turn to the historical transformation of this landscape, which reveals the deceptive infancy of Mlilo’s contemporary appearance.

THE QUAGMIRE OF CATTLE RANCHING

At the beginning of the century, when small-scale cattle ranching was first begun as a state-designed initiative in the area which is now Mlilo, families coming from South Africa settled far in from the main road with a minimum of infrastructure and access to cosmopolitan conveniences. They found circumstances much harsher than they anticipated, with dry, nutrient-deficient soils making grazing difficult, as well as the presence of a stubborn weed that was poisonous to their cattle (Palmer 1977, 274). The area’s population remained minimal, and success frustratingly beyond reach. Today, long after the disappearance of these families, small graves with Afrikaans inscriptions left forgotten in the bush are the only faded remnants of that period.

The contemporary community of Mlilo has its roots in the 1930s, when the approach to cattle ranching shifted radically from small-scale to large-scale production. The nation’s cattle industry experienced its first crisis in the early 1920s, when a decrease in European markets in the aftermath of World War I resulted in a parallel reduction in South Africa, the principal country to which Southern Rhodesia exported its beef (Phimister 1988, 132–3). Although veteran ranchers and scientists from across the world agreed that Rhodesia’s climate and terrain created an exceptionally favourable environment for cattle ranching, the adverse political economy at the time stirred a profound sense of alarm. The drop in export outlets coincided with a period when cattle stocks in the nascent industry were maturing for the first time, and ranchers entered the markets only to discover that their supply was far in excess of the demand. A report commissioned by the government in 1923 to explore the future of the industry states: ‘A most serious state of financial embarrassment of cattle owners has gradually arisen and

²⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, a renowned sport hunter himself, once declared in reference to this celebrated figure, ‘Mr. Selous is the last of the big game hunters of Southern Africa, the last of the mighty hunters whose experience lay in the greatest hunting ground which this world has seen since civilized man has appeared herein’. 23 May 1907.

http://members.tripod.com/selousscouts/frederick_courteney_selous_d.htm

is to-day acute, with every prospect of becoming steadily worse, and unless a prompt remedy is found there must follow the ruin of a large number of our farmers and farming companies' (Government of Southern Rhodesia 1923, 1). This 'remedy' consisted of implementing new refrigeration techniques through the Cold Storage Company to enable exports further afield, offering substantial subsidies in the acquisition of land, tax exemptions for the purchase of equipment, loans for the construction of fences, new educational programs in cattle husbandry and special railway rates for transporting beef.

In Mlilo, the government consolidated the existing ranching properties, which averaged 2500 acres each, and created a far smaller number of new properties, ranging from 30,000 to 100,000 acres. The state adopted this alternative strategy because of the new belief that small-scale ranching would always flounder in areas classified as Natural Regions IV and V, signifying the most arid soils in the country. An optimal ratio of 30 acres for each individual animal was established specifically for these dry areas, which in turn revolutionized the landscape of cattle ranching in the region. By this time, most of the original settlers from the turn of the century had abandoned their ill-fated ventures and, thus, the social landscape changed dramatically as well. The government awarded portions of land to white civil servants, such as long-serving railroad workers, while others bought thousands of acres at substantially subsidized prices.

Eventually, two dozen extended families settled permanently in Mlilo and formed the core of this remote community. The 250 km distance to the nearest city of Bulawayo precluded frequent visits aside from monthly trips for supplies, and in a context where one's nearest neighbour typically lived more than half an hour's drive away, social gatherings clearly carried more significance because of the efforts they involved. Strong bonds of solidarity developed among families, despite the fact that they were all engaged in the same livelihood of cattle ranching, rendering them rivals in a beef market that remained highly competitive. Given the 30:1 ratio of acres to animals, along with the average dimensions of these properties, most families easily owned at least 1000 head of cattle, and sometimes up to two or three times that amount without endangering the optimal threshold of sustainability. While tensions always existed, arising from broken fences and cattle infringing on neighbours' properties, farmers overall worked under a code of cooperation, helping one another by sharing prize steers for breeding, and returning neighbours' calves accidentally born on their properties to their rightful owners in good faith.

Despite the spirit of collaboration and camaraderie, however, just like their unfortunate predecessors, most Mlilo citizens found cattle ranching frustratingly difficult when it came to realizing profits. Over time, it became clear that their fundamental and greatest disadvantage lay in Mlilo's proximity to Hwange National Park. Thus, with the blessing and encouragement of the state, which recognized the irreconcilable conflict of interest between wildlife and cattle presence, the very first white settlers in the area embarked upon systematic projects of wildlife eradication. This practice continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s, focusing on species – particularly buffalo – that were potential carriers of contagious

diseases when domestic and wild animals shared grazing lands.²⁵ Natural predators such as lions, cheetahs, leopards and wild dogs underwent vilification through evocative institutionalized imagery, and consequently became the targets of sophisticated and vicious campaigns of extermination (Carruthers 1989; Mutwira 1989; Beinart and Coates 1995). Officially classifying these animals as ‘vermin’, the government paid bounties for the skins of hyenas, jackals, tiger cats, lynx, mongoose, baboons, grey monkeys, cheetahs, leopards and lions. Clearly, in the eyes of the state, ‘the interests of the game’ had to give place to the ‘claims of crops and cattle’ (Mutwira 1989, 254–5) for the civilizing project.

By some accounts, these concentrated energies proved enormously effective. By the late 1970s, when the seeds of wildlife production were first planted, the sowers found to their dismay that they had a virtually non-existent faunal base upon which to build. For people who still unconditionally invested their faith in cattle ranching, however, persistent problems painted an entirely different reality. One family reported that they had lost 165 head of cattle, of which the majority were calves, to predators in a single year. Despite efforts to outwit returning lions and leopards with strategies that involved changing kraal locations, reinforcing fences and increasing nocturnal vigilance, the losses due to marauding animals continued to prove too great.

Other factors increased the odds considerably, such as the dynamics of the liberation war in the 1970s, when freedom fighters travelled in the bush and launched attacks on white farms in the area, making regular patrols to monitor the movement and safety of cattle virtually impossible. In many cases, moreover, men left their homes for months at a time to fight in the Rhodesian Armed Forces (RAF), leaving their families to live a subdued and fearful existence behind barricaded walls. In such instances, people had no choice but to leave cattle to fend for themselves. Incidents of stocktheft by freedom fighters proliferated, specifically targeting white-owned cattle of imported pedigree; other cows and bulls were shot or mutilated in symbolic defiance, and left to die within their pastures (Grundy and Miller 1979, 90). In the Tribal Trust Lands,²⁶ where the policy of compulsory cattle-dipping had long been regarded with suspicion and resentment, the issue became radically politicized.²⁷ Liberation war guerrillas encouraged villagers to destroy dip tanks by filling them with stones and lumps of concrete, while dip attendants risked death if they insisted on carrying out their jobs. Two years after the compulsory dipping ceased, tick-borne diseases began

²⁵ The primary fear lay in the possible transfer from wildlife to cattle of ‘foot and mouth’, also known as ‘hoof and mouth’, a bovine disease which has recently resurfaced in European cattle industries. The Rhodesian government also supported wildlife eradication as a method of control for the tsetse fly, which causes human sleeping sickness. Similarly, animals recognized as major carriers of rabies, including dogs, were systematically exterminated. In 1903, for example, records show that Veterinary Department officials shot and killed 39,259 dogs (Mutwira 1989, 256).

²⁶ ‘Tribal Trust Lands’, or TTLs, constituted the colonial classification for areas now known as ‘black communal areas’.

²⁷ As a law, every animal had to walk through dip tanks containing chemicals that killed disease-bearing ticks once a week. This controlled the outbreak of sicknesses such as redwater, theileriosis, heartwater and gallsickness.

spreading like wildfire in the communal villages, and panicked villagers sold their cattle as quickly as they could dispose of them. As a result, prices in the overall cattle market plummeted, and created an even bleaker scenario for white ranchers (Grundty and Miller 1979, 85–7). Thus, the tide was set for a progressive disengagement from cattle, and a newfound enchantment with wildlife.

THE SEDUCTION OF WILDLIFE

The term ‘seduction’ here has two meanings, referring both to the inevitable forces which made the temptations of wildlife production impossible to resist, as well as the strategies employed by farmers to seduce wildlife onto their properties. In the context of the political and economic obstacles outlined above, the turn to wildlife production occurred at first as a tiny ripple in the fabric, and gradually expanded to become the only form of production in Mlilo a quarter of a century later. The next two sections draw upon the profuse collection of narratives that people tell about the advent of wildlife ranching, and the peculiar forms of conflict and heartache it precipitated within the community. Although the actual process of transformation was variably interpreted and bitterly contested at every turn, with the rising importance of the wildlife industry in the contemporary national landscape, many people today tend to forget their initial reluctance, and instead assert – and sometimes even embellish – their roles in bringing about this historical shift in paradigms. Farmers competed vigorously with each other in laying claim to certain key roles; for example, in bringing the largest number of animals into the area, or co-founding the Wildlife Producers’ Association (WPA) in 1985, an organization which now represents the interests of over 1000 wildlife producers nationwide. After distilling the widely varying accounts and assembling a clearer chronological picture, one notable story emerged from the farmer who had in fact been the very first person to actively cultivate the presence of wildlife on his property.

Rhinos on the Rampage

Even back in his cattle ranching days, Klaveren was regarded by the rest of the community as somewhat suspect, a renegade with too many strange ideas that unsettled the traditionalists around him. Astonishingly, of all the ranchers in Mlilo, he was the only one who articulated a pre-existing interest in animals as part of his reason for embarking upon wildlife ranching as an experimental enterprise. The idea took root in 1975, when the establishment of the Parks and Wild Life Act gave landowners the right to manage and benefit from wildlife found on private lands (Wildlife Producers Association 1998). The promulgation of this act emerged from a 15-year period of tentative institutional reform in attitudes towards wildlife, propelled by the Wild Life Conservation Act in 1961. Until then, wildlife numbers had suffered alarming declines due to their perceived incompatibility with the project of development in Southern Rhodesia. Thus, what Klaveren identified at the time, and what other farmers were much slower

to recognize, was a gradual sea change in the country, as well as the rest of the world, in moving towards a philosophy of sustainable wildlife utilization.²⁸ In the early 1980s, Zimbabwe was one of the most radical proponents for the paradigm of utilization – as opposed to strict preservation – as a conservation strategy, unleashing harsh censure from the international arena. However, just as wildlife production came to eclipse cattle ranching in Mlilo, sustainable utilization reversed the tables over the course of the next decade and became the dominant form of practice in today’s global conservation culture.

Taking note of the exponential growth in the number of foreign tourists who visited Hwange National Park each year after Independence, Klaveren decided to turn Mlilo’s proximity to the park – the very factor which had thus far been its downfall in cattle ranching – to his advantage and transport the benefits of the tourist industry into the private sector. He set about performing the previously unimaginable by opening up his property to wildlife, the very antithesis of his conditioning as a cattle rancher for the past 20 years. Furthermore, he began establishing contacts with hunters overseas who have since become devoted clients, and built the first luxury lodge in Mlilo. Subsequently, his business has expanded to include a hunting camp, a backpackers’ rest and an upmarket bush camp in addition to the original lodge. Klaveren’s family ultimately became one of the wealthiest and most influential in Mlilo largely because of his revolutionary visions, as well as the enterprising spirit of his four children who later co-managed the business. Today, he never tires of telling the story of an American ecologist he befriended during the 1980s, who pronounced that Klaveren was ‘a hundred years ahead of his time’.

It was in the early years, however, before the benefits of his insurgent schemes became clear, that he encountered the most resistance from the community which harboured a deep-seated distrust and dislike for wildlife. Klaveren began his efforts to entice wildlife onto his land by dismantling all of the fences that lay along boundaries shared with Hwange, and creating new water pans by pumping water from underground aquifers.²⁹ One of the more noteworthy landmarks on Klaveren’s property was a beautiful vlei that soon became a favourite roaming spot for a small herd of zebra. Although this addition represented a triumph for Klaveren, his neighbours felt profoundly threatened by the new presence. From that point on, if any of the surrounding ranchers happened to find wildlife on their properties, they immediately assigned blame to Klaveren, regardless of the unestablished origin of the trespassers. Thus, while the zebra, impala or wildebeest that raised an uproar could easily have come from the national park, as they had been known to do with dismaying regularity in the past, now people automatically assumed that they came from Klaveren’s renegade ranch. For a period of several months, he received weekly invoices from a particularly cantankerous neighbour who

²⁸ The sustainable utilization of wildlife promoted projects such as the culling of elephants in regions where their numbers had reached saturation, and harvesting and selling the products like tusks, skins and meat. These profits were then channeled back into conservation budgets.

²⁹ These steps coincided with the gradual process of selling cattle on the beef market without rebuilding the herd as Klaveren had done each year in the past.

insisted on charging Klaveren for 'zebra [or other wildlife species] found grazing on my land on x date for y amount of time'. In a heated physical encounter during a monthly meeting of the local Commercial Farmers Union chapter, the neighbour threatened to kill Klaveren if he discovered that his cattle had contracted foot-and-mouth from any kind of wildlife. Most of the farmers rallied around him, and Klaveren found himself stigmatized as the black sheep of the community for a period of time.

Nevertheless, determined to persevere, Klaveren's next step consisted of purchasing and transporting some of the rarer, high-profile species that were less likely to make an appearance on his property of their own volition. He reached an agreement with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (DNPWLM), and bought two white rhinoceros from Hwange National Park at a cost of over US\$4000.³⁰ Soon after releasing them onto his vlei, however, the two rhinos found their way over to a neighbour's property where they quickly became embroiled as objects of a huge scandal. Provoked into fiery indignation, members of the community finally voted to force Klaveren to repatriate his rhinos back to the park. Regrettably, he had little choice but to comply, and bid farewell both to his rhinos and his US\$4000. Twenty years later, he derives some degree of satisfaction from watching the rest of the community battle to reacquire rhinos for their populations, but without success because the value of the species has risen too high.³¹ 'One hundred years before my time', he often muttered over tea during our afternoon conversations on his shaded veranda, stirring the contents of his cup angrily. 'They should have listened'.

The Unbanded Bandwagon

Despite the initially violent opposition to Klaveren's project, it was only a few years before others began to see the wisdom of his endeavours. Ranchers with more financial resources at their disposal began investing heavily in the acquisition of wildlife, as well as the construction of lodges and hunting camps to serve the growing number of people who chose Zimbabwe as a destination for their holiday trips. Oftentimes, if a family had sons, one or more of them trained to become a professionally licensed hunter, which enabled the family to run a self-sufficient business without contracting high-priced outside professionals. In other households lacking the capital to set up enterprises for themselves, the hunting concessions on their lands were leased to hunters who needed a place to bring their clientele. Alternatively, some people chose simply to lease portions of their property to lodge companies looking for picturesque sites on which to build what they hoped would be the next trendy hot spot in accommodation.

³⁰ From 1975 to 1985, as part of its infrastructural support for the emerging interest in wildlife on private properties, the government began offering national park animals for sale with the objective of re-stocking depleted commercial areas. Professional 'animal capture' units were also formed to ensure the minimally traumatic translocation of animals. Between the years of 1985 and 1992, these capture units translocated over 15,000 animals to different parts of the country (WPA 1992, 2-3).

³¹ In 1997, a white rhino at a 'live game sale' in South Africa fetched a price of over US\$14,000 (Child 1998, 3).

Thus, by the end of the twentieth century, everyone in Mlilo had jumped on the wildlife bandwagon, and found themselves participating in the industry for their primary source of income. Those who were not actively involved in the procurement of animals hoped to reap benefits simply by opening up their properties, converting their cattle troughs into water pans that blended more aesthetically with the landscape, and sitting back to wait for wildlife to appear from their neighbours' properties or the national park.³² In large part, the 180 degree turn in community practice emerged because of the conspicuous correlation between length of investment in wildlife production on the one hand, and increase in profits on the other. A survey conducted in the early 1990s by the World Wide Fund for Nature compared ranches across the country engaged in the production of cattle, wildlife or both wildlife and cattle on the same property, and concluded that wildlife *only* ranches were the most financially viable, with an average return on investment of 10.5 per cent, compared to 3.6 per cent for 'mixed enterprise ranches', and a mere 1.8 per cent for properties exclusively ranching cattle (Jansen et al. 1992, 19). The same study found that domestic cattle proved far more susceptible than wildlife in times of drought, which in Zimbabwe are frighteningly frequent. The investigators reported, moreover, that the viability of the cattle industry demonstrated much more sensitivity to government pricing, marketing and exchange rate policies than wildlife. Thus, wildlife production enabled ranchers to retain more independence and autonomy in their enterprises, a factor that became increasingly significant as the state's economic policies during the 1990s revealed both lack of wisdom and poor planning.

Almost without exception, then, the people in Mlilo who began wildlife ranching the earliest, as in Klaveren's case, are now also the wealthiest in the valley. They drive sleek new Toyota Land Cruisers rather than battered old Land Rovers, live in plusher homes equipped with home theatre systems and travel more frequently, both regionally and abroad. Not surprisingly, this was the most convincing argument that finally won over the last of the conservative cattle ranchers in the end. At the same time, however, the uniformity in dependence on wildlife belies a volatile terrain of ongoing interpretation and negotiation as people attempt to come to terms with the changing place of wildlife in their lives. It must be emphasized that the transition to wildlife ranching is by no means synonymous with people shifting their allegiances to an alternative worldview, such as one that magically transported wild animals into the realm of the good. For the majority of the community, the choice was principally an economic one. As a consequence, the turn to embracing wildlife as a desirable presence in Mlilo is still very much a new and incomplete project. Many of the conflicts in the community arise from the extraordinarily broad spectrum of attitudes that farmers hold towards non-domestic animals and conservation in general.

During one of my visits to his house, Holloway, a 74 year-old farmer who had lived in Mlilo for his entire life, sat back in his worn armchair, clasped his

³² This physical transformation can be captured by a domino metaphor, wherein fences all around Mlilo began toppling down, triggered by the fall of others.

hands over his spectacular paunch, and fixed me with the hawk-eyed glare to which I had grown accustomed. Without any air of compunction and in a tone that would brook no challenge, he declared, 'Whenever I see an animal in the bush, I feel like shooting it. That's what I've always done in the past'. For Holloway, this fiercely defiant position presents no problematic contradictions with his self-proclaimed love for the bush, and his insistence that he could never survive in an urban context. Holloway's conceptualization of nature therefore does not encapsulate or depend upon the presence of 'charismatic megafauna', as Western perspectives are notoriously inclined to do, but in fact decisively excludes it. His own family's transition to wildlife ranching has occurred only within the past five years, as the power of Holloway's influence has waned in charting the family's course. Conflicts with his sons over the fundamental wisdom and soundness of wildlife production erupt frequently, and his marginal sense of security comes only from the small herd of 100 cattle that they continue to retain as an economic cushion for the unpredictable future.

Members of the old guard like Holloway are thus left behind as the constellation of values attributed to wildlife shifts dramatically to create a new order of things in the community. Under this reformulation, different hierarchies come into alignment, inverting positions of power and prominence according to new rules. In self-conscious dialogue with a vibrant global discourse on conservation, white farmers such as Klaveren who pioneered the industry of wildlife production have come into their own, winning recognition with new labels such as 'cutting edge', 'modern', or 'enlightened'.³³ On the national level, the rising prestige of successful wildlife producers has served to overturn key relationships between core and periphery as well. Black and white Zimbabwean youth who grow up in metropolitan areas such as Harare and Bulawayo internalize the same rural-urban stereotypes that exist everywhere in the world. In recent years, however, identifying the wildlife industry as *the* place where money flows, thousands of cosmopolitan Zimbabweans in their twenties and thirties are competing aggressively to work as wildlife guides and lodge managers in remote and isolated places.³⁴ Moreover, they come to work for people whom they have learned to typologize as the most provincial in the country, often jokingly referring to them as 'hillbillies' who live by generators rather than proper electricity.³⁵ This collision between worlds often coincides with generational conflicts as well, leading to heated antagonism

³³ An important index of this recognition is the fact that donor agencies are now insisting upon the active participation of wildlife producers – now referred to as 'stakeholders' – before releasing aid packages to national parks. Wildlife producers interpret this inclusion as an attempt to ensure the proper monitoring of donor aid by people who have strong expertise in conservation, unlike many Department of National Parks staff.

³⁴ With the recent economic trends in Zimbabwe, it proves much more lucrative to work as a wildlife guide and earn foreign income – some freelance professional guides charge their employers over US\$100 per day, a veritable fortune in Zimbabwean terms – than to work as a business or computer consultant, for example.

³⁵ The wealthier families of Mlilo were finally able to afford the installation of electricity – paying for the construction of power lines themselves – within the past 10 years; however, less well-off households continue to rely on generators and paraffin for their power.

in employer–employee relationships. A wildlife guide who lasts for longer than 2–3 years in a single locale is considered a true anomaly. In contrast to the United States and Europe, where professionals in animal-related industries are expected to profess devotion to the natural world, many wildlife guides in Mlilo framed their occupational choice as originating not from a long-engaged interest in wildlife, but rather from a strategy based on recent economic trends.

Thus, the groundswell of transformation in understandings of conservation at both local and global levels, the changing nature of consumer markets and the desire to keep pace with a perceived modernity rendered the temptations of wildlife impossible to resist. The seduction was never an unequivocal one, however; while representing an externally unified platform, the bandwagon instead formed an uneasy alliance for those who only went along tentatively for the ride. With these differences never fully confronted, the floor upon which people stood would begin to splinter soon afterwards.

OWNERSHIP UNDONE

With virtually everyone in Mlilo involved in some degree of wildlife production, members of the community voted to form a conservancy in 1994.³⁶ Following the pioneering model developed by the Save Conservancy, the farmers decided upon this change in a self-conscious bid to re-create Mlilo into a more enticing potential investment for NGOs and donor agencies.³⁷ This marked the turning point at which wildlife producers no longer just welcomed serendipitous coincidences between their economic endeavours and global popular opinion, but in fact began to publicly rearticulate their businesses in increasingly depoliticized and moral terms. The new strategy emerged in tandem with the realization that for the first time since Independence, the tenure of white farmers on their properties was seriously threatened. In the language of legitimacy, people refashioned their livelihoods as providing invaluable contributions to the nation-state. Thus, farmers suddenly became long-standing and dedicated conservationists, stewarding the country's faunal resources with beneficent knowledge and expertise.

In the ideological discourse of southern African conservancies, a defining characteristic lies in the transition to a paradigm of communal property. This practice emerges from the foremost objective of attracting and maintaining extensive wildlife populations, which flourish with unrestricted movement between different properties. Whereas a 30,000 acre private estate could successfully support a self-contained cattle-ranching operation, an ideal regime of wildlife production calls for land managed on a much larger scale, given considerations such as genetic health, grazing patterns and predator–prey equilibrium.³⁸ In order to ensure their

³⁶ For an illuminating analysis of the newly emerging role of wildlife conservancies in southern Africa, see Murphree and Metcalfe (1997).

³⁷ The Mlilo Conservancy constitution is almost an exact replica of the one instated by the Save Valley.

³⁸ There are notable exceptions to the average size of wildlife ranching properties in the country; for example, in Matabeleland South, a single wildlife producer can own up to a million acres.

individual success, therefore, farmers in Mlilo found themselves in a situation where they first had to buy into the goal of the conservancy's *collective* success. Thus, hundreds of kilometres of wire fences that ranchers had once laboriously constructed were torn down again at great cost. It remains common to see a farmer's workshop surrounded by countless bunches of rusted, rolled up fence wire. Characteristic of white Zimbabweans' habitual frugality, this wire is saved and set aside for the possible future when farmers might feel compelled to return to cattle ranching as their primary mode of production.

Because this transition to wildlife production occurred gradually over the past two decades, however, the ensuing differential levels of investment have caused deep fracture lines among members of the community. The first five or six individuals who embarked upon the enterprise by necessity had to spend tremendous amounts of capital in the process of purchasing and transporting wildlife to their lands. As people began opening up their ranches, some animals did venture into Mlilo from the national park, as in the case of the zebra on Klaveren's vlei; however, these consisted of the less glamorous species in imagined animal hierarchies (Haraway 1989) such as impala, kudu and warthogs, which would fail to attract enough eco-tourism consumers and big game hunters to make the enterprise worthwhile. In the late 1980s, this minority of ranchers therefore began importing wildlife in earnest, sinking their financial resources into animals from all over the country. Today, for example, many of the giraffes in Mlilo come from Gonarezhou in the low veld, the elephants and leopards from Hwange, and the zebra are descended from first generation Mana Pools immigrants.³⁹

Due to the efforts of this handful of producers, by the time the rest of the community jumped on the bandwagon in the early 1990s, Mlilo could celebrate both abundant numbers and impressive species diversity in its resident wildlife populations. At the time, it carried the distinction of being the only private wildlife reserve in the country that could boast the presence of the 'big five', a commonly used index of wildlife desirability, namely elephants, buffaloes, lions, leopards and rhinos. When people eventually came to a consensus on the formation of a conservancy, the initial investors had to face the troubling reality of losing control over their wildlife property in favour of a communal ethic.⁴⁰ On the frequent occasions that animals moved off to explore potentially sweeter grazing lands, the original owner could do nothing but stand aside as a passive onlooker. Ultimately, despite the knowledge that a larger ranging space would benefit the overall welfare of wildlife in Mlilo, certain farmers continue to find it difficult to relinquish their attachments to what they perceive as their rightful

³⁹ The purchase and transfer of these animals require extremely complicated negotiations and coordination at every stage. Although every effort is made to minimize physical and emotional trauma to the animals, tragically a few always die during the stress of capture and transit, or from exhaustion and failure of adjustment after they reach their destinations. The purchasing farmer must absorb these costs on top of the original cost of the wildlife, as well as the considerable expense of quarantining the animals in holding pens for several months before they are released into their new environments.

⁴⁰ Duffy (1997) characterizes the problem of the mobile nature of wildlife by conceptualizing animals as a 'fugitive resource'.

property. One prominent rancher who had bought a total of 150 buffalo over several years in the 1980s recounted bitterly how his neighbour, 'a good enough fellow', had all of his buffalo now despite the fact that he had never paid a cent for wildlife in his life. Thus, ties of ownership, as ephemeral as they were, come undone, quietly unravelling the threads which are woven into the tapestry of relationships in the community.

Renegade Fences and Nocturnal Sabotage

Time proved, however, that not everyone would be content with simply submerging their dissatisfactions and accepting the losses of their property. One of the most dramatic cases unfolded as the tumultuous centre of social and legal controversy in Mlilo for over two years, until the community finally ousted the rebelling party. Lockheart was a wealthy businessman who had made his fortunes elsewhere, and acquired property in Mlilo in the early 1990s from a family who had emigrated to South Africa. The fact that he was an outsider automatically biased the rest of the farmers against him, but the unconventional ways in which he began pouring money into his ranching operation nailed his reputation as a radical upstart. From wildlife reserves and producers in South Africa as well as Zimbabwe, Lockheart imported rare and extremely costly species such as Liechtenstein's hartebeest and steenbok, in addition to large numbers of more commonplace animals. Then, in flagrant defiance of conservancy policy, he proceeded to spend a phenomenal amount of money to protect his investments, and constructed a fenced enclosure around his entire 30,000-acre property.

Although there most certainly would have been voices of dissent, Lockheart might have succeeded in his operation had it not been for the misfortune of having one of the most ill-tempered men in Mlilo as his neighbour. Outraged at Lockheart's audacity, Van den Akker accused him of fencing in large numbers of his own wildebeest when Lockheart put up the fence, in effect committing wildlife embezzlement. The local Wildlife Producers Association and Mlilo Conservancy committees recognized the larger implications of Van den Akker's accusations; Lockheart had in all likelihood fenced in not only Van den Akker's wildebeest, but wildlife belonging to the whole community as well. Because the conservancy only had a constitution voluntarily mandated by its members rather than a legally binding contract, however, the appropriate path of action to take remained unclear. In the meantime, Van den Akker had belligerently taken matters into his own hands, setting upon a campaign of nocturnal sabotage in which he and his workers hacked through the fence and left a gaping hole as large as a room wall to allow the passage of animals onto his own estate. Upon discovering these subversions, Lockheart furiously repaired the damage, only to have Van den Akker return to work at the same spot a few nights later. And so this absurd cycle continued for months while the dispute grew more violently explosive. Finally, driven to his wit's end, Lockheart swallowed his losses, sold his ranch, and moved out of Mlilo. The subsequent owners have removed the fence partially, but with associated histories remaining vivid in people's memories, they find social circles less than welcoming.

The blurred boundaries between private and communal property under the wildlife regime induce similar feelings of isolation and alienation in almost everyone in the community, although few people openly admit it. The dramatic struggle over Lockheart's rebellious individualism provides only one example of the new conflicts that emerged; along the same spectrum, smaller battles occur on an everyday basis concerning ownership and rights to specific animals. When a buffalo is shot on one farmer's property, for example, but manages to escape with a non-fatal wound across a boundary into another farm, to whom does the trophy fee belong? The farmer on whose land the animal was originally tracked and sighted, or the individual on whose property it was eventually killed?⁴¹ Heated disputes like this occur regularly, and at any given moment, one can find warring neighbours as well as feuding families. In the most difficult cases, mediation by district courts functions as a last resort. The halcyon days of tennis games and Sunday picnics alternately hosted by different families have long since disappeared; what remains instead is rivalry, mistrust and jealousy that undo a once firmly anchored sense of community.

The Conundrum of Communal Property

Fences may take many forms, but they universally function as symbolic icons in addition to serving as physical markers. They 'embody and symbolize separation', becoming 'the archetype of division' (Peters 1994, 1). The story that Peters tells in Botswana describes the contested process of dividing communal property for the creation of privatized areas, with the gradual expansion of fences across the landscape. This is the more common narrative amidst the momentous forces of global capitalism in contemporary contexts. The recent transformations in Mlilo portrayed by this article, however, move in the *reverse* direction with their transition from private to communal property, which necessarily emerges from the configuration of wildlife as a fluid resource.

The uniqueness of this equation presents a confounding paradox for those conditioned in the practice of Western concepts of private ownership. Cousins argues that 'property regimes often constitute a terrain of struggle' because they are intrinsically linked to income distribution and, thus, to power (1992, 17). Scholars have revealed over the course of many debates sparked initially by Hardin's 'Tragedy of the Commons' model (1968), that the system of common property itself is not a flawed one; rather, problems arise because of 'the inability of interdependent individuals to coordinate and enforce actions in situations of strategic interdependence' (cf. Runge 1986, 15). Similarly, in his challenge to the purported 'logic of collective action', Olson proposed that in the absence of force, self-interested individuals would fail to act in the interests of the collective group (1971, 2). In reality, the existing tensions in Mlilo resulting from the contested issue of communal wildlife seem to substantiate and justify this rather

⁴¹ Safe and ethical hunting practices dictate that a wounded animal – especially buffaloes which are known to be the most dangerous – must be tracked until a fatal shot is delivered.

pessimistic view. At one conservancy meeting where the questioned ownership of animals yet again surfaced as the centre of debate, ideals of honour and gentlemanly behaviour were swiftly invoked to mask the palpable tension of unspoken accusations and angry glances flung across the table. It was then that one farmer of usually quiet disposition removed his pipe from his mouth and declared philosophically, 'We are all gentlemen, except when it comes to money'. An uncomfortable silence settled upon the group following this frank admission, which cut to the very heart of the problem underlying the fragile fiction of communality. With illusions of civility and integrity cast aside, as long as wildlife continues to be fluid, it will always be a source of deep conflict in Mlilo.

Despite this irresolvable quandary, however, people are reluctant to raise the question of the industry's fundamental viability, for wildlife ranching has unquestionably brought increased wealth to the region. Accordingly, while members of the Mlilo community have reinvented themselves with some degree of success as conservationists in the eyes of outside audiences, the decision to farm wildlife remains essentially an economic one. This raises the question of how the environmental language of nature has been reconfigured as critical 'investments' for the future, with the idea of nature as an 'accumulation strategy' gaining ascendance (Katz 1998, 48). Citing cases such as the internationally influential Nature Conservancy, Katz problematizes the recent corporate environmentalist trends that drive the increasing privatization of nature for the sake of preserving resource 'banks'. As Hughes persuasively argues in this special issue, many of these corporate interests, which appear environmentally friendly on the surface, in fact undermine the community empowerment agendas to which they lay moralizing claim. In this sense, revolutionary ideas are not new at all, in actuality perpetuating the same fallacies of older conservation paradigms.

In Mlilo, wildlife producers mobilize this language of trans-boundary co-operation and mutual benefit in describing the conservancy's relationship with its neighbouring communal areas. Unlike in eastern Zimbabwe as described by Hughes, the degree of permeability between the commercial and communal lands in Mlilo is limited to ranchers purchasing hunting concessions through CAMPFIRE when the quotas on their own properties are sold out. In this context, the logic that growing populations of wildlife in the conservancy, which are left free to roam into communal areas, will only augment CAMPFIRE profits seems unassailable. Yet in reality, many communal farmers complain that the turn to wildlife production in the area has created a safe haven from which animals can raid crops more frequently, and with more ease. As a consequence, they experience just as much damage by crop-raiders as before, but with the close proximity of the conservancy, the offending animals fail to remain in the villages long enough for CAMPFIRE operations to be set into motion. In this way, wildlife production continues to trigger vibrant contestation and multiple consequences, both within the Mlilo community and in the greater regional political economy. As Castree and Braun astutely observe, 'struggles over the social production of nature are multifaceted; they occur at various levels, involve a large cast of actors (not all of which are human), and follow a plurality of social

and ecological logics that cannot be reduced to a single story' (1998, 34); in Millo, this wisdom certainly rings true.

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