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I. Public Spheres

In early March 1998 Nelson Mandela met with cabinet ministers and agricultural leaders to discuss the results of an investigation into a series of murders of white Afrikaans-speaking farmers. Since the historic 1994 elections, more than 500 white farmers have been murdered in South Africa, 35 of them killed in the final two months of 1997 alone. Mandela had ordered the investigation in late 1997, when the frequency of the killings had led to speculations from across the political spectrum that the murders were in some way "politically motivated." Derek Hanekom, Minister of Agriculture and Land Affairs, emerged from the cabinet meeting and announced to reporters, "The overwhelming trend is pure criminality. [. . .] Of course, in certain isolated cases there are people with their own motives and own agendas" ("Crime"). Mandela made no public comment on the intelligence report, and it was not released to the public.

At the height of the farm murders crisis in late 1997, Afrikaner farmers had claimed to be in a "war situation" with, as Transvaal farmers' organization leader Willie Lewies claimed, "losses of life comparable to the Vietnam and Yugoslavian conflicts" ("S. Africans to Set Up"). However overstated Lewies's analogy to genocidal military conflicts might seem, the South African Agricultural Union cited the statistic—impressive in **[End Page 90]** crime-ridden postapartheid South Africa—that white farmers were four times more likely to be murdered than their fellow South Africans ("Mandela"). Rhetoric escalated, ultimatums were issued, vigilante commando units formed, the corporate mercenary outfit Executive Outcomes consulted, but the murders continued. Interpretations of the murders as "politically motivated" fell into three types. The first posited theory was that the murders were committed by members of the former African National Congress and Pan African Congress; Mandela, not rejecting this interpretation out of hand, speculated in November 1997 that "wild freedom fighters" might be acting out of impatience with the slow pace of economic change in South Africa ("Wild"). Second, commentators suggested that the murders were revenge killings for the evictions by white farmers of black tenants and laborers; such evictions have been endemic since 1994, as white farmers feared that impending land reform might grant tenure rights to black farm workers. A third strand of interpretation held that, in the words of Eastern Cape rancher John Biedge, "Perhaps [the murderers] think if we are driven from our farms, the land will become theirs" (Nofal). The murders, in other words, were purportedly a campaign of terror aimed to free up land for land reform programs, whether official or ad hoc.

It was no accident, then, that Hanekom, whose Department of Land Affairs is responsible for implementing South Africa's ambitious land reform program, emerged from the March 1998 cabinet meeting to announce that "pure criminality"—rather than revenge for pre-emptive evictions, or impatience with the slow pace of land reform—was behind the murders of white farmers ("Crime"). That the issue of land reform could be implicated as a motive for murder reveals the profound—and volatile—significance of land in the postapartheid era. Nearly a year earlier, at an April 1997 press conference for the launch of his department's policy blueprint, the White Paper on Land Policy, Hanekom had proclaimed, "The history of land dispossession is the history of this country [. . .]. It is the root of much of the conflict" ("S. African Land"). While the Land Reform program seeks to ameliorate the history of land dispossession in the colonial and apartheid eras, returning land to black South Africans will involve, to what extent or with how much coercion is not yet clear, the surrender of land by white South Africans. Although the 1955 Freedom Charter, a master text for the anti-apartheid struggle, had vowed that "[All] the land shall be shared among those who work



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