White Female Identity-Building in Colonial Africa

I

David McDermott Hughes addresses the controversial subject of Euro-African identities in his book *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging*. Hughes's main argument claims that, by building farms and manipulating the natural ecology of southern Africa, Europeans fostered a "credible sense of entitlement" to the land they invaded.[1] Rather than mixing with or attempting to assimilate the pre-existing indigenous African culture into colonial life, European settlers avoided the discomfort of racial integration—and, in fact, actively created and maintained hierarchies of power based on race that kept whites and blacks in separate spheres—in order to create further distance between the colonizer and the colonized. By completely separating the indigenous Africans from their land, Europeans ignored the former and cultivated the latter to justify their identification as Africans.[2]

Despite presenting a convincing argument, Hughes's evidence does contain gaps—the most pressing being his silence on the gender dynamics of colonial life. While Hughes uses primary sources by women, such as Danish Baroness Karen Blixen, his methodology does not analyze these experiences through gender theory.[3] Thus, Hughes's argument is not absolute; he glosses over the issues of how white women came to identify as African—especially in a patriarchal settler colonial society that often kept them from owning land or participating in politics. Thus,

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[1] David McDermott Hughes, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.
[2] Hughes, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe*, 6-7.
[3] Ibid, 2-3.
Hughes analyzes Blixen's role within British East African colonial structures, especially concerning her ownership of land and labor. However, he fails to acknowledge the nuances of her gender. He discusses her participation within colonial social structure as if the experiences of colonizers were homogenous. This comparison, while utilitarian to Hughes's argument, glosses over the reality of Blixen's position in colonial society.

this paper aims to look at the issue of identity-building amongst Europeans in southern Africa through the lenses of gender and colonialism.

I will first give a brief introduction to the concept of settler colonialism and how this specific phenomenon reflects the goals and identities of certain groups of migrants. Following this, I will look at letters written by Vera Coetzee, the mother of author J.M. Coetzee, to her aunt living in Cape Town. I will analyze how Vera talks about her life in South Africa. By looking at what she finds important enough to mention and shedding light on the gaps in her personal narrative, I will discern what facets of her life contributed to her identity and her outward persona. In particular, I will examine her existence within the domestic sphere and her relationship with African natives—namely her African housemaid—and how these inform her own identity as an African.

In the following section, I will address a counterexample. I will focus on the memoir of Baroness Karen Blixen, which recounts her time in British East Africa running a coffee plantation. The baroness's situation exemplifies the largest gap in Hughes's analysis: while she did own property, it did not result in her permanent settlement within the colony. Thus, I will investigate the nuances of a propertied woman within a strict patriarchal colonial society and how, despite ownership of land and native labor, women like the baroness grappled with identifying themselves as Africans.

Based on the information provided by these sources, I argue that the gendered construction of colonial society in southern Africa often resulted in the limitation of women's ability to cement themselves within it. I look at the ways in which these women went about their lives in the southern and eastern African colonies and assess the extent and effectiveness of their involvement and conformity to the settler society. From the premise of Hughes's argument that "becoming African" relied on the effective transformation of the physical and socio-political

landscape into one hospitable to Europeans, I determine that women were often marginalized in this effort and thus their ability to identify as African made more difficult and, at times, impossible.

II

In his introduction of the first publication of the journal *settler colonial studies*, Lorenzo Veracini introduces a new sub-field of colonial studies, specifically the phenomenon of "settler colonialism." Veracini summarizes the distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism as being the difference between "you, work for me" and "you, go away."[4] Traditional colonialism—such as in the West Indies and India—depends on the labor of the indigenous population. The colonial rulers act in the interest of the home country and create establishments and institutions to secure the sovereignty of the European colonizer. Antithetical to this, settler colonialism is characterized by settlers rejecting their former national identities and building a new way of life in opposition to the indigenous populations.[5] This phenomenon of settler colonialism is particularly evident in the United States and Australia. Indigenous communities were erased through a mixture of cultural assimilation and physical elimination, and white settlers became the ruling majority. In settler communities in southern Africa, the goal was similar but the reality was much different. Europeans in South Africa and Rhodesia, for example, never successfully escaped the plight of minority rule. In light of this, Europeans' process of

[4] Lorenzo Veracini, "Introducing Settler Colonial Studies," *settler colonial studies* 1 (2011): 2.
[5] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

"becoming African" was made more difficult by the overwhelming population of indigenous African communities.[6]

While Veracini glosses over women in his discussion of settler colonialism, viewing his theory through a gendered lens illuminates the gaps in which women often existed. Despite the common myths within the historiography of the African colonies, women played an important role in the maintenance of empire. Colonial society needed women to continue the mission of the empire into the home; care of the home and the family were crucial to the success of society (albeit much less glorified in a white male-driven historiography).[7] Vera Coetzee, mother of author J.M. Coetzee, is a poignant example of what facets of life contributed to women's African identity and helped them actively participate in colonial structures.

An interesting theme in a series of letters to "Aunt Annie" is Vera's mention of the importance of "ha[ving] a place of one's own" to "spend energy and time on."[8] Each of Vera's letters is sent from a different mailing address, emphasizing the constant movement of the Coetzee family and her own lack of a permanent household.[9] Having grown up on a permanent

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[6] For this reason, I use the term Euro-African interchangeably when discussing European's "African identities." Because they never extinguished the existence of natives to such an extent as to make them the minority in their own country (such as in the United States or Australia), Europeans remained hyphenated Africans while the natives remained "Africans," "Coloreds," or "natives." Thus, in this paper, "becoming African" is "becoming Euro-African."

[7] Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 15.

[8] Vera Coetzee, *Vera Wehmeyer Coetzee Letter to 'Aunt Annie,' 1949,* Letter from Harry Ransom Center, *J. M. Coetzee Papers, 1864-2012.*

[9] Vera Coetzee, *Vera Wehmeyer Coetzee Letter to 'Aunt Annie,' 1940,* Letter from Harry Ransom Center, *J. M. Coetzee Papers, 1864-2012.*
Coetzee, *Letter to 'Aunt Annie,' 1949.*
Vera Coetzee, *Vera Wehmeyer Coetzee Letter to 'Aunt Annie,' 1950,* Letter from Harry Ransom Center, *J. M. Coetzee Papers, 1864-2012.*
I studied three letters between Vera and her aunt. The first is sent from a post office box in Warrenton in 1940; the second from 61, Reunion Park, Worcester in 1949; and the third from 12 Poplar Ave., Reunion Park, Worcester in 1950.

farm, Vera's entitlement to her African identity is derived from the ownership of land and space.[10] The substance derived from these farms is a perfect example of Hughes's argument concerning European settlers' identification with the land.[11] While in her childhood, Vera's identity was secured by her ties to the farm, but in her adult life she must find another way to maintain her claim to an African identity. She moves from town to town, from home to home, in an attempt to survive her husband's many job assignments and demotions. She has no land to tie herself to, but rather various homes within which to support her family and glean purpose.

According to Julie Cairnie, the home was the second phase of colonization. While men represented the active colonizers and cemented their African identities through various forms of social, political, and economic participation, white women's claims to Africa were derived through the development and maintenance of the home.[12] Vera's letters reveal the extent to which she reconciled her identity and belonging with her home. In her 1940 letter, she gives her aunt extensive details concerning the family's move to a house in Warrenton.

> We did not have long to wait for a house and I am really sorry we got one so soon… We took the house as we thought it might be months before another one, more suitable is vacant. Somebody is expecting a transfer before the end of the year and said he would give us the tip when he leaves. Their house is quite nice…it is one of the few houses here with water laid on… I went to see [our] house yesterday. They have cleaned the walls, but the floors are dirty, so I asked them to clean those as well.[13]

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[10] J.M. Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Boyhood, Youth, Summertime* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 19.
John, Vera's son, claims that this ownership of land "sets him apart: the two farms behind him, his mother's farm, his father's farm, and the stories of those farms…through the farms he has substance."
[11] See Part I.
[12] Julie Cairnie, "Women and the Literature of Settlement and Plunder: Towards an Understanding of the Zimbabwean Land Crisis," *English Studies in Canada* 33.1-2 (2007), 166.
[13] Coetzee, *Coetzee Letter to 'Aunt Annie,' 1940*

Vera's preoccupation with the house and its effect on her family's quality of life is a direct reflection of her role as wife and caretaker. Any and all flaws with her family's residence threaten to affect the family unit. Her disappointment at obtaining a residence so soon due to its inferiority to another she desires emphasizes the chasm between necessity and comfort. With a new baby, the family desperately needs a new home. However, Vera's own vanity and desire to fulfill her role as homemaker acts as a source of internal conflict.

One large gap in Vera's narrative of domestic life is her employment of and interaction with natives. In addition to her descriptions of their new home in her 1940 letter to Aunt Annie, Vera tells her aunt some of the details of the move. Vera complains that her "kleinmeid" stole pictures, a record book, and socks from the house before she left at the end of her employment.[14] The word "kleinmeid" translates directly to "little girl," but carries a racial and derogatory connotation.[15] In a letter written entirely in English, this unique use of Afrikaans suggests a societal influence on Vera's attitudes. Her disdainful and disappointed tone are largely a result of her detachment from the maid. Vera does not see her as a person, but rather as part of a larger collective of Coloreds who she identifies as "those thieves."[16] In his article "Gender Colonial 'Women's History' and the Construction of Social Distance," author Simon Dagut discusses the concept of social distance between white women and blacks in Africa. Unlike white men, who "interacted with colonized people in public and hierarchical environments" like mines, farms, and military campaigns, Euro-African women lacked this luxury of structurally maintained social

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[14] Vera Coetzee, *Letter to 'Aunt Annie,' 1940.*
[15] Irving Kaplan and others, *Area Handbook for the Republic of South Africa* (Washington D.C.: American University Press, 1970), 174.
D.C. Hauptfleisch, "Racist Language in Society and in Dictionaries: A Pragmatic Perspective," *Lexikos* 3 (1993): 120.
[16] Vera Coetzee, *Vera Wehmeyer Coetzee Letter to 'Aunt Annie,' 1940.*

distance.[17] Like Vera, many women's sole interaction with natives was in the domestic sphere. In this private and less structured environment, the racial hierarchy risked becoming less strictly enforced. To remedy this, settler women often engaged in a psychological project of suppressed perception—which involved, at the very least, viewing natives as inherently sub-human and inferior—in order to maintain a social distance between themselves and their native servants.[18] Vera's slight towards her maid in the letter to Aunt Annie is an example of this phenomenon. With a newborn baby and a working husband, Vera's predominant household companion was her black maid. Thus, the importance of maintaining a sense of aloofness and disdain towards her was paramount towards maintaining Vera's identity as an African and, therefore, upholding the structure of colonial South African society.

Vera Coetzee demonstrates in her letters two of the predominant struggles faced by Euro-African women in "becoming African": lacking ties to the land and maintaining hierarchical colonial race relations within the intimacy of the domestic setting. While Vera seems to overcome these obstacles, this was not always the case. In her fictionalized autobiography, *The Grass Is Singing,* author Doris Lessing tells the tragic story of Mary Turner, the reluctant wife of Dick Turner, a poor farmer and landowner in Southern Rhodesia.[19] Lessing's novel is an exploration of Mary's changing identity from a city-dweller isolated from land ownership and

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[17] Simon Dagut, "Gender Colonial 'Women's History' and the Construction of Social Distance: Middle-Class British Women in Later Nineteenth-Century South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26.3 (2000), 560.
[18] Dagut, "Gender Colonial 'Women's History' and the Construction of Social Distance, 561. Dagut cites settler Ellen McLeod's letters to demonstrate a common shift in attitude towards black natives. McLeod's early letters boast complements to her competent kaffir; however, after a few years, she refers to him as a savage (if at all).
[19] Doris Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1950).
Lessing's fictional work is based on the life of her parents in Southern Rhodesia and their struggles to maintain a failing farm.

native contact, to a farmer's wife immersed in employer-employee relationships with black domestic and field workers and within a community of Euro-African settlers. Mary's inability to reconcile her place within the social hierarchy—which manifests in negligence, violence, rudeness, and condescension—eventually drives her insane. Due to her husband's own insecurities, Mary's gender keeps her from becoming intimately involved in the affairs of the farm. This alienation from the land coupled with her inability to maintain social distance from the natives ultimately results in her murder at the hands of Moses, one of the native field-turned-domestic workers.

Mary exemplifies the difficulties faced by women in the southern African colonies: unable to truly tie herself to the land and lacking the hierarchical safety that her husband has, Mary fails to successfully become African. Whereas Vera demonstrates a woman who persists through these difficulties and maintains the colonial institution of the home, Mary fails to contribute to the permanence of the settler space and threatens the colonial hierarchy.

III

The premise of this paper's argument rests upon the assumption that the social hierarchy of the southern and eastern African colonies was not conducive to white women's ownership of property and, therefore, to their development and maintenance of an African identity. While mostly true, this premise is not absolute. An example of a woman who owned property in the African colonies is Danish Baroness Karen Blixen. After marrying her husband, Baron Bror Blixen, the baroness moved to British East Africa (modern day Kenya) where they ran a coffee

plantation. However, after divorcing in 1921, the baroness took over management of the plantation and its labor.[20]

Blixen's story exemplifies a gap in Hughes's argument: she is a woman who owned property and felt a strong connection with the African landscape, but did not become African.[21] After the failure of her plantation, she sold the land and returned to Denmark.[22] Despite taking on a more masculine role in settler society, the baroness struggled with the nuances and ramifications of gender just as Vera and Mary did. Blixen's ownership of property was a social transgression that distanced her from both men and women, and her inability to maintain social distance with her native workers—despite enlightening her to native culture, tradition, and history—alienated her even further from the Euro-African community. Caught in a grey area between male and female colonial gender roles and the native Africans and the Euro-African community, Blixen was unable to become African.

While Blixen does not talk explicitly about attitudes towards her sole ownership of a farm, her alienation from the male-dominated sphere of land ownership is apparent. The only interactions with other white people that she mentions in her memoir are with those who visit her from Europe and other locations around Kenya—such as Denys Finch Hatton, her lover. This silence surrounding the local settler community is conspicuously coupled with Blixen's silence

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[20] Isak Dinesen [Karen Blixen], *Out of Africa* (New York: Random House, 1937), 14.
I will refer to Blixen when discussing the author's decisions and intentions as well as the actions of the memoir since her true identity is well-known.
[21] Dinesen, *Out of Africa*, 3-7.
In the first pages, Blixen illustrates in intimate detail the physical surroundings of the plantation. She introduces the reader to the place that she carries so much affection for but had to leave behind.
[22] Dinesen, *Out of Africa*, 328-29.

on her ex-husband.[23] Because her divorce resulted in her acquisition and independent maintenance of the farm, her exclusion from the patriarchal settler society was likely a result of the divorce as much as her deviations from gender norms.

In addition to this isolation, in the final section of her memoir, Blixen reflects on her final weeks in Africa and on her relationships with other European settlers.

> When I was with other white people, lawyers and business-men in Nairobi, or with my friends who gave me advice about my journey, my isolation from them felt very strange, and sometimes like a physical thing, —a kind of suffocation. I looked upon myself as the one reasonable person amongst them all; but once or twice it happened to me to reflect that if I had been mad, amongst sane people, I should have felt just the same.[24]

Blixen's sense of alienation from the rest of the European settler community further emphasizes her displacement within the hierarchy of colonial society. Her tone of superiority—seeing herself as "the one reasonable person amongst them all"—demonstrates a misunderstanding of what it meant for Europeans to become African. Her sense of superiority stems from her benevolence towards and connection with the natives—a connection she felt more strongly than that with other whites. This source of belonging, while tying the baroness to the land and its native people, does not result in her becoming African. By breaking the rule of social distance, Blixen's preference for the company of Africans over European settlers leaves her in a social no-man's land. Without a social foundation to fortify her claims to Africa and her African identity, losing her farm indubitably forces Blixen to return to Denmark.

The baroness's situation strongly resembles that of Hanna Renstrom, a character in the novel *A Treacherous Paradise* by Henning Mankell. After arriving in Lourenço Marques in Portuguese East Africa (modern day Mozambique), Hanna marries the owner of a local brothel and, after her

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[23] Blixen only vaguely mentions Bror on one occasion as "my husband." (Dinesen, *Out of Africa*, 265)

[24] Dinesen, *Out of Africa,* 331.

husband's death, comes into a great deal of wealth and property. Although she does not own land to farm on, Hanna owns a large house and her late husband's business.

Mankell's novel informs the reader of Hanna's African identity-building process by contrasting it to white men's process of becoming African: white men's African-ness is born of sheer will to bend the land and its people to their will despite feelings of contempt, both from and towards the natives, and foreignness. Pedro Pimenta embodies this. A wealthy businessman in Lourenço Marques, in a scene at Pimenta's home, Hanna envisions him throwing Isabel, his black African wife, and herself down to the crocodiles.[25] While this functions as a literary device that foreshadows the fates of both women at the hands of Pimenta, this scene also illustrates the attitude of callous capitalism and colonialism that he embodies. As a white man, Pimenta's duty within the colonial hierarchy is to stake a claim to the land, establish dominion over its inhabitants, and make a life for himself.

White African women, on the other hand, do not have the luxury of enacting such supremacy—as they do not inhabit the highest rungs of the social ladder. Thus, Hanna's defense of Isabel's crime against a white man, her intimate relationships with her native employees, and her general lack of conformity irrevocably ostracize her from the Euro-African community.

> She had behaved in a way which all other white citizens would have condemned outright . . .They would have said she was spoiling the blacks, making them obstinate and lazy, and reducing their respect for their white superiors.
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> I'm in the middle of all that, with a foot in both camps, Ana thought. I don't belong anywhere.[26]

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[25] Henning Mankell, *A Treacherous Paradise*, trans. by Laurie Thompson (New York: Vintage, 2014), 177.
[26] Mankell, *A Treacherous Paradise*, 343.

Hanna's disregard for the rules and the hierarchy of Lourenço Marques ultimately prevent her from cementing herself within the colonial society of Portuguese East Africa.

Despite a stark difference in social class, Blixen and Renstrom share a sensitivity to the relationships between settlers and natives. For both women, their ownership of property does not directly correlate to their sense of belonging within Africa. On the contrary, for both of these women, their land ownership conflicts with their gender roles and the expectations colonial society has of them. Dagut's theory of social distance centers on the idea that women only interacted with natives in a more vulnerable domestic setting. However, I argue that he underestimates the role that masculinity played in white men's maintenance of social distance in more "archetypically rigid structures."[27] Even in the rigid structure of labor owner (settler) and labor producer (native), white women's gender caused the hierarchical boundary so clearly defined by white men to be diffused. As a result of this, Blixen and Renstrom refrain from maintaining the "appropriate" social distance from natives and leave themselves, as Hanna put so well, "with a foot in both camps": participating in the colonial hierarchy, but empathizing with the native community. The conflict produced by this transgression of gender roles keeps both women from truly becoming African.

IV

The project of settler colonialism actively pushed back against the fact that "the people *settled upon* clearly hold a stronger claim to belonging" than the settlers.[28] This project of belonging occurred in various forms and with various levels of success. In southern and eastern Africa, the

[27] Dagut, "Gender Colonial 'Women's History' and the Construction of Social Distance," 560.
[28] Hughes, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe*, 1.

physical erasure of the native—such as was done in former colonies like the United States and Australia—was not an attainable goal; thus, European settlers had to develop a different means of justifying their presence and preeminence.

European settlers' appropriation and cultivation of the land acted as a source of identification and entitlement. However, when viewed through the experiences of women, this process was made more difficult, and at times impossible, by the gendered structure of colonial society. The written accounts of Vera Coetzee and Baroness Karen Blixen offer illuminating accounts of the ramifications of being female within these social structures. Because women were often prevented from owning land, their means of forging an identity was less concrete. Even in the event of land ownership, however, gender roles and gender expectations prevented women from using the same mechanisms in the pursuit of becoming African. Underscored by literary examples, Coetzee and Blixen's experiences highlight the gendered experience of building and incorporating oneself into Euro-African settler colonial society.