



Title: Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape and the Problem of Belonging—By David Hughes

Citation: Scoones, Ian. "Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape and the Problem of Belonging – By David Hughes." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 11.4 (2011): 603-606.

Official URL: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1471-0366.2011.00322.x/full>

More details/abstract: Book review

Version: Submitted Version

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Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape and the Problem of Belonging by David McDermott Hughes. Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, 2010. Pp. xx+224. £19.99 (pb), £55.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-230-62142-8.

The images of whiteness in Zimbabwe projected in the media are ones of the white population as victims, struggling against the terrors of the Mugabe regime, dispossessed of their land and exposed to violence at the hands of politically organized thugs. The valiant ‘white Africans’, as powerfully portrayed in the film of the now late Mike Campbell and his son-in-law Ben Freeth of Mount Carmel farm, are seen as an endangered species protecting all that was good in Zimbabwe against the depredations of the present¹. Too often, and most outrageously in this film, the story is told without a sense of the histories of exploitation and violence of the colonial past. In the romanticized visions of white rural lifestyles offered by the growing genre of biographical reflections on the Rhodesian idyll, whites are portrayed as guardians of the landscape, conservers of nature and skilled producers from the soil, creating a ‘breadbasket’ in a barren and backward land. They are in turn seen as the backbone of the former commercial farm economy and the protectors of their servants and workers against all that is bad.

David McDermott Hughes’ important book is a vital counter to these often absurd mythical constructions of white Africa. It is informed and sensitive. It does not deny the injustices done, but it sets these in an historically informed critique. It tries to get beneath the white skin to see where interpretations and perspectives of land and landscape come from. It is refreshingly honest and deeply informed, and so represents such an important contribution at this moment in Zimbabwe’s history, given the way most commentaries are presented.

On my way to Harare recently, I picked up two books in Johannesburg airport. One was Peter Godwin’s ‘The Fear’, widely acclaimed as a vivid account of the atrocities associated with the 2008 elections. The other was ‘Zimbabwe: Years of Hope and Despair’, by Philip Barclay, a former political attaché with the British Embassy in Harare. I thought both would inform me of the Zimbabwe situation, and offer some useful insights. Both are written from the standpoint of white participants – one by a Zimbabwean by birth and a well known journalist and commentator on the country writing in the international media; the other by an expatriate official of the former colonial power. While both are engagingly written, and offer important, often shocking, detail of the events of the recent past, both in their own ways expose an unreflective positioned perspective on the stories they told. The whiteness of their authorial voices is painfully present.

In a review of Godwin’s book in the South African Mail and Guardian, Percy Zvomuya, summed it up well when he notes “it’s difficult not to notice neo-Rhodesian prejudice, its attendant self-righteous angst and a barely disguised nostalgia for the old world”.². Barclay’s book showed an

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¹ <http://www.mugabeandthewhiteafrican.com/>, and the forthcoming book of the same title by Ben Freeth, with a foreword by Desmond Tutu. But see the critical commentary from Blessing Miles Tendi

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/feb/05/mugabe-white-african-zimbabwe>

² <http://mg.co.za/article/2010-11-29-the-only-thing-we-have-to-fear-is-itself>

even more alarming lack of awareness of context and politics, especially given his position. It perhaps reflects the isolated expatriate lifestyle of drinks parties, golf and trips to Nyanga enjoyed by so many of the donors and diplomatic officials overseeing aid and foreign relations with Zimbabwe. A particularly revealing episode was recounted in Barclay's book where a group of expatriate officials dressed up as colonials and went to a new year's eve party, 'larking about in costume' (p.4) as the (black) staff looked on. The extreme lack of reflexivity – on history, on social position, on race – is so evident in much commentary of this sort. Of course the abuses meted out on the white farming community and their workers (often in the background) in the last decade have sometimes been truly appalling, but I have long thought that a more nuanced analysis was required to get to the heart of this, and offer a deeper understanding than these simplistic, popular accounts.

I was so glad therefore that I also had McDermott Hughes' short book in my luggage. While not stacked high on the airport bookshop shelves and presented in a rather dull cover at a somewhat higher price, this was infinitely more nuanced and informed than the books I had bought, despite its main text being just a short 143 pages. It is of course a different type of book, more aimed at an academic audience, and an attempt to link to a wider debate about racial constructions of landscape in other "neo-Europes", notably North America. This dimension I found least convincing. The often bizarre particularities make the Rhodesia/Zimbabwe case, are peculiar in important senses, and so actually rather difficult to relate to that wider literature on race, identity and landscape imaginaries. The book though serves its purpose well as a focused commentary on Zimbabwean whiteness, and so fills a gaping hole in the literature, only made wider and more dangerous by the offerings of Godwin, Barclay and others.

The book is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the Zambezi and the imaginaries constructed around the river and the Kariba dam. The second focuses on the farms, and particularly the area of Virginia near Marondera, east of the capital Harare. Both show careful field research, and sympathetic reporting of complex topics. The characters come across as believable and human, even if sometimes confused and flawed. In the early 2000s, this was not easy fieldwork to do. People's livelihoods and sense of belonging was under threat. The confrontations over land upset long held assumptions about superiority and rights. The social relations on the commercial farms were disturbed. Once defined, in Blair Rutherford's (2003) terms, as a form of 'domestic government', where workers were reliant on the paternalism of the farmer and his family, were now being reshaped. Whiteness and blackness had to interact on new terms. This was, as the book clearly shows, very uncomfortable for many. McDermott Hughes recounts that at this moment, informants admitted to "becoming racist" for the first time. He argues that before this, through bonding with nature, "many neither feared nor loved blacks but simply tried not to think about them". They, in other words, "discounted the Other" (p. xv). That this is not described as evidence of a deep racism at the heart of white identity in Zimbabwe is to my mind semantic gymnastics. Race – whiteness – defined everything: culture, identity, landscape, livelihoods and, on a day-to-day basis, nearly all social interactions. A confrontation with this assumed social equilibrium through the land reform brought out a sharper identification of racial divides, but this was built on a sense of antipathy, indifference and separation, if not outright hostile animosity towards black neighbours, workers, business people, government officials and politicians.

McDermott Hughes argues that the land invasions were the tipping point. For some this resulted in them signing up to the new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change. One of the stalwarts of the white farming community and an outspoken activist for the MDC, Roy Bennett, encouraged many to join in a more political struggle. The unspoken post-independence deal between Mugabe and the whites was broken – you don't mess with politics, but you can continue your lifestyle and keep your land (p.131). As demonstrated in the book, many joined the opposition out of a deep commitment to democracy and development. Some paid a high price, and one in particular, Dave Stevens, was murdered for his political affiliations in 2000. But again the political naivety often shown was clearly highlighted. The fragile consensus that built the stability of the post-independence period that white farmers in places like Virginia profited from was shattered. This was going to happen at some point of course, but the apparent surprise and associated outrage expressed by informants in the book shows an extraordinary lack of understanding of the political context in which whiteness was being constructed in the period from 1980.

Part 1 of the book explores the white fantasies associated with the Zambezi. It offers a fascinating account both of the construction of modernity and (white) engineering triumphing over nature – epitomized by the heroic construction of the Kariba dam (of course mostly with black labour) – and the construction of 'wilderness' on the man-made Lake Kariba, as a place of escape, recreation and sport. This is a highly gendered landscape (a theme not really pursued in the book, as most informants appeared to be men), where sports fishing and engineering feats were very much masculine achievements of brave whites. Aesthetic beauty, conjuring up water in a dry land, and the taming of wild Africa through human intervention was combined in the image of Kariba, and so became a symbolic site for the construction of whiteness in Zimbabwe from the 1950s.

A striking theme of the whole book is that Zimbabwean whiteness was developed in relation to landscapes not people – in relation to the biophysical not the social - but the physical landscape becomes socialized and constructed through its social engagements with whiteness. This is shown in particular in both the way Lake Kariba was colonized as a playground of the white elite, and the way dams, and hydrological landscapes more generally, were constructed on the farms. A particular aesthetic is imposed on the African bush, tamed in ways that appeal to Eurocentric sensitivities, but in a very characteristic form. People's homes, their compounds, the gardens, as well as their recreation areas were all created in this way, and so these constructed – and imagined - landscapes became, as the book so effectively shows, intimately bound up with white identity and culture, reflected in literature, paintings, photographs and wider political narratives about nature conservation and land guardianship: "Whiteness and conservation, in other words, co-produced each other" (xiii). The result was conflicting visions of nature and society in the Highveld, just as Will Wolmer has so effectively shown for the lowveld (Wolmer 2007).

Part 2 concentrates on a set of farms in the Virginia area and focuses on the post-independence period, and particularly the moment when the main fieldwork was done around 2002-03. A fascinating discussion of dam building is offered, a practice that rose to a peak in the 1990s, as a defensive strategy to avoid expropriation and ensure compensation for 'improvements'. While having a political-economic rationale, the frenzy of dam building also reflected the cultural

aesthetic of developing a well-watered landscape. With the shoreline in Virginia expanding 400 per cent in a decade, this meant many more fishing grounds for the white (male) farming community. They made a “hydrology of hope, blind to the gathering dangers of African politics” (xiv). Many lost their farms to land invasions, both by groups of locals, including their own farm workers, but also by elites eager to grab the well developed land. By 2005, only 11 of the 75 farm families recorded in 2002 were still on the land. Those who remained had developed new compromises with the social and political world around them which previously had been kept at bay. Forms of patronage, deals, partnerships and social arrangements with politicians, new black farmers, workers and others were necessary. Whites had to come to terms with their minority status, and their lack of guaranteed privilege. For some in the former farming community this was ‘selling out’, a betrayal of identity and principle. For others, this was a painful realization of reality, one that had not dawned in the 30 years since Independence until the land was invaded. Today, as McDermott Hughes vividly describes, they have to talk to blacks, engage with the social world around them – and as a result spend less time fishing and constructing a parochial white conservation ethic. This brings with it much anxiety, stress and fear, as the testimonies in the book show, but also a long awaited possibility of integration – “a more candid form of pluralism” (p. xv); a vernacular solution to agrarian cooperation (p.128) which might be more completely realized if only the political conditions allow it to flourish.

Most casual observers of Zimbabwe – and indeed many who profess to comment with authority - sadly do not appear to have the benefit of such insights, drawn from in-depth ethnographic analysis. Godwin and Barclay for example, given their positionalities, cannot or will not offer a more reflective account. The appalling coverage in the international media of the last decade of Zimbabwe’s history, and the panoply of myths repeated about land reform, for example – so often based on assumption, conjecture and simple fabrication - are starkly evident in the ill-informed public and policy discourse, reinforced by the media. Our book on Zimbabwe’s land reform (Scoones et al 2010) has provoked much helpful debate, but it has also elicited some extraordinary tirades from the former white farming community. Some of these are simply abusive and not repeatable in a review for a reputable journal, but other offerings reflect clearly some of the insights that McDermott Hughes so effectively expounds in this book. I now can interpret these letters and emails more effectively, and respond more sensitively. For they often echo the sense loss - of belonging, identity and entitlement - that has been so rudely wrenched from them through land reform. They talk of how for generations they looked after the land, and protected it from degradation. They fear for their farms under new ownership and tell stories of how it has been wrecked, the production destroyed and the aesthetic ruined. The emotions of dislocation and dispossession are very real. Yet the almost complete lack of reflection on colonial history, social privilege and the political economy of land and livelihoods is also deeply apparent. Making sense of this transition, both the challenges and the possibilities of ‘belonging awkwardly’ (chapter 6), is important for all those committed to the future of Zimbabwe, black and white. This book will be very important in this on-going and difficult conversation.

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