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Jocelyn Alexander, *The Unsettled Land: state-making and the politics of land in Zimbabwe 1893–2003*. Oxford: James Currey; Harare: Weaver Press; Athens OH: Ohio University Press (pb £18.95 – 9780852558928 and hb £50.00 – 978 0 85255 893 5). 2006, x + 230 pp.

Joost Fontein

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is left wondering whether this bestselling volume will not in due course rejoin the well-furnished ranks of the well-intentioned 'How to Succeed in Ten Steps' books. If that happens, let us hope that hope will not fizzle. Perhaps, after all, Africa's agency is more cunning than the reason of statistics.

PATRICK CHABAL
King's College, London

JOCELYN ALEXANDER, *The Unsettled Land: state-making and the politics of land in Zimbabwe 1893–2003*. Oxford: James Currey; Harare: Weaver Press; Athens OH: Ohio University Press (pb £18.95–9780852558928 and hb £50.00–978 0 85255 893 5). 2006, x +230 pp.

It is not uncommon for academic books to be so delayed in the process of publication that their impact upon broader debates is lessened. Often, however, the slow process of academic publication ensures that academic books are of an analytical and empirical quality that sets them apart from the sometimes hasty publications that writers in other, less critical genres can produce with much less delay. In this case, the long period between research (which was largely done in the late 1980s and early 1990s) and publication has helped to make *The Unsettled Land* a very timely publication. After the early rush of opportunistic political biographies and other 'non-fiction' lamenting the post-2000 turn of Zimbabwe's social, political and economic fortunes, this well-researched, and thoroughly thought-out addition to the growing literature on the complex politics of Zimbabwe's multi-faceted 'land issue' is very welcome indeed. It is also a substantial achievement of academic research and writing, which demonstrates, for all of those who might still harbour any doubt, that central to understanding Zimbabwe's current crisis must be a critical and detailed understanding of the long *durée* of history, land and politics.

Alexander shows convincingly that to get any kind of grip on Zimbabwe's recent, ongoing, and 'poorly understood crisis', a detailed appreciation of the specific complexities of how state-making and the politics of land have been intertwined from the very beginning of the Rhodesian misadventure is absolutely crucial. And this is definitively not a weak argument that seeks (as President Mugabe's own rhetoric might have it) merely to deflect responsibility for recent events onto Zimbabwe's colonial past, but rather to show how legacies of past policies and contests over land and state linger on and re-emerge, even as those pasts themselves are reframed, re-told, re-imagined and re-deployed in the service of the present. As new situations emerge, and structures of authority, power and the land itself are radically changed, Alexander demonstrates how it is the many, existing 'strands of Zimbabwean state-making' that are 'combined anew' (p. 194).

This book could easily have been three books; one on the history of the shifting dynamics, and sometimes complete reversals, of government policies and programmes that have integrated land and state-making in Zimbabwean history, and two more on the specific histories of how these complex trajectories have materialized in the very different districts of Chimanimani in the eastern highlands and Insiza in the Matabeleland region. Alexander's great achievement is that this book is definitely more than the sum of its parts. Some of the best books that have been written about Zimbabwe have been 'district studies' devoted to exploring, in great empirical detail, how the realization of the great movements of Zimbabwe's colonial and post-colonial past – to

name but a few, the Alvordian drive to modernize land use and agriculture in the reserves in the 1930–40s; the emergence of ‘customary policies’ that attempted to draw ‘traditional leaders’ into government administration after the demise of the controversial Native Land Husbandry Act in the 1960s; rural nationalism, guerrilla warfare and the struggle for independence; and the different waves of resettlement of commercial farm land and re-organization of communal areas and local government after independence—actually took place, and the contests that they evoked in specific locales. But few writers have attempted the ambitious, even audacious, endeavour of doing this kind of research in two such contrasting parts of the country, or accomplished the task with such evident success (avoiding the pitfalls both of generalization and of over-burdening the reader with detail). The result is a book that will be essential reading for a wide variety of audiences, from students of African history to researchers, activists and others focusing on the specifics of Zimbabwe’s troubled politics of land—and hopefully including those commentators, biographers and others who felt compelled to exploit the opportunities provided by ‘the crisis’ to deliver their own verdict on the post-colonial politics that has played out in such complex ways across the country.

Given the accomplished manner in which Alexander’s book delivers an analysis that simultaneously explores the broader issues at stake, yet is acutely sensitive to the detailed empirical situations of specific events in her particular districts of study, it is perhaps not surprising that this book can only deal in a brief final chapter with Zimbabwe’s recent land reform programme and the accompanying ‘authoritarian’, and often violent, turn of renewed but narrowed nationalist politics. Nevertheless she uses this limited space well to demonstrate the relevance of the earlier chapters, bringing Zimbabwe’s long and complex histories of land and state-making to the very foreground of the current situation. In so doing, she both provides the tools with which the dramatically changeable and highly unsettled politics of land and authority in post-2000 Zimbabwe can begin to be understood by researchers, and also challenges those tussling with this formidable task by raising the stakes involved in the writing of Zimbabwean history and politics. This is going to remain an important contribution to the literature for a long time to come.

JOOST FONTEIN
University of Edinburgh

MICHAEL AMOAH, *Reconstructing the Nation in Africa: the politics of nationalism in Ghana*. London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies (hb \$74.95–978 1 84511 259 2). 2007, 256 pp.

This book is a PhD thesis reworked for publication. Its main focus is on what the author calls ‘the politics of nationalism in Ghana’. The book contains three main foci of interest: theories of nationalism; nationalism in Ghana; and the outcome of the 2000 and 2004 general elections. They do not fit together that well. Each is fine in its own right, but the overall thrust and import of the book is rather unclear. Yet the book is well written, except for the introduction (Chapter 1)—in which both style and content are problematic—and the brief conclusion (Chapter 10), which is whimsical and insecurely related to the bulk of the material featured in the foregoing chapters.

Chapter 2 is a long (over 40 pages), competently executed account of the emergence and development of the concept of ‘nationalism’. It is the kind of