

Whitelier than white? Inversions of the racial gaze in white Zimbabwean writing

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This article looks at inscriptions of whiteness in selected white Zimbabwean narratives. Through a reading of Andrea Eames' *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* (2011), Alexander Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2003) and John Eppel's *Absent: the English Teacher* (2009), the argument proposes that white Zimbabwean narratives situate whiteness within the context of change and marginality in Zimbabwe. The narratives deal with experiences of change and apprehensions of lived reality marked by the transfer of power from white minority to black majority rule. Our reading of *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* examines how whiteness in the postcolonial Zimbabwean state is perceived through an outsider's gaze, resulting in a kind of double consciousness within the (racialized, white) subject of the gaze. It is argued that the text depicts whites as torn between two unreconciled streams of possibility, reinforcing their sense of alienation. Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* represents whiteness as a thoroughly ephemeral experience. The meaning of whiteness is mediated through perpetual physical movement as whites travel from one point to another. Eppel's *Absent: the English Teacher* affords a rethinking of whiteness as an unstable form of identity contingent on historical and political factors.

Keywords: Zimbabwean literature; whiteness; whiteness studies; racial gaze; whiteness; double consciousness; race

Understanding whiteness in Zimbabwe

Whiteness has assumed a more visible status in Western academia following the impact of whiteness studies as instantiated in the works of Roediger (1991), Morrison (1992), Harris (1993), Frankenberg (1993) and others. In this sub-discipline, theories of whiteness emerge as conceptual models employed to unlock and explain the significance of whiteness in the present as well as the past, interrogating the assumptions underlying whiteness and making it a visible object of scrutiny. Chief among the various trajectories in whiteness studies is the rendering of race as socially constructed (Wiegman, 1999, p. 122). Broadly, 'eliminativists' and 'critical conservatists' are identified as two major strands informing the sub-discipline. Eliminativists pursue the elimination of whiteness as a concept in order to undo its potential abuses of power. Critical conservatists, on the other hand, call for a modification of whiteness so that it can survive as an anti-racist category.

In these dominant streams of whiteness studies, largely based on studies of race in the USA and Europe, we gather that whiteness, domination and invisibility are intertwined (Giroux, 1992). Whiteness, we are told, 'is an unrecognized and unacknowledged racial category' whose invisibility enables it to act as 'the standard or norm against which all so called "minorities" are measured' (Keating, 1995, p. 905). Manson (2004) explains that

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50 whiteness in the USA can be seen as an absence because whites constitute a significant
 51 majority and therefore experience whiteness unconsciously, such as when they maintain
 52 mainly or only white friendships, send their children to white schools and vote for whites:
 53 ‘[W]hite identity becomes so pervasive as to be invisible because it is assumed’ (Manson,
 54 2004, p. 30).

55 Although some of the assumptions informing mainstream understandings of whiteness
 56 apply in African contexts, there are also large differences between whiteness in Africa as
 57 against the West. Whiteness does indeed carry associations of dominance and assumed
 58 supremacy in Africa, as elsewhere; indeed, in Africa, whiteness and colonialism can fairly
 59 be seen as amounting to much the same thing. Colonialism in Africa, in its very essence,
 60 has been a triumphalist (though embattled) performance of whiteness. In African colonies,
 61 however, whites fail to achieve demographic superiority. Unlike colonies such as
 62 Canada, Australia, New Zealand and North America, white subjects in Africa come to
 63 know themselves as a distinct minority among greater numbers of black citizens.
 64 In addition, they see themselves as provincial subjects estranged from far-off metropolitan
 65 centres. Cut off from mainstream whiteness, where their dominance is more universally
 66 assumed and therefore less visible, they go in the opposite direction and make themselves
 67 *more* visible by consciously shouldering the ‘white man’s burden’ – civilizing and
 68 reforming ‘indolent’ and ‘backward’ blacks, as we know from any number of studies of
 69 colonialism in Africa. Away from a critical mass of whiteness, European settlers in Africa
 70 cannot afford the luxury of invisibility.

71 Steyn (2001), a pioneer of whiteness studies in South Africa, argues that ‘even before
 72 April 1994, white South Africans were acutely aware of their whiteness – that it was a
 73 position of privilege, the absolutely defining factor in their life chances’ (p. 63).
 74 In Rhodesia, whiteness was visible in land policies in which, similar to apartheid style, the
 75 materiality of social life was explicitly marked ‘white’ and ‘non-white’. Steyn calls for a
 76 break from dominant or mainstream understandings of whiteness by arguing that South
 77 African whiteness has peculiarities not necessarily shared by whiteness in other parts of
 78 the world. Apart from whiteness in South Africa being more conspicuous, Steyn argues, it
 79 consists of two dominant streams – British whiteness and Afrikaner whiteness – and these
 80 tributaries contend for space, manifesting themselves in divergent ways. Whiteness in
 81 South Africa, she adds, has also been forced to come to terms with ‘postmodern
 82 displacement’ characterized by dramatic changes, not least of which was the loss of white
 83 colonial power (2001, p. 155). Of course, given the historical links between apartheid
 84 South Africa and Rhodesia, whiteness in this regional context is a shared African/colonial
 85 and postcolonial experience, but it is one that cannot unproblematically be equated with
 86 dominant global tropes of whiteness.

87 In Zimbabwe, as in much of Africa, whites find themselves in a tiny minority. As a
 88 result, they cannot escape the reality of their racial marking. They are conspicuously
 89 marginal. During colonialism, whites present themselves as normative human beings –
 90 they do not see their race as a mark of divergence, but as a natural substance. Yancy (2004)
 91 expresses this by stating that ‘whiteness fails to see itself as alien, [...] refuses to risk
 92 finding itself in exile, in unfamiliar territory’ (p. 13). Even as whites work hard to
 93 normalize their whiteness by ignoring it, they take every opportunity to racialize the other,
 94 making him or her feel that they are indeed the ‘wrong’ colour. Fanon demonstrates this
 95 feeling in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) where the black man finds himself interpellated
 96 by a white child: ‘Look! A Negro!’ (p. 91). From then on, Fanon explains, the black man
 97 sees himself through the eyes of the other, struggling to transcend the external boundaries
 98 imposed by the white man’s gaze.

99 Nevertheless, the colonial situation frequently demands that whites become conscious
100 of their whiteness. Although such enunciative moments are numerous, we can cite three
101 significant ones that demonstrate white awareness of selves as *white* during Rhodesia. The
102 country's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1967 marks one such moment.
103 Proclaimed in the spirit of preserving 'civilization' and 'Christianity', UDI was an
104 entrenchment of whiteness in Southern Rhodesia. It should be understood that UDI was a
105 direct response to transitions from white minority rule to black majority rule in Northern
106 Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (now Malawi), leading to the dissolution of the
107 Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front Party was founded
108 during this period to represent white interests against majority rule. The liberation war also
109 foregrounded whiteness in Rhodesia, especially when the black nationalists began to make
110 progress in their fight against colonialism. Whites found themselves confronted by a war
111 that was largely fought along racial lines. This gave impetus to individual and group
112 recognitions of whiteness, some of which led to the hardening of colonial attitudes, while
113 others led to an exodus of whites who saw in their colour a target for nationalist anger.
114 Finally, the transfer of power from white minority rule to black majority rule enabled
115 whites to experience their whiteness anew. Independence signified the loss by whites of
116 (control of) a country to blacks. Again, this event was followed by an exodus of whites and
117 the various re-evaluations of whiteness among those who remained behind.

118 In black-ruled Zimbabwe, whites not accustomed to being referred to as such in public
119 discourse, nevertheless find themselves interpellated as 'whites'. The Lancaster House
120 Constitution, which marked the transfer of power from whites to blacks, recognized the
121 former rulers as 'whites' via a reservation of parliamentary seats marked thus. Not only
122 was this a projection of whiteness as a conspicuously visible entity, it was also a
123 construction; whiteness was being publicly proclaimed a marginal category. Because
124 whites suddenly perceive themselves as threatened, their minority status now clearly
125 demarcated, it becomes increasingly imperative that they be seen, and that they see
126 themselves, as whites. This is the period after 1980, when Smith's settler government loses
127 political power and 'Rhodesians' are transmuted into a 'white tribe' (we see such a
128 transmutation in Smith's (1997) *The Great Betrayal*). Whites, who had always racialized
129 the other, now find themselves racialized in turn, and must re-articulate themselves as
130 whites in defence of their (minority) status. Whites suddenly find their own 'colour'
131 looming large, breaking the metaphoric and literal walls of insulation erected during
132 colonialism. This time around, they try to impose an absence of whiteness by steering clear
133 of public spaces and choosing to stay away from politics and public debate. In Zimbabwe,
134 whites are constantly reminded that they are the wrong colour. They were and are on the
135 wrong side of history, having benefitted wittingly and unwittingly from colonialism. All
136 whites find themselves painted with the same brush of contempt and condemnation.

137 Suffice it to say, by modifying Sartre's assertion (as cited in Fanon, 1967, p. 17),
138 that the status of the white man in the post-colonial state is a 'nervous condition'. Vice
139 (2010, p. 326) asserts that 'feeling uncomfortable is an inescapable part of white life'.
140 The white subject is always conscious of his or her colour, much as *she/he* might try to
141 hide or escape from it. In the eyes of post-colonial black governments, whiteness is a
142 text whose idioms include privilege, exploitation of others, unfair advantage and
143 outright bigotry. In Zimbabwe, whites find themselves held in the gaze of the black
144 man through nationalist film, nationalist literature and patriotic history (see Ranger,
145 2005), among several other cultural artefacts. If, for one reason or another, white
146 subjects do not encounter such revisionist cultural products, there is always the official
147 political narrative in the media, in national museums and monuments, and the frequent

148 national holidays to jolt them into a conscious feeling of their (now very conspicuous)
149 whiteness.

150 After 1980, especially, the white gaze becomes self-reflective. Writers increasingly
151 draw attention to their whiteness or appropriate (African) whiteness as something they are
152 awarded by blacks, such as occurs in Godwin's *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa* (1996).
153 White Zimbabwean narratives, as our analysis of Eppel's *Absent: The English Teacher*
154 (2009) will show, demonstrate that whiteness is neither stable nor coherent. It is
155 historically contingent. Among the options available to whites in postcolonial Zimbabwe
156 is to Africanize or to go into the diaspora. As our analysis of Eames' *The Cry of the Go-*
157 *Away Bird* (2011) and Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2003) shows, these
158 options are not without their challenges.

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162 **Making whiteness visible in Eames' *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird***

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Whiteness in *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* is not muted. The narrator, Elise, self-consciously describes herself at the beginning of the narrative as 'the whitest of whites' (Eames, 2011, p. 8). This awareness of self as 'white' is a cross-reflexive gesture enabled by the narrator's ability to penetrate the black gaze, that is, the manner in which blacks perceive her. Sitting among black servants, Elise testifies: 'I did not feel white' (Eames, 2011, p. 8), but the black masculine gaze of the male workers passing the hut where the black women and Elise are gathered underlines her oddity, her whiteness. Though she does not feel white, she knows that it is her whiteness that attracts the black men to her. Describing this experience, Elise notes that '[black men] flicked me glances – who was this *white* kid sitting with the women?' (Eames, 2011, p. 8; emphasis added). Interestingly, the women are not described as 'black', but we gather through the racialization of Elise that they are 'not white', the new visible colour. The term 'white', characteristically, pervades the narrative, appearing in every chapter in reference to people and several other objects. Chapter two, for example, has 12 uses of the term 'white', 7 of which refer to people.

Mboti (2009, p. 14) defines the term 'gaze' as 'a specific way of looking at the world'. We gather from this definition that gazes are the property of individuals and groups from which images about the world are created. Following the era of Foucauldian studies, the term 'gaze' has also become identified, particularly in postcolonial critique, with discursive frameworks of understanding others under particular historical conditions (cf. the notion of a 'panopticon' in *Discipline and Punish*). The discussion that follows explores how the black gaze is articulated in a white Zimbabwe narrative and how this gaze structures specific forms of whiteness that are simultaneously conceded and contested by individual whites.

The articulation of another's gaze is a commitment to dialogue. It corresponds to Bakhtin's (1984) 'sideways glance' where

every experience, every thought of a character is internally dialogic, adorned with polemic, filled with struggle, or is on the contrary open to inspiration from outside itself – but it is not in any case concentrated simply on its own object. (p. 32)

The sideways glance is characterized by the recognition and assimilation of an alien glance. Elise consistently keeps glancing at the black person in search of the other's perceptions of her. Without this outsider's gaze, Elise would not be able to see herself as complex and thereby fail to reinvent herself in accordance with the needs of a changing society.

197 Eames's *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* is unique in that it foregrounds whiteness as it
 198 is construed within a 'black' gaze. Eames shows how Elise's consciousness and
 199 experience of whiteness is shaped by this outsider's gaze. Elise often sees beyond the
 200 surface of the African servants' performance of smiling friendliness and laughter.
 201 By tearing off her own veil, Elise is able to penetrate the veil of black servants who,
 202 according to her, gazed upon the whites with feelings of hatred and anger. She begins to
 203 notice these emotions, which have always been present but hidden from the myopic gaze
 204 of the white man:

205 I noticed how Saru would sometimes look at us with a cold, absent gaze, as if a mask had
 206 slipped for a moment. I noticed the way she smiled unapologetically after mum reprimanded
 207 her [...] for some error. I listened to the songs that Tatenda was humming, and I was sure I
 208 could hear some pro-Mugabe tunes in there. (2011, p. 135)

209 She finds herself in an environment that forces her 'to reveal and explain [herself]
 210 dialogically, to catch aspects of [herself] in others' consciousnesses' (Bakhtin, 1984,
 211 p. 54). In other words, hers is not a narcissistic experience and consciousness of whiteness.
 212 The other's gaze, which Rhodesian settler narratives do not generally articulate, is given
 213 unusual prominence in *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird*. The white Zimbabwean narrative in
 214 this instance complicates the black gaze by making it a subject in its own right. Eames
 215 humanizes blackness by exploring the nuances of the servants' gazes. She enables Elise to
 216 articulate this gaze in the context of her whiteness and how it is configured in narratives of
 217 nationhood and land reform.

218 In the process of articulating a black gaze, Eames dismantles the colonial frameworks
 219 of seeing both whiteness and blackness. The author compels one to regard with suspicion
 220 white Rhodesia's all-knowing gaze, one that seems to influence the perceptions of adult
 221 characters in Elise's world. These are characters that continue, quite unselfconsciously, to
 222 perpetuate stereotypes about Africans. There is indeed a conflict between what Elise sees
 223 from the viewpoint of the black gaze and what she has been conditioned to see. From the
 224 adults, Elise learns that 'black people were like children, [...] cunning and not to be
 225 trusted' (Eames, 2011, p. 14). Furthermore, if whites had not come to Africa, blacks would
 226 still be living in 'primitive' time with 'no land for farming, [...] no water, hospitals,
 227 roads, schools' (Eames, 2011, p. 14). Whites on the other hand 'were special, somehow.
 228 They did the important jobs, had nicer clothes and bigger houses. You never saw a poor
 229 white person. I thought we must have done something to earn all these nice things. It made
 230 sense' (Eames, 2011, p. 14). Elise's childhood consciousness is thus shaped by a parochial
 231 white gaze, deeply rooted in colonial structures, which construes whiteness as civilized,
 232 privileged and deservingly superior. However, Elise later recognizes the fault-lines of this
 233 gaze. It is a shrouded and myopic gaze that does not see beyond a self-induced form of
 234 whiteness.

235 The adults around Elise, still within a colonial mode of seeing, are convinced that
 236 black workers 'love' and respect them. Together with Elise, for a brief moment, they
 237 believe that Mr Cooper, the easy-going white owner of Cooper Farm, will not lose his farm
 238 because his black workers consider him one of them. She ponders:

239 I could not imagine anyone making Mr Cooper leave his farm. He was so fluent in Shona and
 240 so respected by his workers that he seemed almost superhuman. I could not imagine Lettuce
 241 and Jans and the other black foremen letting War Vets wander in and take over without a fight.
 242 (Eames, 2011, p. 121)

243 These white characters fail to see or intuit the actual emotions behind the façade of
 244 respectfulness because they cannot tear off the veils of their Rhodesian consciousness, or
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246 they choose not to. They exhibit what Pilosof (2012) has termed ‘affirmative
247 parochialism’.

248 The majority of white characters in the text believe that Mr Cooper has earned himself
249 a place in Africa by endearing himself to black workers. He often jokes and laughs with
250 them while speaking colloquial Shona. When the war veterans visit him in his office, he
251 surprises them with this deep competence in Shona and the war veterans, who find it
252 amusing, approve of Mr Cooper as if they have found one of their own. However, Mr
253 Cooper’s self-assured invincibility is a failure to eliminate the filter of white
254 condescension that is necessary to penetrate the black gaze. Even the narrator’s mother
255 is convinced that Mr Cooper ‘is more Shona than the Shona’ and that the blacks ‘love him’
256 (Eames, 2011, p. 226). Within two weeks after the war veterans’ visit, Mr Cooper is
257 viciously murdered by no less than a group of the selfsame war veterans. Elise reluctantly
258 comes to the conclusion that the issue is whiteness and nothing else. Steve, her stepfather,
259 sums this up when he tells Elise’s mother: ‘[Y]ou’re the wrong bluddy [sic] colour. That’s
260 all that matters’ (Eames, 2011, p. 267).

261 The black gaze in *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* is multilayered. It consists of the
262 various perspectives of government, the media, war veterans, random black people that
263 Elise comes across, servants, friends and teachers. The ‘official’ gaze, what one might
264 otherwise describe as an officially sanctioned, predisposed outlook on things, is the
265 deliberate result of the text’s incorporation of the voices of state media and President
266 Mugabe. Elise and her family find themselves relying heavily on television to understand
267 how their whiteness is construed in official circles. It is on television that the steady, overt
268 gaze of President Mugabe is revealed through the veiled and overt threats he makes against
269 whites. Describing the effect this gaze has on whites, Elise says:

270 The news had become a fearful, hated ritual. When we heard the familiar drumbeat, we
271 dropped what we were doing and went into the lounge. We did not sit to watch the news; we
272 stood with arms crossed and our feet planted firmly on the ground, facing it. What was he
273 saying about us today? What does this mean? [...] I watched him yell at the camera. The
274 television’s sound was muted, but I still felt each word landing on me like a physical blow.
275 (Eames, 2011, p. 184)

276 That the news had become a ‘ritual’ shows the involuntary dependence whites suddenly
277 have on an outsider’s gaze and how this gaze renders them impotent. Elise forces herself to
278 understand Mugabe’s outlook as it appears via television. She stares at the screen, ‘leaning
279 in so close that the television image disintegrated into coloured dots of light’ in order ‘to
280 see what was going on in his head’ (Eames, 2011, p. 185). The official gaze, in particular,
281 determines future plans and actions. The narcissist gaze of the Rhodesian past is no longer
282 tenable.

283 The official gaze is just one among several others. The black gaze in white
284 Zimbabwean narratives is a complex kaleidoscope of perspectives. It is multiple,
285 contradictory and unstable. It constitutes a liminal gaze, one that is never entirely
286 accommodating or completely alienating. It is always in the process of unfolding,
287 sometimes veiled and at other times explicit. We see variations in the way whiteness is
288 constructed through the gaze of different black characters in the text. In particular, Elise’s
289 nanny Beauty makes her feel one with the Africans to the extent that Elise claims her as
290 ‘my real Mum’ (Eames, 2011, p. 36). Beauty initiates Elise into African ways by teaching
291 her the indigenous language of Shona, telling her about the importance of totems, taking
292 her to a traditional healer and making her part of a black circle of women. Yet Beauty does
293 not entirely see past Elise’s whiteness. Despite Elise’s attempts to embrace African
294 spirituality and participate in Shona traditional healing, Beauty explicitly tells her ‘black

295 people's medicine does not work on white people' (Eames, 2011, p. 23), sentiments that
 296 are later echoed by Saru, Elise's maid at Mr Cooper's farm (Eames, 2011, p. 147). Still,
 297 Elise finds comfort in this partial acceptance.

298 The black gaze has a significant consequence in the lives of whites. Its net effect is a
 299 state of double consciousness. Double consciousness is defined as '[the] sense of always
 300 looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a
 301 world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (Du Bois, 1994, p. 2). It is a feeling of
 302 'two-ness' marked by the sensation of 'two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled
 303 strivings; two warring ideals' (Du Bois, 1994, p. 2). Fanon (2008) explains this as an
 304 experience of operating with 'two systems of reference' (p. 90). Although both Du Bois
 305 and Fanon have blacks in mind, double consciousness is something anyone can
 306 experience. Bakhtin implicitly validates this point when he says '[c]onsciousness is in
 307 essence multiple' (1984, p. 288). Existence, like the life of language, is polyglot and thus
 308 'serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear'
 309 (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272).

310 While whites discursively challenge the black gaze and the stereotypes that
 311 accompany it, they do not have the material means through which they can launch
 312 sustained resistance against the ways in which they are interpellated. As a result, some
 313 whites find themselves succumbing to this identity, this pigeon-hole created for them,
 314 while others flee the country. At the level of literature, white writing nevertheless writes
 315 against the grain of the self-evident myths about whiteness created within such a black
 316 gaze, such a discourse of (and on) whiteness. For example, Eames insists on a white
 317 Zimbabwean identity despite everything to the contrary upon which the black gaze insists:
 318 'I was a real Zimbabwean, despite my skin' (2011, p. 137). This assertiveness is a response
 319 that the text sustains until Elise eventually has to flee the country for Europe. She
 320 proclaims: '[A]lthough I was white and bred for cold, I was as African as the chattering
 321 mongoose that lives in a world of snakes. [...] I did not think I could live anywhere else'
 322 (Eames, 2011, p. 297). At this point, right at the end of the novel, Eames claims a
 323 transnational identity, whose basic mark is movement.

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326 **Whiteness as an ephemeral experience in Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight***

327 In Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2003) – whose title's contradiction centres
 328 on the notion of movement – whiteness traverses social borders and national boundaries as
 329 seen in the movements that occur in the lives of the narrator's family, who move from one
 330 farm to the next within Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, and from one country to another. These
 331 movements destabilize any possibility of white boundedness. Instead, identities refuse to
 332 be fixed in any one place but are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated across borders.
 333 White movement occurs at various levels in the text. It is both internal and external, and it
 334 is literal as well as figurative. As an ephemeral experience, whiteness is always deferred,
 335 its meaning never fully manifesting itself in any coherent manner. The old and new, the
 336 familiar and the strange, are held in a kind of paradoxical equipoise at both ends of the
 337 journey. It is imperative, in our understanding of whiteness, to follow Gilroy, who
 338 considers 'seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more
 339 appropriately approached via the homonym routes' (1993, p. 19). To see whiteness as 'a
 340 process of movement and mediation', something Fuller emphasizes, frees the concept
 341 from being essentialized and reified within its most alienating vectors.

342 Fuller does not claim a bounded identity. She carefully avoids the term 'belong',
 343 preferring to use a more neutral term 'live' and claiming a transnational identity as

344 opposed to a national one when she confronts the questions ‘what are you?’ and ‘where are
345 you from originally?’:

346 I say, “I’m African.” But not black.

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348 And I say, “I was born in England,” by mistake.

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350 But, “I have lived in Rhodesia (which is now Zimbabwe) and in Malawi (which used to be
351 Nyasaland) and in Zambia (which used to be Northern Rhodesia).”

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352 And I add, “Now I live in America,” through marriage.

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354 And (full disclosure), “But my parents were born of Scottish and English parents.”

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356 What does that make me? (2003, pp. 10–11)

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358 Fuller’s narrative commences by laying a challenge at the feet of real and imagined
359 interlocutors about the fluidity of white identities in Africa. In this challenge lies what
360 Bakhtin (1984) terms ‘a loophole’ that ‘creates a special type of fictive ultimate word
361 about oneself with an unclosed tone to it, obtrusively peering into the other’s eyes and
362 demanding from the other a sincere refutation’ (p. 234). A loophole is seen as one’s
363 retention of unfinalizability, the acceptance of one’s ambiguity and elusiveness. ‘In order
364 to break through to his self’, Bakhtin explains, ‘the hero must travel a very long road’
365 (1984, p. 234). Whiteness in *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight* is not self-evident. It is
366 elusive to both characters and reader, both of whom are forced to conceive it through the
367 motif of movement. Instead of emphasizing origins, the narrative guides us towards and
368 through routes.

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370 In the reading of Fuller’s narrative, we are therefore compelled to return to the
371 metaphors of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) by suggesting that whiteness is a rhizomatic
372 experience because it has the ability ‘to move between things, establish a logic of the
373 AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings’
374 (Fuller, 2003, p. 25). It is interesting, and quite pragmatic, that Fuller does not assume any
375 one national identity out of the seven nations (if we count Rhodesia and Zimbabwe as two
376 separate entities) that have shaped her subjectivity. She embraces her multiple and
377 conflicting heritages without feeling compelled to address her sentiments or loyalties
378 towards a single nation. Her birth is ‘accidentally’ English because it occurs when her
379 parents leave Rhodesia in order to grieve the death of their son Adrian, who dies during
380 infancy. There is nothing cultural or predetermined about this. The places where she has
381 lived are several and are all equally contingent.

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383 The multiple identifications in Fuller’s narrative suggest that her attachments and
384 emotions are decentred and provisional. She has embraced the reality of perpetual
385 movement. In the narrative itself, whiteness simultaneously inhabits multiple places. The
386 narrator’s characterization that Karoi, one of the places they live in Rhodesia, ‘always felt
387 like a train station platform, a flat place from which we hoped to leave at any moment for
388 somewhere more interesting and picturesque’ (Fuller, 2003, p. 48), is to some extent
389 befitting of every place she has ever been to. Even Robandi farm, which the narrator’s
390 mother announces as ‘home’ (Fuller, 2003, p. 51), does not fully claim the Fullers. It is
391 exposed to nationalist attacks from Mozambique, carries with it doleful memories of loss
392 and is eventually taken away by the Zimbabwean government. When the Fullers leave it,
393 they create new loyalties and commit themselves to new places. The farm in Mkushi,
394 Zambia, where the Fullers later live, is equally referred to as ‘home’ (Fuller, 2003, p. 287).
395 This does not mean places lived in have no bearing on one’s identity at all. What Fuller
396 highlights is that no one place is the single and absolute determinant of one’s identity.

393 Homes are also depicted as provisional and temporary. Speaking of migrants in general,
 394 Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Szanton-Blanc (1992, p. 11) concede that ‘while some migrants
 395 identify more with one society than the other, the majority seem to maintain several
 396 identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation].

397 For colonial whites, just as much as for the black Africans depicted in Gilroy’s (1993)
 398 *The Black Atlantic*, movement is a constitutive trope through which one’s race-bound
 399 identity – here, whiteness – is understood as unstable and fluid. This idea is consistent
 400 with the make-up of erstwhile Rhodesian society, which was by its very nature a
 401 community of immigrants. At various stages in the life of the colony, whites were coming
 402 in and going out again. The migratory nature of white Rhodesia is documented by Crush
 403 and Tevera (2010), who provide statistics on the several movements in and out of
 404 Rhodesia and Zimbabwe from the 1920s to the period of land reform in the 2000s.

405 White Zimbabwean narratives are replete with white characters who are on the move
 406 owing to circumstances that are both personal and national. In *Mukiwa* (1996), the
 407 narrator’s sense of estrangement from Africa leads to back-and-forth movements
 408 involving England, Rhodesia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa. In *The Last*
 409 *Resort* (2009), Douglas confesses: ‘I was a sojourner, a global traveler: at the age of thirty-
 410 four I had already lived in three countries – Zimbabwe, South Africa, the UK – and held
 411 two passports. I barely felt Zimbabwean’ (Rogers, p. 19). He rhetorically asks: ‘Where did
 412 I belong’ (Rogers, 2009, p. 19)? Not all the movements are external. White characters
 413 often move from one farm to another, such as happens to Elise’s family in *The Cry of the*
 414 *Go-Away Bird* and Harry in *Jambanja* (Harrison, 2008). Movement is therefore a major
 415 trope in white narratives, and with it one derives an understanding of whiteness as
 416 unstable, fluid, provisional and fractured.

417 The transnational condition of whiteness is a recurring response to the inability of
 418 whites to find a stable residence in African nations. In Zimbabwe, this instability has both
 419 personal and, more significantly, political origins. In *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*,
 420 the attainment of independence by blacks is immediately followed by a white exodus, a
 421 response Fuller finds characteristic of white Afrikaners whose children are the first to leave
 422 Bobo’s white-only school. Their move has ‘a sense of history’ that says ‘we’ve done this
 423 before and we’ll do it again’ (2003, p. 144; emphasis in original). For these whites, history
 424 is merely being re-enacted and in order to capture this idea, Fuller labels the new exodus
 425 back south ‘the little trek’ (Fuller, 2003, p. 144). Before long, however, ‘English
 426 Rhodesians’ also join the movement from Zimbabwe (Fuller, 2003, p. 144). Mobility is
 427 rendered as an integral aspect of white existence.

428 The narrative is an affirmation that transnational experience fosters change and reveals
 429 the mutability of (here, white) identity. The Fullers of Rhodesia are not the Fullers we
 430 encounter in Malawi and Zambia. In Malawi, a government-imposed spy, masquerading
 431 as a servant, clearly tells them ‘this is not Rhodesia’ (Fuller, 2003, p. 245), the insinuation
 432 being that their position as whites has diminished. They no longer have the rights and
 433 privileges that whiteness in Rhodesia used to guarantee them. Their impotence is
 434 underlined in this incident involving the ‘servant’, whom they have to hire simply because
 435 ‘it is required’, ostensibly by the government (Fuller, 2003, p. 244). The Fullers cannot
 436 afford to act as if they are still a ‘ruling colour].

437 Fuller inscribes her whiteness into Africa as a whole, as opposed to any one nation-
 438 state, as a way of coming to terms with the ephemeral experience of whiteness. While she
 439 embraces her multiple heritages, which include European pasts, she insists on her
 440 Africanness while simultaneously remaining suspicious of such an identity in view of the
 441 vastness and varied nature of the continent. She also recognizes the ambivalence that her

442 whiteness provokes in this regard, but nevertheless inscribes her identity in transnational
 443 space when she says: ‘I appreciated that we, as whites, could not own a piece of Africa, but
 444 I knew, with startling clarity, that Africa owned me’ (Fuller, 2003, p. 306).

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447 From ‘whiteness’ to ‘whiteliness’ in Eppel’s *Absent: the English Teacher*

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We have already suggested that whiteness is neither a condition of self-containment nor
 one of stability, despite its pretensions in colonial and neocolonial contexts to universality.
 Rather, whiteness is naked to an outsider gaze and characterized by an ineluctable
 nomadism, both in terms of physical as well as conceptual shuttling. To these
 characteristics, we need to add another: whiteness as absence. In this instance, movement
 occurs at the level of the sign, where the referentiality of whiteness experiences a rupture.
 Eppel’s *Absent: the English Teacher* (2009) is simultaneously an affirmation and negation
 of whiteness. It explodes the concept through paradox, described by its white protagonist
 George as ‘a third force, which transcends [...] two opposites’ (p. 130). He further
 explains: ‘[P]aradoxes are notoriously unstable; they keep slipping back into their opposite
 components, then merging again, slipping back, and so on. So the transcendent experience
 is evanescent, passing . . . as it comes, like twilight’ (Eppel, 2009, p. 130). To the extent
 that existence is characterized by a minimum of two conflicting voices (Bakhtin, 1984,
 p. 252), we conclude that it is a paradox. Identities are therefore characterized by dialectic
 tensions which are ever-emergent rather than sublimated. Adapting De Kock (2010, p. 15,
 see further text) to the present analysis, we therefore propose that in independent
 Zimbabwe, whiteness finds its moving focus within a context of cultural heterogeneity,
 without which it would not signify coherently at all.

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Indeed, in more cases than one, whiteness and blackness are defined in relation to each
 other in nationalist Zimbabwean narratives. In this kind of relational context, De Kock
 (2010) suggests, “‘whiteness’ as a sign should be seen as a trace and not an essence’
 (p. 15). He justifies this point by observing that

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in a context of heterogeneity as marked as that in southern Africa, the signifier “whiteness”
 (along with all its proxy signifiers), despite equally persistent tropes of sameness and rock-
 solid marks of identity, must be regarded as a shuttling moniker, a hot potato variously juggled
 and differently handled, grasped, welcomed or rendered problematic across time and space.
 (De Kock, 2010, p. 15)

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Unlike the two texts already discussed, Eppel’s narrative is more persistent in its diffusion
 of whiteness as a sign. Not only does the text avoid numerous references to the term white,
 it also provokes reflection on the interchangeability of ‘whiteness’ as a space of discourse
 and behaviour, and it questions the necessary correspondence of whiteness and white
 people, a tendency observed by Keating (1995). It is with this in mind that Frye (1992)
 resorts to the term ‘whiteliness’ as a description of attributes and practices normally
 associated with white behaviour, suggesting the possibility that these attributes may be
 possessed by non-whites as much as by whites. ‘Whiteliness’ is described as the distinctly
 negative traits that include being ‘insidious’ and ‘superior’ (Keating, 1995, p. 907). Frye
 explains that ‘the connection between whiteliness and light-coloured skin is a contingent
 connection: This character could be manifested by persons who are not white; it can be
 absent in persons who are’ (1992, pp. 151–152). In Zimbabwe, the term ‘murungu’
 (literally translated as ‘white person’), used in reference to George (Eppel, 2009, p. 18),
 also has a secondary meaning. It denotes anyone, regardless of race, who is financially
 liable at any given time. The usage of the term is quite ubiquitous, so much so that
 someone buying a newspaper from a vendor becomes a *murungu*, and when the vendor

491 boards a taxi on his way home, he/she becomes a *murungu* in turn. The key aspect here, as
 492 in the term's signifying of whiteness, is becoming, something emphasized by Roediger
 493 (1991) in his history of the 'whitening' of Irish immigrants in America.

494 While it is true that 'whiteness is not a single system of practices' (Manson, 2004,
 495 p. 29), its associations with economic and political privilege, especially during European
 496 expansion into African territories, has never been in doubt. A movement from whiteness to
 497 whiteness therefore enables a reformulation and rethinking of black and white identities
 498 such as we encounter in our reading of Eppel's *Absent: the English Teacher*, in which
 499 paradox is a significant motif. Paradox blurs the line that exists between opposites so that
 500 its result can be variously read as 'entanglement' (Nuttall, 2009), as 'heteroglot' (Bakhtin,
 501 1981), as a 'seam' (de Kock, 2001) or a 'hybrid' (Bhabha, 1994). All these concepts testify
 502 to the denial and displacement of absolute opposites. When considered in this light,
 503 whiteness and blackness cease to function as fixed and self-contained categories. They are
 504 involved in a play of instability and flux.

505 In his introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argues that 'the white man is
 506 locked in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness' (2008, pp. xiii–xiv), but in the
 507 post-colonial state the walls can be seen to be crumbling, weakening the 'double
 508 narcissism' that Fanon describes (2008, p. xiv). Whiteness is no longer insulated. The
 509 laager that protects it has been undermined. For whites to remain locked in their whiteness
 510 is self-defeating and dangerous. *Absent: the English Teacher* demonstrates that blacks,
 511 now able to penetrate the echelons of power and those spaces formerly reserved for whites,
 512 can traverse the boundaries of whiteness. They can now enter places reserved for whites,
 513 occupy positions and roles that were once labelled white. They speak English, live in big
 514 houses, own servants and drive posh cars. Such is the depiction of black government
 515 ministers and their mistresses in Eppel's text. Indeed, Fanon tells us, at the risk of
 516 sounding defeatist, that 'there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white' (2008,
 517 p. xiv). Freire (1972) also provides an insight into this trajectory when he says the model of
 518 humanity for oppressed people who have internalized the image of the oppressor is to be
 519 an oppressor (p. 22). It can be argued that Eppel shows us the extent to which the black
 520 middle class, the new rulers, have internalized whiteness and are thus failing to exceed it
 521 in their new roles as leaders.

522 The transfer of power from white minority rule to black majority rule ensures
 523 that whites are erased from public space, and yet their imprint maintains a presence
 524 that cannot be hidden. Whiteness is simultaneously a presence as well as an absence.
 525 Its absence is marked by the marginalization of whites in the Zimbabwean society,
 526 as reflected by George's experiences from the moment he is expelled from his job as
 527 an English teacher, and then arrested for unwittingly erecting Ian Smith's portrait in
 528 place of Mugabe's. Its presence, on the other hand, is seen in traces of whiteness,
 529 that is, 'whiteness' manifesting in the actions, attitudes and behaviours of the new
 530 black middle class. Whiteness, in its general colonialist sense, is forced to retreat in
 531 the face of political change. George not only loses all his material possessions to
 532 Beauticious Nyamayakanuna, one of the new rulers' black mistresses, but also his
 533 independence. In what turns out to be a post-colonial role reversal, he becomes a
 534 servant of the black woman. From the public setting of the school, George is twice
 535 forced into the isolation of prison and the permanent confinement of the servant's
 536 quarters. In this new environment, he discovers that he is an easy target of
 537 persecution, a condition formerly suffered by blacks. His name has been removed
 538 from the voters' roll, which means he cannot exercise political rights. For George,
 539 then, the performance of whiteness, considered here as whiteness, becomes next to

540 impossible. All these changes cement the white man's absence, that is, his
541 insignificance in the post-colonial state.

542 The transition from whiteness to whiteness in *Absent: the English Teacher*
543 recognizes that race, like other identities, is performed. The racialized body, like Butler's
544 (1990) gendered body, 'has no ontological status apart from the various acts which
545 constitute its reality' (p. 136). Speaking on the performance of gender, Butler explains that
546 'acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and
547 organizing gender core' (1990, p. 136). The transition from whiteness to whiteness
548 enables Eppel to redefine white people as a new oppressed group. In typical colonial
549 fashion, George is emasculated. He is referred to as 'boy' by his black 'mistress'. To
550 further underline George's subordination, Beauticious speaks to him in 'kitchen kaffir', a
551 mixture of foreign and indigenous languages that was used by whites in communicating
552 with their black servants. George's attempts to use Ndebele in speaking to Beauticious are
553 met with violent rejection. She tells him in no uncertain terms not to speak to her 'in the
554 vernacular' (Eppel, 2009, p. 116). Fanon's conclusions concerning the imposition of
555 pidgin on the colonized still holds true in this case: 'Making him speak pidgin is tying him
556 to an image, snaring him, imprisoning him as the eternal victim of his own essence, of a
557 visible appearance for which he is not responsible' (2008, p. 18). George assumes that
558 speaking Ndebele will endear him to the black community that has alienated him, only to
559 find himself alienated further. He can neither use English nor Ndebele.

560 When he allows his whiteness to recede to the background, George reconstructs
561 himself as un-white, and as part of a community of oppressed people. After his first arrest,
562 he identifies with black political prisoners, who recognize his whiteness but underline the
563 shared suffering that black Ndebele people and whites experience under the new post-
564 independent government. Referring to whites and the Ndebele, one inmate says: '[W]e
565 both lost the war of Independence' (Eppel, 2009, p. 22). Eventually, George pays bail
566 money on behalf of his black inmates. His selfless love for Polly, the black child he finds
567 abandoned in the streets, underlines his identification with the 'other' race.

568 Eppel seems to suggest that the absence of the white man from the political scene does
569 not translate into the absence of what we are here calling 'whiteness'. Black characters
570 are shown in instances where, in concrete and identifiable ways, they perform forms of
571 whiteness. Various institutions, eating habits, dress and behaviours of the middle class in
572 Zimbabwe are shown to combine, constituting a kind of 'white' visibility. These
573 behaviours and mannerisms, at once discursive and material, are at base a perpetuation of
574 (formerly 'white') colonial privileges. It can be indeed be argued that whiteness has found
575 a new home, though now it is masked, camouflaged by a black skin. So while George is
576 now irrelevant, cannot vote and is economically insignificant, having lost his house, the
577 very attributes normally associated with whiteness are now seen to be inscribing their
578 presence via the black ruling class. It is paradoxical that when George is forced into a state
579 of absence, he tries to assimilate African culture by eating traditional foods, speaking
580 Ndebele and even attaching himself to the character Polly, all at a time when blacks are
581 moving away from their traditions in pursuit of whitely things. Such apemanship,
582 demonstrated in many post-independent novels by writers such as Armah, Ngugi and
583 Marechera, is a site of black identity mutation. It recalls, in addition, the 'mimicry' of
584 Caribbean subjects in search of various forms of craven enrichment as they copy-cat their
585 former rulers' cultural habits in V.S. Naipaul's seminal novel, *Mimic Men* (1967). Indeed,
586 critics such as Fanon (1967) have shown how formerly oppressed Africans take up
587 precisely the characteristics of their former oppressors. Freire (1972) crudely states that for
588 the oppressed, to be is to be like the oppressor. In *Absent: the English Teacher*, the white

589 man's property and body are owned by the black woman. Eppel seems to be demonstrating
590 how whiteness as a sign can easily explode and take up new referents.

591 During his second arrest, George is mercilessly mocked by a policewoman, who finds
592 it satisfying to observe that he 'look[s] like a kaffir' (Eppel, 2009, p. 89). The term 'kaffir',
593 used to homogenize blacks during colonialism, here functions as a form of racial
594 entanglement, 'an invocation of blackness for a white person' (Nuttall, 2009, p. 64).
595 In George's case, it does not imply commitment to black struggle, but the diffusion of
596 traces of blackness beyond the boundaries of race: a simultaneous presence and absence of
597 traces rather than essences. Through identification, not identity, we encounter the process
598 of becoming (or, as in this case, unbecoming) white. On the other extreme, George
599 perceives traces of whiteness in Beauticious, who ostensibly 'strive[s] to out-Rhodie the
600 Rhodies' (Eppel, 2009, p. 116). It is interesting to note that Beauticious is seen to become a
601 'Rhodie' at a time when George is convinced that the sub-culture known as Rhodies is
602 'almost extinct' (Eppel, 2009, p. 10). Here, again, we see the interplay of absence and
603 presence. Whiteness, recognized as 'Rhodie', has migrated to a black individual. Such a
604 post-colonial role reversal shows how the attributes of whiteness and blackness are able to
605 permeate racial boundaries. It represents a paradox that suggests how unstable racial
606 identities actually are.

607 When George finally destroys all his identity documents, he rids himself of the
608 reification and fixity suggested by these official papers. It is also the final disavowal of his
609 whiteness, a self-induced absence that he enunciates through the symbolic destruction of
610 his 'papers', along with the decision to leave what used to be his home but has instead
611 become a place of servitude and confinement.

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614 Conclusion

615 This article has demonstrated that whiteness is a dominant trope in white Zimbabwean
616 narratives. Unlike Rhodesian settler narratives, where whiteness is rendered an invisible
617 essence, or an all-powerful medium, white writing after 1980, and more so in the 2000s,
618 makes whiteness increasingly visible. This is a literature that responds to a different socio-
619 political terrain, one in which whites are racially overdetermined by blacks, who are now
620 in a position of relative political dominance. White narratives nevertheless respond to the
621 question of whiteness in several ways. Eames' *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* articulates
622 the black gaze and how whiteness is framed within this gaze. She acknowledges the
623 limitations, if not impossibility, of ignoring the ways in which whiteness is shaped from
624 the outside. Whites find themselves amid two conflicting frames of reference, one that has
625 colonial/supremacist origins, and the other deriving from blackness, a category here
626 understood as a set of discursive and material practices. Blacks and whites negotiate their
627 almost coeval identities with an awareness of this intermeshing, or entanglement, and
628 insist on a Zimbabwean identity.

629 Fuller does not inscribe a nationally bounded identity. She embraces a transnational
630 identity that exceeds the boundaries of Rhodesia and Zimbabwean nations. Depicting
631 whiteness as an ephemeral experience, she notes how white identities are always in the
632 process of becoming. Whiteness is depicted as an ever-shifting and fluid category. Finally,
633 *Absent: the English Teacher* explodes whiteness to enable a multiplicity of referents.
634 Eppel destabilizes the association of whiteness with white people and reveals a transition
635 from the notion of whiteness to that of 'whiteness'. In such a reading, whiteness ceases to
636 function as a fixed or stable sign. It denotes certain attributes which can manifest in anyone
637 regardless of race.

638 **Disclosure statement**

639 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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642 **Notes on contributors**

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