

AUTHOR:

Kate Law¹

AFFILIATION:

¹ Assistant Professor,
Department of History,
University of Nottingham, and
International Studies Group,
University of the Free State

EMAIL:

kate.law@nottingham.ac.uk

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.38140/sjch.v47i2.7023>

ISSN 0258-2422 (Print)
ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)
Southern Journal for
Contemporary History
2022 47(2):126-128

PUBLISHED:

31 December 2022

BOOK REVIEW

Ushehwedu Kufakurinani, *Elasticity in domesticity: White women in Rhodesian Zimbabwe, 1890-1979*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2019, paperback ISBN 978-90-04-37056-2.

In *Rhodesia: Little White Island*, a journalistic account of settler society, author John Parker reflected - albeit briefly - on a typical day for his wife, Margaret. As he put it, “the domestic day was lubricated [...] by the servants and the sun. The houseboy and the garden boy meant that the heavy side of the housework was done, leaving her free to plan, to shop and to cook as she pleased. She was able to play tennis or to spend the morning beside a friend’s swimming pool”.¹ Yet, the ritual of tennis, bridge and sundowners only partly explains the privileged existence of Rhodesia’s white settler women. Like other recent monographs on the subject², Ushehwedu Kufakurinani sets out to look beyond this caricature, focusing on the ways in which white women, “negotiated, contested and appropriated” the ideology of domesticity (p. 7). Based on a close reading of material found within Zimbabwe’s National Archives, and on some interesting oral histories, over the course of eight chapters - which variously focus on theorising domesticity and housewifery, wage labour, voluntary work, and the gendered and racialised relationship between white women and African people - Kufakurinani has focused on writing a recuperative history that aims to, “insert white women into the colonial narrative” (preface).

1 J Parker, *Rhodesia: Little white island* (London: Pitman, 1972), p. 71.

2 K Law, *Gendering the settler state: White women, race, liberalism and Empire in Rhodesia, 1960-1980* (London: Routledge, 2016).

Situating his study in the broader field of gender and empire historiography, a discipline that has sought to complicate the perception of white women as either villains or victims in the colonial setting, Kufakurinani examines the historical construction of domesticity. Building on the work of scholars such as Anne McClintock, Kufakurinani details the relationship between domesticity, colonialism, and Victorian ideals of womanhood and femininity. As he notes, white women were expected to transform their male counterparts from pioneers into settlers, with the increased presence of white women in colonial spaces seen as a marker of settler permanence and supremacy. Following a tantalisingly brief discussion of animality, domestication and wildness (pp. 27-28), Kufakurinani quickly discusses feminist critiques of domesticity, but there seems to be some slight confusion here – and indeed in other places throughout the monograph – of the supposed “waves” of feminist activity in the twentieth century (e.g. p. 35, p. 63). The final section of the first chapter profitably draws on recent literature in the field of whiteness studies, with the next chapter exploring housewifery as both an institution and occupation. Although in this chapter there is the occasional elision between domesticity and housewifery (pp. 54-55), Kufakurinani carefully explores the ways in which, “housewifery was largely encouraged for and expected of married women” (p. 52), whilst also discussing how notions of a rural/urban divide affected the expectations placed on the housewife. As he notes, “the borders of home on the farm stretched beyond the corners of the homestead” (p. 72).

In many ways, the middle section of the monograph is the strongest as Kufakurinani examines women’s wage labour and their perceived role in Rhodesia’s political economy. As he explains – much like in other parts of the world – in times of war, the formal participation of women in the labour force often increases. For Kufakurinani, domesticity – as a concept – was “elastic” (p. 72) enough that women could participate in wage labour as an extension and not an abandonment of their domestic duties. Going further, he examines the limited employment opportunities for women and how these were bound by gendered ideologies concerning the “appropriate” place for women (pp. 86-87). Indeed, as Godwin and Hancock wrote, now nearly 30 years ago, the position of white women was, “circumscribed by explicit or subtle reminders that [...] [they] lived however willingly in a male world”.³ Continuing with wage labour, Kufakurinani uses the case study of women involved in public service, arguing that, “the subordination of women in the workplace, unfair conditions

3 P Godwin and I Hancock, *Rhodesians never die, The impact of war and political change on white Rhodesia c.1970-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 30-31.

of service and limitations to opportunities available to them reflected on their domestication”, i.e. the endurance of patriarchal prerogatives (p. 91).

Chapters five and six focus on voluntary work as an extension of the domestic sphere, with Kufakurinani arguing that – for the most part – white women’s voluntary organisations, “did not seek to confront Rhodesian patriarchy or radically transform the domestic ideal” (p. 119). I would have liked more on the relationship between women and white supremacy in the Rhodesian context. Although charity work is the focus of this section, there is scant engagement with the vast literature on gender, imperialism and philanthropy.⁴ The final two chapters engage – more explicitly – with race and examine the relationship between white women and African men and women who worked for them as servants. As Kufakurinani and others have argued, while many white women found overseeing their domestic workers as something of a chore, few acknowledged that their own privilege was based on this relationship. Towards the end of chapter seven, Kufakurinani provides brief case studies of some “liberal” women, but as he writes himself, “this section comes somewhat of an afterthought” (p. 179). The final chapter treads well-worn ground as it examines the Homecraft Movement, a scheme whereby white women engaged – on their terms, of course – with African women to teach them about domesticity. There is an interesting case study of the Hafsa Homecraft village, and if anything, more detail here would have been useful (p. 191).

In sum, *Elasticity in Domesticity* is an important addition to the literature which seeks to “recover” the history of white women in Zimbabwe’s colonial history, with Kufakurinani succeeding in his attempt to explain the centrality of domesticity in their lives. In addition, I’m sure it will be of interest to multiple academic constituencies, not least those working in the field of gender and empire studies. It is less successful, perhaps, when engaging with feminist thought or with underlining how these histories help us (re) think Zimbabwe’s colonial history as a corpus. This aside, I’ll certainly be adding it to my undergraduate reading list for my classes on white women and British colonialism, and I’m sure, like Kufakurinani’s 2015 chapter in Jackson and Manktelow’s edited collection, it will become a firm favourite amongst my students.⁵

4 See, for instance: H Gilbert and C Tiffin (eds), *Burden or benefit? Imperial benevolence and its legacies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

5 U Kufakurinani, “Empire and sexual deviance: Debating white women’s prostitution in early 20th century Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia”. In: W Jackson and E Manktelow (eds), *Subverting Empire: Deviance and disorder in the British colonial world* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) pp. 205-225.