



Africa Spectrum

Pilosof, Rory (2014),
Reinventing Significance: Reflections on Recent Whiteness Studies in Zimbabwe,
in: *Africa Spectrum*, 49, 3, 135-148.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-7867>

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:

www.africa-spectrum.org

Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs
in co-operation with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Uppsala and Hamburg
University Press.

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Review Article

Reinventing Significance: Reflections on Recent Whiteness Studies in Zimbabwe

Rory Pilosof

Josephine Lucy Fisher (2010), *Pioneers, Settlers, Aliens, Exiles: The Decolonisation of White Identity in Zimbabwe*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, ISBN 978-1-921-66614-8 (pbk.), xiii + 276 pp.

David McDermott Hughes (2010), *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-0-230-62143-5 (pbk.), 204 pp.

Kate Victoria Law (2012), *Writing White Women: Whiteness, Gender, Politics and Power in Rhodesia, c.1950s–1980s*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield, 249 pp.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, Southern Africa, whites, research, research methods

Rory Pilosof is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. He is a historian of Southern Africa whose main research interests are land and its control, identity and belonging, and the white settler state and its interactions with African nationalism.

E-mail: <rorypilosof@gmail.com>

There are two ways to lose oneself: by a walled segregation in the particular or by a dilution in the “universal”.

Aimé Césaire (1956)

But I wonder if in the enthusiasm of the discovery we have not lost sight of the greater picture.

Virginia Domínguez (1997)

Despite persistent questioning of its value and conceptual sustainability, whiteness studies have continued to gain popularity and momentum over the last couple of decades. Indeed, the number of works committed to the study of whiteness shows no sign of abating, cementing the discipline’s place in academia and, to some, providing evidence of its “coming of age” (Steyn and Conway 2010: 284). Yet, even as this field continues to grow, some commentators have lamented the slow pace of whiteness uptake, and have demanded more production on this front (Nyamnjoh 2012). This review article is devoted to understanding how, if at all, the concept and practice of whiteness is useful to historical analysis. It is divided into three sections: First, a background to recent developments in whiteness studies is provided by tracing the contextual shifts that have allowed this scholarship to find a foothold in Zimbabwe. Second, the paper examines how these works have sought to apply the term whiteness and discusses the innovations provided by this approach. Last, this paper ends with a review of what whiteness is, how it has been adapted to the Zimbabwean and Southern African context and how this concept can aid historical investigations into race, identity, power and privilege.

“Let There Be Whiteness”

Just after the turn of the new millennium, Suzuki (2001: 604) commented that “there is a noticeable absence of studies taking up more contemporary issues of positionality and identity among whites in post-colonial Zimbabwe”. However, since then, largely due to the dramatic events of the fast-track land reform programme, studies of whites have increased in Zimbabwe. The “overturning of the colonial legacies on the land and the heightened racialised discourse of the Mugabe state after 2000 brought the issues of national belonging generally, and white inclusion in particular, to the fore of Zimbabwean politics” (Raftopoulos 2012: 498). As I have pointed out elsewhere, the

deliberate targeting of white farmers and landowners created an international groundswell of sympathy and concern for the country's small but still significantly influential white population. Endowed with the skills (and skin colour) to access and participate in the West's fascination with white experience and suffering in Africa, these "white Africans" were able to exploit and promote their plight as it happened. (Pilosof 2009: 623-624)

As a result of these processes, there is now an enormous archive of media coverage on white farmers and their fate. Space and a market opened up for farmers and white Zimbabweans to write (and sell) their stories, which some did, with varying degrees of success (Buckle 2001 and 2002, Godwin 2008, Fuller 2003). In addition to these various forms of memoir and autobiography, there have been a number of sympathetic and simplistic journalistic accounts of events (Hill 2003; Meredith 2003; Norman 2004). By and large these works have framed farmers as reformed and innocent victims and important contributors to the economy and social fabric who have been violently ousted as Zimbabwe (read: black Africa) destroys itself.

The prime example of this is Christina Lamb's *House of Stone* (2006). Her portrayal of white farmers illustrates this reforming process, from racist to saviour and victim, extremely well. According to her narrative, the white farmer she focuses on, Nigel Hough, was a racist, often employing terms such as "munt" and "kaffir" and making derogatory statements about black people in general, but undergoes a racial reassessment in the 1990s, and by the time of the land occupations in 2000 had no racial bias or prejudice whatsoever. As part of this portrayal of reform and victimhood, white farmers were rendered as people who led simple lives and who had continued farming for the good of the country. Crucially, the contemporary white farming community was disassociated from the white farmers of the 1970s, understood as a racist, bigoted elite who had enriched themselves at the expense of the rural peasantry. The white farmers of 2000 had apparently reformed themselves and had truly become part of Zimbabwe. If they had been racist, they no longer were and were now seen as true sons of the soil who belonged to Zimbabwe in every way. Land inequalities were brushed aside as faults of the government's misrule, not as a colonial legacy, and no attempt was made to discuss the inequalities of wealth. Crucially, the overwhelming amount of coverage on white farmers created the impression that all whites in Zimbabwe were farmers, and the much larger urban populations were generally ignored. This sympathy for white farmers could itself be read as part of a global hegemony of white privilege, where the suffering of a few

white landowners eclipsed the fortunes of many other victims of ZANU-PF, such as the commercial farm workers, the urban poor and opposition supporters (Hammar 2012: 220).

Academics who have studied whiteness have directly responded to these representations and writings of farmers, seeking to provide more depth to the international portrayal of white farmers and place their story into a wider context of events in Zimbabwe. They have also sought to engage with white ideas and discourses of place and belonging. Research by Selby (2006), Pilossof (2012), Hughes (2010), Law (2012) and Fisher (2010) has shed light on various aspects of white society and culture in Zimbabwe. Hughes, Fisher and Law, in particular, have employed whiteness as an analytical concept in their studies on whites in Zimbabwe.

Whiteness in Zimbabwe

A central theme of Hughes' work has been trying to "understand how European settler societies establish[ed] a sense of belonging and entitlement outside Europe" (2010: xii). For Hughes, "they" did this by reshaping the physical landscape around them and placing themselves within this "new" terrain as guardians and custodians. As a result, "they avoided blacks, preferring instead to invest themselves emotionally and artistically in the environment" (xiii). By imagining the "natives" away, "many whites chose [...] to negotiate their identity with land forms rather than social forms". Hughes' work builds upon a number of works that have discussed how white populations have placed themselves into the rural landscape and the colonial practices that allowed them to do so (Pilossof 2009; Chennells 1982). Crucial for the "imaginative project of colonisation", white artists and land-owners created an ideal of "settler-as-nature-lover", in opposition to the "native", who had little regard for the wilderness.

Unfortunately, Hughes' use of whiteness and his assumptions about the white and black populations in Zimbabwe severely undermine the potential of his work. For one thing, there is no complication of the category of "white". While Hughes acknowledges that whites "differed, of course, by national origin, date of arrival, and place of residences", this acknowledgement is out of sync with the rest of the book. Throughout, "white" is presented as a unified and coherent entity, and Hughes falls into the trap of essentialising the white populations. Hughes stresses that white Zimbabweans need to be considered as "post-belonging" and that there is a need to understand "post-mastery" (postcolonial) forms of whiteness. Hughes imagines a process in Zimbabwe whereby a "new

form of whiteness” can emerge that “transcends mastery” and directs the white imagination “away from nature and toward society” (2010: 137). Here, whiteness becomes a cultural marker, rather than a concept by which to analyse privilege. As a result, the analytical capacity of the term is lost as it takes on a diffuse meaning and becomes a catch-all term with no solidity or coherence. This issue is not confined to Hughes and is also a problem with Fisher’s work.

In contrast to Hughes, Fisher examined how whites have interacted with Zimbabwean politics since independence. Specifically, she wanted to understand how the white community engaged with the programme of decolonisation and reconciliation after 1980 and “what were they to ‘unlearn’ and ‘learn again’ in order to leave whiteness behind” (2010: xi). Much of her work confirms a great deal of what is already understood about “whites” in Zimbabwe, such as the withdrawal from politics in the 1980s (Sylvester 1986), the maintenance of a Rhodesian identity (Primorac 2010) and the discursive hoops jumped through to defend position and place (Chennells 1982 and 2004), but the volume of responses and first-hand accounts from many of her informants are well presented and make intriguing reading. Ultimately she is struck by the paradox that “while Zimbabwe’s leaders set out to distance the country from the vestiges of colonialism, [...] ‘whiteness’ remained very much part of Zimbabwe’s national conversation” (Fisher 2010: 221). Unfortunately, Fisher makes many of the same errors and omissions that Hughes makes. She correctly points out that the vast majority of the white population is (and always has been) urban, and that there is a range of ethnic, generational and regional differences. However, none of this is apparent in her treatment of white identity or discourse. “White” is continually referred to as *the* overarching cultural and personal identity trait, and no attempt is made to complicate and disaggregate this categorisation. While Fisher employs the term “whiteness”, she offers no definition of it or what it encapsulates. From her usage, it is clear that it incorporates issues of superiority and privilege. Whiteness has to be left “behind”, or shed, like the skin of a snake (xi). Whiteness is also polluting, and those “sealed in their whiteness” can never truly belong to Zimbabwe or to Africa (120). Whiteness, then, is a condition that needs redress, and “whites” have to escape it in order to dissociate themselves from their corrupt past and become citizens of modern Africa (224).

As Law commented, at the time of her work, the only study of whiteness in Zimbabwe was Hughes’ (she excludes Fisher’s work). As outlined above, there are a number of conceptual weaknesses with Hughes’ work, which Law avoids. Law engages in depth with the con-

ceptual framework of whiteness and endeavours to come to a workable and useful application of the concept. Her work focuses on the changing roles and futures of women in Rhodesia from the 1950s to the 1980s. A key concern of hers, adopting a phrase from Cooper, is how various “redefinitions of political space” resulted in women mobilising “to claim new futures” (Law 2012: 214; Cooper 2002: 2). Law analyses how education and class were important factors in the formulation of political attitudes of women and how they sought to engage in public and private spaces. Through a variety of sources (memoirs, interviews, personal papers and institutional collections), Law examines how issues of belonging and racial identity were negotiated by various groups of white women in Rhodesia and asks critical questions of the understandings, beliefs and attitudes of the women studied. The notion of liberalism is a constant throughout the work. As Law (2012: 45-46) is aware, liberalism “was predicated on a highly paternalistic understanding of race relations in as much as the white liberals wanted to co-opt ‘moderate’ and educated Africans into the existing order”. This order was clearly defined by the understandings of whiteness of the time. Importantly, Law clearly illustrates both the changing role of women in Rhodesian politics during this contested and turbulent period and the fluid nature of gender relations in this settler society. Law has rightly noted that too much work in Southern Africa has conflated the terms “whiteness” and “identity”, and insists that the two need to be separated to give whiteness any significance. Furthermore, much of the whiteness writing from Southern Africa often “lapses into myopia with scholars indulging and exploring their own sense of white identity” (Law 2012: 45). Law also recognises that while writing on the topic is dominated by sociologists and anthropologists, “it is a literature that nonetheless raises valuable theoretical questions that assist the historicisation of a white Rhodesian identity”. Her attempts to show the changing attitudes towards work, home life and political involvement in Rhodesia, and how these interacted with whiteness issues of the time, show how potentially useful it is to provide a historical depth to whiteness discussions.

Problems with Whiteness in Zimbabwe

As these three brief reviews acknowledge, whiteness is beginning to attract serious scholarly attention in Zimbabwe, but such work is not without its flaws. Having looked at the studies of Hughes, Law and Fisher, it is clear that there is a range of understandings of what whiteness is and how to address the concept. The works of all three authors

evince a number of shortcomings in the application of the term, which leads to questions over its use and employment in this setting. In 2001 Eric Arnesen published an impressively insightful critique on whiteness studies in the US and illustrated a number of methodological and conceptual flaws in the term's deployment in American social and labour history. His piece, surprisingly, is hardly referenced in the current literature on Southern African whiteness, but contains a number of important considerations that are worth reflecting upon. Many of his observations about whiteness are still pertinent and apply to the three authors examined here. Cooper's (2005) lengthy discussions of other analytical terms that are hugely popular in current academia (globalisation, identity and modernity) also provide a useful starting point for discussions on the concept of whiteness and some of the issues associated with the term.

There are three main areas of concern with whiteness in Zimbabwean literature that I want to examine here: 1) the social construction of race and how this is undertaken; 2) privileging whiteness, both as an analytical concept and a unit of study, and how this risks confining many of the issues studied to white groups and white identities; and 3) the idea that whiteness can also be extremely limiting, because it often obscures other important categories through which whites comprehend and locate themselves and others.

1. All three authors place an emphasis on the social construction of race and realise that being "white" is not a static category. However, while all note the possible definitions of whiteness, they do not explore in detail how "white" is constructed in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe. Who decides what white is, how this is enforced (legally and socially), and what the ramifications are, are all important questions that are not addressed or examined in this debate. Hughes and Fisher both make such severe assumptions about the homogeneity of the white population in Zimbabwe that their findings and work are undermined. Both are guilty of providing no historical background on the trajectories of being "white" and how these have changed over time. Following from this, whiteness in Africa, especially in those countries with settler populations, is possibly easier to lock down and understand because race was a legislated reality. This does not mean that the boundaries were not blurred and constantly being redefined, but as Steyn and Foster (2008) have commented upon, how whiteness operated in the colonial setting offers important insights into how whiteness shifts and functions after decolonisation.

By contrast, Law provides an excellent summary on the evolution of Rhodesian identity and the fragmented nature of white soci-

ety up to 1980. Building on the work of those such as Kennedy (1987), Shutt and King (2005), Phimister (1988), Caute (1983), Chennells (2004) and Godwin and Hancock (1996), Law (2012: 29) noted that a better understanding of the various “white” minorities (Italians, Greeks and Afrikaners, for example) could provide “research that [would historicise] the development of such identities [and ...] further aid understandings of white settler identities”. Clearly, a limited understanding of whiteness during the colonial or settler period undermines much of the current focus of whiteness precisely because of the lack of historical depth and the failure to understand the trajectories of whiteness, and how these have evolved and changed over time.

However, and I think this is a key point, much of the research on what “Rhodesian identity” was and could be has been carried out by a generation of scholars that pre-date whiteness. As Arnesen (2001: 6) has commented, the construction of race, a key tenant of whiteness studies, has long been a central concern of social and cultural historians. Indeed, he goes as far as to say “whether or not whiteness scholars want to admit it, it is safe to say that, among most academics in the humanities, save for the rare crank, we are all social constructionists now”. The instance that whiteness studies is “discovering” something new and unresearched is often overemphasised and obscures much of the existing literature on white identity, the construction of social strata and the history of white superiority in Southern Africa, and as a result, a great deal of important work is often left out of the whiteness canon. As Law has shown, a large number of scholars who have worked on whites in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia have asked similarly critical questions of race and identity that should not be ignored merely because they fail to employ the term “whiteness”. There is a pertinent example here from South Africa. In a recent paper, Francis Nyamnjoh (2012: 70), who holds the chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, claimed that there are “very few studies of whiteness by [...] anthropologists” both about South Africa and written by South Africans. In addition, he asserts that what little anthropological research does exist on “whites” is unpublished, or is on non-English-speaking or poor whites. He laments:

Neighbouring Zimbabwe – where “the political disenfranchising of whites has failed to render them symbolically unthreatening” [...] – boasts more published anthropological studies of whites than does South Africa. Such ethnographies

of whites [...] argues author of *Whiteness in Zimbabwe* (2010) David McDermott Hughes, “address a significant gap in scholarship” given that “we study ‘down’ to marginal and dis-empowered people but rarely study ‘up’ to the privileged”.

He continues, stating that “the relatively little anthropological curiosity regarding whites in South Africa might suggest that South African whites are – regardless of their internal hierarchies of purity – beyond ethnographic contemplation”. In response to these claims, Isak Niehaus (2013: 119) has bluntly observed that “Nyamnjoh is wrong” and provides an extensive and impressive reading list for Nyamnjoh to consult, in order to correct the false impressions of his own discipline. Niehaus identifies a large scholarship on whites produced by South African and visiting anthropologists that succinctly and unquestionably undermines Nyamnjoh’s unsubstantiated claims. What Nyamnjoh’s comments point to, however, is that the popularity and procession of whiteness studies tends to obliterate much of the good work that has come before it, which may not use the term “whiteness”, but which covers much of the same ground and asks the same questions. Indeed, as with the case of Hughes, it could be easily stated that his work offers nothing new to debates on identity, privilege and control, but retraces familiar ground with new case studies.

2. Privileging whiteness, both as an analytical concept and a unit of study, risks confining many of the issues studied to white groups and white identities. As Hammar (2012: 219) commented in *Whiteness in Zimbabwe*:

Hughes isolates the project and politics of belonging in/to Zimbabwe as being primarily a white concern, whereas it has clearly been and continues to be a profound challenge for millions of black Zimbabweans, albeit on somewhat different political, economic and sometimes ethnic or regional rather than racial terms.

The framing of the study as one of whiteness means that Hughes is unable to look beyond his subject matter and recognise the various shared experiences. To push this further, the insistence that whiteness, according to nearly all proponents, is about studying privilege and superiority (imagined or otherwise) and how these ideas apply to the existence of “whites” offers no tools with which to compare whites with those in other privileged positions. What of the small but wealthy Indian community in Harare? Are they to be explored

with the term “whiteness” just because they are in privileged positions, or must we develop a framework of “Indianness”? The same applies to Indian communities in South Africa and the region. In the postcolonial state, new elites have emerged, often with ethnic or regional biases; does this now necessitate a discussion on “Shonanes” or “Zuluness”? Fanon (2004: 166) recognised that on assuming power, the new political entities of independent Africa often sought to replicate the systems of entitlement and privileged that existed before. He stated:

Before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie.

While this was often the case, the new elites had a range of different considerations that impacted their political and economic power, and often used the authority at their control in inconsistent and contradictory ways. The concerns of whiteness studies are obviously to be found here, but the framing of whiteness prevents any real cross-fertilisation. The ambiguities of independence, and the continuities to realities from the colonial to the postcolonial, are such that there needs to be a concerted effort to compare the issues of privilege, mobility, belonging and citizenship across various strata, including race, class, gender and ethnicity.

3. Whiteness, in the form presented by Hughes and Fisher, can also be extremely limiting. As Stowe (1999: 1359) has observed, whiteness as an analytical tool “risks dulling the historical imagination by obscuring the other equally important and generally more self-conscious categories – regional, familial, religious, occupational – through which people understand and situate themselves and others”. To her credit, Law recognised that various aspects of political engagement, public life, class and work had hugely important implications for the women she studied. It has already been noted that she elides some of the rural–urban divides, and she also fails to examine what, if any, religious aspects there were to the women’s lives, but her treatment of the lived reality of the women who are her focus, and the

limitations and confines of their agency, sets her work apart from Hughes and Fisher. The latter are unable to get behind a white category that is inclusive and definitive. Some have tried to negate these concerns by talking about “post-whiteness” or moving “beyond whiteness”. As outlined above, for Law (2012: 33) this has to do with recognising that race cannot be understood without a firm grasp of the contextual influences of “class, gender and sexual orientation”. As stated earlier, we are all social constructivists now, and thus such an assertion seems obvious. In a sense, taking into consideration the contextual implications of class, gender and the like is what good historical work should be doing in the first place. The possibility that “whiteness”, before it is “post” or moved “beyond”, does not take such factors into consideration paves the way for huge questions about the depth of such work and it flags areas of concern for historians to take into consideration.

Conclusion

For historians of Southern Africa, the term whiteness needs more considered application. As Cooper (2005: 18) has pointed out, “as one looks backward, one risks anachronism: confusing the analytic categories of the present with the native categories of the past, as if people acted in search of identity or to build a nation when such ways of thinking might not have been available to them”. The methodological shortcomings of conflating categories, cherry-picking evidence and misrepresenting historical processes is clearly evident in many of the whiteness studies examining Zimbabwe. Much more considered work on the construction of who and what is white needs to take place, building on the work of Kennedy, Law and others, in order to construct a much clearer idea of the historical trajectories of “being white” in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. As Roos has commented, very little is known about ordinary whites in Southern Africa, and whiteness offers some tools to learn about this. For him, South African historiography has “treated whites as a monolithic social group, disregarding both the ideological and disciplinary construction of whiteness, and the extent of differences among whites” (Roos 2005: 6). However, whiteness needs to offer more as a concept (and not just in terms of the number of works using the expression, as per Nyamnjoh’s request). Arnesen (2001: 6) correctly pointed out that “if whiteness is to endure as a critical concept, its scholars need to demonstrate that more than the historian’s imagination or aspirations are involved”. Currently, the work on whiteness in Zimbabwe remains uncon-

vincing and relies on too many assumptions about what the term means and the implications of its use. Cooper and Brubaker (2005: 59), in their provocative essay about identity, have argued that the term “means too much (when understood in the strong sense), too little (when understood in the weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)”. Whiteness suffers these same problems of use and there is clearly a need for an insistence on conceptual rigour to define whiteness better, so that the term becomes more than an “anachronistic, catch-all category that hovers above historical context and political economy” which “functions as an independent variable, an unchanging marker of civic acceptability to which differently identified populations at different times have gained or been denied access” (Reed 2001: 79).

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