



Whiteness and nature conservation in Zimbabwe

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Book Reviews

Whiteness and nature conservation in Zimbabwe

Yuka Suzuki, *The Nature of Whiteness: Race, Animals, and Nation in Zimbabwe* (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2017), xiv + 212 pp., hardback, US\$90.00, ISBN 978-0-29599953-1; paperback, US\$ 30.00, ISBN 978-0-29599954-8.

In December 2017, the Zimbabwean interim president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, allowed the first white farmer dispossessed under Robert Mugabe's 'fast track land reform' programme (which had run since 2000) to return to his land. Mnangagwa's act seemed to signify an important break with the past. Appearing in the same year as, but before, Mugabe's historic dismissal in 2017, Yuka Suzuki's book *The Nature of Whiteness: Race, Animals, and Nation in Zimbabwe* has come out at a finely timed moment, and it remains to be seen what role race, animals and nature will play in a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. Unquestionably, contemporary political developments have greatly increased the relevance of *The Nature of Whiteness*, which is a worthwhile addition to the existing literature about whiteness and nature conservation in Africa. The book is written very clearly and is full of ethnographic detail, which makes it empirically robust. Suzuki starts with positioning white Zimbabweans in the Mlilo Conservancy, which is a pseudonym for a private conservancy adjacent to four black communal land areas and the Hwange National Park in Matabeleland. She explores how these whites relate to nature – in particular, animals – black Zimbabweans and the national political happenings before and during Mugabe's fast track land reform.

The Nature of Whiteness is based predominantly on white discourse, supported by fascinating stories that Suzuki collected during her 15 months of fieldwork between 1998 and 2001, in which the white Zimbabweans address nature, race and also gender, often metaphorically. In the course of a few decades, most of them have changed from cattle farmers to wildlife ranchers/conservationists/safari or trophy-hunting operators, predominantly for economic reasons. In this process, Suzuki convincingly argues, white identity has been strategically transformed, often into an identity as the authorities of nature. This strategy has first been deployed against the backdrop of a global political economy of increasing wildlife tourism and, later, under the (violent) threat of the fast track land reform.

This comprehensive and descriptive ethnography reveals important information, but also left me with a few questions. For example, what is the theoretical position or argument about that which the title suggests: 'the nature of whiteness'. Although there is a rich engagement with a large variety of literatures, this does not lead to novel ideas about whiteness, about what it is or means today. A variety of literature has been used, on and off, and, although Suzuki presents an argument, this does not really add to existing literature. She explains that whiteness is a changing identity that (in southern Africa) strongly embraces 'nature'. This change is influenced by the pressure of larger political and economic processes, leading to an increase in the whites' connection with nature, and, as such, it has come with political and economic implications (see also, for example, Hughes, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe* and Gressier, *At Home in the Okavango*).¹ In our contemporary global politics, where the importance of racial constructs – and of whiteness – seems to be of growing importance, I think there is a lot we can learn from what happened in Zimbabwe and why it happened. Although I believe a follow-up fieldwork visit could have greatly enhanced the book's overall significance – one of the most interesting points about Mlilo is that most whites have now left the place – I sometimes wondered why Suzuki has kept her book so descriptive while her material is very suited to engaging with more recent debates. For example, it could very well have been linked up with contemporary debates about race and neoliberalism,

1 D.M. Hughes, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); C. Gressier, *At Home in the Okavango: White Batswana Narratives of Emplacement and Belonging* (Oxford, Berghahn, 2015).

natural capital, animal agency, or a more critical engagement with the ideas of David Hughes,² who argued that whites create a sense of belonging through nature but that this is also a strategy to create a life 'away' from blacks (several examples in Suzuki's book show very different dynamics). Moreover, some parts of the book provide information that does not always clearly add to the overall story. This happens most prominently in Chapter 5, with the descriptions about wild dogs, bears as criminal animals in the USA, the cockerel and 'miss wildlife', which are all parts that seem to stand somewhat apart from each other and from the rest of the book. I can understand that there are connections, but these could have been made more explicit.

Another, slightly lesser issue is the conflation of ethnicity and race. In the earlier chapters (particularly Chapter 2), Suzuki focuses more on ethnicity than on race, explaining the difference between white Zimbabweans of British and Afrikaner origin; or between the Shona and the Ndebele, and how these different groups of people articulate their identity in relation to each other. These differences, however, are mostly reduced to the racial categories of black and white in the second half of the book, almost as if they are a part of history and no longer important in the contemporary politics of belonging. Furthermore, the history as described in Chapter 2 is really a *human* history, lacking a description of the (white) people's relation with nature and/or animals, the central theme of the book.

In some cases, assumptions are perhaps made a bit too hastily; especially when these assumptions are controversial, more explanation and/or argumentation is needed. For example, the author suggests that white farmers are often seen as 'an archetype of rural conservatism', about whom 'it is also often assumed that anything more about them is not worth knowing' (p. 5). Some recent literature, however, has in fact shown an increased interest in these people. In another example, she explains on p. 22 that a white woman uses air spray on black labourers before they can enter her car, which makes them symbolically less dangerous. This really puzzled me, and my first thought was that, after a long day of physical work, people can simply smell bad. This does not take away the idea that the use of air freshener might be highly problematic and derogatory, but why this is symbolic of reducing the labourers' 'danger' remains unexplained, though is a highly sensitive thing to say.

The above questions are not meant to discourage anyone from reading the book; especially for scholars working on nature conservation and (white) belonging in Africa, in particular southern Africa, this book is recommended as a rich ethnography full of important issues that are crucial in African nature conservation and race relations. *The Nature of Whiteness* shows empirically very well how power, privilege and inequality are constituted, and the convictions that these are based on (racial, gendered and natured). As such, the book provides very important insights for scholars into the dynamics of nature conservation in Africa, which remain relevant also after the fall of Robert Mugabe.

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Hosts and guests and the new ethical commitments in Mozambique

João Afonso Baptista, *The Good Holiday: Development, Tourism and the Politics of Benevolence in Mozambique* (New York, Berghahn, 2017), 292 pp., 14 illus., 7 figures, 3 tables, bibliog., index; hardback, US\$120.00, £85.00, ISBN 978-1-78533-546-4.

Long gone are the days in post-colonial Mozambique, when the ruling party, the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo), regarded acceptance of foreign investment as synonymous with corruption, held tourism to be a morally debased practice and saw tourists as promoters of bad culture and prostitution. João Baptista's interesting ethnographic study unfolded in a different historical era in

2 Hughes, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe*.