

BOOK REVIEWS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

David McDermott Hughes. *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xx + 204 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$31.00. Paper.

In *Whiteness in Zimbabwe*, David McDermott Hughes offers a fascinating analysis of how white farmers have constructed and understood their role in the country before, during, and following the agrarian reforms currently aimed at them. The work's strengths—its exposition of connections between this group's environmental conservation and its "racial" identity, as well as its extensive reference to literature and photography—make this ethnographic study required reading for anyone interested in the process of colonization.

Hughes refers to J. M. Coetzee's *White Writing* (Yale University Press, 1988), obviously a major influence, in his allusion to the "dream topographies" of the country that whites have created through a combination of imagination and engineering. To feel at home, "Euro-Africans," these "children of the glaciers" accustomed to Wordsworthian landscapes, transformed the African vistas: Zimbabwe had no lakes, so they built them. In his second and third chapters, Hughes describes the massive project that spawned the Kariba Dam and its lake. With an incisive exegesis of scientific and fictional works featuring the lake, he shows how this artificial body of water has become the myth of the African wilderness. In chapter 4 he describes how, after independence, investing in major farm projects like irrigation was also an investment in identity, giving the farmers a legitimate role in the new country while they continued their drive to transform its space. In analyzing the geography of farms and "wilderness," Hughes might have referred to Raymond Williams's masterful account (in *The Country and The City*, 1973) of the ways in which large landowners in eighteenth-century England "invented" natural spaces and lost themselves in their contemplation, making an abstraction of the work and the lives of farmworkers. In its South Rhodesian version, this became what Hughes calls the strategy of "social escape" (58), which leads him to define white racism as a process of "Other disregarding" (xviii).

In chapter 5 Hughes suggests that white farmers, in view of the current agrarian reforms that threaten their imagined realm, have reinvented their

role in the “high veld” in order to preserve their farms. In his study of the Virginia district, he identifies three strategies—conservation, evangelizing, and agricultural development—that nonetheless failed. Those who were still on their farms in 2003 were “playing the game” (xiv, 101) by collaborating with the occupants. While those who stayed on the land did not come to like the blacks any better, they at least “engaged” with them and displayed greater humility.

An opposition between environmental and social aspects is present throughout the book, culminating in the conclusion that the whites must leave the bush and enter into society. This dichotomy seems rather reductive and moralizing. Hughes contends that the colonizers must display greater humility if they are to stay. But will the problem of their presence find its solution in ethics? Are the Africans themselves demanding humility?

While Hughes’s account, including a reflection on racism in chapter 6, admirably presents the white farmers’ relation to nature, his claim that this relationship has been central to their identity and that “they avoided blacks, preferring instead to invest emotionally and artistically in the environment” (xii) requires discussion. For one thing, the avoidance theory is questionable; the role of blacks in their lives has been a constant source of economical, moral, and political concern for white farmers. For another, if they are indeed avoiding the blacks, the process is more diverse and complex than simply indulging a love of nature. What does this identification with nature disguise? Hughes presents it as their escape hatch, but fails to address what they are escaping from. Finally, the white farmers in Zimbabwe are not only “nature lovers,” even if that is one of their *imagined* versions of themselves. The book invites the reader to view this relationship to nature as an accepted discourse and ethos, one that addresses the whites’ love of the landscape but above all the inherent problem of their presence on the land. The idealized “settler-as-nature-lover” could then be considered just *one* response among many to the need for an almost Biblical justification for their presence. It would be one aspect of the white farmers’ existential dilemma, as manifested also in areas beyond Hughes’s focus, such as their relationship to the farmworkers and to religion.

Despite its shortcomings, the book makes a major contribution to the study of settlers, particularly in the attention it pays to the colonial imagination and determination to construct a home that is specifically theirs and not the Africans’. Hughes deserves praise for offering a refreshing, in-depth reflection on the relation between racial identity and space, making it possible to view the white farmers’ investment in the space as a means to be included in the history and compensate for their lack of a past.

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