

# **The Art of Belonging: Whites Writing Landscape in Savannah Africa**

DAVID McDERMOTT HUGHES

*Department of Human Ecology, Rutgers University*

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“I had a farm in Africa ...[where] the views were immensely wide. Everything that you saw made for greatness and freedom, and unequally nobility ... you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be.”

Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa* (1937:3-4).

“I have sometimes thought since of the Elkingtons’ tea table – round, capacious, and white, standing with sturdy legs against the green vines of the garden, a thousand miles of Africa receding from its edge. It was a mark of sanity ...”

Beryl Markham, *West with the Night* (1942:60)

“Their frontier became a heaven and the continent consumed them ... And they can never write the landscapes out of their system.”

Breyten Breytenbach, *The Memory of Birds  
in Times of Revolution* (1996:108)

Imperial colonizers do not seize land with guns and plows alone. In order to keep it, especially after imperial dissolution, settlers must establish a credible sense of entitlement. They must propagate the conviction that they belong on the land they have just settled. At the very least – and this may be difficult enough – settlers must convince themselves of their fit with the landscape of settlement. In other words, all the while

*excluding* natives from power, from wealth, and from territory, overseas pioneers must find a way to *include* themselves in new lands. Two factors interfere with such public and private persuasion: pre-existing peoples and the land itself. Known as natives, Indians, aboriginals, and so on, the people *settled-upon* clearly belong more. If settlement requires a contest of ancestral ties, then settlers will surely lose. The landscape itself also competes – in an oblique fashion – with settlers. As they seek to understand, name, domesticate, and farm the outback, the bush, the desert scrub, etc., those ecosystems spring traps and surprises. On riverless expanses, for example, the frontiersman finds he can neither till the soil nor mark a boundary. Amid failed crops, doubt and ambivalence overwhelm the hubris of settlement. White African writers have taken this uncertainty as their imaginative terrain. “[L]iterature,” as Edward Said argues, “participat[es] in Europe’s overseas expansion and ... creates ... ‘structures of feeling’ that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire.”<sup>1</sup> Or – in the more quotidian project of settlement – writers muddle through, alternately promoting and questioning their central conceit. Overall, the settler canon has assisted settlement. By writing and in writing, extra-European whites have forged senses of belonging more enduring and resilient than empire.

Nowhere has this process of literary enracement proved more necessary than in Anglophone east and southern Africa. The settler colonies of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) suffered from what Dane Kennedy (1987) calls a

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<sup>1</sup> Said (1993:14). Regarding “structures of feeling,” see Williams (1977:132-35).

“demographic conjuncture”: whites sought to monopolize politics and the economy as settlers had done in the United States and Australia, but they immigrated in numbers far smaller than on those frontiers. White enclaves never topped 1% of national population in Kenya, 5% in Zimbabwe, and 20% in modern South Africa (Crapanzano 1986:xiv-xv; Godwin and Hancock 1993:287; Kennedy 1987:1; West 1965:inside covers). It was lonely atop the colonial pyramid. To make matters worse, British colonial officers, in contrast to their French or Dutch counterparts (Stoler 2004), sought to prohibit rather than shape social and sexual intercourse. The metropole closed even the narrow channels of assimilation whereby select blacks associated with whites in French- and Portuguese-ruled Africa. Formalized in South Africa as Apartheid, such regulations kept inter-marriage to a minimum.<sup>2</sup> Whites did not invite even the most “civilized” blacks to dinner, and few learned African languages.<sup>3</sup> In this context of self-imposed isolation, writers implicitly took responsibility for adapting Euro-Africans to Africa. “All white African literature,” writes Doris Lessing “is the literature of exile, not from Europe but from Africa.”<sup>4</sup> It is also, broadly speaking, an environmentalist literature. Karen Blixen for instance, who distinguished herself from other Kenya settlers by her philanthropy towards Africans, still writes more, and more eloquently, about landscape than about people. By loving the land, writers and their readers overcame the sense of territorial

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<sup>2</sup> Mamdani (1996) characterizes Apartheid as more explicit, but not fundamentally different from, indirect rule elsewhere on the continent. Where it occurred, assimilation affected too few blacks to undercut race-based oppression. From the white point of view, however, the mere possibility of mixed society – as in French- and Portuguese-ruled Africa – could not have affected the ideology of rule.

<sup>3</sup> Many Kenyan whites, however, did speak the East African trade language, Swahili. Southern African whites frequently learned a far less elaborate, command-based lingua franca known as Chilapalapa or “kitchen kaffir” (Jeater 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Lessing (1958:700). Hughes (2005:160-61) discusses the use of a continental geographical scale among white writers and conservationists.

exile. Also, by loving the land, settlers put out of their minds the social exile in which they lived. Colonial literature, then, promoted a selective assimilation to Africa.

With the onset of nationalism in the 1950s, black majorities thrust themselves into white consciousness as never before. Settler populations ceded power from north to south: Kenya in 1963, Zambia in 1965, Zimbabwe in 1980, and South Africa in 1994. In losing power, whites also lost the naturalizing power of their imperial and colonial states. Post-colonial government confronted whites and their privileges as contradictions to be resolved with varying degrees of tolerance and force. Little compulsion was required in Kenya's "white highlands." As an elite class of people – frequently gentlemen farmers - Kenya settlers repatriated themselves in the 1960s and 1970s with comparative ease. The harder working, more invested Euro-Zimbabweans farmers mounted a stiffer resistance. Whites clung to their parcels through the incomplete land reform of the 1980s. In 2000, however, a paramilitary program of farm occupations sent most of them off the land to the main cities or abroad. Meanwhile, since the advent of black rule in 1994, South African whites have also been slowly emigrating. Surprisingly, the apparent adversities of black rule have largely strengthened whites' commitment to environmentalism, outdoor recreation, and nature in general (Uusihakala 1999:37). They still lead most regional conservation NGOs and dominate the eco-tourism business. Symbolically, whites claim African wilderness as their own. They have mastered the ways in which "race and nature work as a terrain of power" (Moore, Pandian, and Kosek 2003:1). Nature naturalizes better than empire ever did.

Children of the glaciers

European migrants arrived in Africa with an ambiguous environmental heritage. On the one hand, since at least the Enlightenment, they had treated their surrounds as purely material. Modern rationality disenchanting forest and mountain alike, reducing land to the status of a useful object (Glacken 1967:462-63). That utilitarian stance equipped Europeans quite well for travel: long-distance movement only implied a change of practical context – exchanging one agrarian system for another - not a reorganization of self or values. Even the value-laden dictates of Christianity facilitated relocation. Portable blessings could render any water – not merely that of known sacred springs - suitable for the sacraments. In Word and worldview, then, Europeans built themselves for mobility. But, on the other hand, learned ideas could not altogether overrule the accumulated weight of lived experience. Residence in Europe had imprinted Europeans with an affinity for European landscapes. And, fortuitously, those landscapes differed markedly from much of the rest of the world: glaciers had scoured and molded them, a past that northern Eurasia shared only with the swathe of the Americas.<sup>5</sup> Such topography did not determine white attitudes or actions. An intertwinement with this environmental history did, however, equip whites’ rather better for staying at home than for traveling, especially to the tropics. In moving south, they would inevitably cross a profound divide. White settlement in Africa, then, has unfolded as a contest between these two forms of heritage: the engine of whites’ capacity to adapt to new geographies against the brakes of whites’ geographical custom.

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<sup>5</sup> At their height, glaciers reached to roughly the 50th parallel in Europe and the 40th in North America.

That custom or sensibility centered on shoreline. Above all other factors, ice and temperate rainfall produced long and intricate boundaries between land and water.<sup>6</sup> Glaciers, melting for the last time 10,000 years ago, sent water in channels to the coast, indenting it at regular intervals. “The kingdom by the sea” – in Paul Theroux’s (1983) phrase for Britain – weaves in and out of the Atlantic from peninsula to inlet to spit. This baroque curvature continues inland as well. Glacial meltwater unable to reach the sea formed an inverse archipelago of interior lakes, and year-round rainfall has kept them full. They are also full of meaning. Lakes feature in a body of European literature far too vast to summarize here. In English, perhaps no author has described a lacustrine landscape with greater directness, precision, and confidence than William Wordsworth.<sup>7</sup> “It is much more desirable, for the purposes of pleasure,” Wordsworth opines in an 1822 guide to the Lake District, “that lakes should be numerous and small or middle-sized than large, not only for communication by walks and rides, but for variety.” The optimal shoreline, he continues, “is also for the most part gracefully or boldly indented” (Wordsworth 1991[1822]:22-23). Such an intricate boundary of land and water added variation and interest to a landscape. In the previous century, Edmund Burke had already established a notion of beauty in landscape painting based on moderation – as opposed to the sublime or terrifying. Wordsworth and other Britons applied that standard to the aquatic lattice around, in effect describing a geometry of beauty. Altogether, an alternation between wet and dry, lowland and upland, vale and ridge, glade and grove pleased the farmer and painter alike.

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<sup>6</sup> See Blackbourn’s (2006) recent environmental history of Central European post-glacial wetlands.

<sup>7</sup> Williams (1973:127). For wider-ranging treatments of the importance of water in western thought and symbolism, see Orlove (2002:xi-xxvii), Raffles (2002:180-82), and Schama (1995:245ff)

The tropics violated these norms in every way. After a period of Iberian conquest and monopoly, Northern Europeans explorers began to visit and study Central and South America in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They saw an extreme landscape whose bizarre behavior required further explanation. According to the *philosophe* Buffon, excessive, equatorial rainfall enervated people, plants, and animals (Gerbi 1973:14). Neither crops nor livestock would fare well. At root, in the theory of the day, the land itself was still drying out, having only recently emerged from the ocean. The Andean cordillera provided further evidence of the Americas' youth. It rose jaggedly upwards - far higher than European peaks (Gerbi 1973:62). Such unweathered, sublime geology indicated poor prospects for settlement and other forms of domesticity. Australia, which broke next into European consciousness, presented the opposite problem. Nineteenth-century explorers and surveyors found the continent too lacking in jaggedness: its dry outback contained few mountains and fewer rivers or lakes. "Australia is ... indescribable," writes Paul Carter, summarizing the disappointment, "In so far as its nature is undifferentiated, it does not have a distinct character" (Carter 1987:44). "Australians are still learning to see where it is that they live," writes another local critic (Seddon 1997:71). Africa has provoked a similar puzzlement. Much of the land mass sits on a peneplain of between 1000 and 2000 meters elevation. Few mountains rise, and, far south of the glaciers' imprint, few depressions hold water. Sublime in its sheer monotony, Africa stretches mile after bloody mile. This judgment - whose details and varieties will become clear below - runs throughout the white canon. A continuous, though attenuating, Wordsworthian taste has informed and shaped white expression in and about Africa.

Anglophone white writers have, therefore, devoted considerable attention to specific landscapes and the problems they pose. Surprisingly perhaps, they have largely passed over the parts of Africa most resembling Britain – Kenya’s nearly Scottish Aberdare Mountains, its central “white highlands,” and Zimbabwe’s Eastern Highlands.<sup>8</sup> The colonial canon describes this landscape, but it devotes at least as many pages to the lower-lying, hotter, and dryer savannah to the north and south.<sup>9</sup> This flat grassland, interspersed with bushes and short trees, recurs in settler fiction and memoir, disrupting Euro-African assimilation. “A white child,” explains Lessing writing at mid-century:

“opening its eyes curiously on a sun-sufused landscape, a gaunt and violent landscape, might be supposed to accept it as her own, to the msasa trees and the thorn trees and familiars... This child could not see a msasa tree, or the thorn, for what they were. Her books held tales of alien fairies, her rivers ran slow and peaceful, and she knew the names of the little creatures that lived in English streams, when the words ‘the veld’ meant strangeness, though she could remember nothing else ... [I]t was the veld that seemed unreal; the sun was a foreign sun ..”<sup>10</sup>

More than fifty years later, the same alienation prevails. Lauren, sister of the Zimbabwe-born memoirist, Wendy Kann, has died in Zambia. Kann looks for a gravesite on the farm:

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<sup>8</sup> The white highlands, in fact, contain three lakes – Naivasha, Nakuru, and Elementeita – around which whites have clustered. Hughes (2006c) discusses white literature on a part of African that *became* like Britain: Zimbabwe’s Kariba reservoir.

<sup>9</sup> Beryl Markham (1942:141), for instance, marginalizes Molo in the following terms: “... I move in a place no longer Africa. A country laved with icy streams, its valleys choked with braken, its hills clothed in the green heather that wandered Scotsmen sing about, seems hardly Africa.”

<sup>10</sup> Lessing (1951:49-50). For a fuller, richer explanations of this short story and related themes, see Hotchkiss (1998) and Wagner (1994:181-83).



“We wanted a beautiful place - a place that reflected Lauren’s soul. ... We tilted our heads and squinted at each side, trying to see beyond the bush ... I turned to one side and strode deep into the long grass looking for something, anything. I finally found a tall forked msasa tree with two smaller msasas and spindly acacia close by. If you ignored the scrub and thorns, together they made a circle, a canopy, something like a glade” (Kann 2006:33).

Can white souls rest in African soil? They can, Kann suggests, but only with the assistance of a vivid imagination and good hiking boots.

If contemporary whites worry about the spirit in Africa, earlier settlers obsessed about the body. From the pioneer days of the 1890s, Kenya and Rhodesia presented unprecedented environmental challenges. Theories of “non-cosmopolitanism” warned bluntly that Northern people would die in the tropics, known as the “torrid zone” (Redfield 2000:192-96). “[T]he white man must be content to settle there temporarily [and] to teach the natives to dignity of labour,” admonished E.J. Ravenstein, a leading proponent of non-cosmopolitanism. Yet, in 1890, Ravenstein admitted to “an exception to the rule”: tropical uplands (Ravenstein 1891:31; cf. Bell 1993:331). With cooperation from the climate, altitude could mitigate the effect of latitude. That very year, the British South Africa Company sponsored a pioneer column to advance north from South Africa into what is now Zimbabwe’s highveld. In the same decade, British settlers established Kenya’s white highlands. Above the 1000-meter contour in Zimbabwe and above 1500 meters in Kenya, whites could and did put down roots. Still, fear persisted. The sun – among many threats from nature – seemed to beat down on settlers’ heads. Pioneers feared skin damage and worse: solar-induced sterility (Kennedy 1987:115). Those

settlers who could not avoid solar exposure wore pith helmets and clothed themselves from head to toe. “No medieval knight could have been more closely armoured ... against the rays of the sun,” writes Elspeth Huxley (1959:7), in a memoir of her childhood on Kenyan farms in the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>11</sup> By Huxley’s adulthood, most whites had shrugged off these anxieties. Still, the sense of quarantines imposed and lifted fixed whites’ attention on medical geography. Huxley, who became the literary voice of white Kenya, later reflected, “I do not think it occurred to anyone that politics, not health, would decide the issue” of whether it was “a white man’s country” (Huxley 1985:54; cf. Huxley 1967).

How, then, can one account for the comparatively effortless success of white spirits and white bodies in the western United States? There, in unglaciated, southerly landscape quite different from the Wordsworthian ideal, Anglophones have established a sense of belonging so total as to be nearly beyond question. The first anglophones found Southern California as bizarre as the outback. Its canyons and arroyos evoked a “deep mediterraneaneity” – understood by Spanish colonizers but unintelligible to children of the glaciers (M. Davis 1998:10-14). To make it intelligible, “A process of westernization of the perceptions ... has to happen,” argues Western author Wallace Stegner, “before the West is beautiful to us. You have to get over the color green; you have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns; you have to get used to an inhuman scale; you have to understand geological time” (Stegner 1992:54). Assimilation, in other words, has been tough but doable – all the more so because of favorable political and medical conditions. European rhino viruses wiped decimated native peoples even before settlers and armies could finish the job with outright genocide and expulsion. In demographic

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<sup>11</sup> Huxley lived at Thika, east of Nairobi and just outside the more hospitable white highlands.

terms, much of North America became a “neo-Europe” (Crosby 1986:2). On the cultural plane, white’s forgetfulness and imagination promoted the same transformation. John Muir and Ansel Adams, for instance, represented Yosemite Valley – not as vacated, emptied land - but as *simply* empty, virgin land (Cronon 1995; Solnit 1994:215-220). The elimination of people, in other words, enabled a similar evacuation of environmental history and meaning. Settlers filled the void with invented traditions of wilderness and environmental stewardship (Adams and McShane 1992; Neumann 1998; Schroeder 1999). Those investments paid hefty dividends. Conservation allowed Midwestern environmental essayist Wes Jackson to, as he puts it, “become native to this place” (Jackson 1994). Thus, beyond the imprint of the glaciers, whites did assimilate to the land – assisted by political and demographic conditions favorable to them. In Africa, could they achieve the same belonging without those advantages?

### Escaping African People

For European overseas settlers, bilateral human-land relationships frequently emerged from more complex triangular systems. In a comparison of the United States and South Africa, for instance, George Fredrickson emphasizes a process with three terms: *colonizers’* “struggle with the *original occupants* for possession of the *land*” (Fredrickson 1981:4; emphasis added). Before genocide emasculated the original occupants, Euro-Americans *did* engage with them. In the Great Lakes region, 17<sup>th</sup>-century settlers and Indians established a “middle ground” of shared politics, kin networks, and even religion (R. White 1991). Surely, white Africans could have done the same. The earliest – one might say, proto-imperial – settlers did intermarry. The

Portuguese *prazeiros* of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Mozambique ascended to local chiefships, eventually losing all European ties (Isaacman and Isaacman 1975). Much later, however, colonial governments imposed a strict racial order, segregating blacks into rural reserves and urban townships and reducing inter-cultural contact to a minimum. They could not segregate history and meanings. In many rural areas amid and around white settlement, memories of natives – and often natives themselves - litter the landscape. Upon entering the native reserve, the girl in Lessing’s story experiences “meaningless terror” and senses “a queer hostility in the landscape ...it seemed to say to me: you walk here as a destroyer” of African society (Lessing 1951:56,58). Africans, as the third point of the triangular relationship, would not go away. With effort, though, writers more loyal to the project of settlement than Lessing could minimize and ignore them. Thus, the bulk of Euro-African canon escapes African people while embracing African land.

No novel explains this evasion more explicitly than Francesca Marciano’s recent work, *Rules of the Wild* (1999). Loosely autobiographical, the narrative follows an Italian immigrant, Esmé, as she enters and assimilates to the white, largely conservationist community of Nairobi. First, the land startles her. “You are flattened between the immensity of the air above you and the solid ground. It’s all around you, 360 degrees” (Marciano 1999:15). In contrast to the Italian coastal geometry of beauty, the Northern Frontier District displays a “absolute geometry” of space and unbroken lines (Ibid:16). Esmé falls for a safari guide of settler stock, Adam. Later, in the same district, she marvels at Adam’s sense of belonging, an entitlement he shares with another Kenya-born white, Iris.

“The[ir] conversation made me think of the Aborigines in Australia who believe that the earth was shaped because it had been sung. ... That night, Adam and Iris sang their Northern Territory songlines, as if they had both owned it by birthright ...” (Ibid: 93)

Can whites become indigenous?<sup>12</sup> At one with the land, Adam suggests such a possibility, but Esmé soon sees through him and his kind.

“For the majority of people, *whites*, I mean, the whole point of living in this country is to avoid the sight of other human beings ... If we could press a button and pulverize the humans who happen to spoil the view, we’d happily press it. That’s the whole point of going on safari, isn’t it?”<sup>13</sup>

Esmé replaces Adam with a journalist and social critic, ultimately losing many of her friends. Marciano herself appears to have upset a good proportion of Nairobi whites who recognized themselves under pseudonyms.<sup>14</sup> Many, perhaps, also resented her for raising precisely the question usually dodged: “How does a white person live in a black country? ... Where do we stand in relation to each other” (Ibid:100)? For her, at least, it is not enough simply to stand on the savannah, enjoying the view.

In the mainstream of white literature, empty land discourse plays a prominent role. Notions of uninhabited space have, of course, accompanied and justified Europe’s global expansion for centuries. In New England, for example, 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritans considered the landscape to be utterly wild. Indians lived there, but they were not cultivating fixed, fenced parcels. In other words, they did not “occupy” the land, and

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<sup>12</sup> See Dominy (2001:207ff) for an account of white New Zealand sheep-herders’ discourse of autochthony.

<sup>13</sup> Marciano (1999:194); emphasis in original. Regarding conservationist misanthropy, see Guha (1997).

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, Harare, 15 May 2006.

colonists felt unconstrained by their presence (Cronon 1983:57). Later chroniclers often erased that presence altogether, transferring a myth of empty land to African frontiers (Fredrickson 1981:35). This precedent of the “New World” surfaces almost imperceptibly in Huxley’s reminiscences. “Each time you came to [a glade],” she recalls, “you had the feeling that you were the first person to stand upon that verge and gaze across the tufted grasses, like Cortez and the Pacific, and that some extraordinary prehistoric animal would be browsing there” (Huxley 1959:222). She forgets both the Aztecs massacred by Cortez and the Kikuyu who surrounded her own farm, emphasizing instead a notion of Pleistocene biodiversity.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Africa came to epitomize what Anne McClintock calls “anachronistic space,” that is, a zone stuck “in a permanently anterior time” (McClintock 1995:41,30). Writing in 1942, for instance, Kenyan settler Beryl Markham finds the hunting grounds east of Nairobi:

“formless. ... it was the way the firmament must have when the waters had gone ... It was an empty world because no man had yet joined sticks to make a house or scratched the earth to make a road or embedded the transient symbols of his artifice in the clean horizon.”<sup>16</sup>

This ideal of an unblemished void, in other words, suggested the persistence of Biblical or otherwise primitive states. It swept the clutter of Africans – actually traversing the savannah with cattle and goods – out of whites’ imagination.

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<sup>15</sup> Earlier, in fact, Huxley had written a novel exclusively about Kikuyu, *Red Strangers* (1939), but she understood that work as exceptional. Later, the author described *Red Strangers* as “a foolhardy idea, since I doubt whether any member of one race can get under the skin of people of another race and culture” (Huxley 1985:182).

<sup>16</sup> Markham (1983[1942]:236). In the same vein, Italian journalist Alberto Moravia spies in Tanzania, “an immense panorama, typically African, in other words prehistoric; a panorama of a kind, that is, to suggest ... dinosaurs, mammoths, flying dragons” (Moravia 1974:26; cf. Pratt 1992:219).

Other aspects of the black presence were harder to ignore. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, blacks “rose” against settlers and their institutions. Most notably, Southern Rhodesia’s 1896-1897 *Chimurenga* killed 10% of the settler population (Kennedy 1987:129; Ranger 1967). Even when pacified as a group, black individuals still generated a sense of threat. The small white population depended on blacks for *all* manual labor. Blacks, therefore, circulated in all white spaces, including the home when the man of the house was away. How could settler society protect itself from the “black peril” of an African man raping a European white? In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both Rhodesia and Kenya lurched between “outbursts of public hysteria.” If a white woman was involved, black crime ranging from burglary to “insults” could easily generate a charge of attempted rape (Kennedy 1987:141-46). By World War II, however, whites seemed to have regained a sense of proportion. Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950) complicates the black peril: a manservant remains impassive as the farm wife, going mad, undresses before him. Later, without sexual motive, he kills her. Similarly, in Daphne Rooke’s *Mittee* (1952), two black men terrorize white women without, however, laying a hand on them. Thereafter, rape virtually exited the scene of white fantasy. The subject only reappeared in literature when Coetzee’s *Disgrace* – in which black men gang-rape a white woman - jolted the South African public in 1999.<sup>17</sup> For a half-century, then, white writers forewent the most lurid fantasies of multiracial life. They also forewent the more prosaic realities. “We actually see blacks differently,”

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<sup>17</sup> Armstrong’s war novel *Operation Zambezi: the Raid into Zambia* recalls guerrillas’ downing of a civilian passenger plane in 1978 regarding which “there was evidence to suggest that “female survivors had been raped” upon crash-landing (Armstrong 1979:5). Although guerrillas did shoot surviving passengers, Armstrong appears invented the sexual assault (Godwin and Hancock 1993:228). See Graham (2003) for a discussion of Coetzee’s treatment of rape in *Disgrace*.

confessed Gordimer in 1983, “which includes, [due to racial segregation] not seeing, not noticing their unnatural absence ...” (Gordimer 1983; cf. Crapanzano 1986:39).

In Kenya, whites chose not to see – or not to represent in literature – the enormity of black nationalism, black rule, and friendship with blacks. Writers responded to political agitation with irony and indirection. Appearing in 1959, Huxley’s childhood memoir, *Flame Trees of Thika*, foreshadows the Mau Mau revolt of 1951-54 in only the most oblique fashion. Just arrived from England in 1914, Lettice remarks on whites’ over-confidence : “why people should be so much more nervous about wild animals ... than about other human beings, I’ve never been able to understand” (Huxley 1959:67). Only long after the event, in the third book of the trilogy begun with *Flame Trees*, did Huxley address the reality of Mau Mau and the fantasy of anti-white reprisals - “the night of the long knives” (Huxley 1985:203). By default, then, the job of describing Mau Mau and black rule – as it emerging - fell to an American, Robert Ruark.<sup>18</sup> His novels, *Something of Value* and *Uhuru*, focus unremittingly on terror inflicted by blacks. In this context, Ruark almost criticizes whites’ passion for nature. Declares an American tourist: “If Kenya white people had devoted a fraction of the time and effort you spend trying to convince a lousy leopard to come to a tree so you can shoot him ...[to] trying to make *people* out of savages ... you wouldn’t have all these troubles in Africa today.” (Ruark 1962:310; emphasis in original). After the “troubles” culminating in Independence, many white Kenyans reached across the color bar. Yet, to the extent that it exists, black-white friendship has hardly disrupted the escapist narrative. Perhaps it requires too much

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<sup>18</sup> Maughan-Brown (1985:15) includes Ruark in his treatise on Kenyan literature due to his immense influence in and regarding the colony – his “oracular status in some circles in South Africa.” Indeed, the Zimbabwean author Keith Meadows (2000:284) displays an obvious respect for Ruark.



emotional and representational work – as compared with the land. “Untouched landscapes are undemanding,” writes Kuki Gallman, who moved from Italy to a northern ranch in 1970, eventually becoming a noted conservationist. When her son died, “Nothing was expected of me by the ancient silence of the mountains and of the mysterious gorges. In their unjudging, harmonious existence I found again my own identity and my place” (Gallmann 1991:229). Grieving, Gallman seeks comfort, not among Kenyans, but in an empty land.

To the south of Kenya, the prolongation of black struggle stimulated more social engagement among writers – but perhaps less among ordinary whites. The South African pastoral cannon of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century had virtually ignored blacks. That literature presumed – as J.M. Coetzee, the country’s leading literary critic writes – that “the ultimate fate of whites was going to depend ... on an accommodation with the South African landscape” (Coetzee 1990:8). The inter-racial, cultural landscape only broke into writers’ awareness in 1960 – the same year as Kenya’s independence – when police killed peaceful demonstrators at Sharpeville. After that massacre, writers such as Nadine Gordimer criticized, rather than reproduced mainstream white values. Yet, those values did not immediately change. Her 1972 novel *The Conservationist* concerns a man “in love with his farm.” The farm seems to reciprocate. “If you walk about this place on your own,” the owner explains to his liberal activist girlfriend, “you see things you’d never see otherwise. Birds and animals – everything accepts you. But if you have [black] people tramping all over the place ...” (Gordimer 1972:176). Notwithstanding – or perhaps because of – Sharpeville, the character withdraws from South African society. Rhodesian whites responded in a similar fashion to the guerilla war of the 1970s and

independence in 1980. “[D]espite the years of war and upheaval, and the participation or involvement of the writers in it,” notes the editor of a 1982 collection of poetry, “their preoccupation is very much with the mundane, and with Nature and the seasons of the land they loved” (Bolze 1982:x). What do black people have to do, one is tempted to ask, to hold whites’ attention?<sup>19</sup>

They can give up crops – or belong to a “primitive” group that has never farmed at all. As an exception to the rule, Africans who hunt and gather or herd cattle have captured whites’ literary imagination.<sup>20</sup> In Kenya, pastoralists infected Europeans with “Masai-itis’, an emotional obsession with the Masai,” which destroyed their desire to rule” (Tidrick 1990:172-73; cf. Hodgson 2001:2). The Maasai *morán*, or male warrior, can still stimulate another desire, as recorded by the German ex-wife of one such individual (Hofmann 2005). Hunting narratives almost invariably associate loyal African-trackers - from minority, non-agricultural tribes – with equally devoted the Great White Hunters.<sup>21</sup> These bonds – exclusively male, linked to death, and spatially separate from society – run deeper than the human. Indeed, white writers engage most fully and directly with Africans represented as animalian. No one has generated more lasting and more widely accepted imagery of this kind than the Kalahari explorer and author Laurens van der Post. The San, he writes in an account of his 1952 expedition, consider wild mammals “as companions in mystery, as fellow pilgrims traveling on the same perilous spoor between life-giving waters.” Passing from the faunal to the inanimate: “Wherever

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<sup>19</sup> In fact, the war did spawn a series of macho tales of cross-racial violence, most of which were quickly forgotten (Armstrong 1979, Early 1977, and Trew 1970).

<sup>20</sup> The smaller number of Africans who kill people for a living have earned the same distinction. In modern armies, black warriors and white warriors have broken all the rules of segregation and identity. First-hand accounts of Rhodesia’s mixed-race Selous Scout regiment, betray on the part of whites a “naked envy of African skills and skin” (L. White 2002:4).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Ruark (1962) and Meadows (1996).

he [the Bushman] went he contained, and was contained deeply within, the symmetry of the land” (van der Post 1958:21; cf. Wilmsen 1995). More recently, scholarship has established a different understanding of Kalahari peoples, as cattle-herders and long-distance traders (Wilmsen 1989:98-101). Still, the primitivized forager figure allows whites to appreciate Africans without closing the social distance. “Klara ... was a bushman woman, a Stone Age woman,” recalls van der Post of his nanny, “I looked into her eyes and it was always as if I looked at the first dawn of the first day” (van der Post 1986:3). Beyond multiracialism – and, indeed, beyond explicit racism as well - Klara serves as the environmental Other.

A thousand kilometers from Klara and the Kalahari, only South Africa’s coast seems to enable a more thorough engagement with Africans. Perhaps coincidentally, Rooke and Coetzee, the authors mentioned above as addressing black-on-white violence, grew up in Natal and the Cape, respectively (Johnson 2006; Coetzee 1997). Certainly, *Mestizagem* – or ethnic hybridity – mark’s the littoral’s past and representations of it. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, shipwrecked whites married into Xhosa chiefly lineages. Former guerrilla Hazel Crampton narrates these events with a feeling of personal liberation. Her popular history, *The Sunburnt Queen*, recalls Crampton’s first visit to the Wild Coast, while on leave from Umkhonto weSizwe, the armed resistance to Apartheid. She hears of “[A] black guy with blue eyes” and, “because of my apartheid-era schooling where history was all black and white and two never mixed,” finds herself captivated (Crampton 2004:15). For other white writers, the coast signals not peaceful integration but white extinction. Blacks might drive whites into the sea. Again, it nearly happened before. In 1856, the Xhosa prophetess Ngoquase predicted a mass drowning of all colonials.

“Perhaps Nongquase you will have your revenge,” writes a contemporary South Africa poet, “a displaced people; our demise / Is near, and we’ll be gutted where we fall.”<sup>22</sup> Such counter-hegemonic scenarios seem to separate the coast from the plateau. In Rian Malan’s memoir, *My Traitor’s Heart*, the author’s trekker forebear, “left the Cape a racially enlightened man. And then he ...disappeared into Africa, where he was transformed as all white men who went there were transformed” (Malan 1990:21). Cape Town – or, as van der Post (1958:81) puts it, “the arrogant political intellectualism of the Cape” - is the exception that proves the rule: whites sympathize with blacks and see past the landscape only outside authentic Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the coast and the interior present divergent forms of racial consciousness. Malan’s Capetonians believe in integration. So did Portugal, whose “luso-tropicalismo” created mestizo populations in Maputo and Luanda.<sup>24</sup> Coastal colonials could also practice “heterophobia” (Memmi 2000:117-121), fearing, hating, and wreaking violence upon the Other. Portugal permitted forced labor in its empire until 1961. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “Cape liberals” propounded scientific racism while contemporary Cape frontiersmen put those ideas into practice through enslavement and murder (Dubow 2004:133; Magubane 2003). Even slavery required thought and consideration; it could stir, in the master, and hate, love, or another emotional response. As Toni Morrison

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<sup>22</sup> Hope (1986:116-17). The popular historian Möstert (1992) has also contributed to a recent efflorescence of interest in Nongquase, epitomized in growing tourism at places associated with her – a commercialization itself described by the black novelist Zakes Mda (2000).

<sup>23</sup> In the same vein, V.S. Naipaul (1979:10) writes of East Africa, “The coast was not truly African. It was an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place, and we who lived there were really people of the Indian Ocean.” From South Africa, Lisa Fugard (2006:195) locates the continental boundary in the Transvaal: “Africa – and he’d said it with hunger and passion that Afrikaners and Africans have for the land – begins on the northern flanks of the Soutpansberg [mountains]. He was right. Even the sky seemed fiercer.”

<sup>24</sup> See Freyre (1974) and Owensby (2005) for celebration and analysis of *lusotropicalismo*, respectively.

writes, with respect to the United States, “Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (Morrison 1992:17). In the 20<sup>th</sup>-century imaginary of Anglophone savannah settlers, however, there is an Africanist absence. While occupying and farming the interior, many whites adopted a posture of neither loving nor hating blacks, but simply not caring much about them. Of course, colonial administrators wreaked every form of violence upon blacks,<sup>25</sup> and settlers offhandedly described them as lazy, improvident, and incompetent.<sup>26</sup> Yet, in the creative discourse with which whites portrayed themselves and their place in Africa, blacks bulked small; the land, plants, and animals bulked large.<sup>27</sup> Jean and John Comaroff (2001) refer to this structure of feeling as “post-racist racism.” Perhaps more accurately, images of nature provided an escape route from racism *and* from multiracialism. In the minds of many whites, aesthetics of wilderness took the place of both ethnic chauvinism and pluralism. Landscape, then, served as an attractive, though largely unrecognized, third way. At the threshold of consciousness – just detectable by writers – whites ran from blacks and hid in the bush.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Recent works by Anderson (2005) and Elkins (2005) document state violence during Mau Mau.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Rutherford (2001:88-89). Alatas (1977) provides a broader comparison on the trope of “the lazy native.”

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Nancy Jacobs’s (2006) discussion of the ways in which colonial ornithologists under-represented their African field assistants in print. Even those who worked intimately with blacks, offered few opinions on them – positive or negative – in the public narrative ensuing from such work.

<sup>28</sup> The trenchant travel writer, Evelyn Waugh (1960:141), observes on a visit to the Matopos: “They come to picnic, fish, catch butterflies, and photograph the game. Most Rhodesians seem to me morbidly incurious about native customs and belief.”

## Embracing African Land

Sidestepping the thorny “native problem” did not entirely clear the path to belonging. The environmental route still held challenges: real thorns, aridity, and the lack of shoreline. Could whites surmount their own Wordsworthian heritage and establish belonging in the unglaciated tropics? In the first instance, the question centered on representation: could whites find a means of representing the savannah as home? Whites had to find ways of describing the land – in text, speech, or images - to each other as comfortable, comforting, and home-like. This discursive task required acute sensitivity. “How are we to read the African landscape,” asks J.M. Coetzee, possibly South Africa’s foremost writer and critic. “Is it readable at all? Is it readable only through African eyes, writable only in an African language?”<sup>29</sup> On one level, Coetzee reiterates the problems of nomenclature Anglophones encountered elsewhere beyond the imprint of the glaciers. From Australia to California to Brazil, English explorers found their native tongue inadequate to the task of describing novel terrain (Raffles 2002:101). At a deeper level, Coetzee casts into doubt whites’ entire project of belonging: they may never understand and assimilate to the savannah. Nonetheless, white Africans – and particularly white African writers – have largely muddled through. They have found coping mechanisms and sensibilities allowing them to see African land with European eyes and write it with the English language.

The first such mechanism emphasized those features most reminiscent of Europe’s geology. Describing Kenya’s Great Rift Valley, for instance, early settler

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<sup>29</sup> Coetzee (1988:62). In the same self-questioning vein, Afrikaans author and anti-apartheid critic Breyten Breytenbach (1996:108) continues the quotation at the outset of this paper with, “...We had to go on writing ourselves out there to fit a tongue to the mouth. And then we lost the language. Are the lines not also nooses?” See also Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffen (2002:135).

Frederick de Janzé invokes “the glacial ethereal beauty of the valley” (de Janzé 1928:65). With less need for hyperbole, glacio-philes found the real object of their desire on Mt. Kilimanjaro. At 4500 above the pleneplain, the peak sustains year-round ice.<sup>30</sup> In 1927, Hemingway’s “Snows of Kilimanjaro” began a tradition of gratuitous reference to the peak. Even later works only tangentially related to “Kili” mention it prominently or display it on the cover (Edberg 1977; Gilseth 1992; Shaffer 1985). Physician Michael Latham, for instance, entitles his family memoir rather incongruously *Kilimanjaro Tales: the Saga of Medical Family in Africa* (Latham and Latham 1995). If Kilimanjaro deflects writers from their proper subjects, it also forms the subject of rich photo-literary archive. Those representations often emphasize the mountain’s cosmopolitan quality. A climb to the summit, as one coffee-table book suggests, takes one “from the tropics to the Arctic.” En route, one encounters temperate “high moors” and “heathland” (Pluth, Amin, and Mercer 2001:94,115). Symbolically, Africa metamorphoses at its highest point into European terrain. Yet, if the Scot weary of Africa can find refuge on these slopes, so can a Euro-African completely at home on the continent. David Western, the maverick conservationist who introduced community-based approaches to Kenya, still exaggerates when considering the mountain. His autobiography – *In the Dust of Kilimanjaro* – recalls “my earliest memory ... Mount Kilimanjaro seen from the train window across an endless stretch of thorn country.” Much later, a glimpse of the peak “perfectly matched my image of the archetypal Africa” (Western 1997:7). Kilimanjaro, then, represents Europe to some and Africa to others and, perhaps most conveniently for whites, the marriage of the two.

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<sup>30</sup> The peak stands at 5895 meters above sea level. In fact, global climate change is melting the icecap at a fast rate (Pluth, Amin, and Mercer 2001:187).

Whites located far from Kili and other snowy peaks fell back upon a second approach, an attitude of apology, faint praise, and criticism vis-à-vis the savannah. In 1914, Steward Gore-Brown trekked to Northern Rhodesia to construct an elaborate manor on the remote, tiny Lake Shiwa Ngandu. The place spoke to him, or, as he inscribed on the mantle piece, “This corner of the earth, smiles on me more than any other.” Yet, a letter home described Shiwa Ngandu as a mere replica: “[I]t looks like a little bit of Italy transported here to the middle of Africa. It’s a Mediterranean colour, not an African blue in the least.”<sup>31</sup> Color figures in another backhanded compliment. A review of Robert Paul, Zimbabwe’s first landscape painter, celebrates the way in which he:

“can set up an easel in front of a featureless expanse of nondescript grass and scrubby bushes, and with a few brushstrokes make something that one can look at endlessly. He found form, cohesion, variety, vitality in that seeming nothingness” (Roux 1996:60).

Even “nothingness” could hold positive potential. The National Federation of Women’s Institutes entitled a 1967 publication for immigrants *Great Spaces Washed with Sun*. Recalling the trope of empty land, the advertisement suggested a new aesthetic sensibility for savannah. Yet, the authors could not maintain it through the narrative. As if losing their nerve, they revert to English standards and almost apologize for their landscape: “There are no great natural lakes in Rhodesia, and at times it is difficult for the people of *more favored countries* to realise what man-made lakes and dams mean to Rhodesians” (National Federation of Women’s Institutes 1967:188; emphasis added). The same

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<sup>31</sup> Lamb (1999:frontispiece, 135). Gore-Brown actually wrote the inscription in Latin as “*Ille terrarum mihi super omnes angulus ridet.*” Profiting from colonial nostalgia, Gore-Brown’s descendants have now renovated the house as a hotel (Rogers 2005:136)



ambivalence surfaces in Lisa Fugard's recent novel *Skinner's Drift*. One of the main characters, Lorraine, "let the beauty of the farm at dusk break her heart." Later, however, drunk at party, she wishes for a fountain on her Limpopo Valley estate: "Yes, at night I'd lie in bed and listen to the play of the water instead of the nightjars. I know I am doomed to failure, but I keep on trying to civilize this part of the world" (L. Fugard 2006:147,224). Whites could be demanding parents to the savannah, constantly finding fault in it, rather than simply loving it for what it was.

Only a third, more innovative sensibility found value in the grassland as it was. Skillful writers positioned the "endless stretch of thorn country" from the background for their representations into the primary feature? Among Zimbabweans, John Gordon Davis, an adventure novelist, arguably pioneered this transformation. Writing in 1967, he describes the savannah floridly as "vast green empty spacious great foreverness, pregnant and primitive and exciting and virgin and even dangerous under the great vast blue sky" (J. Davis 1967:301). Davis's tone evokes a sense of the extraordinary and out-of-scale, rather than conventional beauty. Kenya's settlers seem to have understood this aesthetic of space earlier and almost intuitively. Describing their dissolute, adulterous lifestyle of the 1930s, the journalist James Fox conjectures, "such grandiose surroundings were irresistible to the English settlers and often went to their heads." "*Folie de grandeur*" gripped many an otherwise faithful spouse (Fox 1982:13). Beyond such sexual restlessness, the surrounds stimulated a range of emotions. In *Flame Trees*, Huxley reports a conversation at sunset outside Thika: "It is the sort of sky that angry Valkyries might ride across," Ian agreed ... 'it has a barbaric splendor in it, and an element of terror'" (Huxley 1959:127). If dusk provokes fear, it can equally well suggest liberation.

As Gallman prepares to leave Italy for Kenya, she daydreams of “unbounded freedom, of wide open horizons and red sunsets ... I could smell the dry grasses of unknown savannahs ...” (Gallman 1991:17). Topographical openness implied – as any seemingly empty space would – both autonomy and vulnerability. White writers played with this opposition, but those most interested in settlement emphasized the emancipatory effect of savannah.<sup>32</sup>

Aerial views provided still further reassurance, channeling settlers’ aesthetic logic towards property claims. Early white Kenyans availed themselves of unparalleled access to light aircraft.<sup>33</sup> Karen Blixen flew more than most, thanks to her love affair with amateur pilot Denys Finch Hatton.<sup>34</sup> Writing under the pen name Isak Dinesen, she recalls in *Out of Africa*, “[I]n the air, you are taken into the full freedom of the three dimensions; after long ages of exile and dream the homesick heart throws itself into the arms of space” (Dinesen 1937:230; cf. Lasson and Svendsen 1970:131). On a wing, the settler finds his or her place. Beryl Markham, a contemporary of Blixen and business partner of her husband, describes a similar airborne homecoming, notwithstanding the exotic. “Africa is mystic,” she writes in *West with the Night*, “it is wild; it is a sweltering inferno ... to a a lot of people, as to myself, it is ‘just home’” (Markham 1942:8) Criss-crossing British Africa as a professional pilot, Markham developed a sensibility towards the savannah that was almost proprietary. “I ... take off into the night,” she reminisces,

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<sup>32</sup> For a rare, jaded view of pioneer farming and the “lure of the ‘open spaces’” - see Simpson (1985[1937]:257).

<sup>33</sup> Whites still enjoy vastly disproportionate opportunities to fly in private planes (Gallman 1991:243). The less affluent whites south of Kenya have had consequently less free access to private planes, but still much more than the average population of Europe and North America. Until the government’s post-2000 land seizures, many commercial farms in Zimbabwe maintained air strips for themselves and/or for visiting pilots. See Meadows (2000:86-95) for a passage on Zimbabwean Charles Mackie’s flying adventures.

<sup>34</sup> Regarding Finch Hatton, see Trzebinski (1977), and Wheeler (2006).

“Ahead of me lies a unknown to the rest of the world and *only vaguely known to the African* – a strange mixture of grasslands, scrub, desert sand like long waves of the southern ocean” (Ibid:15; emphasis added). Beyond such symbolic claims – and in the longer term - white landownership benefited materially from the aerial view. In Rhodesia and later Zimbabwe, commercial farmers planned crops from air photos, and, of course, government departments mapped almost without pause (Hughes 2006a:70). Constantly published and reproduced, this bird’s-eye view combined aesthetics of the “tourist gaze” with an “imperial visibility” (Urry 1990; Burnett 2000:126-29). Flight, in short, gave whites writers and white farmers the means to develop and implement their newfound appreciation for the savannah.

As that sensibility quickened, whites explored its limits. Outside the savannah, they found, perspectives could extend too far and angles open too wide. The Kalahari and adjoining deserts, for instance, exceeded most whites’ capacity to adapt and embrace. John Gordon Davis describes ex-German Namibia – the setting for his combined treasure- and Nazi-hunting tale - as “the land God made in anger” (J. Davis 1990:6). Namibian-German geologist Henno Martin blames a related deity. “[I]nconceivable under a more temperate sky and in milder latitudes,” he writes of the canyons where he hid from 1940 to 1942 to avoid interment, “[T]he Devil had created them in an idle hour” (Martin 1983:20-21). “As long as the word nature conjured up the green woods and the flower-strewn meadows of our childhood,” Martin recalls, he and his companion can see neither beauty nor balance in the desert (Martin 1983:117). Martin does, in the course of his sojourn, come to appreciate the Namib’s nature, but such questions of meaning and aesthetics do not resolve themselves in Antjie Krog’s aptly entitled *A*

*Change of Tongue*. On holiday, in the Richtersveld, at the southern edge of the Kalahari, the South African journalist echoes Coetzee's doubts: "the landscape does not let itself be told ... I have no language for what I see" (Krog 2003:251). Perhaps Krog just needs to write English with greater poetic license, as does Zimbabwe-born Michael Main in a photo book on the Kalahari. Main begins with geological data: the Magkagikgadi Pans are a paleo-lake that has dried out completely over the past 50,000 years. Today, only the largest floods deposit a thin sheet of water (Main 1987:18). This empirical recounting soon gives way to the romance of anachronistic space: on (so-called) Kubu Island, there is

"a pebble beach and it speaks of a time long, long ago when the pan was a sea ...

There were times when the whole island was deep under water and others when it barely showed, and there were times, like today, when it lay bare and naked to the sun, an island in a forgotten sea." (Main 1987:26)

The evocation plays with tense, conjuring into actuality a long-gone waterscape. In pinch, then, in a pinch, literary whites could imagine away the driest and most unobstructed topographies, but they did not embrace them for what they were.

Landscapes at the opposite extreme - with fully obstructed lines of sight - created an insoluble problem. Having assimilated to the savannah, whites seemed to dread dense, closed woodland, and they sometimes responded to it in lethal ways. Mau Mau, after all, took place in the Aberdare forest. "In a land where limitless space was supposed to be as much a part of your life as the furniture," Ruark writes, Valerie "had lost her husband to the black forests where he had gone to hunt men." Dermott, the husband, began his counter-insurgency patrols a healthy soldier and finished them a disturbed alcoholic

(Ruark 1962:22-23). To the south, only the jesse forest of the Zambezi Valley causes anywhere near such distress. “The tracking was difficult,” writes Zimbabwean Keith Meadows in a passage on hunting, in “that dense, tangled impenetrable barrier of cobretum that favours only the elephants and rhinos” (Meadows 1981:71; cf. Nyschens 1997:211). The forest transmits danger, terror, and evil, constituting what Taussig, describing torture in colonial Peru, calls a “space of death” (Taussig 1987:5,78). Regarding Africa, only Joseph Conrad – who wrote on Central African but certainly influenced the settler colonies - conveys the full force of this zone.<sup>35</sup> His descriptions of the Congo rainforest draw attention to two features: visual opacity and the lurking presence of natives. “The great wall of vegetation ... was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek to sweep every little man of us out his little existence” (Conrad 1902:98). More threatening still, the forest teems with Africans: “suddenly ... I made out deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes – the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement ...” (Ibid 1902:125). Like Aberdare, this forest drives its European interloper mad, provoking the genocidal epithet “exterminate all the brutes” (Ibid:134; cf. Lindqvist 1996). Dense, inhabited vegetation, in other words, could unhinge colonials and colonialism from the inside out. Fortunately for all concerned, the more numerous whites on the savannah felt safe to ignore, rather than slaughter, Africans.

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<sup>35</sup> See Ward (1989) for a description of Conradian themes in white writing of the savannah.

Thus, whites and the writers among them converted an uninviting topography into hospitable terrain. They could have borrowed from African meanings – such as the Zimbabwean oral history of “Guruuswa,” the long grass (Beach 1980:62-63) – and formed a syncretic sense of belonging. To do so would have required a fuller engagement with African Others. Rather than handle such strange materials, whites reworked European aesthetic sensibilities. They could not altogether overcome ambivalence, manifest in an obsession with montane anomalies and occasional faint praise for grassland. Nevertheless, Blixen and others effectively recalibrated the Burkean and Wordsworthian ideal of moderation to accord with African features. They replaced the scale of wet and dry, lake and upland with a metric of open and closed. Glaciers, past or present, were no longer necessary. If the shoreline between land and water carried meaning before, the line of sight now served that function. Moderation and mildness inhered in vistas and horizons of the middle-range, between the infinite and the overly finite. The savannah offered perspective and viewpoints – a less formal version of Renaissance planners’ “geometry of landscape” (Cosgrove 1988). Like a panopticon, the savannah also revealed the presence of blacks – or, more often due to colonial evictions, their comforting absence. By contrast, the tight angles and narrow interstices of forest could conceal Africans. At least, the hunter, trader, farmer, or soldier could not forget them there. Of course, these imaginative conceits did not make the savannah any easier to farm and ranch. Aridity plagued the settler’s bank account even when it had ceased to trouble his eye. But, by Southern Africa’s post-independence period, aridity caused fewer and fewer whites to question their fit with the landscape. If they had once half-

suspected themselves of trespassing, now they felt entitled to farm and to own farms (Hughes 2006b).

That change of consciousness depended upon might be called a political technology of belonging – one that functioned clumsily and only up to a point. The love of landscape was not “innocent.” As Shiva Naipaul writes, Blixen’s reminiscences of Kenyan beauty represented “an act of arrogation, an assertion of implicit overlordship” (S. Naipaul 1980:147-48). Like a special optic, this aesthetic sensibility threw blacks out of focus while zooming in on landscape, plants, and animals. The process of selection worked, Euro-Africans overcame the limitations of minority status. They skipped over the triangular period, or Americanist “middle ground,” of negotiated meanings between immigrant and native. Worth at least 50% population, the attachment to landscape gave a white enclave the hubris of a white nation-state. Still, these mechanics of belonging could not hide their operation entirely. Attentive writers detected the escape-and-embrace and suggested alternatives. “Adventure, sex, beauty ...is crap, interior decoration, advertising” rants one of Marciano’s characters after the death of a friend in a road accident, “Because Africa is a fucking drunk Kikuyu in a Nissan” (Marciano 1999:164-65). Whites, Marciano implies, ignore blacks at their peril. She does not demand an end to racism. On the contrary, in her framework, even explicit racism – against the “fucking Kikuyu” – would represent an adaptive step. As long as they practiced escapism, ordinary whites could not even see the truck heading toward them. Nationalism and anti-white sentiment have repeatedly caught whites off-guard, marginalizing them further. With greater social curiosity – even if tempered with ethnic chauvinism - they might have been able to anticipate and weather these storms. Better

still, with a more pluralistic form of social empathy, they just might have become African citizens in the fullest sense. In the event, by writing themselves so single-mindedly into the landscape, whites wrote themselves out of the society.

Does this selective enraccination – whether complete, underway, or unraveling – constitute a global ex-British sensibility? “White settlers,” argues Nigel Clark, “have been grappling with terrain that is so often resistant to European ideas and practices” (Clark 2005:365). Although philosophically trained for travel, Britons do not welcome the change of social or topographical scenery. But – in Africa, North America, and the Antipodes - they found the latter, environmental distance easier to close. In New Zealand, for instance, white sheep-herders have gone to court to demand the rights of indigenous people. Asserting their knowledge of and affinity for upland pastures, they have tried to occupy what Tania Li calls “the tribal slot” (Li 2000). No master plan or explicit solidarity has guided such symbolic, discursive, and literary work in the zones of European settlement. Rather, at this planetary level, settlers scattered physically from the British Isles have, without always being aware of it, reconverged around a structure of yearning. After movement, they seek emplacement (Orlove 1996). After cosmopolitanism, they seek autochthony (cf. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). That objective has proven elusive, but, on some frontiers, Europeans have, at least, established normal citizenship. Genocide helped naturalize whites as the archetypal North Americans. They belong, in every habitat “from sea to shining sea.” Indeed, as Bruce Braun argues, American popular culture continually encodes hiking, mountain climbing, and nature altogether as white (Braun 2003; cf. Evans 2002). And few critics suggest – in the spirit of Shiva Naipaul – that nature first belonged to other peoples. In North



American, then, ex-Europeans succeeded totally in the enterprise still ongoing and possibly collapsing in savannah Africa. White America realized the home-making project of white Africa and of other extra-European settlements; white Africa unmasks the project of white America.

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