

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Nonhumans, Narratives, and Proximities: The Power of Things and the Cultural Politics of Race, Land and Water in Zimbabwe

ADMIRE MSEBA

Yuka Suzuki. 2017. *The Nature of Whiteness: Race, Animals and Nation in Zimbabwe*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 232 pp.

Joost Fontein. 2015. *Remaking Mutirikwi: Landscape, Water and Belonging in Southern Zimbabwe*. Suffolk: James Currey. 365 pp.

### Introduction

Beginning in early 2000, Zimbabwe's postcolonial rulers expropriated large-scale farms, mostly owned by white farmers. They parceled the land to the country's black inhabitants. Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Program (hereinafter FTLRP) elicited massive international and domestic criticism (and defense) and, above all, prompted a flurry of studies. Many of these studies focused on white farmers' relations with both the colonial and postcolonial states, their self-representations and their attempts to construct a sense of identity and belonging in this former white settler colony.<sup>1</sup> Many more studies were devoted to an examination of the politics of land in Zimbabwe. Some of the studies pointed out how throughout the twentieth century, land was at the center of colonial and postcolonial projects of state-making.<sup>2</sup> A number of these studies debated the logic behind the Zimbabwean Government's belated attempt at radical land reform.<sup>3</sup> Others examined the results of FTLRP exercise.<sup>4</sup> One strand of this literature documented the limits of this land reform by pointing to disruption in both agricultural productivity and the economy that accompanied Zimbabwe's fast track land reform.<sup>5</sup> Another strand questioned the idea that the land reform was a complete failure.<sup>6</sup> Many of these examined how local interests intersected with the broader politics of land and power that inspired colonial and postcolonial rulers' projects of state-making in Zimbabwe.<sup>7</sup>

The two books reviewed here, Yuka Suzuki's *The Nature of Whiteness* and Joost Fontein's *Remaking Mutirikwi*, contribute to this immense literature on white farmers and the politics of race, land and belonging in Zimbabwe. Unlike most of the earlier studies, they pay particular attention to how human and non-human actors assumed importance in the creation of identities and the legitimation of claims to land, power, and belonging.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, they raise the analytical plane to new levels. The remainder of this essay pays particular attention to the ways in which the two authors bring in ideas of nature, landscape, narrative,

**Admire Mseba** holds a Ph.D. in African History from the University of Iowa and is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of the Free State. He is currently revising his dissertation for a book entitled *Land, Power and Social Relations in Northeastern Zimbabwe from Precolonial Times to the 1950s*. His interests are in Southern African socio-environmental and agrarian history.

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v18/v18i1a6.pdf>

and proximity to the analysis of the production of racial identities and the politics of land, power, and belonging in Zimbabwe.

### **Nature, Narrative, and White Identities in Rural Zimbabwe**

In *The Nature of Whiteness*, Yuka Suzuki highlights the importance of animals, especially wildlife, in how white farmers who inhabited the western parts of Zimbabwe constructed their racial identities and a sense of belonging in the country beginning in the twilight years of Rhodesian rule, but especially after Zimbabwe became independent in 1980. White farmers, she points out, deployed metaphors of nature to normalize racial difference at a time when white racial privilege was “out of place—both visually and politically” (p. 5). Moreover, white farmers appropriated the environment to legitimate their claims to belonging to western Zimbabwe. The imageries of western Zimbabwe that the white landowners constructed, Suzuki points out, depicted the area as pristine nature (p.14). Similarly, their understanding of the area’s social milieu erased Africans from the landscape. “When asked the approximate population of Mlilo,” Suzuki writes, “[white] farmers typically replied, ‘about a hundred, more or less.’ The question,” she explains, “was received, however, with the implicit assumption that one was referring to whites, when in reality, the black workers and their families who also lived on these properties easily doubled the total population of the community” (p. 18). However, as Fontein shows, attempts at Europeanising Zimbabwean landscapes never succeed in removing past traces of African presence just as the land reform and the re-Africanization of the land never completely erased traces of European presence in the land.

Suzuki’s deployment of how animals served Mlilo’s white farmer claims to belonging recalls David Hughes’ argument about white farmers’ uses of dams elsewhere in Zimbabwe.<sup>9</sup> However, among Mlilo’s white farmers, animals, were also instrumental in the construction of other identities. By paying attention to how pets were treated within the Mlilo community, for example, Suzuki draws out hierarchies of gender, ethnicity and social difference within this community. White farmers of British origin distinguished themselves from their Afrikaner counterparts by noting that whereas the latter left their dogs outside, they sometimes lived with theirs in the house. “The English,” she notes, “claimed this practice as another example of essential difference between the two groups, implying with subtle shake of head that their way—to allow animals indoors—was the kindlier, more civilized way to treat animals” (p. 133). Suzuki, then, is careful to disaggregate her white subjects even as the lens of whiteness that she uses has the potential of homogenizing them. She achieves this feat by deftly deploying the narrative technique. Her use of narrative enables her to nuance her discussion of the transition from cattle to wildlife. The story she tells is not of wholesale cooperation, but of individuals who turned their cattle ranches into wildlife ranches at different times. This process, she shows, was fraught with local conflicts among ranchers as well as generational struggles within families. The result is a nuanced discussion of the social world of white farmers in late colonial and postcolonial western Zimbabwe.

Suzuki suggests that this social world came to a crashing halt with the land invasions that accompanied Zimbabwe’s FTLRP at the turn of the millennium. The land reform, she argues, signalled an end to wildlife production as an economic activity in Zimbabwe as well

as the undoing of what many believed to be a colonial inheritance. Pointing to the need to factor in “the symbolic dimensions of wildlife with its connotations of white wealth and privilege,” Suzuki maintains that “[f]ar beyond everyday poaching,” the dramatic rise in the number of animals killed during the FTLRP “clearly signified something greater. Animals,” she adds, “were yet again utilized for their powerful symbolism, and their destruction was the physical manifestation of erasing, in one violent act, the wildlife ranching industry painstakingly built by white farmers over the past three decades” (p141). This sense of erasure marks a distinction between her work and Fontein’s study of the remaking of the Mutirikwi landscape to which I now turn.

### **Of Immanence, Proximities, and the Cultural Politics of Land and Water**

Where Suzuki saw erasures and ruptures in the wake of the country’s FTLRP, Joost Fontein stresses co-existences. In this study of contestations over land, water, and belonging in the Lake Mutirikwi area of Southern Zimbabwe, Fontein stresses the persistence, side by side and often times, over time, of past practices and different regimes of power. All of this, he suggests, is visible in the physical remains of the practices etched in the landscape—the graves, the ruins and the dam itself as well as the intangibles—the continued salience of ancestral spirits and ghosts of former white settlers such as George Sheppard. The past he shows, remains immanent in many important ways. Echoing earlier arguments about the legacies of colonial states on postcolonial processes of state-making by Jocelyn Alexander and Michael Drinkwater, for example, Fontein points out that the attempts at reasserting the power of technocrats in the post 2000s era reproduced earlier efforts at achieving similar goals by the Rhodesian state in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Suzuki who emphasises how White farmers instrumentally used animals in constructing identities and making claims to belonging, Fontein insists that “graves and burial sites are not simply passive and inert ‘criteria’ for assertions of belonging” (p. 62). Instead, he argues, “around Mutirikwi at least, graves and indeed ruins have a more active and affective presence” (p. 62). “[A]ncestral graves and sacred *mapa*” he emphasises, “create social obligations and can cause droughts, sickness, misfortune or even political and economic strife” (p. 68). He also suggests that “the agency of sacred places derives ultimately, from the intentionality of the spirits (whether ancestral or troubling, dangerous *ngozi*)” and different individuals respond to it (pp. 68-69).

Although Fontein is careful to point out that, in making the case that graves and ruins have an affective and active presence, he is not denying human creativity (p. 289), it seems to me that he overstates the power of things. My own encounters with Vashona ritual politics elsewhere in Zimbabwe reveals that graves, ruins, sacred groves, and spirits in and of themselves do not have the kind of agency that Fontein ascribes to them. Instead, the power resides in people who find meaning in these things. Put in a slightly different way, the graves or groves or spirits do not, by themselves, create misfortunes, or fortunes or as Fontein put it, social obligations. Human beings through their actions or inactions do. Consider, for example, how two elders who grew up at Chishawasha mission explained why it was important for them to continue sweeping the graves of their ancestors despite the ban on such practices by the Roman Catholic missionaries:

Tigere Mupfumi: Yes we have now converted to Catholicism but we should not abandon our cultural practices. You see those mountains over there. We go there and sweep the graves of our ancestors such as VaNzvere and

Chinamhora.... We go there to sweep, we will be supplicating the ancestors so that when the rain season arrives, we will receive good rains....”

Ndoro: This should be done annually. We begin with *Chipwa*,”

Mupfumi “Then we go and sweep *Nzvere’s* grave, then we go and sweep Dzama’s grave and perform other rituals and then we return to our homes knowing that the coming season will be good.

Ndoro: If I am not mistaken...in some places, after they had finished that work [sweeping graves and conducting rituals], it would rain even before the people have arrived back home.<sup>11</sup>

For these elders, misfortune would have fallen on them if they had stopped performing these rituals in conformity to the new rules imposed by the missionaries. But, this is not because of the powers of their ancestors’ graves but because of the inactions of the living. Conversely, for them, it rained not because the graves in and of themselves had any agency, but because they appropriately performed their rituals. More importantly, the elders made this point not as an assertion of the power of the graves of their ancestors, but as an articulation of defiance against Catholic missionaries’ authority and claims to the land.

Elders in the neighbouring Mangwende area described in similar terms the politics surrounding an important ritual site: a pool that they said belonged to *Nyamhita Nehanda*. In times of droughts, pestilences and other misfortunes, they told me, they would go and propitiate the spirit of *Nyamhita* at this pool. In my discussion with these elders, it became clear that it is not the pool that matters. In fact, its precise location is contested. Instead, what matters was that the rituals at the pool were performed by the right kind of people, those who belonged to the same clan as the original *Nyamhita* who is said to have drowned in this pool. One elder insisted that even the Mangwende chiefs of the area did not have the powers to perform the rituals at this pool, for “they cannot propitiate the spirit of their mother [*havaawomberere amai vavo*].”<sup>12</sup> The point that these elders made speaks to Fontein’s argument about the politics of belonging. The elders stressed that only they, and not the others, could perform the rituals at *Nyamhita’s* pool in order to contest the authority of the Mangwende clan. Thus, they, and not Chief Mangwende and his clansmen, were the rightful “owners” of the land. This is the point that Fontein makes about autochthony. Pools, like graves, ruins and springs, then, become important in the politics of belonging not because of *what* they can do, but *how* people use them to legitimate their claims and contest others’. To be sure, Fontein makes similar observations. “One reason for linking graves and ruins is ethnographic,” he writes, noting that “in justifying current occupations and claims to land, people referred not only to *makuva* of their kith and kin but also *matongo*—ruined homesteads and birthplaces” (p. 65). But, I am not convinced that such references sustain the second leg of Fontein’s argument. That is, graves, ruins and rain have affective and active presence. Indeed, the points that Fontein raises to demonstrate the materiality of things such as the flooding of areas near the lake when it filled for the first time in contrast to what the engineers had predicted may say much about human miscalculations than the active presence or intentionality of water.

That said, there is much to learn in this book as is also the case with Suzuki’s *The Nature of Whiteness*. Fontein’s articulation of local aspirations for land and their entanglement with colonial and postcolonial projects of state-making—something that he achieves through his

insistence on the existences of multiple claims and regimes of power – should be commended. By paying attention to the localized politics of land, he offers a nuanced assessment of the politics of land in Zimbabwe. He raises pertinent questions about land reform and restitution and moves beyond the simplistic narrative that portrayed chiefs, their subjects, and others as people who were co-opted into the land reform by an overbearing postcolonial state.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

- 1 On white farmers' engagements with the colonial and postcolonial state, Selby 2006. Selby's study built on a longer tradition of studies of white farmers' engagements with the colonial state, including works by Murray 1970, Hodder-Williams 1983, and McKenzie 1989. On white farmers' discourses and self-representation see Pilosof 2012. On white farmers' construction of the sense of belonging see Hughes 2010.
- 2 Alexander 2006; Moore 2005.
- 3 See for example, the chapters in Hammar, Raftopoulos, and Jansen 2003.
- 4 Scoones et al. 2010; Matondi 2012; Hanlon, Manjengwa, and Smart 2013.
- 5 Richardson 2004.
- 6 Scoones et al. 2010.
- 7 See Mujere 2011; Kufakurinani and Bamu 2015.
- 8 The exception to this in studies that predated Suzuki and Fontein's work is perhaps the work of Hughes 2010. . Even then, it should be pointed out that the original dissertation upon which Suzuki's book is based predates Hughes' book. See Suzuki 2005.
- 9 Hughes 2010 and Hughes 2006.
- 10 Alexander 2006; Drinkwater 1991.
- 11 Interview between Joseph Jakarasi, John Mupfumi Tigere and Edmund Ndoro 23 July 2014
- 12 Group Interview with Gatsi clan members, Nyamutumbu Hall, 11 March 2017.
- 13 Despite this nuance, scholars continue to ignore the local aspirations that Fontein so eloquently shows in favor of the narrative that the land reform was a simple political gimmick by the postcolonial state. For an account of this nature see the recent book by Charles Laurie 2017.

## References

- Alexander, J. 2006. *The Unsettled Land: State-Making and the Politics of Land in Zimbabwe, 1893-2003*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Dande, I. and J .Mujere. 2015. "Reclaiming Ancestral Lands: The Fast Track Land Reform Programme and Boundary Politics in Makoni District, Eastern Zimbabwe, 2000-2011." In Z. Makwavarara, R. Magosvongwe, and O. B. Mlambo (eds.), *Dialoguing Land and Indigenization in Zimbabwe and other Developing Countries: Emerging Perspectives* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications): 250-71.
- Drinkwater, M. 1991. *The State and Agrarian Change in Zimbabwe's Communal Areas*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hammar A., B. Raftopoulos, and S. Jansen (eds.). 2003. *Zimbabwe's Unfinished Business: Rethinking Land, State and Nation in the Context of Crisis*. Harare: Weaver Press.

- Hanlon, J., J. Manjengwa, and T. Smart. 2013. *Zimbabwe Takes Back its Land*. Boulder, CO and London: Kumarian Press.
- Hodder-Williams, R. 1983. *White Farmers in Rhodesia, 1890-1965: A History of Marandellas District*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Hughes, D. 2010. *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape and the Problem of Belonging*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "Hydrology of Hope: Farm Dams, Conservation and Whiteness in Zimbabwe." *American Ethnologist* 33.4: 269-87.
- Kufakurinani, U. and W. Bamu. 2015. "Resettled Yet Unsettled?: Land Conflicts and Food Insecurity in Insiza North, Zimbabwe, 2005-2013." In Z. Makwavarara, R. Magosvongwe, and O. B. Mlambo (eds.), *Dialoguing Land and Indigenization in Zimbabwe and other Developing Countries: Emerging Perspectives* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications): 272-90.
- Laurie, C. 2017. *Land Reform Deception: Political Opportunism in Zimbabwe's Land Seizure Era*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Makwavarara, Z., R. Magosvongwe, and O. B. Mlambo (eds.). 2015. *Dialoguing Land and Indigenization in Zimbabwe and other Developing Countries: Emerging Perspectives*. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications.
- Matondi, P. B. 2012. *Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform*. London: Zed Books.
- McKenzie, J. A. 1989. "Commercial Farmers in the Governmental System of Colonial Zimbabwe, 1963-1980." D.Phil. Thesis, University of Zimbabwe.
- Moore, D. S. 2005. *Suffering for Territory: Race Place and Power in Zimbabwe*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Mujere, J. 2011. "Land, Graves and Belonging: Land Reform and the Politics of Belonging in Newly Resettled Farms in Gutu, 2000-2009." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38.5: 1123-44.
- Murray, D. J. 1970. *The Governmental System in Southern Rhodesia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pilosof, R. 2012. *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: farmers' Voices from Zimbabwe*. Claremont, CP: University of Cape Town Press.
- Richardson, C. 2004. *The Collapse of Zimbabwe in the Wake of the 2000-2003 Land Reforms*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Scoones, I. et al. 2010. *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths and Realities*. Suffolk: James Currey.
- Selby, A. 2006. "Commercial Farmers and the State: Interest Group Politics and Land Reform in Zimbabwe." D.Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford.
- Suzuki, Y. 2005. "Black Baboons and White Rubbish Trees: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nature in Zimbabwe" Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University.