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I began my career by investigating processes whereby land became an object of colonial and racial conflict and identity in Southern Africa. These struggles pitted natives against colonial settlers, and claims of having originated on the land against claims of having improved it. Conquerors and the conquered fought over nature and over its definition. This frontier formation lingers on, but political and environmental shifts are rapidly superseding it. I am now asking: How should one relate to landscapes and environments after colonialism and under climate change? In the “anthropocene” of artificial nature and widespread risk, what new environmental movements and sensibilities are taking shape? And – to the small extent that my writing influences events – what ideals *should* lead us from or through the looming catastrophe? Based on research in Trinidad and Tobago, I am writing a book manuscript entitled “Ordinary oil: energy, climate change, and the silence of complicity.” Ultimately, I hope to articulate new forms of justice deeply compromised by the imperative to survive.



Karen Blixen's house in Nairobi, Kenya

Whiteness in Zimbabwe

How have European settler societies established a sense of belonging and entitlement outside Europe? Published in 2010 by Palgrave Macmillan, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe* addresses this question in its ethnographic, comparative, and moral dimensions. European colonization, Edward Said writes, depended in part on “structures of feeling” wherein whites felt at home in the colonies. In the “neo-Europes” of North America and the antipodes, Anglophone whites rooted themselves in part by genocide and expulsion of native peoples. Having attained demographic superiority, Europeans became “normal” Americans, Australians, and so on. Zimbabwe deviates from this model. Having established the colony in 1890s, whites never

comprised more than 5% of its population. They monopolized the land but were never able completely to make their presence appear natural. They could have done so by grafting themselves onto local, still vibrant societies. Instead, they adopted a strategy of escape. Avoiding blacks when possible, they invested themselves emotionally and artistically in the environment. Of course, white farmers, industrialists, and administrators exploited blacks. But, in leisure hours, art, and fantasy, many whites chose to negotiate their identity with land forms rather than social forms. I refer to this evasion of natives as “other-discounting,” a sentiment both less pernicious and more persistent than outright racism. Conservation and whiteness co-produced each other.

The book advances this thesis through two extended case studies: first, literature and photography representing the Zambezi River’s Kariba reservoir and, second, practices of commercial agriculture east of Harare. Let me just discuss the latter, more ethnographic case study. By 1990, whites had slipped to roughly 1% of national population, and the state was preparing to redistribute most of their 4500 farms. How, under these conditions, could so few ex-Europeans feel entitled to own so much African land? To answer that question, I conducted ethnography in the Virginia area east of Harare during the 2002-2003 year and again briefly in 2005 and 2007. As I found, my informants fear not only for their property, but also – more existentially, for their place in Africa. Dams addressed both of these insecurities. In the 1990s, Virginia farmers impounded water for irrigation at a frenetic pace. The dams also served a cultural and aesthetic purpose: they answered whites’ longing for well-watered terrain in arid Zimbabwe. They treated the dams as nature and themselves as conservationists. Again, they integrated themselves though the environment rather than through an engagement with black society. In 2000, para-militaries killed their first white farmer in Virginia, Dave Stevens. By 2005, further violence and threats had removed all but eleven of the original seventy-five white families. The farmers allowed to stay invoke a notion of “playing the game” – of haggling constantly with bandits and politicians. Whites, they believe, will never hold *rights* or be considered citizens in Africa, let alone enjoy a sense of entitlement. Nonetheless – through winks, deals, and bribes – they do obtain the ephemeral *privilege* of land-ownership and farming. Virginia’s remaining families focus on social, not environmental, questions. Ultimately, they have traveled from belonging to its antithesis – from the chronic hubris of settler society to the episodic terror of enclave society.

Whiteness in Zimbabwe ends by finding the silver lining in this cloud. Throughout the neo-Europes, whiteness has denoted mastery – of land, of people, and of one’s own body. In some contexts, this control underwrote a doubly-strong form of belonging, wherein whites belonged on the landscape while the landscape belonged to them. Consider Arizona, where “nativist” movements assert the claims of England’s children to canyons, arroyos, and other Hispanic landscapes. If they fit at all, Anglophones belong *awkwardly* in such places. The hesitancy and humility of the immigrant better suits their position than the fierce certainty of the pioneer. Here is my answer to what others have called the “settler question” – the messy business of re-integrating colonizers and their heirs into a plural society. Awkwardness, in other words, might underlie a truly post-imperial and post-colonial whiteness in Zimbabwe, the US, and elsewhere. It might also guide a new approach to conservation, one humbled by imperfection and the end of nature. My current project is exploring these implications.

Ordinary Oil

How does it feel to change the climate? This question seems more absurd than impolite. It implies a chain of causation and responsibility that still remains invisible and mostly unacknowledged. In fact, some people – a billion “high emitters” – burn oil and otherwise pump carbon dioxide into the atmosphere at a rate dangerous to societies and ecosystems everywhere. Some dispute the science and scenarios of climate change. But explicit denial is less widespread than silence and disregard. The bulk of informed citizens simply don’t care a great deal about carbon emissions and their consequences. Menacing as it increasingly is, climate change has yet to become a *moral* issue. I wish to explain this persistent banality. I am not trying to expose – as others have done – the greed of individuals, firms, or governments. Capitalism and convenience certainly underwrite the status quo. Yet, cultural meanings also sustain hydrocarbons, and my account focusses on these dynamics. I am interested in the dispositions and discourses that obscure responsibility for carbon emissions. One notices oil only when something goes wrong – when, for instance, massive volumes gush into the Gulf of Mexico. Water-borne pollution of this sort tends to trigger protest in public and denunciations in print. My ethnography, on the other hand, explores the intended functions of our energy system. When platforms, pipelines, and pumps work properly, oil spews into the air unnoticed and unresisted. This spill everywhere far outweighs local contamination, both in volume and in planetary effects. Oil, in the other words, is most dangerous when it behaves ordinarily and when people treat it as ordinary. “Complicity” describes this structure of feeling better than do “culpability” or “guilt.”



David Hughes (left) and an oil and gas consultant at the energy conference, Port of Spain, 2012.

Usually difficult to detect, petro-complicity breaks into public view in Trinidad and Tobago. The country is arguably the oldest and most successful petro-state. In 1859, drillers in

south Trinidad sunk the world's first continuously producing well. Since then, strict regulations have promoted cleanliness, and safety. Abuses do occur, but Trinidad is no Nigeria, Ecuador, or even Louisiana. The country has almost skirted the "resource curse" of corruption, dictatorship, and local pollution. This normalcy permits a natural experiment: my work probes the conscience of an industry *only* committing global climate change