

David McDermott Hughes' Response to Bram Büscher's Review of Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging

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**David McDermott Hughes' Response to
Bram Büscher's Review of *Whiteness in Zimbabwe:
Race, landscape, and the problem of belonging***

I am gratified, indeed, by Bram Büscher's careful attention to my book—and grateful to the editors of *Conservation and Society* for allowing the two of us to broadcast our hitherto private chat. As Büscher indicates *Whiteness in Zimbabwe* concerns conservation but not in the usual way. I have always thought of conservation as a consequence, rather than as a cause. Deeper, more enduring processes rise to the surface in the form of national parks, eco-tourism, or other nature-loving behavior. And larger forces sweep conservation away (as occurred in Zimbabwe). In the earlier work (Hughes 2006)—to which Büscher alludes—I described the projects known as community-based natural resource management as a conjuncture on the *longue durée* of colonisation. Under Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE, Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources, white-owned tourism firms expanded into zones of black smallholders. A new economic logic was 'unlocking' the communal lands. This thesis accorded with current arguments about the commoditisation of nature and the ecological phase of capital. Clearly, Büscher would have preferred that I carry on in this fashion.

If *Whiteness in Zimbabwe* gives short shrift to political economy, fieldwork made it so. Approaching affluent whites and commercial farms for the first time, I expected to find a Protestant work ethic and little else. Perhaps, if I had started the research before the state's anti-white violence, my informants would have represented themselves monochromatically as businessmen, profiteers in land, labor, and ecological capital. After 2000, they still held these qualities, but something else animated them. Whites spoke more of the landscape than of the land; evicted from productive farms, they missed the view of the reservoir more than the irrigation water it provided. As Büscher relates, these descendants of Europeans wished to belong in Africa, and *Whiteness in Zimbabwe* focused on this deeply felt, obviously threatened project of identity. Seeking to root themselves in the topography—rather than among the people—they fashioned a wilderness ethic and a vernacular of Southern African conservation. From a different vantage, Büscher's commentary links conservation in Zimbabwe to private and state-directed neo-liberal policies emanating from the

Global North. Of course, he is correct, but I would not have chosen to underscore this contemporary political economy. After all, Britons first colonised what is now Zimbabwe in the 1890s. As much as they were seeking to expand markets in foodstuffs and minerals, they were also responding to the most profound contraction in global markets ever seen: the British-led abolition of slavery. Enforced in Africa's interior in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emancipation enabled legitimate commerce, the civilising mission, colonial settlement, and modern development. Had I chosen to emphasise political economy, these older processes would also have framed the book. As it was, I hewed more closely to my informants' concepts of space and time. They stated or implied continuities between themselves and the pioneers of the 1890s—and the Perth-bound evictees more than a century later. This personal geography of striving and instability gave life to conservation: feeling out-of-place, whites clung to nature.

Let me address Büscher's second concern: the book's lopsided attention to whites and neglect of blacks in Zimbabwe. When I presented chapters in Zimbabwe, colleagues faulted me for exactly the same incompleteness. In part, circumstances dictated this narrowing of interest. In 2000, when I was conceptualising the project, the state politicised all contact between whites and rural blacks. I was suspected of being an anti-government agitator—so much so that police arrested a friend of mine in the fieldsite of my first book. I had no choice but to study whites, who could come to no greater harm through my presence. Then, I learned to make a virtue of necessity. The ethnography of whites addressed a significant gap in scholarship. We study 'down' to marginal and disempowered people but rarely study 'up' to the privileged. This choice of subject often contributes to the conventional wisdom that the poor generate poverty, land degradation, and so on. By studying rural Zimbabwe's most affluent sector, I could discern how its attitudes and actions underwrote inequality. And I could direct attention to a broader field as well. For, if I had narrowed the ethnography along one axis to a tiny enclave, I could widen it orthogonally by measuring white Zimbabweans against other ex-European groups. In fact, my informants compared rather favorably to my own, American countrymen. White Africans, at least, wonder whether they and the English language belong in Africa. In the USA, Anglophone whites long ago appropriated the native slot. The state name Massachusetts no

longer conjures up Amerindians, but merely frustrates the child who is learning to spell. In Colorado—named and colonised by the Spanish—an ‘English only’ movement seeks to suppress the use of that language. The hubris of people who belong too well and who feel too securely in-place—by way of an African case, I seek to challenge this structure of feeling.

In sum, Büscher and I approach Southern African conservation with quite different agendas. I wrote a cultural, aesthetic account of complex individuals whom I sometimes admired. Büscher (2010) has detected and dissected a political economy run by corporate and governmental elites virtually indifferent to the human condition. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate the co-existence of meaningful and exploitative practices. In the chinks between the gears of globalisation, people live fragile, even beautiful, lives.

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