

Preface

In the academic literature, 'white'—objectified at the apex of the racial hierarchy—is commonly applied to those who enjoy centring and a sense of agency. Nowhere was this more evident than in Britain's colonies, where the administration imposed categorical identities, locating and positioning people in the social order according to race. Rhodesia provides a case in point. Drawing on difference in this way, Europeans—being the politically and economically dominant party—were invariably experienced by the colonised, the acted on, as racist and oppressive. Bonnett (1997), however, suggests the scholarly reification of 'whiteness' runs the risk of homogenising difference, leaving little room for the recognition of multiple positionings or diversity within. Moreover, categorical representations are not immutable—something recognised by the government of Robert Mugabe when calling for the decolonisation of racial identities at Zimbabwe's independence.

The passing of Rhodesia's settler government in 1980 did not by itself signify the end of the colonial experience. Colonial modes of thought still structured the country's landscape, legislation, language and so forth. The order of the settlers' world was soon challenged when Zimbabwe's newly installed political elite began a programme of decolonisation to assert ownership of and control over the country and its institutions in the name of the black majority. Reworking racial identities would prove to be an intrinsic part of these initiatives, each de-naturalising and raising questions regarding the continuing European presence. How had Zimbabwe's white community understood or engaged with this programme? What were they to 'unlearn' and 'learn again' (Landry and MacLean 1996:4–5) in order to leave whiteness behind? A chance encounter sparked my interest in these issues: a brief conversation late in 1994, not more than the exchange of a few remarks between several whites at a sports club on a hot Sunday afternoon in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare. We were hardly acquainted and I felt in no position to intrude, ask questions or clarify as they muttered and grumbled among themselves about proposed changes to the country's citizenship laws. The local newspaper had carried sketchy details, little was clear and perhaps nothing would come of it. These individuals were, however, clearly worried, mulling over what proposed amendments might mean for their children. Two years earlier in 1992, Zimbabwe's white community had accounted for 0.8 per cent, or about 82 000, of a total population of 10.5 million. Of these, 62 000, or 0.6 per cent, claimed to belong in Zimbabwe as citizens. Nevertheless, they complained of being 'locked out' and 'not wanted', of being outcasts in the country of their birth. At the time, I reflected upon the confidence I held in my identity as an Australian citizen, something I took almost for granted, my forebears having arrived as pioneer settlers in the colony of South Australia

during the mid 1800s. At first glance, 'white liberation' from colonialism appeared to be achieved differently in the Antipodes. This study examines the processes whereby Zimbabwe's racial hierarchy has been dismantled and white hegemony overturned, how in effect the Rhodesian homeland has been remade with an African identity, illustrating Bonnett's (1997:177) point that as a historical and geographical construction, 'white' might also be a site of contest and change.

Our conversation took place more than a decade and a half ago now. I have intermittently followed its trail ever since, probing the bonds that bind whites to Zimbabwe and how these attachments might also be broken. One question led to another, my research broadening to encompass issues to do with place making and indigeneity—all part of the production of white autochthony. The result is an examination of various discourses of national belonging, their borders or boundaries, how these are displayed and enclosed, and the supervision they facilitate, as white identity has been reconfigured in power relations since Zimbabwe's independence. As I proceeded, however, it was Spivak's (1990:121–2) concern with unlearning privilege to gain knowledge of the other that held my attention. Hence, at a more abstract level, the following chapters reflect the interplay of colonial memory in making these people what they once were, and what they have now become, the journey from dominance to an understanding of theirs as a failing community. As something is told of what it means to be white in the post colony, the point is made that Europeans are not beyond finding themselves decentred, dispossessed and marginalised in the name of decolonisation and correcting the colonial record. Ten years have passed since I left the country and Zimbabwe is much changed. In view of which, this study offers a retrospective to what is now known as the 'Zimbabwe crisis' and how issues implicated in it emerged and developed before 2000.

With regard to racial nomenclature, I have applied the terms 'European/white' and 'African/black' somewhat interchangeably, while remaining cognisant of the historical period under discussion. As modes of objectification, these labels, while out of favour in Western antiracist literature, are an integral part of everyday language in Zimbabwe, used to describe oneself and others despite regional and class distinctions or differing views on race and the position of whites in the territory. 'Tribe', also out of favour in Western academia, is still occasionally heard in Zimbabwe, for words have their own veracity. The communal areas might, for instance, be referred to using the Rhodesian name: the Tribal Trust Lands or the TTLs. Politicians, government officials, scholars and others also applied the term to political patronage, voting patterns, provincial names, styles of dancing and so forth. Another semantic divide existed with regard to the armed conflict that ended in 1980 and brought Zimbabwe into being. Black Zimbabweans most commonly referred to this war as the liberation struggle.

For whites, it was the civil war, but again these terms were not rigidly applied. I heard this conflict spoken about as ‘the time of the killing’ by a former black soldier and, comparing it with Australia’s engagement in Vietnam, ‘our five-minute skirmish’ by a white conscript. Places are given the names appropriate to the era, far-reaching changes coming in the wake of political independence.

For obvious reasons, individuals—unless they courted public attention—have not been identified by name. Nevertheless, I would at this point like to sincerely thank the many Zimbabweans who, privately or as members of various institutions, made this study possible. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the support from colleagues at the University of Zimbabwe, where I worked for much of my time in the country. They were rewarding years, first with Professor Victor Muzvidziwa in the Departmental Chair and later with Professor Michael Bourdillon. I also appreciate assistance provided by staff employed at the National Archives and the Central Statistics Office and owe a great debt to those who contributed their time, answering questions and involving me in their daily activities. Thanks go to Professor Nicolas Peterson and Professor Francesca Merlan of The Australian National University for reading and commenting on my doctoral thesis and for helpful suggestions at that time. Special thanks go to Professor Richard Werbner, Director of the International Centre for Contemporary Cultural Research at the University of Manchester, who later in the piece prodded me to revise the manuscript in view of publication. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the encouragement and support of my husband, Roger, during the many years this work has taken to complete.