“God’s own country”: Temporalities of landscape in postcolonial nostalgia

Introduction

This article examines how white former ‘Rhodesians’, who have emigrated to South Africa since Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980, remember and recount the landscapes of colonial Rhodesia, thereby making affective claims of belonging to the land they have left behind but which they hold onto as ‘homeland’. In the ex-Rhodesian vernacular, the landscape in which the memory narratives are embedded, and which they in turn shape, is referred to as bush, bundu1, country, or wide open space. The article will explore the central place that ‘bush’ occupies in the former Rhodesian memory work. I argue that it is at the heart of their moral and spiritual well-being. The article will also examine the ways that the idea of ‘empty land’ is intertwined with that of the bush, and suggest that the emptiness – embedded in nostalgic reconstructions of the homeland and at the core of the commonplace version of white settler landscape narrative – is far from simple. It is an idea and an image of landscape, which consists of complex and contradictory temporalities and moral connotations. Further, the article examines the kinds of interrelationships that are formed with landscapes through recollecting them. It shows how shared stories about homeland constitute a pivotal element of diasporic nostalgia and are, as such, emblematic to the production of the community.

Zimbabwe’s independence was followed by a large wave of white migration during the early 1980s. Of the approximately 100,000 whites who left Zimbabwe, about a half settled in South Africa, a third moved to Britain and the rest mostly to Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada (Eaton 1996). The more or less voluntary postcolonial migrants, whose lives I researched in South Africa between 1999 and 2002 as part of my doctoral work (2008), had mostly represented the urban middle class of British background in colonial Rhodesia. They chose South Africa as their new home for several reasons. First, migrating to the neighbouring country required far less economic

1 Bundu (used in South African and Zimbabwean English) signifies an uninhabited wilderness region, remote from towns. The word derives from a Shona word bundo, meaning grasslands.
resources than moving to Britain or Australia. Second, restrictions regarding age, occupation, education and assets foreclosed other potential destinations from many. Third, and most important, as a society the apartheid South Africa of the 1980s was a country which resembled most closely the colonial ‘homeland’ the whites were leaving behind, and which resonated strongly with their worldview. Many reckoned they could continue a familiar, privileged lifestyle in South Africa more easily than elsewhere.

Like many other diaspora communities, the ex-Rhodesians in South Africa are in part united by a shared memory of an idealised homeland, with which they maintain an enduring relationship. Thus, despite the fact that colonial Rhodesia no longer exists, in the lives of post-migrant Rhodesians it continues to have intrinsic weight as the preeminent place of belonging. Although very few of my interlocutors imagined they would re-migrate to Zimbabwe in any foreseeable future, a sense of rootedness with the homeland was actively maintained by sharing stories about Rhodesia. A white postcolonial narrative fixated on emotional affinity with a territory the whites had formerly colonised, is obviously politically highly ambiguous. While ownership, occupation and rights to land are always at the heart of settler colonial politics, the question has been particularly volatile in Zimbabwean politics. It was a fundamental issue in the country’s struggle for independence and a problem, which has remained unresolved for decades. When I was doing fieldwork in 2000, the land question re-emerged with force, and the political turmoil concerning redistribution of commercial, mainly white-owned farmland in Zimbabwe turned violent. At that stage, approximately 4,500 commercial farming families owned roughly about a third of the land area in a country of 12 million mainly black inhabitants. The forced, and at times violent, acquisition of about 95% of the commercial farmland was justified as a final resolution of the land question (Hammar 2010: 396). Removals and relocations of commercial farmers, farmworkers, and their families, as well as the political violence and economic crisis in Zimbabwe, have since been widely documented and analysed (e.g. Alexander 2006; Moyo 2011; Rutherford 2017).

The land crisis in Zimbabwe therefore forms a vital part of the historical and political context in which my fieldwork took place and in which the nostalgic narratives of homeland were recounted. Although the postcolonial struggle over land is not the analytical focus of this article, it is significant to recognise this background, and particularly to observe how very little the political context penetrated the homeland stories I was told. Such silence, disregard and oblivion, however, are never total. In subtle ways they hover and echo at the back of these stories. I will return to the silence and dismissal

2 Although ‘return’ may have been pivotal in the original concept of diaspora – applied to classic and paradigmatic cases of Jewish, Armenian and Greek diasporas (Cohen 1999) – it is apparent that not all committed relationships with homelands materialise in concrete desires to return. Diasporas, rather, are considered to manifest themselves as stances which may be used to make claims, mobilise energies or to appeal to loyalties (Brubaker 2005: 12) or as personal relationships and moral gestures within the diaspora itself (Werbner 2000).
at the end of this paper and suggest that they form an integral part of the postcolonial nostalgic stance this article attempts to sketch.

In the familiar colonial imagery of ‘empty land’, the landscape is represented as an unmapped, virgin land devoid of (other) human involvement and engagement (Hughes 2010; Pilossof 2012). The emptiness, of course, is a result of cultural imagination and requires particular dismissals and blind spots. In her analysis of white Kenyans, Janet McIntosh (2016: 10–11) adopts a term *structural oblivion* to capture such a mode of moral consciousness. It necessitates erasure, ignorance and denial, and is grounded on a refusal to recognise ideologies that uphold one's elite position as well the experience of others (Uusihakala 2008: 214–215). Understanding the varied meanings, ambivalent sentiments and distinct moral valuations connected with the ‘emptiness’ or ‘wildness’ of the remembered landscape, is thus a central question this article addresses.

There are two main ways of representing the landscape in white colonial and postcolonial discourse. In the first version, the land is presented as a resource to be utilised; in the second, as an environment to be conserved and cared for. In the first form, the allegedly empty land is viewed as an unbounded resource and a potential possession; a terrain lacking ownership and yearning for development. The value of land lies in its potential to produce something of material worth. Such a representation has tended to dominate studies – as well as self-analysis – of settler colonials. It was also very much evident in my earlier research on postcolonial whites in Kenya, in which I suggested that the Kenyan whites’ commitment to the country and their self-legitimation of belonging are prominently demonstrated in investments in land. The investments relate both to the engineering of landscape – arguments that farmers should ceaselessly labour to build and improve their land – as well as to embodied knowledge and conservational care of the terrain, flora and fauna (Uusihakala 1999; Fox 2012).

The idea that investments in land do not necessarily imply transformation but focus rather on preservation, brings us to the second, antithetical interpretation of the whites’ relationship to land. Not only developers and builders, settler colonials have also been described as anti-modern and strongly resistant to social change. This anti-modernity is connected both to a desire to conserve what is considered as the pure and primeval essence of the landscape and to coat it with “rural moral values” (Godwin and Hancock 1999; Dominy 2001). In such a view, the landscape is represented either as a timeless, eternal wilderness or as a pastorial idyll (Chennels 1996; Pilossof 2010). In contrast with a developers’ and builders’ version, the preserver imagines the landscape as a pristine space unharmed by human touch and values it for its true essence, which is considered to emit its emotional force. This perception has become preeminent in much of the more recent research on postcolonial whites in contemporary African societies (McIntosh 2016; 3 Melissa Steyn’s (2012) phrase *ignorance contract* also refers to such a form of moral consciousness and structural position. Drawing from critical philosophy of race, she argues that ignorance contract – a tacit agreement to entertain ignorance – is at the heart of society structured in racial hierarchy, such as South Africa.
Katja Uusihakala

Gressier 2015; Hughes 2010). For example, in her study on whites in contemporary Botswana, Catie Gressier describes the centrality of the bush in white Batswana cultural values. She argues that the construction of the Okavango environment is central to the white identities, spirituality, social relationships and national belonging. These constructions, however, must be understood in terms of a white minority subject position, which renders “nature a considerably less fraught means than the social environment through which to develop identities and senses of belonging” (2015: 40).

The places people most strongly identify with are not necessarily the ones they inhabit. This is the case for many individuals and groups of people voluntarily or forcibly removed from their homelands. Longing for a place where one feels one most comprehensively belongs, is essentially what the concept of nostalgia signifies. Stemming from the Greek words nóstos (homecoming) and algos (pain, grief, distress) (e.g., Boym 2001), the term nostalgia was coined by a Swiss scholar Johannes Hofer in the late 17th century to refer to a severe homesickness, an illness-like longing for home and for homeland landscapes from which mercenaries suffered. Svetlana Boym (2001) defines nostalgia as a sense of loss and displacement, a longing for a home, which no longer exists or might never have been. Nostalgia, she suggests, may manifest itself in restorative forms, which stress nóstos, the return. As such it often signifies nationalistic or revivalist attempts to transhistorically reconstruct a lost home. Alternative nostalgic projects and sentiments might not centralise either the return or a particular place, but fixate on algos – the grief and pain – and on the ambivalence between longing and belonging.

In contemporary anthropological studies on memory, nostalgia has become one of the key concepts used for analysing the interlinking of place and memory, and for understanding temporal positions and processes where the past and the future are tied to sociospatial changes (Bissell 2015: 219). Imaginaries, hopes and yearnings related to the past are projected via the present – often characterised by discontinuity and disappointment – towards a future, which, it is hoped, will resemble and remind one of the past (Angé and Berliner 2015). Often such political temporalities gain strength in situations where the past is, in one way or another, irrevocably gone and structurally disrupted. Diasporas, forced migrations and removals, as well as breakdowns of social systems such as colonial order or state socialism, are examples of such fundamental breaks. Nostalgia, in such contexts of epochal change, appears to be projected to a time or a place which is situated before or beyond traumatic events. The ex-Rhodesian diasporic

---

4 David Hughes considers the relationship white Zimbabweans have with the landscape to be defined by alienation and disconnection. He describes it as a form of “nature-obsessed escape”. The postcolonial whites, Hughes argues, have preferred to invest themselves emotionally and artistically in the environment and negotiate their identity with land forms rather than with other humans or social forms (2010: xii).

5 On colonial nostalgia, see Bissell 2005; Smith 2003. On post-socialist nostalgia, see Berdahl 2010; Boyer 2006.
recollections – the sentimental imaginings and evocations of homeland landscapes characterised by their remoteness, emptiness and removal from social upheavals – are a paradigm case of postcolonial nostalgia, which is what this article explores.

In what follows, I first present two memory narratives to illustrate the cultural construction of white postcolonial relationships to the ‘homeland’ and the complex temporalities they convey. In both narratives the protagonist is a young boy for whom ‘the bush’ was the world. These young boys, David and Norman, are now middle-aged and keep returning to their childhood places in memory. Both claim a passionate longing for the place intertwined with a sense that the place is calling them and longing for their return as well. I analyse the narratives from two perspectives. I first situate them as part of a genre of white colonial landscape narrative, tracing the temporalities of landscape embedded in the different meanings given to ‘bush’, ‘wilderness’ or ‘wide open space’. I propose that despite the fact that Norman and David frame their recollections in the familiar narrative of empty space, the landscape they present in their stories, is much more complex. The flickering emptiness appears as a moral commentary more than a lived reality. Secondly, I examine how the moral landscape commentary becomes an integral part of postcolonial nostalgia and the shaping of diasporic stances and subjectivities.

A place in the bush

“THE MOUNTAINS HAD LOST NONE OF THEIR PRESENCE”

In the 1950s when David was a small boy, his family left behind their urban life in the country’s capital and established a farm near Inyanga on Zimbabwe’s eastern border. In the discussions I had with my interlocutors, the eastern borderland area, together with the Matopos Hills, were presented as the two epitomes of the natural, majestic beauty of the Rhodesian landscape. Unlike the Matopos with its sturdy, arid terrain and topography dominated by spectacular boulders balancing on each other’s shoulders, Inyanga was described as beautiful in a pleasant, European-kind-of-a-way. In these descriptions, Inyanga exemplifies the picturesque in contrast to the sublime beauty of the Matopos.

According to David, farming in the borderland area wasn’t very successful.

---

6 I use first name pseudonyms for the ex-Rhodesian people who have been involved in my research in order to protect their anonymity.

7 The use of place names is a deeply political issue. The colonial placename Inyanga was changed to Nyanga after Zimbabwe’s independence. Here the colonial name is used to cohere with my informants’ recollections. Their use of names may be conceived of both as a nostalgic revival and a nostalgic forgetting.

8 According to J. M. Coetzee (1988: 52) the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque were, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the three categories of European landscape classification. They are so fundamental that they have since organised how landscape is seen and, as Coetzee shows, affected the perception and understanding of colonial terrain.
The soil was poor, rainfall unreliable, droughts recurrent, and hyenas once killed all their cattle. During the liberation war years of the 1970s, the area became a virtual war zone and eventually the family had to abandon the farm. David had recently been back to his childhood home for the first time in more than twenty years, during which time the family farm had become a resettlement area. In our discussion, David contemplated on the mixed feelings he had about his return and on his intense longing for the place.

The farm was very isolated. And it was quite a distance from Inyanga, which is the nearest settlement. It was bad roads. There were no proper bridges; you just drift through the water, through the rivers. I spent all my time exploring, ‘cause it was a very interesting area. And I used to spend all the time in the mountains [...]. We always used to call it the Raingod Mountain. And there was a legend that whenever there was a cloud in the sky, there would always be one over this. ‘Cause they used to have these important rainmaking ceremonies there. It was also this belief that whenever a chief was crowned [---] they used to sort of leave him up this hill or something. And there’s a guy and he used to have to go up there and make various offerings and if the gods were impressed they used to give rain. There was all these signs of this sort of ancient civilization. There was all these terraces and built structures, and it covers an incredible area. [...] My father picked up a lot just from talking with the locals. And then I read books on it as well. [...] There were some very imposing mountains, quite a stupendous view. And our house was a bit further along.

['What was it like to go back after twenty years?' I asked.] It was a sort of mixture of feelings. You know, there was sadness for what it was, what had gone, and yet it was very nice to be back. It hadn't really changed. [...] You know, it was now a resettlement area. It was no longer a farm. But the mountains had lost none of their presence. ['But people had moved in, ' I commented.] Yeah, it was now very settled. In that point of view it had changed a great deal [...] In a way I sort of felt that it was right that this land, which had great religious significance to the locals, should actually have been given back to them. The sad thing was that all the actual blacks they brought in were actually not from the local tribes. They were from outside areas. And the local belief systems meant very little to them. [...] When we gave it over, I liked to think it was to be handed over to the rightful occupants and to the people to whom this mountain was so important. Wish they had got back their land.

The landscape [...] just has a very powerful spiritual feel about it. I just have this emotional connection with it. I don't really feel down here [in South Africa] with the land. I seem to be drawn back. Inyanga, it's a very mystical area. It's very powerful. [...] As I'm getting older, I'm harking back more and more for, I don't know, for Zimbabwe. I seem to be going back more and more often. I think it's the pull of the land, I suppose. I've never quite got over that part of it. You know I really love the country. The country itself. I never much cared for the society. I made do with the society but I really loved the actual country itself. My sisters

---

9 Zimbabwe's independence was preceded by nearly 15 years of civil war in which the white-minority government fought against Zimbabwean nationalist movements ZAPU and ZANU and their guerrilla armies.
go back with me too. We always go back; we will make this pilgrimage back to the farm. They also feel the very strong pull. […] But as I said, in more recent years I find myself harking back more and more for that. Like my life's gone a circle in a way, and I'm sort of going back to beginning.

“The farm was very isolated,” David begins, immediately setting the tone of the narrative. In it one faintly hears the opening of many other stories of white farms in Africa, which so intensely stress solitude and seclusion, as well and the vastness of the surrounding space.10 While it is evident that David knows the landscape through his explorations and wanderings on the mountains, what he accentuates instead, is his interpretation of meanings that landscape has in indigenous belief systems. He elucidates his sense of belonging in a way that suggests a conscious reflection on the experience of others – the indigenous inhabitants of the area. According to Paul Mupira (2003), Mt Muozi (the area that David refers to) is the most sacred place for the VaNyama people inhabiting the area. The mountain was named after Muozi, a powerful diviner and rainmaker among the VaNyama. According to a legend, Mupira writes, the Sawunyama chiefs used to be installed on the mountain and anybody who wanted to become chief had to climb the mountain and be ceremoniously accepted or rejected by the spirits. Eventually the diviner Muozi became so popular and powerful that paramount chief Sawunyama felt threatened and had his army kill him, which subsequently brought a curse on the land and the Sawunyama chieftainship. Numerous droughts followed until Sawunyama managed to appease the avenging spirit. Since then ceremonies have been held on Mt Muozi to prevent misfortune befalling the VaNyama people.

Despite the melancholy tone evoked by ruins of his home, “sadness for what it was, what had gone,” David reiterates the solidity and eternity of the mountains. He takes comfort in their firm, physical presence. When I note that new people had moved in since their departure, David consents and explains how the landscape had changed: the isolation of colonial times had given way to a densely populated resettlement area. At the end of that paragraph, David makes a political statement, which at the time of the interview – the farm invasions in Zimbabwe had then intensified markedly

10 Examples of white farming novels set in Africa are numerous. One immediately thinks of Doris Lessing in Rhodesia and Elspeth Huxley in Kenya, who both grew up on farms in Africa, and whose novels are often written from a lonely child's perspective. This is where the similarities end, however. Huxley and Lessing read very different meanings into the experienced isolation of farming life. For Huxley, the wide open spaces were about opportunity, they called for initiative and development. (See Huxley's trilogy 1981; 1982; 1987.) For Lessing on the other hand, the isolation of farming life is profoundly ambiguous and cannot be considered outside her general frame of social insulation, which is seclusion both for the individual who cannot belong to the community and for the nation cocooned in itself. (See Martha Quest (1973 [1952]), and the short story The Old Chief Mshlanga in Collected African Stories 1979.) For a discussion of the farm novel in South Africa, see Coetzee (1988: chapters 3–6 in particular). For post-2000 pastoral white writing, see Pilossof (2012).
– was quite unique: he felt that the land, because of its spiritual significance, should have been given over to its rightful occupants.

At the end of his narrative, David connects his longing to the spiritual feel of the landscape. He feels that the land is pulling him to return; to “make a pilgrimage”. Although David’s pilgrimage was not exactly of a religious kind, his return to the ruins of his childhood home does resonate with Victor and Edith Turner’s classic notion of the concept. Turners consider pilgrimages as movements away from the mundane centres and everyday social structures to a sacred periphery “to a far place intimately associated with the deepest, most cherished, axiomatic values of the traveler” (1978: 241). Thus, leaving behind his secular ordinary life in South Africa where he does not “feel with the land”, David travels to the random remains of his childhood home. He then returns to his ordinary life with a sense of some transformation; he feels that his life has “gone a circle” and he’s “back in the beginning”.

“THE LAND IS CALLING”

The protagonist of the second narrative, Norman, was introduced to me as a man I absolutely must talk to “because he grew up in the bush”, a phrase designed to convey to me, I presume, that within the diaspora community he was considered “the archetypal Rhodesian”. And indeed, Norman did capture the image of a Rhodesian ‘bush type’ heart and soul. Approaching sixty, he was big, bearded and bear-like, invariably clad in khaki shorts, bush shoes and long striped socks. Norman grew up in a very large family in a small town in central Rhodesia. After finishing school, he had worked at a post office, tried farming and then worked around Rhodesia at various power stations. Subsequently he had driven a loading truck at Durban harbour in South Africa, picked fruit in Australia, worked on a salmon fishing boat in Canada and caught tropical fish in Malawi. “But,” Norman said, “I always used to get homesick.” From all of his journeys he always returned home, “to this small town in the middle of the bush.” “Having travelled the world, I wouldn’t give you anything for Europe. Or America. Or Canada. I’m an African!” he declared. During our discussion, Norman kept returning to the particularity of his home place, which he felt was constantly calling him. When he recalled the place, his rather rough appearance seemed to melt. His spoke softly and tentatively, tenderly and persuasively.

And you spent your life just shooting at birds. I think I killed one. And just pure running around. You knew all the wild fruit, and there was lots there. Lots and lots of wild fruit. So you knew the seasons, you knew where to look. And there, there’s a big river, fishing. 99% of your time was spent at the river [...]. The only restriction: suppertime. The power station used to blow the hooter to tell everybody it’s four o’clock. They used to blow this big siren hooter. And then you know everybody’s going home. And this could be five, six, eight miles away. As soon as that was heard, we used to run home [...] through the bush.

So this place is always calling me. [...] There’s a river, a hill, normal hills, and you get the power station, the power line. And then the hill and all the houses are on
the hill with the club on the top. The club you could see for miles. But as far as you could see, it was bush. Just pure God's bush. Not this stupid plantation. Just God's bush. We're gonna go back. I wanna go back now. It's calling me very much. Saying: 'Come, come, come, come back!'

I don't know if you're ever gonna go there, but if you drive from Messina to Beitbridge, when you cross the bridge, you enter God's own country. [...] And when you start climbing on the hills, you will see the baobabs and the green hills and then you'll know what I'm talking about. It's God's own country. God made Africa and just to make it so everybody's happy, he made the top and the bottom the worst places to be. Whereas the middle he kept for himself. [...] The middle of Africa God reserved for himself. And whenever I've had a garden, I've always left a space for God in the middle of the garden. With that piece of land God could do whatever He wished. Whatever He wished to grow in it, would grow.

Norman sets up the scene by describing the bush as an active playground of a child. Through his illustration, one can imagine a bush busy with bare feet treading the ground, the brush swarming and twigs twisting and snapping. He reflects on himself as a child who knows the bush from within – through running, shooting, fishing and picking fruit. But the narrative not only sets the scene in the physical environment; it also forms a setting of a small-town community of colonial Rhodesia. The sounds of kids flocking and rushing through the vegetation are interrupted by a blow of the power station siren. Every day at the same hour, it would tell everyone now is the time to run home. Thus, Norman's bush is not exactly a pristine, untouched piece of nature. Instead, the bush he portrays is constructed by activity and play, as well as by social engagements, which are scheduled and ordered by a modern, repetitive timetable of a colonial industrial small town.

Norman then attempts to capture the sense and spirit of the place by depicting a painting-like landscape image. He portrays a colonial small town set-up dominated economically, socially and visually by the power station and furnished with the communal centre, the club. Having verbally painted the scene and placed the club on the top, Norman then looks at the scene he has re-created from that very top. What he sees now retrospectively is a bush on a different level to that of his previous description of his childhood engagement with it. This is a landscape morally evaluated: it is pure God's bush. It is bush delineated as an untouched wilderness set in opposition and understood in comparison to "this stupid plantation", which he encounters in South Africa. Norman's stepping in and out of the picture – his recollections of both moving through the bush as well as his morally evaluative gaze of the scene – reflects the difference between what Tim Ingold (1993; 2011) refers to as a dwelling perspective on landscape on the one hand and the cartographer's or the surveyor's sense of space on the other. However, Norman's dichotomous portrayal also reflects temporal and analytical shifts in the memory narrative. The recollection of how one used to move about captures continuous engagement with landscape as expressive of a way of life in the past, while the evaluative gaze offers a moral retrospection of that engaged landscape from a spatiotemporal, diasporic distance.
Norman senses intensely that the place is animate and calls him; it actually speaks with a voice of its own. It is saying: “Come, come, come, come back!” Norman’s voice changes as he enunciates these words. He whispers in a tempting, begging voice attempting to make me understand the power of the call. He then appears to give me driving directions to the sacred land and explains what crossing the bridge over the Limpopo River, a physical landmark demarcating the boundary between the two countries, signifies.¹¹ The border post and the bridge create a transition – concrete and metaphorical – between two realms of being, two irreconcilable ways of life. Although the terrain and the topography do not change dramatically, in many of the diasporic “homecoming narratives” (Basu 2004; see also Gressier 2015: 54–55), the natural scenery does seem to change. On the South African side, it is as if the landscape barely exists; it is just mileage, something to get through as fast as possible. But after crossing the bridge, the colour and texture of the landscape suddenly penetrate the senses. What is undescibed, even unseen on one side of the border, becomes green and fertile and animated on the home terrain.

At the end of his narrative, Norman reflects on the spirituality of the land. For Norman, who defines himself as a non-religious man, the Rhodesian bush landscape is “God’s own country”. This idiom, widely used by ex-Rhodesians, signifies a place of belonging, one’s native ground, a birthplace, a home and a homeland. And it also implies an earthly paradise. Norman, however, conspicuously stresses the numinous essence of the place.¹² To him, the wilderness expresses the presence and nearness of God. That particular nook in the middle of rural Rhodesia into which he offers driving directions, is “God’s bush”. It is a place that God at the time of creation “kept and reserved for himself”. Norman’s intriguing gardening practice, his re-creation of a little spot for God in the middle of mowed lawns and manicured shrubs he otherwise so meticulously attends to, is his unique way of worshipping, of composing a sanctuary and thus commemorating the place of his belonging. By this exceptional practice, Norman demonstrates the essential ambiguity that characterises the settler conceptualisation of landscape; namely the idea that colonial “wide open spaces” call for appropriation and development, the outcome of which is, in the end, its destruction. The dilemma lies in the simultaneous attempt to both preserve the open space, understood as the pure and pristine state of nature and thus valuable as such, and to exploit its natural resources.

¹¹ Messina and Beitbridge are border towns and custom posts between South Africa and Zimbabwe. Beitbridge, linking the two countries, was built in 1927–1929 across the Limpopo River.

¹² The spiritualization of land may also be linked to the idea of a promised land; the idea of a chosen people in their God-given land, of divine purpose carved into a geographic territory. This type of conceptualization can be found in much of the literature on Afrikaners in South Africa, as well as in analysis of various diasporic groups. According to Vincent Crapanzano (1986) for example, the Afrikaner history and their occupation of territory in South Africa is narrated in Biblical terms.
Untangling the bush

How do David’s and Norman’s stories conform to the classic form of colonial landscape narrative where the ‘bush’, understood as an untouched natural ‘wilderness’, is the conceptual core? To explore this question, I will trace the historical layers, temporal complexities and moral meanings that this landscape idea is composed of. How were European, and particularly British, landscape ideas transported to the settler territories? What kinds of a human relationships with the landscape are imagined as virtuous and desirable? How is ‘the bush as nature’ set in conceptual opposition with culture or society in these moral perceptions of landscape?

David’s country and Norman’s bush are cultural categories which are composite of complex temporalities. As such, they are deeply rooted in nature/culture conceptual oppositions in “Western” thinking.13 Further, they connote distinct elements distinguishable in the concept of “wilderness” within the nature/culture complex. The very idea of wilderness, needless to say, is a cultural construct rather than a precise physical entity. Indeed, as William Cronon writes (1996: 7):

Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation [...]. It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered but still transcendent nature can be [...] encountered [but] a product of that civilization.

As a cultural product, wilderness contains layered traces from distinct historical eras. One may detect hints of pre-Israelite demonology, in which wilderness was considered as the realm beyond the reach of God (Coetzee 1988: 49). Likewise, one may observe elements of Judaeo-Christian thinking, where wilderness was seen as a safe retreat, a place of contemplation and purification, and a place where one’s true being could be discovered (ibid.). In ancient Greek and Roman thought wilderness was, along with the garden and the city, considered one of the “archetypal landscapes” (Cosgrove 1993: 297–298). These three landscape categories – wilderness, garden and city – imply a moral narrative suggesting an intensifying human interference with nature; an idea which may also be recognized in David’s and Norman’s ways of moral juxtaposition of the bush with the town.

It has been suggested by many writers that fear was the strongest element in European attitudes to wilderness until the 19th century (e.g. Short 1991: xvi). In fairy tales and folklore, demons and dangers lurked in the forests and mountains. Wilderness was frightening both because of the creatures who dwelled there, and because of the effects it could have on individuals

---

13 Andre Gingrich argues that the potentially all-encompassing character of the nature/culture dichotomy in Western conceptualization is historically grounded in “secularized monotheistic legacy” (2014: 111). The differentiation of nature and culture rests on a tripartite hierarchy between “God, humans and ‘the rest of Creation’ in its organic and non-organic forms” (ibid.: 112).
exposed to its influence. However, in Britain, by the early 19th century, fear had been replaced by a romantic vision; wilderness had become an ennobled symbol of lost innocence. The idealised past in this imaginary was spatially situated in the countryside – and loosely dated somewhere in the early 18th century – and not in uninhabited wilderness. According to Jean and John Comaroff (1991: 71–73), the disappearing yeomanry became the mythical embodiment of a traditional lifestyle, and the most tragic symptom of the era was the scarring of the notion of England-as-garden. In actuality, however, the image of England-as-garden – with its neat walled or hedged fields – was a consequence of the enclosure movement, the privatisation of the commons and the commodification of agriculture, which had preceded and enabled industrialisation and consequently caused the death of the yeomanry. Thus, the longed-for imaginary past merged two different historical periods: the so-called typical English scene of a tidy, geometric patchwork of green fields and one tilled mainly by yeoman households (ibid.: 322 n. 33; Miller 1995: 94). In these nostalgic views, the city had become the moral equivalent of the medieval forest, populated as it was by demons.

Reverie for the mythical wilderness/countryside was accompanied by a keen interest in outdoor life – both very much upper and middle class passions in Britain.14 This enthusiasm was actualised, for example, in the birth of various rambling movements as well as natural history societies. In the words of David Evans (1992: 31), the lone “sportsman-naturalist-collector” became paradigmatic of the 19th century. Such interests further bloomed and prospered in the colonies. Scientific ideas became deeply embedded in imperial rule, shaping the conceptualisation of landscape, as well as ideas and practices of environmental conservation (Grove 1995; Griffiths and Robin 1997; Beinart and Hughes 2007). Thus, a complex mixture of landscape ideas – wilderness as a pristine place of purification, countryside as a rural idyll, Victorian wilderness movements, scientific and conservational pursuits – were all carried out and reshaped on imperial frontiers. Significantly, what these distinctive preoccupations demonstrate is that there was no singular “European landscape imaginary” transported to the colonies and imposed upon the occupied terrains. Instead, the imaginary stems from various historical roots, and mixes and merges complex and seemingly contradictory ideas and temporalities.

**Wide open country?**

At the time of the colonial occupation, the wide-open spaces of the frontier were interpreted, by and large, as ‘free land’ for the colonisers. According to Thompson and Lamar, the most important aspect of frontier land was

14 Indeed, Short refers to the reinforcement of the Country ethic as “Balmorality” (1991: 74). However, he notes that the beginning of the 20th century also saw the emergence of different wilderness and rambling movements in Britain, some of which were explicitly socialist. They encouraged the opening up of the countryside for the benefit of the urban workers; the beauty of nature was seen as an encouragement to a simpler life and higher thinking (ibid.: 77).
its implication of ownership. “Free land [...] not only inspired aggressive expansion into indigenous areas for social and psychological reasons, it perpetuated hierarchical concepts of society and fostered forced labour systems on the so-called free frontiers of both North America and Southern Africa” (1981: 30). Jay Vest (1987: 310) analyses the utilitarian foundations of Western land use ideals – and thus the “European imperialist ethos” – and argues that they are built on John Locke’s pre-societal natural right and individualised ownership theory. For instance, for the Puritans, the occupation of land in America was justified by their concept of vacuum domicilium – a notion that a place is without human habitation or civilisation and thus ‘lonely’ or ‘desolate’. Lands such as these were seen as instrumentally valuable, worthy in what they could offer. Fusing Locke’s theory with a Puritan reading of Genesis 1:28,15 the pioneers refused to see Native Americans as human. On the colonial African continent, similar examples are legion. For instance, W. H. Brown, in his pioneering account On the South African Frontier (1899, cit. Palmer 1977: 16), writes:

> With the Bantu, removal does not entail the same degree of hardship that we contemplate in the dispossession of land in civilized communities. The natives do not hold the soil in the same sense of ownership. To them the earth is as free as the air and the water [...]. The occupancy of any given plot of ground is but temporary.

The fact that the land was not devoid of human involvement at the pioneers’ arrival is obvious; neither can its “occupancy” be termed as “temporary”. However, neither was this the exclusive way that landscape was depicted in the early European explorers and travellers’ accounts. These characteristically included detailed descriptions of local political systems, natural landmarks, and seasonal variations (Beinart 1998). In fact, the ‘empty land’ appears to be a result of much narrative effort; it emerged through a historical process in which descriptive accounts gave way to the gradual hollowing out of the landscape as colonial control was instilled and strengthened, with the effect of rooting the pioneers’ belonging in the soil. Thus, in the piecemeal transformation and solidification of the travellers’ story into the pioneer origin narrative, natural features as well as traces of human involvement in the landscape, were shifted to the background. This created a blank space in which the core action – the colonial ‘opening up’ of the country – could be played out (Uusihakala 2008: 86–90). That the landscape has remained narratively empty since the frontier days, is again the result of substantial cultural work; it has included selectivity, dismissal and disregard (McIntosh 2016). In David Hughes’ words, the settler colonials have had to “imagine the natives away” (2010: xii). It has also meant overlooking and dismissing the fact of severe land segregation; the land could appear wide open and

15 “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’"
empty because the Africans were displaced and settled in Native Reserves and subsequent Tribal Trust Lands.16

Very little of these struggles has penetrated the canonical colonial narratives, which remain resolutely stories of emptiness. Their central motif has been the depiction of wide open spaces as something that suggest opportunity and prosperity looming in the future. Interestingly, the potential futures were very often perceived and articulated by stressing the delightful resemblance and familiarity – the Europeanness – of the landscape, rather than its novelty or exoticism. For example, Errol Trzebinski, a popular historian of white Kenyans, muses on how early pioneers encountered the Kenyan highland wilderness: “The views that lay before them encompassed forest, lake, thicketed valley and green, moist grass where cattle might graze, evoking memories of a summer’s day in Europe” (1991: 28). This landscape vision presents a curious blend of nostalgia, which is not just retrospective in that it longs for the familiar European surroundings of a bygone era, but also prospective (Boym 2001). In its political projection, it envisages, through the evocation of memory, a future that is homespun and familiar.

Elaine and Richard, an elderly couple I became acquainted with in South Africa, reminisced about Rhodesia with deep longing. Their memory narrative plays on a comparison between colonial Rhodesia as open country and the ’stitched up’ land in South Africa. For them the Rhodesian open country was a democratic (as regarded the whites) wide-open space of opportunity. As a hobby, the couple used to prospect for minerals and gems in Rhodesia.

Elaine: I think even on the mining side we were different. [Compared to South Africa.] Up there anybody could go and get a license to prospect. And all the land belonged to the state.

Richard: What you did, you got a license […] and you could go on anybody’s land, subject to a written notice, registered, and send it to the farmer and you could prospect on his land for a month. Certain places you couldn’t go, like into his mielie17 crops and dip tanks and things like that, and obviously you went to see him first to get on good terms. And if you found something, [there was] a rigorous sort of pegging procedure, and then you registered it and you had to develop it or pay a penalty at the end of year […] It was wild country. The thing was that you felt as though the country belonged to you. It was my country.

Elaine: The difference [is, that in South Africa] every bit of what have you, they’ve got a value. Either it belongs to the farmer, the mineral rights, or it belongs to a mining company. And it’s all stitched up. There is no open country as such. No. That you could go along and just help yourself.

16 To give one example, Donald S. Moore’s (2005) study in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe is an example of colonial politics of displacement and dispossession. Moore shows how colonial evictions displaced families from their ancestral lands and how the postcolonial authorities have subsequently turned those lands into resettlement schemes.

17 Mielie (Afrikaans) is maize or corn on the cob.
The open country in opposition to the South African stitched-up one is thus conceived of as one of limitless potential, where “you could go along and help yourself”. The wildness Richard emphasises has to be interpreted from this perspective of potential, for the landscape he remembers and represents was hardly untouched. Instead, it was a land regulated by racially segregated social order and ownership; it belonged either to the colonial state or to private, white, farmers. The state regulated prospecting by controlling and registering the prospectors and requiring the development of claims. The way Richard recasts the land also dots it with human engagement; the mielie fields and the dip tanks on the farmer’s property speak of a structured and nurtured farmland. Moreover, the landscape is intertwined with social relationships; to be able to help oneself to the offerings of the land required social interaction: one needed to be on good terms with the farmer who owned the plot. However, irrespective of these obvious elements of domestication in the landscape, the country is presented as wild. In addition to opportunity, the limitlessness of space evokes a sense of possession, a feeling that “the country belonged to you”. Thus, the pioneering values of enterprise, freedom, and opportunity are time and again narratively carved into the concept of ‘open country’.

Again, the picture is more complicated. In some accounts, ‘emptiness’ was not considered as an opportunity in a purely positive sense. A land without development and control could also implicate danger and maliciousness. Felix, one of my interlocutors in his fifties, called this “the bundu aspect”. He connected the idea of dominating the environment to that of dominating the society. He spoke of Rhodesian politics being guided by an analogy of the way in which the physical environment was encountered:

You were told that you were a cut above in a way. We were Lords of our creation in a sense. It’s a dominating thing. The sort of bundu aspect. Unless you dominate the environment, it’s gonna come at you. The sort of bundu aspect. It’s around you.

Felix’ bundu aspect, the idea that the white relationship with land was analogous with their position in the colonial social hierarchy – that both land and people needed to be controlled or they would “come at you” – indicates how deeply ideas of nature are tied to moral and political concerns. Thus, in a subtle way, Felix’s contemplation integrates political conflict and struggle into the landscape.

THE BUSH AS A MORAL GUIDE

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society (The Portable Thoreau 1947: 592).

Felix’s bundu aspect exemplifies the way people’s relationship with nature can be understood to reflect their relationship with the society; in his
version, both nature and society are potential sources of danger and malice. A more common, but equally politically charged, understanding among the ex-Rhodesians was formed along the more classic line of nature/culture dichotomy. In this narrative pattern, the bush (or country) is set in an antagonistic relationship with town (or plantation), and the former acquires moral superiority. For instance, Stuart, a retired engineer in his 60s, articulates this in the following way:

I would love to live in the bush where there are no houses at all. I love the bush. I go back as often as I can. [...] It is just being on your own. With the animals and the trees and just nature. You know a lot of people love towns. They can't live without a town. I can live without a town quite easily. [...] I take my boat, I go fishing. But it's not even the fishing. Fishing is an excuse. You sit there and you hold a fishing rod and you just look into the bush and everything else and it's just so relaxing!

In David, Norman and Stuart's nature vs. society polarisation, the bush is idealised as pure and innocent and valued above the society. David “never much cared for the society”. He made do with it, but he really “loved the actual country itself”. The place that calls Norman is “just pure God’s bush” and “not this stupid plantation”. Stuart, as well, could easily “live without a town”. In this sense, their country and bush connote to those long-established ideas in European wilderness thinking in which wilderness is regarded as intrinsically precious and morally pure, rather than valuable in the sense of what it could be made into.

These conceptual dichotomies are also reflected and employed in more recent wilderness thinking in contemporary Zimbabwe. According to William Wolmer (2007: 142), the wilderness vision in which conservation and development programmes are rooted has two facets. On the one hand the lowveld landscape is seen as “disease-ridden, barren and fearful landscape that must be battled and tamed to become productive”. On the other hand, wilderness is regarded as a “pristine and glorious piece of national heritage that must be preserved or rehabilitated.” Although both of these facets of wilderness may be present, the latter view has, in recent years, become hegemonic.

The trend can be observed in my ethnographic examples as well. While Richard's and Elaine's open country is very much the pioneering frontier land of opportunity, for David, Norman, and Stuart, the wilderness is meaningful in itself: it is valued for what is perceived as its unspoiled and pure essence, rather than its productive potentiality. For Stuart, the bush is not as much a localisable place as it is for Norman. Stuart goes ‘back to the bush’ as often as he can, although the bush he goes back to is not always the same. Knowledge of particular locales that Stuart has previously encountered may be considered as setting up “structures of expectation and feeling”, as Christopher Tilley proposes (1996: 162). These “structures of expectation and feeling” affect the way the bush, wherever it may be located, is encountered and categorised. Thus, the bush may be conceived of as not so much a particular place as it is a morally evaluated affective experience of landscape.
The structure of expectation relates not only to the way landscape is experienced but also to the way in which it is narratively construed. What is significant in David’s and Norman’s recollections is that while the stories appear to be situated in the classic settler landscape narrative which builds on the nature vs. society dichotomy, neither of them factually erases people, their engagements, built structures, or beliefs from the landscape. Whereas the familiarised colonial genre sets up historically structured frames, conceptual oppositions, and particular idioms with which the experienced landscape may be represented, David’s and Norman’s detailed reminiscences complicate the prevailing image of white postcolonial nostalgia. Their narratives do not unfold simply as stories of an empty land; nor do they suggest a postcolonial ambiguity of belonging (cf. Hughes 2010). Both men clearly sense that the landscapes they reflect upon are their spiritual homes. The emptiness, wildness and infinite quality they perceive in the landscape emerge as a moral commentary highlighting the essential sanctity of the place.

Affect and temporality in postcolonial nostalgia

I have suggested that the ex-Rhodesian recollections of homeland landscapes – characterised by purity and emptiness and their separation from the society – are more complex than the conventional dichotomies of anthropological analysis suggest. As such they create an illuminating site for examining some key elements in white postcolonial nostalgia. What makes nostalgia a particular form of remembering is its affective dimension (Keightley and Pickering 2012: 116). In David’s and Norman’s narratives the emphasised affect combines an intimate sense of belonging and an intense yearning for the homeplace with the felt potentiality and virtue of that place. This is powerfully expressed in the idea that the remembered landscape is animated, capable of intention and action, and has a power to speak. The landscape is presented as tying the persons recalling it into a mutual relationship: the landscape calls back, haunts, lures and enchants those recalling it.

In Keith Basso’s analysis such an animation of places is set in motion by the thoughts and feelings of persons who attend to them. Animation is linked to the fact that self-consciously attended-to familiar places are experienced as inherently meaningful, and their value is considered to emanate from “the form and arrangement of their observable characteristics” (1996: 55). In David’s and Norman’s descriptions, these characteristics are the wild and undomesticated, thus spiritual and mystical, elements they observe in the landscape. Further, actively sensed places are more than mere points in physical space. They possess a unique capacity for triggering acts of moral evaluation and self-reflection, as well as engendering a deeply felt connectedness. The recollection of places may take one across periods of time – the places may “evoke memories of who one used to be and thoughts about who one might become” (Basso 1996: 56).

Basso’s last point suggests that actively sensed and affectively recalled places evoke reflections of oneself through time revealing relationships that
exist between past, present and future. In nostalgic narratives, the homeland landscape becomes the site in which the converging of space of experience and the horizon of expectation can be observed. These concepts with which the past and the future are coordinated are, according to Reinhart Koselleck, both metahistorical and historically particular. He writes: “Every human being and every human community has a space of experience out of which one acts, in which past things are present or can be remembered, and, on the other, one always acts with reference to specific horizons of expectation” (2002: 111). Ricoeur (2004: 443; pace Heidegger) links these temporal horizons to the pairing of “return” and “anticipation”, which in my mind captures pointedly the temporality of nostalgia – reaching both retrospectively to the past as well as prospectively towards the future – in relation to remembered landscapes.

Reflexively, nostalgic remembering can then be critically turned to what is lacking in the present and what is anticipated and hoped for in the future. Thus, according to Rebecca Bryant (2008: 404) nostalgic visions of lost place imply a homeland that is not absent but rather apocalyptic, a homeland yet to be realized. Bryant further suggests that nostalgia appears to emerge with a break represented by a lost dream: “Whether this is the dream of the immigrant who longs for a country that has changed in her absence, a dream of capitalism whose collapse results in post-Soviet nostalgia, or the dream of modernity whose alienation leads to a longing for some imagined former Gemeinschaft, nostalgia seems to be predicted on collapsed hope. Nostalgia then may be said to represent a type of everyday disenchantment” (2014: 155).

In David’s and Norman’s nostalgic narratives the temporal dimensions of past and future meet in the homeland landscape, the recollection of which calls for intense reflection on one’s life trajectory. David’s remembering of the site of his home and the surrounding magical mountains, and his sense that the place wills for his return, urges him to consider his life “as having gone a circle”. In this nostalgic temporality, his future return will take him back to beginning, to the place which has “gone unchanged”. David’s homeplace offers itself as his future that might be “an endpoint rather than a lost beginning” (Bryant 2014: 160). Norman, for his part, shows that the return in body might not be necessary to hold the remembered homeplace – a place of redemption and renewal (Stewart 1996: 5) – close by. His inimitable engagement with the hallowed homeland landscape, his transportation and re-rooting of a metonymic piece of “God’s own country” into a foreign soil, demonstrates by a creative nostalgic act of renewal, what nostalgia does and enables.

**Conclusion**

This article has explored the complex ways in which the idea of empty land is embedded in the nostalgic postcolonial recollections of homeland among white former Rhodesians in South Africa. It has drawn out intricate historical layers, which underpin this culturally construed idea. It has
further sketched how relationships with landscapes of memory are formed from a spatiotemporal distance, where exclusion from the place becomes an intrinsic element defining the human/landscape relationship. Although the two main narratives I have focused on may well be located in a familiar genre of settler narratives of empty, wide open spaces, in actuality the landscapes that David and Norman portray, are much more complex. While the two men describe the landscape they long for as pure and primeval, they do not erase its social and cultural layeredness. Thus, more than a lived reality or a literal space, the ‘emptiness’ of landscape, I argue, is a narrative and perceptual frame of expectation, and a moral commentary about ideal relationship between people and their landscapes. Further, instead of a classic settler colonial understanding of landscape as opportunity and possession valued for its productive potentiality, the landscape that David and Norman present is portrayed for what is perceived as its authenticity, purity and sanctity. It is portrayed as a spiritual home and an intrinsic place of belonging.

As a particular mode of remembering, nostalgia captures closely some central elements in postcolonial human/landscape relationships, one of which is their affectability and intimacy. The particular places and locations tied into meaningful and intimate relationships are sites in which history appears to be condenscd in ways that intertwine personal life experience with immutable natural presence. In the two examples, these are also places which are considered potent, powerful and intentional. It is quite evident that not all places speak or call for an affective mutual relationship. According to Basso (1996) only places “of focused thought and emotion” may be given the power to speak. Through a relationship of interanimation with places, their value is further increased. Such places are uplifted from the mundane. They are coated with a numinous essence – a sense that they are capable of emitting moral messages.

By closely examining diasporic homeland narratives, I have considered moral landscape commentaries and practices of return and renewal as elements of a nostalgic process in which a particular spatiotemporal relationship between persons and places of deep belonging are being created. However, not all narratives of the past are nostalgic. What characterises nostalgia as a particular mode of remembering is its reaching back to moments before and beyond conflict. Distinguished by their remoteness and wildness, the homeland landscapes discussed in this paper offer an example of such temporalisation and moral appraisal: the places recalled are set over and above social upheavals and political struggles. In this respect the remembered landscape is distinctly shaded by dismissal, denial and forgetting, and characterised by a mode of moral consciousness, which might be termed as structural oblivion (McIntosh 2016: 10–11). 'Empty land' emerges as a paradigm of such oblivion embedded in the landscape. The oblivion further relates to a specific temporal position – nostalgia is not necessarily about longing to return, it is a particular, selective way of narrating the past from the diffuse elements it is composed of.
References


