

# Being White in Post-2000 Zimbabwe: A Reading of Eames' *Cry of the Go-Away Bird*

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## Summary

This article looks at Zimbabwean whiteness in the context of loss, dispossession, victimisation and the need to belong. It draws from literary narratives written by Zimbabwean whites, particularly Andrea Eames' *Cry of the Go-Away Bird*, and argues that in the aftermath of the fast-tracked land reform programme of 2000, the avenues of speech became increasingly restricted for Zimbabwean whites. This gave rise to new sites of speaking and literary narratives. By means of fiction, memoirs and autobiographies whites make themselves heard and add their voices to the mainstream debate about whiteness, land ownership, citizenship and a need to belong, albeit to a marginalised group. Eames' *Cry of the Go-Away Bird* is significant in its engagement with the aforementioned issues. This article examines the text against the background of Du Bois' notion of double consciousness, the sense of being caught between conflicting ideals, and the need to belong.

## Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word ondersoek ingestel na Zimbabwiese witheid teen die agtergrond van verlies, onteining, viktimisering en die behoefte om lid van 'n groep te wees. Daar word gekyk na die literêre narratiewe van Zimbabwiese wittes, in die besonder *Cry of the Go-Away Bird* deur Andrea Eames, en daar word aangevoer dat wittes in Zimbabwe sedert die versnelde grondhervormingsprogram in 2000 toenemend minder geleentheid kry om hul gevoelens te lug. Dit het aanleiding gegee tot nuwe uitingsterreine en literêre narratiewe in die vorm van fiksie, memoires en outobiografieë deur middel waarvan wittes hul stem laat hoor en 'n bydrae lewer tot die hoofstroomgesprek oor witheid, grondbesit, burgerskap en 'n behoefte aan samehorigheid, al is dit ook as lede van 'n gemarginaliseerde groep. Eames se *Cry of the Go-Away Bird* is van belang omdat dit met al hierdie aspekte handel. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die teks teen die agtergrond van Du Bois se gedagte van 'n tweeledige bewussyn, dat mens vasgevang voel tussen teenstrydige ideale, en die behoefte om tot 'n groep te behoort.

## Introduction

This article looks at Zimbabwean whiteness in the context of loss, dispossession, victimisation and the need to belong. It draws from the literary narratives by Zimbabwean whites, with the realisation that in the aftermath of the fast track land reform programme in 2000 avenues of speech for Zimbabwean whites were increasingly narrowed. Prior to the land reform in 2000, white voices could navigate the spaces of social and political dialogue through representations such as those from the Commercial Farmers Union. In the first decade of independence, whites even had a voice in government owing to the Lancaster House Agreement's stipulation of a 25 percent quota in parliament. Of course during and after the land reform, privately-owned media afforded whites relative space to voice their concerns and air their views. White narratives, in the form of fiction, memoirs and autobiographies, have however emerged as the most accessible avenue through which whites make their representations and restore their voices to mainstream dialogue about whiteness, land, citizenship and belonging, albeit marginalised.

It is imperative to note that for most whites in Zimbabwe, political change in 1980 did not result in radical economic change. The policy of reconciliation championed by the new black government in the 1980s generally ensured that white economic power remained intact. Whites maintained a superior class with several privileges dating back to colonial rule. Even most of the land remained in white hands until 2000. Whites continued to live in posh, secluded suburbs and made minimum appearance at national events in Zimbabwe. If independence in 1980 was indeed the death of white Rhodesia, the fast track land reform of 2000 with its attendant violence and discourses on white unbelonging was the final nail in the coffin of colonial whiteness. It marked the end of white Zimbabwean economic and social privilege. White citizenship was called into question, manifesting through the "go back to Britain campaigns" of the post-2000 and the indiscriminate seizure of white farms. The events of this period are well documented in Alexander (2004), Hughes (2010), Fisher (2010) and Pilosof (2012).

It is in the post-2000 era in Zimbabwe that this discussion of whiteness is situated. During the period prior to the agrarian reform, white writing focused on their claim of belonging to Africa, represented in some of these writings as "bush" (Tagwirei & De Kock 2015a), and did not focus particularly on farms, which appeared to be under no visible threat of seizure then. However, having lost the land and finding themselves displaced, white people felt their identity threatened and had to rethink their place in Zimbabwe. Narratives such as; *African Tears: The Zimbabwe Land Invasions* by Catherine Buckle, *Soldier Blue* by Paul Williams, and of late, *Absent the English Teacher* by John Eppel and *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird*, by Andreas Eames, project the pain the white Zimbabwean community

endured because of displacement. They also depict white identities under threat and, hence, individuals struggling to belong to both the white and black Zimbabwean communities.

These narratives are an account of the transformations that have taken place particularly in post-2000 white Zimbabwean communities since the fast track land reform programme beginning 2000. Increasingly, whites find themselves targets of verbal, physical and psychological abuse at the hands of the government, state functionaries and other ordinary people. Having thus been rejected and unable to fully identify with the European countries of their descent, they become what Alexander (2004) has called “Orphans of the empire”, that is, liminal beings with no definite claimants. Such is the place of white Zimbabweans post-2000 that they end up caught up in a frame of double-consciousness in their attempts to carve places of belonging in what, to them, has become hostile territory.

Muonde and Primorac (2005) observe that “white Zimbabwean identity is a complex process in which tensions between belonging and ownership, [...] displacement and settling, [...] personal and national memories and histories are negotiated” (139). For Tagwirei (2014) questions of ambivalence, instability and simultaneity are integral to post-2000 Zimbabwean whiteness. Hughes (2010) observes the failure by Zimbabwean whites to create a neo-Britain before 1980 while Pilosof (2012) sees “affirmative parochialism” in white attempts and failures to belong meaningfully to Zimbabwe. Though scholarship has dealt with the questions of white Zimbabwean identity, loss and (un)belonging, the dialogue will benefit from a rethinking of these questions within the context of double-consciousness.

This research therefore studies the literary depiction of white Zimbabwean identity within the boundaries of double consciousness. It evokes Dubois’ (1903) concept of double consciousness in the reading of Eames’s *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* and its engagement with the racial politics in Zimbabwe. Although Dubois uses the phrase double consciousness with American blacks in mind – having borrowed it from the medical field where it referred to a Negro disease, drapetomania, which is a mental illness defined by an unrestrained propensity to run away – I seek to invert this logic in order to locate whiteness within the boundaries of ambivalence of identity resulting from two heritages, one, which is European, and the other, which is African.

## Explaining Double-Consciousness

It is important to quote Dubois at length:

One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, Two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone

keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.

He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

(Du Bois 1903: 8-9)

Double consciousness is thus defined as a sense of ambivalence. It describes a condition of unbelonging, that is, the recognition of oneself as comprising conflicting identities and being unable to fully reconcile them. In the end, the individual remains on the fringes. S/he is “neither the one nor the other” (Bhabha 1994: 36). More importantly, the sense of unbelonging is engendered from outside, by those with whom the individual wants to belong. Since Du Bois, double consciousness has found additional inflections from various scholars. McWhorter opines that double consciousness is a result of seclusion, as illustrated by contemporary America, where whites resist true inclusion of blacks in the American fabric, to such an extent that blacks feel they do not belong to the American community even if they are part of it. Furthermore, Lyubansky (2004) observes that acculturation and racial discrimination are responsible for the reflex action that evolves as double consciousness. His observation implies that one’s culture and the feeling of acceptance gives them their identity. However, when these are denied, one is left with no self-consciousness and their identity is obscured. They end up viewing themselves through the eyes of the discriminator and those of their own, hence double consciousness.

Sawyer (2008) contends that double consciousness is a result of inclusionary discrimination. His illustration of Latin Americans, patriotic and critical national symbols, denied equal access to social, political and economic power, demonstrates the condition of white Zimbabweans. They live in a nation that claims to be independent and democratic, yet it denies them access to social, political and economic power. Additionally, Somersan (2006) points out that double consciousness is not peculiar to African Americans but is a condition that occurs to those who are excluded from power, for instance through nation building.

For Somersan (2006), “persons situated at either opposite ends of the spectrum of dominance possess a common attribute, the two-fold, and/or dialectic nature of their consciousness [...] the more one is removed from the center of the socio-economic, the stronger the sense of double consciousness” (158-159). He further identifies communities where this

condition is most likely: “the Basque in Spain, the Irish, Welsh and Scottish in the UK [...] Turks and Kurds in Germany, Moslems in Greece [...] Native Americans, Hindus, Budhists [...] Moslems in USA and UK especially after events of 9/11(2001)” (161). What can be gleaned from this diagnosis is that double consciousness encapsulates the multiple reactions the marginalised have in response to their seclusion.

### **Double Consciousness in *the Cry of the Go-Away Bird***

*The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* tells the story of Elise, a white farm girl who is displaced from what she considers home, due to the farm invasions resulting from the Fast Track Land Reform Programme in Zimbabwe. The story reveals Elise’s unending attempt to inhabit the world of the majority Shona in Zimbabwe and identify with their culture. Nevertheless, she finds this world impenetrable, resulting in a double consciousness of sorts, as the ensuing discussion demonstrates. Significantly, Elise’s experiences typify those of her fellow whites who, to varying degrees, battle with the demons of their Rhodesian pasts and the challenges these demons pose to their belonging particularly to post-2000 Zimbabwe where official whiteness is reconfigured as oppressive, exploitative and violent.

While political reconciliation in 1980 sought to rehabilitate whites into a multicultural community, its aftermath witnessed a movement from a reconciliation discourse to a more polarised discourse of white marginalisation (Fisher 2010). Through commemorations of the past such as Heroes Day, whites are reminded of the colonial injustices that they perpetrated against Africans. Confronted with an economy of anti-white signs, white Zimbabweans are forced to simultaneously see themselves through the contemptuous eyes of blacks (Tagwirei & De Kock 2015b) and their own weakening white gaze. They fail to belong as Zimbabwean citizens and cannot identify themselves as European and/or British because they have never been elsewhere except Zimbabwe. Indeed, one is compelled to agree with Coetzee’s (1988) characterisation of white writing in South Africa as deriving from “the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African” (11). The only home and life style familiar to whites in Zimbabwe seems to be largely Zimbabwean.

Eames reveals the conflict which confronts whites in Zimbabwe after 2000. They tread a liminal place between Zimbabwean-ness (racially marked blackness) and foreignness (which is marked whiteness). The novel is dominated by the protagonist Elise’s desire to be accepted as a full Zimbabwean citizen regardless of her skin colour. The novel begins with an introductory description of Elise’s black nanny Beauty, whose Zimbabwean-ness, with no doubt, Elise finds appealing. Having been raised by Beauty, Elise finds her identity entangled, in Nuttall’s (2009) sense of “being twisted

together or entwined” (1) with the black woman with whom she spends most of her childhood while disavowing her biological mother:

My mother, however, was someone I saw in the mornings and at night, and for some parts of the weekends. It was Beauty who made me breakfast [...] walked with me to school every day. [...] Beauty heard all my stories about teachers and other kids. Beauty [...] came to live with us when my dad died, which was before I can remember.

(2011: 11)

Beauty, described by Elise as her “real mother” (36), represents the African world Elise cannot easily shake off and would not want to let go. By disavowing her biological mother, she tries to strike an interracial bond predicated on shared experience and socialisation, rather than mere biology and skin pigmentation. In this regard, the protagonist realises her naivety. The world which she thinks she knows has marked her as white and therefore alien.

When Elise sits with Beauty and other black women, she realises that her skin colour separates her from them. She confesses, “I was the whitest of whites, with freckles and pale eyes that blinked and burned in the sun but I did not feel white” (8). Even as she concedes to her white skin, Elise is adamant that her knowledge system is not whiteness, but African culture. She realises that her personality is a paradox: “the Elise who sat quietly and did her homework in the white house [...] was different from the Elise who played with the workers’ children” (8). Yet, one cannot help but notice the laboured nature of Elise’s relations with blacks. Elise believes she and Beauty have a strong bond such that she feels cheated and betrayed when her biological mother decides to uproot her from the home she has known to Harare. To her, home is the farm in Chinhoyi where she can continue to fraternise with her “real mother.” It therefore comes as a shock when she discovers that Beauty does not grieve along with her. To Beauty, Elise is merely incidental and, therefore, dispensable. When the black farm guard, Cephas, whom Elise considered a friend disappears, Elise naively searches for him convinced that “he wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye” (198). This conviction has its basis on Cephas’ small acts of kindness towards her, actions which Elise mistakes for genuine love. She only discovers that Cephas’ attitude to her was perfunctory when she eventually finds him among a group of fellow blacks agitating for land repossession (although it is not clear to the reader at the time), and he refuses to recognise her preferring instead to see her as a “bloody white kid who thinks she can do whatever she wants” (201).

Elise’s claim to an African identity is built around her home on their farm in Chinhoyi. It is the place that holds her African identity because that is where she was born and socialised to view the world as a Zimbabwean. However, her displacement from Chinhoyi destroys her sense of belonging.

She fails to belong in her new home at the Cooper's farm. She concludes: "The new farm smelled all wrong. [...] the sweet nicotine scent of tobacco and something else that I could not identify, but which was clearly Not Home" (51). Chinhoyi is the only place Elise identifies with because it carries the memory of Beauty who taught her how to conceptualise the world. Elise cannot therefore identify with Harare, her new home, because it is dominated by the white society. Eames uses the school as a platform that paves way for Elise's recognition of the other while making her aware that she does not belong in either the black nor white world. On her first day at school, she realises that her white teacher does not like her. Even the other white girls distance themselves from her. In these people's eyes, Elise is not white enough, having recently arrived in Harare. Her estrangement from whiteness is further demonstrated by her failure to identify with the white girls from the magazines sent by her grandmother. Having already failed to find accommodation from the black world, her awareness of racial bifurcation in Zimbabwe becomes acute:

I had never been so aware of blacks and whites at school before. I did not know if it was just because I was older or because things were different in Harare, but there was a very clear division between us. And, after Shumba had called me a racist, I was unwelcome in both camps.

(80)

Elise realises that she has been alienated from both the white (European) world and black (African) world. She does not fully belong to either worlds but can still claim both the African and European heritages.

Due to this alienation, Elise realises she is vulnerable, weak, fragile, lonely, dependent and indefinite. This paves way for her recognition of strong, bold, confident and independent Kurai, who becomes her friend. In befriending Kurai, it appears Elise has a real chance of becoming "African." She begins to identify with black role models, such as Oliver Mtukudzi, something her white tradition fails to provide. Elise is also afforded the chance to witness African cultural traditions and customs when she visits Kurai's rural home. She even increases her efforts to learn Shona, which reminds her of Chinhoyi and Beauty, and discovers that "everything had two names, an English name and a Shona one, side by side" (89). This discovery marks a point of epiphany in that it makes Elise aware that there was more to reality than mere whiteness. The two languages come to represent the two worlds that constitute her, that is, the two-ness Du Bois recognises in the American Negro. Elise realises that her identity is made up of two streams of consciousness which she has to understand though she is denied full comprehension of them.

Despite Elise's identification with the African world, she remains an outsider. The visits to Kurai's rural home sharpen her sense of unbelonging: "[Kurai's] house was exotic, smelling of strange cooking and a body odor

different to my own [...]. They found me exotic too, Kurai's white friend with the fair hair, who sat quietly at their table being small and pale" (87). She adds "Even though [Kurai] told me long stories about what this cousin said to that cousin, what the witch doctor said to her aunt [...] she knew I could never understand. [...] I never knew how to deal with the air of black magic and tribal secrets that hung about her visits to the country" (87). What makes the failure to belong painful is the knowledge that post-2000 Zimbabwe is constructed as a black Zimbabwe. The least, one can do is identify with blacks, yet skin pigmentation stands in the way of full integration. It remains a curse which whites have to drag along.

The invasion of white farms by war veterans is a clear indication that whites are not regarded as true Zimbabweans despite their citizenship status. Eames' white farmers have ingratiated themselves with the land and the African people. The narrator's uncle "was rooted in the soil like a baobab tree. There was dirt under his fingernails that no amount of scrubbing would clean; every crease in his palms was a thin brown line. His skin had been burnt forty African summers to the consistency of horse-hide. He spoke Shona more readily than he spoke English" (242). Similarly, Mr Cooper is a "bluddy Zimbabwean, just like the blacks" (187) and is ostensibly loved by the black farm labourers. Elise cannot imagine him anywhere except on his farm where he seems part of the landscape. Despite white concessions to belong, they are evicted from the farms. Mr Cooper, who even renounces his British and South African citizenships, is brutally murdered in the process. At this stage, Elise's experiences are revealing in as much as they expose the arrogance of whites towards blacks whom they think they have figured out. In the end they are treated as aliens in the country of their birth and forced to call Britain home, a land some, if not most, had never inhabited.

When the government forces whites to choose single citizenship, their multiple loyalties and conflicts become more evident. For some, the option to renounce or retain a Zimbabwean citizenship becomes a choice between death and survival. Steve, Elise's stepfather, holds on to his British passport until the final day of submission. He reasons "I'm keeping my Zimbabwean one. I'm a Zimbabwean, I'm not a bluddy Brit. [...] I'd rather give up my British passport than my Zimbabwean one" (221). Steve's dilemma echoes Du Bois' diagnosis of the American Negro: "[his] double-aimed struggle is to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American [...] In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost" (1903:9). Eames insists on this fact, preferring to interrogate the logic of a monolithic identity. Her awareness of the liminal position whites occupy in Zimbabwe is reflected through Elise's insistence on a dual identity. Elise ponders why the Zimbabwean society expects her to remain with a single identity, whiteness, when she has been socialised into the world by two women from two cultures. She sees in the forced separation of identities a new construct, "illegal aliens", which made whites seem like monsters with two heads



rather than just being white Zimbabweans with British passports. She queries “How could I possibly grow up with two mothers, one black and one white, and still be just white” (218)?

Although Elise’s family eventually leaves Zimbabwe at the end of the novel, the message Eames seems to be sending is clear. Whites are partly to blame for the problems they face in post-2000 Zimbabwe. Their arrogance, preventing them from familiarising themselves with blacks, has maintained and even increased, the racial separation between the two races. Whites therefore find themselves hastily trying to belong meaningfully at a time when suspicion and inequality have been on the rise. The ability to see themselves through the eyes of the blacks, what Tagwirei and De Kock (2005b: 4) call “a cross-reflexive gesture enabled by [whites’] ability to penetrate the black gaze”, is therefore the key towards meaningful integration. Thus, Elise is able to re-examine and disavow whiteness:

In reality, no one was really white (white like blank paper, or clean washing); People were pink, sun burnt red, sallow or brown. White was being shunted hurriedly to the front of a queue, watched by a hundred resentful eyes. White was money, swimming pools, two cars. It was glow-in-the-dark, marking you at once on a black street. All those poems we learned at school about skin fair as snow, fair as petals or cream, did not take into account the other side of it – the lack of pigment the sickly, greenish tinge that white skin could have, the way it made us ghosts in a vivid country.

(128)

Whiteness as privilege does not provide the resources for the transformation required in new circumstances such as those demanded in post-2000 Zimbabwe. Only a re-examination of sorts is required.

## Conclusion

Eames’ *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* is an important addition to a corpus of white-authored texts engaging with the subject of whiteness in post-2000 Zimbabwe. It raises pertinent questions on the place of whiteness under changing circumstances where race is still a fiercely contested topic. This article has demonstrated the challenges whites face in their attempts to belong. Finding themselves caught between two traditions, one European and the other African, they occupy in-between spaces where they are neither fully European nor African. Such a reality engenders double-consciousness, described by Du Bois as a “sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others”, eyes full of contempt and pity. *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* painstakingly reveals this crisis of belonging and how it enables a re-examination of racial identities.

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