



Once the dust of Africa is in your blood: tracking Northern Rhodesia's white diaspora

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Northern Rhodesia isn't just a place that postcolonialism forgot, it is a place colonialism chose not to remember, if by remembering we mean laying down images and representations. Unlike more glamorized imperial possessions (Hubel, 1996), it produced little colonial fiction, memoir, or travelogue, though this is belatedly emerging (Bennett, 2006; Coe and Greenall, 2003; Herbert, 2002; Gornal, 2008; Lawley, 2010). The white population that departed after Independence has only fragmented individual memory to draw upon and relies on stories from Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe (Fuller 2003, 2004; Godwin 1997, 2007) but aging people are now forging collective memory to recuperate their past. Despite the emergence of revisionist histories of empire and Britain's apparent "post-colonial responsibility" (Power, 2009), white former Northern Rhodesians find few places where they can recognize themselves and more often encounter texts by authors (Baucom, 1991, 1999) determined to write colonial memory as "them" rather than "us". This paper seeks to contribute to the growing literature of memory in diasporic identity (Agnew 2005; Baronian et al. 2006; Blunt, 2005; Fortier, 2000, 2005; Stoler, 2006) by considering a people who are conscious of their tenuous entitlement to the place that defines them.



Background

Named as an afterthought to the country immediately to the South, Northern Rhodesia came into existence as a protectorate in 1924, immediately after the discovery of copper, lead and zinc (Coleman, 1971). Zambia became independent in 1964 when an underpinning of colonial administration was no longer necessary for their profitable extraction. It was a short-lived colony that never outgrew the frontier stage. Its European population jumped from 3,634 in 1921 to 13,846 in 1931, but the big increase came after the Second World War, when there was active recruitment in Britain and South Africa; by 1951 there were 37,221 whites and in 1961 (the last census before Independence) 74,640. The African population was less precisely counted at 980,000 in 1921, 1,330,000 in 1931, 1,890,000 in 1951 and 2,490,000 in 1961. (HMG Colonial Office, 1962; Northern Rhodesian Information Office, 1953)

Throughout the history of Northern Rhodesia there were roughly twice as many immigrants from South Africa as from Britain plus small numbers from continental Europe (Shapiro, 2002). South African cultural influence was always strong and there was residential, employment, educational, health and social apartheid in all but name, also a restricted franchise (not that the vote meant much, policy decisions being made in London). The white population was largely cocooned in the towns, the African population restricted to the rural areas and "townships". There was no interracial marriage and little opportunity for interracial friendship (Zulu, 2007).

An already close association with Southern Rhodesia became closer with the formation in 1953 of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, designed to shore up European hegemony in Central Africa - Southern Rhodesia having a substantial settler population, Northern Rhodesia's mineral resources providing the bulk of the revenue. In January 1964 the Federation was disbanded, Zambia gained its Independence in October, then, in November 1965, the white government of Southern Rhodesia made an illegal Unilateral Declaration of Independence with terrible consequences for Zambia.

The cliché of the genteel colonial lifestyle was never going to fit the majority of white Northern Rhodesians - refined "Englishness" was not a prized attribute in this colony dominated by artisans and semi-skilled mine and railway workers. There could be considerable physical hardship and manners were often fairly rough but, for most of the white population, Northern Rhodesia represented an escape into a freer life of open spaces and few rules. Immigrants rarely wanted to return "home" (it was said that one "home leave" would cure the worst case of homesickness).

The exodus

As Independence approached, white people, facing up to the fact that their time was up, started to think where they could settle, some compiled lists of the countries in a dwindling British Empire, most consoled themselves with the Commonwealth. Finding somewhere to live was not a straightforward matter of "going home". There was no mass exodus, the population simply trickled out over about a decade and any assumption that a racial elite cut and ran when Independence was won is too simple. A minority, who had been brought up to believe in *swart gevaar* (Afrikaans - black peril), refused to live under an African government and headed south before Independence, often citing the Congolese atrocities. The contracts of colonial civil servants were terminated and though many left (with generous lump-sums and pensions) others were immediately re-engaged on fixed contracts by the Zambian Government. People in mining and the railways mostly stayed until their jobs were Zambianised and there was actually an increase in the white population after Independence with expatriate recruitment. From the mid 1970s, however, there was progressive economic decline, due to Rhodesian boycotts, the global oil crisis, then the collapse in copper prices when the Vietnam war ended. Rampant inflation, shortages of basic goods, deterioration in public services, and rising crime rates drove out all but a few Europeans who took Zambian citizenship. The people who had intended to stay in Zambia often express the greatest regret and the fondest memories.

Denial and acceptance

Doing memory work, one should not be surprised to encounter specters from the past, but tracing members of Northern Rhodesia's diaspora in Australia, I was confronted by an unexpected ghost, that of my sixteen year old self. A woman in Melbourne gave me a wad of memorabilia including a 1961 school magazine containing a competition-winning essay. Entitled "The Future of Education in Northern Rhodesia", it began, "At the passing of the 1867 Reform Act, Lowe declared, 'Now we must educate our masters'," and made a plea for universal secondary education for African children in preparation for Independence. It didn't quite say, "A class of persons, [African] in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect," (Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education*, 1835) but it was getting pretty close. I read the essay with a mixture of shame and pride. What I had thought radical was clearly condescending (Fabian, 2001), but it was pretty far out for its time, place and social context - there were just two high schools for African children in the whole country and no apparent possibility of integrated education.

A determination to "forget" the day-to-day circumstances of living in a white dominated African country and denial that I was a typical Rhodesian white has been a theme of my adult life. Unlike Alexandra Fuller (2006) who protested, despite all evidence to the contrary, "I have an African mind and soul," I

recognized that an “Africanist” would never be the same thing as an African and I was unwilling to claim the right of a colonial to “love” a colony (Shurmer-Smith, 2000). Old people, however, can no longer afford to reject their youth and recently I realised that I *wanted* to know what had happened to the confidently superior white minority that left Zambia. I am a fragment of that diaspora and I am telling “our”, not “their”, story in an ethnography of involvement and identification (James, 1998). Like Ricoeur (2004), I want to see what one can do with acres of past to redefine the present and fashion what is left of the future. Also like Ricoeur, I want to think about the questions of reappraisal, remorse and forgiveness that can emerge from an active confrontation of the past via memory.

Ricoeur employs the notion of the aporia of memory - that one cannot remember what was, only contemplate its re-presentation. Representations, impressions, traces may seize one unbidden - memory as passion; or they may be the result of searching, summoning, putting together – remembering as action. The dialogue between the two informs Ricoeur’s work and provides a fruitful approach to my research. I can neither stand back from active remembering nor deny the passion of the transports of memory, neither can my respondents. A woman wrote from Connecticut: *“I left home at 17 and blocked the Copperbelt out of my mind for quite a number of years (until that darn Pommy brought me back there)”*. Saying how painful and pleasurable she found dredging up recollections for me, she had started writing her memoirs as a gift for her daughters.

The aspect of memory that interests me is its ability to spin a thread of connection between contemporaries who are otherwise separated by conventional social categories and by space. Halbwachs (1992) asserted that all memory is collective and Coser (1992) claims that people cannot easily settle into social groups without shared memory, a view caught by the man who wrote from Canada:

“People I worked with said I was the biggest liar they had ever met, I was only reminiscing about my youth and it was all true”

by the same token, I am arguing that one cannot renounce membership when there is memory in common.

The “just allotment of memory”

Forgetting is the essential counterpoint to memory. Ricoeur asks why some memories are privileged, others neglected, “an excess of memory here, an excess of forgetting elsewhere” (2004, xv), arguing for, “a just allotment of memory”. Legg (2007, 459) emphasises the exclusionary nature of memory, pointing out that alternative stories do not necessarily go away, “Collective memory is a narrative that excludes rival interpretations and is thus haunted by the potential to remember differently or to refuse to forget.” Werbener (1998, 1) refers to the “right of

accountability”, of factions in the Zimbabwean War of Liberation. This theme is taken up by Baines (2008) regarding the memorialisation of white South African dead of the Border War. History is impoverished if, to put it bluntly, only those deemed to be virtuous are permitted to remember. My research is about people whose forfeited past might seem not to deserve the right of accountability.

Methodology

My strategy is an engagement with people who constitute a category only by reference to their past. Agreeing with Fortier's view of diasporas as rhizomic, I am trying to recuperate what has been pulled through to be used as a device for coping with the present and the future. Ricoeur distinguishes three modalities of the trace of the past - the inscribed, the affective, and the corporeal. These are the stuff of my research - texts, affects and embodiments.

Research started slowly as I had few links to draw upon but a breakthrough came serendipitously when I found the web-site “*The Great North Road – Northern Rhodesians Worldwide*”, with this on its homepage:

“ In the heart of Central Africa, a frontier spirit engendered a hardy breed. Hard work and a generous land greatly contributed to the prosperity of all the subcontinent. We shared a very special time and place. Through this medium we've been able to reconnect again and to share our memories of the remarkable Northern Rhodesian experience. The diaspora of Northern Rhodesia has scattered our small stock far and wide across the planet – from South Africa to Iceland, Hong Kong to Zimbabwe, North America to Australia, the British Isles to New Zealand ... Northern Rhodesians Worldwide ”

The site contained a membership list of 4333 people. By joining I could access profiles of members - current residence, date of birth, period in Northern Rhodesia/Zambia, residence, schools attended and employment there. I deselected people who were under the age of 10 at Independence or had experienced only Independent Zambia and sent e-mail messages to 1056 people, asking them to write whatever they thought was important about life in Northern Rhodesia, their feelings about the country, decisions surrounding leaving it and subsequent life. I have also been contacted by people who have heard about the project. So far, 378 people have sent me well over 500 messages. I cannot know the reasons for non-response, but, the list having started in 1996, many e-mail addresses will have changed and large number of the people I wrote to will have died. Others may have refused for similar reasons to the man who wrote that, courtesy of the Internet, he had found a passage on the postcolonial I had written (2002 p.67) and could not trust me.

The people in this study are old or late middle-aged. I regret that I did not start sooner when the memories I could retrieve would not have been predominantly of youth – most mature adults at the high point of imperial rule in Northern Rhodesia are now dead, the remainder very old.

I avoided constructing a questionnaire (though I will conclude my research with one to tie up loose ends and permit more systematic comparisons) because I did not want to close down what people would write by asking formal questions. Some responded with just a few sentences, others sent substantial accounts, including book-length memoirs and the typescript of novel. Ricoeur stresses that remembering is a hunt involving the discovery of traces; people have told me what they want to and these have evoked my own parallel experiences, sometimes developing into lengthy correspondences. Although I am not drawing upon the as yet incomplete data in this paper, I am also in the process of interviewing people in Australia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and the UK.

The population

A simple plotting of destinations shows that the 1056 targeted population as:

South Africa	294
UK	245
Australia	194
USA	95
Canada	90
Rest of Europe	53
New Zealand	34
Rest of Africa	27
Middle East	9
S & SE Asia	8
Caribbean	7

Neither South African nor British residence necessarily implies return migration. Old Commonwealth countries have long been popular with displaced colonials, sometimes because of a welcoming policy (Blunt, 2005) but often with a simple hope that it is easier to settle in “new” countries. Regardless of where they live, my respondents define themselves by where they were rather than where they are.

This account is particularly graphic, but not atypical:

In 1963 as independence drew nigh my contract came up for renewal. As new parents our decision was to return to the UK and buy that rose covered cottage in the Cotswolds ... Well it did not work out that way.

After a year ... we knew that our personal ambitions and my career aspirations would not be realised in the constraining environment of England. We had changed too much for life in the old country. Recognising that Africa was no longer a continent where we could make a home for our children and desirous of seeking a climate akin to that of Northern Rhodesia we placed a ruler across a world atlas along Mufulira's line of latitude. Townsville in Queensland, Australia was where we decided to make our future. Engineer (Australia)

The memories

Opening my e-mails I never know what passions will assail me – the name of a place or a person, a reference to a scent, a story, can trigger elation, resentment, amusement, regret, affection. Many correspondents, too, say that, once they start writing, they are, “*pulled back to the old days*”, or end their messages with words like “*I have become quite emotional writing about this*” or “*I'm getting a lump in my throat thinking about the old country*”.

I've been sent stories of relatives taken by crocodiles, the misery of being sent to boarding school before the age of ten or the grief of having to send small children away; accounts of living in mud huts with pit latrines, malaria, alcoholic parents and sadistic teachers. I've read about hospitality and easy friendships, the open spaces, marvelous sunsets, the scent of the bush, the sound of lions roaring in the distance, the glory of the rainy season. There have been tales of hunting and camping, building one's own house and cooking on wood-stoves, hair-raising overland arrival stories and accounts of the luxury of liners and steam trains. The phrase “Africa isn't for sissies” is almost the motto of the diaspora and, retrospectively, the hardships are prized as much as the joys. Old Northern Rhodesians like to represent themselves as tough and they repeatedly express frustration at ending their days in environments where they feel impotent, their improvising skills wasted. Only in a minority of accounts, however, do African people emerge other than as a category and in that minority a pride is taken in having gone against the grain.

Repeatedly, people describe multiple moves, expressing feelings of being unsettled, not fitting in, not understood, liable to move again:

“Offspring of a peripatetic miner culture, I have never really settled down anywhere. I carry a branch around and call it my roots! Really! My base is with my wife – could be anywhere in the world” Professor of psychology. Canada

“We travelled extensively, but never found that perfect place to settle. In fact we are still looking...I yearn for that period of my life that has gone for ever, a period when the musty damp overcast rainy season

ended and that magic period of crisp Autumn, Winter and Spring came around... I long for that stable world when everything seemed to be under control. Mining engineer. South Africa

"All the different moves have meant that I feel a little bit of a refugee with no real roots anywhere. I turn 60 this year and am looking for somewhere (hot) to retire to." Air Traffic Controller UK

"We tried the UK, Australia, the USA, Kenya and now realise that we are stateless. We don't fit into Africa any more and I can't identify with American or UK values." Accountant (USA)

"Every time we take a vacation to a different part of the world we seem to be looking at our destination as a potential home. I guess we will never belong 100% to any one country." Builder (Canada)

"I miss all the moving. Life seems a bit bleak now, with the knowledge that this is where we STAY! Like we are in God's waiting room. In Africa after Independence there was always the knowledge you would have to move some day. So each day had a vague feeling, how long, when and where?" Retired mechanic Australia

But one man in his 80s, living in Britain wrote quite simply: *"I'd like to end my days in Zambia"*

As if conscious of Connerton's (1989, 2008) notion of embodied memory, Geurts' (2005) "feeling in the body" or Freud's construction of melancholia as the internalization of a lost attachment, Africa is constantly represented as a bodily presence:

"If you grew up here on the copper mines, you would take this country deep inside. It's a passion that you will only appreciate by having been there, it played such an important part in our upbringing, running around bare foot." Retired miner (South Africa)

"Africa gets into your blood and wont let go. In the travel business the same thing happens; most people have a spiritual awakening when they visit Africa from the first world. It's a special place." Travel Agent (USA)

"Africa is in my blood and I long to return, but at my age it is impossible. Now I live on my wonderful memories." Accountant (UK)

"Africa is still very much in my heart ... I do very much want to go back before I crumple to dust." Secretary (UK)

“There is always a part of me that is missing. Firstly I always function better in the Southern hemisphere and secondly a part of my heart is always in Africa. As soon as I land anywhere in Africa I have arrived home, for Africa, especially Central Africa, is my home and always will be so. Unknown profession (UK)

Hughes (2010) shows how whites in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia undertook a “powerful imaginative project” (p.2) of ownership and dwelling that has been articulated through a relationship with nature and the landscape; Uusihakala (2008) comments that settlers in South Africa hark back to an undifferentiated “bush” rather than particular places. Northern and Southern Rhodesia are similar in this respect:

“...the smell of the charcoal burners and the way the smoke used to be in three layers through the bush. .. the smell of the earth after the rains ... the smell was like the earth being reborn ...” Technical instructor (Australia)

“The smell of the steam trains going to school, standing on the open platform at the end of the carriage and smelling the wonderful African bush” Mining Engineer (Australia)

“Being free. Walking in the tall elephant grass and being totally safe” Nurse (UK)

Sliding seamlessly from the virgin bush to land cleared by his family, a third generation Northern Rhodesian wrote:

“I went back in 2005 ... The worst sight to me personally was to see how the lovely Northern Rhodesian bush is being decimated for charcoal. It nearly broke my heart. My sister and I did manage to find our grandparents' farm and stand by Oupa de Lange's grave to reflect on the lovely life we had there. Such memories can have no money value placed on them.” Retired miner (South Africa)

People, who otherwise represent themselves as tough survivors, reveal a softness when they write of their sensuous relationship with the land and their vulnerability when separated from it. Aware of the accusations of postcolonial melancholia (Gilroy, 2004) another man who had read my (2002) passage expressed a willingness to confide in me because, “Although I'm turned off by the whole academic bit ... quite frankly I'm only writing because I know you are one of us.” Similarly the man who complained of being stuck in Australia wrote:

“It is so nice to write to you. I do not have anyone here who reads or cares about anything. You are one of the real chosen people, a Northern Rhodesian.”

This research has incorporated me (both willingly and unwillingly) within a community that I realise I am simultaneously constructing. It begs the question as to what “one of us” means. Stoler (2009 p. 252) asks, “what sensibilities would a rough and charmless colonial history track?” suggesting that it “might dispense with heroes – subaltern or otherwise.” I can only agree with this rejection of the heroic. Members of Northern Rhodesia’s white population have followed different trajectories to arrive at different points – geographically, socially, politically. Experience of a wider world has caused some to reappraise the structures of colonial Africa but others to defend them. Remembering the scents, walking in the long grass and taking the dust into one’s blood obliges “us” to recognise each other in our past and present relationship with Zambia and Zambians.

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