

## David McDermott Hughes

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As an environmental anthropologist, I study the relationship between, on the one hand, culture, politics, and political economy and, on the other hand, physical landscapes and their biotas. I straddle the boundary between anthropology and geography and, indeed, teach and advise graduate students in both disciplines. More precisely, I am interested in the ways in which groups of people seize upon particular landscapes and particular species, investing them with meaning and placing them at the center of power struggles. Such processes unfold continuously in many places. Yet, the colonial encounter – wherein outsiders literally seize landscapes – tends to sharpen these issues, rendering them more accessible to the ethnographer or historian. Hence, I have focused my scholarship thus far on Southern Africa and, within that region, mostly on Zimbabwe. British settlers colonized Zimbabwe in the 1890s and – I argue – set in motion political and cultural conflicts that persist to this day. Much of that conflict centers on policies of conservation and economic development, and my scholarship makes a contribution to such applied debates.

### *From Enslavement to Environmentalism* project

How do natural resources become the objects of political struggle, and what forces lock them in that position? I arrived at Rutgers deeply engaged in the first of these questions and developed the second one during my first years here. With respect to the politicization of natural resources, I departed somewhat from the political ecology school in which I was trained at Berkeley. Whereas some of my teachers had described forests, wildlife, and so on as *inherently* contested, I sought to explain how these aspects of nature *came to be* contested. In Southern Africa, this shift occurred in the context of colonization and on the frontier. My book, *From Enslavement to Environmentalism* – published in University of Washington Press's Culture, Place, Nature series in 2006 – summarizes this sea change: political structures centered on controlling people (clients, slaves, women, children, and so on) shifted towards the control of land. Put differently, cultural conventions that conferred status by counting a man's dependents fell away and were replaced by conventions that assign social position by access to land. I call this new formation "cadastral politics," and, in the book and two related articles (in *Development and Change* and *Journal of Southern African Studies*) describe its gradual rise in eastern Zimbabwe in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book contrasts this rupture with the continuation of practices of enslavement in the immediately adjacent region of Mozambique. Portugal, which conquered – but did not colonize - this area in the 1890s, perpetuated pre-colonial routines of forced labor. Indeed, those practices persisted through independence and until the end of Mozambique's civil war in 1992. At that point, South African timber firms began the first serious effort at territorial colonization: they claimed land and threatened to evict peasants from fields and forests. Various NGOs jumped into the breach, assisting rural people to bound and map their land. Through this uneven and confused process, as I narrate from my own participation in it, Mozambicans assimilated to the cadastral politics already a century old in Southern Africa. *From Enslavement to Environmentalism*, thus, presents what might be called a natural experiment: of culturally similar places diverging under different external pressures and then converging again as land-grabbers descend. The experiment demonstrates the seminal power of colonization – as a catalyst for the political economy and political culture of natural resources.

Having established this model of political change, the book then develops a theory and critique of colonization itself (which I have also explored in my graduate “Frontiers” course). I describe colonization, not as a historical moment, but as an enduring process, still ongoing today. That process shares many of the features of classical liberalism: a celebration of the (colonizing) individual, tolerance of the Other, and belief in the improvement of land and people. At root, colonization centers on two characteristics of frontiers: the expansion into territory hitherto barred and the removal of barriers between different groups of people. Colonization *opens* the frontier. This liberal foundation gives colonization tremendous resilience and adaptability. Indeed, as the book demonstrates, contemporary policies of conservation have adopted many of its values and practices and even expanded the frontiers of colonization. In Zimbabwe in the 1990s, community-based natural resources management opened to external investment land previously reserved for the exclusive use of black smallholders: the “black lowlands” wherein hereditary chiefs had administered land. After 2000, neo-liberal reformers even advocated the full commoditization of those zones. Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and other African states are promoting implicit markets in land, wherein hotel- and tour-operators bid against smallholders. In such market-based desegregation, I foresaw the further dispossession and immiseration of rural people. Among critics of community-based natural resources management, I initiated this analysis (in the *Journal of Agrarian Change*), and the book and another article (in *Cultural Anthropology*) push it still further. Ultimately, I argue for a reinforcement of black lowlands as the policy that has best restrained colonization in Southern Africa. The argument challenges accepted post-independence wisdom. As against liberal policies ranging from economic empowerment to republicanism to desegregation, I find value in colonial reserves, paternalism, and chiefs. It is not an ideal option – by far. But, in comparison with colonization, rural gentrification, and a market free-for-all, segregation protects the weak and provides minimal entitlements for survival.

Despite – or perhaps because of its unorthodox approach – the scholarship of *From Enslavement to Environmentalism* has brought me into partnership with various institutions in southern Africa. The project began in 1995 with a consultancy to the World Bank and the government of Mozambique. I conducted the “social assessment” of an area of the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border slated for “transfrontier conservation.” The same zone became the site of my dissertation research, and, while conducting early fieldwork, I directed one of the first community mapping projects in Mozambique. Funded by an Italian NGO and intended to protect rural people from expropriation, this effort ultimately contributed to the technical annex of Mozambique’s 1997 Land Law. Two years later, I consulted for a Zimbabwean NGO, this time on possibilities for land reform in the border zone. After that point, however, I outgrew the constraints of consulting – and the financial need for it as well. Since joining Rutgers, therefore, I have taken advantage of my earlier experience so as to influence policy debates among conservation NGOs. I have presented parts of *From Enslavement to Environmentalism* to numerous workshops of practitioners and even within the Harare offices of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The publication itself has attracted considerable attention in the region. The Ford Foundation subsidized a Zimbabwean edition and plans to distribute the book to more than fifty grantee agencies in Africa. To my delight, the proposals of *From Enslavement to Environmentalism* are reaching an audience that can act upon them.

#### Whites, Water, Wilderness project

Currently underway, my next book project also scrutinizes Southern African conservation – but from an entirely fresh perspective. Beginning in 2000, political violence made my earlier

form of fieldwork – among black smallholders - too dangerous for them and for me. Therefore, in the spirit of “studying up,” this new enquiry centers on elite Zimbabwean whites and their efforts to belong in Africa. As before, I begin with the protracted colonial encounter, this time from the white, rather than the black, point of view. European settlers confronted issues of pacification, administration, and development – all familiar concerns in the study of African history, politics, and political ecology. Yet, settlers *felt* most keenly a concern largely ignored in scholarship: the question of how to *belong* in Africa. The options were twofold: settlers could engage with African society or they could engage with African landscapes. With a surprising degree of unanimity, settlers invested their energies in the latter – geographical rather than sociological – route to belonging. In so doing, they sidestepped the intractable problem of their minority status. Instead, they obsessed about mountains, plains, plants, and animals, canalizing that nervous energy into conservation movements and the eco-tourism industry. In this connection, I will seek to make a double contribution to scholarship. First, I would like to demonstrate that modern conservation rests, not only upon science, but also upon whites’ identity. There is a (white) *culture* of conservation, supplementing conservation’s better-documented politics of knowledge and force. Second, that culture rests upon a racial strategy, if not explicitly upon racism. In what I call an “Other-discounting move,” many whites avoided multiracialism *and* racism. I would like to expand the discussion of race – in Africa as well as the Atlantic world – to include this form of environmentalist escapism.

Thus far, fieldwork and early writing have focused on the role of water in whites’ turn to nature. Water has both obstructed and facilitated this engagement. Here, I wish to diverge from the dominant paradigm of social constructivism in environmental anthropology. The irreducible physical qualities of water – as a reflective, flowing, life-giving substance – have fulfilled aesthetic needs on the part of whites. In comparison to northern Europe, the highlands of southern Africa lack surface water. This aridity complicated white’s environmental escapism: the land was nearly as alien and unwelcoming as the people. Dams helped, however. Having blocked rivers for the prosaic needs of irrigation and hydropower, whites greeted the resultant reservoirs with joy and triumph. *Whites, Water, Wilderness* will document this aesthetic response and its political consequences in two cases: the Kariba Dam across the Zambezi River and a group of farm reservoirs on the agricultural “white highlands.” Completed in 1960, the enormous Kariba Dam provoked, among white writers and photographers, environmentalist horror, followed by ambivalence, culminating in the embrace of “pristine wilderness” at reservoir’s edge. As I argue in a forthcoming article (in *Journal of Southern African Studies*), whites embraced the reservoir because, to them, it was beautiful: its physical properties fulfilled their longing for a well-watered topography. Thus, as I claim in another piece (submitted to *Society and Natural Resources*) protected areas along the reservoir enshrine, not natural history, but (white) cultural heritage. An article just published (in *American Ethnologist*) presents the even more striking case of farm dams. Like Kariba, these more recent impoundments destroyed riparian ecosystems. Again, whites embraced the reservoirs, conflating beauty and pristineness. Farm dams gave whites a sense of belonging and, what is more, entitlement. Dams, in other words, hydro-powered a dangerous form of escapism: whites believed they could own most of Zimbabwe’s arable land – until the very moment, in 2000, that the state took those farms by force. These findings – combined with a small amount of follow-up research – will comprise the manuscript of my second book: *Whites, Water, Wilderness: Race and Conservation in Africa*.

In common with the earlier project, *Whites, Water, Wilderness* has found an audience among practitioners in conservation and development. The work addresses two sets of applied concerns: 1) land reform among Zimbabwe’s white-owned farms and 2) the reform of

conservation ethics. On the first of these points, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the University of Wisconsin's Land Tenure Center recruited me to lead a major research effort in 2000. I assembled a team of five Zimbabwean scholars and together we assessed the suitability of contract farming as a model for land reform. During the 2002-2003 academic year, I coordinated that project from Harare. By then, I realized that the success of land reform would depend upon an unprecedented down-sizing of dams and irrigation for use by resettled small-holders. Such questions lay beyond my expertise; so I applied to the Mellon Foundation for a New Directions retraining fellowship. That grant allowed me to take courses in agricultural engineering at the University of Maryland and conduct site visits in Sri Lanka and throughout Southern Africa during the 2004-2005 academic year. Based on the insights gained thereby, I am collaborating with the University of Zimbabwe's Centre for Rural Development on a new project. We have written a concept paper for action research on farming and irrigation systems and will shortly submit it to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Meanwhile, on the second, more abstract theme of reformed conservation ethics, in 2003 I organized a workshop on "Options for wildlife on Zimbabwe's highveld." The deputy director and two board members of the Department of National Parks attended. To continue that conversation, IUCN appointed me to its Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy, an advisory position that, I hope, will allow the widest dissemination of my ideas.