

## Whitelier than white? Inversions of the racial gaze in white Zimbabwean writing

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This article looks at inscriptions of whiteness in selected white Zimbabwean narratives. Through a reading of Andrea Eames' *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* (2011), Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2003) and John Eppel's *Absent: the English Teacher* (2009), the argument proposes that white Zimbabwean narratives situate whiteness within the context of change and marginality in Zimbabwe. The narratives deal with experiences of change and apprehensions of lived reality marked by the transfer of power from white minority to black majority rule. Our reading of *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* examines how whiteness in the postcolonial Zimbabwean state is perceived through an outsider's gaze, resulting in a kind of double consciousness within the (racialized, white) subject of the gaze. It is argued that the text depicts whites as torn between two unreconciled streams of possibility, reinforcing their sense of alienation. Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* represents whiteness as a thoroughly ephemeral experience. The meaning of whiteness is mediated through perpetual physical movement as whites travel from one point to another. Eppel's *Absent: the English Teacher* affords a rethinking of whiteness as an unstable form of identity contingent on historical and political factors.

**Keywords:** Zimbabwean literature; whiteness; whiteness studies; racial gaze; whiteness; double consciousness; race

### Understanding whiteness in Zimbabwe

Whiteness has assumed a more visible status in Western academia following the impact of whiteness studies as instantiated in the works of Roediger (1991), Morrison (1992), Harris (1993), Frankenberg (1993) and others. In this sub-discipline, theories of whiteness emerge as conceptual models employed to unlock and explain the significance of whiteness in the present as well as the past, interrogating the assumptions underlying whiteness and making it a visible object of scrutiny. Chief among the various trajectories in whiteness studies is the rendering of race as socially constructed (Wiegman, 1999, p. 122). Broadly, 'eliminativists' and 'critical conservatists' are identified as two major strands informing the sub-discipline. Eliminativists pursue the elimination of whiteness as a concept in order to undo its potential abuses of power. Critical conservatists, on the other hand, call for a modification of whiteness so that it can survive as an anti-racist category.

In these dominant streams of whiteness studies, largely based on studies of race in the USA and Europe, we gather that whiteness, domination and invisibility are intertwined (Giroux, 1992). Whiteness, we are told, 'is an unrecognized and unacknowledged racial category' whose invisibility enables it to act as 'the standard or norm against which all so called "minorities" are measured' (Keating, 1995, p. 905). Manson (2004) explains that

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