



An Ambivalent Sense of Belonging

By Zahra Moloo



In Kenya, the place occupied by descendants of British settlers in the country is a contentious issue. At times, it explodes into controversy and debate, for instance in 2017 when conflicts occurred between pastoralists searching for grazing land and private white landowners in Laikipia. In 2006, angry debates about the racism and colonial history of white Kenyans erupted when Tom Cholmondeley, the heir of an influential colonial settler in Kenya and a large-scale landowner, shot and killed a man whom he believed was poaching wildlife on his family's farm. This was the second such incident: a year earlier, he had shot and killed another man on his land.

The uneasy nature of white Kenyans' sense of belonging in the country is unraveled and analyzed in Janet McIntosh's fascinating book *Unsettled: Denial and Belonging Among White Kenyans*. Based on extensive in-depth interviews, and structured poetically into different themes which explore varying components of the white Kenyan experience, McIntosh's book reveals the complex and often ambivalent positions of white Kenyan subjectivities in contemporary Kenya. She explores their relationships to the land, to Kiswahili, to domestic workers, to other black Kenyans and to their own white community. The last chapter is dedicated to white Kenyans' relationship to the occult and how they justify or explain their participation in practices that transcend a "rational" European worldview.

Through her interviews, McIntosh discovers an interesting dynamic at play in the white Kenyan consciousness. Their uneasy sense of belonging is expressed through the notion of a "moral double

consciousness," a term borrowed from the phrase "double consciousness," defined by W.E.B. DuBois, and which in McIntosh's book is used to describe what results when white Kenyans look at themselves through the eyes of others, and experience the shock of seeing that their community is being seen. They were raised to think of their settler families as good, but now have to grapple with the fact that they were in fact, oppressors and that they are also seen through the same lens. They experience an inner self-doubt, and shift between a moral self-assurance and a sense of anxiety elicited by their critics. As they cannot for long dwell in shame about themselves or about their colonial past, some settle into a "defensive stance" in order to remain in their comfort zone and mystify their structural advantages. Others focus on their felt bonds to Kenya and insist that their personal intentions take precedence over history. A very small number try to find ways to empathize with black Kenyan perceptions. In today's Kenya, argues McIntosh, white Kenyans are no longer looking to rule, but to belong.

White Kenyans who try to maintain their comfort zone adopt a kind of "structural oblivion;" a position of "ignorance, denial and ideology" which comes from occupying an elite social position, and involves refusing realities like the reasons for the resentment towards them from less privileged groups. This oblivion operates alongside their taking for granted a hegemonic model of the way the world should be—in other words, a liberal individualistic model of personhood and a capitalist model of the economy. In this view of the world, white Kenyans are to be seen as individuals, and cannot be held responsible for the crimes of their forebears.

Perhaps the most glaring and contentious area in which the presence of white Kenyans in the country comes to the fore is around the question of land. As McIntosh notes in her second chapter, land is already a "painful theme" across Kenya which often plays out in terms of which ethnic group was on the land first. Taking the reader back in history, she describes how the British colonial government expropriated land and imposed individual land rights to encourage agricultural production and "proper" land use. The Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902 imposed English property law and forced Africans to give up land that was not occupied or developed, enabling the colonial state to give huge swathes of it in the Rift Valley to European and South African settlers. These fertile areas, so desirable to white settlers, were places where Maasai pastoralists practiced seasonal migration under a complex system of rights to land and water. As the colonial administration created more room for white settlers, the Maasai were coerced into signing away their lands. In 1911 and 1912, thousands of Maasai were herded toward the south at gunpoint and by 1913, they had lost between 50 and 70 percent of the land which they had previously used.

The settler descendants that McIntosh interviews about this history do not seem to know about the land expropriations. Operating out of what she describes as ignorance, collective defensiveness and possibly systematic whitewashing, settler descendants spin their narratives to assert that the Laikipia territories were fairly purchased from the Maasai, or that Laikipia was a no-man's land at the time of settler arrival, echoing the classic settler frontier ideology of *terra nullius*. Many believe that their forebears worked to develop the land, and do not think that they should give it up or compensate the Maasai. One settler descendant understands the Maasais' grievances but cannot accept that they deserve any kind of reparations. In his words, "It's a romantic effort to recreate an impossible past." Echoing their colonial predecessors, some of McIntosh's interviewees undermine the Maasais' pastoralist lifestyle, deeming it haphazard, unfocused and based on "feelings" rather than deliberation or pattern, in comparison to European notions of responsible land use and ownership. Several of her interviewees evoke childhood memories when describing their attachment to the land and wildlife, encouraging an idea of white belonging as "innocent." McIntosh writes that "black pastoralists are often seen as abusing the land, whereas white's relationships to land are described as intimate and sensory," and white Kenyans can assert that they appreciate the land in ways the Maasai do not.

Although these ways of thinking may seem outrageous today from a non-white Kenyan perspective, they have successfully enabled white Kenyans to assert their entitlement to land in the present day. Those who are sitting on some tens of thousands of acres can claim that they are acting as stewards of the land. This positioning justifies the extensive involvement of white Kenyans in the conservation industry and the expansion of community-based conservation initiatives now widespread on much of the land belonging to settler descendants in Kenya. Although couched in language about empowering local communities, conservation projects do not level the playing field between white and black Kenyans. Rather, as McIntosh writes, “whites reproduce the larger relationship of patrons to black Kenyans;” local communities must rely on the support of white conservationists for their survival and well-being, while whites are re-inscribed in a privileged position. Helping communities has become for some progressive whites, a kind of “cover story” in order to hold onto their resources “in the face of a public that objects to radical inequality.”

The paternalism present in land-based conservation initiatives also carries over into domestic spheres. McIntosh writes about how white Kenyans occupy an ambivalent position, expressing a fondness and kinship for their domestic staff and yet paying lower wages than recently arrived expatriates. When cash is needed for special requests, they dole out extras, encouraging a dependency on the part of the domestic staff while they in turn experience a sense of feeling needed and embedded in the lives of their staff. Such relationships work to create “a sense of belonging to the Kenyan people and, in turn, to the nation.”

Race-class boundaries are trickier to navigate when it comes to marriage and relationships. McIntosh observes how interracial marriages are less common among Kenyans from settler families than among white expatriates. While they profess a desire to belong to a multicultural country, white Kenyan’s intimate relationships are for the most part with other whites and they tend to self-segregate. While interracial marriage is often frowned upon in the white settler community, speaking African languages offers a safer way to connect with black Kenyans. White Kenyans’ attitude toward Kiswahili is described by McIntosh as a kind of “linguistic atonement” that enables them to “mitigate a history of colonial discrimination.” Whereas before independence, Swahili was something that “one condescended” to speak, today, speaking Kiswahili is important to white Kenyans as a way of signaling their belonging to Kenya. For some, it also creates the impression that the race and class-based playing field has been leveled and Kenyans “of all backgrounds can connect with mutual pleasure.” However, their primary use of English over Kiswahili for more intellectual conversations reveals a linguistic hierarchy at play; English remains the language of authority and Kiswahili is essentialized as a less intellectually sophisticated language than English. White Kenyans can therefore move fluidly between the authority of English and the authenticity of Kiswahili, enabling them to feel both white, and privileged, as well as Kenyan and “cosmopolitan.”

One area in which there are some interesting ambiguities is around the occult which until now has been largely thought of in the settler consciousness as the domain of Africans and not whites. In *Unsettled*, some settlers claim that the occult has no real force, but at the same time, they seem bewildered by how it operates and keep open the possibility that it does have some power. Some even consult occult help to restore their health or to police difficult employees. McIntosh notes that this signals a significant departure from the contempt settlers had for African beliefs.

Things have certainly changed in the decades since Kenya’s independence, and white settlers have attempted to adapt to these changes. Yet, as McIntosh observes, their desire to belong straddles an ambivalent position. They want to integrate, but not to the extent of practicing interracial romance; they want to see the country united, but they self-segregate along “cultural” lines; they feel a kinship with their domestic staff, but “secure affection through economic dependency.” As McIntosh eloquently sums it up, white Kenyans are “wrestling with the incoherence of a consciousness founded on colonialism that is confronted with the imperative to renounce it.”

McIntosh's book provides brilliantly written, nuanced and insightful analysis into white Kenyan subjectivities in contemporary Kenya. One area in which the book could arguably offer further insight is in analyzing the role of Asian Kenyans in the racial hierarchy, who as she notes "aren't certain of their entitlement to belong either." McIntosh explains this absence to her decision to focus on denial and belonging as centering on the anxieties that white Kenyans have towards their community's treatment of black Kenyans. They must "reckon" with black rather than Asian Kenyans. Nevertheless, given how long and how entrenched the white-Asian-black hierarchy has been in Kenya, some analysis on those dynamics would be a welcome addition.

In considering the question of white Kenyans' entitlement to belong, it is worth asking what is at stake in their desire to belong. As noted in the book, it is "convenient" to belong when "one wishes to stake a claim to land, jobs or other entitlements." Instead, the question of whether white Kenyans do in fact belong in the country must assume secondary importance to the question of how Kenyans contend with a legacy of a past which still impinges on the present. This legacy continues in ongoing land dispossessions, in the disproportionately powerful role occupied by white Kenyans in conservation, in the erasure of Kenya's extremely violent colonial history in public narratives, and perhaps most significantly, in a capitalist development model which is built on the crimes of the past. Perhaps one way for white Kenyans to truly commit to belonging to the country is to accept responsibility for the past, as individuals and as a collective, and to agree to [demands for reparations](#) for the crimes of their ancestors.

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