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White African Women Memoir Writing: Grappling with White Privilege Guilt,

Emotional Land Domain, and Feminine Inferiority.

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts in African Studies

by

Louise Hyland

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

White African Women Memoir Writing: Grappling with White Privilege Guilt,

Emotional Land Domain, and Feminine Inferiority.

by

Louise Hyland

Master of Arts in African Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Stephanie Bosch Santana, Chair

This thesis seeks to explore the intersectionality of Race, Whiteness and Gender Studies through the lens of comparative literature with particular focus on the memoir writing of Alexandra Fuller. Memoir writing, by its very nature, is an emotional and personally challenging endeavor. While the author is at the center of the work, various other actors play a pivotal role in adequately and appropriately conveying the existential crisis, inevitable climax and hopefully, the ultimate resolution. The very egocentric nature of memoir writing demands that the other actors such as characters, location, society and culture be offered in a way that either validate or negate the journey of the author. The challenge for a memoir author is to afford these actors the authenticity and expansion that contributes to the writing

and intended 'story'. An additional challenge arises as the author attempts to adequately bring these actors into play as either friend or foe. Neutrality is hardly ever conducive to the very poignant nature of memoir.

Three concepts that greatly influence the nature of Fuller's writing will be the focus of this work: White Privilege Guilt, Feminine Inferiority, and Emotional Land Domain. Fuller explores these through various lenses in her writing which, at different times, proves them to be both friend *and* foe. White privilege guilt is commonly associated with white African women who understand the disparity in privilege between themselves and people of color. The guilt stems from atrocities committed by mostly male racists and should have no bearing on the white women non racists. However, these women completely understand that all the privilege they experience is a direct result of those actions, hence, the guilt. While Fuller navigates the tribulations and challenges as well as privileges afforded her through her race and gender, perhaps the greatest question arises as she explores if her race negates her from even being an African at all. This question is one that troubles many white, women Africans.

This thesis includes the following works by Alexandra Fuller: *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood; Scribbling the Cat: Travels with an African Soldier; Cocktails Under the Tree of Forgetfulness; Leaving Before the Rains Come;* and *Travel Light, Move Fast.* All of Ms. Fuller's works explore racism, feminism, colonialism, white privilege, land domain, networks, and the contrast between Africanism and Americanism. While this thesis cannot fully explore all of these important features of African memoir writing, they will be touched upon in order to validate the claims regarding the three main concepts.

The thesis of Louise Hyland is approved.

Allen F. Roberts

Andrew Apter

Stephanie Bosch Santana, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

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Preface

While my fellow high school students were complaining about the amount of reading necessary in English and Afrikaans classes, I found myself reveling in both the artistic ability and excruciating pain from which African writers constructed their poignant works. Books such as Dalene Matthee's *Kringe in 'n Bos* and Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* drew me into a world I thought I knew and understood but clearly did not. This mild exposure (I say 'mild' because during the apartheid era, many other prolific books by African writers were banned) to the intricacies of the African writer instilled in me a deep desire to read more and to better understand the underlying emotions of the writers and their usage of various subtexts in order to explain the anomaly that is African writing.

As my love for reading developed I became fascinated with African memoir writers who use Africa as a 'character backdrop' to explore the intricacies and challenges of life. However, it is the authors that eschewed the lighthearted, almost flippant, approach to an African way of life that I gravitated to most. There is a necessity to accept life challenges such as death, living in close proximity with unpredictable animals, and the always unanswered question of belonging, to name a few. Incidences that would be considered horrific in the so-called "Western world" have resulted in a commonly used phrase: "TIA". The acronym for 'This is Africa" simply justifies all manner of odd occurrences and is often used with humor in an effort to accept challenges experienced in Africa. While there is nothing amiss with humor in memoir, I found myself attracted to works that, while they may include humor, also openly and thoughtfully expose the horror and pain that can be, and often is, part of growing up and coming of age in an oft war-torn, discrimination prone, divided, and sometimes terrifying Africa. It is these authors

that explore, and many times leave unanswered, the questions that I broach in this thesis. They do so with honesty and exposure of their own failings, while spotlighting the various cracks in their families, their communities and cultures, and society at large.

As Alexandra Fuller inscribed in my copy of her book *Scribbling the Cat: Travels with an African Soldier*:

for Louise,

The only way to see into our darkness is to shine the light of our truth into it.

With best wishes,

Alexandra Fuller

It is with this in mind that I attempt to "shine the light" on the important and challenging concepts Fuller broaches as highlighted in the title of this thesis.

In researching this thesis, I have diligently explored the University of California, Los Angeles libraries and its extensions. I have been thrilled to find a number of, as of yet, unexplored works. The fact that these works are both not digitized and their spines have not been cracked in person, is both disconcerting and reassuring: while I am sure I am not the first to explore them universally, I am delighted at being amongst the first to explore these works at UCLA. While I am grateful for the research resources available, I have found myself challenged by an inability to further explore the resources in the libraries as a result of the Covid shutdown. This thesis uses the resources available to me during this current crisis.

Introduction

The mere act of titling this thesis may be perceived as fraught with implication. A reader could determine the structure to demonstrate that one adjective carries more weight simply due to its placement. Consider the alternative implication if it were titled: "White Women African Memoir Writing…". The purpose of structuring the title as it is, is an attempt to imply that this work will cover the intricacies of being a 'white African', an 'African woman' and also, a 'white African woman'. Wrestling with the title is only the beginning of the challenging task that lays ahead in considering the subtexts of politics, race, gender, colonialism, culture, land, etc. While each of these abstractions may easily stand alone and be fully developed as contributing factors to the complexities of the memoirs explored, it is their interconnectedness that weaves a successful narrative.

In the case of memoir, in order to create that successful narrative, the author must effectually assign themselves an autoethnography. Carolyn Ellis explains, "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy)* personal experience *(auto)* in order to understand cultural experience *(etho)*. A researcher uses tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to *do* and *write* autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product."[i]

In Fuller's works we witness her explore and analyze her cultural, gendered and historical place in the world as she artfully guides us through her life. As Ellis, et al, notes in a later work:

> Writing is a way of knowing, a method of inquiry. Consequently, writing personal stories can be therapeutic for authors as we write to make sense of ourselves and our experiences, purge our burdens, and question canonical stories…conventional, authoritative, and "projective" storylines" that "plot" how "ideal social selves" should live. In doing so, we seek to improve and better understand our relationships, reduce prejudice, and encourage personal responsibility and agency, raise consciousness and

> promote cultural change, and give people a voice that, before writing, they may not have felt they had.[ii]

Fuller offers just such a window into the various prejudices, cultural differences and questions those “ideal social selves’.

While these writers offer the reader a voyeuristic glimpse into the extraordinary world of memoir writers with unique life experiences and perspectives, for those closest to them, it is often painful and ill received. Fuller explains her husband’s concerns regarding her memoirs, “In the next couple of years, I traveled back to southern Africa and wrote a troubling book about soldiers from the war I had grown up in. [iii] Charlie grew tired of the way I seemed to need to peel back the scabs of old wounds and explore the painful bloody parts of my vicious history. I told him I was compelled to dig into the world in this way. He said it was unnatural and unhealthy and made of me a terrifying wife.” [iv]

One can assume her husband was disquieted at his wife’s desire to lay bare all the family’s dirty laundry, as she does, and perhaps his consternation was accentuated by her willingness to explore more global concepts such as belonging, a midlife coming of age, and transitions through life’s mile markers. While her husband might be disappointed at her exploration of these complex ideologies, a student of African affairs might be delighted at witnessing Alexandra Fuller exploring the controversial topics of white privilege guilt, feminist inferiority, and emotional land domain as she navigates her own development between the United States and southern Africa through the medium of memoir. Through her memoirs she explores her own autoethnography through these topics. She recognizes, and experiences guilt, as a result of her white privilege. She also recognizes what could be compared to a caste system that not only includes color but also includes disparity between men and women. As she navigates this world

in Africa, she must assign herself an ethnography that includes her race, her gender and also includes questioning if she even belongs to the land she loves.

White Privilege Guilt

When speaking at the first Steve Biko Memorial Lecture at the University of Cape Town (2000) Njabulo Ndebele reminded the audience of the circumstances surrounding Steve Biko death: a miserable and lonely death, naked and manacled, beaten to death on a mat on a cold stone floor of a prison cell. Ndebele continued to point out that this is simply one of the many atrocities that those who are white can inflict on black bodies. He noted the hope that a "new white humanity" might emerge from recognizing such historical injustices and a voluntary engagement:

> …by those caught in the culture of whiteness of their own making, with the ethical and moral implications of being situated in the interface between inherited, problematic privilege, on the one hand, and on the other, the blinding sterility at the center of the "heart of whiteness.[v]

Ndebele challenged not only the concept of African whiteness and the privileges afforded it, but he continued by challenging the international whiteness that contributed to the sanctioning of such atrocities in Africa:

> If South African whiteness is a beneficiary of the protectiveness assured by the international whiteness, it has an opportunity to write a new chapter in world history. It will have to come out from under the umbrella and repudiate it. Putting itself at risk, it will have to declare that it is home now, sharing in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies. South African whiteness will declare that its dignity is inseparable from the dignity of black bodies.[vi]

While many white Africans may not consider themselves complicit in atrocities such as colonial land grabbing, segregation and oppression there is recognition that complicity comes in many forms. Even the most simple form of standing by and doing nothing while others inflicted the atrocities demonstrates white privilege and with it, comes white privilege guilt. It is this complicity that Alexandra Fuller explores in her works.

Despite racial tensions being prevalent in the United States where Ms. Fuller resides, it is no surprise that the exploration of her white privilege and its complications arise during her travels back to Africa to visit her family. Having lived and schooled in a number of African countries, many of which were fraught with uprisings and wars in an effort to establish equality and eliminate segregation and oppression, Fuller looks back on a white childhood with fresh, adult eyes of understanding. This is particularly evident as she explores her time in Rhodesia which would later become Zimbabwe.

In explaining the uprising which would ultimately facilitate this change, Fuller offers background for her readers, "The young African men whom we used to see sloped up against the shebeens[vii] in the Tribal Trust Lands have disappeared as the war has intensified. They have left their homes and have headed into neighboring countries to join the guerrilla military camps there."[viii]

While these simple statements of fact do not demonstrate how Fuller feels about this uprising, in subsequent comments she chooses language that offers us greater insight, "As we dust our way through the Zimunya TTL on our way from the farm into town, we see only the women, the elderly, and young children. They shrink from our gaze, from our bristling guns. Some of the bigger children run after us and throw rocks at the car."[ix]

Without explicitly speaking of the privilege that allows her family to travel in a car, own weapons, have food and freedoms that the women, elderly, and children do not have, Fuller is able to demonstrate her family's white entitlements.

She also expertly demonstrates the fear experienced at the hands of white oppression and adds to our understanding of the conditions:

"Over a million African villagers are forced to live in "protected villages" surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by Rhodesian government forces so that there can be no more *pungwe.*[x] Children of fighting age are kept at gunpoint. Toddlers, the elderly, and women crouch under the watchful eyes of their captors. They are allowed to fetch water. They are fed. The women pull the babies to their breasts, sink back on their heels, and wait for liberation."[xi]

These inhuman conditions are flatly explained with little overt emotion but the language allows the reader to understand that Fuller herself now understands the injustices and the complexity of the situation.

To adequately demonstrate how profound this white privilege is, Fuller uses an example of play during her childhood. She narrates an often played game of "boss and boys" "Of course, I am always the boss and they are always the boys."[xii]

Despite the gendered inequality; if the boys had been white, as a girl she would be considered inferior; but as white she is automatically superior.

The term "boy" was often used in segregated countries such as Rhodesia and South Africa to derogatorily refer to a grown black man in service of a white person. It insinuates that the black man is lesser than the white adult. Fuller details how she makes these children pretend to be "boys" in service to her to do her bidding. When Fuller's black nanny sees this she sends the children away much to Fullers' indignation:

"Why did you send my boys away?"

"They are not your boys. They are children like you. Girls and boys."

I've told her that if she shouts at me I will fire her.

"I can fire you if I like. Anytime I want, I can fire you."[xiii]

There is a disconnect between what Fuller understands as her privileged role in contrast to what the nanny actually means to her. The white privilege extends to Fuller's mother having the luxury of a nanny who would be expected to perform tasks normally taken on by a mother. By extension, the nanny might be more of a mother than her true mother; except in terms of social standing. Even at this young age she recognizes that she has a higher social standing than the nanny and operates from a position of power. However, she also demonstrates the love and care she receives from her nanny, "If I fall, or hurt myself, or if I'm tired, my nanny lets me put my hand down her shirt onto her breast and I can suck my thumb and feel how soft she is, and her breasts are full and soft and smell the way rain smells when it hits hot earth. I know, without knowing why, that Mum would smack me if she saw me doing this."[xiv]
While the child understands that her current environment demands that she feel shame for this close relationship with her black nanny, Fuller is at a loss to understand the complexities of the segregated world the adults have created. The confusion of entitlements, allowances, and boundaries of acceptability as a child, and a white child, are demonstrated through Fuller's exploration of these simple, yet insightful childhood grapplings.

Author Michelle Friedman explains the challenge of wrestling with the conditions of whiteness within an oppressive environment, "On the one hand we knew full well that we were part of it and for some of us at least, that is why we were making choices to not perpetuate it, certainly in quite the same ways that our parents did. However, I can honestly say it was the first time I had to start owning: 'yes I am probably racist and yes I am white and yes I have to face what that means and hold it…even while continuing with whatever challenges I am facing'."[xv]
Fuller acknowledges her inherent racism when explaining her childhood interactions but she also offers an understanding of her upbringing that instilled this unfortunate but expected racism.

When a domestic dispute results in the near death of one of Fuller's mother's maids, her mother refers to the perpetrator as a "Fucking kaffir".[xvi] It is not simply the profanity laced slur that contribute to the understanding of the racial dynamic but it is also compounded by the diminutive approach to the staff that accentuates the inherent racism. Her father gathers his staff to go after the perpetrator. Fuller details how the use of the word "boys" contributes to the continued derogatory and racist undermining of black men being considered "less than" a white man,

> "The boys are coming with me. I'm going to catch him."
>
> The "boys" are Dad's most loyal laborers. Duncan is the boss-boy. He has a handsome open face, with a long nose and wide set eyes. Cephas is a small squat man whose father, Chibodo, is our witch doctor.[xvii]

Despite the elevated social stature that Cephas holds by virtue of his position in *his* society, within the confines of a white society, he is still relegated to the diminutive "boy". Fuller attempt to set the record straight when she notes, "The men – Dad's "boys" – arrive on foot."[xviii] She continues reminding her readership of this incongruity by subtly reinforcing it using quotation marks in subsequent mentioning's, "Dad's "boys" scramble over the river and pull July and his companion out from under the bridge." "For some minutes Dad's "boys" beat the thieves, kicking them and punching them…" "He nods to the "boys." "Dad's "boys" kick July…"[xix]

Fuller uses this technique four times on one page which reinforces for the readers the racism and the derogatory diminishing of the men's basic humanity. Perhaps more importantly, through this writing device, Fuller demonstrates the origin of her racism.

Is inherited racism excusable?

In her second memoir *Scribbling the Cat,* Fuller further explores this notion through the mysterious character simply known as K. The derogatory terms K uses for black Africans are as a result of both his upbringing as well as his time as a soldier and a mercenary fighting against the liberation from white rule of various African countries. *Munt, gondies, gooks, kaffir, spook*…all names K uses for black Africans. The dichotomy of K's personality is further explored by his claim to be a Christian and his efforts to care for his farm workers. He has a black farm manager who is named Michael, evidently not his Shona name but, at least, K does not refer to him as a "boy".

K also uses a derogatory term for whites: wazungu, when he points out to Fuller that oppression and atrocities against people of color are not merely the domain of Africa:

> "K grunted, as if absorbing this information, then he said, "What do they call their munts over there?'
>
> "You mean African Americans?"
>
> "No, I mean your original munts."
>
> "Native Americans," I said.
>
> K laughed.
>
> "But then they shot them in the back the first chance they got."
>
> "Who?"
>
> "The wazungu. It doesn't matter what they *call* them, they still shot them and shoved them in compounds."
>
> "Reservations."
>
> "Same thing."
>
> "It's complicated," I agreed.

"No, it's not."[xx]

We see Fuller acknowledging her own confusion when being forced to acknowledge the similarities in oppression and land grabbing between Africa and America. Through her interactions with other Africans, both black and white, Fuller is confronted with the challenge of 'dismantling identity'. Bennett and Friedman note, "The process of acknowledging complicity with structural systems of racism demands, it seems to us, a dismantling of so many of the scaffolds around which our identities have been built."[xxi]

It is the 'scaffolding' upon which white African's find, and develop their racial identities. This scaffolding begins in household childhood, extends through educational environments, social expectations, and relationship development. Fuller demonstrates this most strikingly when she recounts how her parents deliver colonial ideals in teaching their young children a song that explores the narrative that Rhodesia belongs to whites:

> And then someone starts, "*Because we're"* – pause – "*all Rhodesians and we'll fight through thickandthin!"* and we all join in. We throw back our heads. "*We'll keep this land"* – breathe – "*a free land, stop the enemy comin' in. We'll keep them north of the Zambezi till that river's runnin' dry! And this great land will prosper, 'cos Rhodesians never die!"*[xxii]

The irony of the use of the word "free" is not lost on any student of Africa. The previously uncolonized territory of Nyasaland was a free and fair state where indigenous peoples were able to honor their freedoms, their ownership of the land, and their ancestors. The mere insinuation of "white" colonizers claiming Rhodesia to be *their* "free land" and claim indigenous people as the "enemy" is the ultimate testament to racist scaffolding within a colonial childhood.

Fuller approaches 'whiteness' from both the perspective of her family being 'settlers' while also considering being a 'native' white African. It is most often in terms of the "settler" that white identity in postcolonial Africa has been given content and meaning. Michael Chege

notes that “the meaning of whiteness in Africa is in flux” and that being white in Africa “covers diverse, sometimes conflicting loyalties.” Little attention is given to how such “white Africans” construct their identities and whether the diverse contexts he discusses have much in common in relation to these “whitenesses.”[xxiii]

Fuller might disagree with this position as she clearly constructs her and her family’s “whiteness” as being foreign and not belonging in Africa. When interviewed recently, Fuller explained, “Being a white southern African, who saw the transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, the sense of being an outsider was absolutely instilled in my limbic system.”[xxiv] She expands on understanding her personal ‘whiteness’ in *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight* when she explains the educational scaffolding of her childhood at boarding school:

> The blacks laugh at me when they see me stripped naked after swimming or tennis, when my shoulders and arms are angry sunburnt red.
> “Argh! I smell roasting pork!” they shriek.
> “Who fried the bacon?”
> “Burning piggy!”
> My God, I am the *wrong* color! The way I am burned by the sun, scorched by flinging sand, prickled by the heat. The way my skin erupts in miniature volcanoes of protest in the presence of tsetse flies, mosquitoes and ticks. The way I stand out against the khaki of bush like a large marshmallow to a gook with a gun. White. African. White-African.[xxv]

By way of contrast to most narratives of white colonizers on the African continent who wish to demonstrate superiority, Fuller places concerted effort in ensuring her readers understand the “wrongness” of her whiteness. Essentially, she appears to be apologizing for being in the wrong place with the wrong skin color. The continuation of this narrative can be found in her explanation of time spent in white ruled Rhodesia in her work *Travel Light, Move Fast,* “I couldn’t feel it then, at all. Our hypocrisy, the hypocrisy of white Rhodesians, was so official, so complete, so pathological we couldn’t feel it ourselves. We could say one thing; we could believe and feel and do another.”[xxvi] Demonstrating an intellectual understanding of collective

white guilt through her own personal experience offers the opportunity for her work to be accepted, or even appreciated, by a broad audience. Broader say, than if she were to write from an asserted position of established white privilege without questioning it. By demonstrating her feelings of inadequacy and lack of true belonging as an African, she characterizes herself as being relatable and entertainingly tortured.

'Whiteness' as a concept carries with it the implication of an invisible but powerful abstraction that other groups have experienced as monolithic. This is not to say that whiteness as a cultural category is monolithic, but to understand how the politics of privilege is experienced by those who are white-identified and those that are not.[xxvii]

Fuller might agree with Mary West as she clearly understands her privilege and what it affords her. While traveling through drought and poverty stricken Zimbabwe, Fuller is painfully aware of this privilege, "How you see a country depends on whether you are driving through it, or living in it. How you see a country depends on whether or not you can leave it, if you have to."[xxviii]

It is generally accepted that white people with political and financial capital will be the Africans with the capability to leave a country if circumstances dictate the need. Fuller demonstrates this point when she shares, "It should not be physically possible to get from the banks of the Pepani River to Wyoming in less than two days, because mentally and emotionally it is impossible. It wasn't that I didn't want to join in the innocent, deluded self-congratulation that goes with living in such a fat, sweet country. I did. But I couldn't. Gradually the winter seeped into spring and I resumed the habits of entitlement that most of us don't even know we have."[xxix]

She uses cleverly constructed language and intentional choice of vocabulary, that allows the audience to perceive her understanding of her white privilege; her expression of guilt for that

privilege, as well as her subversive apology for having "entitlements"; as profoundly white. The ability to immigrate to a "fat, sweet country" requires money and education, often the privileges afforded only white Africans at the time of her immigration. Her choice of the term "deluded self-congratulation" also demonstrates a form of apology for her ability to be in America. It is this language that allows her a superior "whiteness" when compared to the black Africans she leaves behind in poverty and desolation, as entitled. I, too, have experienced this discontent, "Back in California, I seem to slip back into my entitled lifestyle with relative ease. Every trip to South Africa diverts me, if only for a short white, from my privileged Los Angeles lifestyle. In South Africa, my heart aches at the poverty, the HIV rate that skyrockets daily, and the constant fight for bellies to be full, if only for today."[xxx]

As with Fuller, my various entitlements have offered me a variety of cultural capital that allows me to immigrate to the United States.

Colonizers and their descendants who remain in the colonized territory are often known to experience a sense of isolation, alienation and displacement. The residue of that historical relationship of the settler to the colonized territory is often demonstrated in 'white writing'. J.M. Coetzee has defined 'white writing' in South Africa as 'white insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African'"[xxxi]

Throughout her writings, Fuller makes note of her how her father introduced himself to everyone, "Tim Fuller, of no fixed abode." While this is in recognition of the Fuller family moving so regularly that they often did not have a firm address, it is more of a recognition of the underlying concept that none of the family are truly African as a result of them having been born in England, in addition to their "whiteness" never allowing them to truly be considered

‘Africans’. It speaks directly to the color of their skin placing in to question their identities. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in her work, *Leaving Before the Rains Come:*

> I was accidentally British, incidentally European – a coincidence of so many couplings. But I was deliberately southern African. Not in a good or easy way. There is no getting around the fact that there had been so much awful violence to get here; my people had engaged in such terrible acts of denial and oppression; I so obviously did not look African; and yet here I still was.[xxxii]

Fuller appears to be attempting to demonstrate contrition for acts of aggression that are not even hers to own. In fact, in all of her writings she demonstrates an appreciation, reverence and respect for black Africans. However, her mere skin color seems to place her in a position of inferiority as a true African, even if only in her own opinion. And then this is challenged by her understanding of her white privilege. The irony of this cannot be underscored.

Perhaps the ultimate white privilege is exposed when we recognize a simple truth. Being a black African comes with one simple acknowledgement: lack of privilege as well as a clear understanding of what side of the social, cultural and political fence one belongs. Being a white African comes with overt and subversive privileges. Amongst those privileges is the ability to flirt with the fine line of being perceived as racist, or liberal, or non-demonstrative of taking a side due to the mere lack of understanding of what it is to be a black African and the mere privilege of being white. The mere appearance of a white person does not allow for someone else to perceive them as a racist or a supporter of black causes. It is only when they themselves either verbally or by actions assign themselves allowing others to understand what position they hold. A white person can also stay quite or operate from a place of inaction resulting in those around them not being sure which position they take. Whiteness allows for a positionality of nondescript ‘being’ of the ‘other’.

As a white African woman memoir writer myself, I have found it necessary to expose this nondescript positionality in my own writing. I was horrified to find myself using my white privilege to appear as mediocre as possible on a visit to South Africa as I describe in my memoir, *Learning to Cry: A Journey Across Three Continents in Search of a Home:*

> The singing and dancing begins to wind up for the climax, and it ends in a crescendo of traditional ground stomping, clapping, and *toi toi-ing* (a loud, piercing yelling). The sound is haunting. Twenty-five years ago when we heard that sound, we would run for cover, as it was the sound of rioting masses protesting apartheid, and it always resulted in violence as they clashed with the police who tried to quell the rebellion…I mention to the men how we would run away from the sound, but the manager laughs and reminds me, "Ja, but we shot them, hey? We shot those bastards."
> I reach for my wine. The comment has me sobered up almost immediately, and I don't like it – the soberness or the comment. I think back on the past few days and wonder how I've become known as a racist. I'm know as Liberal Louise in my family for a reason. Then I realize I've slipped easily into the trap so many white South Africans have to in order to not be ostracized by any one group. I've been exceptionally polite to all staff, regardless of color, and I have avoided making any comments or judgements that would categorize me either way. I have become a human Switzerland, completely neutral.[xxxiii]

The position of being neutral is only possible as a result of *my* "whiteness". As the world changes and racism and injustices become more prevalent, it is becoming necessary to not remain neutral in order to effect overdue change. Fuller acknowledges this and demands more. In *Cocktail Hour under the Tree of Forgetfulness,* she regularly reminds the reader of accepting responsibility for the past:

> Whether out of desperation, ignorance or hostility, humans have an unerring capacity to ignore one another's scared traditions and to defile one another's hallowed grounds: the Palawa Aborigines lost at Waternish, the MacDonalds trapped in St. Francis Cave on Eigg, the MacLeods burned in Trumpan Church, the Boers dying in British concentration camps, thousands of Kikuyu perishing during the Mau Mau, the Rucks family hacked to death in Kenya's White Highlands, Adrian's grave desecrated. Surely until all of us own and honor one another's dead, until we have admitted to our murders and forgiven one another and ourselves for what we have done, there can be no truce, no dignity and no peace.[xxxiv]

This is perhaps the most profound demonstration of white privilege guilt. Although Fuller has committed none of those atrocities herself, she is cognizant of the fact that the privilege she

experiences is a direct result of white oppression. She includes herself in the complicity by using words such as “us”, “ourselves”, “we” thereby insinuating that she does not experience dignity or peace as a result of the guilt and inability to offer reparations.

She validates this further when explaining the loss of her parent’s farm during the transition between Rhodesia and Zimbabwe, “But most of us also don’t pay so dearly for our prejudices, our passions, our mistakes. Lots of places you can harbor the most ridiculous, the most ruining, the most intolerant beliefs and be hurt by nothing more than your own thoughts.”[xxxv] It is no great leap to assume that she is referring to the colonization of Africa. Again, she demonstrates complicity and guilt as she speaks of herself as well as others.

While her feelings are certainly understandable as she enjoys the fruits of the white perpetrators labors, the irony lays in the lack of guilt or assumption of responsibility by the actual perpetrators. Known as the “social engineer” of apartheid in South Africa, Henrik Verwoerd once said, “There is no place for (the Bantu) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labor…What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd.” Verwoerd often referred to people of color as “it” negating their humanity. He was also the developer and enforcer of unjust, inhuman and oppressive tactics. However, just as with another prime minister of South Africa, P.W. Botha, he experienced no guilt. Botha once famously said, “I never have the nagging doubt of wondering if perhaps I am wrong.”

Fuller carries with her a white privilege guilt for racism that although perhaps inherent and not overt, is a result of her circumstances, her childhood, governmental authority figures and closer authority figures such as her parents. As Fuller notes of her mother, “The violence and

injustices that came with colonialism seem, in my mother's version of events, to have happened in some other unwatched movie, to some other unwatched people."[xxxvi]

Her mother was quite upset when her first book was published as she believed the writing made her appear to be both a racist and a terrible mother. Fuller's mother now refers to her writings as, "The Awful Books". Fuller notes that the title of the first book may never be mentioned in the company of her family. It seems that Fuller must carry the guilt for those who will not.

The last word on this guilt belongs to Fuller herself, "The front line had spread from the borders to the urban areas to our doorsteps, and if we didn't all have bloody hands, we were all related by blood to someone who did."[xxxvii]

Emotional Land Domain

"I am not African because I was born in Africa but because Africa was born in me"

Kwame Nkrumah

Ernest Hemmingway said of Africa, "Now, being in Africa, I was hungry for more of it…the discomforts that you paid to make it real…to know the language and have time to be in it and to move slowly." Rudyard Kipling offered, "One cannot resist the lure of Africa." They are not alone in their love for Africa. It is quite common for visitors to fall in love with the land as Fuller explains about her parents, "People often ask why my parents haven't left Africa. Simply put, they have been possessed by this land. Land is Mum's love affair and it is Dad's religion."[xxxviii] In her work Fuller explores what I refer to as 'emotional land domain'. Fuller's parents, herself and her sister were all born in England. Her deceased three siblings were born in Africa. While her parents owned various farms during their time in Africa, none of the family can be considered truly African as a result of not being born on the continent. However, even those born on the continent who are white, may not be considered truly African either. Fuller explores both positive and negative emotional connections to the land which contribute to identity, often with the specific lens of colonialism.

Fuller introduces this concept in her first memoir where she notes that due to her accent while living in America she is often asked where she is from 'originally':

> I say, "I'm African." But not black.
> And I say, "I was born in England," by mistake.
> But, "I have lived in Rhodesia (which is now Zimbabwe) and in Malawi (which used to be Nyasaland) and in Zambia (which used to be Northern Rhodesia)."
> And I add, "Now I live in America," through marriage.
> And (full disclosure), "But my parents were born of Scottish and English parents."
> What does that make me?[xxxix]

The question posed covers both the emotional and physicality of ‘belonging’. Sarah Nuttall explains this as she explores Gillian Slovo’s book *My Family, My Country,* “Belonging and leaving may not follow in sequence: Here it is the parents who come to inhabit the frame of belonging and the daughter who is less securely or unambiguously tied to a place, politics, and country”[xl]

This is precisely what Fuller demonstrates through her memoirs. Despite being raised on the African continent she often does not feel that she belongs, while her parents both raised in England, feel a deep sense of belonging.

Perhaps it is the differences between Fuller’s perception on colonialism contrasted with her parent’s perception, that influences this discord. Nutall adds, “In a context in which one would normally “belong” on the basis of one’s skin color, in which one’s racial origins signified everything, espousal of a political cause changed the very ontology in which it was embedded.”[xli] Fuller’s parents believe they are entitled to belong to Africa because part of it was won for them through colonization by their homeland, England. Mary West refers to this as “the cultural chauvinism of Englishness”.[xlii]

It is Fuller’s mother who most exemplifies this.

Maureen Colleen Ewings explains how colonizers demonstrate this chauvinism through their view of the land or the ‘wilderness’:

> Nature endangers human superiority and authority and this causes fear. People attempt to counter the wilderness by creating ordered gardens that serve as proof of humanity’s ability to control some of the natural world. While some people see culture as protection from the unknown, fearful wilderness, another interpretation perceives the natural

environment, the “wilderness”, as capable of providing people with an escape from the

“meticulously ordered gardens” of civilization.[xliii]

Fuller’s mother, Nicola, vacillates between the two. While she does not create a meticulous garden (although she does have a garden) she certainly attempts to ‘tame’ the land. When a crocodile is found gorging on her fish in the ponds, she quickly orders the death of the crocodile and relishes watching the skin cure on her manicured lawn. Nicola also brings a number of culture activities to Africa. She insists on her children using correct diction and English expressions as well as correct, English acceptable table manners. She loves the ‘wildness’ of Africa while simultaneously attempting order it. She repeatedly expresses her entitlement to Africa.

Nicola is horrified at the outcome of the Rhodesian/Zimbabwean uprising, “She’d been far more appalled at the loss of the war than had Dad; unlike him, she hadn’t been expecting it.”[xliv]

Nicola cannot be blamed for not expecting to lose the war considering the previous win record of colonizers, particularly the British. As she tells Fuller, ‘“In our day, one was expected to live abroad; it was the done thing. Wasn’t that the point of the bloody empire?” Mum sniffed unhappily.”[xlv]

Her use of the word “empire” signifies ownership of colonized lands as the British Empire often claimed. Exposing her mother’s inherent racism and assumed superiority even further, Fuller relays a later exchange when she asks her mother why she did not return to England with her parents:

“I knew I couldn’t follow my parents to England. My mother was heartbroken, but I knew I wanted to stay in Africa.”

What Mum doesn't say, but what she means is that she wanted to stay in White ruled Africa. In some ways, she doesn't need to say it. Most white Africans either left the continent or receded farther and farther south as African countries in the north gained their independence.[xlvi]

Regardless of others receding, Nicola remains firm in her entitlement to the land regardless of white or black rule.

One might understand Nicola's disdain for Fuller's writing as she exposes the deep recesses of racism and colonialism in her mother: "It is true that in Mum's opinion land is good, blood soaked land is better and land soaked in the blood of one's ancestors is best."[xlvii]
Perhaps the most telling trait that Fuller offers us about her mother is not about land but about the indigenous people of the land, "'Oh dear," Mum says, pained. "Embracing of all humanity? Must we? Isn't that like born again Christians?' …Oh dear, Mum says. "No, I don't think so." Mum has fought for what she saw as Her Land in Africa, and she fought fiercely and without apology."[xlviii]
While I do not believe Fuller's intentions are to besmirch her mother, I applaud her courageous writing as it aptly explains the inherent racism and discrimination that leads to the belief of entitlement. It also demonstrates the colonial perspective that often negates an understanding of the "other".

Fuller on the other hand, repeatedly informs us that she struggles with the concept of being entitled to belong to Africa. Ewing notes the recognition of, "…their "dispossession" also results from their separation from both their culture and their land."[xlix]
Of course, Ewing is referring to the indigenous people of Africa who have been removed from their land and as a result, lose their culture in the process. Fuller understands this in a

dramatically different fashion than her mother. Fuller's first understanding of this hostility is when she is informed of the response to her father proposing to her mother, "Dad telegraphed England with the news of his engagement and the answer came back from his father, 'Is she black? Stop. Don't do it. Stop."[l]

Perhaps it is that Fuller grew up in Africa with little of the "empire" mentality that her parents were exposed to while growing up in England. Fuller's different perspective allows her to be horrified at land grabbing unlike her parents. Fuller explains the colonial process of land grabbing in Rhodesia:

> By 1930, all Rhodesia's land had been officially apportioned by the colonial government. Unsurprisingly, designated European areas coincided roughly with the high rainfall, fertile areas; Tribal Trust Lands lay more or less in the dry periphery; and the tiny allotment of Native Purchase Areas were further away in the oppressively hot, teste fly prone zones. European settlers gave no sign that they considered their allotment as either immoral or dangerously unsustainable.[li]

The settlers specifically took the most fertile lands as they could "tame the land" thereby verifying the need to remove the land from indigenous people and promote the notion that they were incapable of taming the wilderness and caring for themselves. Max Oelschlager documents how the interpretation of "wilderness" changes as the notion of culture evolves, "Wilderness is essential in revealing to us what it means to be *civilized* human beings, since only through the recognition of what we are not (the negative) can we understand what we are (the positive)."[lii] Once humanity separates itself from nature and places higher value on the complexity and worthiness of themselves, then nature becomes associated with the negative. The colonial process was specifically focused on exploiting the natural resources while negating the humanity of the indigenous people and simultaneously placing higher value on the humanity of the settlers. Rhodesian prime minister Ian Smith said in 1970, "but sixty years ago Africans were uncivilized savages, walking around in their skins." Citing God as having given permission to take the land,

colonizers also often noted that the circumstances for indigenous peoples were far superior now with no acknowledgement of sophisticated living systems before their arrival.

Fuller has a deep understanding of land ownership and handles her own approach to emotional land domain very differently than her mother which affects her identity. In each of her memoirs she vacillates between belonging to Africa and feeling as though she belongs nowhere. In *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* she notes, "My soul has no home. I am neither African nor English nor am I of the sea."[liii]

In *Leaving Before the Rains Come* she contradicts herself when she claims that she is "…deliberately southern Africa."[liv]

However, a few chapters later she writes about being at a reading and book signing, "Do you consider yourself African?" someone asked during the Q and A, as someone almost always does."[lv] Fuller navigates the question through three pages of thoughtful writing. She concedes that she has only had African passports until recently receiving her American passport where she knows she does not belong either. She questions herself, "Did I consider myself African? The truth is, I longed to say, "Yes," as I had years ago. Even, defensively, "Of course, yes." I longed to have an identity so solid, so obvious, and so unassailable…"[lvi]

Fuller admits that she feels more at home in southern Africa than anywhere else on earth but she finally responds with, "Not anymore, not especially." "I knew I would never apply the label of African to myself again…"[lvii]

Her final word on the subject is during a visit to Africa where she acknowledges, "It was deeply comforting and familiar, and yet I knew I no longer really belonged here. At least, I had lost my unequivocal sense of belonging."[lviii]

Perhaps it is the guilt and disdain that she explores in stark contrast to her mother's perspective that forces her to acknowledge that Africa cannot belong to white people and white people cannot belong to Africa.

An excellent writer, Fuller carefully constructs her prose to 'show' the injustices and oppression regarding land rather than simply 'tell' her readers. While describing a drive through Zambia Fuller contrasts the difference between white and black areas:

> On the stretches of road that pass through European settlements, there are flowering shrubs and trees, clipped bougainvilleas or small frangipanis, jacarandas, and flame trees planted at picturesque intervals. The verges of the road have been mown to reveal neat, upright barbed wire fencing and fields of army straight tobacco, maize, cotton, or placidly grazing cattle shiny and plump with sweet pasture. Occasionally, gleaming out of a soothing oasis of trees and a sweep of lawn, I can see the white owned farmhouses, all of them behind razor gleaming fences, bristling with their defense.[lix]

Her choice of words, "settlements", "clipped", "picturesque", "neat", "gleaming", "sweet", "soothing" focus on two aspects: white settlers have taken the most fertile lands and have exploited that land for their own gain and wealth advancement. Her language and prose switches to expose the alternative:

> In contrast, the Tribal Trust Lands are blown clear of vegetation. Spiky euphorbia hedges which bleed poisonous, burning milk where their stems are broken poke greenly out of the otherwise barren, worn soil. The schools wear the blank faces of war buildings, their windows blown blind by rocks or guns or mortars. Their plaster is an acne of bullet marks. The huts and small houses crouch open and vulnerable; their doors are flimsy pieces of plyboard or sacks hanging and lank. Children and chicken and dogs scratch in the red, raw soil and stare at us as we drive through their open, eroding lives. Thin cattle sway in long lines coming to and from distant water and even more distant grazing.[lx]

While she does not explicitly state it, her disdain for these disparities is evident through her thoughtful prose and word choices. However, she is also fair enough to explore and check her privilege and exposes herself through her childhood and in to her adulthood. This expose colonial writing is fraught with challenges.

Marum explores these challenges, "Even now, when the subject of African literature has been well researched and documented on an international scale, there is little agreement as to the definition of 'Africa' in the theory and criticism the subject has produced. Similarly, 'colonialism' continues to mean different things to different people (among them, African writers)."[lxi] As Fuller navigates her childhood and coming of age, she exposes the truth of not fully understanding colonialism or the question of who 'owns' Africa. She recounts the last item on a list of My Duties as a Citizen of Rhodesia, "'It is my duty to be just, tolerant and courteous to my fellow countrymen…' I couldn't feel it then, at all. Our hypocrisy, the hypocrisy of white Rhodesians, was so official, co complete, so pathological we couldn't feel it ourselves. We say one thing; we could believe and feel and do another."[lxii]

Fuller focuses on the hypocrisy of what constitutes a 'fellow countrymen'. At the time of this publication it was intended to mean only white Rhodesians and the ownership of the land is insinuated through the word 'countrymen'. As an adult, Fuller now has the development that allows her to see this as 'pathological' and her definition of 'colonialism' is adjusted.

She expands on this developing understanding as she ponders:

> I thought then of the collective memory of the land, of the ways in which people and animals and geological events cannot help but leave scars, sculpt wonders, and weave stories onto its cover. And I thought too of how I had inherited my understanding of land both from southern Africans for whom there was no separation of soil and soul and from European settlers for whom land was a commodity, even if it was a commodity with which they had fallen so violently in love that they had forgotten both the ungodliness of the original acquisition of godliness of soil. We cared for land, but too often it wasn't our land to care for.[lxiii]

In a world of oppression and injustices constructed by white men, Fuller has managed to throw up multiple queries about her own understanding of emotional land domain while accepting and explaining the positionality of others. Through this exploration she creates a feminine "self" of her understanding of African land as it relates to oppression and colonization. This is achieved not only through her gaining a greater understanding of colonial history of Africa but she also must explore how her feminist inferiority has aided in her acceptance of colonist views. Only once she explores this is she able to develop her own opinions and move towards a more progressive and equitable view on Africa.

Feminine Inferiority

In Lucienne Boyce's novel, *To the Fair Land,* the character of Ben Dearlove, attempting to discover the author of a book, asserts that the author cannot be a woman because, "No woman ever launched a volume on the world without apologizing for it first." While that may since have changed there remains a sense of inferiority that female writers have foisted upon them by patriarchy or impose upon themselves. In Fuller's case, this is further complicated by being a white woman writing about her own life in Africa. Jane Bennet and Michelle Friedman refer to this as a "defensiveness" when they ask the question of why white women respond so quickly and so fervently about their lack of racism when faced with black women's challenges. They explain, "Our speculations about 'white women's defensiveness' may carry no validity at all, but if they do, it will be because of the ways in which each of us has been connected both to 'whiteness' and to 'defensiveness'."[lxiv]

The 'whiteness' in African memoir writing has been addressed. Feminist inferiority offers an additional complication in this genre of writing by often offering apologies and justifications. Fuller regularly broaches this topic in her memoirs.

Fuller begins *Scribbling the Cat* with an author's note, the entirety of which is an apology or justification. She begins by explaining that the account is one sided, "It is a story about the continuing relationship that grew between the man and me and it is a story about the land over which we journeyed. But it is only my story; a slither of a slither of a much greater story."[lxv] She goes on to apologize for hiding the true identity of the soldier she refers to simply as "K". (One might understand this apology as she admits to having an extra marital affair with him.) She apologizes for telling the story at all, "But, as a fallen soldier might, I have broken the old covenant, "What goes on tour, stays on tour."[lxvi]

She finishes by justifying her choice to write the book at all, "Because when we are all dust and teeth and kicked up bits of skin, when we're dancing with our skeletons, our words might be all that is left."[lxvii]

Avid readers of memoirs would agree that seldom do men make such apologies or justification for their writing, regardless of salacious content. This trend is not specific to writers. Schumann and Ross offer, "According to various academic and popular writers, women apologize readily for their transgressions, whereas men do not. Some commentators suggest that women are too apologetic, but most presume that men are insufficiently contrite. These commentators offer a set of related explanations for the gender differences, the basic tenet being that men associate apologies with weakness."[lxviii]

While this may be true, why are women so quick to apologize or justify their self-perceived inferiority if they too may be perceived as weak? In Fuller's case she often feels inferior as a white person in Africa and also as a woman in the world where allies are hard to come by. West explains how white women might ally with black men, "(There is) a political identification between black men and white women, both of whom share an ambivalence towards white men, and whose political agendas might complement each other's in countering white masculine control."[lxix]

Fuller demonstrates this when she details her last encounter with the black cook before she gets married. He has been her best friend, saved her from punishment for transgressions from her father and helped her solve many personal crises. She tells Adamson that she will place his gift of a bowl somewhere she can see it every day in order to remember him. "Ah, you don't have to remember me," Adamson said. "You must forget all of this. You must go forward."[lxx]

He recognizes that she now 'belongs' to a white man and therefore, they can no longer be friends as they are no longer equals.

Every culture, because of its own traditional constructs has to find methods of addressing the problems related to gender. Fuller's writing offers numerous queries related to oppression, colonization and gender. Jain offers:

> Many women writer's, for fear of being ghettoized and of being marginalized, are tentative about their feminist affiliations even today. For the feminist is not juxtaposed with the masculine, but with the universal and as such is treated as a subculture. It is pushed into the language and category of the victim and the oppressed; patriarchal viewpoints are not very generous in conceding it space or equality.[lxxi]

The issue of space is addressed when Fuller is navigating the breakup of her marriage and subsequent divorce. She ponders over self-help books which often demonstrate women collapsing with grief in the kitchen or on the bathroom floor. It is this attempt at healing that allows her to gain a greater understanding of the 'space' that women are often relegated to, "Why always these two rooms? Couldn't anyone fall over anywhere more comfortable? It was only later I discovered that women dissolve in these two places for a good reason: the kitchen because it is the place from which we have nurtured our soon-to-be devastated families, and the bathroom because it is private."[lxxii]

Fuller is recognizing that women rarely have their own private places as men often do because their spaces are usually those which enforce their inferiority in terms of being assigned "womanly" roles.

As with the other pitfalls that Fuller navigates in her writing, her idea of being inferior is validated by her mother, "They think you're feeble without a man."[lxxiii] Just as she does with

racism that she witnesses at the hands of her parents, she must also challenge this notion of inferiority. Jain explains this process, "Women's writing is engaged in changing the terms of these definitions. With all its variety, timidity and marginality, it has been moving through self-expression and self-questioning toward self-assertion and redefinitions."[lxxiv]

Fuller is forced to consider this journey through redefining her place in the feminist world when she makes a statement at a speaking engagement. She insists that increasing women literary fluency in Africa would allow the women to read their HIV medication bottles, medication necessary after having been raped by HIV positive soldiers. She is approached after the presentation and is accused of being a "bad daughter of Africa". Her accuser is offended that she shared this information in front of his wife and in front of a mostly white American audience. Fuller ponders this accusation:

> The truth is, I wasn't only not a good daughter of Africa, I was not a good daughter of anywhere, nor was I a good wife or a good mother. I was a woman on the brink of a free fall, and it was hard to be a good, acceptable woman on the brink of a freefall, and it was hard to be a good, acceptable woman in any language or in any place when simultaneously contemplating becoming undone. For the first time, I was beginning to see that for a woman to speak her mind in any clear, unassailable, unapologetic way, she must first possess it.[lxxv]

Not only is she made to feel inferior for making a truthful statement but it permeates her very being and allows her to feel inferior in all aspects of her life.

It is only through this journey and understanding that she must throw off the acceptance of inferiority in order to find her voice. She finally does. The last lines of *Leaving Before the*

Rains are, "As if for once I wasn't my gender, or my powerlessness. As if for those hours, I was enough."[lxxvi]

Conclusion

Alexandra Fuller's memoirs offer multiple exploration avenues in African Studies: colonization, racism, whiteness, gender studies, land, and what it means to be 'African'.

Fuller's work brings to the forefront the numerous challenges faced by white women in Africa. While these challenges pale in comparison to black Africans of either gender, the issues she raises deserve consideration none the less.

A prolific writer, Fuller opens up, not only her own world as she exposes her flaws and her privileges, but she is also willing to expose the raw inherit nature of racism, discrimination and hatred in her family and her community. These acts perpetrated on black Africans have far flung consequences as we are currently witnessing in the United States.

Fuller might be considered an example of how one goes about dismantling systemic racism: thorough and thoughtful self-examination, exploring and understanding but always questioning historical practices, and ultimately being willing to challenge the status quo.

As Fuller has demonstrated through her five successful memoirs, this process is ongoing, answers vacillate and finality is hard to come by.

One day you're African, the next, you're not.

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