At Home in the Okavango: White Batswana Narratives of Emplacement and Belonging. By Catie Gressier. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015; 244 pages.

*At Home in the Okavango* tells the story of a small white minority in northern Botswana. Famed for its spectacular natural beauty, the Okavango Delta is a magnet for tourism, an industry which is dominated by native and expatriate whites. This study revolves around the desire for belonging among white nationals in a context in which sustained forms of white privilege contradict postcolonial nation-building. In the course of its journey the book reveals that the patriotism of white citizens is built on their postcolonial insecurity.

Students of white settler cultures in Africa have repeatedly shown that their historical implications in the violence of colonialism and racism has made their status as ‘white Africans’ politically and ontologically ambiguous. For instance, in his compelling study on white South Africans in the early 1980s, Vincent Crapanzano (1985) identified white subjectivities as mired in ‘waiting’ (the concept that gave the book its title). ‘Waiting’ was a future-oriented angst, nourished by a paradox: the domination over and simultaneous fear of the de-humanised black Other. The postcolonial transitions across the wider region gave rise to new questions about the resident white elites and the way in which these ‘orphans of empire’ (Pilossof 2012) negotiated their political disempowerment.

A British protectorate until 1966, Botswana’s colonial history was less virulent than that of its neighbours. However, Gressier’s discussion is rightly placed within a wider southern African nexus. Not only are the family histories of her interlocutors intertwined with the larger British Empire in Africa, their identities are entangled in postcolonial and, hence, transnational constructions of whiteness. The author argues that this social location accounts for an ‘ontological insecurity’ among her subjects who realise that their belonging is essentially ‘contingent on the goodwill of the majority’ (p. 212).

In exploring their stories and lifestyles Gressier asserts that her participants’ practices of belonging are responses to this inherently unstable condition. What she aptly calls ‘experiential autochthony’ emphasizes claims-making beyond politics. While her interlocutors keep a low profile politically their claims to the Okavango ‘home’ reverberate through emotional, sensory, and skills-based practices. Here tourism becomes central, both as the main source of income and a site for constructing white identities. These revolve in particular around a strong claim to the Okavango as a terrain of emotional attachment and object of so-called ‘bush knowledge’, keenly expressed through safari guiding and hunting. The author reveals the multi-faceted and ambiguous character of these practices in both subtle and illuminating ways: They are emphatic claims to the African home as much as expressive of a masculine ‘frontier identity’ which resonates with nostalgic ideals of white settler history. Her participants value ‘resourcefulness’, ‘anti-materialism’, ‘individualism’, freedom from the shackles of society, a hunting-derived knowledge of nature as well as ‘alcohol-fuelled lifestyles’ (p. 126-8). Engaging as expert guides in the Okavango is an embodied form of self-emplacement as well as a site of performing autochthony to (mostly wealthy white) tourists who seek a ‘neo-primitive’ (p. 89) experience in Africa.

The discussion reveals that white privilege is not simply sustained by economic advantage but also by other forms of capital and, above all, by citizenship. The author’s argument that white identities are nevertheless animated by a fundamental postcolonial insecurity is persuasive. However, the notion of insecurity itself and its conceptual and social underpinnings remain ethnographically underexplored. Is insecurity an explicit or a hidden social script? Is it an emotional state? How do individuals navigate it as part of their social relationships? As the book maintains, insecurity has deep roots in the colonial legacy of racial politics. The last chapter examines ‘race’ discourses more explicitly, and includes voices of black Batswana who otherwise figure marginally. These voices bring to the fore racialized tensions in the Okavango. Gressier’s white participants are largely evasive about their advantaged positions and actively distance themselves from the racism of other whites. While they employ an idealist discourse about race relations, their desire for ‘autochthony’ is nevertheless exposed as bounded by race: friendships and marriages between black and white remain rare. At the end of the book one is struck by the extent to which race discourses are haunted by the history of colonial whiteness.

While the book successfully avoids grouping individuals into the simplistic category of ‘whites’, it would have benefitted from a closer integration of its key informants into their wider social and biographical networks. This may have given the cultural meanings of ‘insecurity’ sharper ethnographic contours, and offered further insights into the relationship between personal lives and the legacies of empire. These comments aside, *Home in the Okavango* provides an insightful account of white minority identities in contexts in which nature tourism has become a site of lingering postcolonial inequalities.

References:

Crapanzano, Vincent (1985) Waiting: The Whites of South Africa. London: Granada.

Pilossof, Rory (2012) The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Farmers’ Voices from Zimbabwe. Harare: Weaver Press.