In late September 2006 prison warders escorted Thomas Cholmondeley (pronounced “CHUM-lee”) into a wood-paneled courtroom in Nairobi, where he pled “not guilty” to a charge of murder. He wore a cream-colored linen suit, blue paisley tie, and handcuffs, and his 6-foot-6-inch frame and pale complexion cut quite a figure in this courtroom largely packed with black barristers, spectators, and journalists. Cholmondeley, heir to the colonial-era Delamere family fortune and a vast swathe of coveted land in Kenya’s Rift Valley, had been charged for the second time in about a year with shooting an indigent Kenyan dead on his own ranch.

In the first case, in April 2005, Cholmondeley had reportedly believed that he was being robbed, and prosecutors had dropped the charges, accepting his claim of self-defense. But the deceased, a Maasai man, had been an undercover ranger with the Kenya Wildlife Service who was investigating illegal game cropping on Cholmondeley’s property. The Kenyan public was appalled at the idea of an Eton-educated scion of a wealthy colonial family killing a Maasai father of eight. When Cholmondeley was released, flashing a double thumbs-up to cameras, the outcry was so intense that the then president of Kenya, Mwai Kibaki, reportedly ordered the chief prosecutor sacked.

In 2006, after Cholmondeley pulled the trigger again and was charged with murdering a man poaching wildlife on the Delamere family ranch, the Kenyan media went into overdrive. He insisted upon his innocence, but a headline of Kenya’s Daily Nation deplored, “Oh No,
Not Again!” and editorials approvingly invoked Zimbabwe’s violent campaign of redistributing white-owned farms. Kenyan bloggers suggested that Cholmondeley killed indigent blacks for sport, and Kenyans and British journalists alike reminded readers of the early twentieth-century “Happy Valley” era of Cholmondeley’s great-grandfather, the third Baron Delamere, when prominent colonials in Kenya notoriously indulged in epic gin-soaked parties, wife-swapping, and lavish lifestyles. As Cholmondeley’s trial dragged on for nearly four years, public reactions sounded a wake-up call for some whites with family roots in Kenya. They realized that he was not only a symbol of a bygone era but also, fairly or not, a stand-in for the rest of them. And they could not help but detect the subtext to the media outcry: colonials, go home.

But for many aging former settlers and their descendants, Kenya is home. True, the Europeans who came to East Africa a century ago didn’t always imagine it that way. However enticing they found the golden savannah and teeming wildlife, however embroiled they were in carving a life out of the bush, Kenya, or as it was pronounced in those days, “Keenya,” was a site where Britain would inscribe and magnify itself as an emissary of civilization and enforcer of empire. The microcosmic aspects of European life replicated there—country clubs, polo matches, tea parties, churches, medical clinics, and schools—remind us that Britain, for most, was the touchstone of their identity. Though some settlers had other European roots, English culture suffused their institutions, as did racial exclusion. Settler children sometimes had African playmates when they were little, but they were eventually segregated with other Europeans in elite schools, or sent abroad to boarding school where they could learn to enact the “prestige” that would uphold whites’ civilized image. Although here and there one could find a settler with an unusual affinity for “the natives,” most considered Africans to be intellectually inferior, vaguely polluting, and potentially dangerous. No wonder that even those settlers who would leave their bones in Kenya still called England “home,” many referring to themselves as “British Kenyans” or simply “British.”

Many of today’s settler descendants have, however, adopted a Kenyan nationalist discourse of shared future aspirations. After political power shifted into African hands in 1963, settler families went from brazen race-based entitlements to sharing power and resources with a growing elite and middle class of African and Asian descent. The transition was so destabilizing that tens of thousands of whites emigrated for fear that their fortunes would fall. Of whites who are citizens of Kenya today, those
with family roots in the colonial era number only between about three and five thousand. Eager to differentiate themselves from the image of the vilified colonialist, many I spoke to insist that their families had remained in Kenya because of the emotional impossibility of leaving it. Their very being, they say, is connected to the landscape and people of Kenya, and they consider themselves dedicated to the nation’s future. They wish that ethnic divisions and ethnoterritorialism—called “tribalism,” in Kenya—would give way fully to liberal nationalism; if that happened, the nation would be at peace, they feel, and perhaps they would stop being reminded that, in the eyes of some, they are always interlopers.

Broadcasting their sincerity, energetic young and middle-aged settler descendants tell me they are devoted to helping “develop” Kenya, working with Kenyans of all backgrounds to move its economy forward. They have valuable know-how, they say, because they understand the place and its people and bring modern managerial expertise to bear on their projects, whether fund-raising, conserving wildlife, managing a hotel, or running a library well. They passionately describe their families’ charitable efforts, conservation forums, and businesses, which (sometimes) conspicuously offer employment to some of Kenya’s neediest groups—beadwork for single Maasai mothers, for instance, or training for indigent youth in the basics of restaurant service. They call their domestic staff “part of the family,” and consider these relationships evidence that their lives are braided together with those of black Kenyans. (I use the phrase “black Kenyans” with hesitation, realizing it may rub some Kenyans the wrong way, since they are accustomed to being called simply “Kenyan”; however, racial categories and perceptions are important to my analysis and I often need to clarify which group I am discussing.) And many younger whites insist that, unlike many of their settler forebears, they speak Kiswahili, Kenya’s national lingua franca, with pride and affection, using it as their “language of connection” with their fellow citizens. In light of all this, when the incumbent president Mwai Kibaki rigged the December 2007 elections in his favor and the country exploded into violence, white Kenyans wrung their hands. Their promising nation seemed on the brink of disaster, and their lives had been destabilized, they told me. Most of them felt “Kenyan, through and through.”

The public stance of many white Kenyans has shifted from identification with Europe to proud Kenyan nationality. But beneath the surface, this change has been fraught with ambiguity. For one thing, history has left most of them with trappings of privilege, and for all of their efforts
to support those in poorer communities, they prize their lifestyle of manicured gardens and cheap domestic help. “I could never live this way in Europe,” says a middle-aged Nairobi businessman I call Simon, with a hint of sheepishness in his glance. Like many whites in the Nairobi suburbs, Simon lives in a beautifully kept, airy home behind concrete fences, with Maasai or Samburu security guards at the gates. Some settler descendants in the Rift Valley occupy sweeping ranches replete with zebra, elephants, and wealthy Western tourists; meanwhile, retirees on the coast swim and fish in turquoise, palm-fringed waters. Those with the energy and means enjoy rally driving, polo, and windsurfing. One young man said he adored “driving like a maniac across the country” and the feeling of commanding wide open spaces. “You couldn’t get away with that anywhere else,” he told me. “It’s exhilarating.” Although there is some wealth disparity among settler descendants, their vision of an acceptable standard of living still far outstrips the possibilities for millions of black Kenyans. All of those I met, for instance, have at least the means to employ domestic staff to clean their homes, launder their clothes, or prepare their food. Some may say they love Kenya selflessly, but they also know it is possible for them to live “like kings” there, as one put it.

And they realize their privilege has not gone unnoticed. History has marked them for reminders that their claims to belong are tenuous, and they could lose much should grievances be aimed in their direction. To be sure, they haven’t seen the nadir of loss faced by white Zimbabweans forcibly removed from their farms over the past decade and a half in Robert Mugabe’s violent campaign of land reform. Nor have they faced an economic restructuring like that in South Africa, where racist apartheid-era protections for white employment were replaced by an affirmative action program to empower blacks. Still, the Cholmondeley trial and other recent events have been powerful reminders that, in the eyes of some, white Kenyans risk looking like the archaic residue of a dead world order. They are legal citizens, in other words, but without the more elusive imprimatur of full cultural citizenship.6

And so, for instance, when Jason Dunford, great-grandson of the renowned Lithuanian Jewish settler and hotelier Abraham Block, proudly carried Kenya’s flag into the Olympic Stadium in 2012 as a member of Kenya’s swim team, social media lit up as some Kenyans watching the ceremonies on television expressed shock and dismay. “WTF??” one participant in an on-line sports forum typed. “The Kenyan flag was just carried in by a white swimmer?!” An onlooker inter-
viewed in Nairobi, Sebastian Murunga, summed up a common objection: “He does not really represent Kenyans. Kenyans are black while he is white.” While other black Kenyans defended Dunford, deeming him a worthy choice as a committed athlete and a Kenyan citizen, it was clear that for some, his race made him unsuitable as a representative of the nation.7

Such issues of belonging have arisen again and again for settler descendants in recent years.8 Mary, whose British family were influential coffee farmers before they sold their land at Independence, told me of the bad feeling in the air when the Cholmondeley scandal was at its height. A week or so after the second shooting, Mary was shopping in Nairobi when she passed a young man hawking magazines on the street. She called him out, she says, for selling back issues of *National Geographic*. “That’s supposed to be subscription only,” she said indignantly. (Like many settler descendants, Mary sees the rule of law as an important contribution from the colonial era, and takes offense at both political corruption and rule-breakers.) As she recalls it, the young man retorted, “You keep your nose out of this. You know, it’s like Zimbabwe; you’re just a visitor here. We can get rid of you.” Her lined face looked exasperated as she remembered her reaction. In her own mind, her life trajectory gave her just as much belonging as his lineage. She had been born in Kenya, and was clearly his generational senior. “I thought to myself, Oooohhh! Well, I’ve lived here longer than you!”

Nationalist gestures, resented privileges, and acute defensiveness—all are components of what it can mean to be a white Kenyan today. In this ethnography, I explore the subjective lives and stances of white Kenyans descended from colonial families as they navigate their unsettled sense of identity in the nation today. I don’t aspire to offer a comprehensive account of this diverse group; rather, my material emerges from participant observation among roughly 150–200 individuals of middle- to upper-class status, about fifty of whom I interviewed. Seeing themselves as seen by their critics has been unsettling for them, and some of my respondents seem to ricochet between an embryonic sense of embarrassment and a frustrated, defensive reaction. They continue to enjoy enormous privileges, but their self-consciousness and uncertainties suggest that in some respects, they are of two minds about their entitlement to belong.

A phrase that captures the unease of some white Kenyans is “moral double consciousness.”9 When W. E. B. Du Bois first defined double consciousness to characterize African American subjectivity in the early twentieth century, he described it as “this sense of always looking at
one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” It would be absurd, of course, to draw a direct comparison between Du Bois’s subjects and my own; double consciousness among African Americans emerged from their legal, economic, and cultural immiseration, whereas settler descendants in Kenya are still reaping the benefits of white privilege. But scholars such as Linda Martín Alcoff (1998, 2015) in her discussion of white American crises of identity have extended the concept to encompass situations where a privileged social group reckons internally with the judgments of its critics, destabilizing it, even if not critically injuring its members. As Marc Black (2007) notes, white double consciousness may have promise, for unlike the often degrading double consciousness of people of color and colonized populations, it can open the possibility of much-needed self-critique as whites encounter epistemic friction. That said, the first glimmers of double consciousness in elites seem just as likely to result in a defensive reaction that attempts to shut down its associated discomforts and revert to an emotionally safer pole of consciousness—namely, the evaluative stance they started with. (Du Bois describes a similarly protective maneuver of denial and repression in his characterization of the fragile white American ego when challenged by even the slightest recognition of black humanity; see Watson 2013: 31–35.) Among former settlers and their descendants, their nascent double consciousness stems from an unsettling of the colonialist notion that whites are paragons of humanity, and a realization that to some, they and their history represent injustice. True, unlike any subaltern group, most white Kenyans have the luxury of moving toward or away from this discomfiting awareness of their critics. But when they experience the shock of seeing their community being seen, they see themselves “othered,” that is, refracted through essentialist stereotypes that portray them as part of an undesirable, alien social mass. This, indeed, speaks to another prong of the “two-ness” Du Bois described, in which African Americans struggled to reconcile “two warring ideals,” namely, their identity as American and their identity as “Negros.” Though white Kenyans are hardly disenfranchised, they do face an awkward tension between their ethnoracial and national identities in a nation where, in public discourse, entitlement to belong and to own land increasingly hinges on having deep ancestral roots in local soil.

For many of my white Kenyan respondents, then, this embryonic double consciousness is a morally confusing experience. Most of them had been raised to think that their settler family members were good,
giving people who lived bravely and sacrificed much, and that the colonial endeavor had been engineered to uplift Africa. Now they are informed that their forebears were oppressors, and that perhaps in some fashion they are too—and while they don’t have to internalize this view of themselves, it has made inroads on their awareness. The resultant embarrassment, frustration, and (sometimes) anger have meant they have sometimes had to struggle to compose themselves. Some have had enough close brushes with critics to taste the edges of humiliation about the settler past and their privileges in the present. But shame is not a comfortable dwelling place, and many settle into a defensive stance, reclaiming their comfort zone and mystifying their structural advantages. Some dance around the tension by focusing on their felt bonds to Kenya and black Kenyans and insisting that their personal intentions and feelings take priority over history and structural inequalities. A few, though, a small minority, have come to soul-search, questioning their received truths and seeking new, more empathic ways of understanding the perceptions of their black fellow citizens.

Seeing inner conflict and self-doubt in colonial whites is not an altogether new project. We find inklings of the same idea, for instance, in the work of Albert Memmi, an Algerian Jew who famously excoriated colonial psychology in the mid 1950s. To Memmi, colonialists knew “deep down” that they were “usurpers,” but strenuously defended their own legitimacy. The racist devaluation of the colonized was crucial to this dynamic, including an angry hostility toward Africans, whose oppression “made [of the colonialist] a tyrant.” In this model of white supremacy, colonials made draconian claims about racial superiority, not so much out of conviction as to defend against the lurking suspicion that they were unfit to rule. Other scholars, too, such as John Lonsdale, Bruce Berman, Frederick Cooper, and Ann Stoler have plumbed uncertainties among the agents of empire, arguing that although colonial states posed as reasoned and rational, administrators wrestled with their own confusions and with the unruly behavior and feelings of the very settlers who were expected to represent European superiority. Self-deception, mixed feelings, and contradictory practices all led to the nagging suggestion that European “common sense” was based on fragile conceits. The historian Brett Shadle pinpoints a kind of double consciousness among settlers in Kenya in the early twentieth century. In his keen depictions of their anxieties and sometimes vicious racism, we see, not only fear of black contamination and insubordination, but also a fear of being found out. White settlers in Kenya, he argues,
“constantly observed themselves through . . . the eyes of the dominated. Their fear was that Africans would measure the white soul with the tape—a tape the settlers had made—and find that soul lacking.”

If white anxiety in the colonies is an old story, what has changed? One striking shift is that today, instead of asserting white supremacy, many settler descendants I spoke to are striving to fit into a liberated Kenya as morally accepted nationals. This isn’t to say that chauvinism among them is dead, but when it’s alive, it must lead a more clandestine existence. One could argue, in fact, that there has been a related sea-change for whites globally, who continue to enjoy untold advantages, but some of whom find that the confidence of white supremacy has been punctured by global liberation and civil-rights movements. And so Alcoff insists on the importance of exploring the “ongoing but rarely named struggle” of anxious double consciousness among some American whites who wish to move beyond the notion of a white master race but find themselves grasping for self-esteem. Former settlers and their descendants in Kenya, while distinctive to their history and place, are part of this broader historical fabric.

That said, in Kenya, white vulnerabilities are perhaps more keen. Though white Kenyans enjoy friendly relationships with plenty of black Kenyans, whites have lost political sovereignty, epistemological credibility, and control over the plotline of Kenya and the narration of its colonial past. And while most whites in the West enjoy the luxury of racial invisibility as part of their “whiteness,” Kenyan whites are conspicuously marked as an ethnoracial minority and, depending on the context and the historical moment, as outsiders. Although Kenya entered Independence with a public ideology of civic nationalism, in which citizenship and rights would be conferred across racial and ethnic groups in egalitarian fashion, the stark truth is that the idea of (essentialized) ethnic differences has stalked the political landscape. The colonial administration scored sharp, institutionalized lines between “tribes,” despite histories of intermarriage and (often) different ways of dividing the social pie (subsistence, lineage, clan, or trading partnerships, for instance), and used tribal designators to determine different potentials for social mobility. Today Kenya has as many as seventy or more ethnotribal groups, depending on how they are counted; the largest of these are Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kamba, and Kalenjin—but there are subgroups of each, with their own internal divisions. With the chronic inequality and land hunger of the post-Independence era, politicians often frame conflicts
over resources in ethnic and ethnonationalist terms. In 2008, for instance, with encouragement from political players, Kikuyu and Kalenjin clashed over which group had deeper roots in and hence more entitlement to Rift Valley lands; meanwhile, thousands of South Asians fled Kisumu to escape violent attacks on their places of business, and some coastal Mijikenda floated the idea of chasing Kikuyu and Luo out of Coast Province in a reprisal of earlier clashes in 1997. Whites intersect in a strange way with these national subdivisions; typically, they aren’t rhetorically discussed as a local “tribe” (though, as I discuss later, occasionally they wish they could claim a tribal identity so as to better fit in); rather, they are treated alternately as emissaries of Westernization or as interlopers—in either case, representing the West rather than another local group. Unfortunately for them, as in many sub-Saharan African nations, Kenyan ethnonationalism turns again and again to autochthony as grounds for belonging and landownership—and here is a criterion whites just cannot meet. Although the Kenyan state hasn’t endorsed the forcible removal of white landowners, stakeholders such as Maasai in Laikipia have publicly challenged whites’ rights to hold land, while the Cholmondeley scandals that began in 2005 prompted a national discourse that sometimes asserted that settler descendants should go back to Europe. Whites can sputter, then, about civic nationalism and wanting to be part of a “multicultural Kenya,” but they also know that some black Kenyans reject them as cultural citizens, on mingled grounds of race, class, and history. If, in the colonial era, beleaguered colonized subjects struggled for credibility among white elites, perpetually seen, in Homi Bhabha’s famed phrase, as “not quite/not white,” now settler descendants are the ones who risk disdain. Their imperative is no longer to rule, but to belong.

Evidently, my respondents live in complex conditions of ethnic nationalism and amidst national memories that threaten to condemn them. And their moral double consciousness, when they experience it, leaves them with a jumble of questions. How should they now understand the colonial past, and the beloved friends and family members implicated in it? How should they relate to black Kenyans in the present? Can they fit into Kenya as accepted cultural citizens? How “African” are they—and how African do they want to be? How can the love they say they feel for Kenya—its landscapes, its people, its languages—be so discounted? Is it possible that, as one put it to me, they’re “not right the way they are”?
STRUCTURAL OBLIVION AND ETHNOGRAPHY OF ELITES

If colonial racism was, as Memmi argues, a response to colonials’ anxieties that they were not fit to rule, settler descendants’ moral nationalism emerges from a somewhat different insecurity, one concerned about holding onto their residue of privilege while currying a modicum of public acceptance. In some of these chapters, then, I describe settler descendants’ anxious responses to their critics, and their protestations that they are in fact good nationals who belong in Kenya. They talk of their stewardship of land and wildlife, which they feel displays responsible regard for Kenya’s resources; their charitable care for needy Kenyans; the kin-like affection they have for domestic servants, which they hope will be irreproachable; and the connection they say they feel to other Kenyans through effortful cultivation of Kiswahili, the national language. The worst of the colonial past is sometimes renounced, sometimes held at arms’ length as a product of another time and another attitude, or sometimes denied altogether. These announcements of loyalty and protestations often seem heartfelt, but they are also adaptive efforts to belong in the face of having the wrong sort of history and the wrong lines of descent.

Locating their comfort zone—that mode of moral consciousness in which white Kenyans use their own yardstick—requires particular dismissals and blind spots, and particular ideas of the good. To capture these, I have coined the phrase “structural oblivion.” Structural oblivion is a state—a subject position—of ignorance, denial, and ideology that emerges from an elite social structural position, and it is constituted by the refusal of certain implications of social structure. In particular, structural oblivion includes refusing the experience of and/or reasons for the resentment of less privileged groups, and overlooking the ways in which one’s ideologies, practices and very habits of mind continue to uphold one’s privilege. Structural oblivion is constructed at a variety of scales, ranging from the institutional structuring of information flow (as in, for example, a colonial administration’s whitewashing of its own human rights violations); to collective myths, ideologies, and discourses that skew interpretations of the social world; to psychological mechanisms that surely sometimes include denial and the repression of unpleasantries. Structural oblivion thus may require certain kinds of “work,” but this does not mean any given individual’s condition of oblivion can readily be called “deliberate.” Through structural oblivion, the line between deliberate and unwitting oppression blurs, as
elite actors can channel a colonial residue without being fully aware of how it is problematic. If double consciousness has precipitated a minor crisis of identity for some settler descendants, structural oblivion is what allows them to shake it off.

The concept of structural oblivion articulates with certain recurrent themes in whiteness studies—including Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) and Shannon Sullivan’s (2006) work on white privilege as habitual and unconscious, and Charles Mill’s (1997: 18) suggestion that a tacit “racial contract” produces for whites an “epistemology of ignorance . . . producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.” Melissa Steyn dubs this dynamic “The Ignorance Contract,” and contends that white South African ignorance of the depredations of apartheid “must be studied as a social accomplishment, not just as a failure of individual knowledge acquisition.” I locate systematic ignorance as well among some of my respondents, but with the phrase “structural oblivion” I highlight the architecture of elite ignorance, self-deception, and ideology, a crucial component. Most people of European descent take for granted a very particular, hegemonic model of the way the world is or should be, a model so all-permeating that it includes the economy, the political and material world, and the person. For instance, like most people of European descent, my white Kenyan respondents presume a liberal, individualistic model of personhood in which persons are (ideally) self-determined and rational; a largely capitalist model of economy in which private property structures access to resources and land should be made “productive”; and a model of civic nationhood, in which ethnicity and descent should be irrelevant to rights. In the moral domain, they presume that a person’s intentions are or should be crucial to the adjudication of their morality, while individual deeds should be central to one’s entitlements. Such assumptions cluster together again and again, and their logic privileges European expertise by envisioning an ideal, “developed” Kenya that looks more like the West, eschewing customary African modes of organization and power (collective land rights, expansive kinship structures and attendant structures of reciprocity and obligation, ritual healing, or respect for occult agency, to name but a few) and actively marginalizing the colonial past, deeming it irrelevant; after all, if the individual is sovereign, the son does not inherit the sins of the father, and belonging is (or should be) established at the individual level rather than by descent. To be sure, it is possible that some of these liberal individualistic ideologies—held by some black Kenyans as well as
Unsettled whites—might hold the seeds of a less ethnically turbulent Kenya. But white Kenyans are not in an especially good position to proselytize, and they also have difficulty seeing the world through alternative lenses to grasp why (for instance) many Kenyans’ feelings about collective redress are so acute. Theirs is a model of a good nation, then, in which colonialism would be neatly forgotten—yet they live in a moment when popular discourse and politics in Kenya are suffused by invocations of grievances past.

Structural oblivion, of course, is hardly exclusive to white Kenyans; many of us live in contexts of profound inequality in which elites have limited understanding of the sources and human implications of their own privilege. If “hegemony” is a system in which all social strata are implicated in the process of oppression,28 then not only do the subaltern sometimes unwittingly collude in their own oppression, but, too, the powerful oppress not only deliberately but sometimes unwittingly—even if their conscious, explicit ideologies (e.g., of multicultural enthusiasm, or love for Kenya) might suggest otherwise. This is not to suggest that oppression is never witting, or that elites should be let off the hook, or that elite ignorance and denial are completely innocent. Being “out of it” requires a certain self-interested kind of work—refusals and erasures at many levels, including, no doubt, at the level of the psyche, where denial can sweep undesired fears and discomforts out of sight. But the engines of elites’ self-deception are also bigger than they are; they have often been supported by state institutions, widespread social narratives, and collective amnesia. (To offer but one example: when one elderly former settler living on the coast griped about coastal Mijikenda threatening violence against elite landowners in 2008, I tried to contextualize events by reminding her that for several decades Mijikenda, like so many other “natives,” had been excluded from landownership by the colonial government.29 It turned out not to be a reminder after all. “Really?” she replied incredulously. “I find that very hard to believe.”) The phrase structural oblivion clarifies that elites don’t always grasp what they have brushed aside or the depth of what they don’t know, and they tend not to recognize the machinery of power that has structured their selective lens on the world. It clarifies one way in which elites can be implicated in hegemony.

Structural oblivion runs deep through the material that follows. Many white Kenyans I spoke to about Laikipia landholdings, for instance, know little about precolonial modes of land tenure, the ecological facts of precolonial pastoralism, or the details of colonial-era land appropria-
tion, blind spots that help them feel comfortable with whites’ landownership (chapter 2). In their relationships with domestic staff, which they describe as kin-like and affectionate, they maintain a structure of paternalism with colonial echoes (chapter 4). Even in young white Kenyans’ embrace of Kiswahili as a “beautiful” language, they sustain an unconscious linguistic hierarchy that marks English as more prestigious (chapter 5). And at the same time younger settler descendants frame themselves as culturally tolerant and cosmopolitan, their enduring resistance to other modes of personhood—acceptance of the occult, for instance (chapter 6), or the mingling of marriage with economic need (chapter 4)—places limits on how much they are willing to take on cultural traits that colonials marked as “African.” While there are exceptions—a young activist who strives to preserve indigenous ethnobotanical medicine, for example, or another who undertakes anthropological studies at university—many former settlers and their descendants share a developmentalist mentality founded on a culturally bounded vision of what constitutes a good society with many Westerners, while largely unaware of the merits of other possible social worlds that by now have been marginalized by colonialism, neoliberalism, and global capitalism. Among many I spoke to, then, their self-presentation broadcasts their nationalism and care for their fellow citizens, yet a residue of colonial hegemony and a dose of ethnocentrism still shape their opinions. Structural oblivion helps to explain why these elites are in disfavor to begin with, and also explains why it’s so hard for them to see their way out.

And yet structural oblivion on its own does not account for all the aspects of white Kenyan subjectivity I explore. The less reassuring pole of their double consciousness is home to that critical voice that prods them, reminding them of the pain and depredations imposed by the colonial order, and suggesting that they need to reckon with various African vantage points in new ways. While some settlers and settler descendants have heard this critical voice intermittently over the years, it was especially loud at the historical moment in which I conducted my work. I began to focus on white Kenyans around the time of the publication of two widely publicized volumes criticizing the British administration’s moral conduct during the 1950s anti-colonial “Mau Mau” revolt, a moment that put white Kenyans in an uncomfortable spotlight. I was there during the incarceration and trial of Tom Cholmondeley, during which some whites felt conspicuously re-racialized. Many of my interviews were conducted just after the post-election violence of 2007–8, when Kenya exploded into politically sponsored ethnorough vicinity
conflict, and whites wondered if they might be targeted next as allochthons, or interlopers. The ethnic violence of 2008 sharpened whites’ alarm at the prospect of being treated as outsiders, and (ironically) highlighted the fact that precisely because they disapprove of Kenyan tribalism, they are misaligned with the many Kenyan citizens who believe in collective historical redress. A decade or two before, then, whites arguably had felt more comfortably situated in the country. But the events of the 2000s shook the structural oblivion of some, and I was able to capture some of their ambivalence and confusion. Although almost none of my respondents were able to see past hegemonic Western ideas of progress and development, and very few put their noses deep into history books about colonial oppression, some had expanded their sense of possible moral truths compared to those of earlier generations. While there may have been a strategic element to these preliminary concessions to African points of view, the struggle to reconcile the idea of themselves (and their colonialisator forebears) as good people with black Kenyan grievances marks a new and sometimes uncomfortable way of being white in Africa today. That struggle is central to this book.

Ethnographies of elite groups are somewhat unusual; most cultural anthropologists prefer to explore the experiences of people who don’t have much of a voice (as I did in my first book, about coastal Giriama people). As Joel Robbins (2013) has noted, recent decades have seen the anthropological lens zero in on those he calls “suffering subjects”; groups subject to oppression, exploitation, and discrimination. What then justifies putting ethnographic energy toward studying a privileged group? One reply can be found by harkening back to the anthropologist Laura Nader’s 1972 essay “Up the Anthropologist,” in which she challenged anthropologists to swivel their lens and “study up.” Nader argues that although power is lodged in the political and economic realm, we can’t fully understand it unless we understand how the elite make their privilege feel credible to themselves. She also urged anthropologists to complement these efforts by “studying down” in order to understand all the strata in the social field. There I have failed her—and indeed I have failed laterally as well, since Kenya’s elite stratum now includes wealthy African and Asian Kenyans. While I include a limited number of African Kenyan voices in these chapters, furnishing a richly class-conscious understanding of diverse black Kenyans’ interactions with and opinions of whites would have meant writing another book altogether. But though my focus may be limited, I take up part of Nader’s challenge, and
question the presupposition that my respondents are easy to understand from afar, or simply abhorrent and thus not worth studying. Such characterizations flatten them out, and fail to understand that they act and justify their position in the world through complex, internally fraught frameworks of meaning, rather than, say, sheer malevolence or simple greed. Other ethnographers have come to similar realizations in communities that outsiders are tempted to pigeonhole as “the repugnant other,” to invoke Susan Harding’s phrase in her exploration of American Christian fundamentalists.31 Even Kathleen Blee, in her study of women in the Ku Klux Klan, ultimately concluded that understanding them meant realizing that their pathological racism started at the community level rather than in the psychology of already-twisted individuals.32 Such work reminds us again and again that tidy villains make for good stories but inadequate scholarship. Perhaps some simplified portrayals of elites stem from anxiety; if one concedes the moral complexity of the persons involved, including ways in which they may believe themselves to be doing the right thing, one risks being misunderstood as endorsing the system they subscribed to. But as the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo reminds us about the ethical limits of cultural relativism, “To understand is not to forgive. Just because you come to terms with how something works in another culture doesn’t mean you have to agree with it; it means you have to engage it.”33

Some scholars of colonialism, too, have argued that we must not succumb to a version of critical history in which agents of empire are reduced to mere caricatures.34 Vincent Crapanzano, in his discussion of white South Africans anxiously awaiting the end of apartheid in the early 1980s, contends that to understand white domination, one must come to grips with the complexity of whites’ attitudes.35 Others, such as Terence Ranger and Alasdair Pennycook, have eschewed limited stereotypes of European colonials, seeing them instead as both human and complicated—and thus immediately relevant to elites currently living in, and rationalizing, social hierarchies.36 Such works have helped set the stage for a recent flowering of scholarly interest in whites in South Africa and Zimbabwe, where whites have had reason to feel more destabilized, more unsettled, than perhaps ever before.37 I allude to some of this work as I go, and much later, in the conclusion, I discuss the rather airy concept of “whiteness,” after I have covered enough ground to make whiteness seem both more concrete and less homogeneous among whites in Africa.