

The Art of Survival

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Depictions of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean in Crisis

Edited by

Anna Chitando, Joseph Chikowero
and Angeline M. Madongonda

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FOREWORD

The book *The Art of Survival: Depictions of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean Crisis* is being published at a critical moment in the history of the country. The question that the book immediately foregrounds is: Are we talking of the Zimbabwean crisis or the crisis in Zimbabwe, or both? This question suggests that there is no one way to satisfactorily pinpoint the meaning of the term *crisis*. Other ancillary questions that the book provokes have to do with when it can safely be said that the crisis began. If one takes a longitudinal view to responding to this question, it is easy to think of 1890 as the genesis of the crisis, whose morbid symptoms had been felt for more than three decades when the country gained its independence in 1980. Other historians and social critics are of the opinion that the crisis that Zimbabwe intensely underwent in the early part of the 21st century was, in fact signified not only in the grudging way in which the country was forced to negotiate a political settlement in 1979, but also in the reformulations of the concept of sovereignty after the war, in which, to use Agamben's words, "confronted with excess, the system interiorizes what exceeds it through interdiction and in this way designates itself as exterior to itself" (1995:18).

There is, however, solidifying consensus that the so-called Zimbabwean crisis was exacerbated by the political indulgences of those in power. These debates cannot be taken for granted because, by some twisted logic, in what some describe as the crisis, other Zimbabweans see an opportunity to "complete" the series of African people's struggles against inherited forms of oppression. Political scientists openly challenge the very idea that Zimbabwe is in a crisis, or at least that there is one source of this crisis. David Moore (2008:28) is cheeky to even suggest that crisis of one form in Zimbabwe can turn into options for those in decision-making positions that affect people at a national level. Furthermore, and as if in a calculated desire to mock what he sees as the casualisation of the discourses on the crisis, Moore poses a puzzling question when he asks "what if 'crisis' cannot quite explain the constant recurrence of viciousness" (2008:29) in Zimbabwe?

These views might appear to be shared by a minority of Zimbabwean critics who have become cynical of ever breaking the cycle of the Zimbabwean crisis, but nevertheless, the questions force us to reassess how the local and glocal conditions of possibility make the framing of issues into crisis a plane of contestation, as is evidenced in the articles in this book. The questions also bear on the fact that they persuade us, as the contributors do in *The Art of Survival: Depictions of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean Crisis*, to also rethink the material and symbolical possibilities that there could be discursive crises in the ways in which the Zimbabwean crises are narrated. If it can be assumed that there is a disjuncture in the process of knowing the crisis and its telling, Raftopolous (2003) further complicates our understanding of crisis when he implies that the epicentre of the Zimbabwean crisis is not merely that the old refuses to die and the young cannot be born, to paraphrase Gramsci's descriptions of irrupting moments of political interregnum. For Raftopolous (ibid.), the ominous extension of the Zimbabwean crises is also the potential that the opposition political voices might end up aping forms of political behavior that they have been decrying.

Whatever can be said, one thing that is irrefutable is that Zimbabwe went through a patch of historical crises. The morbid symptoms of these crises are the evidence provided by the recognition that the "decade of the Zimbabwean crisis" saw a marked decline in almost all aspects of life, namely socially, politically and economically. During this period, individuals and families resorted to unorthodox survival strategies. Similarly, in the field of the arts, works that emerged from this era reflected these multiple and contested survival strategies. The height of the Zimbabwean crisis was marked by upheavals in all spheres of life, as seen in the hyper-inflationary environment, poor health delivery systems and mass exodus to the diaspora.

The chapters in this book demonstrate how the Zimbabwean crisis instigated different survival strategies. While some sought to create coping mechanisms within Zimbabwe, others took the "exit option" and went into exile. Both groups, however, still had to come to terms with the massive challenges that included unemployment and underemployment, food shortages and violence. The arts played an influential role in assisting Zimbabweans to make sense of their situation. Through music, day-to-day interactions, religion, drama, poetry, short stories and jokes, Zimbabweans sought to mitigate their pain. More critically, the contributors employ the arts to challenge simultaneous status quos and suggest alternative spaces that were not totally inhabited by the parasites of the aftermath of

independence. Artists, politicians, and the ordinary masses forced the birth of images of the new society that they long(ed) for, even though the dreams contained in these images have not completely positively materialised. The existence of this book is therefore testimony that the collective dreams have not festered. Thus, *The Art of Surviving: Depictions of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean in Crisis* makes a significant contribution to the scholarly debates on the deployment of the arts in society in the context of the Zimbabwean crises.

Whether or not we rely on Agamben's (1995) characterisation of national crises as producing states of exceptions that are formalised as law, the crises in Zimbabwe have been abrasive on all in ways that rendered most lives grievable (Butler 2010). The significance, therefore, of the publication of the compilation of chapters in the book, *The Art of Survival: Depictions of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean Crisis* is that all of the contributors to this important intellectual project are all too aware that their voices are attempting to reframe the essence of what constitutes the crisis in the first place. The assertions captured in the chapters that dwell on the different aspects of the crises from multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary perspectives are testimony that the zone of "bare life" (Agamben 1995) is not necessarily one of complete bodily and spiritual liquidation. To have survived the crisis as the contributors did and to live to narrativise their experience of the crisis is the evidence that they have, which is that even in the most trying and depraved conditions, humanity can organise and maintain a semblance of dignity, the bricks of which can be used to build a new society.

Professor Maurice T. Vambe
English Studies (UNISA)
Pretoria, 2015

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INTRODUCTION

ANNA CHITANDO, JOSEPH CHIKOWERO
AND ANGELINE M. MADONGONDA

It was a crisis of incredible proportions, almost beyond linguistic description. How does one begin to wrap their head around figures, statistics and rhetoric that made no sense? Indeed, for the majority, statistics and rhetoric became peripheral. How does one begin to calculate the price of a simple item that costs over \$20 billion? Or an inflation rate that grew so rapidly, the responsible office simply stopped once it reached 230,000,000. Figures and statistics have their way of telling a story, a cold story that measures the successes and failures of nations. Away from the cold abstraction of statistics, the stories of how Zimbabweans fared during the decade of crisis are meant to delve into the ordinary lives of the people themselves. These are the stories we recount here; recounting their sheer heroism by simply refusing to collapse when everything else around had long given up, stories of trauma and triumph, staying on in Zimbabwe and fighting to the bitter end, stories of dreamers and adventurers who dared travel to distant shores and their other stories of success and failure in faraway places.

Beyond banal, abstract statistics are human beings who eat, love and dream about beautiful tomorrows. While governments measure development by way of numbers, the humanities animate the experiences we mentioned above. Indeed, fiction, linguistic innovation in the form of urban humour, theatre, drama and song capture the magic of survival under stress, the very pulse of such a life. That is exactly what the scholars – themselves based both at home and in far-flung lands – attempt in the following chapters.

This book deploys the human arts – music, fiction, poetry, theatre, drama – to account for Zimbabwe’s proverbial “lost decade”, the 1998-2008 period, during which Zimbabwe was gripped by a political and economic crisis. As these chapters demonstrate, everything literally reached a nadir: Industry ground to a complete halt, shops and

supermarkets were virtually empty, the Zimbabwean central bank printed banknotes of astronomical figures, whose real value was at best farcical; the political climate was dominated by bipartisan gridlock and authoritarianism, while the quality of life suffered beyond living memory. While there is abundant literature on various aspects of “the collapse” of Zimbabwe, what this book attempts is a scholarship of both the general collapse and what almost all existing literature has ignored, but is most significant: the very art of survival during this challenging period. The book is broken into three parts to give a systematic discussion of the issues at play.

Part I is titled *Narrating the Crisis: Fiction of Survival*. It discusses fictional texts that grapple with the multiple survival strategies that Zimbabweans inside and outside the country adopted to see out the difficulties that they encountered.

In chapter two, Joseph Chikowero’s “Dystopianism and Survival in Petina Gappah’s *Elegy for Easterly* and Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North*” builds on fictionalised accounts of ordinary Zimbabweans who struggled against the violent currents of the aforementioned crisis. The chapter deploys the ideological prism of the crisis of consciousness in African literature. Modern African literature such as Chikwava’s *Harare North* and Gappah’s *Elegy for Easterly*, Chikowero posits, grow out of a “hostile milieu”, a troubled contemporary. Despite the almost universal failure by African governments to convert political independence into meaningful development for the African masses, the continent’s fiction has retained a stubborn insistence on beautiful tomorrows rather than the depressing present, an optimism that often defies the dark clouds of woe and tragedy in the lives of the characters it narrates. Chikowero argues that Zimbabwean “Literature of Crisis” is more than an endless catalogue of suffering, but rather embodies within it a certain resistance ethic, a style that often takes a satirical turn and frowns on tears and self-pity in favour of laughter, even in the most heartbreaking of circumstances. This radical utopianism becomes an enduring quality of some of the fiction associated with the extraordinarily difficult “crisis” decade in Zimbabwe.

Brian Chikwava and Petina Gappah’s *Harare North* and *An Elegy for Easterly*, respectively, offer imaginative insights into what is often labelled Zimbabwe’s lost decade, the 1998-2008 period when the southern African country was in the grip of the worst political and economic crisis in living memory. Chikowero posits that the death of the egalitarian “gutsaruzhinji” principle, which underpinned the Second Chimurenga and

supposedly, the post-war government, meant a new kind of existentialism took precedence – that of personal survival.

Far from losing hope, young Zimbabweans in the two texts are presented as resourceful and capable of adopting new strategies and adapting to both the harsh conditions at home and the unfamiliar, yet exciting, adventures of foreign countries, to survive. For young Zimbabweans starved of opportunities in a shrinking economy, migration to more stable, yet largely unknown Western countries offered a sliver of hope and a window of opportunity.

This ability to mask oneself, to slip into and out of often contrasting identities, itself a key survival strategy, lends a certain folkloric hue to the narrative as the youthful narrator worms his way around British officialdom. The in-between space that the narrator occupies is itself symbolic of the uncertainty of migrant experiences by other Zimbabweans fleeing economic ruin and those pursuing fanciful dreams abroad.

Josephine Muganiwa's "Armed with Hope: Women and Survival in Zimbabwe" in chapter two, examines the role of women in ensuring the survival of the family in the context of the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe. Muganiwa uses Valerie Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope* (2006) and Virginia Phiri's *Highway Queen* (2010) as primary texts to reflect on their portrayal of the social problems that women face and how they deal with the threat of HIV and AIDS.

Both *Highway Queen* and *The Uncertainty of Hope* present to the reader, female characters that are consumed with anxiety over the economic survival of their families. The opening lines of *Highway Queen* read:

"When one has a job, there is hope for a decent life such as having enough food, own[ing] a home, education for children, health care and peace of mind. When that hope is taken away, one does not want to imagine" (7).

Gender dynamics in pre-colonial Zimbabwe had a culture that governed the relationship between the sexes and their role within the community. These were meant to ensure the complementarity of the sexes and social cohesion as culture is the coded wisdom of a people accumulated over centuries. What is passed on is what works for the good of the whole community, which includes the people and the environment.

Muganiwa argues that colonialism brought a new set of codes and ideas that tended to distort the perception of gender in Africa. *The Uncertainty of Hope* and *Highway Queen* are unique in their direct discussion of women's sexuality vis-à-vis the threat of HIV and AIDS. The representations are also made refreshing as they do not point to women being victims, the virus having been brought to them by men. Women are active participants who consciously engage in sexual activities for various reasons. Prostitutes are not portrayed in the traditional mode that simply condemns them. The authors try to inform the reader of the conditions that have led the women to make such choices. The role of the media in forming and reinforcing certain images is also critiqued.

"A Critical Analysis of the 'Exit Option' in Selected Stories in *Hunting in Foreign Lands and Other Stories*" by Aaron Mupondi analyses the depiction of the "exit option". This is the migration of Zimbabweans to foreign countries in search of the proverbial greener pastures in the wake of the crisis. Mupondi perceives migration as a result of a stressful economic slump in Zimbabwe between 1998 and 2008. The economic scourge was largely blamed on the government's political and economic policies, including the land reforms which were alleged to have led to food shortages and the decline in industrial production. The decline in industrial production caused shortages of basic commodities, wage and salary freezes, retrenchments and the closure of many companies. The price of basic commodities rose beyond levels that the majority of the citizens could afford.

In chapter three, Mupondi argues that writers in selected stories in *Hunting in Foreign Lands and Other Stories* view the "exit option" in different ways. Some see the diaspora as the "Promised Land" where Zimbabweans successfully achieve their dreams, while others see "hunting in foreign lands" as a fruitless undertaking that tears families apart. Yet, some writers in the same collection have an ambivalent view of the "exit option", seeing it as both potentially rewarding and destructive. In Charity Chiruka's "Gone with the Whirlwind", Ruby Magosvongwe's "Esther's Breakthrough" and "Tauya's Arrival", Barbara Chiedza Manyarara's "The Road to Damascus" and "OKRH", and Elias Mambo's "Home?" Mupondi sees diaspora presented as many things; as a source of hope and as a dead end.

In another story, "Home?" by Mambo, Mupondi discovers a sojourn to the diaspora presented as a dead end. The story begins with a telephone

conversation in which Tambu is reminding Jacob, her husband in America, of his obligations to his family:

You should know you left a wife and a kid. Your own son is suffering as if the father is long dead... Should we die of hunger and poverty while you are there? (88)

Chapter four is titled “Zimbabwean Literature from the Diaspora: Economic and Family Dynamics.” In this chapter, Ivan Bachisi picks examples from different short story anthologies to portray the various survival strategies adopted by Zimbabwean in the diaspora. The chapter examines the portrayal of economic and family dynamics in Zimbabwean literature in English from and about the diaspora. This study adopts a trans-disciplinary approach as it draws from studies in economics, migration, literary theory and sociology in an attempt to explain how these themes are handled in the various works of literature that are analysed. Bachisi contends that Zimbabweans migrated from the country en masse mainly due to economic factors, leading many of those migrants not only to become economic refugees or modern day slaves in often hostile host countries, but also to be de-skilled and disempowered professionally.

Chapter five is by Angeline M. Madongonda and Anna Chitando. In this chapter, “Survival in a Land of Death: An Exploration of Selected Stories in Irene Staunton’s *Laughing Now*,” the two authors examine the different faces that death assumed at the height of the crunching socio-political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe. It demonstrates how death became part of survival as people used it resourcefully to make ends meet. The chapter probes the unparalleled opportunities that people found in death, in an effort by Zimbabweans to continue to exist in trying times.

Part II of the book is titled *Speaking Survival: The Language of Endurance*. The chapters in this section examine how people used language to make sense of the Zimbabwean crisis. They describe the terms that were used in everyday conversations during that difficult period.

In chapter six, “‘*Mbudzi Inoguta Payakasungirirwa*’ (A Goat Feeds where it is Tethered): An Analysis of the Deployment of Sayings during the Zimbabwean Crisis,” Munyaradzi Madambi, Pedzisai Mashiri and Ezra Chitando argue that proverbs serve a multiplicity of functions in different societies. In this chapter, the authors investigate the use of Shona proverbs during the Zimbabwean crisis. Specifically, they focus on the exploitation of proverbs to protect ethically problematic behaviour. Thus,

in order to justify certain actions, some individuals resorted to, or even invented, proverbs. The chapter explains how specific proverbs proved to be more popular during this particular period. The chapter asserts that proverbs do not stand by themselves; they have to be decoded within a well-defined economic, social and political context.

Chapter seven is “Linguistic Transformation for Change.” Here, Taurai L. Chinyanganya argues that the traumas of the “lost decade” can be mapped linguistically by examining the changes in the language choices that people made. As captured in the changes witnessed in the country’s linguistic landscape, this was a decade of political crisis that brought in its wake rapid economic decline that caused chaos and emotional, social and psychological despair. Poverty and its attendant entailments, poor sanitation, starvation and disease plagued the population. HIV and AIDS were on the rise, yet there was little help from the health sector, which was also being pummelled by the hostile situation. The decade thus witnessed the mass exodus of many able bodied and highly qualified Zimbabweans from the country in search of greener pastures in the diaspora. Those who remained weathered the storm, but at a cost. Shona, the most widely used language in Zimbabwe, rapidly mutated to articulate these uncongenial experiences. The erstwhile varieties of Shona that were usually spoken in the country were heavily influenced or tintured to become bastardised mixtures of Shona, slang and different versions of English in an effort to cope with the challenges presented in this rapidly changing decade. Language is dynamic and cannot survive if it fossilises in one form while culture is evolving, thus Shona has had to change to stay abreast of, and reflect the cultural dynamics of the nation in that decade of strife. The chapter shows that this change in our language has been inevitable and has illuminated our essence through the way people talk in an effort to interpret our world.

In chapter eight, Molly Manyonganise and Godfrey Museka contend that as the Zimbabwean crisis deepened, the average Zimbabwean suffered even more in “‘When the enemy shall come in like a flood...’ (Isaiah 59: 19): A Critical Analysis of the Church’s Response to the Zimbabwean Economic Crisis”. The law of the jungle (survival of the fittest) prevails as the socioeconomic environment continues to deteriorate. Christians are not spared. The chapter is an investigation of how the “people of faith” (Christians) survive through the crisis. Important to the chapter is how Christians seek to deal with the crisis, without compromising their faith.

Part III of the book is *Staging Survival: Music and Drama during the Decade of Crisis*. It deals with the staging of survival; that is, the music, drama and theatre of survival during the economic and political crisis.

Chapter nine, “Coming Clean: The Art of Surviving in Post-2000 Zimbabwean Drama and Theatre,” by Ephraim Vhutuza discusses hit-and-run drama and theatre using case studies of the dramatist Stephen Chifunyise, and the Savannah Trust and Theatre in the Park theatre institutions within a given socio-political historical context: that of the post-2000 Zimbabwe era. He demonstrates how a dramatist and two theatre organisations have evolved survival strategies in their drama texts and theatrical performances to legitimize and/or challenge or subvert state hegemony in the highly restrictive and choking post-2000 Zimbabwean political landscape.

Using Stephen Chifunyise’s selected drama and the experiences of the Savannah Trust and Theatre in the Park theatre groups, Vhutuza argues that to a larger extent, despite the resistance from the pro-hegemonic social actors, dramatists and theatre practitioners in Zimbabwe have consolidated and maintained their presence and relevance alongside other oppositional civic society cultural formations by evolving both overt and covert survival strategies in interrogating the Zimbabwean crises in the post-2000 era.

Vhutuza advances the argument that, like oppositional media and the mainstream civic society groups such as the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), ZimRights and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), drama and theatre have been targeted by the state bureaucracy and apparatuses with a view to silencing and possibly obliterating their counter-hegemonic activities and that they have managed to survive or “come clean” by evolving and consolidating their newly found survival strategies. He suggests that state sanctioned drama in this context means the “allowed” narrative because the drama either “talks” to state hegemony or is silent on state–contestation narrative. The drama texts, especially *Intimate Affairs* and *Muramu*, narrowly focus on contestations within the domestic space – the family – unlike most of the drama in English, both published and unpublished, that was written between 2000 and 2009 by fellow Zimbabwean dramatists.

Focusing on hit-and-run theatre, Vhutuza shows that change and adaptation is what makes an individual, society or institution move forward in the face of challenges such as the ones faced by Zimbabwean

theatre practitioners in the post-2000 era. Theatre, like other institutions had to find and embrace new ways of confronting the state in the face of a stubborn hegemonic body politic. As a result, the post-2000 era in Zimbabwe produced new theatrical forms and practices that have been called hit-and-run theatre, a method and a theory that can be applied to the changing tactics that drama and theatre practitioners used during this period to survive the onslaught on the artists' work. The goal of hit-and-run is to circumvent state censorship and state security agents.

Chapter ten is "Laughing Off the Zimbabwean Crisis through Protest Theatre: An analysis of *Final Push* and *High Rate High Risk*." The authors, Kelvin Chikondo and Nehemiah Chivandikwa, argue that the decade of crisis provoked theatrical imagination in the form of protest theatre. This theatre has reflected upon, commented on and challenged major players in the crisis, who include the state and the general citizenry.

The chosen works reflect the thematic content and context of protest theatre. What the two authors find curious, however, is the absence of works that interrogate humorous aspects of protest theatre. It is as if in an effort to reflect anger against tyranny, repression, economic meltdown and political venality, protest theatre has been mainly deploying "angry" messages and gloomy metaphors and images. The two writers therefore set out to investigate the place of humour in a context of intense crisis, and they contend that protest theatre simultaneously aids and complicates our understanding of the possibilities and limits of humour in a crisis-ridden postcolonial African state.

The chapter focuses on two protest theatre productions: Silvanos Mudzvova's *Final Push* (2008) and Tafadzwa Muzondo's *High Rate High Risk* (2009). The former was produced at the height of the Zimbabwean crisis and the latter premiered at the University of Zimbabwe at a time when Zimbabweans felt that the crisis was about to end. The authors seek to address the following questions: (1) what is the function of humour in protest plays which are supposed to express anger and disapproval over inept state governance and repression? (2) How can we theorise the socio-political possibilities and limits of humour in theatrical performance texts that function in a context of general pain and deprivation?

The superiority function posits that humour is an expression of superiority over someone perceived to be socially or morally inferior by the person laughing. Therefore, humour is theorised as some kind of non-violent aggression. The relief position states that humour provokes

laughter which eases muscle tensions, and therefore contributes to physical well-being and psychological wellness.

Joking, humour or laughter enables one to portray the shocking and disturbing conditions of human existence without making people cry. It enables a playwright the means to visit the dark side of life without inducing shock and denial in the spectator. The human mind is afraid of revisiting turbulent memories because such memories resurrect the pain of the past. There is an attempt to evade and suppress these memories. The challenge, then, is how one can revisit the past without recreating the agony that is inherent within it.

High Rate High Risk, the authors propose, mock both the victims and villains of the crisis. However, on a balance of scale, the play functions as subaltern self-laughter. While the play ridicules and satirises state agents, it simultaneously and vigorously mocks the marginalised and oppressed, including university students, workers, widows and ordinary people in general, whose overall contribution was to sustain an evil system through both sins of omission and commission. In the play *Bling-Bling*, a Bachelor of Business Studies university graduate is forced into illegal foreign currency dealings after failing to secure employment. He is recruited by Bad-Dhara – a rapacious, ruthless and mean senior police officer who runs several “business” enterprises. While *High Rate High Risk* is indeed to a larger extent self-criticism, in its context, it provides some relief or escape to both spectators and performers. The play was performed at a period when memories of political violence, deaths from cholera, and the hyper-inflation were still vivid. In any case, the introduction of a multi-currency system did not bring immediate relief. The audiences were still recovering from the pain of being swindled through various foreign currency exchange systems. The subversive function of humour is also analysed.

In chapter eleven, “Prophetic Imagination in Zimbabwean Pentecostal Music: A Critical Examination of the Deployment of Gospel Music during the Crisis Years,” Kudzai Biri explores Pentecostal music against the background of the diverse socio-economic and political challenges that Zimbabweans faced during the period 2000 to 2008. The popularity of gospel music during the crisis years saw the release of new albums, and galas in different places such as the National Sports Stadium and the Harare Gardens. This popularity calls for an exploration of the role of music during crisis. The study makes use of the role that religion has played in the Zimbabwean crisis years to “equip” Christian believers so that they can soldier on with their challenges, by paying particular

attention to Pentecostal spirituality. The study makes use of Pentecostal spirituality in Zimbabwe to argue that the “therapeutic” nature of gospel music was the basis of its popularity, given the need and search for “healing” by Zimbabweans. Biri argues that, more or less like Pentecostal sermon discourses that address the existential realities, needs and aspirations of believers, Pentecostal gospel music has performed a similar role during the crisis years. She unravels how gospel music has appealed to Zimbabweans through a critical examination of the inherent dominant themes.

Biri also argues that Pentecostal gospel music is characterised by prophetic imagination. During the crisis years, music counter-attacked the dominant political and economic theories of Zimbabwean pessimism. Music remains a powerful instrument that Zimbabweans (even non-Christians) have made use of in their daily struggles, and has offered them symbols of hope in the midst of the shadow that covered Zimbabwe and bred pessimism.

Using Mary Moyana and Charles Charamba’s popular songs, *Mwari Makanaka* (God you are good) and *Nyika Zimbabwe* (The Nation Zimbabwe), Biri undertakes a discourse analysis of the lyrical and contextual content to relate the musical performances to the crisis situation in Zimbabwe. At once religious and secular, Biri argues that the songs cover a wide spectrum of national issues and other dimensions that are significant to our study and enable her to unravel dimensions of prophetic imagination, its role and impact.

Biri argues that Pentecostal gospel music in Zimbabwe espoused several themes. Among them, the following themes were the most popular: hope, the blessedness of Africa/Zimbabwe, the goodness of God (because nothing good seemed to come out of Zimbabwe!) and God’s love for the nation of Zimbabwe.

Pentecostal gospel music, posits Biri, is a form of political engagement and it is optimistic because it counters the Zimbabwean pessimism. Debatable as it might be, the significance of this type of political engagement and attitude towards challenges lies in the discourse of prophetic imagination that scoffs at the problems and renders them insignificant in spite of their persistence or resilience.

Chapter twelve, “Oliver Mtukudzi’s ‘Izere Mhepo’ (2009) (‘It (The Hunting Pouch is) Full of Air’) and Diaspora Uncertainties” by Anna

Chitando and Mavis A. Madongonda is a critical analysis of popular secular music as it reflects on the expectations, successes, failures and tensions of the crossborder migrations of the period under discussion. When the social, economic and political situation in Zimbabwe deteriorated after the year 2000, many people were forced to leave the country. This mass movement of people has seen the significant expansion of the Zimbabwean diaspora. Push and pull factors account for the mass movement of Zimbabweans into the region and beyond. Push factors include the economic meltdown, political violence and the shortage of life-sustaining medication such as anti-retroviral drugs. Pull factors incorporate the anticipation of employment and higher standards of living, peace, better health and prosperity. Third, there is a crisis of expectation on the part of relatives and friends who remain in Zimbabwe. The entry of one of their own into “better countries” is often celebrated as an almost miraculous breakthrough. There is anticipation that the lives of those who remain in Zimbabwe will be transformed drastically in the shortest period of time. This puts the migrant under a lot of pressure. He or she carries the burden of realising the economic dreams of the extended family. This is why individuals and families seek spiritual support to ensure safe passage, including visiting prophets to have their passports sanctified, before they embark on the journey to the foreign lands.

In Jackie Madondo’s seminal song, “*Mazuva Acho*” (“The Nature of the Days”), Chitando and Madongonda sense the anxiety that gripped the country during the crisis years. In her song, “*Mazuva Acho*” (“The Nature of the Days”), Madondo captured the suffering by singing, “*Mazuva acho Mwariwe atorarama orwadza, nguva dzacho Mwariwe dzotorarama dzorwadza*” (“Dear God, the days in which we live are now painful; dear God, the times we live in are now painful”).

In Oliver Mtukudzi’s “*Izere Mhepo*” (“It (The Hunting Pouch) is full of air”), the two authors suggest that the song is a commentary on the Zimbabwean diaspora. The song questions the supposition that leaving Zimbabwe will automatically transform an individual and his/her family’s fortunes. It shows the problems that are associated with the diaspora and warns Zimbabweans against getting overexcited about leaving the country. Mtukudzi seeks to play his role as an educator and counsellor.

At the height of the Zimbabwean crisis, many individuals went into the diaspora with particular targets, such as to mobilise sufficient funds in order to buy a house or a car, to save for school or college fees, to buy a commuter omnibus, and so on. The hope was that as soon as the set target

was met, one would return to Zimbabwe. However, for most people, these hopes were dashed due to a number of reasons.

The chorus in Mtukudzi's song reinforces the idea that the diaspora option is futile. By continually saying, "*gume nhava izere mhepo*" ("in the end, the hunting pouch is empty"); the artist is questioning the notion that going into the diaspora will result in prosperity, emphasising the uselessness of going into the diaspora.

PART I:

**NARRATING THE CRISIS:
FICTION OF SURVIVAL**

CHAPTER ONE

DYSTOPIANISM AND SURVIVAL IN PETINA GAPPAH'S *ELEGY FOR EASTERLY* AND BRIAN CHIKWAVA'S *HARARE NORTH*

JOSEPH CHIKOWERO

Introduction

In an attempt to theorise the crisis of consciousness in African literature, Omafume F. Onoge (1974:386) notes that writers' consciousness "have been a result of sociological conditioning", by which he means that "the sociopolitical visions of the artists have been set in motion by dialectical developments within the political economy of Africa." Modern African literature, he notes, was itself born in a "hostile milieu". Much of what we study as canonical African literature, suggests Onoge, is concerned with oppositional and affirmative consciousness; first attacking the intrusion and damages of the colonial encounter via theoretical and mystical ideologies such as Negritude and Pan-Africanism while asserting various shades of ideologies associated with the nationalist struggles across the continent and the wider Black Diaspora. Despite the almost universal failure by African governments to convert political independence into meaningful development for African masses, the continent's fiction has also retained a stubborn insistence on beautiful tomorrows, rather than the depressing present, an optimism that often defies the dark clouds of woe and tragedy in the lives of characters it narrates. What is fascinating about the so-called Zimbabwean "Literature of Crisis" is not so much the catalogue of suffering as a certain resistance ethic at the centre of the writing, a style that often takes a satirical turn and frowns on tears, in favour of laughter, even in the most heartbreaking of storytelling. In this chapter, this radical utopianism is used as a prism through which one can read some recent fiction associated with the difficult 1998-2008 decade in Zimbabwe.

Keith M. Booker (1995:58) argues that the postcolonial condition presents the African writer with complex challenges: The “revolution” achieved after years of anti-colonial struggle has not quite delivered its promise to the vast majority of Africans who were impoverished by centuries of slavery, exploitation and colonial domination. From the raw angst of Dambudzo Marechera, to Chimamanda Adichie’s cautious optimism, the African writer’s vision is, at least in part, according to Booker, “utopian”, rejecting the ugliness of the present in preference for beautiful, but somewhat hazy tomorrows. The irony here is quite obvious: the sociological condition itself is dystopian; heartbreaking for the masses, and yet, the fiction is undaunted in its commitment to equality and to more egalitarian futures.

F. Odun Balogun (1984:41) suggests that a feature that characterises contemporary African writing, which accounts for this undying optimism in the face of grim realities, is the element of the absurd. The absurd, he posits, as “both as an element of satire and as a style in its own right, has always been manifest in African literature, both oral and written” despite the attacks by the so-called nativists for indigenous aesthetics. The pessimistic, cynical man for whom the absurd is an indisputable reality in contemporary African literature, is, according to Balogun (42), not merely a product of “world-wide malaise dominating all spheres of modern life, the general dissatisfaction with politics, economic depression which daily erodes the quality of life, and mounting crimes and violence, but a specific historical and racial experience molded by slavery, colonization, and neo-colonialism”. Independence and black majority rule had promised a drastic change in the quality of life and yet, half a century after that first wave of independence, it has been, for most Africans, a harvest of thorns.

Three decades into Zimbabwe’s independence and a globally-dispersed population, two young writers come closest to what the iconic Dambudzo Marechera attempted in the 1970s and 80s; that is, to present a dystopian society – if indeed society is the word – in which personal survival driven by an unapologetic pragmatism is paramount. Using dystopianism as my analytical prism, I examine the visions of Brian Chikwava and Petina Gappah in their respective fictions about Zimbabweans’ struggles for survival within the country and in the diaspora.

While dystopian fiction became a paradigmatic expression of the Western imagination in the twentieth century, what problems and opportunities does it present for African experiences within the genre? How, I ask, does Zimbabwean fiction within the dystopian genre reflect on

themes of the Zimbabwean crisis of the first decade of the 21st century? Of special interest to me in this paper is the radical shift from the egalitarian (or utopian) gutsaruzhinji philosophy of the liberation war and the early post war period, to an utterly cynical existentialism, evident in both the society and fiction of the early 21st century.

A dystopia – derived from a Greek word for “bad, hard” – simply defined, refers to an Orwellian-like society that is in a repressive, controlled state, though often celebrated by its powerful elites and supporters as ideal.

***Gutsaruzhinji?* – Failure of Egalitarianism**

Repressive social control systems – that is, active and passive coercion – form the backdrop to the politics of personal survival in Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North* and Petina Gappah’s *An Elegy for Easterly*, respectively. The two offer imaginative insights into what is often labeled Zimbabwe’s lost decade, the 1998-2008 period when the southern African country was in the grip of the worst political and economic crisis in living memory. As other contributors to the volume have shown, this was a period characterised by a shrinking economy, sharply declining formal employment, political intolerance, rising migration and a general sense of loss. For my purposes, this was also a period when the egalitarian “gutsaruzhinji” principle which underpinned the Second Chimurenga and – supposedly – the post-war government became largely irrelevant and a new kind of existentialism took precedence.

Far from losing hope, young Zimbabweans in the stories selected are presented as resourceful and capable of adapting to both the harsh conditions at home and the unfamiliar, yet exciting adventures of foreign countries in order to survive. For young Zimbabweans starved of opportunities in a shrinking economy, migration to more stable yet largely unknown Western countries offered a sliver of hope and a window of opportunity. Unable to prove their worth at home, young Zimbabweans flock, first by the millions into the southern African region and then to the former colonial power, Britain, as well as other distant lands where the expectation remains that they would gain employment and in turn sustain their extended relatives back home by way of remittances.

Harare North: The Exile's Experience

In *Harare North*, Chikwava, a winner of the of the Caine Prize for African Fiction, employs a version of English that readers quickly associate with his unnamed narrator's limited formal education. The novel is thus the story of a young Zimbabwean man's migrant experience in Britain, colloquially called "Harare North" by Zimbabweans because of the large number of Zimbabwean exiles there. It is, without a doubt, a story about middle – and marginal – spaces; it speaks to the hopeful adventures and potential tragedy contained in the very kernel of the recent Zimbabwean migration wave, without claiming to represent every exiled Zimbabwean. The narrator's past is as grim as his present; he is a fugitive from Zimbabwean law and is apparently wanted for involvement in the murder of an opposition political activist. A former member of a notorious pro-government militia with blood on his hands, the narrator makes it to England under the pretext of fleeing political persecution as a member of the youth wing of the opposition party. This ability to mask oneself, to slip into and out of often contrasting identities, itself a key survival strategy, lends a certain folkloric hue to the narrative as the youthful narrator worms his way around British officialdom. The reality, of course, is something else and the narrator is indeed unwanted at home and abroad and only the success of his mission in "Harare North" will ensure his survival. The in-between space that the narrator occupies is itself symbolic of the uncertainty of migrant experiences by other Zimbabweans fleeing economic ruin and those pursuing fanciful dreams abroad.

Arriving in England on a false narrative, bearing nothing but a survivor's instinct, the narrator lives a parasitical existence as a shadowy, officially unacknowledged member of the forgotten, invisible class in London – a place that, by the author's own admission, gives him "a mixture of feelings" – and Brixton (Primorac 2010). Forbidden from legal work until the authorities can sort out his true legal status, the narrator ekes out a rat-like existence, slipping into and out of his self-scripted identities to keep body and soul together. Out of necessity, he must stick to the shadows, lose all pretence to morality and somehow make a living in an alien environment devoid of enduring community and family networks. The harsh realities of London and Brixton leave him no option but to forego all morality and adopt a predatory instinct that does not discriminate between relative and stranger.

With a less-than average education, the odds are stacked against the narrator who must not only make a living as an illegal immigrant, but must

also negotiate the jagged edges of a society that has little patience with the Empire's human flotsam who routinely wash up on its shores unannounced. Like Ken Saro-Wiwa's Mene in *Sozaboy*, Chikwava's narrator is unabashed about his undistinguished education, and yet claims to be a highly disciplined man whose sole mission in England is to put together US\$5,000 (US\$4,000 to make the murder case against him in Zimbabwe go away and US\$1,000 for the uncle who paid for his ticket) and then go back home. Sucked into the proverbial belly of the beast and yet prevented from working until his asylum claim is properly processed, the narrator can only count on distant relatives and friends for assistance. In this dark comedy, "Harare North" proves to be radically different from the gold-paved paradise of Zimbabwean lore.

Harare North: Outsider Looking In

"Harare North" does not, in fact, escape the novelist's satirical eye; the narrator quickly learns that many of his compatriots are working in unskilled and culturally humiliating occupations, including personal care work, what his countrymen and women humorously call BBC; that is, British Buttocks Cleaner. The humiliation of low-paying, low class jobs, the culture shock of having to accept such humiliating jobs, the impossible demands by relatives back home and the perennial fear of being arrested by the authorities, for not having the proper papers, compel the anti-hero to manipulate those around him – often fellow sufferers – while maintaining a façade of morality.

Exile and Unravelling Familial Bonds

For starters, the narrator discovers that kinship bonds mean little in a place where time, patience and money are permanently in short supply, tempers short and the state's coercive machinery perhaps a few shadows behind. "Harare North", it turns out, is not the London of the postcards; the Buckingham Palace with cheerful Royal Guardsmen, the London Bridge, the doves feeding from charitable people's hands, great statues, iconic landmarks and other fanciful paraphernalia that make that London a happy, but distant place to the narrator's people back home. Instead, Chikwava presents the narrator's life in the ghettos of London; a monstrous London that is utterly unpalatable, but all too real; the London that has metaphorically swallowed many immigrants into its vast and insatiable belly, turning them into junkies and predators. His cousin, Paul, and his wife, Sekai, for example, show no particular interest in his plight

and are only too happy when he moves in with an old school friend, Shingi.

In Shingi's lodgings, the narrator finds his friend living with four other "tenants" – including a young woman, Tsitsi, and her child. In this congested household are rules; the first being "don't eat what you did not buy", the second being a repetition of the first, the third being "don't eat what is not yours", the fourth "if you don't work, you don't eat", and the fifth being about washing plates after eating. Determined though he is, the narrator finds that his status as an undocumented and unskilled African immigrant carries a heavy tax; he ends up falling victim to eastern European managers of construction projects who ritually underpay him.

The narrator's initial never-say-die spirit seems to be captured at a point in the story when he has decided to quit manual labour in favour of extortion and manipulation: "History is littered with them ruined underpants of small people leaping about in vex style and trying to save them bread from the long throats of big people"(46). It is no surprise then when the narrator learns that even his commander in the youth militia, Comrade Mhiripiri, has in fact been trying to con him of US\$5,000. Patriotism, he learns, is a mere slogan that politicians chant to serve their personal goals. It is at this point that he loses all respect for laws guiding human behaviour and adopts laws from the animal world where only the fittest and smartest survive at the expense of the weak and less cunning.

Humour as Survival Tool

Even as Chikwava's novel highlights these often poignant realities of African immigration into the global North, the story itself is never short of a kind of wry humor that seems to propel the narrator when all else fails. It is a kind of humour that finds cause for laughter in all human actions, a brand of humour that laughs even at the failures of the self. Recording his nasty experience at one construction site, the protagonist says:

You spend them weeks shifting mud with shovels and sweat beads come out of every pore in the body because you is putting out heaps of effort while your buttocks point to high heaven and migrant flesh start to stink around you as shirts and underpants get damp. Here you quickly know that the weight of your buttocks increase by the hour and come down only by night when you is sandwiched between blanket and mattress (49).

Here, the narrator expresses not only his dissatisfaction with exploitative manual labour, but also the seeming meaninglessness of the activity – “the weight of your buttocks” – which forces him to rethink and change his *modus operandi*. It is upon reflection that he reckons that survival, for marginalized figures such as himself, hinges on predatory instincts, often at the expense of other similarly disadvantaged characters, but also the government, other authority figures and institutions. Aleck, a fellow struggler, lives in free council housing, and yet he charges each “squatter” 35 pounds a week in rent. When the narrator catches Sekai, his cousin Paul’s wife, in bed with a Russian, he gleefully adds another blackmail victim. Sad as it is, Tsitsi regularly hires out her baby to single women applying for council homes. As he gains experience in living at the edges of an unforgiving society, the narrator becomes cynical of all human motives: “You always know more than you believe in, but always choose what you believe in over what you know because what you know can be so big that sometimes it is useless weapon, you cannot wield it proper and, when you try, it can get your head out of hear and stop you focusing” (43).

Despite his own claims to being a disciplined “military person”, the narrator quietly turns predator and begins to feed off his friend, Shingi, whom he lavishes with empty praise. In one of the funniest moments in the narrative, Shingi expresses his desire to acquire a fake EU passport and the narrator quickly praises him for dreaming big, telling him that he will soon be “a big Frenchman” and even starts calling him Mr. Chirac while adding,

Maybe when you get back home you can tell big story about life in Harare North; big story about how you became laborer, sewage drain cleaner and then French president; being many people in one (61).

At this point, the narrator has effectively joined the band of predators and survivors like Aleck or Tsitsi. Truth, he says, “...is like snake because it is slippery when it move and make people flee in all directions whenever it slither into crowds, but Sekai don’t know” (8). Put differently, truth is not what is universally held to be correct, but whatever ensures survival in a place apparently devoid of empathy. Deliberately inverting words, their meanings and creating new ones along the way, the narrator learns that his survival as a “little man” in England hinges on his ability to mask his true identity and feelings. To complete the guise, he must lace his speech with “kak kak kak”, a long, hollow laughter designed to fool his prey by setting them at ease.