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The Flip Side: Re-visioning Zimbabwe's Third Chimurenga Land Discourse in Lawrence Hoba's Short Stories

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Abstract: During Zimbabwe's past decade, which has been characterised by the state's (re)configuration of black land ownership as the ultimate sign of liberation, creative literature has emerged as a fruitful site on which to encounter various discourses, versions, and subversions of the meaning of land. While several authors have explored the land and its significance to contemporary political and economic urgencies in terms of the state's nativist narrative, the turn of the century saw the emergence of Zimbabwean writers who sought to chart alternative imaginings of land and its political, economic, and spiritual significance to the ordinary citizen. This article contends that the short stories in Lawrence Hoba's collection *The Trek and Other Stories* epitomises this strand of narrative aesthetic in their critical engagement with the state's narrative of land. It explores the short stories' treatment of the land question, particularly their depiction of the ironic ambivalence of black beneficiaries of the government's land resettlement programme. Finally, the article discusses Hoba's symbolic characterisation and manipulation of the sincerity and clear-sightedness of the child narrator in constructions of ambiguity in the politics of land and decolonisation.

Keywords: Third Chimurenga, land reform, liberation, child narrator, nationalism

I. Introduction: The Post-2000 Controversy of Land as a "National Interest" in Zimbabwe

The unprecedented political and ideological polarity that characterises the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe complicates any delineation of what constitutes (or what is in) the "national interest." The question of national interest raises the problem of definition—not simply what is (or is in the) national interest but more importantly, what, in the post-2000 period, informs economic and political policies suitable for the nation's sustainable development. The post-2000 Zimbabwean political sphere is cluttered with hegemonic and counter-hegemonic attempts to redefine and reconfigure notions of nationhood in relation to emergent land politics and the general economic crisis.[1] In post-2000 Zimbabwe, the land question has emerged as the main focus of state-inspired modes of understanding the nation and its interests. It is therefore imperative to explore cultural responses to and renditions of this approach to the problematics of imagining the nation during this period.

This study focuses on how Lawrence Hoba's short stories engage with the problematics of the national interest as it relates to the Third Chimurenga[2] land reforms. Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses of land and national identity in post-2000 Zimbabwe define contrasting notions of the national interest. In focusing on the short stories' relationship to the state's Third Chimurenga land discourse, I explore perspectives on political and social significance attached to land that are manifested in the stories' systems of signification and discern the contours of their social and hegemonic engagement.

The eleventh chapter of Robert Mugabe's book *Inside the Third Chimurenga*, entitled "Addressing the Land Question on the Ground," announces the resolution of the land question as the most urgent national interest and, adjunct to that, the attendant struggle to defeat local and international opposition to the reforms. The chapter highlights the official conceptualisation of the land question and its relationship to the broader political urgencies of the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe:

> The land issue remains the central national question claiming all our energies and attention in order to secure its genu-

> ine and lasting solution. In my countless addresses to you, I have emphasised that the national question enjoys a Siamese closeness to the question of our National Independence and Sovereignty. . . . [I]ndeed we know it to be the core issue and imperative of the Third Chimurenga which you and me are fighting. (Mugabe 92)

Mugabe's statement summarises the substance of the state's grand narrative of the post-2000 land reforms. Formulated and circulated by a team of intellectuals led by former Information and Publicity Minister and political science professor Jonathan Moyo, this grand narrative created a delicate political nexus between the pressing land question[3] and the supposed indispensability of the ruling ZANU PF party in its resolution. The political establishment has taken centre stage in propounding (and sometimes imposing its notion of) land reform, seeing it as central to the nation's identity and interests.[4] This interpretation of the national interest is tactically steeped in genuine popular concerns linked to the unfinished business of decolonisation.

Literary representations of the post-2000 land reforms tend to reproduce the polarisation that characterises political discourses on the same. Without directly endorsing the state's historiography of land, texts such as Olley Maruma's novel *Coming Home*, Nyaradzo Mtizira's *The Chimurenga Protocol*, and Mashingaidze Gomo's *A Fine Madness* covertly and overtly depict the land reforms as the pinnacle of freedom and black empowerment. The protagonist in Mtizira's detective thriller, for instance, is an ideologically "correct" state agent who puts his life on the line to save the Chimurenga Protocol from a traitorous senior land official intent on selling it to the British. The symbolic significance of the protocol as a blueprint of the nation's land reforms and its rescue from a hostile former colonial master synchronises with the state's nationalist profiling of Britain as an enemy of the people constantly seeking ways to reverse Zimbabwe's decolonising project.

Hoba's short stories are not the first to grapple with the darker side of Zimbabwe's land reforms. A significant number of literary texts by emerging writers—such as Eric Harrison's semi-autobiography

Jambanja: The Life Story of a Zimbabwean Farmer, Chris Gande's novel *Section Eight*, and the various short stories published in Dudziro Nhengu's edited volume *Exploding the Myths about Zimbabwe's Land Issue*—have shied away from the positive ideological perspective of texts such as *The Chimurenga Protocol*. Harrison's work epitomises these texts' counter-discursive approach to Zimbabwe's land reforms and the broader resuscitation of a feisty brand of nationalism in the post-2000 period. Harrison's text questions the racial basis and method of the state's land reform programme. It follows the ordeals of a white farmer and his family as they are forcibly ejected from their farm by ruling party supporters. The politically and racially charged violence and chaos that mark the farm's takeover indicts the government's *jambanja*[5] method of settling a national problem. The autobiographical first-person point of view facilitates an intimate evocation of the violence in a way that elicits the reader's sympathy. As sympathetic readers, we are affectively guided to suspect the state's profiling of the white narrator as a remnant of imperial Britain who deserves to be jettisoned from both the national imaginary and the land.

My analysis of Hoba's short stories aims to trace a complex thread of their relationship to the state's reconfiguration of land politics in the post-2000 period. I focus on how the short stories engender a critical aesthetics which not only problematises ZANU PF's land policy but imagines other forms of liberation and personal and group identity outside of the land question. In view of this, I read Hoba's short stories as cultural products proffering a particular kind of ideological and moral vision that relates in complicated ways to the politics of the government-proclaimed national interest around land.

Literary criticism in Africa has continued to focus on fiction's "commitment" potentialities: that is, the writer's artistic engagement with the pressing social, economic, and political issues that inform the dystopian postcolonial present. This is not because literary scholarship in Africa is unaware of (or unconcerned with) the problems associated with the burdening of imaginative literature with political, social, and economic themes and/or functions. The interest in the "committed" functions of creative literature is informed by the realisation that while creative

literature needs to retain its unique artistic and aesthetic systems and functions, the artistic imagination in Africa has retained a close affinity to historical pressures. For George Nyamndi, "African literature's close, even organic link with the society that generates it settles a pathfinder role on that literature" (566). This means that much of the literature (and its criticism) is still concerned with the often unstable postcolonial African condition. This is clearly a committed perspective, but it is informed by a longstanding narrative tradition that has deep roots in oral storytelling practices across most African societies. There are, of course, many ways of reading the literature, but critics are often pressured by their standing as intellectuals to engage with its potential to describe the historical human condition. My analysis of Hoba's *The Trek and Other Stories* follows along these lines: it is a way of evaluating the place of the writer and creative literature in some of the most critical discourses and debates on the state of the nation.

II. Context: Situating Lawrence Hoba's Literary Counter-Discourse

To better understand the nature and workings of Hoba's counter-discourse it is important to locate it in a broader political picture. Hoba's counter-discourse can be viewed as critically engaging with another counter-discourse—the state-authored Third Chimurenga. The Third Chimurenga emerged in the early post-2000 period and based its resuscitation of a racialized nationalism on what the ruling ZANU PF party considered to be Britain's renewed imperial interests in Zimbabwe, particularly against the backdrop of the post-2000 Fast-Track Land Reform Programme, which appropriated land belonging to white farmers mainly of British ancestry. In its radical and essentialist form, the Third Chimurenga counter-discourse "spoke back" to what ZANU PF perceived as Britain's protection of white interests at the expense of the landless black majority (Mugabe 92). Inevitably, the Second Chimurenga became the ruling party's convenient source of legitimacy and was used to whip up anti-British emotions in support of Black emancipation through land reform.

Hoba's counter-discourse not only demonstrates "the complex ways in which challenges to a dominant or established discourse might be

mounted from the periphery" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 56) but surreptitiously and discursively points to the ruling party's unstable construction of the socio-economic and political condition of being black in post-2000 Zimbabwe. Hoba targets the racial essentialism that typifies ZANU PF's reconstruction of black Zimbabweans as economically oppressed citizens whose wretchedness could be easily offset by their acquisition of white-owned land (Mugabe 93). Hoba's work depicts ordinary citizens and supporters of the ruling party whose tragic circumstances following their new statuses as land owners reflect on the shaky politics behind their resettlement. Without necessarily denying the emancipatory potential of land for the hitherto economically disempowered black population, Hoba's short stories create discursive irony in their portrayal of failed, clueless, and even reluctant black farmers. The irony and ambivalence of ruling party fanatics who support and initially participate in the government's resettlement programme but later give up on it marks the short stories' subtle subversion of the positive state narrative of land in post-2000 Zimbabwe.

A scan of the social, economic, and political context of the Third Chimurenga time-space and the major stylistic and socio-political concerns of Hoba's generation of writers reveals the political and cultural pressures and discourses that I bring to bear in my analysis of Hoba's short stories' engagement with the state's narrative of land. Born in 1983, Hoba is one of the young Zimbabwean writers who are variously identified in literary critical circles as the "third generation," "born free," and, to some extent, "oppositional." Hoba's short stories are part of a twenty-first-century counter-culture that (unlike the twentieth-century works of writers such as Charles Mungoshi, Chenjerai Hove, and Stanley Nyamfukudza) responds to the turn-of-the-century hegemonic reconstruction and rearrangement of nationalism and independence in Zimbabwe.

ZANU PF's post-2000 accentuation of race in its strategic political attempts to close the economic gap between disenfranchised blacks and landed whites was heightened by the party's essentialist binary construction of its supporters as patriots and those opposed to it or its Black empowerment programmes as traitors (Mudavanhu 327). In the post-

2000 period, the ruling party's projection of land reform as the pinnacle of total independence dovetailed with the party's construction of Black resettlement as a form of redemption or salvation (Primorac 435). Blackness or nativity, land, the nation, and the nationalist liberation wars were thus intertwined and the contours of their political meanings circumscribed by the ruling party. This stranglehold on the narrative of the nation, its land, and its people was ultimately a political strategy to insure ZANU PF's position as the only legitimate guardian of the nation.

ZANU PF's urgent need to secure legitimacy and rule was a uniquely post-2000 political task that was triggered inter alia by growing public consternation over the country's cataclysmic economy. Third-generation Zimbabwean writers (including Hoba) were therefore faced with unprecedented challenges shaped by the state's new methods of influencing public opinion, especially on land and its political significance. They had to carve out space for their own voices in a panoptically surveilled political context.[6] Unlike their older counterparts, whose writings had to contend with an overtly racial and brutal colonial system and the restrictive colonial space it maintained, the third-generation writers had to delicately engage with a more complex postcolonial black state without appearing to be anti-independence and therefore traitorous.

Political issues, particularly the struggle to find a voice in which to tell an alternative story of the post-2000 political and economic crisis, were some of their major concerns. The writers, especially in the short story collections edited by Irene Staunton[7] (including *Writing Still: New Stories from Zimbabwe*, *Writing Now: More Stories from Zimbabwe*, *Women Writing Zimbabwe*, and *Writing Free*), search for new ways of renarrating and making sense of the unprecedented post-2000 experience. Edward Chinhanhu's short story "These Are the Days of Our Lives" epitomises these writings in its sketching of symbolic routines in the life of an ordinary man. Read in the historical context of the collapsing economy and the state's defensive rhetoric, the aptly named protagonist Freedom's economic hardships become a palimpsest of alternative experience. Third-generation writers' main interest is recovering a civilian subjectivity and tracing the contours of its evolution outside norma-

tive, state-authored modes of behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions. In the process, political taboos are shattered as writers—including Tendai Huchu in his novel *The Hairdresser of Harare*, Virginia Phiri in her novel *Highway Queen*, and others—explore previously unnarrated and politically incorrect lives of hitherto despised figures such as homosexuals and prostitutes.

III. The Child in Post-2000 Zimbabwean Literature

The child in Zimbabwean fiction of the post-2000 period is both a political and politicised figure. Unlike Hoba's child-focalised stories, much of the child-focused fiction published is stories about them rather than narrated by them. Studies on such literature have mainly focused on how depictions of children as sites of violent performances of masculinised nationalist power destabilize the ruling party's sources of legitimacy, especially the liberation war. Kizito Z. Muchemwa's essay on the "significance of democratic expression in the creation of father-and-child stories" (1) epitomises such studies. Muchemwa reads post-2000 children-father stories in Zimbabwe as symbolically and allegorically reflective of the broader unstable relationship between the self-proclaimed political fathers of the nation (the ruling ZANU PF) and the nation's children (the liberated people). Focusing on the short stories "The Sins of the Fathers" by Charles Mungoshi, "The Grim Reaper's Car" by Nevanji Madanhire, and Freedom Nyamubaya's "That Special Place," Muchemwa notes how children are used to question "a regime that uses fatherhood to foreclose political debate" (1) within a context of the political reinscription of the anti-colonial struggles as "wars of men" (Muchemwa and Muponde xviii). These studies demonstrate how children are artistically expedient in literary engagements with power in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Hoba's stories share much with Christopher Mlalazi's child-narrated novel *Running with Mother* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, which tell haunting narratives of unreconciled ethnic violence and the pleasures and pains of becoming an economic refugee, respectively. However, the texts' thematic concerns are different and so are the aesthetic functions of the child perspective in the two texts. While

Mlalazi and Bulawayo, like Hoba, deploy the child narrator to critically engage with post-2000 socio-economic and political challenges, they avoid the contentious land question and its significance to the national economic quagmire facing the country. In a period marked by political polarisation, the child narrator easily becomes the untainted observer and narrator who can be relied upon to offer an innocent perspective on the unfolding historical moment.

One of the major aspects unique to Hoba's child narrators vis-à-vis their instrumental use in deconstructing the state's self-serving narrative of land is that they not only create a sense of innocent or politically detached judgement but they are also intricately connected to the short stories' satiric counter-discursive approach. This connection is demonstrated in Hoba's inversion of traditional patriarchal configurations of power and agency. Such configurations strategically infantilise and effeminise the ruled (including women, children, and less powerful men) as a way of silencing them. As hinted above, the Zimbabwean state's masculinisation of power is inalienably linked to constructions of political legitimacy as derived from the liberation struggle that is constantly and exclusively claimed by ZANU PF (Primorac 437). In this context, Hoba's child narrators can be read as recuperating hitherto silenced voices and the tinge of satire in their chronicles as problematising the state's conservative politicisation of expressive space. Hoba's child-focalised stories are stylistically fresh in their intervention in efforts to pluralise discourses of land in post-2000 Zimbabwe. In this light, issues around Hoba's specific narrative methods, particularly his transfiguration of the previously silenced (child) voice into a formidable window onto the unseen, are indispensable to an understanding of the short stories' refreshing engagement with the politics of land in post-2000 Zimbabwe.

IV. The "Adult" Child Narrator and the Doomed Third Chimurenga Journey Motif

Hoba's short stories are generally marked by their use of a first-person narrator who is often a child. The question of perspective or point of view is therefore important. A brief theoretical grounding in the aesthetic meaning and function of focalization in fictional narratives is nec-

essay to an understanding of its potential. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's theory of focalisation can help us to decipher the semantic function of the short stories' narrative points of view. For Rimmon-Kenan, focalisation revolves around two important questions: "Who sees?" and "who speaks?" (72). She claims that there is a fundamental difference between the narrator (the one who speaks) and the focalizer (the one who sees) in a story. This also applies to first person narratives that prima facie collapse the distance between narration and perception. This difference best manifests in retrospective first-person narratives in which older narrators relate events that happened in a distant past and were witnessed by their younger selves. Rimmon-Kenan cites the example of *Great Expectations* in which Pip, the child focalizer, is differentiated from the older narrating Pip through, inter alia, the adult narrator's vocabulary which is beyond the child Pip's grasp. Yet the focalizer can also be the narrator, and this is the case in Hoba's short stories. Unlike *Great Expectations*, Hoba's short stories do not give any hints about the temporal distance between events and their narration. This encourages readers to assume that the events are either narrated as they unfold or immediately afterwards. The net effect of this coalescing of the focalizer and narrator is that it produces a truth-like vivid and up-close account of events and characters. The reduced gap between the events and their narration creates the impression that the narrator is not critically reflecting on what he sees and narrates. His "projected teller role" (Margolin 1) is that of the reporter or chronicler who "vouches for the truth of his assertions regarding the narrated" (1).

Writing in a Third Chimurenga epoch in which the dominant political creed demands certain loyalties and a very specific political orientation from specific age groups, yet most of the so-called "born frees" have been associated with the opposition (Mate 109), Hoba's youth is a factor in any attempt to understand the ideological substance of his literary works. Hoba's apparent consciousness of the artistic and political burden of his identity as a "born-free" writer can be inferred from one of his earlier poems, titled "My Politics" and posted on his blog. The poem captures the deep-seated generational antagonism in contemporary Zimbabwean politics:

Farewell
to our destiny
which we have again surrendered
to bitter old men
holding hands
with rehearsed camera smiles
promising us unity
they once shattered. (Hoba, "My Politics" lines 1–8)

The speaker in the poem is defining his/her politics in terms of loss. The lost object—"destiny"—implies a youthful life that can potentially grow and flourish but whose progress is inhibited by "old men." The unappealing description of the cause of the loss foregrounds the age-induced tension that becomes an age-induced political polarisation and conflict. In *The Trek and Other Short Stories*, the age factor manifests itself in the narrative viewpoint, since the short stories are mostly narrated by a child whose sarcasm reveals his detachment from both the "old" people around him and their worldviews.

The first short story in the collection, entitled "The First Trek—The Pioneers," is perhaps the best starting point from which to interrogate Hoba's disruption of dominant notions of land and the land's relationship to the condition of being black and independent in post-2000 Zimbabwe. "The Trek" stories in Hoba's collection form a trilogy in which a black peasant family's history is traced from the moment they leave the unproductive soils of rural communal reserves,[8] through their resettlement on a sugarcane farm taken over by the post-independence government from a white farmer, and their return to the communal reserves after failing to use the farm productively and being evicted by another powerful official. The journey motif operates on a symbolic plane. The various challenges encountered by the narrator's parents as they get entangled in the demands of the farming business reflect the futility of resettlement as a way of economically empowering them. The family ironically finds peace only upon their return to their rural home.

Hoba's alternative conceptualisation of the Third Chimurenga can be easily felt in the narrator's impressions of his family's resettlement

attempts. His subjectivity as he withdraws from the family's initial euphoria at resettling and provides his personal impressions of the family's experiences is heightened by his deft construction as a child. The resettlement appeals to his immature psyche as a simple case of changing houses. There are several aesthetic and thematic implications around this first-person, child-narrative style that bring out the narrator's impression of land reform as well as the short story's subtle inscription of the darker, problematic side of the Third Chimurenga land reform process. In his commentary on his use of the child narrator, Charles Lambert mentions some of the general benefits of the narrative device that are applicable to Hoba's short stories:

> One of the things I'm doing when I choose to use children as the channel through which the narrative is seen is what Henry James did with Maisie;[9] I'm exploiting their clear-sightedness and innocence. Children see everything, but don't necessarily understand any of it. Whether they are protagonists or witnesses, they tend to be one step behind—or to one side of the attentive adult reader, which sets up an interesting narrative gap through which the unsettling elements can squeeze. (qtd. in Njogu 140)

In Hoba's short story "The First Trek," the child narrator sees and reports events in a way that slyly leads readers to perceive the deeper implications of his observations. The gap in the narrator/narrative relationship is heightened by Hoba's admission that, despite favouring a child-centred narrative, his short stories are targeted at an adult or mature audience: "I write for an adult audience. I think it takes much more to be able to communicate effectively with children. The choice was never made deliberately but it became apparent from story to story that the way I expressed myself was more for the adult audience than for children" (qtd. in Musiyiwa). Thus, for Hoba, the child narrator is strategic to a story such as "The First Trek," which engages with issues of national significance such as the land question.

The narrator in "The First Trek" is a child who is used to reinforce the short story's claim to "clear-sightedness" (Lambert qtd. in Njogu 140) in its engagement with ignored or hidden dimensions of the Third

Chimurenga land reforms. Hoba's comments reveal his conscious use of the child narrator as a method of creating specific impressions of the world for adult readers. The child narrator's "clear-sightedness" and "innocence" can earn readers' trust and sympathy and consequently compel them to align their perceptions with his observations. The narrator's stealthy critical gaze and prominence puts him in the category of narrators that Mitchell Leaska calls "narrator-observers" (164). Leaska argues that "[b]ecause the narrator-observer, in reporting his [or her] story, is simultaneously interpreting that story, the reader's response to it and to his [or her] interpretation of it will inevitably be influenced by the impression he [or she] gets of the narrator, himself [or herself]" (164). In "The First Trek," the "interpretation" of the child "narrator-observer" is facilitated by his inherent clear-sightedness.

Zooming in on the narrator's delineation of his new farmer parents, articulated with his innocent, childlike, and keen attention to detail, we can perceive the opportunism that foreshadows the Magudu family's eventual degeneration into forlornly incapable farmers. The family is depicted not only as penniless and overwhelmed by the financial demands of large-scale commercial farming but also as simple peasants without any understanding of what commercial sugarcane farming entails. The family's poverty, the first sign that their impending farming venture will be a disaster, is captured in a telling description of what appears to be their only valuable asset:

> The old scotch-cart makes its way slowly along the old beaten down track. 'JJ Magudu, Zimuto' lies scribbled on both sides in black paint against the dark rotting wood. The inscription must be as old as the wood on which it lies. I do not know who wrote it. Even *Baba* does not know because one day I asked him and he said that only his father, who is dead, knew about it. The axle is almost broken and the old metal wheels, brown with rust, make a squealing sound. (Hoba, *The First Trek* 1; emphasis in original)

While in Zimbabwe's impoverished rural societies the scotch-cart has become a symbol of material worth (revealed by the signature of own-

ership in the inscription "JJ Magudu, Zimuto"), it designates material paucity in view of the Magudu family's newly acquired status as commercial sugarcane farmers. The scotch-cart, depicted as the family's most prized asset, inherited from past generations, is symptomatic of their poverty and under-equipped state—an impression that pervades the short stories to signify the peasants' incapacity and inability to use the acquired land productively.[10]

The narrator's description of his family's economic impoverishment is intricately linked with his depiction of Baba's fecklessness as a father figure and farmer. In the eyes of our trustworthy child narrator, Baba is a repellent, wife-bashing, and lazy patriarch who is entirely out of touch with the basics of commercial farming, let alone the political and ideological significance of the land revolution in which he is a participant. To the curious narrator, Baba's notion of farming consists of inscribing a metal board with an announcement of his takeover as the new owner of the farm. This can be felt in the narrator's childlike, inquisitive exposé of his father's myopic personality, an analysis that unfolds as he sits in the scotch-cart en route to the new farm:

> A metal board leans against the plough, 'Mr BJ Magudu, Black Commercial Farmer, Farm 24' is crudely scribbled in white paint. I have never known Baba wanted to be a commercial farmer. One day he had come home after he had been away for several weeks and told Mhama that he had got a sugarcane farm, together with the farmhouse, that had been acquired by the government. Mhama listened solemnly. I think Baba should have written 'MRS' instead of Mr. He never works in the fields. The farm will be Mhama's to run. . . . I know tomorrow we'll all be busy, Chido and I will be discovering our new home, Mhama will be exploring her fields. Baba will be gallivanting, searching for the farmer who might have brewed a few drums of thick, rich *masese*.[11] (2–3; emphasis in original)

Baba does not make any attempt to learn the farming trade and to him the land revolution ends with his hoisting of the "Black Commercial Farmer" insignia proclaiming his occupancy and ownership of the farm,

not producing from it. Read in the context of Mugabe's 2009 claim that the Third Chimurenga land reforms are "the best thing that could ever have happened to an African country" ("Transcript"), the narrator's sarcastic description and judgment of his resettled father's character indicates Baba's insouciant disposition, which is contrary to the commitment required to make a success of commercial farming. The cynical tone in which the child narrator alerts us to his father's priorities raises questions about his commitment to productively use the land. This cynicism can be inferred from the following quotation:

> Chido cries when no one has hit her but Mama didn't cry when Baba hit her with his hoe handle. Now she can't weed the fields anymore. . . . [T]here are no other children. They all went away when Baba couldn't pay them. Only *sekuru* didn't go. I asked him why he didn't go and get his own farm like Baba did. He did not reply. He just put his hoe down on a pile of dried sugarcane. It's last year's sugarcane. We harvested it when we arrived. Mama has forgotten the old priest now. She doesn't go to church anymore. No one tells her to reap only where she sowed. There are heaps and piles of it. The whole farm. Baba couldn't find a tractor to take it to the mill. He says the *murungu* should have left the tractors. (5; emphasis in original)

This passage typifies the narrator-observer's "innocent" yet loaded and multi-layered gaze. His naïve recall of the basic maxim of God's justice—"reap what you sow" (Galatians 6:7–8)—accentuates personal effort in achieving one's goals in a witty way that leads readers to suspect the moral justice of his parents' harvesting of the evicted white farmer's crops. However, the allusion to the imperative of sowing as the ethical antecedent to reaping not only makes the narrator's parents' reaping of the former white owner's crops unethical but perhaps more importantly recasts their manifest incapacity to sow their own seed ("grow sugarcane") as reflective of the corrupt basis of their land acquisition and impromptu career as commercial sugarcane farmers.

Some of the oft-cited fallacies about the nature and method of the Third Chimurenga land reforms are satirically exposed through the

strong vein of irony that permeates the child narrator's recollections of his interactions with the elderly people around him. This sarcasm can affect readers and guide them to a new, emotional cognisance of them. Here lies the potentially political effect of the short story. If, as Maria Pia Lara iterates, "[n]arratives draw on the materials of everyday life, but, as the stories unfold in the public sphere, they return to and reconfigure life itself" (93), then one can argue that the mockery of land reform in the fictional life-world of "The Trek" can easily be extrapolated onto the real Third Chimurenga life-world.

Autochthony as the basis for black people's rights to commercial land ownership and a source of moral and political justice to displace the white farmer is unsettled by the narrator's sardonic recollection of Baba's excuse for failing to utilise the farm—that is, his lament over the evicted white farmer's tractors. Mhama's excuses for failing at the farm are not spared this ridicule. The narrator recalls her intimating that the only remaining "worker," *sekuru*, who is of Malawian origins, is responsible for their failure with commercial sugarcane farming. She accuses him of "using medicine to make [their] sugarcane fail to grow" because "he liked the *murungu* too much" (Hoba, *The Trek* 4; emphasis in original). The absurdity of Mhama's claim is revealed by the narrator's sympathetic and even intimate profiling of *sekuru* as the only hard worker on the farm (Mhama cannot work because she is recovering from beatings by Baba). Mhama's explanation of the family's failure is ridiculous, especially when read in the context of *sekuru*'s own, more sober version of the Magudus' farming tragedy, revealed in the narrator's reminiscences: "If only Baba had come home with money he got from selling our three oxen and the cow. . . . Maybe if the engines were working, there would be enough water to irrigate the fields. There might be even fertiliser, that's what *sekuru* said the crops needed to grow" (5). Hoba exploits yet another trait typical of children—their impressionability—to create two contrasting narratives of the Magudus' failed farming venture. The competing narratives are recalled by the narrator, with sustained reminders about their antagonistic sources—*sekuru* and Mhama. While the rationality and irrationality of the two narratives, respectively, is apparent, a tinge of sarcasm can be discerned in the narrator's reportage of Mhama's

story. Hoba deploys sarcasm to highlight the futility of a national land resettlement programme premised on autochthony and whose beneficiaries lack the necessary commercial farming expertise. Not only is he suspicious about Mhama's claim that she saw *sekuru* performing witchcraft rituals to stunt their crops but he also remembers *sekuru*'s more sensible version of the story of the sugarcane's stunted growth which effectively mocks Mhama's version. However, beyond illuminating the absurdity of Mhama's story, the narrator's urge to remember *sekuru*'s alternative tale may be read on a symbolic plane as correlating to the short story's intransigent attitude toward the empirical Third Chimurenga's attempts to entrench a positive and consistent narrative of the post-2000 land reforms.

While the injured Mhama and the gallivanting Baba have only their nativity for justification to occupy the farm that they immediately run down, the narrator constantly alerts readers to other able, hardworking people such as *sekuru* and the white farmer. The exoticised (such as *sekuru* and the white farmer) are jettisoned out of the autochthonously conceived land and citizenship even though they are more capable of efficiently utilising the land. To a perceptive reader, Baba and Mhama are not just ordinary failures and *sekuru* and the *murungu* are not ordinary victims. When read in the context of the Third Chimurenga mantra, epitomised by ZANU PF's signature line during the 2000 election, "the land is the economy and the economy is the land,"[12] Mhama and Baba's failure as new farmers and comical sense of their new ownership of the farm exposes the unreliability of the autochthonous premise of the land revolution.

VI. Uncultured "Revolutionaries" and the Tragedy of the Third Chimurenga

Hoba's portrayal of new black farm owners and depictions of their lives on the resettlement farms evince an unsavoury picture of land reform. Whereas "The Trek" deploys a child narrator whose innocent gaze satirically exposes his parents' farming ineptitude, Hoba's short story "Maria's Independence" is narrated from the point of view of a young adult who is participating in the forceful takeovers of white-owned farms. The

nameless narrator describes life on the acquired farms with an ironic tone that reflects his excitement at participating in a "third revolution" (5) while simultaneously exposing the foibles of his own and his fellow land invaders' conduct. A constant sense of guilt pervades the narrator's reminiscence of his experiences and ushers in his self-indictment. The overarching impression is that the land occupiers have a narrow understanding of the meaning and value of land. As the narrator discovers, some of his colleagues simply become too enthralled by the adventure of dispossessing white owners to care about the economic significance and value of the land to their lives: "For on the farms we had rekindled the old spirits. We started holding all night *pungwes*[13] as in the liberation struggle. This was the third revolution and had to be treated as such if we were to fully understand what it was all about. For there were some who only understood what they'd involved themselves in after more than three months on the farms" (5; emphasis in original). The narrator's split attitude about the land invasions leads him to subconsciously condemn it in the very act of praising it. The allusion to *pungwes* that "rekindle" the spirit of liberation invites us to read the farm occupiers' "third revolution" as a teleological culmination of the previous two revolutions.[14] Herein lies the irony in the narrator's excitement and inclination to imagine the land invasions as a reincarnation of the old liberation struggle. As the narrator tells us, some of the "revolutionaries" take up to three months to come to terms with the meaning of their presence on the farms. To a conscious reader who is aware of both the "hero-centred narrative" (Primorac 437) of the Third Chimurenga and the high levels of commitment and sacrifice required of liberation struggle combatants, the narrator's generation of happy-go-lucky "revolutionaries" are opportunistic impostors who (ab)use the history of the liberation struggle as a smokescreen to conceal their pillaging.

The narrative voice in "Maria's Independence" betrays the subconscious rationality that pervades the narrator's recollections of his experiences in the farms. This produces an air of subtle irony and light humour that amplifies his impressions of the land occupiers' uncouth approach to their new function and status. The following extract illustrates the constant ambivalence in the narrative voice:

> As time passed, people began to falter. The farms were not the paradise we'd thought them to be. There were no schools or clinics. We had neither the strength of our ancestors nor the machinery of our ancestors' enemies. What had once been there had long been stolen. . . . Even the [wild] animals that had kept us clinging on disappeared one by one. Those who now found game and firewood scarce simply moved deeper into the farmlands where they remained in abundance, or did until we arrived. We had unknowingly become the bad custodians of our ancestors' wealth. (Hoba, *The Trek* 6)

There are two fluctuating selves in the narrator's voice that are woven through the narrative of "Maria's Independence." The first and more overt one is shaped by his radical nationalism and informs his naïve participation in the violent Third Chimurenga land reforms. This blind fellowship exists in an unstable relationship with the second self—a more subterranean, introspective self that persistently pops up to ridicule the violent nationalist self, leaving no doubt as to where our sympathies should lie. In the passage above, the narrator is visibly torn between a feeling of restraint spurred by his conscience and a "revolutionary" demand for *jambanja* in the land acquisitions. His better judgment, typified by his covert expression of scorn at the environmental devastation that he and his colleagues have wrought, constantly lurks behind his preoccupation with the excitement of the land occupation. In the process, a conflict between his violent farm invader self and his moral and rational self ensues. This internal psychological instability between the narrator's subconscious rationality and conscious participation in a specious land revolution encourages a suspicion of his participation in it. The narrator reflects on his past moments of preposterous fanaticism with a sense of self-reproach and awareness of the contemptibility of his conduct.

Obviously, the trivialisation of what is supposed to be a critical phase of the decolonising Chimurenga legacy in "Maria's Independence" conflicts with the veneration[15] of the Third Chimurenga land reforms in the state's empirical grand narrative of land reform epitomised by

Mugabe's *Inside the Third Chimurenga*. In such official narratives and in the evolving oeuvre of Third Chimurenga land reform-endorsing literary narratives cited above, land reform acquires a special eminence as the outstanding issue in black people's realisation of total independence. However, reading through the short story "Maria's Independence" as guided by the reminiscing voice of the first person narrator, one forms a more cynical impression of land reform, especially because of the unappealing portrayal of its enactors and supporters. Without directly engaging or criticising the empirical Third Chimurenga land reforms, "Maria's Independence" builds a life-world that depicts unpleasant agents of the land revolution whose reckless and wanton disposition can move readers to a "demystifying consciousness" (Foulkes 59) of dominant narratives. Readers are consequently led to reimagine land reform outside and beyond the perceptible hegemonic inflations of the Third Chimurenga mystique.

Besides presenting an apparently miscreant yet surreptitiously sagacious narrator who is a beneficiary of the land takeovers and proclaims the downside of his farm occupations, "Maria's Independence" uses situational irony and humour to shock readers into realising the incongruity of the farm occupiers' penchant for trivia and their portrayal in the state's grand narrative as evidence of black economic empowerment. In the light-humoured tone he uses to describe his group's violent farm occupations, the narrator sarcastically reveals the violence that accompanies his group's land acquisitions. The story briefly switches to poetry:

> The Masses,
> With clenched fists
> Swept us onto the farms
> there we all met with neither hoe, tractor, plough, seed nor cow . . . for after many years of independent bondage, we sprang up to the ancestors' beckoning to return to the land, their land, our land. Lost through the barrel, won through the barrel. (Hoba, *The Trek* 4)

Implicit in the response to the "ancestors' beckoning to return to the land" is the use of violence, symbolised here by the barrel of the gun and

the clenched fist of violent liberation nationalism. Fanon argues that decolonization "cannot come as a result of . . . friendly understanding [and] is always a violent phenomenon" (33). However, the sceptically humorous tone with which the narrator describes his excitement at violently reclaiming the farms "with neither hoe, tractor, plough, seed nor cow" dissuades us from perceiving his violence as connected to any form of liberation. The violence-infested farms in "Maria's Independence" become a jungle, once more, and the fittest survive as the "third revolution" creed takes precedence over the country's formal laws. The ironically self-indicting description of the farms by the narrator of the short story "Having My Way" reminds us of the state-endorsed *jambanja*: "The justice of the farms was instant. The liberation war creed reigned—we refused to recognise the slow colonial justice system adopted by our government. We beat up thieves . . . and severely beat or killed suspected sell-outs of the revolution" (20). In his praise of the violence of the land acquisitions, the narrator unconsciously criminalizes the land resettlements.

Closely related to the violence topos in the narrative of the "third revolution" in *The Trek and Other Stories* is the recurring motif of chaos. The narrators in Hoba's short stories are peculiarly keen on relating the native land occupiers' appetite for trifling behaviour, disorder, and lasciviousness as well as depicting the entirely anarchic nature of their land takeovers. The land occupiers' inclination to the "*pungwe*" practice, "*kongonya*,"[16] and "*masese brew*" (which pervades most of the short stories), identifies them not with the state narrative's "patriotic" nationalists who embrace the Third Chimurenga land revolution as the culmination of the Chimurenga struggle but with a buffoonery that reveals them as ordinary, lawless thugs and clowns seeking the temporal pleasures of dispossessing and owning. In "Maria's Independence," for instance, the land occupiers are depicted as obscenely hypersexual, constantly lusting after women and taking turns at stalking Maria each time she goes to bathe in the river. The male farm occupiers concentrate more energy on outmanoeuvring each other to win over Maria than on commercial farming.

Adding to the chaotic image of the farm occupations in Hoba's short stories is the land occupiers' constant fear of losing even their newly

acquired land to other, more powerful blacks. The fear is informed by some of the land occupiers' scepticism about the tenability and sustainability of the land revolution. As the narrator in "Maria's Independence" says: "Some [land occupiers] had left their wives behind, either in the cities or in the sandy reserves, unsure of when someone with more power would come to chase them off the land and tell them to look for more unclaimed land" (Hoba, *The Trek* 6). In "The Second Trek" (a sequel to "The First Trek"), the child narrator's characteristic attention to detail reveals the callous eviction of his family from their new farm by a political figure whose identity and status is reinforced by the narrator's habit of remembering and identifying people by their physical appearance: "[H]e [*sekuru*] seems unperturbed by the big *mesidhisi-bhenzi* [Mercedes Benz] parked outside the field. There is a man with a big stomach standing beside it. Maybe if Baba worked hard he would also have a stomach like that" (29; emphasis in original). The Mercedes Benz and the big stomach are, in fact, symbolic motifs commonly used by Zimbabwean writers to evoke the wide material gap between corrupt politicians and the impoverished masses.[17] Baba's eventual loss of the farm is therefore predicated on his lack of political connectedness. The "third revolution" is effectively reduced to a mere political play wherein the political "small fish" such as Baba are used by the big ones as expendable "foot soldiers" to "break in"—as Baba literally "broke" into the white farmer's farmhouse (28)—only to lose the farm to the more powerful and politically connected man.

VII. Conclusion

Linda Hutcheon asserts that creative literature "force[s] the reader (not overtly ask[s] him) to create a fictive imaginative world separate from the empirical one in which he lives" (211). The fictive world constructed in Hoba's *The Trek and Other Stories* reveals a complex yet close relationship with the empirical one, functioning as a subtle critique of the Third Chimurenga land reforms and their supporting discourses. The short stories' subtly dissenting attitude towards state rhetoric that projects black land ownership as the ultimate sign of total decolonisation reveals a fascinating element of post-2000 literary imaginations of land and

nation. In the context of the state's politically motivated circumscription of land and national identity highlighted above, Hoba's portrayals of the child's "honest" gaze and the hesitant, new black land owners foregrounds an alternative perspective, experience, and narrative of land. The satirical depiction of irresolute ruling party supporters evokes a sense of ambivalence that encourages readers not only to suspect the racial basis of their resettlement but to imagine other ways of liberation outside the state's teleological connection of black people's acquisition of land to the legacy of past liberation wars and independence. Beyond disrupting the state's monolithic narrative of land and defying political pressure to toe the state's line, Hoba's short stories demonstrate the subtlety with which post-2000 fictional texts critically engage with the politically motivated erasures, inflations, or misrepresentations that characterise the state's historiography of land in post-2000 Zimbabwe.

Notes

1 The Zimbabwean economic crisis can be dated back to 14 November 2007, known as "Black Friday." The Zimbabwe dollar lost over seventy percent of its value against the US dollar. The debate on the causes of the currency crash are inconclusive, but many scholars (Lahiff and Cousins; Kadenge and Mavhunga) attribute it to a combination of the failure of economic policies supported by the International Monetary Fund, Zimbabwe's unbudgeted payment of gratuities to war veterans, and the country's military involvement in the Second Congo War in 1998.

2 The Third Chimurenga (third liberation struggle) refers to the post-2000 land reforms in Zimbabwe. The earlier two Zvimurenga (plural form of Chimurenga), fought between 1896 and 1897 and 1966 and 1979, were armed struggles against colonial rule.

3 Officially known as the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) and informally (and perhaps intimately) as the Third Chimurenga, the land reforms started in 2000 after a national referendum rejected the ZANU PF government-sponsored new constitution which sought to inter alia institute the compulsory acquisition without compensation of white-owned farms for the resettlement of black people. The timing of the land reforms (when ZANU [PF]'s popularity was dramatically waning, as evidenced by the party's near loss to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change in the 2000 general elections) has led some scholars (Sachikonye; Addison and Laasko) to insinuate that the land reform programme was part of a grand strategy to shore up ZANU PF's political relevance and legitimacy.

4 Apart from print media, which has a significant number of independent media houses, the more efficient (in terms of ease of circulation) electronic media are dominated by state-owned/related owners. This stranglehold on electronic media has ensured wider space for enhanced circulation of propaganda on the land reforms through the use of jingles. One of the most popular of these jingles, entitled "Rambai makashinga" ["Remain Steadfast"], adjured Zimbabweans to remain steadfast in the face of the crisis, rejoicing at the final conclusion of the land question "*ivhu zvarauya*" ["now that the land has been reclaimed"].

5 *Jambanja* is a slang code name for the countrywide forceful acquisition of white-owned land by ruling ZANU PF supporters led by the veterans of the liberation war. The land takeovers started in 2001 just after the government's constitutional draft meant to legalise compulsory appropriations of white-owned land was rejected in a referendum.

6 Several pieces of legislation were crafted in the post-2000 period that curtailed the creation and circulation of alternative perspectives on the country's political situation. The commonly cited pieces of legislation are the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act of 2002, which constrained liberties on accessing and circulating certain information, especially through the media, and the Public Order and Security Act, which criminalised group organisation against government decisions and policies.

7 Staunton co-owns Weaver Press, one of the most productive publishers in the post-2000 period.

8 Also known as the Tribal Trust Lands, these are black settlements that are largely a product of the colonial Land Apportionment Act of 1930 which reserved much of the productive land for whites and condemned black families into areas with poor soils.

9 Henry James' novel *What Maisie Knew* (1897) uses first-person narration to tell the story of the experiences of a young girl of divorced parents.

10 The issue of what is and is not productive use of land is a hotly contested area in discourses on land reform in post-2000 Zimbabwe. A conventional economic point of view perceives productive use in terms of financial figures. However, as Hanlon et al. note, the very fact of black ownership of land suggests (especially in ZANU PF circles) a successful reversal of colonialism, making it a sign of productive use of land in its own political way.

11 *Masese* is a name given to all types of traditional beer brews.

12 This was also the theme of ZANU (PF)'s 2000 election manifesto. The manifesto placed the then ongoing seizures of white-owned farms at the centre of the party's nationalist strategy to indigenise the national economy and empower blacks.

13 The all-night political vigils—a combination of entertainment and political indoctrination—were popular during the liberation war.

14 See Primorac 436. Among other grievances, the First Chimurenga and the Second Chimurenga were primarily fought to reverse the colonial land system, which favoured whites.

15 This reverential attitude towards land reform is encapsulated not only in such claims as Mugabe's statement that the Third Chimurenga land reform is "the best thing that could ever happen to an African country" ("Transcript") but also in an academic work by Hanlon, Manjengwa, and Smart. ZANU PF's "Reason 21" in ZANU PF's propaganda booklet *100 Reasons to Vote ZANU PF and Cde Robert Mugabe* suggests that land reform "means uplifting the poor [black] segments of society to levels where they become active participants in the veins and arteries of the national economy."

16 A sexually charged dance that was popularised by the Chimurenga *pungwe* virgils.

17 Literary texts that use the symbols of the big stomach or Mercedes Benz to depict the material differences between politicians and their constituencies include Musengezi's satirical play *The Honourable MP*, Chingono's short stories in *Not Another Day*, and Huchu's novel *The Hairdresser of Harare.*

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