

“White Man Crawling”: Time, Race and Power in John Eppel’s Depiction of Middle-aged and Elderly Whites during the Zimbabwean “Crisis”

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Summary

This article applies Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, in conjunction with a rights-reading approach, to John Eppel’s fiction, with particular reference to Eppel’s depiction of middle-aged and elderly whites during the Zimbabwean “crisis”. Taken at one level to mean the organisation of value-laden space-time in a literary text, and also at another level, the spatio-temporal relationship between a text and its socio-historical context, the chronotope emerges as a useful concept in analysing polarised racial relationships that characterised Zimbabwe during its “crisis” period. While the *Chimurenga* chronotope is a cyclical representation of time whose racialising strategy depersonalises whites as constant foes and strangers rendered in a permanent war narrative, Eppel responds in his fiction, particularly through the chronotopes of ageing and reversal, by delineating an array of white subjectivities characterised by physical infirmity and loss of socio-political power, to challenge the homogenisation and vilification of whites.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is ’n toepassing van Bakhtin se konsep van die chronotoop, tesame met ’n regte-lees-benadering tot John Eppel se fiksie, met spesifieke verwysing na Eppel se uitbeelding van middeljarige en bejaarde witmense tydens die Zimbabwiese “krisis”. Die chronotoop wat op een vlak die organisering van waardebelaaië ruimte-tyd in ’n literêre teks kan beteken, en op ’n ander vlak, ook die tydruimtelike verwantskap tussen ’n teks en die sosiohistoriese konteks daarvan, kom na vore as ’n nuttige konsep in die ontleding van gepolariseerde rasseverhoudinge wat kenmerkend van Zimbabwe wys tydens die “krisis”-tydperk. Hoewel die *Chimurenga*-chronotoop ’n sikliese voorstelling van tyd is, waarvan die rassifiseringstrategie wittes ontpersoonlik as konstante vyande en vreemdelinge wat in ’n permanente oorlog-vertelling weergegee word, reageer Eppel in sy fiksie, veral deur die chronotope van veroudering en vernietiging, deur ’n verskeidenheid wit subjektiwiteite wat gekenmerk word deur fisieke afgeleefdheid en verlies van sosiopolitieke mag, uit te beeld om die homogenisering en beswadding van witmense te betwis.

Introduction

Contemporary Zimbabwean fiction, including John Eppel's, evinces a strong relational sense of time in which authors respond directly to socio-political events as they unfold and, in the process, inevitably dialogue with history. Some titles of novels, collections of short stories and poems, for example, can be read as running commentaries on Zimbabwe's socio-political life over time, expressing by turns protest, resilience, dejection, resolve, and at times hope for change (Ndlovu 2017). To generate a nuanced reading of Eppel's work, itself heavily punctuated by ideas of human temporality in the form of ageing and death, as well as transience of phenomena in general, this article embraces Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the literary chronotope to perform a rights-reading of Eppel's work. The need to use the literary chronotope in tandem with a rights-reading approach will become apparent shortly. First, though, is the need to briefly explain the two concepts.

Bakhtin's notion of the literary chronotope is based on its literal meaning – “time-space”, a mathematical concept borrowed from Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity which propounds the inextricable link of space and time. Broadly understood, chronology cannot be separated from events and events naturally unfold in time. Hence, time is inseparable from events, their order, the manner of their understanding, and narration. In one sense then, and in Bakhtin's (1981: 84) words, the chronotope is “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”. Following this logic, different literary genres operate with different arrangements of time and space, which further gives each genre its specific narrative character, themes, structures and characters. Bakhtin illustrates this expansively in his essay, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1981) in which he discusses the chronotope in terms of genre, motifs and other literary categories.

Literary chronotopes carry within them, emotions and values, given that literary texts are themselves temporal, grounded in specific socio-historical contexts with their own understandings of time and space. As Bakhtin (1981: 243) remarks, “[i]n literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values.” Thus, chronotope contains evaluation of time and space from a certain point of view, as pointed out by Holquist (2002: 153) who adds that chronotope is thus “a term, then, that brings together not just two concepts, but four: a time, plus its value; and a space, plus its value”. Chronotope as a tool for examining the space-time relations also extends beyond textual analysis to life as lived, meaning that chronotope is “an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring” (Holquist 1981: 426).

If chronotopes are intrinsically punctuated by or express values of one kind or another, for scholars such as Steinby (2013: 122), “chronotopes are primarily not categories of cognition but of the possibilities of human action”, given that they “open up to the characters a certain time-space of possible action, which is conditioned by a locality or a social situation but still leaves the individual the freedom of ethical choice”. The view of chronotope as an ethical category ties in with the discourse of human rights and the rights-reading approach employed in this article. Human rights can be said to be moral and legal rules, particularly in their insistence on unalienable rights such as the right to life, liberty and dignity. The discourse and practice of human rights both offer us a “moral vocabulary” (McClennen & Slaughter 2009: 1) to discuss oppression in literature or life in more or less the same way that chronotopes contain and invite moral or ethical evaluations. Rights-reading, therefore, demands an ethical and committed reading, because any human-rights based inquiry or undertaking “no matter how elegant it is, that considers it irrelevant or does not entail the importance of how to right wrongs is a hollow rhetoric that deserves our hermeneutical suspicion (Ilesanmi 2011: 455).

Informed by the concept and practice of human rights, rights-reading is a time-conscious and self-reflexive approach which is always mindful of the fact that humanness has never been a “given” or obvious (Goldberg & Moore 2012: 222). Instead, humanness is a time-framed quality that can be accorded or withdrawn. This approach, therefore, does not place one set of people above others in terms of their humanness. Rather, it reads the mechanisms that make humanness possible. This article employs a rights-reading approach with insights from the time-conscious concept of the chronotope to understand the fluidity of being human. Thus, rights-reading is a potent interdisciplinary enterprise that engages with concepts of the human and rights from diverse positionalities and historical moments, always putting at the centre a rights-bearing subject with full humanity but exposed to the vagaries of time and space. Its main focus is to tease out the deployment of the term “human” by posing some questions: who has been accorded the status of a “full” human (Messer 1993: 222), who has had it revoked or partially bestowed, *when* and *why*? Rights-reading privileges context, just as Bakhtin’s chronotope does. For example, Bakhtin (1981) argues that all meanings, even abstract ones, become comprehensible only in a given context, which is invariably situated in time-space. Just as human rights are about “what should be” (Twiss 2005: 226), rights-reading is equally aspirational as it seeks, through its ethical approach, to “re-humanize” (Davis 2013: 102).

Having said that, some have argued that the conception of modern human rights along with their institutions and ways of looking at the world have a “westcentric history” (Goldberg & Moore 2012: 3). Following this view, human rights discourse, particularly its portrayal of postcolonial contexts, is seen as “Western interventionism” in which “human rights activism [is] the

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West’s current civilizing mission” in the recycling of “imperialist discourse” (Szeghi 2012: 245). Admittedly, ideas and practices of human rights are not perfect, are culturally relative and thus open to contestation. Nonetheless, human rights, in this case through rights-reading of literature using the lens of the chronotope, can give us ethical or moral language to analyse polarised socio-political situations such as Zimbabwe’s “crisis” moment, deeply dissected by contesting forms of identity.

Chronotopic Reading of the Zimbabwean “Crisis”, Whiteness in Zimbabwe and Human Rights Literature

A chronotopic reading provides an avenue to explore the mediated relationship between art and life (Holquist 2002). The encoding of time in fiction is indissolubly linked to the writer’s literary intent, for he/she exists in a particular time-space. It is necessary, therefore, to do a chronotopic reading of the “crisis” period, the three *Chimurengas* or wars of liberation (also referred to in this article as *Chimurenga*-time, following Bakhtinian terminology), John Eppel’s stature in Zimbabwean writing, whiteness in the *Chimurenga* chronotope, and finally the genre of human rights literature which, this article argues, is embraced by Eppel. All of these aspects are connected and their space-time configurations as experienced or imagined in actual life are artistically embellished and give rise to an identifiable genre, certain narrative structures, themes, chronotopes, and smaller chronotopical scenes and motifs.

The Zimbabwean “crisis” which is given the calendar dates 1998-2009 was not a “mono-crisis” but “crises” (Chiumbu & Musemwa 2012: ix). To speak of that period is to reference the defining issues of that moment: land and property rights, human rights and constitutionalism, political violence, opposition politics, the role of Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF in all these matters, and most importantly race in Zimbabwe. This period created a vortex of politically polarised and racialised narratives of confrontation that culminated in a crisis of human values and rights, particularly the most basic right – the right “to be human and to remain human” (Baxi 1997: 3).

It is impossible to understand this period without unpacking the *Chimurenga* chronotope as conceived and deployed by the ruling party, ZANU-PF. This chronotope embodies, from ZANU-PF’s point of view, Zimbabwe’s key historical moments around land dispossession and reclamation, two historical events that have become cornerstones in the narration of Zimbabwean history and the country’s artistic expressions. *Chimurenga*-time is cyclical. It starts with the colonial encounter of dispossession, repression and exploitation of black people by white colonists. Then follows the protracted armed liberation struggle for land, political freedom, social justice, peace, human rights and dignity. This happened between the mid-1960s and 1979 and has come to be

known as the Second *Chimurenga*, the First *Chimurenga* having been waged by both the Ndebele and the Shona in 1893 and then in 1896-1897. The Second *Chimurenga* was an armed struggle and is significant for its legacy of violent war rhetoric and practice, both assimilated into the Third *Chimurenga* or crisis period. According to *Chimurenga*-time, particularly through Robert Mugabe as its chief spokesperson, the country's economic collapse during the "crisis" was yet another form of aggression by the West, geared towards recolonisation of the country with the help of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and Zimbabwean whites, designated as Britain's "kith and kin". In this logic, time had come full circle, necessitating another war with the usual enemies, for total emancipation. The *Chimurenga* chronotope also suggests that the "characters" in this debacle have fixed identities: whites were their usual racist, supremacist and stubborn selves, while Robert Mugabe was still the same principled, battle-hardened freedom fighter with all black people's interests at heart.

Chimurenga-time silenced key events outside its narration, including gross human rights abuses and ill-advised economic decisions that led to the years of crisis. For example, a finer post-colonial time line reveals that between 1982 and 1987 there was *Gukurahundi* or state-led massacres in Matabeleland which resulted in the death of at least 20 000 civilians (Ncube 2018). This started the Mugabe regime's seasons of, to borrow from Ncube (2018: 41), "disinfection and purgation", given the propensity by the ruling ZANU-PF government to frame dissenting voices as constituting "dirt, filth and undesirability". Most of Mugabe's reign, this article argues, constituted seasons of state violence or terrorism against dissenting citizens, that is, those on the wrong side of cyclical *Chimurenga*-time. *Gukurahundi* was followed by Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 1990s, which started the country's economic decline. Then followed the Third *Chimurenga* or "crisis", after the government paid unbudgeted gratuities to war veterans in 1999, followed by violent state-sponsored farm invasions. The delayed Lancaster House Agreement on land redistribution caught up with the government much quicker than it had anticipated. There was also the challenge from the MDC which, for the first time in ZANU-PF's reign, threatened ZANU-PF's power.

There is contestation, however, over whether the Third *Chimurenga* was a *Chimurenga* or a crisis of legitimacy which ZANU-PF won by manipulating the past, what Terrence Ranger (2005: 217) calls "rule by historiography". Such contestations, expressed on diverse platforms, including cultural expressions such as literature, remind us that because of inherent axiological elements, the same time-space can be perceived and responded to differently. This is true of Eppel's work which writes against *Chimurenga*-time by representing time as moving forward, as marked in quotidian details of characters' ageing and death. Politically, Eppel reflects on change of government. In his fiction, as reflected in *Absent: The English Teacher* (2009)

(subsequently titled *Absent*), political change results in reversals of power and prestige – the erstwhile white oppressor becomes not only a vassal but the despised when power shifts to a few powerful blacks in the ruling party.

Accordingly, it is useful to comment on Eppel’s stature in Zimbabwean writing as it is crucial to our understanding of whiteness, state violence and human rights. Eppel is a prolific writer with six novels to his name, five poetry books, three short story compilations, and one play. In spite of his prodigious output, he has never won a writing prize in Zimbabwe but has won two notable ones in neighbouring South Africa. He is not recognised in Zimbabwe because, first, he is white. Writing by white Zimbabweans tends to be marginalised in the country. This is because some of those behind canon formation “adopt a black nationalist-cum-socialist ideological approach to Zimbabwean literature in line with prevailing state-centric ideology” (Tagwirei 2011: ii). Under this system, issues raised by white writers are thought to be irrelevant or tinged with racism. The second reason for Eppel’s marginalisation is that he has always been critical of ZANU-PF, particularly over *Gukurahundi* and endemic corruption in government. Since literary awards are directly controlled by the government, Eppel becomes disadvantaged.

Eppel describes himself as a humanist whose work expresses “moral outrage” (Shaw 2012: 106) over all forms of inhumanity. Part of what led to a rights-reading of Eppel’s work is a reluctance by virtually all critics to closely analyse the “human” in white Zimbabwean writing, a stance that can be seen as refusal to acknowledge the genre that Eppel works in or the full humanity of Zimbabwean whites. The fate of white Zimbabweans, particularly the middle-aged and elderly, is linked to colonial experiences of white dominance and supremacy, resulting in constructions of phenotypical whiteness and ideas of whiteness “amounting to much the same thing” as colonialism (Tagwirei & De Cock (2015: 184). Antoinette D’amant (2015: 175) puts it succinctly when she writes: “As a white person of European ancestry in South Africa, I am a walking reminder of colonialism and racism and all it is associated with – a history of conquests, dominance, alien rule, and the humiliation of conquered people”. In Zimbabwe, particularly as expressed in ZANU-PF’s *Chimurenga* chronotope, “whites are constantly reminded that they are the wrong colour. They were and are on the wrong side of history, having benefitted wittingly and unwittingly from colonial-ism. All whites find themselves painted with the same brush of contempt and condemnation” (Tagwirei & De Cock 2015: 186). When one looks at each calendar year in Zimbabwe, it is punctuated by national holidays imbued with war rhetoric which easily morphs into anti-whiteness, melding colonial and post-colonial moments to feed everyday imaginations of self and belonging and in the process valorising ZANU-PF and demonising whites, amongst others (Mpofu 2017).

Undeniably, no white person can be freely decoupled from the system of white power and privilege. But to homogenise and vilify Zimbabwean whites who have in the last 15 years lost their power and privilege, whose numbers have dwindled due to death and outmigration, is to naturalise the negative colonial aspects of whiteness and refuse to acknowledge the movement of time and events in the country. Eppel signals this anachronistic construction by mocking this homogenisation, by first ironically agreeing to it and then challenging it. In *Absent* (2009), the main character's name is George Jorge George. He is in his early sixties and, apart from the variation in the spelling of his middle name, has the same name repeated three times as if to underline that he is a type. The name is reminiscent of the slang for linguistic competence in the English language, as in the question "Can you George?" The language in this instance mutates into British nationality, which further morphs into Europeanness and then whiteness in general. Hence, the character George declares: "I am a synecdoche of whiteness, of Europeanness" (Eppel 2009: 30). His captor, Beauticious Nyamakununa, the government Minister's mistress, shares the same view as the ruling party, that George and his "kith and kin" in "England and America" (31) are responsible for the collapse of the Zimbabwean economy. However, "George's kith and kin, what little he knew of them originated somewhere in Eastern Europe, possibly Lithuania, possibly Estonia, possibly the land of the blood-sucking vampire, Count Dracula" (31). Eppel is hinting at how white Zimbabweans have been reduced to rigid types or symbols and also demonised, owing largely to the cyclical and schematic chronotope of *Chimurenga* in which whites are frozen as permanent and foreign foes whose power is derived from the past.

During and after the "Zimbabwean Crisis", Eppel, like other Zimbabwean writers, has had to use, consciously or not, a particular genre from which to write his Zimbabwean whiteness – a position of decline, persecution and precarity. He has embraced the genre of human rights literature to challenge spatio-temporal discourses of ZANU-PF that do not only conceive of whites as perpetual strangers but also enemies with a fixed colonial psyche. A tradition of human rights literature, by which is meant "a critical ascription of similarities among works produced under analogous experiences of human rights restrictions and violations, loss, and post-crisis rebuilding" (Galchinsky 2016: 6), can be traced by the critic, although the writers identified as belonging to this genre may not be self-consciously writing themselves into the tradition. Eppel's work is part of a body of Zimbabwean works that Irikidzayi Manase (2016: 132) describes as "the rise of a literary trend focusing on advocacy and human rights narration in contemporary Zimbabwean literary production". This type of writing is not peculiar to whites.

To understand what human rights literature is, it is best to first describe the conditions under which it emerges and the general aims it exhibits. Human rights literature arises in situations where the humanity of one or several groups of people is being diminished; that is, it arises from contexts where

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key aspects of human rights such as safety, freedom and dignity are violated. Literary narratives of human rights, then, are stories that bear witness to extreme suffering. As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith put it,

Stories enlisted within and attached to a human rights framework are particular kinds of stories – strong, emotive stories often chronicling degradation, brutalization, exploitation, and physical violence; stories that testify to the denial of subjectivity and loss of group identities.

(2004: 4)

Part of the aim of writing such stories, therefore, is reclamation of humanity or humanness. In addition to writing resistance to abuses of power, human rights literature writes against the inhumane or what Judith Butler (2006: 1661) calls the “monstrous”. It is above all an ethical kind of literature that writes against the forgetting of human commonalities.

Writing Against the *Chimurenga* Chronotope

In writing against the *Chimurenga* chronotope, Eppel uses two counter chronotopes, that of ageing and reversal. Eppel depicts ageing in three ways. The first is a linear temporal process that inexorably moves forward with the expected key characteristics of physical debilitation, loneliness and death. This can also be called the chronotope of the everyday. Eppel also portrays ageing as heavily punctuated by loss of socio-economic power for whites, in the form of farm seizures, loss of family due to economic migrancy of the young, and loss of pensions to hyper-inflation. This is called the chronotope of reversal because the resulting penury in some instances, such as that of George in *Absent* (2009), leads to white vassalage. In another instance, whites desperate to keep their farms have to grovel, as depicted in the titular story “Whiteman Crawling” (2008), an example also of inverted racial hierarchy. In both instances, a subtheme under ageing and whiteness is state brutality.

As mentioned above, Eppel deploys several subthemes of ageing to counter *Chimurenga*-time. Under the subtheme of the everyday, Eppel depicts characters going about their daily lives, doing mundane things such as taking a walk. Under this time-space, Eppel breaks down routine tasks into small, repetitive bits to contrast the grand and gladiatorial time-space of *Chimurenga*. This is captured, for example, in the short story “White Man Walking” in which the narrator recounts wordless encounters with a “recently retired” white man “striding long, muscular legs, one slightly thinner and less muscular than the other” (22). As time goes, the walking man’s dog ages and dies. He is reduced by age to almost an invalid:

The once challenging stride had been reduced to a shuffle. When he saw me he smiled sheepishly and tried to straighten his back, but only his dewlap

reacted. He was streaming saliva, and his eyes were lustreless. But there he was, on the pedestrian track between Ruskin Road and the Hillside school playing field, shuffling along in slippers and pyjamas, and a cordless dressing gown.

The quotidian details are a form of individualisation, highlighting the vulnerability of the old, irrespective of race. This technique in most human rights inspired literature underlines characters' humanness. One is reminded of a similar technique in the South African play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (Fugard, Kani & Ntshona 1986) in which fine details regarding family life, especially memorialisation through photographs, is a way of reclaiming the humanness that apartheid denied blacks. This technique climaxes in Sizwe's outburst in which he rhetorically asks if he is not a man in form (he mentions having a head, eyes, strong arms and legs) and behaviour (he mentions his ability to work and status as a father of children). This example, together with the vignettes of ageing in Eppel's work, constitute what in extremely oppressive time-spaces can be read as begging to be human.

The pernicious effects of Chimurenga-time on everyday Zimbabwean life are illustrated by Eppel in the story "The Lunch Hour" published in the collection *The Caruso of Collen Bawn* (Eppel 2004). Misheck, the gardener, represents one possible reaction from poor blacks on whom ZANU-PF has successfully used *Chimurenga*-time as a tool of mobilisation against whites. The story illustrates how the continued use of the language of confrontation and denigration has come to mark interracial relations on a daily basis, with the result that such relations can be said to be crippled and inhumane. Mrs Bangle, well over 70 years, returns from a shopping trip and hoots at her gate ten minutes before the end of lunchtime. Eppel describes the hooter as "that symbol of Rhodesian command" wanting Misheck to open the gate (12). Although 17-year-old Misheck can hear the hooting, he does not want to open the gate for her because this "was the twenty first century not the nineteen fifties" (12-13). Misheck will only open the gate at two o'clock, when his lunchtime officially ends. Mrs Bangle feels betrayed by Misheck whom she believes she has been very kind to over the years, and she refuses to let Michelle, the maid from across the street, open the gate for her.

Misheck on his part is unhappy about his wage, from which he cannot buy basics because of hyperinflation, largely caused by the ruling party. Unable to deal with what she perceives as Misheck's audacity, Mrs Bangle suffers a cardiac arrest and dies behind the steering wheel. When Misheck discovers that she is dead, the following happens (16):

He let go the head and went to open the gate for her. His next task was to weed the little patch of lawn that she had made him keep alive with bath and sink water; then he would feed Nuisance and the two cats, top up the water in the bird bath, polish madam's shoes, turn the compost ... and that should bring

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him to knock off time when he would be free to seek out Michelle and give her the sad news.

In this situation, colonial-time (1950s) is contrasted with *Chimurenga*-time of the 2000s where blacks are no longer scared of whites. Moreover, finer margins of time, such as ten minutes before the end of lunchtime and knock-off time, all become politically and ethically charged for the “born-free” Misheck and readers of the story. Mrs Bangle could have opened the gate herself or allowed Michelle to do so. Misheck could have thought of her, in spite of her paternalism, as an elderly woman in need of help and opened the gate since his lunchtime is almost over. Misheck chooses the personal rights and not ethical path of refusing to interrupt his lunch to open the gate as well as disregarding Mrs Bangle’s death to perform chores which, with Mrs Bangle dead, are senseless.

Under the subtheme of loss, Eppel focalises old whites in distress, those left behind in Zimbabwe with no family around them owing to migration by younger family members to other countries with thriving economies. He also portrays the dehumanising effects of pensions lost to hyperinflation. The phenomenon of old people left behind by younger members of the family eventually becomes ‘normal’ and widespread for both whites and blacks. In the story “The Keys” (Eppel 2008), all of Ruth Newman’s family is overseas and she is left in the house that the family owned since 1895. Eppel writes: “The only remaining member of the Newman family, old Ruth: mother of four, grandmother of seven, and great grandmother of twelve, all, all in other countries across the globe: was confined to a wheelchair (75)”. The black servant given the responsibility of looking after Ruth throws parties every day, and the biggest on the day she dies.

In the ironically titled story “Home Sweet Home” (Eppel 2008), Eppel explores the penury, destitution and death of Foxie Terrier. Grant Terrier has returned to bury his grandfather, who died destitute at a home for the elderly because of the hyperinflation that completely wiped out the old man’s pension. Eppel writes:

When James ‘Foxie’ Terrier retired in 1995 his monthly pension amounted to the princely sum of \$10 000. He was rich. He was a paid up member of the Bulawayo Golf Club. He had accounts at Haddon and Sly and Highfield Pharmacy. Once a week he dined out at Maxies or New Orleans. What more could an old man want? Ten years later that same monthly pension bought him one third of an English cucumber.

(26)

Such are the devastating effects of occupying a certain time-space, which suggests that those who left were escaping to a different time-space. The atmosphere of gloom in this story underlines this point:

All Zimbabweans who relied on pensions to support them had become destitute, and those who weren't kept going by the Western Union simply turned their faces to the wall and died. Very few actually drank insecticide or packed their grizzled heads in SPAR plastic bags and left them there. Most simply stopped living.

(Eppel 2008: 26)

In highlighting white suffering that is shared with fellow black Zimbabweans in pensions that were whittled away by record inflation, Eppel contests the assumption of fixed white privilege across time.

The chronotope of reversal is aptly portrayed in the story "White Man Crawling" (2008). A middle-aged farmer named Nols still has a few farms to hold on to by grovelling to and feting powerful people in the ruling party. The story anticipates state-led violence against white farmers, a point elaborated on later in this article. Nols desperately attempts to keep the few farms he has left by sponsoring a ZANU-PF minister's election campaign and entertaining the First Lady. In his over eagerness to prove that he is a defeated and loyal subject, and to "surprise" the minister, Nols performs an obscure ritual of fealty:

Then Nols, all six foot four of him, did an amazing thing. He performed a ritual that had not been witnessed since the days of King Lobengula. He walked on his knees, bottle of whisky held high, right across the front lawn of the house, to the honourable minister. His cartilages could be heard creaking (old rugby injuries) from as far away as the river front where crickets in their numbers began to accompany the sound. To rapturous applause, the honourable minister received his gift with noble condescension.

(12)

The applause celebrates the "fall" of white domination. It reveals a reversed racial hierarchy confirmed by what appears to be a fitting performance of abjection and wretchedness. When the First Lady arrives, Nols goes rather too far. He expertly lances a bullock "and tears out its still pulsating heart" (12) which he then offers to the First Lady who declines and asks instead, for "a piece of Kentucky Fried Chicken with chips and tomato sauce" (13). Whilst Nols blunders in performing what he thinks are authentically African rituals, what is not lost to us is the feeding frenzy by the ruling party officials as confirmed by recurrent images of eating in stories similar to this one.

The chronotope of reversal is also illustrated in the proprietary, exploitative and humiliating relationship between George and Beauticious in *Absent* (2009). George is a poor school teacher in his sixties, fired just before retirement as a result of a schoolboy prank that sees him inadvertently putting up the picture of Ian Smith, the racist and former Rhodesian prime minister, in place of that of Robert Mugabe. Unintentional as the swap is, it suggests a continuity of oppressive rule. Reversing his "1978 Ford Escort 1.3L" (3) into Beauticious's expensive Mercedes Benz, "a motor car so expensive that a few

spare parts were worth more than his house and its entire contents” (28), is the beginning of George’s bondage. George’s old car has no insurance cover, given that “like all teachers who didn’t sell black market products on the side, [he] could not afford to take out fully comprehensive car insurance” (27). He has no money to pay Beauticious because “his pension pay out, after forty years of full-time service, bought him two jam doughnuts and a soft tomato” (28).

To Beauticious, George and his house constitute, in the *Chimurenga*-time context, spoils of war. She hires him out at weddings as a page, where the sight of a white servant is still a novelty, especially as George is ordered by Beauticious to wear an “Elizabethan outfit, doublet and hose” ordered from the “theatre club” (109). Thus, time, like George’s car, is reversed tragically and George is treated as a relic to humour black crowds while bringing in financial gain for Beauticious, enhancing her prestige in the process. We notice that “she loved to parade George in front of her friends” whom she invited to tea specifically for that purpose (47). George wears an ill-fitting houseboy’s uniform and gets spoken to “for the most part in what the Rhodesians called ‘Kitchen Kaffir’ or ‘Fanagalo’ or ‘Chilapalapa’, because that is how she remembered being talked to by white people when she was a little girl” (30). In similar fashion, Beauticious’ lover calls George “umfaan” (boy). George’s performance of abjection suggests that whiteness is not a fixed category as he quickly becomes a sub-person. As one of the police officers asks him, “Isn’t it you look like a kaffir?” (89). Time and space can reverse widely accepted and expected roles as seen, for example, by the increasing presence of white beggars at Johannesburg’s traffic lights (Ndlovu 2016). In this case, George has a triple crisis – of belonging, ageing and forced pauperism.

Another subtheme that Eppel uses to write against *Chimurenga*-time is state-led violence against elderly white farmers, which is evident in the story “The Very High Ranking Soldier’s wife” (Eppel 2004). The following quotation is informative:

The happiest day of her life came when the Very High Ranking Soldier’s wife was given one of the most productive commercial farms in Zimbabwe. The racist white occupiers had the effrontery to protest. I mean! Fucksake! Chave! Chave Chimurenga! When will these people realise that the land is ours, and that they stole it from us? The racist white couple were in their late seventies, so it wasn’t too difficult to chase them away, what with the help of the police, the local governor, the war vets, and the “green bombers”. The two old land grabbers were given such a hiding that they had to be hospitalised. Mrs Wordsworth still hasn’t recovered the use of her sphincter, and Mr Wordsworth is permanently deaf in one ear.

(7)

The Wordsworths are evacuated from the main house and are left “waiting in the vacant servant’s quarters for death or senility” (9). The ordeal does not end there. The couple is ordered to shout ZANU-PF slogans and sing liberation war songs of the Second *Chimurenga*. The Very High Ranking Soldier’s wife has a parting shot:

She verbally abused them for a few minutes, calling them thieves, homosexuals and racists. Then she demanded that they return her property: the silver tea set, the World War II service medals, and the photograph albums.

The erstwhile land grabbers handed over the loot. The Very High Ranking Soldier’s wife was particularly taken with the silver tea set, and she promised the Wordsworths that, as soon as she had settled at the farmhouse, she would invite them to tea.

(10)

The physical violence, rendered in ironic humour, is clearly out of proportion and wanton. The language and sloganeering are taken from ZANU-PF’s fixed *Chimurenga*-time discourse and the mock indignation in the narrator’s voice underlines the ridiculous nature of this attack. The brutality unleashed against an unarmed old couple speaks of inhumanity, unless the intent is racial revenge. Clearly, the wresting of personal possessions, such as medals and photographs, and the ironic invitation to tea are meant to humiliate the Wordsworths.

These subthemes or tropes illustrate that unlike many coeval white Zimbabweans who responded to the crisis or Third *Chimurenga* through memoir writing to claim their Zimbabweanness and rights to property (Manase 2016), Eppel continued to use satirical fiction and poetry to reveal a more complex idea of whiteness and belonging in Zimbabwe, beyond the reduction of this identity to a few odious characteristics, some of which were shared by some European “researchers”. One such researcher is the Austrian “Doctor Doctor Lisbet Schwatzenhaegar” who has published two books that “confirm what the world already knew about so-called Rhodies: that they are lazy, stupid, good for nothing, dyed in the wool racists” (Eppel 2008: 55). This is in spite of the hospitality that she gets from Zimbabwean whites, most of whom sacrifice their meagre resources to show her this hospitality, including Kevon Kitchen who is evicted from a farm “he had purchased after Independence” (54). In other words, post-1980 purchases, which did not amount to stealing the land, were lumped together with farms that had been claimed and kept by some families of pioneering stock. But what incenses Eppel about Lisbet is her complete disregard for time and change among Zimbabwean whites:

We are in the year 2005. The last remnants of Zimbabwe’s white community (apart from the handful of exceedingly rich wheeler dealers who have sold their souls to ZANU-PF) are well and truly down. Lisbet, however, is not

“WHITE MAN CRAWLING”: ...

prepared to stop kicking. The ones she kicks hardest are the really quite decent – even by Australian and Canadian standards: teachers, nurses, social workers, receptionists, housewives, househusbands, researchers, journalists, general practitioners, poets, and – *the majority – old-age pensioners*. It fills Lisbet with disgust and resentment to find that most white citizens of Zimbabwe are not enormously wealthy, enormously cruel, and enormously insensitive; most of them are not tobacco barons, mining magnates, big game hunters; most of them (to misquote the Bard) are, unaccommodated, no more than poor, bare, forked creatures.

(53-54, emphasis added)

Eppel thus writes against invidious sentiments that turn all whites into fixed social and political scapegoats of racially motivated hatred. The old and middle-aged whites, as Eppel makes evident, are also classed; not all of them are rich farmers or professionals. Eppel’s moral outrage is directed mostly at the government for blurring the difference between a legitimate state mandate and state criminality. Instead of it being a humanising and humanistic construct, the state has turned into rights violator instead of rights protector.

Conclusion

Choosing to focus on a white Zimbabwean writer, and particularly his depictions of middle-aged and elderly whites, is to acknowledge the importance of diversity in the narration of the Zimbabwean nation; that depending on our subjectivities, our “psychological time” is not the same. This article concerned itself with Eppel’s contribution to Zimbabwean literature in constructing not only white subjectivities, but also the subjectivities of a group of whites often forgotten in discussions of the Zimbabwean “crisis”. Narrative time-space, as Bakhtin (1981) argues, is historically and contextually situated and its values and emotions are dependent on the observing subject. Eppel responds to the *Chimurenga* chronotope through the chronotopes of ageing and reversal to reveal that there has been redistribution of power in Zimbabwe, with whites reduced to foreign bodies that do not bear rights. He focalises a post-colonial moment when national reconciliation had been officially revoked and the category “human” seemed to have been redefined to exclude or call to question the humanity of white Zimbabweans. This alerts us to Eppel’s humanist vision whose force finds expression through the genre of human rights literature, of which the key subject – the category of the “human” – is itself framed by time-space or, put differently, is a chronotope of an ethical nature in its refusal to endorse the inhumane.

Eppel’s writing back to Mugabe’s militarist *Chimurenga* chronotope and its distortions of whiteness in Zimbabwe troubles not just matters of belonging but most importantly humanness or inhumanity. Yet, critics of Zimbabwean fiction of the last twenty years have stayed clear of commenting on the

systematic dehumanisation of Mugabe’s “enemies”, particularly whites, and calling it out for what it is. Part of the reason is the pan-Africanist appeal of re-appropriation of land from white farmers and the other part is the *Chimurenga* chronotope which privileges a cyclical conception of time, leading to an everyday oppressiveness and the diminished humanity of target groups. A rights-reading of Eppel’s work strongly suggests that human life must be understood in terms of temporality, and that we need to change the way we respond to Zimbabwean literary texts by becoming more aware of those texts whose political and ethical vision calls for the introduction of a grammar of morality and ethics across race and other identities.

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