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# The Brand New Native White Zimbabwean in Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*

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The white population in Zimbabwe once "reached its peak of about 300,000 in 1973" (Chennells 70). Those who have been living in Zimbabwe for decades, or "who were born, raised and buried" in it are not "foreigners or enemy," but "native Zimbabweans" (Shen 3) in the eyes of some indigenous Zimbabweans. Yet, in the history of black Zimbabwean writing in English since its beginning in the early 1950s, white people have seldom been portrayed as native Zimbabweans, that is until Tendai Huchu created Trina Price: she is a white woman embraced by and integrated into the black milieu of *The Hairdresser of Harare*. Huchu, a Scotland-based Zimbabwean diaspora writer, is "the first 'born-free' among the internationally visible Zimbabwean authors" (Primorac and Chan 720). He is regarded as an "unusually astute and unflinching writer" (Housham) by *The Guardian*, and he has been placed by *New York Times* among the ranks of the most influential African young writers after he published *The Hairdresser of Harare*. The novel is set in Harare at the beginning of the 21st century when the country was trapped in a socioeconomic crisis. It "provides a fresh and moving account of contemporary Zimbabwe" (Specht): Narrated by Vimbai, an ambitious hairdresser at Khumalo Hair and Beauty Treatment Salon in Harare, the story revolves around the relationship between Vimbai and Dumisani (short for "Dumi"). The former is shocked to learn Dumi, her would-be-lover, turns out to be a gay man. The work is "the first internationally circulating Zimbabwean novel explicitly to draw the parallel between compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchy and social violence" (Primorac and Chan 720). It has widely been reviewed for creatively "construing homosexuality" (Ncube 8), a subject that remains largely closeted in Zimbabwe. Mtenje contends that the novel, furthermore, "complicates narratives about nationalism and belonging by including narratives of gender and sexuality that have been excluded from the nationalist, hetero-normative national script of Zimbabwean identity" (172). The portrayal of Trina Price, a white ex-farmer as a native Zimbabwean, provides another perspective to explore further the issue of Zimbabwean identity when white people were denied their Zimbabwean identity in the "Fast Track Land Reform Program." She represents a brand-new white character in the history of works in English by Zimbabwean black authors. The emergence of the new character and the underlying causes behind it provide a lens through which to examine the racial dynamics, political climate, and other complex sociopolitical issues in contemporary Zimbabwe. By analyzing the birth of the character, the article not only highlights the interplay of historical, cultural, and power structures but also underscores the need to delve into how these factors shape the social and political landscape of contemporary Zimbabwe.

Before Trina Price, white people portrayed in black Zimbabwean literature in English were mostly insubstantial or flat aliens. According to Collin Style, the few white people in black Zimbabwean writing from the 1950s to the 1970s are presented as "fleeting and tenuous" (56). In the works published after Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, such as Charles Mungoshi's "A Need for Shelter" (1980), Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* (1988), Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* (1993) and *Without a Name* (1994), Memory Chirere's "When Passion Gather" (2000), and Petina

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Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (2015), white characters are still intangible, trivial, or flat outsiders. They have stereotypically been an integral part of the mainstream black Zimbabwean literature in English for decades after independence when the authors keep looking back, "denouncing the suffering and injustice which dominated the colonial past" (Primorac).

However, Trina Price is different. She is portrayed as a tangible, respectable, and vibrant native Zimbabwean. Trina is one of those thousands of white farmers whose farms were confiscated in the land reform. In her new business, she supplies hair products to the hairdressing salons in Harare and associates with the black hairdressers. She is popular among the black community, mainly represented by Khumalo Hair and Beauty Treatment Salon, "a social hub and an information dissemination center" (Primorac and Chan 720). Her identity as a native Zimbabwean is reflected not only in how she looks and behaves but also in how the black people, including the First Lady, treat her. In fact, Trina's appearance and behaviors both indicate that her identity as a native Zimbabwean is respectfully recognized. Huchu plays down the white color of Trina's skin and highlights the common feature she shares with the blacks. In Vimbai's eyes, the freckles on Trina's face confirm she is one of them because she "had been basking in the glory of the same sun for far too long" (Huchu 44). Trina is even "browner" (104) than Dumi. By emphasizing Trina's dark skin color, Huchu conveys that skin color or race should not be used as a sign of Zimbabwean identity. Neither should White Zimbabweans be deprived of their Zimbabwean identity because of their skin color. After all, we are in a post-modern society, where identity is "historically, not biologically, defined." (Hall 277) Historically, as a member of the second generation of settlers, Trina was born and raised in Zimbabwe which she regards as the home where she has integrated well with the blacks. She is hard-working, friendly, generous, trustworthy, and "there was no one else in the city who did what Trina did with the same level of integrity" (111). As a reliable partner and close friend of the black hairdressers, Trina possesses an identity as a respectable Zimbabwean that has been formed in her "continuous dialogs" (Hall 276) with the outside world, represented by the hairdressers. The integration of the two races showcases that the racial reconciliation the black government began to advocate when Zimbabwe won independence in 1980 has taken effect.

Trina's choice of language also evidences her Zimbabwean identity. She always speaks Shona, the language of about 85% of Zimbabweans, "with a full Zezuru accent" (44), when she converses with the hairdressers. In fact, the latter have never heard her speak English. Importantly, as the language of the colonizers, English was a "means of . . . spiritual subjugation" (Ngũgĩ 289). At the same time, English proficiency still functions as a symbol of a good education and higher social status. But in *The Hairdresser of Harare*, Huchu wisely deploys Trina to give up speaking English in front of the blacks. In a novel noting wittily and ironically that the secret of being a successful hardreser is "your client should leave the salon feeling like a white woman," since "whiteness is a state of mind" (3), Trina's language choice deserves special attention. The choice is a signifier of Trina's efforts to distance herself from the colonial legacy to construct a Zimbabwean identity. Since languages are "the depositories of both ethical and national histories" and carry "significant ideological connotations" (Adéeko 237–238), language choice is the touchstone of one's cultural identity. Speaking Shona, then, allows Trina to approach the blacks emotionally and psychologically and to assimilate the local culture more conveniently. In contrast, in the colonial society where Doris Lessing grew up, "no white child learned Shona" (Lessing 140). Rejecting Shona reflects the white people's sense of superiority, as well as their alienation and detachment from the local experience. Trina's language choice, together with her natural familiarity with the hairdressers, evidences her deep integration into the local life.

Apart from Trina's skin color and behaviors, especially her language choice, the spontaneous sympathy and frim support she wins as an ex-farmer from the blacks further confirm her Zimbabewan identity. From the blacks' sympathy and support for Trina, the public voice of the Zimbabweans toward the controversial and influential "Fast-Track Land Reform Program" is articulated. By focusing on what Trina suffers and earns, *The Hairdresser of Harare* discusses aptly the land

reform, through which we view "a culture wrestling with corruption, class stratification and the aftershocks of colonialism" (Specht).

When the narrator feels sympathetic with Trina for her experience of being expelled as a conscientious and productive ex-farmer, the implied author expresses the criticism of the controversial land reform causing the loss of Trina's Zimbabwean identity. The aim of the land reform was to take back land from the white commercial farmers and distribute it to poor or middle-income black people. But the expulsion of the white people caused social instability and economic recession, arousing widespread concern and controversy. When the program started, Trina immediately gave away one of the two farms inherited from her parents and parents-in-law. She realized that it is unjust to keep all the land that her ancestors took possession of, and was, therefore, willing to return some of it back to the blacks. After they returned one of the farms to the government, her family got a letter from the latter "telling them they would be allowed to stay" (45). Had the land reform been implemented in an orderly way and achieved its desired results, conscientious and experienced white farmers like Trina would have kept at least part of their land and continued their productive farming activities to make a significant contribution to the economy of Zimbabwe. However, Trina's second farm, Good Hope, was coveted and violently occupied by the greedy Minister M_ who already owned eight farms. After being uprooted from the comfort and familiarity of farming life, Trina moved to the city to start a new career. The narrator's sympathy for her is obvious when she sensed that the bustle of the city "must have been a culture shock for a girl who had grown up in wide open spaces" (45). The sympathy from the bottom of the narrator's heart implies the criticism of the dishonest behavior of corrupt officials involved in the land reform. They were thought to be "intoxicated with power, losing touch with the interests of the masses they lead" (Magosvongwe 89). Minister M_ is their representative and is thus the target of rebuke and hatred from average people. When the black hairdressers sympathize with Trina, they treat her as one of them.

What's more, the blacks' firm support and strong bond of affection for Trina is manifested in the following scene: Dumi, the incarnation of courage and justice, risks his own safety to help Trina when she is confronted with Minister M_ and her identity as a native Zimbabwean is denied. When encountering Trina in the salon, Minister M_ calls her "white pig" and orders her to "go back to Britain" (105). She adopts the official discourse of the land reform to oppose Trina and denies her Zimbabwean identity. The official aim of this program was to fight "residual Rhodesian colonial influence and Euro-American imperial control of the country's land and other natural and economic resources" (Manase 6). Responding to Minister M_, Trina insists that "this is my home and I have as much right as you to be here" (205). Trina is claiming her Zimbabwean identity for thousands of Zimbabwean white people who fought to "claim the rights of citizenship they feel entitled to after generations of settlement in Africa" (Suzuki 4). But she is losing out and forced to leave before her hair is done. Given the power of corrupt Minister M_, Trina's vulnerability is akin to that of the Zimbabwean public. It's up to Dumi to stand up for Trina. He does his best to persuade Minister M_ to stop insulting Trina. His words enrage Minister M_ so much that she alleges he has "sold out" and is "a member of MDC," the opposition party. Labeled as a "traitor," Dumi is denied his Zimbabwean identity for assisting Trina. Feeling challenged, Minister M_ instantly calls the war vets, the main force in the land invasion, to fight for her.

The confrontation between Trina and Minister M_ is the epitome of the political violence in the land invasion which deprives white people of their Zimbabwean identity. The salon as a miniature battlefield dramatizes the abruptness and arbitrariness of the violence. Minister M_'s conditioned reflex to resort to violence illustrates the "normalization and legalization" (Shen 170) of the political violence that accompanied the land reform. The threatened violence lurking in the Salon frightens all the hairdressers and clients, but Dumi does not give up. His courage wins him recognition, appreciation and love from Mr. M_, who offers help to Trina to escape at the critical moment. Trina is presented as the weaker party who wins spontaneous help from the blacks. In this way, *The Hairdresser of Harare* showcases the masses' disgust and revolt against the violence used in the land invasion.

Opposing the violence directed against white farmers is the way to counter the corrupt official's denial of Trina's Zimbabwean identity. According to Stuart Hall, "identity shifts according to how the subject is addressed or represented," thus "identification is not automatic, but can be won or lost" (280). Trina's Zimbabwean identity, once negated by Minister M_, is finally won back by the black hairdressers who convey the voice of the implied author. Behind the domineering Minister M_, there is Mr. M_ who "overrule[s]" (109) and prevents her from acting willfully. Huchu stresses his belief in the existence of integrity and justice among the officials, and the faith he holds with his home country. Actually, the name of Vimbai means exactly "having faith" (Primorac and Chan 722).

Huchu's faith is notable in the portrayal of the First Lady, the symbol of supreme power. The First Lady's appreciation for the achievements Trina's clan has made for Zimbabwe confirms Trina's identity as a native Zimbabwean. The First Lady is related to Dumi, and Vimbai. The latter calls the First Lady "Auntie Grace," alluding to the former president Robert Mugabe's second wife, Grace Mugabe. The real-life Grace's reputation was doubtful, and she was described as "maladroit untutored in protocols and manners and extravagant and tasteless in her clothing" (Chan 100). In literary works, such as Petina Gappa's *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009) and Christopher Mlalazi's *Dancing with Life* (2008), Grace is presented as extravagant, hypocritical, and greedy. However, Huchu portrays a different First Lady fitting in his setting and plot to justify Trina's Zimbabwean identity. His First Lady is not only amiable, helpful, and astute, but also reasonable, grateful, and inclusive. She makes an appearance at the opening ceremony of Vimbai's new salon as a warm and loving senior to support her career. As soon as Trina is introduced to her, she realizes that Trina is related to the Prices and instantly acknowledges that "no one has done more than the Prices to put the Zimbabwean flag on the sporting map" (146). In reality, the golfer Nick Price, and his nephew Ray Price are two of the most influential superstars in Zimbabwe.

Inviting the fictional First Lady to praise the real-life contributions white people have made, the story operates simultaneously on the fictional and realistic levels. This mix is double-voiced, foregrounding the white people's achievements. John Eppel, a contemporary Zimbabwean writer, expresses a similar idea by telling a universal children's story – "The Enormous Turnip" – in his acclaimed novel *Absent: The English Teacher*. In the story, all those who help pull the turnip up, even "the humble little mouse" (Eppel 141), share the turnip dinner, in the spirit of Ubuntu, the southern African traditional social engineering principle advocating cooperation, mutual respect, and collective interests. Based on Ubuntu as well as the basic moral principles taught in our childhood, those who have helped build Zimbabwe should be remembered and respected for the sake of the development of Zimbabwe, the white people in all walks of life included. At independence, only the white people could provide the economic freedom that the black government needed. In 2000, approximately 4,500 white commercial farms produced "70% of agricultural output" (Raftopoulos and Mlambo 216). White people also served as teachers, doctors, engineers. Their contribution should be judged impartially, and racial barriers should be broken to build a more desirable, equitable Zimbabwe. The presence of a grateful and sensible First Lady signifies the existence of social justice and the operation of proper governance in the country. It gives Trina hope that the injustice white people have suffered will be remedied, and their Zimbabwean identity be acknowledged.

In conclusion, Tendai Huchu portrays Trina Price as a native white Zimbabwean. He has created a brand-new character in the history of black Zimbabwean writing in English. It's the natural outcome of racial reconciliation in Zimbabwe and conveys a critical consideration of the adverse effects of the "Fast-Track Land Reform Program." The new native white Zimbabwean demonstrates that an inclusive account of African belonging "will reserve space for white Zimbabwean farmer" (Imbo 24). It also bears witness to the "Africanness" that is "bridging the gaps" in African literature (Zhu and Li 163). Trina as a native Zimbabwean has counterparts in reality. The current Zimbabwean government has been taking measures to call for the white ex-farmers to return to Zimbabwe (see Herald Reporter), and the returned whites have received a warm welcome from the blacks, mirroring that they deserve an appropriate place in Zimbabwe and have their roles to play in building the country.

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