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Scrutiny2

Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rscr20

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To cite this article: Tendai Mangena (2024) Precarity of the (Employed and Unemployed) Educated in Zimbabwe in Valerie Tagwira's *Trapped* (2020), Scrutiny2, 28:1, 20-32, DOI: 10.1080/18125441.2024.2320891

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2024.2320891

Published online: 17 Apr 2024.

Precarity of the (Employed and Unemployed) Educated in Zimbabwe in Valerie Tagwira's *Trapped* (2020)

Tendai Mangena
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2333-763X
University of the Free State, South Africa
University of Leeds, United Kingdom
tendaimangena@gmail.com

Abstract

Zimbabwean writer Valerie Tagwira's novel *Trapped* (2020, Harare: Weaver Press) is set in Harare between the latter part of 2016 and November 2017, the period leading to the ousting of Robert Mugabe, the late former president of Zimbabwe, from power. The novel provides a glimpse into the lives of three protagonists, all of whom are university graduates, (un)employed, and forced to hustle for survival. Through these characters, Tagwira dramatises the condition of the educated and (un)employed in a dysfunctional economy and in the grips of a persistent crisis, which transforms them into "vagrants, vendors and criminals." The overarching argument in this article is that the experiences of Tagwira's characters are prisms through which to determine the effects—on the lives of the educated, both employed and unemployed—of Zimbabwe's unprecedented and prolonged political and economic stagnation. Drawing on Guy Standing's concept of the precariat and Michel de Certeau's idea of the practice of everyday life, this article contends that Tagwira's representation of the experiences of the educated, unemployed, and employed highlights the economic injustices that are rampant in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

Keywords: precarity; Zimbabwean crisis; educated; employed; unemployed; Valerie Tagwira

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scrutiny2
www.tandfonline.com/rscr
Volume 28 | Number 1 | 2024 | pp. 20–32

https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2024.2320891
ISSN 1753-5409 (Online), ISSN 1812-5441 (Print)

Introduction: *Trapped* and Zimbabwe's Enduring Stagnations

According to Nherera, despite the significant strides that Zimbabwe has made in democratising educational opportunities, the problem of general and youth unemployment persists (2000, 342). He also highlights that real wages effectively collapsed between 1980 and 1990. Minimum wages were deemed "starvation wages," wholly insufficient to meet the basic needs of an average family of six (Nherera 2000, 341). These observations about the plight of educated youths facing unemployment and employed people with stagnating salaries were made by Nherera over two decades ago, against the backdrop of the economic liberalisation that marked the 1990s. The situation of what Nhundu refers to as "educated unemployment" (1992, 84) in Zimbabwe has deteriorated further over time. Indeed, it has become so dire that the government attempted in 2019 to export labour to countries such as South Sudan, Botswana, and Namibia to deal with the problem of unemployment. This attempt to export labour is a reality that is dramatised in Tagwira's novel *Trapped* (2020), which is studied in this article (see also *The Herald* 2019). As a result of these efforts to export labour and the general problem of brain drain, Zimbabwe has effectively "become a human resources training ground for other countries" (Shizha and Kariwo 2012, 5).

The precarious condition of workers, educated people, and unemployed people has been one of the defining features of what has come to be known as the "Zimbabwean crisis" (see Mangena et al. 2022; Muzondidya 2010; Raftopoulos 2006). Precarity in this sense is taken to mean insecure existential conditions that result, in this case, from socio-economic circumstances. As Mangena et al. note, "the Zimbabwean crisis has many dimensions, dynamics and controversies that speak to its complexity and contestedness" (2022, ii). However, the symptoms and effects of the crisis have included a "dysfunctional economy, world-record hyper-inflation, perennial civil service strikes, massive emigration, contested elections" and massive company closures (Mangena et al. 2022, iii). Some of these have had a direct impact on educated people, both employed and unemployed, placing them in a condition of precarity. Such aspects of the economic crisis, have, for the greater part of the past two decades, effectively rendered the country an economic catastrophe (Moore 2010).

Against this background, this article seeks to explore how Valerie Tagwira's latest novel, *Trapped* (2020), grapples with issues relating to Zimbabwe's economic ruin, and, in particular, how it depicts the precarious condition of educated people, both formally employed and unemployed. It further argues that Tagwira's representation of the experiences of the worker and unemployed university graduate provides a discursive space in which the economic situation in post-independence Zimbabwe can be debated.

Trapped unfolds from 2016 to the days leading up to the end of Robert Mugabe's 37-year political reign to the November 2017 coup. The narrative has various settings, with Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, serving as the main backdrop. However, as the plot progresses, the story transitions to different locations within the country and even beyond its borders. The characters' movement can be interpreted as "a form of flight"

(122) driven by the impacts of the crisis. Even in these new locations, however, the lingering effects of the crisis continue to be profoundly felt. The movement and struggles of the characters in different parts of the country underscore the far-reaching impact of the crisis, presenting it as a pressing national concern. Moreover, it emphasises how individuals are compelled to constantly move from place to place and 'hustle' (make unusual plans) in their quest to make ends meet. Some of Tagwira's characters migrate to the "diaspora," which in the Zimbabwean sense is any place outside Zimbabwe (Mangena and Nyambi 2022). Such diasporic movements highlight one of the ways in which the Zimbabwean crisis has spilled over into and specifically impacted neighbouring countries, especially South Africa. Indeed, South Africa is one of the most popular destinations for economic migrants from Zimbabwe. An influx of undocumented immigrants, and asylum seekers in particular, triggered violent xenophobic riots in South Africa in circa 2008 (Hammerstad 2012).

The temporality of the text is as important as its geographical settings. The events that defined Mugabe's last days in office are some of the key indicators of Tagwira's narrative time space. At the end of Robert Mugabe's era and the beginning of the so-called Second Republic or New Dispensation, many people were expecting "change" in Zimbabwe. This anticipation of positive change in the New Dispensation is expressed in Tagwira's text through the protagonist Cashleen, whose experiences of the coup included feeling "a sudden lightness of spirit, in anticipation of change, and the possibility of a brighter future" (301). Historically, "this hope [for a better post-Mugabe era] is perhaps best epitomised by the endorsement of the coup by socio-political protest movements … and the opposition" (Nyambi, Mangena, and Ncube 2022, 3). In contradistinction to such envisaged hope, the title of the novel, *Trapped*, hints at a sense of irretrievability, of futures lost, and of 'dreams stolen' (271), in the context of what Nyambi, Mangena, and Ncube (2022, 3) term "enduring stagnations." In the novel, the reader is confronted with an uncertain space and time, as postcolonial Zimbabwe has become a time and space of crisis.

In my analysis of the novel *Trapped*, I explore two central questions. Firstly, I delve into the factors that contribute to the precarious condition of educated individuals who are employed or unemployed. Secondly, I investigate the existential strategies employed by the characters in the face of harsh economic realities. The primary focus of this article is to examine the subjectivities and agency of educated and (un)employed people during Zimbabwe's prolonged national politico-economic crises. In this context, subjectivity refers to how the (un)employed educated individuals are positioned as subjects within the socio-economic landscape. The characters' agency, meanwhile, is akin to what Charrad describes in a different context as the "capacity to act … to initiate change or to commit … to a transformative or challenging course of action" (2010, 517; 519). Agency, in the novel *Trapped*, serves as the crux of the various tactics employed by Tagwira's characters to survive the crisis and to eke out a living against all odds.

The "Precariat" and Tactics of Survival

There are various kinds of precarity. The main one—"precarious labour," which is associated with Guy Standing (2011)—provides the theoretical frame within which I analyse Tagwira's novel. In his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), Standing highlights how precarious labour is a defining feature of what he terms the precariat. In his definition, the precariat is a group of people whose "lives [are] dominated by insecurity, uncertainty, debt and humiliation" (2011, vii). It should be noted that the concept of "precarious labour" has featured more prominently in contemporary discussions around labour market transformations and the rise of insecure, non-standard forms of employment. Standing (2011, xi) discusses the concept of the "global precariat" in the broad context of the industrialised world, and his examples are drawn mainly from Western countries. However, I find this concept particularly relevant to the numerous challenges faced by Tagwira's characters in the novel *Trapped*, which, I would argue, is about a specific, Zimbabwean precariat. Despite being educated, these characters struggle either to find jobs or to lead decent lives as workers amid the backdrop of what is known as the "Zimbabwean crisis." Tagwira's narrative questions the stability and security of human existence, especially for marginalised workers and unemployed graduates, and how their lives are made more precarious by social, economic, and political forces in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

In my analysis of *Trapped*, I aim to highlight Standing's (2011) characterisation of the precariat, encompassing both its "suffering" and "liberating" aspects. It should be recognised, therefore, that the Zimbabwean precariat does not only experience suffering but also moments of resilience and survival, as illustrated by the lives of Tagwira's characters. In my bid to understand the characters' resilience, I pay particular attention to their strategies of survival. I do this using Michel de Certeau's (1984) philosophy of "everyday practice." The "practice of everyday life" refers to the ways in which individuals navigate and negotiate their daily struggles. I specifically argue that Tagwira's characters engage in creative and tactical practices to survive the numerous economic challenges they face. Tactics, in this sense, are the small, everyday actions that people take to navigate their difficult lives and negotiate their agency.

Educated, (Un)Employed and Precarious Existences

The novel *Trapped* opens with a team of medical doctors working at a government hospital in Harare. In this scene, the medical professionals' dedication to saving lives is juxtaposed with the poor state of the hospital: their place of work. This prompts one of the characters to ask, "what is the chance that anyone receives excellent care in this dump?" (2). A dump is a deposit of rubbish; in this novel, it also represents not only Zimbabwe's run-down health system and dilapidated health structures, but also the poor working conditions of civil servants, as evidenced by the doctors' "laughable salaries" (3)—what in precarious labour discourse has been termed "precarious income" (Standing 2011, 18). The irony, in this case, is that medical doctors are considered to

belong to the upper echelons of society. The image of the "dump," as it relates to the dilapidated hospital facilities, is resonant with "kaka" (faeces or human excrement), which is the metaphor of Zimbabwe as a failed state used in NoViolet Bulawayo's award-winning debut novel, *We Need New Names* (2013). The resonance can be further located in the sense that "to dump" or "to take a dump" can mean to defecate. Further resonances can be found in the related metaphor of dirt as it was used by current president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, to describe Mugabe's regime. During his inauguration speech on November 24, 2017, Mnangagwa referred to corruption as "dirt" that his administration would be committed to "clean" up in order to mark a break with and from the "First Republic" (Mangena 2022). However, the persistence of dirt, literally and metaphorically, in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe calls into question the narrative of a New Dispensation advanced by Mnangagwa's government (Mangena 2022). The presence of Mugabe's smell (Mangena 2022, 136) in the current regime, in the form of the unending Zimbabwean crisis, speaks directly to the lack of hope envisioned by Tagwira in the novel *Trapped*.

In *Trapped,* medical doctors often experience frustrations at work and are confronted by insurmountable challenges in their efforts to save lives. This struggle is poignantly symbolised by the shortage of blood for patients who urgently need blood transfusions. The scarcity of blood in an institution dedicated to preserving lives serves as a stark illustration of its dysfunctionality. Indeed, at state hospitals, many deaths occur that "could have been prevented if only … hospitals had been well-resourced" (22). The prevalent lack of resources and support in these settings gives rise to a situation where the lives of ordinary people are devalued, and they are denied the most basic medical justice.

Medical doctors working in state hospitals are classified as civil servants. In Zimbabwe, jokes abound that reflect the lowly status of civil servants in general. In a similar vein, the novel *Trapped* presents a powerful scene in which the death of a once-prominent academic, now living in destitution, prompts a grade 7 graduate to assert: "I think university degrees are a farce! It doesn't matter how educated or brainy you are ... with my grade 7, I am better than some graduates" (131). Tagwira also weaves one other instance into the narrative where she pokes fun at civil servants. The other humorous instance portrays street kids referring to themselves as teachers on days when they do not earn any money begging on the streets, further reinforcing the negative stereotype about public school teachers. Through these narratives, the author depicts how individuals with minimal education, represented by a person with grade 7-level education, and street kids, are considered to be superior to university graduates and public school teachers in Zimbabwe. This reflects a societal shift in which educated people and those in formal employment have fallen to the lowest positions on the social ladder through decades of persistent economic turmoil, becoming the subject of mockery and jokes. As a result of this loss of social esteem by the educated (some of whom even die in destitution), the perception that education is useless has taken root in Zimbabwe.

This idea is further reinforced in the novel, where Cashleen, the protagonist, holds an honours degree in journalism and has been actively searching for a job for over a year, but her efforts are futile. She is portrayed as a perpetual job hunter, who cannot even secure volunteer positions. Cashleen's relentless search leads her to companies that are downsizing. At one point, she comes across a company that offers to create a tailor-made graduate internship or learnership position for her, but the terms include a waiver that exempts the company from paying her any allowances. The practice of internships in *Trapped* is therefore depicted as a form of exploitation, with graduates essentially providing free labour to companies that are letting go of full-time employees in favour of casual labourers and unpaid graduates (34). This situation in the novel aligns with Standing's observation that internships are often presented as an opportunity to gain valuable experience that could potentially lead to a regular job. However, in practice, many employers use internships as a means of acquiring cheap and dispensable labour (Standing 2011, 128).

At another level, we could interpret the representation of internships in *Trapped* as a reflection of the precariousness faced by those who are formally employed during Zimbabwe's economic turmoil. For many workers, their employment feels akin to providing free labour, resembling "modern-day slavery masquerading as jobs" (64). At one point, Cashleen humorously refers to Unesu (a medical doctor) as the "Ministry of Health's slave" (170). Significantly, "slaves" and "slavery" are themselves terms of precarity. Sieglinde Lemke notes, in this regard, that slaves were "historically held in the most precarious state of all, deprived as they were of their most basic human rights" (2016, 14). In this sense, the images of "slavery" and "slaves" are invoked to depict the metaphoric slavery of Zimbabwean workers whose salaries are deplorably low or who are not paid at all. During the period leading up to Mugabe's forced resignation in 2017, for example, there were numerous reports in popular news about workers going for months without receiving their salaries. In *Trapped*, this idea is echoed in a news headline that reads "Unpaid for 14 months: Railway workers go on strike" (87). This highlights further the dire situation faced by many employees during the economic crisis.

For the greater part of the story, the protagonist Cashleen relies on the diaspora for sustenance. She receives financial support from her sister Rufaro who works in the United Kingdom. Rufaro then develops clinical depression as a result of what she calls her siblings' overdependence on her. In my reading, Tagwira here draws the reader's attention away from the dominant notion that the diaspora is a source of sustenance for those that remain in Zimbabwe. Through the relationship between the two sisters, the writer depicts a more complex relationship between homeland and the diaspora. Homeland is portrayed as parasitic, in the sense that it overburdens and drains those who have escaped. The never-ending demands for financial and material help from relatives at home cause "headaches" for and overwhelm those in the diaspora. This is one of the many ways in which diaspora and home become entangled (Mangena and Nyambi 2022). Tagwira impresses upon the reader that even those who have left

Zimbabwe remain perpetually affected by the crisis at home. The situation for "diasporans" is complicated further by the fact that, as migrant workers, they experience what has been referred to as "hyper-precarity"—a result of the interplay between neoliberal labour markets and highly restrictive immigration regimes (Lewis et al. 2015, 582). I elaborate on this concept of hyper-precarity later in my analysis of the depiction of Sando, a Zimbabwean immigrant worker in South Africa.

On her doctor's advice, Cashleen's sister Rufaro discontinues her support to family members in Zimbabwe. This leaves Cashleen even more desperate than before, forcing her to think of other ways of surviving. She initially becomes a street vendor, selling bananas and airtime on the streets of Harare. In this way, she becomes part of the largely informal industries that have sprouted on the pavements and street corners of Harare. These streets, in Tagwira's text, have offered Cashleen and others a space in which to create "industries" and earn a living. A good example of such an industry is the selling of second-hand clothes at thrift shops known in Zimbabwe as *Kotamai* (bend over) boutiques, where "customers would have to contort themselves and bend over just to take a closer look at the wares" (20). These "temporary" jobs, which the educated people do until they get (proper) jobs (120), allow them to pay rent and buy food: that is to say, to survive. We can think about this use of the streets within the context of Michel de Certeau's (1984) idea of the poetics of space, which is about the ways in which individuals appropriate and use spaces. In this particular text, the unemployed graduates transform streets into viable business premises. The same streets are, however, also spaces of violence, as evidenced by the running battles between the vendors and the repressive state apparatus in the form of the municipal police who try to evict vendors from the streets. Despite the "bleak realities of trying to eke out a living on the streets of Harare" (189), the vendors always return to the streets and resume their businesses. Such "persistence and tenacity could never be underestimated because the streets were their source of survival" (35). Other places such as houses are turned into business premises. One character called Farai, for example, sells fuel such as petrol, diesel, and paraffin from his house. This, however, proves to be a risky business that sees the destruction of his home by fire. The violence faced by informal traders on the streets of Harare and the destruction of houses-cum-business premises render the matter of survival precarious and very risky.

Characters such as Kule Jojo and Delta's parents are, in Tagwira's narrative, prisms through which we can discern the problems faced by pensioners in contemporary Zimbabwe. Kule Jojo, for instance, could not retire because, like many elderly people, his pension was wiped out during the hyperinflationary era. Delta's parents, meanwhile, are retired teachers, barely able to survive on their paltry monthly allowance from the National Social Security Fund. This social security fund is here ironically associated with financial insecurity and highlights just how financially insecure pensioners are in Zimbabwe during the economic crisis. Delta's father "plans to look for a job, he is actually on the waiting list for manual work at the Chinese kumaindustry" (126). If he does get the job, then that would mean he would have gone full circle, and working at

the Chinese industry would naturally place him more at risk of exploitation. Chinese industries in Zimbabwe, as imagined in *We Need New Names*, exploit "African workers," who go to work in regular clothes, torn T-shirts, vests, shorts, trousers cut at the knees, overalls, flip-flops, tennis shoes" (42), making them workers whose clothes index poverty.

Trapped enacts how employed and unemployed graduates and retirees suffer in multiple ways in contemporary Zimbabwe. They all belong to the category of the precariat, or, as Banki puts it, "those that experience precarity" (2013, 451). Tagwira shows how the different precarities are, paradoxically, a source of motivation for survival. In other words, the process of the world and life becoming suffused with precarity becomes a form of resilience, which according to Luthar, Cichetti, and Becker (2000, 543), reflects what they call a "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity."

Negotiating Safety and Survival

The daily struggle for survival in an economically harsh context forces Tagwira's characters in *Trapped* to become inventive. They deploy various tactics, akin to what de Certeau (1984, 3) terms "clever tricks, [and] maneuvers" in a bid to survive the challenges that life throws at them. But in some cases, these manoeuvres give rise to further precarities, as argued by Banki (2013, 451), who asserts that "precarity of one kind may aggravate other precarities." This is similar to what Diabate (2020, 3) describes as "a cycle of power and vulnerability."

The strategies for survival vary. Some medical doctors, for example, left the profession because of the unattractive conditions. This also happened in other professions such as teaching. In *Trapped,* for instance, Unesu's friend Takunda left the medical field "after six months [of assuming duty]" to deal in diamonds with a Lebanese cartel across the border in Mozambique (6). Takunda exits the medical profession and the country, not only out of frustration, but also in search of safety. However, such an exit forces him into dealing in diamonds: something that he is not trained to do. He describes his new line of work as "some sort of entrepreneurship, … unrelated" to medicine (his profession) (37–38). It is a form of hustling, commonly referred to as *kukiya kiya* in Zimbabwe, in order to make ends meet. The term *kukiya kiya* was developed among Shona-speaking communities to describe the different ways of hustling for survival. Jones (2010, 286) defines *kukiya kiya* as multiple forms of "making do" for survival: "We *kiya kiya* [hustle] in order to stay alive," people say, "in order to eat." Jones notes further that in this sense, *kukiya kiya* is "an adjunct to bare life where people are prepared to do any work to survive" (2010, 286). We could therefore consider *kukiya kiya* as a Zimbabwean version of de Certeau's concept of everyday tactics.

Another form of *kukiya kiya* involves Unesu, who remains in the medical field but does locums at Orion Clinic, which "provided some kind of inadequate relief" (29). Unesu

effectively holds down two jobs. Orion Clinic fronts as a facility for sexual and reproductive healthcare, although it actually specialises in the termination of pregnancies. Where there is extreme subjugation of human lives, Tagwira demonstrates that there is no room left for moralising. The termination of pregnancies, for instance, is normalised and sanitised as follows by Unesu: "a woman with an unwanted pregnancy would always find a way out. Surely it was better done by a medical professional than a non-medical person who used unhygienic sticks, reeds, bicycle spokes, knitting needles and herbal concoctions. By providing procedures in a safe, clinical setting he would be saving lives" (137). The reader knows all too well, however, that Unesu joins Orion Clinic "for the great money" (137) and not necessarily to save lives.

In the novel *Trapped*, the character Sando embodies the theme of precarious immigrant labour. According to Standing (2011, 153),

> migrants make up a large share of the world's precariat. They are a cause of its growth and in danger of becoming its primary victims, demonised and made the scapegoat of problems not of their making. Yet, with few exceptions, all they are doing is trying to improve their lives.

Through Sando's experiences, the author vividly illustrates the complexities of the challenges faced by the migrant workforce. Sando migrates to South Africa "on a job-hunting mission" (12). Upon leaving Zimbabwe, he understands his movement as an escape from the country's crisis, but on arriving in South Africa, he realises that being a migrant worker is equally precarious. He works as a waiter, then becomes a cleaner. Throughout his stay in South Africa, he is an illegal worker, because it is difficult to get a work permit, without which it is virtually impossible for him to secure a stable job. He ends up doing what is known among Shona Zimbabweans as *rese rese* (casual or miscellaneous work). Doing casual or miscellaneous work places Sando and others like him in the category of the precariat, who face the challenge of insecure and unstable temporary jobs. As an immigrant without a work permit, moreover, he is more at risk of exploitation. Individuals like Sando also live in perpetual fear of the police and deportation. Sando's situation echoes the challenges faced by foreign nationals in the novel by South African writer Phaswane Mpe: *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001).

Another character, Delta, is a chemical engineering graduate, who, when the novel begins, works as a receptionist at a company called Agro-Innov8, which is later closed down. This menial job is a survival outlet which she accepted "to get through one day and face the next" (17). The receptionist job in particular had "given her the means to track adverts efficiently and to network on job-search platforms" (15). We discern agency in Delta's decision to take up a low-status job. However, her situation also highlights the phenomenon of underemployment and how the human resources potential has not been tapped in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Delta later becomes a restaurant worker, then a market gofer, and when the story ends, she has a new job as an "escort," a sanitised label for a commercial sex worker, at an upmarket lodge in Harare. This constant change of jobs brings to the fore employee desperation and fits perfectly into

the category of precarious employment that is largely insecure and non-standard. "'Status discord', [where] people with a relatively high level of formal education … accept jobs that have a status or income beneath what they believe accord with their qualifications" (Standing 2011, 16), could be a factor that contributes to Delta's dissatisfaction.

In order to secure a job in the restaurant called Hunger Buster, Delta manipulates and masks her academic qualifications and lies about her working experience. She gets new certificates and a new identity card, mainly in a bid to conceal her degree qualifications. The name Hunger Buster underscores the very element of survival that characterises Delta's life, and the job there served as a "starting point for her bigger plan [and gave her] … a sense of purpose" (41). Her deceptive reinvention mirrors the "fragrant deception" practised at Hunger Buster, which turns "decaying" meat into "top selling [tasty] chicken" (49). The company relies on black market suppliers of meat and oil and stolen transformer oil is used for culinary purposes at the restaurant. The counterfeit experts in downtown Harare responsible for creating Delta's new self, along with the decayed chicken sellers, and transformer oil dealers, thrive on shady deals. Their activities are representative of the numerous unconventional industries that have sprouted up in Zimbabwe amid the persisting economic woes. The formation of such industries is, to use de Certeau's (1984, 30) phrasing, "dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstances." The high prices of chicken and cooking oil motivate the selling of rotting chicken and transformer oil, just as the shortages of cash in banks result in the creation of financial black markets in which cash is sold. Other related "crimes" committed in hustling include the sale of stolen, unsafe and/or smuggled goods by street vendors. In some instances, vendors bottle Harare city council water and sell it as purified water. Such "crimes" committed in an endeavour to survive arguably point to what have been termed contested criminalities (Mangena 2019), where the law is broken with good intentions, and in this case, for the purposes of eking out a living.

The aforementioned shady deals are comparable to the corrupt activities undertaken by individuals in formal employment. There is the example of Gerry, a "shifty policeman," who earns a paltry salary like other civil servants, but who seems to be "loaded with money most of the time" (32), and he "changes cars like bicycles" (91). He gets the money from mounting fake roadblocks during which he takes bribes from motorists. He even recruits an unemployed friend into this "business." This example of hustling at one's place of employment is summarised in the Shona proverb *mbudzi inogutira payakasungirirwa* (a goat grazes wherever it is tethered). Roadblocks are, in this case, a "personal money spinner" (175) for this policeman. The proverb "a goat grazes wherever it is tethered," according to Achille Mbembe (1992, 7), recalls "the mouth and the belly at the same time as they celebrate the great feasts of food and drink that set the pattern not only of official banquets but also of the more banal yet still major occasions of daily life." In Tagwira's novel, the proverb highlights the numerous ways in which the formally employed engage in corrupt practices for financial and other benefits within their workplaces.

Self-reinvention and survival, for some of Tagwira's characters, also involves the adoption of catchy job titles in search of dignity and respect. "Cross-border traders" become "entrepreneurs"; "dealer" is even ambiguously used to cover "legitimate work, and dishonest, and criminal behaviour" (150); in place of "smuggler" one adopts the label "imports procurement agent"; "escort" is the euphemism for "commercial sex worker." This inventiveness allows characters to dignify their "jobs" or what they do for a living. This search for dignity is elaborated in the depiction of a character called Zenith. The name Zenith itself speaks of success, but ironically the character, a university graduate, is a street vendor in Harare. Zenith was better off when he was a student, but as a graduate, he now lives in poverty. Social media, however, enables him to create a better persona, a better self, to become someone who lives in "Mutare, doing some desk research work for an international client" (37). It offers a site in which "Zenith could concoct an image that made [him] appear more beautiful, more successful and happier" (38). In the Certeauan (1984) sense, Zenith, is publicising his "fantasy … far removed from his actual reality" (38). He uses rhetoric as a tactic in which ways of speaking contribute to projecting a desired image. Broadly speaking, characters in *Trapped* tell lies in order to occupy that place of their dreams. Self-reinvention, then, offers the space for characters to dream of a good life. This can be read as the performance of a good life—"beautiful illusions" (38)—where such a good life is denied.

Conclusion

There is growing discourse in the literary domain on what is known as the "Zimbabwean crisis," a more than two-decade period of socio-economic and political challenges that have rendered Zimbabwe a dystopian state. This article is an attempt to expand on this discourse through an analysis of the novel *Trapped* by Tagwira. I argue that Tagwira draws attention to an important aspect of the Zimbabwean crisis: the precarity of educated people. The novel *Trapped* highlights the complex and challenging circumstances faced by various characters within a context of economic turmoil in postcolonial Zimbabwe. It specifically explores the theme of precarious existence, including precarious income and employment, experienced by the educated characters, who are either unemployed or formally or informally employed. Despite their education and professions, Tagwira's characters find themselves in positions of insecurity and vulnerability, mirroring the larger societal shift, where educated and formally employed people are ridiculed and undervalued. I have argued in this article that most of the characters who inhabit the literary space of *Trapped* are educated, yet they lead precarious lives, and generally belong to the category of the precariat. What links Tagwira's characters to the global precariat are factors emanating from the dysfunctional Zimbabwean economy. They are literally trapped in untenable presents and disillusioned futures. Precarity does not, however, result in hopelessness/complete despair, as it spurs invention of ways of survival. Survival in the face of economic hardships forces characters to become inventive, resorting to various tactics, such as taking on multiple jobs, engaging in informal industries, and adopting catchy job titles

in a bid to find dignity and respect. The diverse survival strategies invented by the characters are a means of negotiating day-to-day life. In such a situation, there is no space for moralising, as most of the survival tactics are illegal and criminal. The diverse rituals of survival, then, become sites of contesting and dystopic presents and futures during the twilight of Mugabe's rule and the dawn of Mnangagwa's New Dispensation.

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