

Subversion or Identity Work? Tracing the Reception of Zimbabwean Counter-Narrative Memoirs

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*This article analyses the reception of memoirs that position themselves as counter-narratives to state-sanctioned Zimbabwean storytelling. It asks whether these texts play the subversive role that one might expect from their status as counter-narratives. To study the lives of counter-narratives, I propose that it is helpful to examine their narrative communities, distinguishing between implicit and imagined narrative communities. Under scrutiny are four very different memoirs: *Nkomo: The Story of My Life* by Joshua Nkomo (1984), *The Great Betrayal/Bitter Harvest* by Ian Smith (1997/2001), *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* by Peter Godwin (2006) and *These Bones Will Rise Again* by Panashe Chigumadzi (2018). The article examines the counter-narrative gestures of the memoirs and then places them in the context of their narrative communities, exploring how they are reviewed and debated, particularly online. Considering audiences in Zimbabwe, the ex-Rhodesian community, the west and the Zimbabwean diaspora, the article concludes that the target audience is rarely the Zimbabwean state itself. Instead, these texts are written and read in support of a number of identity projects, serving to confirm readers' understanding of the world. Countering the Zimbabwean state narrative is not always the prime concern of readers who, like the texts, communicate mostly with like-minded people.*

Keywords: counter-narrative; narrative community; Zimbabwe; memoir; audience; identity

Introduction

Repression fosters resistance. When a regime like the Zimbabwean one attempts to control not only people's lives but also how they understand the past, other stories will seep up through the cracks. Such counter-narratives, whether in the form of private conversations, activism or published texts, are often praised for their subversive character. Discussing autobiographical writing, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni celebrates the genre as 'one of the most useful ways of subverting official partisan histories masquerading as histories of the nation'. He suggests that '[t]hrough close reading of autobiographies, we access the other side of history of those written out of the nation'.¹ In this essay, I explore work by four Zimbabwean authors who position their memoirs as counter-narratives to the propaganda and state-sponsored 'patriotic history' of Robert Mugabe's regime. In doing so, I want to interrogate whether they are always subversive by considering their likely audiences. While the state may appear to be the interlocutor, memoirs that present themselves as counter-narratives tend to be written for and read by entirely different audiences. As I argue below, memoirs may challenge the dominant narratives of one group while corroborating those of another. In speaking truth to power, one might say, writers also repeat already established truths that have power in another group.

I want to consider who the audiences for these texts might be and how this confirms or complicates those texts' status as subversive counter-narratives. I will read the texts themselves for the signals they give to their readers, and I will place them in their contexts of reception by drawing on reviews, online commentary and existing research about the diverse

¹ S.J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo of Zimbabwe: Politics, Power, and Memory* (Cham, Springer, 2017), p. 12.

narrative communities who have picked up the memoirs. In particular, I examine the kind of ‘identity talk’ that readers engage in when discussing books online. As Benwell *et al.* note, the real readers of texts have often been neglected by post-colonial critics, who have instead set up ‘model’ or ‘straw’ audiences.² While keeping in mind that it is almost impossible to measure a readership and its reactions accurately, I hope to establish the contours of the ‘likely audiences’ of these memoirs. Somewhat perversely, I borrow this term from the apartheid censors of South Africa, who, when determining whether a text was suitable for distribution or should be censored, also judged its potential subversiveness on an assessment of its ‘likely readership’.³ My intention, however, is not to pronounce a verdict on the suitability of the memoirs but rather to investigate how their counter-narrative claims are taken up by their readers. By focusing on some of the most vocal readers, we get an indication of the audiences that have engaged most actively with the texts. Considering reception thus enhances our understanding of the narrative landscape – in and outside Zimbabwe – in which the texts operate, allowing us to see them as more than simply state-critical memoirs. I argue that texts that present themselves as counter-narratives are read by many different audiences for many different reasons. Dismantling state-sanctioned narratives is not always the primary motivation for readers who, like the books, enter into a dialogue of sorts with like-minded people. Reading and discussing such books serves as much to sustain a sense of identity as to criticise the regime’s official storytelling.

The four authors discussed include two politicians – the nationalist hero and (at the time of his writing) exiled opposition leader Joshua Nkomo and the leader of the last white minority government of Rhodesia, Ian Smith – and two expatriate writers – the USA-based journalist Peter Godwin and the novelist Panashe Chigumadzi, who lives in South Africa. All were born in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe but, at the time they wrote their memoirs, ironically only Ian Smith was still resident there. As we will see, many of their readers – as far as can be confirmed – are also located outside the country. The years in which these texts were published span the decades of Robert Mugabe’s increasingly dictatorial rule, with Nkomo signalling his worries about the new regime in the early 1980s and Chigumadzi voicing her concerns, after the 2017 coup, that things might not change with Mugabe’s removal from power. Common to all these writers is that they write, though in quite different ways, against the narratives of Zimbabwe promoted by Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU[PF]). But, as we will see, they also each write *for* another narrative community.

Counter-Narratives, their Subversive Potential and Narrative Communities

All narratives are in dialogue with existing storytelling, whether the intention is to counter or corroborate other stories.⁴ A counter-narrative is one that signals to its readers that it is in opposition to a dominant narrative. As Goldberg, Porat and Schwarz explain,

[a]s opposed to official narrative, counter narrative should be seen as a narrative unsanctioned by state institutions. It is a narrative which evolves and revolves around the official narrative through critical or antagonistic reference either to the official institutions (state organs, policies and actions, officials, symbols, etc.) or to the official history itself (textbooks, declarations). A narrative should also be seen as a counter narrative if it focuses as agents on groups underrepresented or excluded from the official

2 B. Benwell, J. Procter and G. Robinson, *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception* (London, Routledge, 2012), pp. 8–12.

3 P.D. McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2009), Chapter 1.

4 A. Rasch, ‘Autobiography After Empire: Individual and Collective Memory in Dialogue’ (PhD thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2016); J.V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 60.

institutions or the official narrative. This should especially apply when such a focus is aimed at giving voice to the hitherto unheard, or at widening the horizons of action of such a group.⁵

The definition is helpful because it points to several of the aspects of a narrative that might give it its 'contrary' quality. To transpose their definition to the texts studied here, sometimes they are critical of the official institutions and their actions, such as the Gukurahundi of the 1980s or the fast-track land reforms from 2000. At other moments, the focus is on countering official history to insist that it is selective and biased. Finally, Chigumadzi's memoir – though arguably not the other three – seeks to give voice and agency to people who are normally left out of official narratives.

Interestingly, the definition that we find in Goldberg *et al.* says nothing about the reception of the narrative nor about its expectations of finding a willing audience. However, I believe such attention is important in order to distinguish between texts that are actually subversive and texts that only claim to be so. It is difficult to imagine a text that does not voice its counter-narrative with the expectation of meeting at least some sympathetic listeners – in other words, people who share its outlook. Thus, even memoirs that are critical of the dominant social order will generally adopt the narrative framework of a group, however small. As Molly Andrews notes, '[o]ften people who construct personal stories which go against the social grain, do so with a consciousness of being a member of an outside group. While they might position their stories as being on the margin, they do not consider them to be unique'.⁶ This is a significant point because it reminds us that counter-narratives will tend to have a sympathetic audience of readers who belong to the same group. In the words of Richard Delgado, '[a]n outgroup creates its own stories, which circulate within the group as a kind of counter-reality'.⁷ Not only do such stories have a therapeutic effect on the teller and the outgroup, but 'stories told by underdogs', if listened to by the oppressor, 'can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo'.⁸ Such stories, then, have subversive potential.

However, just because a text positions itself as a counter-narrative does not mean that it is necessarily subversive. If the author has no ambition to address those responsible for the criticised official narrative and if, instead, another audience is intended that is not in fact marginalised, the subversive claims of the text are questionable. In the case of the memoirs studied here, it makes a difference whether they are written to convince those who subscribe to the Zimbabwean state narrative or only to the author's own group. And it makes a difference whether the narrative is actually suppressed in the readers' society.

Even if the claim is spurious, there is legitimacy and sympathy to be gained from representing oneself as the voice of a silenced group. It is not uncommon for people of privilege to appropriate the position of a threatened minority. In her prescient book about what she calls the 'identity politics of the dominant', Sally Robinson argues that 'there is much symbolic power to be reaped from occupying the social and discursive position of subject-in-crisis'.⁹ Studying populist communication, Samuel Bennett observes that 'right wing political actors often represent their own interventions as taboo and "saying what can't be said", whereas in reality their topics of focus (immigration, integration etc.) are some of

5 T. Goldberg, D. Porat and B.B. Schwarz, "'Here Started the Rift We See Today": Student and Textbook Narratives Between Official and Counter Memory', *Narrative Inquiry*, 16, 2 (2006), p. 323.

6 M. Andrews, 'Opening to the Original Contributions: Counter-Narratives and the Power to Oppose', in M. Andrews and M. Bamberg (eds), *Considering Counter Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense* (Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing, 2004), pp. 1–2.

7 R. Delgado, 'Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative', *Michigan Law Review*, 87, 8 (1989), p. 2412.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 2414, 2436–9.

9 S. Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 9.

the most widely discussed in politics'.¹⁰ Smith and Godwin couch both themselves and their stories as suppressed, despite the privileges that they and their sympathising audiences enjoy.

As we will see, Nkomo's memoir seems to be the only one written with the ZANU(PF) regime as one of its intended audiences (and even so, his main audience is likely to be his followers). The other three texts seem rather to address those already sympathetic to their narratives. In the case of Chigumadzi, that does not remove the subversive potential of the text as her ambition is to give voice to an under-represented group. But Godwin, who is writing for a mainstream Anglo-American audience, can hardly be called subversive. Smith's audience of ex-Rhodesians and right-wing, even white supremacist, sympathisers, does not look like a marginalised outgroup either. Even if their place in the UK and US mainstream is less assured than Godwin's, recent years have seen the mainstreaming of opinions previously deemed outside the *cordon sanitaire*.¹¹

Counter-narratives, then, should be studied at the level of both the text and its reception. A text may clearly signal that it wants to be perceived as a counter-narrative, even if the author expects that it will be well received in his or her own narrative community. Or it may be written as a counter-narrative but be appropriated by the very state that it criticises. The texts studied here use textual markers to signal to their readers that they should be interpreted as counter-narratives. But, when we consider their narrative context and reception, that interpretation becomes less straightforward.

Even for counter-narratives, there are, in other words, narrative communities that engage with them. To define 'narrative community', it is useful to consider proximate terms. In his discussion of the concept of a 'textual community', James Wertsch distinguishes between an 'implicit community' of people who use the same cultural tool (such as a text), but do not think of themselves as belonging to a community for that reason, and an 'imagined community', as defined by Benedict Anderson as a self-aware and identity-supporting group. A 'textual community' (a concept Wertsch borrows from the medievalist Brian Stock) is 'a collective whose thought and action are grounded in written texts', and it is hence akin to an imagined community.¹² For a textual community, a particular written text, such as the Bible, serves as anchor for the members' identities. A narrative community, as I conceive of it, is often less self-aware, and its reliance on a particular text is less clear, making it more like an implicit community. What its members have in common is the sharing of a certain narrative which, to a lesser or greater extent, forms their outlook. They need not define themselves primarily through this narrative – that is, it is not necessarily constitutive of their identity – but they may draw on the narrative when called upon to describe that to which the narrative pertains.

To illustrate, we may consider the readers in the west who are familiar with and accept the 'bread basket to basket-case' narrative of post-independence Zimbabwe or that of the Zimbabwean fast-track land reforms as anti-white ethnic cleansing.¹³ Familiarity with these storylines need not be something that preoccupies such western readers in their everyday lives, but, if asked to describe Zimbabwean history, they will have easy access to those narrative templates. They may thus form part of other imagined communities (for

10 Samuel Bennett, 'Standing up for "Real People": UKIP, the Brexit, and Discursive Strategies on Twitter', in J. Zienkowski and R. Breeze (eds), *Imagining the Peoples of Europe: Populist Discourses across the Political Spectrum* (Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2019), p. 234 n. 3.

11 C. Schofield, 'Brexit and the Other Special Relationship', in S. Ward and A. Rasch (eds), *Embers of Empire in Brexit Britain* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 87–99.

12 Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, p. 28.

13 W. Willems, 'Remnants of Empire? British Media Reporting on Zimbabwe', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* (November 2005), pp. 91–108; A. Harris, 'Facing/Defacing Robert Mugabe: Land Reclamation, Race and the End of Colonial Accountability', in A. Bernard, Z. Elmarsafy and S. Murray (eds), *What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say* (New York, Routledge, 2015), pp. 105–20.

example, belong to different nations) but are brought together in the consumption and circulation of narratives that might transcend those imagined communities, even if they are not conscious of being thus united.

But, as Wertsch describes, an implicit community can become an imagined community if it feels itself to be under threat. So, too, the sharing of narratives that are couched as counter-narratives can be an identity-sustaining practice for groups who are, or imagine themselves to be, marginalised. As we will see, this is practised by groups as different as the ‘ex-Rhodesian’ community and southern African feminists. Thus it may be helpful to distinguish between implicit and imagined narrative communities, while recognising that the boundary between the two is neither watertight nor permanent.

Zimbabwean State Narratives

Before we look more closely at how the memoirs have been received in their narrative communities, let us consider the Zimbabwean state narratives against which they position themselves. In her essay ‘Tracing the Path from National to Official Culture’, Zoë Wicomb describes how an anti-colonial culture of resistance that was necessary to overthrow the old regime can grow into a reactionary culture that ‘opposes further change’. In the ‘ossification’ of national into official culture, there is ‘an attempt to fix certain forms, to authorize and validate them as *the* desirable, correct forms’.¹⁴ While Wicomb writes about South Africa, the observation applies well to a Zimbabwean context, where the governing party has jealously guarded national storytelling. As demonstrated by Ashleigh Harris and Hazel Ngoshi’s essays elsewhere in this issue, the state has patrolled the narrative landscape through censorship.¹⁵ But it has also promoted its own accounts of the past. These have developed over the past 40 years to the inclusion and exclusion of different groups. Through state-controlled media, memorials, carefully orchestrated national days and youth militia camps, the Zimbabwean state has promoted accounts of history that celebrate the ruling party, ZANU(PF), and its followers for liberating and building the nation and silenced the contributions of other groups.¹⁶ In the early days, the Nkomo-led opposition party, the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), and the soldiers in its military wing, the Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), were seen as threatening national unity as understood by the government. Official maligning of Nkomo’s followers as ‘dissidents’ went in tandem with the Gukurahundi massacre – the murder, torture and rape of thousands of people in the ZAPU-friendly Matabeleland and Midlands regions.¹⁷ But, after the Unity Accord of 1987, whereby ZAPU was subsumed into ZANU(PF), the focus shifted elsewhere, and Nkomo would eventually come to be celebrated as a national hero.¹⁸

14 Z. Wicomb, ‘Tracing the Path from National to Official Culture’, in A. van der Vlies (ed.), *Race, Nation, Translation: South African Essays, 1990–2013* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018), p. 46.

15 A. Harris, ‘“The Diary of a Country in Crisis”: Zimbabwean Censorship and Adaptive Cultural Forms’; H.T. Ngoshi, ‘Repression, Literary Dissent and the Paradox of Censorship in Zimbabwe’, elsewhere in this issue.

16 W. Willems, ‘“Zimbabwe Will Never Be a Colony Again”: Changing Celebratory Styles and Meanings of Independence’, *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 36, 1–2 (2013), pp. 22–33; T. Ranger, ‘Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 2 (2004), pp. 215–34; J. Alexander and J. McGregor, ‘War Stories: Guerrilla Narratives of Zimbabwe’s Liberation War’, *History Workshop Journal*, 57, 1 (2004), p. 83.

17 S. Eppel, ‘“Gukurahundi” – The Need for Truth and Reparation’, in B. Raftopoulos and T. Savage (eds), *Zimbabwe: Injustice and Political Reconciliation* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2005), pp. 45–6; J. Alexander, J. McGregor and T. Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the ‘Dark Forests’ of Matabeleland* (Oxford, James Currey, 2000), Chapters 8 and 9; N.J. Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent Politics, 1980–1987* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 4, 30–31, 74–9; S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and W. Willems, ‘Reinvoking the Past in the Present: Changing Identities and Appropriations of Joshua Nkomo in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe’, *African Identities*, 8, 3 (2010), pp. 194–6.

18 Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, ‘Reinvoking the Past in the Present’.

From the mid 1990s, as the economy faltered, pressure on the government grew from both veteran groups and the new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).¹⁹ ZANU(PF) sought a new scapegoat for the country's ills. With their real and imagined links to the British government and the MDC, the remaining white farmers offered not only an ideal object of scorn but also the solution to the enduring unequal distribution of land and a way to placate the war veterans through promises of property.²⁰ Borrowing revolutionary rhetoric from previous struggles against settlers (the First and Second Chimurengas), the violent land occupations became known as the Third Chimurenga and were officially portrayed as redistributions of land held by colonialist settlers, even though most victims of the occupations were black farm workers.²¹ This rehashing of anti-colonial language for new purposes was also useful in delegitimising the opposition. Threatened by an increasingly popular MDC, the state propaganda machine turned to 'patriotic history'.²² In this version of the past, ZANU(PF)'s role in securing independence was played up, making it the only authentically Zimbabwean party, while the lack of war credentials of MDC leaders supposedly disqualified it as a party of government. When Mugabe was deposed in 'Operation Restore Legacy' in 2017, generals and the new party leaders said that he had failed the principles of the liberation war, demonstrating once again how the past could be refurbished to suit present needs.²³ In the state narrative, then, history revolves around a string of heroes and a changing cast of enemies of the state.

It is against these changing official narratives that the authors write, whether it be to insist on ZAPU's contribution to independence and national unity (as does Joshua Nkomo), to assert the magnanimity of white Rhodesian rule (as does Ian Smith), to portray white Zimbabweans as victims of ethnic cleansing (as does Peter Godwin) or to reclaim agency for 'little people' in the history of the country (as does Panashe Chigumadzi). In writing their counter-narratives to the official Zimbabwean account of the past, however, they are also addressing audiences who are at home in a different narrative community, who read the memoirs to confirm their identities. It is these other narrative communities that I want to explore in my reading of the books and their reception.

Joshua Nkomo – *Nkomo: The Story of My Life* (1984)

Writing at a time when the government was actively seeking to portray him as a threat to Zimbabwean unity, Joshua Nkomo used his memoir to challenge that narrative. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems observe, the text was "a claim for truth" that sought to respond to ZANU-PF's representations of Nkomo'.²⁴ Nkomo recounts being exiled after assassination attempts because he 'symbolised the national unity that [ZANU(PF)] rejected'.²⁵ This is important, given the accusations against him of 'plot[ting] to overthrow the government', charges that he calls 'false', 'exaggerated' and 'ridiculous'.²⁶ Through such counter-narrative gestures, Nkomo signals to his readers that the state-sanctioned narrative has it wrong: it was

19 B. Raftopoulos, 'Crisis in Zimbabwe, 1998–2008', in B. Raftopoulos and A. Mlambo (eds), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-Colonial Period to 2008* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2009).

20 Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe*, p. 5.

21 Raftopoulos, 'Crisis in Zimbabwe', pp. 203, 216–17; Human Rights Watch, 'Fast Track Land Reform in Zimbabwe' (March 2002), p. 19, available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2002/03/08/fast-track-land-reform-zimbabwe>, retrieved 22 July 2021.

22 Ranger, 'Nationalist Historiography'.

23 B-M. Tendi, 'The Motivations and Dynamics of Zimbabwe's 2017 Military Coup', *African Affairs*, 119, 474 (2020), pp. 41, 51–4.

24 Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, 'Reinvoking the Past in the Present', p. 197. See also M.T. Vambe, 'Fictions of Autobiographical Representations: Joshua Nkomo's *The Story of My Life*', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 25, 1 (2009), pp. 80–97.

25 J. Nkomo, *Nkomo: The Story of My Life* (London, Methuen, 1984), p. xiv.

26 Nkomo, *Nkomo*, p. 224.

in fact Mugabe, not he, who was working against national unity.²⁷ He positions himself as an ‘outcast’, describing how the efforts to undermine public trust in him were combined with violent intimidation.²⁸

For Nkomo, there is much at stake in writing the memoir. On the one hand, it may put him in more danger. On the other, it lays out his vision for the future, suggesting that he still harbours hope that he might one day return to government. From the way in which he guards his words when speaking of Mugabe, it seems that he does not want to alienate himself too far from the prime minister, placing responsibility for its failures with the ‘Zanu special committee’ and suggesting that Mugabe was its ‘servant’ who was ‘obeying orders’.²⁹ He finishes the memoir with the hope that Mugabe will ‘change his mind’ and work with Nkomo towards reconciliation.³⁰ It is hard to gauge whether this is to keep a door open for returning to government or out of fear of how more outspoken criticism would be received, but both options suggest that Mugabe or his censors were among the readers Nkomo had in mind.

However, while he is wary of how his text might be read by state authorities, Nkomo does seem to write primarily for his followers, who still considered him to be ‘Father Zimbabwe’. As Jocelyn Alexander and JoAnn McGregor have shown, counter-memories like his were popular among ZAPU followers and ZIPRA veterans. As they argue, ZIPRA veterans ‘challenged the ruling elite’s monopolisation of liberation war history for its own political ends’.³¹ While the repression of veterans and civilians in ZAPU-friendly territory during the Gukurahundi was initially silenced, there was an increased focus on the atrocities in the 1990s. In this changed atmosphere, former ZIPRA guerrillas ‘wanted to insert their experience into the nation’s history, and to engage in the widespread reassessment of the meaning of the nationalist struggle’.³² Nkomo’s memoir would thus have fed into the stories of an increasingly vocal imagined narrative community. This community identified and gained a sense of agency through the sharing of accounts of the past in which ZIPRA guerrillas had fought for independence only to be mistreated by the new government.³³

For many years after publication, the book was *de facto* banned in Zimbabwe. Eventually, however, Nkomo would come to be elevated to the pantheon of national heroes.³⁴ After the Unity Accord of 1987, Ndlovu-Gatsheni says, Nkomo was represented ‘as a selfless nation-builder and unifier who put the nationalist interest above the party interest’ – a representation that suited both himself and Mugabe.³⁵ After his death in 1999, Nkomo was appropriated both by ZANU(PF) as a figure of unity and by the MDC, who represented themselves as his heirs to voters in Matabeleland.³⁶ At that point, his memoir was serialised, with differing agendas, in three newspapers, the state-owned *Herald* and *Chronicle* and the oppositional *Daily News*.³⁷ The editor of the *Daily News*, Geoff Nyarota, speculated that the state media had been tipped off about his plans to publish the memoir. He said it ‘was obviously an error of judgement’ and presumed that the editors ‘didn’t read the book before

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 200–203.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 229.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 217, 220.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 252.

31 Alexander and McGregor, ‘War Stories’, p. 82.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Alexander and McGregor, ‘War Stories’.

34 Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, ‘Reinvoking the Past in the Present’, pp. 201–3; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo*, pp. 31–33.

35 Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo*, p. 30.

36 Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, ‘Reinvoking the Past in the Present’, pp. 201–2.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 201–3.

serialising it'.³⁸ While that may be the case, it only demonstrates the rush that the state media were in to be the first to lay claim to Nkomo's words. After a few days, Nkomo's family had the serialisation stopped, saying that they held copyright.³⁹ This attests to the struggles over the meaning of Nkomo and his memoir after his death, with different narrative communities claiming the right of interpretation.

It is interesting to ponder what the republication in the state press did to the story's status as counter-narrative. While the editors of the *Chronicle* chose to omit a passage in which Nkomo details the Gukurahundi and the harassment of himself, the *Herald* included it, because, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems argue, its omission was an embarrassment to the government – so much so that the editor responsible was fired.⁴⁰ In other words, the too visible attempt to silence the most critical aspects of Nkomo's counter-narrative had come to be seen as a liability. For a government that wanted to embrace and appropriate Nkomo, it was more important to be seen to tolerate criticism from 'Father Zimbabwe' than to hide from view actions that Mugabe now dismissed as a 'moment of madness'.⁴¹ Curiously, then, embracing Nkomo's counter-narrative could be used to support an official narrative of ZANU(PF) as the party of all Zimbabwe. We can speculate that the very counter-narrative qualities of the text had become useful for the state because they enabled it to represent itself as allowing criticism, albeit under controlled circumstances, given the actual death of the author. This republication in the state press is a curious fate for Nkomo's memoir, given his own description of attempts to silence him.⁴² It demonstrates that the textual markers within a text can, to a certain extent, be overridden if it is given a new context in which the counter-narrative is appropriated and neutralised. As late as 2016 and 2018, the *Herald* was still publishing tributes to Nkomo in which they cited his memoir's calls for unity while referring to the Gukurahundi and repression of Nkomo in the vaguest terms as 'serious differences between Nkomo and Mugabe which culminated in political disturbances' that were fixed by the Unity Accord.⁴³ Nkomo's new readers in the state media were 'aberrant decoders',⁴⁴ reading the text against its grain in service of a quite different identity project by interpreting his call for reconciliation as support for a one-party state.

At the same time, the fact that the *Daily News* also published the memoir – and specifically published the parts omitted by the *Chronicle* – suggests that it had not lost its critical sting for Nkomo's followers in the opposition.⁴⁵ The Unity Accord did not cost him his status as government watchdog among his followers, despite ZANU(PF)'s attempts to co-opt him after his death.⁴⁶ Different narrative communities, then, have been vying to appropriate Nkomo's legacy for different identity projects. By comparison, Ian Smith's audience is somewhat narrower.

Ian Smith – *The Great Betrayal: The Memoirs of Ian Douglas Smith (1997)*

38 'Another Zim Editor Sacked', *News24*, Cape Town, 7 July 2001, available at <https://www.news24.com/News24/Another-Zim-editor-sacked-20010707/>, retrieved 18 June 2020.

39 Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, 'Reinvoking the Past in the Present', p. 205 n. 21.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

41 Robert Mugabe, speaking at Nkomo's burial about the 1980s, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 201.

42 Nkomo, *Nkomo*, p. 230.

43 S. Tsiko, 'Remembering the Man They Called Father Zimbabwe', *Herald*, Harare, 20 June 2018, available at <https://www.herald.co.zw/remembering-the-man-they-called-father-zimbabwe/>, retrieved 22 July 2021;

Political Writer, 'We Are Dr Joshua Nkomo', *Herald*, 1 July 2016, available at <https://www.herald.co.zw/we-are-dr-joshua-nkomo/>, retrieved 22 July 2021.

44 L. Strelitz, 'Approaches to Understanding the Relationship between Texts and Audiences', *Communicatio*, 26, 2 (2000), p. 41.

45 Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, 'Reinvoking the Past in the Present', p. 203.

46 Although some did see him as a sell-out; see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo*, p. 31.

Like Nkomo, Smith writes to correct the official Zimbabwean account of the past. Repeatedly, he insists that the nationalist story about his regime was false: '[t]he communists had successfully *misrepresented* the situation by depicting white Rhodesians as colonial oppressors and our black Rhodesians as the oppressed. But *the truth* was that our black people were better off than blacks anywhere else in Africa'.⁴⁷ Contrasting the 'misrepresentation' and 'the truth' is a central counter-narrative gesture, offering the memoir as the correction to the conventional story. Yet for all his attention to the 'communists', Smith is writing for somebody else.

Smith's text gains its *raison d'être* from the notion that it is a corrective to an otherwise widespread understanding. The entire structure of the book is one of 'setting the record straight', with both the foreword and the postscript opening with an 'I told you so'.⁴⁸ Had he written it with the explicit intention of addressing only his sympathisers, the book would have lacked much of its narrative drive and energy. There would have been little reason for him to reiterate everything that had happened according to the version of history that his followers had already bought into. Instead he situates his narrative as a response to Mugabe's 'propaganda machine', which tried to brand him as 'public enemy number one': '[n]ot only were they successful in brainwashing local opinion, but much of the rest of the world was misled into accepting that I was an undesirable character, a racist who was opposed to black government'.⁴⁹ Smith, then, is writing not only against the official narrative in Zimbabwe, but also against representations of himself and white Rhodesia in western media, which, he insists, have unfairly painted him and his regime as racist. His memoir positions itself as a refutation of this narrative, in Zimbabwe as well as abroad, seeking to 'place on record some facts of history that prove conclusively how the truth has been distorted in order to besmirch the white man in Africa'.⁵⁰ The language is replete with signals of the contrast between truth and distortion. Here attention to different narrative communities helps to examine the memoir's claim to speak for a silenced group. Yes, most people both inside and outside Zimbabwe probably do see Smith as a racist white supremacist who fought against black rule. In the sense that his memoir disputes that, it is indeed a counter-narrative. But I am convinced that the intended as well as actual audience for the text is not ordinary Zimbabweans, nor the regime, nor critics abroad of Smith's minority rule.

Several researchers have described the continuing existence of a transnational commemorative community of 'ex-Rhodesians' who share wistful tales of the Rhodesian past – also sometimes referred to as 'Whenwes' for their tendency to reminisce constantly about 'when we were in Rhodesia'.⁵¹ Much of this research has focused on the late 1990s and early 2000s, precisely the period into which Smith is writing, a time when storytelling was clearly important for maintaining the ex-Rhodesian sense of community. As Katja Uusihakala argues, '[r]eflecting upon the place of belonging and a sense of home, as well as ritually celebrating a common past, all relate to, and are formative of, how the ex-Rhodesians understand themselves and their place in the world'.⁵² In other words, despite the

47 I.D. Smith, *The Great Betrayal: The Memoirs of Ian Douglas Smith* (London, John Blake, 1997), p. 375, my italics.

48 These appear in the republished version, I.D. Smith, *Bitter Harvest: The Great Betrayal and the Dreadful Aftermath*, 2nd edition (London, John Blake, 2001), pp. x, 415.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 415.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 428.

51 D. Lowry, 'Rhodesia 1890–1980', in R. Bickers (ed.), *Settlers and Expatriates* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 148; R. Pilosof, *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Farmers Voices from Zimbabwe* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2012); B. Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 415; K. Uusihakala, 'Memory Meanders: Place, Home and Commemoration in an Ex-Rhodesian Diaspora Community' (PhD thesis, University of Helsinki, 2008), pp. 6–7.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

disappearance of ‘Rhodesia’, ‘ex-Rhodesians’ were united in an active imagined narrative community through sharing memories in real life and online.⁵³ Not only did such reminiscing unite ‘ex-Rhodesians’, it also served to counter negative representations of white Rhodesia by the ZANU(PF) government and western liberal criticism of Smith’s white supremacist regime, which went all the way back to the era following the unilateral declaration of independence. For those still resident in Zimbabwe, like Smith, the notion that they were ‘enemies of the state’ was galling. Blair Rutherford describes his interview in the early 2000s with a white Zimbabwean farmer whose insistence that he was a patriot was a retort to the state-sanctioned narrative: ‘[t]he unspoken discourse to which he and others are responding is that white farmers are not Zimbabweans; rather, they are colonial settlers, thinking only of themselves and other whites in a black, African nation’.⁵⁴ Similar to this farmer’s professed patriotism, we find Smith insisting that he was ‘a white African’ whose ‘home was Rhodesia’ and who had the interests of the black population at heart.⁵⁵ At the time Smith was writing, then, ‘ex-Rhodesians’ in Zimbabwe and abroad were preoccupied with asserting their right to belong and their contributions to the country in a concerted effort to refute the official story.

Ian Smith writes for such an audience of ‘ex-Rhodesians’ and their conservative fellow travellers abroad who lament the transition to majority rule. A glance at the book’s Amazon.com reviews page demonstrates that these are indeed the people who have picked it up. Readers who post reviews there often remark on their own attachment to Rhodesia: many have grown up there and since left; others have followed its history from abroad and express disappointment at their own government’s lack of support for white Rhodesians.⁵⁶ Several customers reiterate Smith’s argument about the inevitability of the Zimbabwean crisis, making him a prophet: ‘[w]hat Ian Smith predicted has all come true. Independence to the colonies yes, but the manner in which decolonisation was handled all over Africa was a disaster which caused and continues to cause suffering to its people’.⁵⁷ Thus many readers use the opportunity to comment on the state of Zimbabwe, to declare ‘[m]iss you deeply Mr Smith’ or to lament multicultural society.⁵⁸ The latter suggests that Smith continues to be a lightning rod for all manner of right-wing opinion, not only those directly addressing the Zimbabwean context. From Enoch Powell to Donald Trump, conservatives and people on the extreme right in the USA and the UK have used crises in southern Africa to warn of what might happen if civil rights or multiculturalism were taken ‘too far’.⁵⁹ Alongside readers who

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 7; T. King, ‘Rhodesians in Hyperspace: The Maintenance of a National and Cultural Identity’, in K.H. Karim (ed.), *The Media of Diaspora* (London, Routledge, 2003), pp. 183–7.

54 B. Rutherford, ‘“Settlers” and Zimbabwe: Politics, Memory, and the Anthropology of Commercial Farms During a Time of Crisis’, *Identities*, 11, 4 (2004), p. 545.

55 Smith, *The Great Betrayal*, pp. 55, 67.

56 See, for instance, entries by CarlaP, 22 January 2019; Chuck Clowdis, 10 June 2015; Platenut, 26 March 2015; Bruce Pentreath, 14 July 2013, ‘Amazon.Com: Bitter Harvest: Zimbabwe and the Aftermath of Its Independence’, amazon.com, May 5, 2008, available at https://www.amazon.com/Bitter-Harvest-Zimbabwe-Aftermath-Independence-ebook/dp/B0078X0YBW/ref=sr_1_1?crd=2CGNNTYKS2N2P&dchild=1&keywords=ian+smith+bitter+harvest&qid=1590063469&s=books&prefix=ian+smith+bi%2Cstripbooks-intl-ship%2C241&sr=1-1, retrieved 22 July 2021.

57 Entry by CarlaP, 22 January 2019, ‘Amazon.Com: Bitter Harvest’. See also entry by anonymous reviewer, 5 June 2020.

58 Entries by Amazon Customer, 24 September 2017; Geir Jorstad, 13 April 2018; Sam, 18 November 2017, ‘Amazon.Com: Bitter Harvest’.

59 B. Schwarz, ‘“The Only White Man in There”: The Re-Racialisation of England, 1956–1968’, *Race and Class*, 38, 1 (1996); Schofield, ‘Brexit and the Other Special Relationship’, p. 96; K. de Greef and P. Karasz, ‘Trump Cites False Claims of Widespread Attacks on White Farmers in South Africa’, *New York Times*, 23 August 2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/world/africa/trump-south-africa-white-farmers.html>, retrieved 10 June 2020.

identify closely with the Rhodesian narrative, there are others for whom it is part of a bigger story about the decline of ‘western civilisation’.

The reviewers share Smith’s understanding that his is a marginalised story, stating that it is ‘an account of history not normally published’ that gives a different view to ‘the popular one’.⁶⁰ One reader argues that it ‘shows that what the normal people are told through the media is often a complete fabrication and distortion of the truth’.⁶¹ The counter-narrative premise is thus not only accepted but supported by these readers. However, the very outpouring of enthusiastic reviews (despite its dubious literary qualities, the book scores 4.5 out of 5 in Amazon’s customer rating) suggests the existence of a narrative community whose members endorse Smith’s version of history.

A review that 35 other Amazon.com users ‘have found useful’ is symptomatic of many of the reviews and hence bears citing at length.

Whilst it isn’t politically correct to say this, there are many black & white Zimbabweans (Rhodesians) who would like to see Ian Smith running the country again! [...] What Ian Smith said would happen in this book, did happen. Mugabe & his cronies have murdered & pillaged their way and manipulated and stolen elections & the British throw up their hands & say ‘we didn’t know’ – they did – Ian Smith told them many times it would happen! This book tells it like it is, it’s not pretty but it is an honest account of what went on up to & after Mugabe took over. Told by a man who had a deep love for his country and its people.

In case you haven’t guessed, I was born & bred in Rhodesia – I’ve never lived in Zimbabwe though I have been up many times to visit family still there so I have witnessed first hand the degeneration of the country exactly as it is laid out in this book.⁶²

At work here are several key traits of the book’s reception on Amazon.com: the notion that Smith’s is a tale that is not ‘politically correct’ yet is truthful, the idea that Smith had predicted the contemporary crisis, the insistence upon Smith’s love for the country, and the reviewer’s reference to his own Rhodesian past as corroborating evidence in support of the memoir’s claims.

Smith’s memoir is a counter-narrative to the extent that he writes against the state narrative and many western representations of his regime. However, he also corroborates a narrative that is thriving elsewhere. While white Zimbabweans did constitute an ‘outgroup’ in the country around the year 2000 (albeit an affluent and historically privileged one), the ex-Rhodesians and other right-wing Smith-supporters in the West who continue to read it do not. Among these groups, Smith’s story is the dominant one, even if a central feature of it is its claim to being marginalised by the ruling social order in Zimbabwe as well as in the west. As we will see, at the time he was writing, critical western representations of white Zimbabweans were also starting to give way to media narratives that focused on white victimhood.

Peter Godwin – *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun: A Memoir of Africa* (2006)

Writing from and for Anglo-America, white expatriate journalist Peter Godwin shares with Nkomo and Smith the situation of writing simultaneously against the state narrative and for a more sympathetic audience. Yet, even less so than Smith’s, Godwin’s audience can hardly be seen as marginalised. Godwin has written several memoirs detailing government repression and violence, such as the land reforms of the early 2000s, presenting himself as the messenger who brings an otherwise suppressed story out into the open – or, more accurately, into the west. In Godwin’s narrative, he and white people still resident in Zimbabwe compose

60 Entries by K.Schneider, 13 April 2013, and Rhi, 14 August 2017, ‘Amazon.Com: Bitter Harvest’.

61 Entry by M Fairley, 21 February 2014, ‘Amazon.Com: Bitter Harvest’.

62 Entry by Glynn Hall, 20 August 2013, ‘Amazon.Com: Bitter Harvest’.

an enclave of resistance, speaking out against an oppressive, racist government discourse. Specifically, he dramatises his own and his sister's journalistic work of trying to bring to the surface hidden stories of repression and the efforts to shut them down through intimidation and censorship, describing both 'death threats' and reporting under the fear of 'torture chambers'.⁶³ This representation of the reporter as heroic actor is one that Wendy Willems identifies as recurrent in British media coverage of the land occupations in Zimbabwe.⁶⁴ We may consider here the emotional reward offered to both author and audience of the counter-narrative mode. The notion that Godwin is a messenger of a suppressed story both adds to his self-image as a saviour figure and allows readers to feel that they are bearing witness to something that has been kept from the public, even as readers are indulging in the most widely produced western account of Zimbabwe after 2000.

Godwin portrays the land reforms as whiteness under siege. He describes a propaganda video that represents the land reforms as 'war' against 'little Englanders' and cites the response of his Jewish father: "[b]eing a white here is starting to feel a bit like being a Jew in Poland in 1939 – an endangered minority – the target of ethnic cleansing".⁶⁵ The now familiar trope of white Zimbabweans as the Jews of Africa has been circulated in a number of white memoirs and films about the crisis.⁶⁶ Willems documents the ethnicisation of the conflict by British media and politicians who tended to make the complex situation of the land occupations into a simple question of black-against-white violence and to describe it in terms of 'ethnic cleansing'.⁶⁷ Harris traces a similar dynamic in British representations of the conflict where '[t]he violent scene of black peasants reclaiming ex-colonial territory from white owners' was 'compulsively reiterated'.⁶⁸ As observed by both Willems and Harris, such narratives rendered the 'much larger number of black victims invisible'.⁶⁹ Godwin, too, uses black victims of the land reforms mainly to enhance the image of the Mugabe regime's malevolence rather than granting them individual voice, agency or identity. While there is no doubt that the official narrative during the fast-track land reforms was anti-white, Godwin is not so much writing for a Zimbabwean audience, offering a counter-narrative to such discourse, but is rather targeting British and American readers who are already familiar with the 'ethnic cleansing' narrative from the massive media coverage of the expulsion of white farmers. For these audiences, Godwin does not offer an alternative account but rather corroborates the image that the media have already provided.

With reviews in the *New York Times*, the *Observer*, the *Independent* and the *New Yorker*, Godwin's memoir clearly targeted – and hit – a mass audience in the UK and USA. In an indication of their relative popularity, Smith's memoir has 63 customer reviews on Amazon.com, while Godwin's has 351. Indeed, in the words of one reviewer, Godwin's three memoirs are all 'pretty-much universally acclaimed'.⁷⁰ Some reviewers do take issue with his failure to engage with the colonial backdrop of his narrative or find his comparison with Nazi

63 P. Godwin, *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun: A Memoir of Africa* (New York, Little, Brown, 2006), pp. 24, 83. See also pp. 63–88, 101, 120.

64 Willems, 'Remnants of Empire?', p. 94.

65 Godwin, *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun*, p. 176.

66 Harris, 'Facing/Defacing Robert Mugabe'.

67 Willems, 'Remnants of Empire?', pp. 97–8. For media representations in other western countries, see also N. Ndlela, 'The African Paradigm: The Coverage of the Zimbabwean Crisis in the Norwegian Media', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 2 (1 February 2005), pp. 71–90.

68 Harris, 'Facing/Defacing Robert Mugabe', p. 112.

69 Willems, 'Remnants of Empire?', p. 98; Harris, 'Facing/Defacing Robert Mugabe', p. 116.

70 N. Barker, 'When a Crocodile Eats the Sun, by Peter Godwin', *Independent*, London, 4 August 2012, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/when-a-crocodile-eats-the-sun-by-peter-godwin-8001275.html>, retrieved 22 July 2021.

occupation a bit excessive.⁷¹ In general, though, the book is recommended as ‘a searing account of what has happened to Zimbabwe in the last 30-odd years’⁷² and ‘a powerful narrative of grief and desperation, both personal and national’.⁷³

The fact that the memoir is picked up and generally positively received in these fairly liberal outlets suggests that it is not only Smith’s conservative followers who are prone to consume tales of white victimhood. As I have argued elsewhere, white expatriate memoirists like Godwin and Alexandra Fuller position themselves quite consciously as thoroughly ‘postcolonial’ and liberal, and yet their narratives betray nostalgia for the colonial order.⁷⁴ We saw above how Smith appeals primarily to a narrative community that subscribes to the ‘I told you so’ account of post-independence Zimbabwe in which majority rule was almost inevitably going to end in a violent dictatorship. Godwin, on the other hand, seems (also) to address people on the centre-left of politics for whom the situation in Zimbabwe is one of dashed hopes and wasted opportunities. But, of course, the liberal and the conservative accounts occupy much of the same discursive space. They overlap and derive sustenance from many of the same stories, even if they subscribe to differing explanations for the Zimbabwean crisis (roughly speaking, blaming too much or too little colonialism). The role of white Zimbabweans who bear witness is crucial in the production of both types of narratives. In the post-2000 era, their narratives increasingly reverted to colonial-era ‘white African identities’ in a flourishing of ‘neo-Rhodesian’ rhetoric.⁷⁵ Between Godwin’s memoirs of 1996 and 2006, we see a hardening of the prose, demonstrating the sliding relationship between these conservative and liberal accounts.⁷⁶

Whether his readers are on the right or left of politics, most of his mass audience are likely to identify less as members of a Zimbabwe-related narrative community than Nkomo’s and Smith’s followers. While some of his reviewers on Goodreads.com comment on their personal attachment to Zimbabwe,⁷⁷ several note that they knew nothing about it,⁷⁸ while others lump it in with the rest of ‘Africa’: ‘[t]he unraveling of a nation, the hopelessness of tyranny. Africa. This memoir more than anything sheds light into a little known world’.⁷⁹ The remark of one reviewer, that ‘I love stories set in Africa and this memoir does Africa so well’⁸⁰ calls to mind Binyavanga Wainaina’s piercing critique of the consumption of romantic tales about a stereotypically catastrophic and exotic ‘Africa’ in the west.⁸¹ For these readers, Godwin’s is one account of many about Zimbabwe and ‘Africa’, one that will ‘haunt

71 M. Kakutani, ‘When a Crocodile Eats the Sun’, *New York Times*, New York, 18 May 2007, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/18/books/18book.html>, retrieved 22 July 2021; J. Cowley, ‘Stick Around and You Might Just Learn Something’, *Observer*, London, 4 March 2007, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2007/mar/04/society.politics>, retrieved 22 July 2021; ‘When a Crocodile Eats the Sun’, *New Yorker*, New York, 30 April 2007, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/07/when-a-crocodile-eats-the-sun>, retrieved 22 July 2021.

72 Kakutani, ‘When a Crocodile’.

73 ‘When a Crocodile’, *New Yorker*.

74 A. Rasch, ‘Postcolonial Nostalgia: The Ambiguities of White Memoirs of Zimbabwe’, *History and Memory*, 30, 2 (2018).

75 R. Primorac, ‘Rhodesians Never Die? The Zimbabwean Crisis and the Revival of Rhodesian Discourse’, in J. McGregor and R. Primorac (eds), *Zimbabwe’s New Diaspora: Displacement and the Cultural Politics of Survival* (New York, Berghahn Books, 2010), p. 204; Pilosof, *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being*, pp. 118–19.

76 A. Rasch, ‘The Family Connection: White Expatriate Memoirs of Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44, 5 (2018), pp. 884–7.

77 Entry by Gillian Stokes, 14 April 2012 ‘Goodreads: When a Crocodile Eats the Sun’, available at https://www.goodreads.com/work/best_book/1201622-when-a-crocodile-eats-the-sun-a-memoir-of-africa, retrieved 18 June 2020.

78 Entries by Wendy, 2 September 2011; Adam Curtis, 26 November 2018, ‘Goodreads: When a Crocodile’.

79 Entry by Tom Oman, 12 August 2019, ‘Goodreads: When a Crocodile’.

80 Entry by Kerri, 27 January 2018, ‘Goodreads: When a Crocodile’.

81 B. Wainaina, ‘How to Write about Africa’, *Granta*, 92 (2005).

you'⁸² but that is relevant for one's identity only in so far as it confirms one's sense that 'Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated'.⁸³

The consumption of graphic accounts of the misfortunes of a country in disarray comes with its own attractions. This pleasurable, exotic thrill is evident in a reviewer's remark that reading Godwin's memoir was 'like taking a harrowing holiday in a bright/dark world and returning to the comforts of home with a malady – a fluttering heart-sickness – which defies all traditional forms of medication, which simply cannot, and should not, be healed'.⁸⁴ Godwin's memoir allows western readers to be vicarious disaster tourists and have their sense of self as concerned, caring liberals confirmed from the safety of their armchairs.

Panashe Chigumadzi – *These Bones Will Rise Again* (2018)

For readers without the luxury of 'returning to the comforts of home', counter-narratives can hold a sense of political urgency. For a final comparison, I turn now to Panashe Chigumadzi's recent book *These Bones Will Rise Again*. A young novelist and journalist, Chigumadzi plays with genres, blending memoir, critical analysis and essay. Her narrative spans more than a century, and often she herself is at the margins of the narrative, which focuses instead on a wide array of especially female family members and incarnations of the spirit of resistance, Mbuya Nehanda. The form of her story thus underpins its message, which is a challenge to the conventional way of writing history, including how Zimbabwe's past has been told. In this, she criticises both white settler writing and later Mugabean 'patriotic history'.⁸⁵ Indeed, more than a criticism of any particular regime, the text is a reflection on ways in which storytelling have been aligned with power and an attempt to imagine a different way of telling personal and national stories. Chigumadzi stresses the subversive potential of rethinking history as 'always in a state of flux'. Such a counter-narrative, she says, 'is most troubling to nationalist agendas, because it is too difficult to control'.⁸⁶

Chigumadzi thus positions her text as a counter-narrative to existing versions of the past. The most significant way in which Chigumadzi's book is different from the other memoirs is in her insistence on bringing out the voices and agency of people who do not normally figure in official narratives. While the main protagonists in Smith's, Nkomo's and Godwin's memoirs (the Rhodesian government, ZAPU/ZIPRA and white Zimbabweans) have been reviled in the Zimbabwean state narrative, they have always been assigned agency. The very fact that these groups have been represented as threatening to national unity and independence reveals the way in which they have been seen as actors. Chigumadzi instead turns the attention to the 'little people', in particular women, too often erased from history books.⁸⁷ To assist the imaginative effort of writing them back into history, she uses the missing photo of her deceased grandmother as a young woman and she interviews her family to try to imagine what her life might have been like. Instead of reading the nation's life as embodied by one of its male leaders, as per the tradition of the political memoir,⁸⁸ she thus uses her own grandmother as a model. She describes her mature countenance in the photo: '[a] woman who, like her country, had and would continue to experience much turmoil in her life and yet would come out on the other side with a triumphant spirit, ready to stand tall and meet the world's gaze'.⁸⁹ This 'like her country' subverts the nationalist identification of

82 Entry by Spudsie, 5 July 2008, 'Goodreads: When a Crocodile'.

83 Wainaina, 'How to Write about Africa'.

84 Barker, 'When a Crocodile'.

85 P. Chigumadzi, *These Bones Will Rise Again* (London, Indigo Press, 2018), pp. 25–7.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

88 H.T. Ngoshi, 'Masculinities and Femininities in Zimbabwean Autobiographies of Political Struggle: The Case of Edgar Tekere and Fay Chung', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 29, 3 (2013), p. 121.

89 Chigumadzi, *These Bones Will Rise Again*, p. 55.

Smith, Nkomo or Mugabe as the ‘Father of the Nation’. Weaving together national history with her own maternal family history is one way to make the nation’s past more about the ‘little people’.

Another model for her narrative is the revolutionary spirit of Mbuya Nehanda and her incarnations. She stresses that resistance is continuous and cannot be isolated to a neat history of three Chimurengas.⁹⁰ In explicitly communing with Mbuya Nehanda, Chigumadzi insists, as she has said elsewhere, that she has ownership over the tradition of self-liberation, even if she is a ‘born-free’, implying also that the right to rule the country belongs not only to the generation of war veterans.⁹¹ This is a direct intervention against the state propaganda that has sought to delegitimise those without war credentials. At the same time, Chigumadzi uses the idea of spirit possession to counter the individualistic tendency of hero-worship by looking at the many different people who have been Mbuya Nehanda’s spirit medium.

Her use of this non-linear narrative tradition and some chiShona phrases makes her memoir partly inaccessible to western readers. A young German woman of colour, leynes, who reviews the book on Youtube.com, laments that the book gives insufficient information about Zimbabwe for an outsider to follow the narrative, while a white Englishwoman would have liked a glossary and a Czech man finds the ‘nonlinearity [...] quite confusing’.⁹² These readers are explicit and somewhat apologetic about their own positionality as westerners lacking the cultural fluency necessary to get the full benefit of the book. While leynes says that it is her impression that Chigumadzi is writing for ‘other people, including people in the West’, the reception has primarily been concentrated in southern Africa. Despite being published and launched in the UK, *These Bones Will Rise Again* has been reviewed only in South African outlets, on online sites dedicated to black writing and by reviewers with attachment to (South) Africa.⁹³ This is, of course, testament to the structures and strictures of publishing and promotion of black writing. But it also suggests that Chigumadzi’s narrative is partly impenetrable to those not familiar with the context, language and traditions on which she draws. In that sense, readers who lament its inaccessibility can be seen as only partial

90 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

91 ‘Novuyo Rosa Tshuma and Panashe Chigumadzi in Conversation – Meditations on the Traumas and Triumphs of Zimbabwe’s Histories’, *Johannesburg Review of Books*, 6 August 2018, available at <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2018/08/06/novuyo-rosa-tshuma-and-panashe-chigumadzi-in-conversation-meditations-on-the-traumas-and-triumphs-of-zimbabwes-histories/>, retrieved 22 July 2021.

92 ‘books by leynes’, Panashe Chigumadzi: *These Bones Will Rise Again* | Book Review, 2019, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xEZfMoJ4rA>, retrieved 22 July 2021. Entries by Lou, 10 November 2018 and Cody, 20 June 2019, ‘Goodreads: These Bones Will Rise Again’, available at https://www.goodreads.com/work/best_book/62878934-these-bones-will-rise-again, retrieved 9 June 2020.

93 ‘books by leynes’, Panashe Chigumadzi; K. Magdalena, ‘Review: These Bones Will Rise Again by Panashe Chigumadzi’, 26 January 2019, available at <https://karinamagdalena.com/2019/01/26/review-these-bones-will-rise-again-by-panashe-chigumadzi/>, retrieved 22 July 2021; J. Malec, ‘Panashe Chigumadzi Reflects on Zimbabwe’s “Coup That Was Not a Coup” in Her New Book, These Bones Will Rise Again’, *Johannesburg Review of Books*, 30 April 2018, available at <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2018/04/30/the-jrb-daily-panashe-chigumadzi-reflects-on-zimbabwes-coup-that-was-not-a-coup-in-her-new-book-these-bones-will-rise-again/>, retrieved 22 July 2021; S. Ebrahim, ‘These Bones Will Rise Again Is An Intimate Telling Of Zimbabwean History’, *Daily Vox*, 6 December 2018, available at <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/these-bones-will-rise-again-is-an-intimate-telling-of-zimbabwean-history-shaazia-ebrahim/>, retrieved 22 July 2021; J. Landey, ‘“Perhaps She Was” This, “Perhaps She Was” That’, *Review 31*, London, available at <http://review31.co.uk/article/view/592/perhaps-she-was-this-perhaps-she-was-that>, retrieved 2 June 2020; African Queer, ‘Book Review: These Bones Will Rise Again’, *Rewrite*, available at <https://www.rewritelondon.com/portfolio/book-review-these-bones-will-rise-again/>, retrieved 2 June 2020; L. Gasser, ‘These Bones Will Rise Again’, *poco.lit.*, 10 January 2020, <https://pocolit.com/en/?page&year=2020&monthnum=01&day=10&name=these-bones-will-rise-again-by-panashe-chigumadzi>, retrieved 22 July 2021.

members of the book's narrative community. While they endorse its feminist, post-colonial and power-critical politics, they struggle to understand it for lack of familiarity with its cultural and narrative backdrop, including the state narratives that Chigumadzi criticises.

For her (diasporic) Zimbabwean and wider (southern) African readership, on the other hand, the book clearly resonates. The book is called a 'must read (particularly for those interested in all things Zimbabwean)', 'a seminal book in Zimbabwean literature' and 'an inspiration' that can 'guide us through times of uncertainty'.⁹⁴ Several researchers have studied how social media are used by people in the Zimbabwean diaspora to foster a sense of identity, or 'home away from home', as well as by 'counter-hegemonic voices' inside and outside the country to 'resist [...] state propaganda'.⁹⁵ For these users, a book like Chigumadzi's can serve as a focal point for such identity talk and political debate, as they comment on its merits to signal to themselves and their followers that they keep in touch with their Zimbabwean roots and how they feel about the political issues that the book raises. When a Botswana-based Zimbabwean remarks on Goodreads.com that '[t]his filled me with hope for the country of my birth', it demonstrates how not only reading but also sharing opinions about texts online is a way to connect to the homeland and express political opinions.⁹⁶

Chigumadzi's claims that 'little people' are left out of history books do not quite acknowledge the extensive interest in social history, including oral history and attention to the stories of women, among Africanist historians over recent decades. Similarly, her use of Mbuya Nehanda reads less like a recovery of a forgotten historical actor when set against the central role of Nehanda in state propaganda, most recently exemplified in the decision to raise a monument to her in the middle of Harare.⁹⁷ Yet the counter-narrative premise of the book is embraced and celebrated by African and European readers alike. The Zimbabwean author Tendai Huchu recommends the book on Twitter, stressing its reclamation of history from white writers. It is, he says, 'a mind-blowingly brilliant book centring family, women & Shona religion as a way of understanding recent events, the past and the future. Read it, or wait for some book by some white dude purporting to explain your history. #Zimbabwe'.⁹⁸ Reporting for the *Daily Vox*, whose mission is to give voice to South Africans not normally represented in the media,⁹⁹ the reviewer Shaazia Ebrahim finds Chigumadzi's take on history refreshing and important for a South African context as well: '[f]or too long our history has been dominated by the narrative of (often white) men in positions of power ... Books like *These Bones Will Rise Again* are important because they challenge dominant narratives and

94 Tweet by S. Sawlani, 18 June 2018, *Twitter*, available at <https://twitter.com/samirasawlani/status/1008594827003523075>, retrieved 9 June 2020; F. Mudzingwa, 'Seeking the Real Chimurenga', *Mail and Guardian*, Johannesburg, 17 August 2018, available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-08-17-00-seeking-the-real-chimurenga/>, retrieved 22 July 2021; Magdalena, 'Review: These Bones Will Rise Again'.

95 L. Moyo, 'Constructing a Home Away from Home: Internet, Nostalgia and Identity Politics among Zimbabwean Communities in the Diaspora', *Journal of Global Mass Communication*, 2, 1–2 (2009), pp. 66–86; S. Mpfu, 'Social Media and the Politics of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe', *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 34, 1 (February 2013), p. 116.

96 Entry by L. Areka, 13 October 2018, 'Goodreads: These Bones'.

97 R. Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation: History and Memory in Making Zimbabwe* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2015); Y. Mkondani, 'Works to Erect Mbuya Nehanda Statue Commence in Harare', *ZBC NEWS* (blog), 6 July 2020, available at <https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/works-to-erect-mbuya-nehanda-statue-commence-in-harare/>, retrieved 22 July 2021.

98 Tweet by Tendai Huchu @TendaiHuchu, 14 July 2018, *Twitter*, available at <https://twitter.com/TendaiHuchu/status/1018193554869506049>, retrieved 22 July 2021.

99 'About Us', *Daily Vox*, available at <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/about-the-daily-vox/>, retrieved 9 June 2020.

provide more inclusive accounts of historical events'.¹⁰⁰ Writing from Northumberland, UK, Lou is at a greater distance from the issues raised in the book, yet she applauds its counter-narrative angle: '[t]old from the perspective of the marginalised and oppressed rather than from any party political point-of-view, Chigumadzi gives a voice to those who have so often been pushed aside'.¹⁰¹

Readers with no personal connection to the southern African context may thus derive satisfaction from engaging with a text like Chigumadzi's because it demonstrates their solidarity with her and her cause. For them, too, commenting on the book online is a way to position themselves, in this case as people who are interested in black women's writing. Most reviewers applaud the book for picking up a theme overlooked in the other three memoirs, namely the role of women. It is hardly a coincidence that the book is discussed almost entirely by women and people who signal their interest in (intersectional) gender politics by calling themselves '@SisterKilljoy' or 'African Queer' or listing 'intersectionality' among their interests.¹⁰² While challenging dominant narratives and a repressive order, Chigumadzi, is also writing for audiences sympathetic to her approach and agenda.

These readers engage with the book's politics from different angles, yet, broadly speaking, share a set of narratives about giving voice to the marginalised, in particular women and people of colour. While they appear to draw energy and agency from such narratives, they do not constitute one uniform group, nor are their anti-racist gender politics or their opinions about the Zimbabwean and South African ruling class necessarily identical. We must assume that these issues hold different importance for the various commentators. For some, they may be constitutive of their identity, while, for others, they are a narrative resource among many they can draw upon; as we saw above, some of the narratives with which Chigumadzi and her southern African readers are fluent are alien to some audiences in the west. This demonstrates how a narrative community can be fuzzy around the edges: the same cultural tool can be essential for some and less so for others. The extent to which one belongs to an imagined or implicit narrative community may indeed, as Wertsch observes, depend upon whether one feels the narrative to be under threat.

Conclusion

A definition of counter-narratives as opposing state-sanctioned storytelling might lead one to think that the state is the authors' primary conversation partner. However, studying the reception of Zimbabwean counter-narrative memoirs, we can see that most readers have turned to these books to have their identity and world view confirmed, seeing themselves as allies of the author. Even when state media reappropriated Nkomo's memoir, they sought to prop up the government's narrative of Zimbabwean unity rather than enter into constructive dialogue with the text's criticism.

For Smith's and Chigumadzi's readers in southern Africa and the diaspora, a key attraction of the memoirs is clearly that they are seen as telling an otherwise ignored or even repressed story, giving voice to a community that feels itself to be under-represented. This would also have been the case for Nkomo's followers in the 1980s – if indeed they could get hold of his book. For these groups, the texts are closely related to identity projects. Rehearsing counter-narratives that are dominant in their own communities, the readers seem

100 Ebrahim, 'These Bones Will Rise Again Is an Intimate Telling'; see also Magdalena, 'Review: These Bones Will Rise Again'.

101 Entry by Lou, 10 November 2018, 'Goodreads: These Bones'.

102 Tweet by Wachuka @SisterKilljoy, 1 May 2018, *Twitter*, available at

<https://twitter.com/SisterKilljoy/status/991200323506188294>, retrieved 22 July 2021; African Queer, 'Book Review'.

to derive a therapeutic validation of their experience through reading and communicating about the books.

It is not surprising that (diasporic) Zimbabweans, whether black or white, are likely to belong to an imagined narrative community for whom counter-narratives from the country serve a vital role in maintaining group identity. In contrast, such texts play a more subtle role in the identities of Smith's, Godwin's and Chigumadzi's western readers who had no direct links to Zimbabwe. They constitute only implicit narrative communities in the sense that stories of Zimbabwe are not a conscious narrative resource to which they might be likely to turn if asked to give an account of who they are. Yet these readers still consume and debate Zimbabwean counter-narratives to have their understanding of the world and their own place in it confirmed.

For all this attention to the ways in which these authors also write for a sympathetic audience and not only against Mugabe and ZANU(PF)'s dictatorial regime, it is no coincidence that we find such an outpouring of critical writing about the regime. It has not been my intention here to justify the regime in the face of these authors' criticism nor to suggest that they should not have written critically about it in the first place. Rather, I want us to take a step further than simply deeming a text subversive or supportive of the established order by pointing out that there are several orders and several audiences, and that texts may perform their own constructions of reality even as they challenge that of a repressive regime. We may want to interrogate what other agendas are slipped in on the back of a legitimate criticism of authoritarianism. In the case of Smith and Godwin, the memoirs feed into readers' stereotypes about 'Africa' and lamentations about decolonisation. Partaking in a narrative community is not inherently suspect. But we might get a fuller picture of the politics of storytelling if we recognise both what a story subverts and what it supports.

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