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Debating 'Zimbabweanness' in diasporic internet forums: technologies of freedom?

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The protracted and multi-staged economic and political crises that visited Zimbabwe in the 2000s were accompanied by politically charged, narrowed-down definitions of national identity and citizenship. As many Zimbabweans left for Britain, the USA, South Africa and other destinations, so the Internet became an important multi-platform medium for publishing and obtaining news about Zimbabwe. It could provide linkages between Zimbabweans in different parts of the diaspora and enabled them to debate political and economic change. The burgeoning diasporic Zimbabwean media have primarily served the growing population outside Zimbabwe but have also been accessible to some constituencies at home, and have provided alternatives to the shrinking state-controlled media space in Zimbabwe. Leading diaspora websites such as *SW Radio*, *Zimdaily* and *New Zimbabwe* have offered up-to-date news and provided critical reflection on Zimbabwe's demise.

The internet has often been celebrated as a medium which enables those subject to censorship to evade regimes of control. For example, de Sola Pool (1983: 5) argues that '[f]reedom is fostered when the means of communication are dispersed, decentralised, and easily available, as are printing presses or microcomputers. Central control is more likely when the means of communication are concentrated, monopolised, and scarce, as are great networks'. The internet has been described as making possible a new form of cyberdemocracy or as enabling a more inclusive public sphere (Poster 1997; Tsagarousianou et al. 1998; Liberty 1999; Gimmler 2001; Papacharissi 2002; Dahlberg and Siapera 2007). Others have discussed the way in which the internet can threaten the power of authoritarian regimes (Kedzie 1997; Kalathil and Boas 2003). In the context of Zimbabwe, Peel (2008) has proposed that Zimbabwean internet fora constitute 'a microcosm of Zimbabwean diversity which deconstructs the authoritarian nationalism that has been a signature of Mugabe's 28-year rule'.¹ However, against these positive celebrations of the liberating potential of the internet, more sceptical observers have highlighted the way in which the internet can also give a voice to extremely reactionary perspectives such as those of the extreme right and neo-Nazi white supremacists (Brophy et al. 1999; Adams and Roscigno 2005; Atton 2006; Roversi and Smith 2008).

This chapter considers the way in which national identity and citizenship were debated within an online discussion forum on the diasporic website *NewZimbabwe*. It specifically focuses on discussions around the participation of a Zimbabwean nurse, Makosi Musambasi, in the

¹ Peel, Clayton, 'An African Perspective; is Cyberdemocracy Possible?' In: *Pambazuka Newsletter*, 30 July 2008. Retrieved 12 October 2008 from: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/49780>.

British *Big Brother* series, broadcast on Channel Four in 2005. Via the ‘Makosi case’, the chapter examines how diasporic Zimbabweans defined themselves and how they imagined ‘Zimbabweanness’ in internet chatrooms. Through the case study, the article discusses the extent to which their imaginations can be seen as an alternative to the narrow and exclusionary nationalism articulated by the ruling ZANU PF government. The first part of this article provides a background to the authoritarian nationalism espoused by the Zimbabwean government in the 2000s. Subsequent sections address emerging diasporic Zimbabwean media and the specific case of *NewZimbabwe*, Makosi’s entry into the *Big Brother* house and the final section discusses online discussion forum debates on ‘Zimbabweanness’.

Nationalism and the articulation of authentic, patriotic citizenship

In the 2000s, national identity and citizenship in Zimbabwe became defined in increasingly restrictive terms (Alexander 2004; Muponde 2004; Muzondidya 2004, 2007; Alexander and Muzondidya 2005; Raftopoulos 2004; Ranger 2004). State nationalism excluded certain groups of Zimbabweans who were regarded as inauthentic and unpatriotic Zimbabweans and not considered to rightfully belong to the ‘nation’. While at the eve of independence, President Robert Mugabe made a pledge for reconciliation to the white population and assured them that ‘[i]f yesterday I fought as an enemy, today you have become a friend and ally with the same national interest, loyalty, rights and duties as myself’,² in the 2000s, white Zimbabweans were more and more categorised as aliens who did not have a lawful claim to Zimbabwean citizenship.

Coinciding with Mugabe’s numerous insults against whites, the government also introduced the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2001 which denied citizenship to anyone whose parents were born outside Zimbabwe unless he/she would renounce their claim to a second citizenship. The act not only affected white Zimbabweans but also impacted on Zimbabwe’s coloured and Indian community, as well as Zimbabweans of Malawian, Mozambican and Zambian descent whose ancestors had mostly migrated to Zimbabwe to work in mines and on farms.³ As Muzondidya (2007: 334-5) has pointed out, the latter category has often been excluded from the ‘Zimbabwe nation’ in official discourses through derogatory names such as ‘mabwidi emutaundi’ (foolish people without rural homes) or ‘manyasarandi,’ or ‘mabhurandaya’ (Malawians), ‘mamosikeni’ or ‘makarushi’ (Mozambicans).

‘True’ Zimbabweans were not only those whose ancestors were born in Zimbabwe but also those who resided in or had strong links with the rural areas. Peasants toiling the land were seen as the authentic vanguard who had assisted in ‘giving birth’ to the Zimbabwean nation through their participation in the liberation struggle. While trade unions and urban workers played an important role in the emergence of African nationalism in the period between the 1940s and 1960s, government’s narrow version of ‘patriotic history’ ignored their contribution and instead focused on the revolutionary role of peasants and emphasised their support for and

² Available from Kubatana website. Retrieved 2 September 2007 from http://www.kubatana.net/html/archive/demgg/070221rm.asp?sector=OPIN&year=0&range_start=1.

³ However, in 2003, the act was amended in order to enable the following persons to retain dual citizenship and exempted them from having to renounce foreign citizenship or entitlement to foreign citizenship: (1) persons of SADC parentage who may be citizens of those countries; (2) persons born in a SADC country, whose parents were born in Zimbabwe and migrated to such country for the purposes of employment. The act then thus mainly affected white, coloured and Indian Zimbabweans. See Kubatana website for a copy of the act. Retrieved 10 November 2007 from <http://kubatana.net/html/archive/legisl/030214citbill.asp?orgcode=par001>.

assistance to the guerrilla fighters (Ranger 2004: 218).⁴ Urban Zimbabweans were increasingly presented as not belonging to the 'nation'. For example, during an election campaign rally in Bindura in 2000, President Mugabe singled out residents of Harare's oldest township Mbare as 'undisciplined, totemless elements of alien origin'.⁵ Mbare was established during the colonial period as a dormitory township and housed a significant number of migrant workers from the broader Southern African region.

The exclusion of urbanites was particularly expressed through the so-called Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order (OM/RO) which began on 19 May 2005 and lasted for several months.⁶ While OM sought to 'weed out criminals in the informal sector', RO aimed to demolish 'illegal' residential structures in the urban areas. The two operations resulted in many urban residents losing either their home or their livelihoods, or both. Around the time of OM/RO, a Deputy Minister defined 'Zimbabweanness' as follows during a debate in Parliament: 'the definition of an indigenous person is one who has a rural home allocated to him by virtue of being indigenous, and a home that one has acquired in an urban area because it has been bought or it has been allocated to him by the State'.⁷ Not having access to a rural home was associated with not being 'indigenous' and 'un-Zimbabwean', and therefore as undeserving of a place in Zimbabwean society. OM/RO particularly affected Zimbabweans of Malawian, Zambian and Mozambican descent who either worked on farms or lived in urban areas and often did not have access to land in rural areas.

The attack on urban residents was primarily motivated by the fact that Zimbabwe's urban areas were the major support base of the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). In all elections between 2000 and 2005, MDC received the majority of votes in urban areas and ZANU PF's support remained confined to the rural areas.⁸ Before the March 2005 parliamentary elections, President Mugabe addressed Harare residents as follows in a speech at a funeral of a government minister at the national burial ground Heroes Acre:

You are Zimbabweans, you belong to Zimbabwe which was brought by the blood of our heroes lying here and others scattered throughout the country. Should we give it away to sellouts here in Harare? This is our capital city. You are sons and daughters of revolutionaries. What wrong have we done you? Harare: think again, think again, think again.⁹

Whereas Mugabe represented MDC voters as 'sell-outs', those voting for ZANU PF were portrayed as true, authentic and patriotic Zimbabweans. For government, the MDC posed a threat to national sovereignty and represented British, American and Rhodesian interests. While MDC

⁴ See Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni (1999) for an urban historiography of Zimbabwe, and specific focus also on the role of urban associations in the resistance against colonialism.

⁵ 'Zanu PF Accused of Tribalism', *The Daily News*, 14 October 2002.

⁶ The Shona term '*murambatsvina*' literally means 'clear the dirt or filth'.

⁷ Statement made in Parliament, 23 June 2005, by Phineas Chihota, Deputy Minister of Industry and International Trade, 'Urban Dwellers not Zimbabwean – MP', *The Zimbabwe Independent*, 1 July 2005 (quoted in Muzondidya 2007: 334).

⁸ This refers to the following elections: June 2000 parliamentary elections; March 2002 presidential, mayoral and council elections; September 2002 local elections; August 2003 council and municipal elections and March 2005 parliamentary elections,

⁹ 'Harare, Think Again', *News24*, 2 March 2005. Retrieved 11 November 2005 from http://www.news24.com/News24/Africa/Zimbabwe/0,,2-11-1662_1670235,00.html, quoted also in Kamete (2006: 263).

was constructed as an alien party unconnected to Zimbabwe's history, ZANU PF's role in the liberation war served as a justification for its continued rule over Zimbabwe.

Apart from invoking binary oppositions such as black/white, indigene/stranger, rural/urban and ZANU PF/MDC, President Mugabe also began to exclude the increasing number of Zimbabweans leaving the country for greener pastures in South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. For example, in his speech at Independence Day in April 2006, he blamed Zimbabweans for joining the diaspora in the United Kingdom:

You might go to England, but you will be discriminated against there. You will be given menial jobs like looking after old people in their homes. If you flee then who will make the country better? Is it Mugabe alone? Did I fight for the county alone? The answer is no. It was a collective exercise [...]. We should remain united, love each other and help each other and know that we are all Zimbabweans especially in the face of the current challenges. Zimbabwe is one country and is the only country we have. If it's the only country we have, let's make it great because people fought for it [...]. You might flee and go to South Africa or the UK, but we will meet; *nyaya haiperi* [the crimes will not be forgiven].¹⁰

While the increasingly desperate economic situation forced many Zimbabweans to seek their fortunes elsewhere, Mugabe blamed them for not being committed to their country.¹¹ In another speech in 2006, he mocked the diaspora for returning back to Zimbabwe as 'retirees in wheelchairs'.¹² When South Africa saw a spate of xenophobic attacks targeting Zimbabweans and other foreigners in May 2008, he urged South Africa-based Zimbabweans to consider coming back to Zimbabwe and offered that '[w]e have land for our people in South Africa who may want to return home'.¹³

Therefore, in order to qualify as an authentic and patriotic Zimbabwean, one was expected to: be black; have ancestors who were born in Zimbabwe; live in rural areas or at least be entitled to land in the rural areas; and vote ZANU PF. The next sections discuss whether discussions on diasporic websites provided an alternative discourse to this increasingly narrow form of authoritarian nationalism.

Emerging diasporic media: the case of *NewZimbabwe*

Coinciding with the increasing Zimbabwean diaspora, there was a corresponding rise in different types of media that began to cater for the growing numbers of Zimbabweans abroad. In December 2001, former journalists of the state broadcaster Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) set up a radio station *SW Radio Africa* which operates from a studio in northwest London and broadcasts on the shortwave in Zimbabwe as well as on the internet. In February 2005, a weekly newspaper, *The Zimbabwean*, was established which was produced and disseminated in the United Kingdom but also distributed in Zimbabwe and neighbouring countries.

¹⁰ Quoted in: 'Come Home, Let's Rebuild Zimbabwe', *Association for Zimbabwe Journalists website*, 20 April 2006.

¹¹ While President Mugabe mocked the diaspora for being 'unpatriotic', the governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), Gideon Gono, urged Zimbabweans to work abroad and to remit foreign currency back to Zimbabwe. As he said in June 2004, '[t]he country's foreign currency reserves would improve significantly if more people went to work abroad [...]. The exportation of labour has helped many countries in earning foreign currency as citizens use official channels to send money back to their families at home. I encourage Zimbabweans to seek jobs outside the country' (quoted in: Kahiya, Vincent, Mugabe's shadow dogs Gono in diaspora, *The Zimbabwe Independent*, 19 June 2004). In order to ensure that remittances from diasporic Zimbabweans would be channelled through official money transfer services, RBZ launched the HomeLink scheme in May 2004.

¹² Nyamutata, Conrad, 'Don't Demonise the Diaspora', *The Zimbabwe Standard*, 27 August 2006.

¹³ 'Land for Zimbabweans who Return from South Africa – Mugabe', *Reuters*, 25 May 2008.

Apart from these 'old' media, Zimbabweans increasingly began to profile themselves through a range of websites which were mostly set up by former journalists. Websites such as *The Zimbabwe Situation* (<http://www1.zimbabwesituation.com>), *Zimdaily* (<http://zimdaily.com>), *NewZimbabwe* (<http://www.newzimbabwe.com>), *ZWNews* (<http://www.zwnews.com/contact.cfm>) and *ZimOnline* (<http://www.zimonline.co.za>) sought to keep Zimbabweans posted on developments back in their country. Most of these emerging media provided news, information, entertainment and advertisements, and offered discussion fora on current affairs and the challenges that were part of living in a foreign country. They covered topics of relevance to Zimbabweans in the diaspora, e.g. legal issues to do with asylum applications and carried political activism aimed at exposing the injustices perpetrated by the Zimbabwean government. However, they also aimed to provide critical perspectives on the crisis to Zimbabweans 'at home' in the context of the increasing repression of private media and the monopolisation of public debate by government. These newly emergent media therefore aimed to connect 'the homeland' and 'the diaspora' in multiple and imaginative ways.

The website *NewZimbabwe* is of particular interest because of the way in which it sought to imagine a 'New Zimbabwe' beyond the 'official' version of the Zimbabwean nation articulated by the ZANU PF government in its increasingly authoritarian nationalism. The website advertises itself through various slogans such as 'the Zimbabwe news you trust', 'the biggest name in Zimbabwe news' and 'breaking news as it happens'. The website features news items, both written in-house and compiled from other sources, as well as showbiz news, sports, columns and opinion articles. Prominent Zimbabweans have contributed pieces, including the previous Minister of Information, Jonathan Moyo, businessman Mutumwa Mawere, young academics, intellectuals and novelists such as Chenjerai Hove.

The website was set up by Mduduzi Mathuthu in June 2003.¹⁴ Mathuthu is a Zimbabwean journalist who used to work for *The Daily News* as correspondent in Bulawayo, which is the second biggest town in Zimbabwe, located in the western part of the country. Like many other Zimbabwean journalists, Mathuthu came to the United Kingdom to embark on postgraduate education. He enrolled for an MA degree in Journalism at Cardiff University and started the website after he completed his degree. As one of his major sources of inspiration, Mathuthu names Piers Morgan, the previous editor of the British tabloid the *Mirror*. In an article on the website, Mathuthu said to be 'drawn to editors with a sense of mischief, who want to make waves, and who take risks', even though these editors 'occasionally drop clangers – but that's the nature of taking risks: you have to push the envelope'.¹⁵ The front-page of *NewZimbabwe* is indeed modelled along the lines of a British tabloid, with bold and provocative headlines in big capital letters. For example, when Makosi's application for asylum was accepted by the British Home Office, *NewZimbabwe's* front page featured a close-up picture of Makosi's bare breasts, taken in the *Big Brother* house, and the headline read: 'They can stay'.¹⁶

NewZimbabwe is supported by a large number of advertisements and banners on the front page, addressing diasporic Zimbabweans, mainly those based in the United Kingdom. Money

¹⁴ In mid-2007, *NewZimbabwe* also launched a tabloid newspaper which was circulated in branches of the Nandos restaurant chain and African shops across the United Kingdom. This article strictly focuses on the *NewZimbabwe* website.

¹⁵ Mathuthu to edit new Zimbabwe paper in UK, *NewZimbabwe*, 22 September 2004. Retrieved 21 February 2008 from <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/fusion3.11665.html>.

¹⁶ *NewZimbabwe*, 'Makosi Update'. Retrieved 29 May 2006 from <http://newzim.proboards29.com/index.cgi?board=zimele&action=display&thread=1118907878>.

transfer companies present their services to transfer money to Zimbabwe against 'parallel' exchange rates. HIV/AIDS anti-retroviral medicines, groceries and fuel can be bought for relatives in Zimbabwe. Phone companies offer cheap calling rates to friends in Zimbabwe and other companies advertise affordable flights to Zimbabwe. Announcements of events featuring Zimbabwean musicians or DJs are made as well as notices of social gatherings in Luton, which are informally known in Zimbabwe as 'braai' or 'gochi gochi' (barbecues).

Apart from news articles and advertisements, visitors are strongly encouraged to join 'the debate' on the discussion forum section of the website, which has proven very popular with 8,152 members registered in May 2006.¹⁷ New members can join by simply choosing a username and password which provides them access to the forums. The forum section has been divided into debates on different categories of topics: general discussion, high school reunions, audience with a politician, talking sport, hot gossip, humour, relationships, technology, music and entertainment, religious corner and health and lifestyle. The 'general discussion' and 'relationships' sections are the most popular with the highest number of postings. The discussion forums on *NewZimbabwe* particularly address what can be called the 'interpretive community of in-group members' (Mitra 1997), given that active participation in the chatrooms requires some knowledge of local languages in Zimbabwe. Discussions are mostly held in English and Shona, or Shonglish, which refers to the mixture of Shona and English that is common among Zimbabweans, and sometimes Ndebele is also used.

The issue of 'tribalism', as it is referred to in the chatrooms, is a popular discussion topic in the forums and moderator Mathuthu, a Ndebele-speaker, has occasionally been accused of stirring up 'tribal' divisions on the forum and for promoting tribalism and advocating 'Mthwakazi', which refers to the call for self-determination of the 'Ndebele nation'. One participant in the forum even suggested introducing a special section on the forum for discussions on tribalism in order 'to keep the main page "venom" free'.¹⁸ As the same contributor argued: 'Those with an itch to post some tribally or racially stuff, would then simply click on that link and post their anger, frustration dreams hopes and lies. If you don't want to read the tribal crap then you will keep off that thread! Summarily let birds of the same feather fly together'.¹⁹

Although this would require further offline research, it appears likely that a significant number of participants in the *NewZimbabwe* forums are Zimbabweans based in the United Kingdom. This is demonstrated not only by the language that participants use but also by the topics they discuss in the chatrooms which strongly relate to everyday life situations of Zimbabweans in Britain. For example, in a thread entitled, 'Nzondoro [chicken feet] in the UK', participants discussed where to buy chicken feet, a Zimbabwean delicacy, and Palmers Butchery in Bletchley, Milton Keynes was recommended as the best place. According to one participant, queues at Palmers Butchery often resembled the '[a]gricultural show days with zimboz coming as far as Leicester etc for the meat'.²⁰ The question about 'why the fuss? Aren't there any other butchers which have right about the same quality of meat' was dismissed by those who appreciated the 'supreme taste' of meat from the 'famous Palmers Butchery'.²¹ The participants

¹⁷ A count of members was conducted in the forum section on 29 May 2006. Retrieved 20 August 2008 from <http://newzim.proboards29.com/index.cgi?action=members>.

¹⁸ Post by nygent on 26 June 2006, 10.58am, part of thread 'Start a Tribalism Section'.

¹⁹ Post by nygent on 26 June 2006, 10.58am, part of thread 'Start a Tribalism Section'.

²⁰ Post by Valerie on 12 May 2006, 09.09am, part of thread 'Nzondoro in UK'. The Agricultural Show is one of the most well attended annual events in Harare.

²¹ Post by Valerie on 12 May 2006, 09.09am, part of thread 'Nzondoro in UK'.

were familiar with most places in the United Kingdom as shown by the way in which they tried to help each other in identifying the exact location of Palmers Butchery.

Both the front page of *NewZimbabwe* and the forum section often carried lively debates on a range of issues, and particularly on the crisis. While the front page mainly gave space to opinion pieces from Zimbabwean academics, intellectuals and politicians, the forum section was accessible to ‘ordinary Zimbabweans’, i.e. all members who had registered with the website. As the title of the website suggested, *NewZimbabwe* aimed to establish a new version of Zimbabwe with new possibilities and challenges. It sought to imagine a different country from beyond the physical borders of the nation. Mathuthu played a crucial role in triggering debates and provoking responses, in line with his motto to ‘make waves’ and ‘to push the envelope’. As will be demonstrated in this article, a particularly interesting debate took place on *NewZimbabwe* around the participation of Makosi Musambasi, a migrant nurse from Zimbabwe, in the 2005 British *Big Brother* television show, broadcast on Channel Four.

Makosi Musambasi: A Zimbo in *Big Brother*

The 2005 *Big Brother* show that provoked such significant debate among diasporic Zimbabweans in Britain was the sixth edition in the United Kingdom. The show kicked off on Friday 27 May 2005 and drew thirteen contestants together for seventy-five days in the confinement of the *Big Brother* house. Makosi quickly drew the attention of Zimbabweans, both those based in Zimbabwe and those part of the diaspora. Bubbly, charismatic, confident and stunning, Makosi provided Zimbabweans with plenty of material to talk about. During her days in the *Big Brother* house, she confessed to being a virgin upon entering the house, went topless, controversially kissed female housemate Orlaith, allegedly engaged in unprotected sex in the pool with fellow housemate Anthony and claimed to be pregnant. As a prominent Zimbabwean in the United Kingdom commented: ‘I have been to several Zimbabwean gatherings in the past few months and was surprised at the amount of time spent by people discussing the Makosi issue. We have to admit that Makosi has become a household name to many of us’.²²

The website *NewZimbabwe* fulfilled an important role in providing space to diasporic Zimbabweans to discuss their recent move to the United Kingdom and to debate the antics of their fellow Zimbabwean in the *Big Brother* house. More generally, the internet played a key role in the lives of diasporic Zimbabweans. A study conducted by Bloch (2005: 72-3) for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) concluded that participating in internet discussion groups was the most regular activity that diasporic Zimbabweans engaged in with other diasporic Zimbabweans (24.5 per cent). Although this could to some extent be explained by the fact that the IOM conducted part of its survey through internet questionnaires, it is significant that this activity was mentioned and recognised as an activity that kept them in touch with others, as a means to maintain a sense of community.

In line with Mathuthu’s tabloid aspirations mentioned earlier, *NewZimbabwe* quickly set the stage for a lively debate through its announcement that ‘[e]very Zimbabwean should be ashamed’ of Makosi in an article on its frontpage:

The reality TV show *Big Brother* – a sad and pointless contest in which 13 participants compete for fame and £100 000 in the same house for nearly 2 months, trailed by television cameras – this year features a pathetic, self-obsessed Zimbabwean who claims to be a virgin! [...] Zimbabweans are generally cultured people, but not this chicken-brained sanctimonious squit. She has already started

²² ‘Chireka, Dr Brighton, Makosi’s Case, as I See it’, *The Zimbabwean*, 25 November 2005.

behaving like an Amazon squirrel, plunging the depths of iniquity to try and rile the other inhabitants of the jungle that is *Big Brother*.²³

NewZimbabwe referred to Makosi as a ‘foul mouthed weasel’ who undermined fundamental Zimbabwean values. The provocative front page article quickly triggered a significant amount of debate in the forum section of *NewZimbabwe* and at least one hundred discussion threads in the forum section focused on Makosi. As chatroom participants noted, Makosi soon became a topic that could not really be avoided. For example, one participant remarked that ‘the girl’s antics have forced her into all the newspapers (for the wrong reasons) and you just cant help reading about it, its like trying to ignore the Iraqi war, its always in your face anyway’.²⁴ Another participant confessed to not normally watch the show but somehow felt obliged to engage with conversations about Makosi: ‘I not a fan of *Big Brother* and I don’t stay glued to the TV either. As a matter of fact I have not been watching *Big Brother* at all. Its just that all the white people at work been talking about her and her antics on a daily basis. I did not even witness the said incident but everyone is talking and there is no smoke without fire’.²⁵ The remainder of this article focuses on the way in which *NewZimbabwe* forum participants discussed Makosi’s involvement in the *Big Brother* show.²⁶

Defining the ‘nation’ through Makosi’s multiple identities

Makosi’s participation in the *Big Brother* show clearly brought to light the contested nature and often exclusionary definition of what forumites perceived as ‘Zimbabweanness’. Initially, the arrival of Makosi in the *Big Brother* house generated huge excitement amongst diasporic Zimbabweans participating in the *NewZimbabwe* discussion forum. One participant had immediately identified Makosi as a Zimbabwean through the way in which she spoke English: ‘I picked it up from her DISTINCT Zimbo accent before they said “She’s originally from Zimbabwe”. Our accent is unique and quite easy to pick!! Can’t wait to hear her scream “MAIWEEEE” ’.²⁷ ‘Maiweee’ literally is a call for one’s ‘mother’ in Shona, Zimbabwe’s major local language, and is an expression often used when facing danger or when calling out in disbelief.

Another *NewZimbabwe* member exclaimed ‘We are on the map’, hereby suggesting that Makosi’s partaking in the show had made diasporic Zimbabweans visible in the United Kingdom.²⁸ It was felt that Channel Four’s *Big Brother* show was meant to represent society, ‘ratio in a way’, and Makosi’s participation therefore suggested that ‘Zimbos are now getting the recognition’.²⁹ Forum participants felt that Channel Four had finally realised the presence of large numbers of Zimbabweans in Britain, hence the need to portray this minority through Makosi. But the recognition of Zimbabweans in Britain, through Makosi’s participation in the

²³ ‘Every Zimbabwean Should be Ashamed’, *NewZimbabwe*, 29 May 2005. Retrieved 26 June 2006 from available from: <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/fame4.12697.html>.

²⁴ Post by DRBOB on 8 June 2005, 11:23am, part of thread ‘Makosi’s Blow-job on National TV.’

²⁵ Post by TSOTSI on 8 June 2005, 11:24am, part of thread ‘Makosi’s Blow-job on National TV.’

²⁶ On 29 May 2006, an advanced Google search on Makosi was done on the forum section of *NewZimbabwe* (<http://newzim.proboards29.com>). This yielded 221 hits. Ultimately, nearly 100 threads were identified with the subject heading Makosi. These were ordered chronologically and analysed. In order to retain the character of the postings, none of the quotes from the chatrooms have been edited. All typing and grammar errors have been retained.

²⁷ Post by jmcguire on 27 May 2005, 9:37pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

²⁸ Post by Bantuwarrior on 27 May 2005, 9:39pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

²⁹ Post by watisthis on 27 May 2005, 11:07pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

Big Brother show, was felt not going to last for long. As a result of persistent forms of racism in British society, one chatroom participant expected Makosi to be voted out of the show fairly soon:

HOW LONG DO YOU THINK SHE WILL LAST I GIVE HER 2 WEEKS OR LESS YOU KNOW
THE BRITISH AINT GOING TO LET A BLACK PERSON WIN, LET ALONE A AFRICAN
AND OHH SHIT EVEN WORSE SHE IS FROM ZIM, TONY BLAIR WILL HAVE THAT
BITCH OUT OF THERE QUICK.³⁰

The capital letters used by this chatroom participant serve to underline the urgency of the comment which was indirectly a comment on the broader diaspora experience of Zimbabweans in the United Kingdom. As Cunningham (2001: 136) notes: 'much diasporic cultural expression is a struggle for survival, identity and assertion, and it can be a struggle as much enforced by the necessities of coming to terms with the dominant culture as it is freely assumed. And the results may not be pretty'. The above posting shows the participant's disappointment about majority white 'British' attitudes towards 'a black person' and more particularly about Tony Blair's possible vindictiveness on a fellow Zimbabwean. This imagined power of the dominant white British hosts was an issue recurrent on the *NewZimbabwe* forum. Participants shared a number of fears and conspiracy theories on behalf of Makosi which ultimately connected to their own insecurities of being diasporic Zimbabweans in Britain, many of whom did not have a secure residence status or permit.

Another participant expected Makosi to be voted out because she indirectly represented Zimbabwe's regime with which the British government no longer had sound diplomatic relations. While the participant above emphasised Makosi's identity as a black person in Britain and more specifically as a Zimbabwean who by virtue of being Zimbabwean did not enjoy a secure residence status in Britain, participant 'Dr Chinoz' portrayed Makosi as a representative of the ruling party ZANU PF because of her alleged affair with Philip Chiyangwa, a prominent ZANU PF parliamentarian and businessman. Makosi, which literally means 'princess' in Ndebele, was in fact a 'Zanu princess':

I got a feeling that Makosi has been lined up as the first candidate to be booted out next Friday not only because she is Zimbabwean, but because she has been a 'Zanu Princess'. How can they give her the tall order of having to receive the highest nominations from all the house's in mates within the first seven days?³¹

In these comments, diasporic Zimbabweans strongly identified with Makosi and in the process expressed their own views on their self-perceived roles and positions in British society. The hostile attitudes of British 'hosts', both in the house and more generally in British society, led participants to show their solidarity with Makosi.

However, debates did not always express a demarcation between 'us' (Zimbabweans) and 'them' (British). Makosi's participation did not necessarily strengthen collective identities but precisely brought to the fore the fragmented nature of the 'Zimbabwean nation'. Instead of identifying with Makosi as diasporic Zimbabweans based in the United Kingdom, some forum participants began to distance themselves from her in terms of both her class and ethnic background. They attempted to situate her back in her previous Zimbabwean context which was

³⁰ Post by watisthis on 27 May 2005, 10:21pm, part of thread 'A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!'.

³¹ Post by Dr CHINOZ on 28 May 2005, 11:29am, part of thread 'A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!'.

not shared by all chatroom participants. For example, one *NewZimbabwe* member mainly saw Makosi as a fairly well-off Zimbabwean, often expressed in the term ‘musalad’ (‘salad-eater’) which refers to young well-to-do urban residents of upmarket suburbs who dress in Western clothes and are often embarrassed to speak in local Zimbabwean languages:

Haaa!!! Wanditangira JoeDoe. Zi Accent racho. I told my young brother she was from Zim, before Davina said it. Gore rino tinoonerera. Accent yacho haiite kunge akakura achishoferwa tho. ndainonga chop chop. Makosi... Makosikhazi?³²

English translation from Shona:

Haaa!!! You beat me to it. It’s a very Zimbabwean accent. I told my brother she was from Zim, before Davina [*Big Brother* presenter] said it. This year has plenty in store. She has a posh Zimbabwean accent, although she sounds as if she grew up being chauffeur driven. I quickly figured out the accent. Makosi [literally princess]...Makosikhazi [literally queen]?

Makosi was thus represented as a relatively wealthier Zimbabwean which was expressed in her particular accent in English. Despite the likely class difference between Makosi and the chatroom participant, Makosi was still considered as a Zimbabwean. Another participant agreed that judging from the way Makosi speaks, she is a ‘pure muZimba’.³³ But this was disputed by others on the forum who rejected that one could be identified as Zimbabwean simply through the way one speaks: ‘So you’re saying she’s Zimbabwean because she has an accent? Under those qualifications I would be American because of my accent’.³⁴ The same chatroom participant stated:

She [Makosi] only identifies herself with Zimbabwe because she grew up there. But in terms of the blood running in her very veins and even her genetic make up she is not Zimbabwean. The fact fact she has 0% = Zimbabwean blood. Scientifically speaking, culturally speaking you name it she is not Zimbabwean.³⁵

So while most of the early forum postings celebrated the arrival of Makosi in the *Big Brother* house, subsequent contributions rated her ‘Zimbabweanness’ in a much more unfavourable light. Her ethnic background became a factor that was often drawn into this debate, particularly when *NewZimbabwe* members began to reflect on Makosi’s roots. Some believed Makosi was born in Zimbabwe to a South African mother and a Mozambican father, and this suddenly made her Zimbabwean identity appear questionable:

Can’t vouch that a Mosken [derogatory term used for Zimbabweans of Mozambican origin] with a South African mother represents Zimbabwe in the true sense of the word, values, culture, the lot. Were they passing through Harare when she was born? She is quite a loud mouth, and not very likeable.³⁶

Some considered her to be a ‘muNyasalandi’ which is a derogatory term referring to migrant workers of Malawian descent. Others pointed towards Makosi’s surname which for them proved that she was no ‘Zimbabwean’: ‘OK to end this argument is “Musambasi” a Zimbabwean

³² Post by FullMessage on 27 May 2005, 9:44pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

³³ Post by watisthis on 27 May 2005, 11:04pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

³⁴ Post by spie on May 28, 2005, 7:39pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

³⁵ Post by spie on 28 May 2005, 8:12pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

³⁶ Post by munodawafa on 27 May 2005, 10:58pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

surname? – No its not! Just like surnames Liboma or Modimo its not a Zimbabwean. She just grew up in Zimbabwe but is not Zimbabwean’.³⁷

Merely having been born in Zimbabwe was not sufficient for being ‘Zimbabwean’, and another participant drew parallels with his/her own British-born child: ‘If she [Makosi] is Zimbabwean then my son is English’.³⁸ Others felt that ‘Zimbabwean culture’ should simply be defined in terms of a person, born and bred in Zimbabwe, someone who has solid ‘roots’ in the country.³⁹ One *NewZimbabwe* member even argued that it did not make sense to discuss ‘foreigners’ on a forum that was supposed to deal with ‘Zimbabwean’ issues: ‘She is beautiful its a pity Zimbabweans argue about foreigners on a ZIMBABWEAN FORUM’ and the participant acknowledged to be ‘proud of ZIMBABWEANS that excel but I resent foreigners that masquerade as Zimbabweans, one’s nationality is of paramount importance .Visiting a stable does not make you a horse’.⁴⁰

However, calls for support to Makosi were made and justified particularly by referring to her position as an African and victim of racism in the *Big Brother* house. For example, one participant put it as follows: ‘I read “pull her down” syndrome in the majority of contributions. Why not support a sister from mother Africa guys? If she does not get your support, who will give it?’⁴¹ It was felt that Makosi could not count on votes from British viewers who were unlikely to support her. Fellow housemate Saskia’s racist remarks were also mentioned as a reason for support to Makosi: ‘Yeh, let’s support her. We should nominate Saskia for eviction. She sez she hates immigrants!’⁴² The mood thus shifted to ‘she got my support’ and to ‘Guys we should stick together and prevent her from being voted out next week’.⁴³

Other ways in which Makosi was discussed was through framings of gender. Several participants, most of whom seemed to be male, were not particularly concerned about Makosi’s exact roots but primarily saw her as a ‘hot chick’. When a picture of Makosi was posted on the forum, participants exclaimed: ‘damn she looks quite nice, She has that Zimbabwean look, at least they found a descent girl to represent Zimba. I now might jus vote to keep her in’.⁴⁴ One member alerted the forum to the fact that Makosi was in a ‘Bikini right now on E4. Wow nice to see a woman with hips for a change! Was tired of sticks with boobs!’.⁴⁵ The debate turned into adulation for black women: ‘I love black women. Black women huchi [honey]!!’⁴⁶ The comments queried Makosi’s claim that she was a virgin and became suggestive of her sexual potential with talk of thighs looking ‘like they have never been stretched that much’.⁴⁷ Makosi was considered to be a ‘proper’ and ‘voluptuous’ Zimbabwean woman as compared to her ‘thin’ British housemates.

³⁷ Post by spie on 28 May 2005, 4:21pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

³⁸ Post by spie on May 28, 2005, 5:42pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

³⁹ Post by munodawafa on 27 May 2005, 11:21pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

⁴⁰ Post by vumani on 28 May 2005, 8:55pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

⁴¹ Post by munodawafa on 28 May 2005, 12:22am, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

⁴² Post by JonDoe on 28 May 2005, 12:39am, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

⁴³ Post by spie on 28 May 2005, 12:32am, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

⁴⁴ Post by watisthis on 27 May 2005, 10:50pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

⁴⁵ Post by JonDoe on 27 May 2005, 10:54pm, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

⁴⁶ Post by munodawafa on 28 May 2005, 12:58am, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

⁴⁷ Post by munodawafa on May 28, 2005, 1:08am, part of thread ‘A Zimbo in *Big Brother*!!!!!!’.

Conclusion

It is arguable that the growing numbers of Zimbabweans leaving their country for greener pastures, such as the United Kingdom, have set up a vibrant media culture that has catered for a wide audience. The above discussion has shown how diasporic Zimbabwean media culture incorporated and subverted mainstream representations in the British media. The intensity and scope of the debates around the participation of a Zimbabwean nurse, Makosi Musambasi, in the 2005 British television show *Big Brother* are a good example of the mobilising aspect of issues of national identity on the internet. As a nurse, Makosi was the archetype of the Zimbabwean diaspora experience in the United Kingdom. Well-summarised by Taffy Nyamwanza, a UK-based lawyer, in the newspaper *The Zimbabwean*, Makosi 'brought to the fore some critical issues that Zimbabweans in the diaspora are all too familiar with: nursing as a platform to bigger things, AIDS and the rumours of AIDS, media xenophobia, and perhaps by far the most topical, a perilous immigration status accompanied by the constant fear of forced removal to Mugabeland by the real *Big Brother*, the Home Office'.⁴⁸ Zimbabweans could easily identify with Makosi's experience in Britain but also profoundly distanced themselves from her.

As a migrant to the United Kingdom, Makosi underwent training as a nurse upon arrival in the country. As Nyamwanza suggested, this was not because she was particularly interested in nursing but like many other Zimbabwean migrants, Makosi considered nursing as a 'stepping stone' to a more glamorous professional career. Another issue that enabled diasporic Zimbabweans to identify with Makosi was the amount of racism that both Makosi and other Zimbabweans were confronted with in their daily lives in the United Kingdom. The producers of *Big Brother* received a number of complaints from viewers about alleged racism when Makosi's fellow housemate Saskia told her 'You lot always have a chip on your shoulder' and made derogatory comments about her Afro-hairstyle: 'And you wear a fucking wig on your head'.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Makosi was also confronted with the same levels of insecurity surrounding her immigration status in Britain when she faced deportation two weeks after the show.

But most importantly, Makosi's television performance profoundly challenged and provoked ideas about what internet participants understood as 'Zimbabwean' identity, morality and womanhood. The 'Makosi case' triggered a more serious debate about what it means to be 'Zimbabwean'. This case has illustrated the ways in which diasporic Zimbabweans tried to fix identity, to provide an essence that could be seen as 'Zimbabweanness'. Participants attributed different identities to Makosi such as 'muZimbo', diasporic Zimbabwean in the United Kingdom, 'musalad', 'Mosken', 'muNyasarandi', foreigner, 'hot chick' and 'Zimbabwean woman'. While some identified with Makosi because she was 'a pure Zimbabwean', others explicitly denied that she was a Zimbabwean because her parents had not been born in Zimbabwe. These imaginations of the nation to some extent echoed the authoritarian nationalism espoused by ZANU PF in the 2000s. Although Makosi had lived her whole life in Zimbabwe, forum participants excluded her from the nation in similar ways as the Zimbabwean government sought to disenfranchise Zimbabweans of Malawian, Zambian and Mozambican descent from their citizenship. In this way, official highly exclusionary notions of the nation were thus reproduced on the *NewZimbabwe* forum. Hence, while it is tempting to consider the internet as a free counter-medium compared to controlled, monolithic and monopolised state media in Zimbabwe, internet debates among diasporic Zimbabweans about Makosi's participation in the

⁴⁸ 'Nyamwanza, Taffy, Makosi and the Real *Big Brother*,' *The Zimbabwean*, 16 September 2005.

⁴⁹ Makosi in *Big Brother* racism row, *NewZimbabwe*. Retrieved 21 February 2008 from <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/fame14.12816.html>.

Big Brother house often reflected state discourses and presented nativist conceptions of Zimbabwean citizenship instead of more cosmopolitan notions. The internet proved a forum that served to highlight and reinforce divisions among Zimbabweans instead of project a common understanding and identity. Divisions were not only along political lines but ethnicity proved a recurrent marker used by diasporic Zimbabweans on the internet to frame each other.

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