‘Diaspora Ethnicity and Politics in the Electronic Media:
Case studies of United Kingdom-based Zimbabwean internet websites and their
associations’

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ABSTRACT

The project explores how the internet gives groups of Zimbabwean exiles in Britain a medium to express their own identity and consciousness. It describes the manifestations of different Zimbabwean identities in the British diaspora, showcasing similar and contrasting histories, memories of home, concepts of citizenship, and negotiation with homeland and hostland agencies on behalf of marginalized interest groups in both contexts. Four case studies of interest groups that illustrate the plurality of these discourses help to re-focus scholarship on Zimbabwean migrants in Britain from a purely political or economic contestation with the Zimbabwe government, to a multi-sited engagement of diverse diaspora communities not only with the government, but also with their base constituencies in the homeland. The research uncovers in these cases reproductions of different Zimbabwean identities which, while unusable in the British context, are important in sustaining connectivity with homeland spaces. The conceptual grounds for case selection are diverse constituencies on the margins of the Zimbabwean public sphere, whose presence in Britain and access to the internet allows them to reproduce their identities outside of the homeland’s legal and social constraints. Through use of surveys and interviews, the research probes group traits and the role of the internet in facilitating their transition from online narratives into tangible initiatives in public life.

The conversations and actions analysed in the online and face-to-face interactions are important insofar as they germinate outside the strictures of the African nationalist ‘unity’ narratives that are dominant inside Zimbabwe. Their facilitation via the internet, and in the diaspora, locates the research in the two fields of communication and diaspora scholarship, with the social history of the groups providing a crucial undergirding to the narratives and social action ensuing. The thesis conceptualizes internet use and associated activism by Zimbabweans in Britain as twin agencies in a transnational public sphere that allows Zimbabweans abroad to continue to engage with Zimbabwe, while maintaining networks that generate discourses about group identities in Zimbabwe and abroad. These discourses, forming an alternative to the majoritarian discourses of the Zimbabwean state and the ‘abstract wholism’ of global understandings of diasporas, provide space for minorities and non-state players to interact with each other, the homeland, and with their host country as part of an extension of the Zimbabwean public sphere.

Out of the analysis emerges an ethnically diverse and politically polarised account of Zimbabwean histories, personal voices, and interest group discourses, an account that is revealingly honest about the fissures in Zimbabwean society and, by extension, its diaspora, extending postcolonial scholarship to previously ignored groups on the margins of former colonies. With its empirical description of each website and activity, the thesis has engaged with multiple authenticities in a way that undermines hegemonic perspectives of Zimbabwean nationality.