‘The Diary of a Country in Crisis’:
Zimbabwean Censorship and Adaptive Cultural Forms

ASHLEIGH HARRIS
(Uppsala University)

Zimbabwe has an extensive censorship infrastructure that operates both formally, through the board of censors, and informally, through intimidation by the police and other state and civil players. The use and misuse of censorship legislation in the country has made for a chaotic situation in which misinterpretations of the law have been widely used to justify police crackdowns, arrests and destruction of art, literature and other cultural forms. This article reads censorship as a multiple and sometimes inconsistent phenomenon that shapes the strategies of cultural producers in manifold ways in Zimbabwe. Different literary and cultural forms constitute varying degrees of threat to the state, the police or individuals, depending on the audiences they address. I wish to explore how literary and cultural forms adapt to very localised practices of censorship. Interpreting the shifting forms, genres and modalities that literature and culture take as part of their strategy to avoid censorship provides new understandings of how literature and culture records social change.

Keywords: Zimbabwean literature; Zimbabwean censorship; Zimbabwean theatre; Theatre-in-the-Park

Introduction

In a contribution to the Zimbabwean newspaper The Standard in 2012, an anonymous writer publishing under the pseudonym ‘Bookworm’ lamented the long history of censorship in Zimbabwe. Bookworm takes up varied examples: from the censorship of literary writers and playwrights Dambudzo Marechera, Chenjerai Hove and Cont Mhlanga in the 1980s, through that of playwright Raisedon Baya and artist Owen Maseko in the 2000s, to the 2015 arrest of the erotic dance group ‘Bev and the Sexy Angels’. While this wide-ranging stretch in forms of expression from literary writing to erotic dance throws together political and moral censorship in ways that enmesh these different repressive impulses, Bookworm nevertheless raises an important point about the operations of censorship in the cultural sphere: that is, censorship is directed towards those cultural forms with the greatest social impact. While discussions of censorship often focus on discrete texts and their individual content, this...

1 Bookworm, ‘Censorship and Zimbabwean Literature’, The Standard, Harare, 29 June 2015, available at https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2015/06/29/censorship-and-zimbabwean-literature/, retrieved 2 May 2020.
article posits that, in a time of mass and social media, censorship is less concerned with the content of a critique than with its capacity to go viral. Popular forms have always been threatening to oppressive states, but what this article suggests is that by contemplating how censorship affects culture, we learn something about how literary and cultural forms adapt and mutate in direct response to the pressures applied by repressive state institutions, legislation and representatives. From the perspective of literary and cultural studies, this suggests that the emergent form of various cultural products (whether literary, artistic or popular) may be read as an index of how censorship operates in any given society. An obvious example is women writers’ use of male pseudonyms for publication of certain kinds of content and literary forms in the 19th century. Such a phenomenon tells us a great deal about how literary form, social mores and political limitations all contributed to a censorious environment for women, who adjusted their writing accordingly.

This article aims to explore this idea in the context of censorship in independent Zimbabwe. By focusing on modality rather than content, I move away from an analysis of how writers and cultural producers use style, analogy, irony and abstraction to avoid censorship. Instead I consider how political critique seeks modes that reach certain constituencies. Content remains important, of course, but only insofar as it is perceived by the state to be engaged by an audience of significant size and political import. What follows is a discussion of cultural form (including printed texts, theatrical performance and online video sketches) in the context of Zimbabwean repression. How these forms have emerged in this context and how they then respond to actual suppression when it occurs are understood in terms of the audiences that they address and the scope and impact of their political critique.

Forms of Dissent: From the Shelf to the Screen

Some of the most contentious events in independent Zimbabwean history are those collectively described by the Shona noun Gukurahundi, which describes the spring rains that wash away the chaff from the wheat. Gukurahundi was a Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU[PF])-driven operation that, as its name suggests, aimed at eliminating political dissent in the Matabeleland and Midlands regions in the 1980s. It was in these regions that ZANU(PF)'s strongest opposition, the Zimbabwean African People’s Union (ZAPU), had a political stronghold during the first democratic election of 1980, and the ruling party feared that dissident soldiers were rallying support against its rule. ZANU(PF) tasked a military unit known as the Fifth Brigade with the suppression of this ostensible uprising, which resulted in mass displacements, violence and killings, not only of suspected dissident soldiers but of entire villages and communities. The extent of the killings and acts of violence has never been fully verified, in part because of the successes of ZANU(PF)'s erasure of these events from the historical record through two key tactics: minimising or denying the events and their scale, and censoring witness accounts and cultural representations of the events.

In a previous article on censorship and literature in Zimbabwe, I considered the adapting forms that culminated in Christopher Mlalazi’s novel Running with Mother (2012), a novel

---

2 As Bookworm puts it, ‘[writers] can only say so much and hope that their readers will get the message implied by the unsaid or blank spaces without attracting the censors’.
3 It is important to note that crimes against humanity were also committed by various players during this time, including dissident soldiers themselves, the Zimbabwe People’s Militia and other arms of the Zimbabwean government, such as the Zimbabwe National Army, the Police Internal Security and Intelligence Unit (PISI) and the Central Intelligence Organisation.
4 As recently as February 2020, a civilian group known as the Matabeleland Civic Society took President Emmerson Mnangagwa to task for his refusal to acknowledge the atrocities committed at that time and for his own role in those events.
that depicts the atrocities that occurred during *Gukurahundi*. Mlalazi’s first published seed of this novel was a short flash fiction, published simultaneously in English and Swedish in an online Swedish magazine. This somewhat remote outlet was unlikely to attract the attention of the Zimbabwean board of censors in 2011, but Mlalazi nevertheless published the story under the pseudonym Keziboy. Furthermore, the story, titled ‘Becoming an Insect’, began with a short unattributed editorial note that read: ‘there are some things that can never be depicted in Zimbabwe; neither in journalism nor in fiction. But in this short story, a Zimbabwean writer writes under pseudonym about a historical case of ethnic cleansing. This novel would be impossible to publish in Zimbabwe’. Yet, less than a year later, Mlalazi did indeed publish a novel based on this short story with Zimbabwean independent publisher Weaver Press, and he did so under his own name. This raises a question as to why Mlalazi was too anxious to publish a *Gukurahundi* text online in Sweden under his own name but felt comfortable publishing a novel in Zimbabwe on the same topic a short while later. The answer lies, I argue, in the differences between the modalities and potential reach of online flash fiction compared to that of the novel. Irene Staunton, publishing stalwart and founder of Weaver Press, makes a relevant observation about state censorship in Zimbabwe:

> [w]e [at Weaver Press] don’t have, and have never had, any problems [with government interventions]. Our print-runs are small, never more than a thousand. This is nothing in a country of over ten million, even if over half of them are children. If I were to publish a contentious political pamphlet in an indigenous language in hundreds of thousands, then this would be a concern for the government. But an expensive book, hidden away in a bookshop? No, I don’t think so.⁷

This insight goes to the heart of the relationship between cultural form and censorship and explains why Christopher Mlalazi’s harrowing novel about *Gukurahundi* seemed to go relatively unnoticed by the authorities, while other artists depicting *Gukurahundi* around this time were arrested and their work censored.³ Does this mean that literary books have become so irrelevant – and expensive – in Zimbabwe that authors of published novels can operate relatively freely below the radar of the state? Quite possibly. But then, such literature has less impact than other forms, which weakens the force of its political critique. It is this balance between social relevance (and accessibility) and the political threat of a work of art, culture or literature that is at stake here. In a censorious climate, the arts are called upon to have a social and political impact, which requires a high degree of visibility, at the very same time as high visibility draws the attention of various players of the censorious state apparatus, thereby possibly resulting in complete silencing of the said critique.

Different kinds of literary interventions and forms have greater and lesser potential for visibility in a country like Zimbabwe, where, according to World Bank statistics, 49 per cent of the population live in extreme poverty and more than 80 per cent live on less than US$5.50 per day.⁹ In such an economic climate, the published book – whether a novel, a short story collection or poetry – has the lowest social impact of all cultural forms.¹⁰ At the

---

5 A. Harris, ‘Plastic Form and the Extro- and Emergent Versions of Christopher Mlalazi’s *Running with Mother*, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 30, 3 (2018), p. 360.
6 Editorial note, C. Mlalazi, ‘Att bli en insekt’ (‘Becoming an Insect’) *Dissidentbloggen* (2011), available at https://www.penopp.org/sv/artiklar/att-bli-en-insekt, retrieved 20 March 2020.
7 A. Klother, “‘You Need to Have the Idea, the Vision, and the Passion’: An Interview with Irene Staunton”, *Matatu*, 34 (2007), p. 217.
8 One high-profile example is that of visual artist Owen Maseko, whose 2010 exhibition ‘Sibathontisele’ (a series of paintings about *Gukurahundi*) at the National Gallery in Bulawayo led to his arrest and the shutdown of his exhibition.
9 Statistics available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/zimbabwe/overview, retrieved 10 May 2020.
10 Because of the high-level of piracy of books in Zimbabwe, the book’s affordability is not a straightforward matter. I have discussed this in some depth in ‘Hot Reads, Pirate Copies, and the Unsustainability of the
other end of the spectrum, an extreme case of a highly visible form of critique would be graffiti. Once again, our contributor to *The Standard, Bookworm*, makes a significant point about the relevance of graffiti in this climate, noting the marked increase of graffiti as the state’s censorship increased in the country.

A new anonymous poetry emerged that defied limitations. Anonymous graffiti scrawled on public walls, security walls, defaced billboards. It evoked laughter and introspection in its brief but very poignant and effective staccato lines. Graffiti became the diary of a country in crisis. In staccato shorthand, the walls told of histories and hatreds.11

While graffiti in its most abstract forms, such as tags, is the limit case of a cultural form because it resists content altogether, the examples that Bookworm refers to were most often expressed in clear, concise political messages. For example, in the aftermath of ZANU(PF)’s victory in 2013, a spate of anti-ZANU graffiti emerged across the country. While such graffiti are political statements rather than artistic critique, it is worth noting that graffiti as a form cross freely over such taxonomies of culture.12 Yet, even at their most abstract, graffiti operate as a symbolic rejection of the status quo. That is, it is the risk of completing an illegal activity in a censorious environment that makes the graffito read as anti-establishment. As David Fieni puts it:

> [g]raffiti decodes the performance walls enact as a theatrical disavowal of the porosity of sovereignty – by deforming, inflating, playing with letters, making them something you can see but cannot necessarily read. Graffiti would have the letter of the law succumb to a liquefaction of its own material ontological guarantee as public writing, at least at the moment of the encounter with graffiti, at the moment of inscription or viewing.13

Beyond the risk of the moment of writing, the graffito that remains is the perfect form with which to critique safely and substantially a repressive state, because it is anonymous yet thrives on its visibility. This is in direct opposition to a literary form such as the novel, which is reliant on an established industry, is seldom anonymous and is restrictive because of its cost and the socio-economic and educational preconditions that make it necessary to have the time and skills to read. As a form, the novel also retains the residues of its colonial history (not least in the fact that the novel in Zimbabwe remains dominated by English). The novel, simply put, is not a form that easily registers everyday life of the street.14

There is a wide continuum of literary and cultural intervention between these two extremes of the novel and graffiti. Closer to graffiti, we have forms such as Magamba15 and Bustop Television. These are largely YouTube-based platforms that promote free speech and

---

11 Bookworm, ‘Censorship and Zimbabwean Literature’.
12 For example, Owen Maseko’s 2005 ‘Khululeka’ exhibition, a public art installation hosted by the National Gallery of Bulawayo, consisted of graffiti in a public toilet, with captions such as ‘The Gukurahundi could never discuss, only shoot you’. Many of the pieces in Maseko’s contentious ‘Sibathontisele’ exhibition, mentioned above, include graffiti in the frame of his painting as something of a homage to the spirit of public dissent. I am grateful to the reviewer of this article for drawing my attention to the ‘Khululeka’ exhibition.
13 D. Fieni, ‘What a Wall Wants, or How Graffiti Thinks: Nomadic Grammatology in the French Banlieue’, *Diacritics*, 40, 2 (2012), p. 75.
14 I have argued elsewhere that the novel in English in Zimbabwe remains a largely extroverted form, in Eileen Julien’s sense of the word; see Harris, ‘Plastic Form’, p. 358. That is, it is primarily aimed at readers outside Zimbabwe. Even if a Zimbabwean novel is stocked in the few bookshops remaining in the country, it is a largely de-realised form detached from the potential audiences on the street. A. Harris, *Afropolitanism and the Novel: De-Realizing Africa* (London, Routledge, 2019).
15 Magamba translates from chiShona as ‘freedom fighters’.
aim to inform, conscientise and educate young viewers. The Magamba network also includes a creative hub for young artists, trains journalists and runs the high-profile Shoko Festival.\footnote{For more about this network and festival, see \url{http://magambanetwork.com/}.} The multiple forms covered by the network speaks to the need for cultural initiatives to be malleable and open to a variety of different forms to maximise their outreach. This plasticity of form as well as organisation also speaks to what Jeremy L. Jones calls the \textit{Kukiya-kiya} economy, which is a survival economy based on the hustle or, as the term \textit{Kukiya-kiya} implies, of ‘making do’.\footnote{J.L. Jones “‘Nothing is Straight in Zimbabwe’: The Rise of the \textit{Kukiya-kiya} Economy 2000–2008”, \textit{Journal of Southern African Studies}, 36, 2 (2010), p. 285.} Instead of processing culture through the highly regulated, formal economies of the publishing industry, young producers of culture are innovating new forms for maximum impact.

Due to the almost universal access to mobile phones in Zimbabwe,\footnote{In 2008, only 13 inhabitants per 100 had a mobile phone subscription, whereas this proportion had increased to 102 by 2013. Since then, this number has stabilised at around 95 per cent. ‘Number of Mobile Cellular Subscriptions per 100 Inhabitants in Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2018’, \textit{Statista}, available at \url{https://www.statista.com/statistics/510660/mobile-cellular-subscriptions-per-100-inhabitants-in-zimbabwe/}, retrieved 18 June 2021.} it is fair to say that mobile technology is one of the most important factors influencing shifts in cultural forms there in the 2010s.\footnote{For a consideration of how digital media are changing the radio industry in Zimbabwe, see S. Tsarwe, ‘Mobile Phones and a Million Chatter: Performed Inclusivity and Silenced Voices in Zimbabwean Talk Radio’, \textit{Journal of African Cultural Studies}, 32, 2 (2020), pp. 161–77.} The fact that smartphones provide a multi-modal platform for text, video and visual art forms makes this technology ripe for \textit{Kukiya-kiya} or street innovation. The example of Bustop TV is illustrative. Bustop TV is a YouTube channel designed to be viewed on mobile devices to encourage so-called viral sharing in quick, everyday encounters (such as at bus stops, as the name suggests), via free communications apps such as WhatsApp.\footnote{I am grateful to Robert Muponde for drawing my attention to this distribution aspect of Bustop TV.} The distribution of the sketches is based, then, on the sociality of the street, since the sketches are short, mostly between 3 and 10 minutes, and largely in Shona. The model is one primed for social, human-to-human, distribution. The content of these social media platforms is a mix of satirical sketches and journalism, both of which take up everyday concerns and events in Zimbabwe. On their ‘about’ page on YouTube, we read that ‘Bustop TV is a youth-run Zimbabwean media house that was established in 2014. We are widely known for our satirical skits that go viral as they comment on economy, political and social issues that affect society’. The site goes on to describe Bustop TV’s mission as being to ‘[c]reate awareness that enables people to make informed decisions daily’. This consciousness-raising mission is very similar to that stated by Magamba TV, a regular collaborator with Bustop TV.\footnote{For a recent example, see \#ZimbaweanLivesMatter, available at \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAclnSmyjxA}, retrieved 18 June 2021.}

The popularity of these forms (Magamba regularly receives between 3,000 and 30,000 views, and Bustop TV has in some cases exceeded half a million views) heightens the threat that they pose to government. Because the content is distributed on social media, it is beyond the control of the state and can go viral before the censorship board can intervene. Indeed, the Zimbabwean police force seems hopelessly behind the times of the internet and its viral culture. On 26 February 2019, Bustop TV actresses Samantha Kureya (known as Gonyeti) and Sharon Chideu (known as Magi/Maggie), the two recurring characters in the episodes, were arrested for a sketch that was published in 2016.\footnote{M. Mbewe, ‘The 2016 Video Skit that Got Gonyete and Magi from Bustop TV Arrested’, \textit{Creative Loop}, 26 February 2019, available at \url{https://www.creativeloop.co.zw/2019/02/watchthe-2016-video-skit-that-got-gonyeti-and-magi-from-bustop-tv-arrested/}, retrieved 3 April 2020.} In the offending sketch, ‘Order & Law: Special Women Unit’, the comedic pair donned fake police outfits and...
ridiculed the infamous police brutality in the country. They were arrested for ‘violating the Police Act by wearing Police Uniforms’, which seems a trumped-up charge for an offence that happened three years before the arrest. While not much came of this arrest – Gonyeti and Magi were released the same day – the duo continued to produce their satirical sketches uncowed, and the offending clip is still available on Bustop TV’s YouTube channel. Yet Gonyeti became the victim of a far more sinister attack in August 2019. Various commentators on this attack, in which Gonyeti was ‘beaten, stripped and made to drink sewage’, suggest that this was ‘one of a series […] targeting critics of President Emmerson Mnangagwa and the ruling Zanu-PF party’. This is a brutal reminder of what highly visible critiques of a violent system that break through the veil of censorship can result in. While Magamba TV has not reported such extreme violent responses to their work, they have received threats, had their content blocked, and the police have attempted to demolish their creative hub in Harare. This response is commensurate with the capacity of these online forms to reach wide audiences. Co-founder of Magamba Comrade Fatso notes, ‘Zimbabwe has over a hundred percent mobile phone density. Basically everyone has got a mobile phone. And so we’re able to reach more and more people through mobile broadband internet, which is quite widespread in Zimbabwe.’

The short comedy sketch distributed on YouTube and based on topical, everyday life situations that we see in Magamba and Bustop TV has its roots in another street form, newspaper or taxi theatre. These versions of Augusto Boal’s invisible theatre involve two or more actors starting up a scripted argument or discussion about a current event (often sparked by a newspaper article) in a public space, such as a taxi. Praise Zenega discusses the ways in which such street theatre in Zimbabwe increased in the early 2000s as a protest strategy when the state cracked down on theatre groups producing staged plays. The street form emerges, then, out of the very conditions of censorship, in the tradition of Boal’s theatre of the oppressed. In Zimbabwe, it became dubbed ‘hit-and-run theatre’, which has its own local specificities. Praise Zenega provides an excellent account of the emergence of hit-and-run theatre, which, like Boal’s invisible theatre, ‘takes place not on a stage but in people’s everyday life – in a restaurant, a bus, a supermarket’. As Zenega writes, ‘[s]ince hit-and-run is staged in crowded and noisy public spaces like shopping malls, marketplaces, storefronts, open streets, and buses, artists must first gain the attention of the audience and continue to hold that attention’. When the audience has gathered, the hit-and-run artists have a short time to perform to ensure that the authorities do not become aware of the performance. This is dangerous work: if the impromptu gathering is disrupted or a police scout happens to be in the audience, the consequences for both the performers and their unwitting audience could be violent. Once the hit-and-run theatrical performance is over, the actors and actresses must disappear into the crowd quickly. As such, the form makes little to

23 Bustop TV, ‘Order & Law: Special Women Unit’, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZjXQOVUKgt&lis=1s, retrieved 3 April 2020.
24 Mbewe, ‘The 2016 Video Skit’.
25 J. Burke, ‘Zimbabwean Comedian Goes into Hiding after Abduction and Beating’, Guardian, London, 23 August 2019, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/23/zimbabwean-comedian-samantha-kureya-goes-into-hiding-after-abduction-and-beating, retrieved 5 April 2020.
26 C. Roland, ‘Laughing at Power in Zimbabwe’, Ifex, Toronto, 25 May 2017, available at https://ifex.org/laughing-at-power-in-zimbabwe/, retrieved 18 June 2021.
27 Ibid.
28 P. Zenega, ‘Hit-and-Run Theatre: The Rise of a New Dramatic Form in Zimbabwe’, Theatre History Studies, 30 (2010), p. 26; K. Chikonzo, ‘From Panic to Reconciliation: Protest Theatre and the State in Zimbabwe, 1999–2012’, Theatre Research International, 41, 3 (2016), p. 219.
29 B. Burstow, ‘Invisible Theatre, Ethics, and the Adult Educator’, International Journal of Lifelong Education, 27, 3 (2008), p. 275, cited in Zenega, ‘Hit-and-Run Theatre’, p. 15.
30 Zenega, ‘Hit-and-Run Theatre’, p. 26.
no use of props and, as Zenega writes, is terse and didactic with a regular ‘use of in-character, discussion-based performance’. 31

The strategies of hit-and-run resonate with the high-risk activity of graffiti writing. As Augusto Boal says of invisible theatre, it ‘does not intend to violate the law. It intends to question the legitimacy of the law, which is a very different matter altogether’. 32 This is the same form of critique as that suggested by David Fieni’s argument that ‘[g]raffiti would have the letter of the law succumb to a liquefaction of its own material ontological guarantee as public writing’. 33 But, just as graffiti is a transient form, easily painted over by the authorities, so too is hit-and-run theatre a passing form that is always under erasure. This makes it hard to know how effective these strategies are, politically, but it also constitutes a difficulty for scholarship, since the material only ever exists in situ. This is exacerbated by the fact that hit-and-run spectators may not understand that they are observing a theatrical performance 34 and, as such, are unlikely to record it on mobile devices; also, the performers themselves are precisely trying to avoid leaving any archive of their intervention. While hit-and-run theatre has high visibility for a small audience, it does not achieve visibility on a national – or even regional – level.

How, then, might cultural producers who are critical of the state achieve a balance between reaching a substantial audience and avoiding censorship? This balance is itself a kind of innovative practice, one which requires an openness to adapting the cultural product to both its medium and its immediate context. In the final section of this article, I turn to a discussion of staged theatre to consider how playwrights and producers walk this tightrope between censorship and sustained political critique. This discussion, which is focused on an example of a play by renowned playwright Stephen Chifunyise, directed by Daves Guzha of Rooftop Promotions and Theatre-in-the-Park, considers how the mode and context in which a play is performed or presented might alter its relationship to the censorious state. Furthermore, the convergence of live performance and online recordings is a new mode of taking an ephemeral event, with a located audience, and archiving it as part of a national record of historical trauma. Such technological advances begin to fill in the gaps left by de facto censoring and shutdowns of any particular live performance.

Staging Public Memory: Stephen Chifunyise’s Rituals (2010)

In ‘Performing the Subversive: Censorship and Theatre Making in Zimbabwe’, Samuel Ravengai provides an overview of how censorship became institutionalised through the National Arts Council (NAC) of Zimbabwe during the 2000s. This was a time of crisis for ZANU(PF). In February 2000, it had suffered a major setback when it lost a constitutional referendum that would have given the government the ability to acquire land without compensating landowners. The loss was one factor that fuelled the ‘fast track land reform programme’ of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association, who violently seized farms and shot Zimbabwe to international media attention. Further to this, the founding of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999 and its growing political weight at this time made ZANU(PF) vulnerable in ways that it had not faced since its suppression of ZAPU in the 1980s. It is not uncommon that vulnerable regimes crack down on critique, and Ravengai provides a substantial account of how the NAC became the controlling arm of this suppression of critique in the cultural sphere during the 2000s.

31 Ibid., p. 35.
32 A. Boal, ‘Invisible Theatre’, in R. Schneider and G. Cody, Re: Direction: A Theoretical and Practical Guide (London, Routledge, 2002), p. 119, cited in Zenega, ‘Hit-and-Run Theatre’, p. 36.
33 Fieni, ‘What a Wall Wants’, p. 75.
34 See Zenega, ‘Hit-and-Run Theatre’, p. 15.
According to Ravengai, the NAC made use of the provincial arts councils to ‘control, manage and regulate’ local performances and to vet theatre groups wishing to tour their work around the country. Already established theatre groups such as ‘Rooftop Promotions, Amakhosi and Savanna Arts managed to continue performing protest plays under [this] political climate’ because they had been vetted by the NAC before this time of political crisis. However, this does not mean that these groups were not targeted in the 2000s by the police and the NAC. Any artist or production working in collaboration with these established, politically informed theatre groups would, writes Ravengai, be ‘branded as anti-government’ and closed down.36

Yet these processes of censorship and shutdown were inconsistent. While several plays critical of the state were allowed to continue freely at Harare’s Theatre-in-the-Park, many of these productions were ‘prohibited in other parts of the country’.37 Also, when plays that ran at the Theatre-in-the-Park were staged for potentially international audiences, this also resulted in sudden intervention by the state. Ravengai cites the play Super Patriots and Morons by Raisedon Baya as one such example: it played at the Theatre-in-the-Park, but ‘when it was put on the program of the Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA) 2004, which normally attracts both local and international audiences, the state moved in to ban it’.38

Not only were there inconsistencies in the banning of protest content but the interpretation of the laws most often cited when justifying arrests and shutdowns of theatrical performances were equally inconsistent. For example, the two Acts most often used to justify arrests and shutdowns were the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA)39 and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA).40 Yet theatre, as Ravengai points out, is not cited in AIPPA and is exempt from POSA.41 POSA did, as Praise Zenega notes, make ‘it illegal to ridicule the president’,42 which allowed for the closure of a number of satirical and comic productions under this Act. While the incoherent implementation of these Acts alongside the work of the censorship board may have allowed the occasional protest play to slip under the government’s radar, political theatre groups operated under constant fear of shutdown or police brutality during the early 2000s.

The play that I have selected as a case study is interesting in this context for a variety of reasons: first, the play offers an overt critique of the government’s role in election violence in 2008 in Zimbabwe. Second, the play deals with acknowledgement as the key to reconciliation, a matter that resonated with the increase in demands for government to acknowledge its role in Gukurahundi at that time. Third, the play is a Rooftop Promotions production, first performed at Theatre-in-the-Park in 2010 without raising the concerns of the state but shut down when it travelled to other venues in the country. Finally, the play is now archived on YouTube, a fact that gives it visibility in the cultural archive despite the uncomfortable tale it tells.

After a hung presidential election in March 2008 and a spate of electoral violence running up to the second election in June that year, ZANU(PF) and the MDC entered a highly

35 S. Ravengai, ‘Performing the Subversive: Censorship and Theatre Making in Zimbabwe’, Studies in Theatre and Performance, 35, 3 (2015), p. 246.
36 Ibid., p. 247.
37 Ibid., pp. 247–8.
38 Ibid., p. 248.
39 ‘Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act of Zimbabwe’, available at http://www.veritaszim.net/node/240, retrieved 27 April 2020.
40 ‘Public Order and Security Act of Zimbabwe’, available at http://www.veritaszim.net/node/115, retrieved 27 April 2020.
41 Ravengai, ‘Performing the Subversive’, pp. 241–2.
42 Zenega, ‘Hit-and-Run Theatre’, p. 20.
contentious Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2009. The GNU turned to the discourse of reconciliation to try to assert its own legitimacy as a governing instrument as well as to, at least ostensibly, address the immediate violence that had occurred in the country as a result of the national election. That post-election violence had indeed opened the wounds left by Gukurahundi, and numerous public voices emerged at this time demanding retribution and justice for those earlier atrocities of the 1980s. With this in mind, the GNU created the ‘Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration’ (ONHRI), which was variously seen as an organ for healing the traumas of the immediate, post-election violence of 2008 and as having larger ambitions of finally achieving closure on the events of Gukurahundi. Critics of the ONHRI illustrate that the organ failed because it had emerged as a concession to the MDC but was not largely supported by ZANU(PF),43 because of the top-down approach of the ONHRI,44 and because the ‘fear of retributive justice in Zimbabwe stall[ed] the reconciliation and healing process’.45

Given such retributive violence, the fact that Stephen Chifunyise’s play Rituals, which directly addresses the electoral violence of 2008, ran at all in 2010 might seem surprising. Yet, as Kelvin Chikonzo points out, Rooftop Promotions had seen a shift in its content from 2009 onwards, when, under the strong influence of Chifunyise and in line with the goals of the ONHRI, it produced a number of plays that were focused on reconciliation and healing. Both Mhako and Chikonzo cite Heal the Wounds (2009), Rituals (2010) and Waiting for the Constitution (2010) as exemplary of such theatre, to which Chikonzo adds Indigenous, Indigenous, Indigenous (2012).46 Chikonzo reads these plays as marking a broader shift from panic or agitprop theatre to reconciliation theatre.

As stated earlier, Theatre-in-the-Park had been vetted by the NAC before the crisis decade of 1999–2008. For this reason, and because the urban, middle-class audiences of Theatre-in-the-Park productions were not seen as a political threat, Rooftop Promotions seems to have continued its programming largely uninterrupted during that decade of crisis. This is evident in the example of The Good President (2007), a Rooftop Promotions production written and directed by Cont Mhlanga. As Chikonzo notes, ‘The Good President premiered without problems at Theatre-in-the-Park in Harare. On the second day of its run in Zimbabwe’s second largest city of Bulawayo, however, the riot police stopped the play and ordered everyone to leave the theatre’.47 Because Bulawayo is seen as a stronghold of opposition to ZANU(PF), this is perhaps no surprise. But Theatre-in-the-Park was also, in Chikonzo’s view, allowed to run protest plays because ‘in the big urban centres the state could monitor protest theatre, allowing it to flourish as a gesture of tolerance’.48 If a protest play runs to a relatively small group of theatre-goers in the city, the state is not too concerned about its message: much like the unread book in a bookstore, the impact is too small to warrant concern.

To return to the case of Rituals, it is important to note that Stephen Chifunyise, who becomes so active as a writer for Rooftop Promotions during the time of the GNU, had

43 M.K. Chiweshe, ‘Efficacy of Top-Down Approaches to Post-Conflict Social Coexistence and Community Building: Experiences from Zimbabwe’, African Journal on Conflict Resolution, 16 (2016), pp. 11–34.
44 O. Masunda, N. Musonza, S.O. Ehiane and D.E. Uwizeyimana, ‘The Travails of the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration (ONHRI) as a Strategy for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation in Zimbabwe’, African Renaissance, 16, 4 (2019), pp. 91–112.
45 J. Tarusarira, ‘Theorising Reconciliation and National Healing in Zimbabwe’, in E. Chitando, K. Chikonzo and N. Chivandikwa (eds), National Healing, Integration and Reconciliation in Zimbabwe (London, Routledge, 2020), p. 91.
46 D. Mhako, ‘Identities of Women in Zimbabwean Protest Theatre’ (MPhil dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 2014); K. Chikonzo, ‘From Panic to Reconciliation: Protest Theatre and the State in Zimbabwe, 1999–2012’, Theatre Research International, 41, 3 (2016), p. 219.
47 Chikonzo, ‘From Panic to Reconciliation’, p. 221.
48 Ibid., p. 220.
served on the NAC from 2004 to 2008, just prior to this phase of his work. We might speculate that Chifunyise and Guzha, the writing and production team for this play, found themselves in a compromising position in 2008, caught exactly at the crossroads of high visibility while producing theatre critical of the government. Ultimately, the long history of trust between Chifunyise and the government through his work at the NAC and the relative freedom with which Rooftop Productions had been able to run its theatre programme did not put the play beyond the reach of state censorship. Kelvin Chikonzo notes that Rituals ‘had run uninterrupted’ at Theatre-in-the-Park but that when it toured, the actors and their driver were arrested

on 5 January 2011 at Nhodziwa Growth Point in Chimanimani, Manicaland Province, [where they] were detained at Cashel Valley Police Station. The police accused them of unlawfully holding a public performance reminiscent of the political disturbances of June 2008, which incited the affected members of the public to revive their differences.50

To understand how the play could elicit such varied responses from the authorities, it is important to take a closer look at how its content might signify variously in these different contexts.

Rituals is exemplary of what Kelvin Chikonzo calls reconciliation theatre, structured as it is around two rituals of cleansing, apology and consequent reconciliation. The first character to seek cleansing is a member of parliament, Sarudzai, who has been involved in orchestrating electoral violence and whose family is consequently demanding that she perform a ritual of apology to her community for her actions. Sarudzai is genuinely penitent, and the play suggests that her acceptance of having to perform the ritual makes her a model of responsible political leadership. A second character, John, has been directly involved in the killing of opposition party members during the electoral disturbances. His family seeks out the help of a traditional healer, or n’anga, because John has become possessed by the spirits of the people he killed. The n’anga refuses to perform a cleansing ritual on John until he makes a full confession of his actions and names all the people he has killed. The play’s themes of guilt, reparation and the naming of the dead as a crucial aspect of the reconciliation process evoke more than the immediate political violence they depict. The same matters, as they related to Gukurahundi, were re-entering the public imagination in 2010 as media and public attention to Gukurahundi denial and cover-ups was growing.

That the character John is driven to insanity by the spirits of the dead is also suggestive of the play’s insistence that there will be no peace for either victims or perpetrators of the violent past without acknowledgement and apology. The perpetrators’ suffering and the play’s focus on community-based solutions of reconciliation both seem to be a gesture towards the rhetoric of the ONHRI. Indeed, the play was performed for a special audience of the ONHRI in Harare. In the context of this particular performance, the drama is not incendiary because both Sarudzai and John are humanised through their suffering and through the interventions of their families and communities, and the play ultimately recommends confession as a step to reconciliation. By taking the attention off the victims and focusing instead on the perpetrators of violence, one could argue that the play is aiming at a narrative of forgiveness and atonement – a narrative that might well have suited ZANU(PF) amid renewed calls for justice for victims of Gukurahundi. While the play ran at Theatre-in-the-Park in Harare, it was probably the appeal of its message of reconciliation that diminished its more controversial content. The member of parliament who is depicted as being directly involved in electoral violence is ultimately redeemed by her contrition.

49 Daves Guzha is an actor and the director and producer at Rooftop Promotions.
50 Chikonzo ‘From Panic to Reconciliation’, p. 228.
Similarly, John becomes a figure of our sympathy (even humorously so) as he suffers the consequences of his actions.

Chivandika, Chikonzo and Mlenga argue for setting plays about historical violence in the contexts where that violence has been experienced. They argue that the seamlessness between the setting of the play and the context in which it is performed is conducive to the work of national healing and reconciliation. The affective intensity that a play accrues when performed in the context that it represents can be seen in the case of *Rituals* when it moved beyond the political and cultural elite of Harare to audiences more directly affected by the election violence. In these contexts, the play became explosive. As such, the same play performed by the same actors with the same basic props and costumes appears to different degrees of intensity on the state’s censorship radar. The play’s insistence that acknowledgement of wrongdoing is necessary for reconciliation was a message that became incendiary and threatening to ZANU(PF) when played to certain audiences. This was not simply the state’s perception of the potential of such a play to create civil unrest. Kelvin Chikonzo notes in an interview with Daves Guzha that,

during the tour with *Rituals* in Bikita district, located in Masvingo Province in south-east Zimbabwe, villagers stopped the play to narrate how they were beaten by the youth members of political parties. Brawls started after the play as villagers demanded justice for their lost loved ones, livestock and property. Rape victims also stood up and named perpetrators. The situation was so tense that Guzha and his cast realized that it was beyond their control. He noted that it dawned on him at that moment that he needed the support of non-governmental organizations that dealt with post-war trauma.

While the play clearly had far greater significance for the audiences where it was shut down, I believe that Guzha ultimately discovers a way to balance political critique, local relevance and avoidance of censorship, not by sticking to Theatre-in-the-Park but through social media and online technologies. A recent video version of the play that splices together two performances by the same cast has been made available on Rooftop Promotions’ YouTube channel. This was uploaded as part of the Stephen Chifunyise Festival, which was planned as tribute to Chifunyise, who passed away in 2019. The festival was to run at Theatre-in-the-Park in early April 2020 but was interrupted by Zimbabwe’s national lockdown due to the Covid19 pandemic. The video version of the play constitutes a fascinating theatrical event in itself. For one, the two versions spliced together include an (undated) performance at Theatre-in-the-Park and the performance mentioned above for the ONHRI, at what appears to be a conference venue (ONHRI banners form an oddly discrepant backdrop to the play’s performance). As such, we see the play operating in two of its rhetorical forms here, although one wishes that the version of the play staged for audiences in Bikita district were made publicly available too. As a YouTube event, the play is now part of a nationally and internationally accessible online tribute to Stephen Chifunyise. Removed from its national moorings, it is hard to imagine this play in its YouTube form as incendiary. And yet, in this new modality, with the constant reminder of the play’s theme of reconciliation when the action cuts to the office-like, fluorescent-lit ONHRI performance, it is hard to view the play in this video version without thinking of President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s recent refusal to acknowledge his own role in the violence of *Gukurahundi*. Indeed, by detaching the play from the immediacy of its 2010

51 N. Chivandika, K. Chikonzo and T. Mlenga, ‘Theatre, Grassroots Civility, and Healing/Reconciliation: A Critique of Heal the Wounds’, in Chitando, Chikonzo and Chivandikwa (eds), *National Healing*, p. 137.
52 Chikonzo ‘From Panic to Reconciliation’, p. 225.
53 S. Chifunyise, *Rituals* (2010), The Stephen Chifunyise Festival page, YouTube, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QCulFG74m8, retrieved 7 April 2020.
context and ‘restaging’ it as a YouTube video, it becomes both an archive of the events of 2008 and more broadly applicable to a longer Zimbabwean history.

**Conclusion**

This article has attempted to problematise a singular narrative of cultural censorship in the Zimbabwean context. When we take a closer look at how protest literatures and cultural events emerge and circulate in a repressive context, we see that censorship is itself a multiple and fragmented phenomenon, justified by varying interpretations of the law and exercised unevenly in different locations within the nation state. This has led cultural practitioners in Zimbabwe to experiment with literary and cultural form and modality both on the street and online. The onset of YouTube as a major mode of circulation in Zimbabwe might help to make visible previously invisible protest culture and archive it – and the stories it tells – for the future work of reconciliation. Whether on the street or online, Zimbabwean cultural and literary forms are most potent in their protest against state repression when they speak to a broad Zimbabwean audience about their everyday experiences. But it appears that it is the malleability, accessibility and high visibility of online forms that make them the likely modalities for enabling a healthy public critique of the state beyond censorship in the future. As such, whether in the form of comedic sketches, recordings of theatrical or poetic performances, memes or online writing, the potential for online cultural material to provide ‘a diary of a country in crisis’\(^{54}\) is notable. While web content can be removed from the internet, just as graffiti can be removed from walls, viral content is uncontainable, and removed content can always appear elsewhere. Without the extensive monitoring and web-blocking capacities of a country like China, the internet is that much harder for the resource-strapped Zimbabwean state to keep track of. Print and performance cultures were censored in Zimbabwe as part of ZANU(PF)’s project to rewrite national history as ‘patriotic history’\(^{55}\) by removing all aspects of the past that showed ZANU(PF) in a critical light. Internet forms are offering a new kind of archive – too multiple and messy to be contained by the narrative of patriotic history. It is an emerging diary of a country in crisis that will refuse expedient forgetting of the traumatic past.

**Acknowledgements**

I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Swedish Research Council for making this research possible (‘African Street Literature and the Future of Literary Form’, 2016-01144).

ASHLEIGH HARRIS

Professor, Department of English, Uppsala University, Box 527, 751 20, Uppsala, Sweden. E-mail: ashleigh.harris@engelska.uu.se

\(^{54}\) Bookworm, ‘Censorship and Zimbabwean Literature’.

\(^{55}\) 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).