



Different narration, same history: The politics of writing ‘democratic’ narratives in Zimbabwe

Walter Kudzai Barure & Irikidzayi Manase

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Over the past five decades, Zimbabwe’s political trajectories were characterised by a historiographic revision and deconstruction that revealed varying ideological perceptions and positions of political actors. This article reconsiders the current shifts in the Zimbabwean historiography and focuses on the politics of positioning the self in the national narrative. The article analyses three Zimbabwean political autobiographies written by political actors from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), particularly Michael Auret’s *From Liberator to Dictator: An Insider’s Account of Robert Mugabe’s Descent into Tyranny* (2009), Morgan Tsvangirai’s *At the Deep End* (2011), and David Coltart’s *The Struggle Continues: 50 Years of Tyranny in Zimbabwe* (2016). It also discusses how writing in Zimbabwe is a contested terrain that is bifurcated between oppositional and dominant imaginaries of politics, the revolutionary tradition, and past performances of power. **Keywords:** history, narratives, oppositional and dominant imaginaries, political autobiographies, Zimbabwe.


Introduction

This article considers how oppositional narratives answer back to patriotic narratives’ denigration of opposition and civic discourses, and their exclusion of the citizenship of minorities such as white Zimbabweans. Zimbabwean letters have witnessed the rise of a body of writings, produced by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and other political and human rights actors, termed ‘democratic’ narratives, which contest patriotic narratives that were constructed using a singular version of history (see Ranger who defines patriotic history as a monolithic version of history that supports the performance of power by ZANU-PF political actors). In essence, these oppositional narratives subvert the autocracy and knowledge produced by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) that draws on discourses of decolonisation, nationalism, Afro-radicalism, and nativism to suppress other narratives. As a result, the power to narrate *by the MDC* and other human rights activists or to block other narratives from forming and emerging *by ZANU-PF* is very important in the constitution of connections that exist between the former and the latter (Said xiii; emphasis added). The occlusion of alternative narratives has been used since independence by ZANU-PF, especially through a hegemonic production and control of memorialising the past, termed as “Mugabeism” by Ndlovu-Gatshezi (1–2). Nonetheless, ZANU-PF’s “silencing strategies” incited what Ndlovu (140–2) calls “Writing back [...] the Zimbabwean way”, which implies an answering back to ZANU-PF and its patriotic canon.

We chose political autobiographies, which consider self and nation and history and narrative, and disrupt singular narrative focuses because the autobiographical discourse here positions the narrator as either the performer of power or the victim of the performance of power. Smith and Watson (6–10) note that autobiographical strategies of representation include the autobiographical acts of storytelling; counter-narration and rhetorical aims such as self-interrogation; and campaigns for social change, justice, and human rights, thus underlining this genre’s counter-discursive quality. It is in line with this context that we infer in this article the connotative power of self-writing and how it influences subjectivity, multi-vocality, and the disavowal of myths and stereotypes. As such, we have singled out these three autobiographies for three reasons. Firstly, they were written by founding


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members of the MDC who were born in Southern Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe). Secondly, Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart have backgrounds in civil society organisations such as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), Zimbabwe Congress for Trade Unions (ZCTU), and the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF) as well as the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) that criticised the ZANU-PF government. Thirdly, these political actors perceive themselves as ‘witnesses’ of an unfolding democracy in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Therefore, Michael Auret, Morgan Richard Tsvangirai, and David Coltart’s conception and claim of the ‘democratic’ space in the MDC is based on their personal endeavours in introducing participatory democracy and their frank and sound political ideals into the narrative of the nation.

The entry point of this article is to understand the writers and the context of their work. We note that Auret’s autobiography was written in exile and omits personal information such as the year of his birth and childhood experiences, while both Tsvangirai and Coltart’s trace their birth in the racially-segregated Southern Rhodesia and how the existing conditions led to a protracted liberation struggle aimed at attaining majority rule. Auret’s narrative is fast-paced and disconcerting because it begins in the 1960s when he was a young white Rhodesian soldier who rose through the ranks to become a Military Intelligence Officer. Auret later resigned from his military career in 1965 after Ian Smith’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence and became an outright critic of Smith and the Rhodesian Front. Auret joined the opposing Rhodesian Party with his wife Diana when it was in its early stages and stood in the 1974 election as a candidate for the Bulawayo District constituency. He also worked at the CCJP as its Director and was responsible for reporting human rights violations and electoral violence. In 1998 Auret was Tsvangirai’s deputy in the NCA, an association that fought for constitutional change, and later joined the MDC. He won the parliamentary seat in 2000 for the Harare Central Constituency but resigned the same seat in 2003 and emigrated to Ireland.

Auret’s autobiography, as the title suggests, grapples with the serious error of judgement on the character of Robert Mugabe who transformed from a hero and an international symbol for African freedom to an international outcast who brooked no opposition. Thus, Auret highlights identity politics through the portrayal of Mugabe’s unpredictable Janus-faced personality, which became synonymous with the country’s trajectory from hope to disillusionment. We also note how Auret’s narrative differs from the other two texts. Auret does not criticise Tsvangirai like Coltart despite the contradictions and ambivalences immanent in Tsvangirai and the MDC. Therefore, Auret, unlike Coltart, does not comment on Tsvangirai’s character and the political culture of the MDC, yet his text mirrors the national picture of political dislocation and disintegration within the MDC that Tsvangirai himself covers but with limited critical perspective.

Tsvangirai, who rose from the ranks of trade unionism to become the founding president of the MDC and the second Prime Minister of post-independent Zimbabwe, draws on these personal experiences to construct a symbolising self and paragon of the ‘democratic’ struggle. Ironically, we note reflections in his self-writing of how this ‘democratic’ struggle was invested in one person who ended up institutionalising a personality cult and hence highlight the politics of representation inherent in patriotic narratives. Nonetheless, Tsvangirai’s narrative alters the meaning of heroism, a status traditionally viewed and reserved for those who fought for the nation’s liberation, to include those who fought for democracy.

Finally, David Coltart, a white Zimbabwean lawyer by profession, founding member of the MDC, former government minister and opposition Member of Parliament, documents the complex and dynamic nature of belonging that is dissimilar from that of Auret and Tsvangirai. Coltart begins his narrative by setting the record straight that he is “not originally indigenous to Zimbabwe” despite having been born on 4 July 1957 in Gwelo, in the then Southern Rhodesia (2). This narrative path resonates with Auret’s in which he concedes that he would never have called himself a “white Settler” until it became clear that the majority of the people in Zimbabwe considered anyone of Rhodesian background to be an interloper (xvi). However, it should be underlined that the politics of locating the self in the national narrative is bound up with the three autobiographical narrators’ allegiance to Zimbabwe and Africa. Therefore, Coltart’s quest for belonging is a major dimension of his struggle over the nativist turn in ZANU-PF’s politics of nationality.

The above writers’ life narratives are in contradistinction with the ruling ZANU-PF’s grand narrative about the nation. Coltart’s and the other two autobiographies express narrative confrontations that map the differences between oppositional narratives and patriotic narratives. Here, the patriotic narratives focus on the state-sponsored version of the past in which only heroic deeds are projected and misperformances of the past are conscientiously glossed over. In contrast, oppositional narratives debunk authorised versions of history and privilege

national issues such as state-sponsored violence and human rights violations omitted in the grand narrative of the nation.

This politics of writing the nation is demonstrated by how Mugabe was infuriated by the publishing of the Gukurahundi Massacre report entitled *Breaking the Silence*, which was compiled by Auret and Coltart in 1997 (Auret 151). Subsequently, Mugabe swiftly expressed his displeasure by castigating the report as “insensitive to national unity” because it was reopening old wounds (Tsvangirai 183). Mugabe further retorted that “the wrongs of the past by whoever should not be allowed to come into the future of the nation” (Coltart 242). Nonetheless, Coltart depicts both the ambiguities in the national narrative and historic events that were censored by patriotic narratives. Ironically, Auret and Tsvangirai, in a way similar to patriotic narratives, do not treat some of the historic moments. We argue further that Coltart’s narrative is also distinct from both Auret and Tsvangirai’s because it criticises both ZANU-PF and the ‘democratic’ struggle. Therefore, the politics of writing the narrative of the nation is predicated on the control of the past and modes of memory-making.

We underscore that ‘democratic’ narratives offer a counter-interpretation of the dominant patriotic narratives and the ritualised performances of power by the then Mugabe-led ZANU-PF. The personal narratives we examine here subvert and are hence counter-narratives to the ‘romanticised’ story of the nation. Ndlovu (140–42) postulates the need for counter-narratives, a view that is in tandem with Mbembe’s proposition for “another form of writing” that deconstructs a romanticised history imbued by myths and nativist theses, postulations that guide our analysis here (“African Modes of Self-writing” 241).

This counter-narrative dimension is evident in the paradigmatic juxtaposition of the MDC and ZANU-PF in the three autobiographies under discussion. Tsvangirai’s *At the Deep End* exemplifies this differentiation when he writes “[w]e were talking about democracy; Mugabe was talking about patriotic history” (274).

This comparison is akin to what Culler (48) calls the “difference by differing”, a mere attempt by the MDC to be what ZANU-PF is not. Thus, patriotic and oppositional narratives are constantly competing and countering each other, especially in the depictions of the political selves in the postcolonial trajectories of the nation. However, this article argues that ‘democratic’ narratives confront and de-silence the past in a way that promotes a reconfiguration of the political space. It also considers how ‘democratic’ narrations answer back to the dominant ZANU-PF story by paradoxically appropriating some of the central ideas of patriotic narratives.

Situating the politics of writing ‘democratic’ narratives

Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart’s texts are significant in mapping the essence of ‘democratic’ narratives in post-2000 Zimbabwe through their interweaving of the autobiographical narrators’ political subjectivity with the memory and fate of the nation. Earlier on we stated that the ZANU-PF elite has been dominating the narrative of the nation while the MDC and, in particular the authors under study here, contest this control of the past and modes of memory-making. Thus, Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart narrate a national and, by extension, ‘democratic’ identity through selecting, plotting, and interpreting events from their childhood memory of colonial times to the present post-2000s Zimbabwe.

According to McAdams (233), narrative identity reconstructs the autobiographical past and imagines the future in a way that provides a person’s life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning. Similarly, Lejeune (14) highlights the politics of representation in autobiography and argues that the reader will attempt to establish resemblances and automatically look for differences, errors, and deformations. As a result, we note how the three political autobiographies perform ‘rhetorical acts’ of narration such as settling scores, disputing accounts by other political actors, upholding reputations, justifying perceptions, and inventing desirable futures (Smith and Watson 10). Nonetheless, these narratives are key in that they map the narration of the self and nation as underlined by contested interests and a blurring of the personal and the political which complicates the distinction between ‘democratic’ and patriotic narratives.

One of the major areas used in the grand narrative of the nation, which Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart contest, is the issue of participation in war against colonialism. ZANU-PF’s grand narrative records failure to participate in the liberation struggle as an act of cowardice. Various political rhetoric and popular culture texts such as political songs and party insignia venerate all those who participated in the fight to liberate the country. However, Tsvangirai justifies his non-participation in the liberation struggle by grounding his memories of suffering during the colonial era. For instance, he laments that: “Perhaps I would have become a political activist but my parents

needed financial help to support the other children through school” (25) and “Politics aside, I was increasingly concerned about the future of our own family and my role in pulling them out of poverty” (31).

As expected, Mugabe and ZANU-PF deride Tsvangirai, Auret, and Coltart as unpatriotic sell-outs, non-participants of the liberation struggle, and unrepentant Rhodesians respectively.¹

The foregoing review of past national politics shows that ZANU-PF's political imaginary equates participation in the liberation war with heroism and hence most of its leaders use this as a major trope in their political autobiographies. Interestingly, Tsvangirai brings in a counter-narrative image where personal circumstances defined by the same colonial domination such as poverty would lead to a different subjectivity that includes opting to look for a job to sustain one's family and perhaps craft heroism at a micro and family level. In addition, one could still contribute patriotically in the post-independence era as Tsvangirai notes in the description of how he joined the ZANU-PF Bindura Town branch after the 1980 elections and was elected secretary of the local structure of ZANU-PF (78).

The formation of the opposition MDC, as pointed out later, is still an extension of the different forms of patriotism that needs to be acknowledged in the face of the monolithic ZANU-PF based idea, just as the decision to seek work for the family's survival. The same paradigm of an over-arching grand narrative of patriotism that is nonetheless contested by different forms of patriotism is also evident in the way Auret—a Rhodesian Military Intelligence Officer—and Coltart—a member of the British South African Police, having not officially joined ZANU-PF—later join opposition politics in the post-2000s only to contend with the label that they are sell-outs owing to their colonial past.

It should be acknowledged that the three autobiographies indeed highlight the disillusionment with Mugabe and ZANU-PF felt by Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart. Auret documents his short-lived support for Mugabe and ZANU-PF as shown below:

For my part, I spent the first decade believing in Mugabe, despite Matabeleland, and working hard to bring about the development he seemed to want for the country. In the second decade, disillusionment began and the drive for development became a drive for democracy and the protection of human rights. But it became clear as time went on that a white person who considered himself indigenous and who dared to criticise would not be accepted in an authoritarian state. (170–1)

Tsvangirai says, “Full of enthusiasm, and regarding Robert Mugabe as a champion of freedom, I had joined the ruling party after the elections of 1980. I would leave it in 1984, after losing faith in both the party and its autocratic leader, giving myself over to national trade union activities” (88).

It is clear that the post-independence disillusionment compelled Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart to seek alternative formations in the form of civil society and political organisations, which include the CCJP, ZCTU, and the Forum Party as equally significant in advancing checks and balances in the nation's politics and governance. This seeking of alternatives is commonly used by political actors when criticising other political parties and yet these three writers present their experiences and choices as constituting other forms of the larger attempts at entrenching freedoms in the nation.

Ultimately, the three autobiographical narrators illustrate that ZANU-PF used its liberation credentials to exclude other forms of subjectivities seeking various freedoms for the citizenry, thus underlining the oppositional stance embedded in the ‘democratic’ narratives that critique patriotic history.

Another central premise of ‘democratic’ narratives concerns the politics of representation and deterioration in the country's political leadership. Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart treat the issue of politics of representation in their depiction of Mugabe as more of an enigmatic leader and embodiment of popular aspirations than the commonly-held image of nationalist par-excellence. This political inquest is clearly noted in Auret's rumination: “Zimbabwean politics is about Robert Mugabe—no more, no less. Indeed, strip out all the eloquent anti-imperialist and anti-Western rhetoric and you find an old man desperate to cling to power. [...] Those who knew Mugabe during the struggle say that we are witnessing the real Mugabe” (xiv).

Auret paints the image of Mugabe as a political figure who had always been authoritarian, and this is something that those who had known him during the struggle had witnessed (see Tekere's *A Lifetime of Struggle*). Similarly, Tsvangirai (90) and Coltart (123) underscore how Mugabe altered his communist and ‘terrorist’ image in 1980 into that of a darling of the West by appropriating the renowned reconciliatory rhetoric in a timely manner.

Both Tsvangirai and Coltart's autobiographies suggest that this was just personal political brinkmanship aimed at gaining international recognition. It is our contention that Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart's autobiographies are critical and revisionist of the colonial and postcolonial historiography that ignores the hidden elements of populist and self-serving leadership in Zimbabwe. In addition, Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart's criticism is indicative of the need to recognise the surface and hidden, and hence multiple views about the nature of both the performance of the liberation war and the nationalist leadership. Finally, reference to Mugabe's early 1980s reconciliation rhetoric, which is dramatically discarded in the post-2000 black-nationalist and anti-Euro-American discourses, calls for a much more critical view of the politics and governance under the ZANU-PF.

'Democratic' narratives also focus on how the ZANU-PF engineered past events such as the use of political violence and undermining electoral processes. Each autobiographical narrator outlines how Mugabe scorned them during the 2000 parliamentary election, which was the first tough multi-party election ZANU-PF had to content with after the formation of the MDC in September 1999. The authors state that they were labelled as "vassals of imperialism" (Tsvangirai 349; emphasis added) and "former Selous Scouts" making a political come-back in the political scene (Auret 149; Coltart 329).

As a result, some white Zimbabweans who opposed the ruling party were displaced politically, socially, and economically, with some like Auret being forced into foreign lands as political exiles. Furthermore, Tsvangirai was given a contemptuous nickname, "Tsvangson" which, according to patriotic narratives, sounds non-Zimbabwean (Tsvangirai 279). The same nickname was exploited by Mugabe to depict Tsvangirai as a surrogate son of his colonial masters and, hence, an outsider who should not be allowed to take power in Zimbabwe. Ironically, Tsvangirai became the second Prime Minister during the government of national unity in 2009, despite Mugabe's renunciation of his performance of power.

A further irony which falls within the focus of the following section—the paradoxes inherent in democratic narratives—is evident in the way Tsvangirai denigrates his political rivals in the opposition camp. For instance, he engages in a semantic derogation of other political players as noted in his likening of Professor Welshman Ncube and Gibson Sibanda to parasitical ticks after the MDC split in 2005 over the introduction of the Senate in the Zimbabwean government (451).

Tsvangirai also undermines Auret and Coltart by making himself a well-decorated 'democrat' in the narrative of the nation. Coltart rebuts this by portraying a sense of belonging in Zimbabwe as noted in his resilience to stay in Zimbabwe when white Zimbabweans were leaving the country (390) and thus disrupts the organicist interpretation of national identity. Nonetheless, this static yet contradictory binary representation of black or white, insider or outsider, and patriot or sell-out in colonial and post-independent Zimbabwe is also narrated in the irrational and public pronouncements by Mugabe's predecessor, Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith. During the liberation war Smith vowed that there would never be majority rule in Rhodesia in a thousand years (Smith 199), a view echoed by the then President Mugabe in his mantra that Tsvangirai and the MDC will never govern the country and that Zimbabwe will never be a colony again.

In essence, the above use of political violence and creation of unstable electoral conditions underlines a fixity on controlling the performative space of representation and maintaining the performance of power that is synonymous with patriotic narratives and which 'democratic' narratives vividly capture.

The 'democratic' narratives' engagement and reading of the nation's liberation history is also instructive in defining the nature and context within which 'democratic' narratives came into being. As already noted, patriotic writings always affirm the heroic performance of the liberation struggle and undermine the roles of non-participants and non-combatants. Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart appropriate the liberation struggle not to venerate ZANU-PF nor claim some form of participation but to justify their pursuit for a 'democratic' struggle. Tsvangirai clearly outlines this in the way his narrator links the story of the liberation struggle with patriotic history and how this history often provides a rationale for instability, corruption, abuse, and dictatorship (274). This crafty appropriation of the patriotic narrative to undermine its purveyor, ZANU-PF, is shown in other textual examples. Auret writes: "Now Mugabe began to show his true colours. He twice made death threats against the opposition and those who supported it. [...] He described the MDC as a white-led party that would take the country back into colonization [...]" (158–9). According to Tsvangirai:

Mugabe's mentality and political strategy had never moved out of the ideological shell with which [...] [h]is ideas on governance were permanently rooted in the defeat of white Rhodesia and colonialism. To him, defeat of those twin evils was both symbolic and terminal; it was in a sense the end of his story [...]. Those who sought to move on in a postcolonial framework were treated with utmost suspicion. (209)

Both authors show how patriotic narratives constantly link the past with the post-2000 political developments that they focus on. Auret reveals how the post-2000 violence on the opposition is unjustifiably legitimated through the invocation of the past war of national liberation. Tsvangirai also shows how patriotic narratives proclaim the need for continuity of the history of the Zimbabwean revolutionary tradition in a way that stifles any new forms of 'revolutions' such as the MDC's fight for values that include the respect for political and civic freedoms, the rule of law, and individual rights to property. It is interesting that this war of liberation tradition is ritualised through an affirmation of Mugabe and the ZANU-PF's past heroic performances and veneration as the sole liberators of Zimbabweans. For instance, political (auto)biographies such as Martin and Johnson's *Struggle for Zimbabwe* (1981) and Mutambara's *The Rebel in Me: A ZANLA Guerrilla Commander in the Rhodesian Bush War 1975-1980* (2014) depict Mugabe and ZANU-PF as the only liberators of Zimbabwe.

Therefore, 'democratic' narratives engage with ZANU-PF's veneration of the patriotism enshrined in the 1970s liberation war, invert the ZANU-PF's assumption of the history as a linear continuum of the heroic tradition, and in that way offer an alternative discourse that seeks to create new ideals and values that will set the nation on a new path in the post-2000s present and future.

It should be underscored that part of the explanation for the MDC's point of departure from patriotic history is that they envisage a leadership guided by a framework that is different from the anti-colonial worldview of Mugabe. The representation of Mugabe and ZANU-PF in Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart's texts reflects the 'democratic' narratives' attempt at departing from the liberation struggle narrative. For instance, Coltart records an alternative account of the liberation struggle, as a British South African Police Patrol officer and then as a Joint Operations Command Research Officer, who felt entrapped by a war that was costly on all fronts (80). In addition, Tsvangirai, as a non-participant of the liberation struggle, only focuses on the 'democratic' struggle against ZANU-PF and Mugabe (352).

In essence, a counter-discursive demystification of the performance of power by ZANU-PF is shown in how "ZANU PF refused to see this vision, insisting on a sense of ownership of Zimbabwe" (Tsvangirai 210). This explains why Tsvangirai justifies the MDC's non-concern with the past performances of the liberation struggle because they claim ownership of "an entire generation of educated 'born-free' Zimbabweans without any emotional attachment to the liberation struggle" (210).² A variant of this position is shown by Coltart (340) in his rumination that some of the so-called 'born-frees' were forced by ZANU-PF to join the national service programme, a principal campaign tool to counter the opposition's dominance (see Ranger for a detailed analysis of how the ZANU-PF government instituted youth militia training camps). Therefore, the 'democratic' narratives present patriotic history as weaponised by ZANU-PF to disrupt the political performance of the MDC, a move that the MDC itself counters in its alternative story about the liberation of the country.

Nevertheless, the MDC's and other 'democratic' narratives' presentation of an alternative history proved to be a futile exercise. The historiographic revisionist approach failed to differentiate the MDC's narrative from that of ZANU-PF. Mbembe contends that "[m]any things are not simply set by side; they also resemble each other" (*On the postcolony* 148). Seen in this light, the MDC fortified the simplification of the past and sustained a monolithic narrative in favour of ZANU-PF. This reproduction of ZANU-PF and, by extension patriotic history in oppositional circles, is what Bond and Manyanya (271) and Tendi (236) label "Zanufication of the MDC". We are interested in the way the MDC replicated ZANU-PF's performances of power and slowly digressed from their 'democratic' claims and principles.³ Coltart (430) highlights that they were not closer to rooting democracy six years after the party's formation and, hence, they had not changed anything other than causing great suffering for all who had stuck their necks out in support of the party. Auret and Tsvangirai even employ the rhetoric of democracy to appeal to the Zimbabwean electorate and the rest of the world in order to be considered as a preferable alternative to the ruling ZANU-PF. For instance, Tsvangirai places expediency above principle, maintains the guise of a tightly controlled 'democratic' party, yet depicts his assimilation of dictatorial tendencies, as noted in the following comment:

Personally, I abhor the use of too much executive authority. I believe in sharing. I believe that it is always better to start by random sharing [...]. Perhaps this is a weakness. There were instances where, as the party leader, I felt I had to take a firm stance and drive the political agenda and process. Dictatorial as it may sound, the truth is that in the end the buck stops with the party-leader not a committee or the executive team. (315)

Thus, Tsvangirai shows that he loathes the use of unrestrained authority and considers it a form of weakness, and claims justification when he takes firm and autocratic decisions on behalf of the party. Coltart's narrative bemoans this leadership style because it is contrary to the ideals of participatory democracy that distinguishes the MDC from ZANU-PF (426–7). Coltart's criticism is also reflected in his ruminations on how Tsvangirai felt betrayed and angry when most of his trusted colleagues voted in favour of the reintroduction of the Senate, an upper house of the parliament, in 2005 (466). Ultimately, we note a contradiction of political performance where Tsvangirai appropriates ZANU-PF's leadership style yet attempts to be different; hence the next section evaluates such paradoxes evident in the democratic narratives.

Paradoxes in 'democratic' narratives

The examined narratives are indeed replete with various contradictions. Tsvangirai's attempt to recast what constitutes a hero from a 'democratic' perspective is evidently paradoxical. ZANU-PF's bestowing of a nationalist hero, as already noted above, has been inward and exclusionary. Ironically, Tsvangirai perpetuates and maintains the ZANU-PF hierarchisation of heroism. This is depicted in Tsvangirai's non-conferment of hero statuses to white Zimbabweans such as Alan Dunn, a regional organiser of the MDC, while hailing the activist Tichaona Chiminya and his wife, Susan, as true national heroes (Tsvangirai 532).⁴

In addition, Tsvangirai's text includes many unsung heroes such as Learnmore Jongwe, the young spokesperson of the MDC who is glossed over because he committed suicide in October 2002 after being arrested for killing his wife in a domestic dispute. This position is parallel to the politics of recognition that is prevalent in patriotic narratives as is evident in Mugabe's refusal to confer hero status on former ceremonial president Canaan Banana in November 2003 because of the scandals associated with his sexuality. Nonetheless, Auret (160) and Coltart's (546) autobiographies express a contrary view by recognising unsung heroes, black or white, political or apolitical, living or dead.

The second paradox is in the way Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart consider other opposition parties in relation to the MDC. Tsvangirai (158), contrary to Auret and Coltart's narratives, regards opposition leaders such as Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole, Reverend Abel Muzorewa, Edgar Tekere, and Margaret Dongo as loose political groupings that were largely symbolic and inconsequential. Tsvangirai terms himself and the MDC as the 'real' opposition because some of the traditionally ardent ZANU-PF supporters found comfort in the new movement (266). Conversely, the MDC is considered as a democratic party because it is inclusive and fosters a liberal culture of debate and popular participation. This is prone to ridicule, especially considering how some of the MDC's political actors began to mimic authoritarian and repressive leadership styles. Nevertheless, all autobiographical narrators insist that the inclusive structures of the MDC made it popular across the country and a real threat to ZANU-PF.

The third paradox is reflected in the ideological differences that are constantly politicised by both ZANU-PF and the MDC to create partisan dichotomies and hierarchies. We have noted above that the three autobiographical selves consider their activism as different from the ZANU-PF's and that the MDC emerged as a 'democratic' alternative to the ruling party. This essential difference, inferred by Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart, becomes a self-made marker of 'democratic' identity.

Ironically, the call for attention to "difference" ends up rendering "difference" into a metahistorical principle and thus it becomes impossible to distinguish one kind of "difference" from another politically (Dirlik ix). In addition, the three assume that political identity thrives through differentiation and can be constituted through a radical criticism of ZANU-PF structures. This assumption considers identity as a product of difference rather than negotiation. In addition, Auret, Tsvangirai, and Coltart disclose that the structuring of the MDC leadership after its formation in 1999 indicated the emergence of a new kind of politics (Auret 148; Tsvangirai 298; Coltart 262). This 'new kind of politics' can be interpreted as a new political discourse that is based on participatory democracy, inclusivity, and non-racialism. However, the same discourse underlines what Spivak (361) calls a

“triumphalist self-declared hybridity” as the majority in the MDC were at one time in ZANU-PF, as noted in the way Tsvangirai left ZANU-PF in 1984 having been its member since 1980.

Notably, the autobiographical narrators in Tsvangirai and Coltart’s autobiographies lament that the MDC’s organisational approach mimicked the ZANU-PF’s structural models (Tsvangirai 292; Coltart 472). Evidently, this created internal party contestations. It is inevitable that when two or more political cultures blend, people tend to return to what they were used to rather than move towards change. The autobiographical narrators describe this oscillation in the following manner:

In September 1999 a new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was founded, based on the labour movements, which commanded a sizeable following in the country. [...] The followers of this new party were by no means exclusively from labour movements, as the desire to see democracy restored in the country was embraced by many people from civil society—the legal profession, business and agriculture. (Auret 148)

Tsvangirai (242) writes, “The few whites in the MDC exhibited both their strengths and their own idiosyncrasies. Our cultures are different—and that resulted in friction over policies, organisational styles and mass mobilisation activities” and according to Coltart (296), “[...] many white farmers started funding the MDC, demonstrating to ZANU PF that this block would vote against them in the election. Some farmers went to the extent of taking leadership positions in rural structures of the MDC”.

The implication of these divergent yet competing political influences shows the hybridity of the party. As such, many whites in the MDC did not want to adopt the structural models of the party that were preferred by former unionists (Tsvangirai) and Civil Society activists (Auret and Coltart).

As a result, white MDC members devised their own structures in the form of support groups that also comprised of influential black Zimbabweans who were not always keen to be seen at the forefront of political activism but preferred to work behind the scenes, supporting MDC programmes and activities on the ground (Auret 156; Tsvangirai 245; Coltart 269). It is clear that the MDC endured the combination of influences from different political backgrounds. Nonetheless, the paradox here is that the disagreements on matters of policy were governed by individual and group interest dynamics in a party that viewed itself as democratic.

Conclusion

In this article we discussed the different perspectives inherent in ‘democratic’ narratives and laid out some of the foundational issues encountered in the politics of narrating Zimbabwean politics from an oppositional standpoint. We highlighted how autobiographical narrators from the Zimbabwean opposition MDC contested the legitimacy of patriotic narratives by writing back to ZANU-PF and its authorised patriotic historiography. They also sought to fill the historiographical gaps that were decisively generated in the narration of the nation in the making. We noted Coltart’s criticism of Tsvangirai and vice versa, which we view as leading to a reconfiguration of the political space where political actors should be accountable for their actions. However, the self-representation of political actors from the MDC as ‘democrats’ led to the Zanufication of the MDC. Given these nuances, the autobiographical act of narrating democratic politics is riddled with the appropriation of undemocratic tendencies, such as the maintenance of dictatorial structures, de-legitimisation of other political actors, and a cult of personality politics.

This can be attributed to the reality that the majority of members defected from ZANU-PF and hence mimicked some of the nationalist party’s policies and structures. Thus, there is a sense in which the ‘democratic’ project ended up emulating hate-speech and violence and assimilating dictatorial structures. Tsvangirai simultaneously appropriates ZANU-PF’s leadership style yet seeks in vain to project himself as different. Political actors on both sides of the divide are primarily obsessed with personalising power in order to firmly control the party under the illusion of unity and democracy. Therefore, we have demonstrated that ‘democratic’ narratives make use of differences in order to forge a ‘new’ narrative of the nation. However, the same discourse ends up assimilating undemocratic tendencies that are common in patriotic narratives. The sum of such an exploration reveals a very limiting and limited conception of patriotism, patriotic history, nationhood, national belonging, unity, and democracy.

Finally, the implicit paradoxes of the democratic narratives compel us to ponder the kind of political autobiography that can emerge in the present Zimbabwe, especially in an era after the 2017 military coup that deposed Mugabe and some of his close allies. While the exercise seems an act of speculation and an attempt to analyse a

text that has not yet been produced, one may still wonder how political figures in Zimbabwe will narrate the self and nation in an era where the country's political trajectories are now under the open hand of the military and former military figures that present themselves as the champions of people's wishes and democratic rights.

There is a particular interest here in the likely nature of political autobiographies—currently being written by the deposed ZANU-PF leaders now in exile—and how they will depict a counter vision to the present political condition and the subjectivity thereof.⁵ The kind of 'democratic' narratives likely to be produced from the political figures in the different MDC formations and civic organisations is also worth pondering considering the contestations within the MDC formations over constitutional principles and access to positions of power. Whatever the next political autobiography to be produced will look like, the old trope on the control of history and its impact on imagining political subjectivities is likely to continue. Perhaps this time the contest will be on the history of the MDC's founding principles and figures, and that related to ZANU-PF's hold of Mugabe as a true hero (although he was not buried at the National Heroes Acre in Harare) as well as the new ways of reconciling the 1970s liberation struggle and the 2017 'second liberation' of the country from Mugabe's rule.

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Notes

1. Huddlestone records Tsvangirai's argument that it is ironic that the anti-colonial war, which was waged to preserve Rhodesia as a sanctuary for whites, gave him so many opportunities to advance himself. This statement caricatures Tsvangirai in patriotic narratives as a self-interested coward.
2. The born-frees are a generation that was born after independence and were eligible to vote for the first time in the general election of 2000.
3. Chan highlights that there are several similarities, such as patronage, vote-buying, factionalism, violence, and class exploitation between Tsvangirai's thinking and that of many ZANU-PF thinkers.
4. Vesta Sithole regards her husband, Reverend Sithole, as a true hero and the father of the armed struggle.
5. Jonathan Moyo, the former Minister of Higher Education, is writing a book and stories about Mugabe's last years in exile.

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