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The ghosts of Colonization

An interview with Simukai Chigudu

by Jules Naudet & Igor Martinache

What traces have colonial enterprises left behind? By confronting the public history of colonialism in the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe with that of his own family, Simukai Chigudu reveals the repressed part of the colonial legacy and how it continues to fuel the cycle of violence.

Born in Zimbabwe in 1986, Simukai Chigudu arrived in England at the age of 17, where he studied medicine. He worked for the National Health Service for several years and took part in several missions in sub-Saharan Africa, notably in South Africa and Tanzania. His interest in public health issues led him to return to his studies, which he completed with a doctorate in African studies at Oxford University. Published in 2020 under the title *The Political Life of an Epidemic: Cholera, Crisis and Citizenship in Zimbabwe* (Cambridge University Press), his thesis highlights the institutional and political factors behind the major cholera epidemic that hit Zimbabwe in 2008 and 2009. Currently Associate Professor of African Politics in the Department of International Development at Oxford University, he has just completed a book entitled *When Will We Be Free? Living in the Shadow of Empire and the Struggle for Decolonisation* to be published in 2024, in which he combines the memoirs of his own family with a historical study to highlight the social, political and cultural traces left by the British colonial enterprise in Zimbabwe, both in the former colony and in the former metropolis. He has also played an active role in the "Rhodes must fall" international movement, which began in South Africa in 2015 to remove the statues of former entrepreneur and politician Cecil Rhodes in front of the University of Cape Town and, more broadly, to decolonise public space and higher education, not without strong resistance from across the political spectrum.

Books and Ideas: **You're currently working on the multiple forms in which colonization keeps shaping the material and symbolic frames of the present day.**

In your forthcoming book, *When Will We Be Free?*, you ground your work on Memories, Archives and oral history of your own family as it is mobilized in the struggle for the decolonisation of what was then known as South Rhodesia. Beyond the cathartic and probably reparative dimension of your writing, how does this dove into your family history allow you to question the traditional narratives of how the Zimbabwean people struggled and in many ways are still struggling to break the chains of colonization?

Have you been allowed to identify the dynamics of colonialism and decolonisation that scholarship has so far tended to leave unquestioned?

Simukai Chigudu : I began to think about my book *When will we be free?* during the anti-racist uprisings of 2020, as will be well known in the United States following the murder of George Floyd, there was a kind of racial reckoning under the guise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Now, this reckoning had a ripple effect across the world.

And in the UK, where I was living at the University of Oxford, I became involved in a discussion about how Britain reckons with racism in the present and with the country's colonial past and being one of about ten black professors at the University of Oxford specializing in African history and politics, I thought that I had something important to say.

I wanted to take the challenge of the present moment, as it was then to reflect on colonialism and its aftermath. I wanted to tell an epic story with my family at the center of it, and use this personal narrative as a vehicle to thinking through how Southern Africa was colonized in the first place, to write about the land that was stolen from my ancestors, and to think through the liberation struggle, and to wrestle with the lingering effects of colonialism in everyday life in southern Africa.

And then later to question what it might mean to understand and escape the legacy of colonialism as a migrant living in Britain. As I started to work on the book, I started to flesh out the complexity of this interrogation. On the one hand, in Zimbabwe, I was always fed a pretty linear and straightforward story that the country was colonized, was under the repression of white rule and that a generation of heroic nationalists fought to liberate the country.

My father was part of that generation. But digging deeper into this family history, I've come across a more complicated story, one that uncovers just the fierce violence of what it meant to be a nationalist, the authoritarianism within the liberation movements, as well as the necessity of fighting the oppressive Rhodesian force. So it's a more subtle and more complicated look at what it means to be devoted to a political cause and the costs of that.

And that's important because it starts to show how the make-up of what Zimbabwe is as a nation is not reducible to its colonial history. Even though the country was born in the crucible of the fight against colonialism. And so I think just trying to add a bit of nuance, trying to push against a straightforward history of before and after of good guys and bad guys.

But getting into the nuances and the complexities of what it meant to live through that period of history, I want to add another dimension to this, too. I've been asking myself the same question when I've been in the UK, how colonial colonialism is made distant and abstract in a lot of the British public discourse and the reckoning with public history.

And part of it is a pervasive, societal phenomenon where colonialism is taught as something that ended the middle of the 20th century, the history of late decolonisation, particularly in southern Africa, is brushed off to the side. But why might that be so? And part of what I'm arguing is that my book aims to disrupt a kind of national mythology that Britain's colonial influence was much more benign than its European counterparts, that colonialism was fundamental to the making of the modern world only in good ways.

And you know, that was not quite the case. And the family history is a very effective vehicle for showing the ugly sides of colonialism to a British audience. And at the same time, complicating the story that Zimbabwean nationalists tell about the past.

***Books and Ideas*: What does writing on one's family rather than on people with whom you do not share kin ties change?**

Simukai Chigudu : When I began thinking about writing this book, my instinct would have been to use the tools of an academic to write, perhaps in an abstract idiom as a comparative political sociologist, about different forms of colonialism, and how

they affect the world. But writing in this way felt to me a little bit too stale, a bit too stodgy and dry for an experience that, you know, hews so closely to the bones of my experience.

And writing about my family throws that into sharp relief. One of the ways that I see this is when we reckon with the colonial past, I think that there are terrible omissions in the public record. So let's look at the two countries that I mostly focus on Britain and Zimbabwe. In Britain, there is so much whitewashing of the colonial past looking over of, say, violence committed against African nationalists in southern Africa or against the Mau Mau in Kenya.

And this has been the subject of an ongoing public litigation as many scholars, writers, journalists have been challenging the British state to acknowledge just the sheer extent and the violence of its colonial rule and so I'm continuing to do so. You know, for instance, at my university, the University of Oxford, we commemorate the Victorian imperialist and a benefactor to the university, Cecil John Rhodes.

And here I'm asking us to say, well, who was Rhodes really? How did he manage to gain such wealth? How did he exploit the labor and extract wealth from Southern Africa? What tools of repression did he actually use? Can we delve into the historical record and uncover very specifically about how he assembled armed forces, mobilized them at the end of the 19th century, had people shot down with Maxim guns, threw dynamite into caves where women and children were hiding out from invading colonial armies mobilized by Rhodes.

You know, this is the ugly history that's often overlooked when we celebrate things like the Rhodes Scholarship. We put up a statue honoring the man. And at the same time, when I think about my family, I've been able to tell this story by gathering oral testimonies from my parents where they tell me about their lives. And doing so has brought to my attention the fractal nature of colonial violence and its aftermath.

Not only as society do, we failed to account fully for what actually happened in the history of men behind Rhodes. But even in my parent's account of their lives, there are these terrible omissions that recur in how they tell me about their past. There are multiple reasons for this. There are questions of shame, of guilt, of unprocessed grief and of trauma.

So confronting the past through the prism of my family is like a parallel process of confronting the public history of colonialism and thinking through, well, what is

foregrounded and what is left out. So, for instance, when I talk to my parents and I try to understand, you know, gaps in their account, long periods that are underrated, particularly periods where they were both in war or how they perhaps are uncomfortable talking about the losses they suffered, whether that was within their own families or lost romantic relationships, there are all of these little ambitions that lead only to a partial account of who we are as a family and who we are as a society. And so part of my project of what I'm trying to illuminate here is holding myself to account for the same standards that I want. At a societal level, I am challenging us to reckon with the past in its fullness, all its glory and its tragedy. And I'm trying to do the same thing within my own family.

Books and Ideas: In the chapter "Inheritance" of your book, you powerfully describe the traumas of repression that run through your family from your grandfather being jailed for three years, to your father being whipped by a professional and coldly sadistic torturer for having participated in a nationalist protest. The occurrences of traumatic ordeals are plenty, as you describe his buttocks being sliced across by the whip, leaving rivers of blood pouring along his leg.

Here the emotional load of your writing is at its climax. This leaves the reader with the suggestion that the evisceration of personhood is intimately linked to the birth of a fledgling nation. What does this tell us about the challenges young decolonised nations have to face?

Simukai Chigudu: In many ways, this is a question that lies at the heart of the book, because the account that I give of my father's torture and that I've revisited since has left me with many questions. One of them is to live through and survive. That kind of torture is at once a testament to a profound resilience, a drive, a determination toward freedom.

But it's also not without scars. It comes with a bitterness and with a resentment. And certainly in a fledgling Zimbabwean nation in the 1980s, men of my father's generation were left in this very difficult position of trying to celebrate their new freedoms, while also trying to process the hurt and the pain that they went through to win that freedom.

And I think that the history of Zimbabwe lies in many ways between these two impulses, one impulse is a drive towards reconciliation and looking to the future. Another is haunted by the ghosts of the past. And I've also seen that in my father's own life and how he remains tormented by what he went through.

And yet at the same time, you know, doggedly fixed on what the project of Zimbabwe as a nation could be. And I think that the trouble comes when both the pain of the struggle is not given the room to be processed, and therefore the bitterness and the resentments to be aired out before a move can be made toward a reconciliation and the kind of almost excessive optimism about the future can lead to a kind of blinkered thinking, an inability to reckon with the fact that one can't step into the future without accounting for the divisions, the enmities, the lingering scars, you know, from things like the liberation struggle.

And I think what's happened in in Zimbabwe at different points in time is the very violent playing out of these of this unresolved bitterness and resentment. We see it, for instance, in the early 2000 when Robert Mugabe sanctions and supports the reclamation of white owned land. To be sure, this was a historical injustice that needed to be addressed.

But it happened at a moment of political expediency and within the self-serving interests of the ruling party. And so the framework of justice gives over to something much uglier. The same is true in the 1980s, when the new ruling party massacres, and there's not a better word for it. They massacre the other members of the other nationalist party that was competing for Ally and that fought in the struggle leading to the deaths of up to 20,000 people, which is, you know, one of the minority ethnic groups within the country.

And that episode of violence has continued to haunt the country right through the present. And so in many ways, I look at Zimbabwe as a kind of incomplete, some might say, failed project of really reconciling after the liberation struggle. And in that sense, I think, well, one of the lessons for the fledgling nation is that cycles of violence can continue to recur.

This raises the challenge of how does one bring those cycles of violence to an end? How do we stop it? This is a big question, one that I'm still thinking through and trying to write with, but certainly being able to sit with it just through my father's experience is a starting point.

Books and Ideas: **It is often suggested that the Decolonial and Marxist ideals at the center of the anti-colonialist struggles ended up being sidelined by the nationalist agenda, which in turn got hijacked by cronyism, nepotism and clientelism as embodied in the regime of Robert Mugabe. How do you approach this dialectic between independence and oppression, emancipation and subjugation? Why has the Zimbabwean political community not yet been able to build stronger institutions?**

Simukai Chigudu: It's a complicated transition from colonialism to independence. One version of events is in some ways articulated by the philosopher, psychiatrist, renowned anti-colonial thinker from Martinique Frantz Fanon, who wrote about Algeria's struggle for independence: anti-colonial struggle calls at a moment in time for an all encompassing nationalism, a collective project where all of those who are under the yoke of colonialism rallied together to overthrow the existing order.

But that's not the end of the struggle. What then has to happen is a kind of resolving of the internal social contradictions of that very nationalist movement. In other words, the divisions by hierarchy of class, of gender, of ethnicity, need also to be abolished in order for true independence to be arrived at. So one could argue that what's happened in Zimbabwe, in countries like it, is an incomplete process, an incomplete revolution, if you will.

That's one way of thinking about it. I'd like to take that as a jumping off point. The historian in me says that works at a theoretical level, but we need to get into the specifics of what actually happened in Zimbabwe. And part of it, I think, is the state, the apparatus of government that the new ruling party inherited was itself designed under colonial rule for authoritarianism.

And so you had a ruling party that adopted this bureaucratic, powerful state apparatus with multiple legislative provisions for, say, emergency rules and lockdowns, for shutting down dissent, as well as the physical means, the monopoly on violence to enforce this through the security apparatus, policing, the military, etc. And I think that ruling party also came through the crucible of anti-colonial struggle dependent on an internal model of authoritarianism, to weed out spies, to maintain internal coherence.

As you know, liberation movements are rarely democratic machines. They can't be they have to be their militarized operations. And this was translated into government within an apparatus that was designed for the same purposes. So I think that that's a big part of that transition. And what we see in the history of Zimbabwe is a gradual eliminating of opposition in various ways through the eighties and nineties.

Until in the late nineties a new opposition party comes to the fore. You know, formed out of a new generation church groups, certain farming communities, youth movements, etc. And for a long time, through the 2000s, it was a battle between the existing ruling party and this new opposition. And I think there's just been these repeated cycles of, you know, practices of quelling dissent, of using access to, let's say, the Treasury or the central bank and so on for graft and enrichment.

I think long histories of deprivation are part of what motivates that. So the failures to build these institutions, I think, can really only be understood through the historical processes by which the nation came to be. There is without suggesting that this was inevitable. I am arguing that a certain part of this was overdetermined just by the nature of what colonial rule was and the nature of the struggle to come out of it, and then the logics of governance that then proceeded.

But I don't think looking now ahead into the future that that it will necessarily be this way forever. I think that new generations of Zimbabweans are thinking through different models, different ways of forming a polity. And I challenge the very institutions and structures and how they've been used to benefit a particular nationalist elite and whether they can be made more exclusive.

But all of this is about politics and about struggle. There are no easy victories here, but I'm not without optimism about what the future holds in this respect.

Books & Ideas: **You grew up and lived in Zimbabwe prior to coming to the UK and 23, how was this very first direct experience of the materiality of colonial looting and the symbolic power that was constructed over it? This probably informed your activism in the "Rhodes Must Fall" movement, which calls for the decolonisation of the British academic world and of Oxford in particular. But what kinds of resistance do you face within academia when trying to push this agenda?**

Simukai Chigudu: In 2003, when I arrived in the UK, I was 16 years old. Zimbabwe was going through a political convulsion, an economic meltdown. Now, at

that time, the dominant narrative in the British press was that all of Zimbabwe's problems boiled down to one man, the person of Robert Mugabe. And in the in the telling of that story was a total overlooking of the country's colonial past of inequalities in the distribution of land, of the liberation struggle, of Britain's failed promises to help facilitate land transfer within Zimbabwe.

And it just was too easy to lean on a colonial stereotype of the big African man, the political leader as a primitive and cruel tyrant. Now, at the time, I didn't really have the vocabulary or the language or even the knowledge to explain or to distill this complex history, you know, to say that this is a question of both.

And it was partly a desire to make better sense of the country that I came from and the country that I was living in that led me as a graduate student to study African history and politics. I did this at the University of Oxford, which somewhat paradoxically was an incredibly rich, engaging, intellectually rigorous space in which to come of age as a scholar, as an academic.

And at the same time, it's also an institution that played a key role in Britain's colonial past. It was the site of close of the training of colonial administrators. Parts of Oxford are an open air museum of statues to slave owners, busts, portraits, engravings, museums, all named after the great men of the British Empire.

And so there was that almost a kind of schizophrenia of, on the one hand, trying to study Africa, and on the other hand, being in a place where Africa was a foil, treated as a foil to Britain's imperial greatness. And so when Rhodesmustfall, which first began in South Africa, spilled over into the university of Oxford, this became a kind of rallying cry to say, we need to decolonise the university and myself and the students involved in Rhodes must fall understood our work in three domains.

One was to look at the symbolic and material environment in Oxford and to challenge that to say that we need to have better, more interesting ways of how we mark public space, of the iconography we put up around us so that we could on a different kinds of people who've been through the university, not only these big men involved in British imperialism, another aspect of our work was to look at the curriculum, to look at how history, literature, philosophy, language and so forth are incredibly eurocentric and in a way that does the kind of violence a disservice to ways of thinking to modalities of thought, to ways of documenting the human experience that exist outside of the Western canon. For instance, at that time in 2015, when we started this student movement, you could graduate with a bachelor's degree in history

from Oxford without ever having studied anything from outside the North Atlantic world. Similarly in philosophy, one of the criticisms that arose among students is that everybody deemed great and worthy of philosophical consideration was pale, stale and male.

And likewise with literature. Entire bodies of postcolonial writing were treated as narrow specialisms and not something that's fundamental to understanding the majority of the world today. And we could continue on with myriad such examples. And finally, there was the question of the composition of the student body, and the faculty were at both levels. There was a gross underrepresentation of black students and students, other minority ethnic backgrounds.

There's been some progress in the student body to address this, but the situation remains dire among the faculty a recent piece in *The Economist* stated that there are 11 black professors in Oxford, myself included, out of 1952. This is a gross underrepresentation when compared to national demographics. Now being an rhodesmustfall, we faced all kinds of resistance. Early opponents to the movement included politicians like Daniel Hannan, a conservative politician and one of the architects of Brexit who came out and said that Rhodes must fall is too silly for words and accused the students involved in it as being an unruly mob with no respect for history.

Likewise, the new Vice-Chancellor at the University in 2016, Louise Richardson, joined the university and immediately said that Rhodesmustfall represented a dangerous attempt to erase the past. Ostensibly left-wing intellectuals like the celebrated Cambridge classicist and Professor Mary Beard similarly said that Rhodes must fall was a dangerous attempt to erase the past, and she insisted that students like me need to look at the Rhodes statue with a "cheery and self-confident sense of un-batterability".

In other words, we were like snowflakes unable to just cope with our physical environment. And then you had the likes of Will Hutton, head of one of the Oxford Colleges, regular columnist for *The Guardian* and a noted political economist in Britain who came out and said in a peaceful paper that if it wasn't for the British Empire, South Africa would descend into unaccountable despotism as embodied by the then President Jacob Zuma, and that it was in fact the British Empire that bequeathed to South Africa constitutionalism, the rule of law, the freedom of the press and freedom of association.

One has to wonder what history books Mr. Hutton has been reading that would equate apartheid South Africa with the freedom of association. And so I think that Rhodesmustfall tapped into a very particular moment in British political and social and cultural life. It exposed how a certain portion of the establishment is utterly ignorant of its own history and thoroughly resistant to voices that challenge it, particularly when those voices come from the former colonies and are embodied by young people.

You know, if we were to dissect and look closely at the statements that were made against Rhodesmustfall, the students, myself included, were being dismissed not on the merit of our actual arguments, but we were portrayed as petulant, stupid, as impervious to reason, unworthy of serious consideration. The tide did change somewhat in 2020 during the Black Lives Matter protests, and that was partly because a racial reckoning was happening the world over, and that was forcing Britain itself to start to reconsider these questions.

And there's something both encouraging and dismal about this. It shows that there is a kind of exigency, a reactivity to what's happening elsewhere in the world. Before some of the critiques that we had mounted internally within Oxford were taken seriously. But then again, I think this is how history unfolds. There are these moments that erupt into public view and we seize upon them to point out instances of daily and structural injustices, particularly as they pertain to racism and the aftermath of colonialism.

Anything I think to push the conversation forward is important. And so I see the work that Rhodesmustfall began in 2015, that received a boost in 2020, as still very much part of an ongoing and unfinished project of decolonisation.

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