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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Unruly diaspora action as decolonization: Abjection and activism among Zimbabweans in London

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Abstract

In an era where migration and asylum are becoming more securitized, this article argues that unruly action by asylum seekers contributes to decolonization through challenging stratified citizenship and hierarchical immigration laws. I argue through a case of members of the Zimbabwe Vigil in London that diasporas challenge the system within their countries of settlement, enhancing self-determination, and speak back to their homelands by demanding rights where excluded. The article draws from 20 key informant interviews conducted with members of the Zimbabwe Vigil in London and their partners on the ground in Harare, Zimbabwe. Through speaking back to the homeland, these individuals play a role in challenging coloniality within the homeland and thus are agents of decolonization. Ultimately, the article answers calls by scholars to expand and challenge the way we have conceptualized diaspora in addition to the literature on diaspora lobbying, engagement and decolonization.

KEYWORDS

agency, activism, diaspora, decolonization, unruly action, transnationalism

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INTRODUCTION

This article argues that unruly action by asylum seekers contributes to decolonisation through challenging stratified citizenship and hierarchical immigration laws, at a time when migration and asylum are becoming more securitised. I contend that transnational claim-making and activist profiles amongst UK-based Zimbabwean diaspora members of the Zimbabwe Vigil Coalition are strong examples of decolonizing action. The diaspora organization members discussed here use unruly acts such as creating activist profiles for themselves to challenge notions of deportability and increase their chances of staying in the United Kingdom. This is because being active in opposition politics makes you a target of the Zimbabwean state apparatus, and as such, the Home Office would not send you back knowing that you are at risk of persecution. Scholars have argued decolonization entails reclaiming subordinated voices (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). It also means 'rehumanising the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanise subjects and communities...and the production of counter-discourses...counter creative acts, and counter-practices that ... open up multiple other forms of being in the world' (Maldonado-Torres, 2016: 10). Here, I argue that diaspora members, particularly those deemed 'irregular' or 'undocumented' are not passive victims of their situation but actors with agency. There is a tendency by the media and some academic literature to portray irregular migrants and by association diaspora groups, as passive victims who do not play a big role in their circumstances, and it is crucial to put these counter-practices and acts on the centre-stage.

Decolonizing migration studies, as scholars have argued (Achieme, 2019; Collins, 2022; Demir, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), involves telling stories of migrants from their own perspective and showcasing their actions and agency in a world that is becoming more restrictive to movement and xenophobic. It also means recentring empire, colonialism and racism which are often obscured in debates about why and how people move in addition to recentring the south (Fiddian-Qasimiyeh, 2020). Migration is often racialized and involves hierarchies in terms of how people are viewed based on where they are originally from – with migrants from the so-called global south usually viewed as the bottom of the food chain. Citizenship is also hegemonic, with stratified rights based on understandings borrowed from the West. As Achieme (2019: 1522) asserted, migrants can 'enact a process that enhances individual self-determination' within the global north. I argue here, through the case of the Zimbabwe Vigil Coalition (from hereon, the Vigil) based in London, that so-called irregular and, as others have contended, 'illegal' migrants are strong actors in their own circumstances and participate in transnational solidarity, claim-making and activism across borders just as much as their 'regular' counterparts. The article shows that not only are these 'irregular' diaspora members engaged in self-determination within the hostland, but they also challenge authority within their homeland through these claims and unruly acts.

Abjection here refers to the space that the group of migrants with insecure status discussed here occupies because their legal status is exclusionary, forcing them into precarity. As McGregor (2008) discussed, they are legally outcast, and abjection implies being imputed with negative characteristics like impurity, criminality, animality, speechlessness and victimhood. These individuals are often forced into stereotypically dirty jobs avoided by citizens (Nyers, 2003). The article argues that despite being in these situations, members of this group who are denied a voice by the legal system transgress these rules based on what they believe is right. They achieve this through unruly acts, challenging the state not only in the United Kingdom but also in their home country, Zimbabwe, where they were driven out for various reasons. I follow arguments by Squire (2021) on unruly migrations and how they challenge the system, and I contend that this unruliness within migrants gives them a voice as they work to regularize their stay in the United Kingdom. Not only do they do this, but unruly diasporas also challenge the political status quo in their country of origin, somewhat contributing and influencing the homeland, inadvertently contributing to a decolonial understanding of migrant agency.

The article draws from a total of 20 interviews with key informants as well as participant observation conducted between 2017 and 2018, equally spread between the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe. The research was part of a broader multisited study on transnational activism among Zimbabweans in the United Kingdom and its impact on their

homeland (Mutambasere 2020). The sample of interlocutors in the United Kingdom included a mixture of individuals with and without refugee status and, as such, 'irregular' and undocumented. Some interlocutors had indefinite leave to remain but still participated in the Vigil. By including individuals both with and without status, it allowed me to compare and contrast the reasons behind participation in the organization. Not only was I interested in finding out how those with status achieved it, but why they continued to support the organization. In Zimbabwe, I conducted interviews with 10 key informants linked to the activist organizations supported by diaspora-based Zimbabweans to ascertain the impact and influence that this group, which included undocumented members, had in the homeland. I spent 5 months, from mid-2017 to early 2018, with both the Zimbabwe Vigil, which meets outside the Zimbabwe Embassy in central London, and their partner organization, Restoration of Human Rights (ROHR), as a participant observer.

The position from which I write this article is that of a member of the same diaspora group which forms the basis of the arguments, who is interested in transnational activism and diaspora mobilization. As such, this was not my first time visiting the Vigil. This is significant, as decolonizing migration studies, like Raghuram and Sondhi (forthcoming: 11) argue, requires the 'voices of migrant scholars who often can broker access to migrant communities that are being researched'. I had prior knowledge of the Vigil's existence and had previously visited them on numerous occasions. This made reconnecting and fitting in easier. The time I spent with the participants as an observer allowed me the opportunity to identify key informants to interview. This is because the issue of irregularity is one that can be sensitive, so I had to gain the trust of my informants first before I was able to ask them about their status. Once this was done, I set up interviews with them away from the Vigil's meeting area outside the Zimbabwean Embassy in central London, at locations they were comfortable with. As such, the names of my participants have been pseudonymized, and no data contained in this article can be traced back to them. In Zimbabwe, research was conducted mostly in the capital city, Harare, and its surrounding areas. I conducted another 10 interviews with key informants who were selected through tracing the networks from the United Kingdom. As Mercer et al. (2009: 149) argued, 'transnational networks also produce multiple actors from below', which makes this specific network visible and its contribution necessary to explore. During my time with the Vigil, I kept a record of who they were partnering with on the ground in Zimbabwe. I then asked the leadership to connect me with the various individual activists and organizations they worked with in Zimbabwe. I also interviewed the programme team, who act as a proxy and are responsible for the Vigil's operations in Zimbabwe. Data was eventually analysed as part of the broader multisited transnational study mentioned above using a grounded approach.

DIASPORA, AN EVOLVING CONCEPT

Diaspora as a concept has been evolving over the years. Early discussions about the term point at how the Jewish diaspora is used as the concept's defining paradigm (Safran, 1991; Cohen, 1997). Safran's (1991) argument is that the degree of force that initiates a population's dispersal is what normally defines what counts as a 'diaspora', 'semi-diaspora' or 'non-diaspora'. He further goes on to say their ancestors or they themselves have been dispersed from their original region to a peripheral or foreign region, and they retain a collective memory myth or vision about the homeland, they believe they might not or cannot be accepted by their host society (Safran, 1991: 83–84). Cohen (1997) posited that there are five types of diaspora which are trade, labour, cultural, imperial and victim. He also cautions that these diasporas change, and their characters might overlap over time (Cohen, 1997). Cohen's typology breaks the assumption of victimhood or violent dispersal. Of importance to note is that the concept of a diaspora is not 'limited to a historical experience but rather functions as both a complex analytical discourse as well as a theoretical concept that invites a kind of theorising that is always embedded in particular maps and histories' (Pasura, 2011: 144).

This is crucial as it allows us to start conceptualizing a situation in which diasporas are made, or indeed, make claims, and, connected to that, how they have agency. It additionally takes away the understanding of diasporas as victims who have been violently displaced. This article departs from some sociological concepts of diaspora and adopts the view that it is a claim rather than a specific set of features, following Kleist (2008), McGregor (2011b), and others. This

is because much of the literature discussing what a diaspora 'is' does not capture the vernacular 'liberalization' of the term to encompass a far broader range of groups in the past two decades (Betts and Jones, 2012: 6). For instance, Zimbabweans living in the United Kingdom call themselves the 'diaspora', a name they are also referred to by those in the homeland despite not fitting most of the traditional typologies of a diaspora. But this positioning matters, as it is a claim that has important social and political effects.

Brubaker (2005) argued diaspora is a stance, whereas others like Van Hear (2012) say it is a discourse or a practice (Adamson & Demetriou, 2007). Here, I follow Betts and Jones (2012) in understanding diaspora from a Durkheimian point of view and arguing that the usage of the term creates a social fact. By adopting this view, the article hinges on an understanding of the notion of a diaspora as a political and social construct. Being labelled and acting as a diaspora is one possible way of activities such as transnational political mobilization by diasporas to have certain political consequences, "regardless of any fit with more conventional, fixed academic definitions" (Betts and Jones, 2012: 6). Furthermore, following Betts and Jones (2012), the article deems diaspora an object of organization, shaping and influencing. But it does not just shape diasporic actions, as these diasporic engagements are also the concern of citizens within the homeland: Many of the latter look up to those in the diaspora and associate diasporic claims with notions of status, creating expectations.

More recently, Demir (2022: 4) has argued that 'diaspora research has often ended up tightly hemmed into the history, sources, and understanding of the nation-state'. She contended that much of the literature focuses on case studies without 'necessarily informing how the case study can expand or challenge the way we have conceptualised diaspora' (ibid.). For Demir, links between diaspora and empire are sometimes ignored, leading to the erasure of the consequences of expansion. She further argued, 'diaspora should instead be understood as inscribed and entangled in a series of historical and political processes associated with empire and expansion - including, of course, nationalist and ethno-political responses to these' (Demir, 2022: 4). This is important for the argument I am making here, as I shall discuss further below. Through their acts in the hostland, diasporas indeed challenge and respond to not just laws but other cultural and societal tropes, both in the country of settlement and origin. Through this speaking back to the homeland, diasporas therefore play a role in challenging coloniality within the homeland and thus are agents of decolonization (Demir, 2022). Finally, diasporas can also be a population known and subject to certain techniques of power as the homeland states try to govern them (Foucault, 2009). Treating diaspora as a stance, claim, and set of practices shaped by relationships to states invites further attention to transnational domains of activism.

UNRULINESS AND DECOLONIZATION

Decolonization is a buzzword that is currently being utilized in every discipline of academia, from biology to zoology, as part of the 'decolonial turn'. In this article, I labour to, as Raghuram and Sondhi (forthcoming: 6) remark, avoid using it as a 'currency within the intellectual', but to actually engage with calls by scholars such as Demir (2022), to rethink how we conceptualize diaspora and to show how diaspora actions can decolonize as well as show agency. However, my goal here is not to offer another definition of the term, as this has been extensively done elsewhere (see Fanon, 1963; Mignolo, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2007; El-Enany, 2020). My intentions are to show how unruly acts of diasporas can also be decolonizing through their impact in the hostland and homeland. As scholars have argued, decolonizing phenomena entails giving people a voice, 'challenging certain frameworks' (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023: 13), and acknowledging that migration is a colonial product given the power asymmetries that have classified people. The work that the Zimbabwe Vigil does shows that they have agency, and it also gives them a voice through these counter-creative acts and practices during a period of increased anti-immigrant sentiments and restrictive policies within the United Kingdom. Migration to the global north can contribute to the decolonization of the host nation through challenging neo-colonialism, given the fact that European colonialists were present in the global south, as argued by Achiume (2019). They challenge some of these legacies of 'human hierarchies which made the exclusion of millions of people from "human" rights during the late colonial era, live on' (Mayblin et al., 2020: 110). I show how

diasporas, particularly so-called irregular members, can contribute to these efforts both in the homeland and hostland through a transnational understanding of their work. By robustly recognizing and appreciating diasporans' agency and showcasing their work, their voices become louder, and we can begin to shift this understanding of irregular migrants and refugees as destitute, despite being forced to occupy abject spaces.

Addressing Latin American migrants in London, McIlwaine (2015: 507) contended that migrants 'exercise some form of agency in the sense of being conscious actors in both creating practices to navigate their exclusion as well as negotiate often hostile migration regimes rather than being victims of their circumstances'. They manage this through their unruly actions, following Khanna et al.'s (2013) definition of 'unruly politics', a notion specifically relating to political action by the excluded, and they argue:

political action by people who have been denied voice by the rules of the political game, and by the social rules that underpin this game. It draws its power from transgressing these rules – while at the same time upholding others, which may not be legally sanctioned but which have legitimacy, deeply rooted in people's own understandings of what is right and just. (Khanna et al., 2013: 14)

The nature of their status in the United Kingdom, being undocumented, means that technically they are transgressing rules, whereas maintaining a visible presence despite knowing it could lead to detention. This also shows a connection between ideas of politics and citizenship. Others such as Kaulingfreks (2016: 5) also use the term unruly politics to:

designate the political agency of people who are not recognized as worthy, or formal, political actors within the domain of institutional politics, but who nevertheless interfere in the political organization of society, while they do not abide by the formal, moral and legal rules of accepted practices of civil engagement and political participation.

In this case, Kaulingfreks was referring to young rioters from poor neighbourhoods in The Netherlands, particularly The Hague, who are often excluded from what constitutes a citizen as they are associated with 'deviant street culture'. What is evident here is a lack of recognition that these youths, much like the undocumented diaspora members I am discussing here, are denied agency because they are either associated with a preconceived idea of violence in the case of young rioters or illegality from the perspective of the state in the case of these diasporans. In the next section, I outline some of the dynamics of emigration from Zimbabwe to the United Kingdom in order to give a general background of how we ended up with a situation whereby some have asylum claims denied.

DYNAMICS OF ZIMBABWEAN EMIGRATION TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

The dynamics of Zimbabwean emigration and immigration to Britain in the late 1990s were such that significant numbers entered the British asylum system or were deemed 'irregular' migrants. This was particularly the case after the British government imposed a visa on Zimbabwean travellers in 2002 (Pasura, 2014). This period coincided with the downfall of the economy in Zimbabwe and the upscaling of the persecution of political opponents and activists. Some Zimbabweans fled to the United Kingdom to either join family members or to claim asylum. Sassen (2016: 205), in explaining why people take risks to travel, argued, 'migrations do not just happen but are produced, they are not autonomous and are tied to problems in the homeland', which is relevant in the Zimbabwe case where political repression and economic plunge escalated from the late 1990s. The Zimbabwean diaspora in the United Kingdom is heterogeneous and includes a minority of members who support the current ZANU-PF regime as well as the larger group who support the opposition. The diaspora includes black, white and mixed-race inter alia, and minority ethnic groups as well as the main Shona and Ndebele groups. Much existing research suggests that those who were politically

persecuted in Zimbabwe and came to claim asylum in the United Kingdom are supporters of the opposition MDC¹ parties (McGregor & Pasura, 2010; Mbiba, 2012).

Some Zimbabweans claimed asylum on arrival in Britain, whereas others came on various types of visas from study to visit, but when the visas eventually ran out, this placed them in illegality as 'overstayers'. The broader Zimbabwean diaspora in the United Kingdom thus came to include many whose claims to asylum failed, 'whose status in the UK is precarious and always shifting'. (Kuhlmann, 2013: 322). Many such migrants spent years in hiding after they had arrived in the United Kingdom for fear of deportation, and many were failed asylum seekers whose applications and subsequent appeals were turned down by the Home Office.² This group of migrants with insecure immigration status occupies 'abject spaces' (McGregor, 2008) and can include both the silent and visible (Pasura, 2010a, 2010b) members who hardly take part in transnational affairs as they are too busy worrying about their own status, survival, jobs, inter alia. But this insecurity can also provoke visibility, as demonstrated by the Vigil, which provided an opportunity for being heard politically in the hostland as well as globally. Their illegality did not, however, translate into passivity, as I will discuss below. These claimants of rights, who came together as Zimbabweans at the Vigil, were mostly united through a common situation of exclusion in the United Kingdom and demands for inclusion. Below, I discuss the Vigil, from its formation to the type of work they do, and how this can be seen as unruly action which can decolonize.

THE ZIMBABWE VIGIL COALITION

According to one of the Vigil's founders, the organization was created in 2002 'to draw attention to human rights abuses in Zimbabwe'³; it was seen as a conglomeration of groups, did not belong to any political party, and claimed to have always welcomed people from other organizations who agreed with what it stood for. Although the co-founders of the Zimbabwe Vigil claimed that it did not belong to any political party, it was in fact founded using existing structures and membership of the Central London Branch of the MDC opposition party (before it split in 2005) together with white farmers lobbying over the land issue (Benton & Benton, 2017). Benton and Benton (2017: 10) claimed, 'the decision to start the Vigil was made by the Central London Branch of the [recently formed] Movement for Democratic Change, who used to hold regular forums on Mondays'. In the early 2000s, they were addressed by then MDC MP Roy Bennet and a Zimbabwean human rights activist, Tony Wheeler, who were visiting the United Kingdom, urging the gathering to draw public attention to the violence and abuses in Zimbabwe. The first Vigil was held on the 12th of October 2002.

Here, we can already see that, in its inception, the Vigil was engaged in activism through lobbying. According to the Vigil's coordinator at the time of my research, when the organization started, there were a lot of white Zimbabwean exile members who were looking for a place to lobby over the land issue. This was because the formation of this organization coincided with the arrival of white farmers who had been evicted from their farms by 'Mugabe and his hooligans'.³ Pasura (2014) argued that the existence of white Zimbabweans at the Vigil has to be problematized considering their absence from grassroots and national political activism in the country prior to the emergence of the MDC and their self-interest in taking part in the Vigil. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that these white Zimbabweans were not only protesting their dispossession of land by the Zimbabwean government but also the broader erosion of democracy and rights. So, there is also a sense of request for rights and democracy within the United Kingdom but also in Zimbabwe, from the very beginnings of the organization.

The coordinator, however, argued that the white presence at the Vigil had declined over time, and the balance had shifted gradually as more and more Black Zimbabweans also joined the diaspora.⁴ He argued that the beginning, most of the efforts came from white Zimbabweans, but by the time of my research, the protests had about 95% or more black Zimbabweans, and they were also in leadership roles.⁵ This is an interesting statistic, which Benton and Benton (2017) attributed to the easier assimilation process for white Zimbabweans compared to black Zimbabweans, as most whites had a straightforward path to citizenship in the United Kingdom and did not have to enter the asylum system

or endure protracted illegality. As Morris (2003) argued, racism underpins discriminatory practices of extending rights to migrants by host nations. Notwithstanding, the Vigil included members who had been political and human rights activists before leaving Zimbabwe and who continued their political engagement in the United Kingdom. For most black Zimbabweans who moved to the United Kingdom after 2000 because of the situation in Zimbabwe, the Vigil offered a visible place for them to protest and have a public profile in raising knowledge of the ills of the Zimbabwean government. It was motivated by ideas of human rights, lobbied and pressured the British government and other international institutions to take action over the situation in Zimbabwe. One can argue here that this action was to an extent disrupting coloniality within the homeland, wherein age-old colonial era tactics are deployed by the government to harass opposition activists *inter alia*.

The Vigil was successful in raising the profile of their demonstrations in the early years (2000–2008), thanks to the interest on the part of the British press and UK politicians in Zimbabwe's trajectory, which McGregor (2009) argued reflects the legacies of settler colonialism – in contrast to Kurdish groups in Germany, for example Østergaard-Nielsen (2001). This political support can provide one explanation for the militancy, but the desperation of the members who comprise the majority of those present at demonstrations is another, as they see their protests as a means of legalizing their stay. Morris (2003) stated that those who are in a country unlawfully are not always entirely lacking in rights, but claiming this right could jeopardize their presence, something members of the Vigil seemed not to worry about. Quite the opposite, as members hoped that their participation and public profile could support a trajectory into legalizing their presence. Although the past levels of political support had waned somewhat by the time of the research, the Vigil still had political access and support via figures like Kate Hoey, who led the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Africa in the UK Parliament and who had a history of raising concerns over human rights, supporting white farmers, and the Zimbabwean political opposition. A further reason for the organization's militancy and ability to sustain a regular presence was the support they got for their programmes via local authority funds in the 2000s, though this funding had ceased, according to my interviewees,⁶ which is largely a reflection of austerity cuts by the UK Government. As Demir (2022) and Achiume (2019) argued, diasporas can indeed decolonize countries of settlement, and one could argue that in addition to austerity, there is resistance from the metropole to facilitate settlement of the 'other'.

Challenging deportability as unruly action

As alluded to above, the precarity of members of the Vigil did not necessarily translate into passivity, and they used unruly action to have rights recognized. This can also help us understand diaspora and migrant agencies, as they work to make their cases visible. Vigil members arrived and applied for asylum at different junctures since 2000, with variable outcomes, and it is important to contextualize changes in British policies and practices towards asylum seekers and irregular migrants over time. The differentiated status of Vigil members reflected these changes and created a form of civic stratification (Morris, 2003). While waiting for a decision on asylum applications, you are not allowed to work in the United Kingdom, so Vigil members had spent long periods in limbo. This could be seen as some of the precursors to the now fully blown 'hostile environment' as advocated by various Conservative Home Office Secretaries over the past few years. As discussed by Morris (2003), a person used to be able to work in the United Kingdom 6 months after applying for asylum, but this changed in 2002. In some periods, there were significant numbers of Zimbabweans in detention centres, such as in 2005, when the Home Office halted deportations back to Zimbabwe. Like other migrants in irregular circumstances, Zimbabweans finding themselves excluded have used a variety of means to try legalizing their stay (on such manoeuvres in other contexts, see De Genova (2002)). Over the period from 2010 in particular, Zimbabweans in irregular circumstances have also been subject to regularization; as Morris (2003: 89) argued, 'Britain [...] targeted some groups in rather limited regularisation exercises including old case rulings on asylum seekers'. Despite these efforts, it is evident that the situation in the United Kingdom has been and remains challenging for asylum seekers and has been getting worse.

In her study of Latin American migrant struggles, McIlwaine (2015) argued that 'illegals' in the United Kingdom manage to regularize themselves over time, notwithstanding legal obstacles. This was also the case in relation to Zimbabweans. However, there were still some Zimbabwean migrants who had insecure status and sought to get it regularized who were not included in the unofficial regularization, or who had fallen out of legality subsequently as student and other visas expired and they had stayed on. These were some of the people who were active with the Vigil at the time of my research. As rumours of deportations resurfaced in the Zimbabwean UK diaspora after the change of government in Zimbabwe in 2018 and following press reports of Zimbabweans in detention being deported, most were keen not to be removed and sent back and saw working closely with the Vigil as a means of helping them to make a convincing case to remain. However, during the time of research, there were no Zimbabweans who were deported, though there were reports of individuals in detention.⁷ Insecurity has also been an on-going issue even among those individuals who were granted status, either because people were only given temporary rights or because it takes time for people to really feel secure given the hostility to migrants in a public sphere that was shaped by debates over Brexit in which anti-immigrant sentiment had been key.

As I eventually discovered, some of the newest members of the Vigil were failed asylum seekers who were attempting to be politically active by denouncing the Zimbabwean government so that they avoided a chance of getting deported back to their homeland (cf McGregor & Pasura, 2010 on an earlier period). These Vigil members had decided to put matters into their own hands by using this unruly form of action as they were not getting anywhere with the Home Office. Over the years, the Vigil had helped members of the Zimbabwean diaspora with asylum applications. These actions in the quest for political inclusion fit Isin and Nielsen's understanding of acts of citizenship, which are extended by what Mutambasere (2022) has called diaspora citizenship. Not only are they acts of diasporic citizenship, but they are also unruly acts, as this is action by members of the society who have been denied political action by the powers that be (including government departments such as the Home Office). These actions make the government and citizens of the country of settlement aware of the plight of these diaspora members but also contribute to the homeland as they demand to be included and a return of democracy. In addition, they challenge hegemonic understandings of the modern world, in which citizenship, sovereignty and borders dominate, and open up spaces in which other forms of knowing and being are recognized. This is further outlined below, where I discuss how they spoke back to the homeland. Notwithstanding, over the years, the numbers of Zimbabweans making asylum claims has dwindled. This reduction in the number of Zimbabweans within the asylum system meant that the Vigil had increasingly struggled with fundraising for its operation. These funds are also what they used to support their partner on the ground in Zimbabwe, as I will discuss in the next section. The treasurer elaborated:

The Vigil fundraises through donations, at times you just put a tin and people who come or pass by to support put some coins or whatever it is they have in there. We sell t-shirts, caps, pins, wristbands here on Saturdays and we also do other events to fundraise like this year we have an All-White Boat Party (everyone has to dress in white clothes) on the River Thames which is £50 entrance and we will be launching our book too. We also collect membership fees for ROHR International.⁸

Though this boat party mentioned by the treasurer was a fundraising campaign meant to be attended by both Vigil and ROHR Zimbabwe members and the general public, the ticket price put a strain on those who were not gainfully employed. Eventually, photos that were posted on the Vigil's website showed that there were only a handful of people in attendance.⁹ On top of this, three of the respondents I spoke to also argued that it was difficult for them to attend the boat party, for example, as they did not have a steady income and would rather keep the money they have for upkeep. As Tadiswa explained:

I do not have a job and have not been working officially and legally for a while meaning I do not have a lot of money lying around. It is a difficult decision for me as I also want to contribute to the cause but do not have much.¹⁰

What this meant for members such as Tadiswa was that she had to think very hard before taking part in some of the activities and events hosted by the Vigil. She did not have the necessary financial capital, though she wanted to be a part of the event so as to be visible. She also wanted to be seen at the boat party so as to further add to her activist profile. The challenge with most of the members in Tadiswa's situation was that, as much as they did not have legal status in the United Kingdom, they did work on the side, did not earn much but had families in Zimbabwe to take care of. This then affected the level of investment in the organization by its members, which in turn affected its general effectiveness. Despite this, members still attended on a regular basis, with the hope that this activity would reduce their chances of being deported back to Zimbabwe, given that they were civic activists. The funding issue was one that was important as it affected the way in which activities were run both in the United Kingdom and in Zimbabwe as I will outline below.

Transnational claim-making as speaking back to the homeland

As argued above, diasporas can also play a decolonizing role by speaking back to their homeland (Demir, 2022). This is because some of them would have left due to repressive regimes that are reminiscent of the colonial state and which sometimes use laws and criminal codes that were first passed during the colonial era. This creates an environment which squeezes some political and civic activists out of their countries of origin. Diasporas can then help decolonize their homelands through speaking back and challenging such repressive governments, lobbying for rights and a return to democracy. In the case of the Vigil, their arm on the ground was the organization ROHR International. ROHR was officially formed in 2007 in the United Kingdom by a group of Zimbabweans who were mainly members of the Vigil. According to the founding president, ROHR existed even earlier but was not formally and officially registered. The idea had been present since 2003, and the organization was meant to be a victim-oriented organization for those who had suffered human rights abuses in Zimbabwe. After it was officially formed in the United Kingdom, a member of the Vigil who had been in the United Kingdom 'opted to go home and join the others',¹¹ meaning he went back to Zimbabwe to form the Zimbabwe chapter of ROHR. The organization carried on and would coordinate funds in the United Kingdom, remitting them back to Zimbabwe via this network, where they would be used for various activities on the ground. This network-based activism is crucial, not least because it gives these precarious migrants a voice in the homeland they fled.

In the United Kingdom, the organization collected membership fees of £10 (and still did during the time of research) per month from Vigil members who were almost all members of ROHR and from other well-wishers who either joined or just gave money, including people who were not members of the Zimbabwean diaspora. ROHR, however, has not run smoothly over the years, and its problems have been covered extensively in Zimbabwean diaspora media. Headlines broke in 2009–2010,¹² with Nehanda Radio carrying a story on the 30th of June 2009 that ROHR and ZimVigil were exploiting asylum seekers. It reported that the organization was charging £120 to write asylum seekers 'letters of activity', which is evidence of exploiting their members. The organization's policy was that you could get such a letter if you had been a member for more than 12 months; however, reports in the media¹³ claimed that ROHR's president was asking for the 12-month subscription upfront to write these letters. The president at the time had been removed from his position as MDC UK chair a year before this for 'financial irregularities'.¹⁴ Despite this, the organization carried on, and this unruliness of the organization is also interesting when it comes to migrant agency. Migrant and diaspora organizations can also sometimes suffer from scandals and mismanagement, yet in this case, the organization persisted.

The literature has largely focussed on claim-making made in situ in the hostland when discussing irregular migrants, yet unruly action through a proxy human rights organization in Zimbabwe allows this network of migrants brought together by the Vigil in London to make their claims transnationally in reference to the homeland. Van Meeteren (2012) argued that some migrants choose to engage in transnational politics and, in this case, activism because usually this is what would have prompted their decision to leave. They could protest freely as they felt they were out of reach

of the homeland government; indeed, as I argued above, such protests were also seen as a route to gaining asylum. Yet ROHR's difficulties as an organization partly reflected the irregular status of its members in the diaspora, which I argue has contributed to the accusations of corruption and unaccountability.

The irregular Zimbabwean diaspora members in Britain who founded the Vigil and ROHR have been called traitors by the Zimbabwean government and have been rendered powerless through denial of access to rights in the political systems of the homeland and hostland. They, however, were taking other steps in transgressing some of the exclusions by challenging the homeland as well as hostland government from afar using organizations, the *modus operandi* of which is complex and not transparent. ROHR claimed it was a 'non-political organisation, whose members were passionate and committed to bringing about change in Zimbabwe'.¹⁵ The organization sought to 'educate and encourage Zimbabweans to stand together, encourage active participation in Zimbabwe on governance issues including their constitutional rights'.¹⁶ Nonetheless, below, I scrutinize these claims, showing that the organization's work on the ground was contradictory and more ambivalent than its creators claimed. In some ways, I argue, it can indeed be seen as particularly 'unruly', though the organization's difficulties also reflected the challenges of a repressive environment, politicization, and corruption issues that have marred the broader political and civic sphere within Zimbabwe.

ROHR [Zimbabwe] International drove transnational initiatives for the Vigil at the time of research. It was, for most of the members, one of the ways they were in touch with the homeland, given that many could not travel. A member of the Vigil explained that because you have claimed political asylum, 'even if you are granted travel documents as a refugee, you are not meant to travel back to your homeland, as that defeats the whole purpose of the asylum. If it safe for you to return home, then you should go back home'.¹⁷ This meant that the contact Vigil members had with their homeland was indirect, and ROHR presented them with an opportunity to contribute to the civic sphere in the country so as to change the situation and to make claims on their continued citizenship at home. Although I have characterized some aspects of ROHR as demonstrating 'unruly action or politics', it nonetheless participated in shaping the political sphere in Zimbabwe through its human rights work and its on-going personal connections to Zimbabwe opposition politics. Khanna et al. (2013, 13) argued that an act cannot stay unruly for long, and once it is engaged as political, it 'enters the lexicon of political action and instead becomes a recognised mode of political action'. It becomes a form of negotiation for power. Respondents at the Vigil felt there was some value to it: They seemed to understand that the work they did with ROHR was to try and make some changes, however big or small, within the country to foster democracy and uphold human rights arguing:

To raise awareness of the situation, of our situation in Zimbabwe. The singing that we do, those are protest songs. Songs and prayer are important because you would be asking for divine intervention. I know that people walking past might not understand but in Zimbabwe will definitely understand, that is why we sometimes "toi toi"¹⁸ because that is the other way of attracting people and getting the message across. Some people they do not understand all these things which is why we also speak to people. In Zimbabwe we have our partners who work tirelessly on the ground to encourage democracy and good governance.¹⁹

Thus, ROHR was an important conduit for these diasporans to be able to interact with the homeland in a more direct and political way as well as speaking back. Much like Brees (2010) argued in the case of transnationalism among Burmese refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border, this shows an example of how precarious irregular migrants nonetheless make claims related to democracy and representation in the homeland as well as the hostland.

An example of how ROHR worked on the ground and attempted to level the political playing field towards the 2018 elections was an idea I learned about while conducting fieldwork called the Zimbabwe Peace Actors Platform. ZimPAP was an ambitious project that sought to create a civilian army (women and youth led) of peace actors and protectors within communities who would work hand in hand with the police. The project was created in anticipation of the 2018 general elections. The idea was mooted by members of the UK chapter initially but took a while to get mobilized and be

implemented in Zimbabwe. The ambitious target of the project was to recruit around 100,000 civilian peacekeepers at ward level and at least 100 community-based organizations (CBOs) by the end of 2018.²⁰ This immediately begins to highlight how overambitious the project was

[...] launched since last year February and [...] idea was there needs to be a civilian army of peace actors, peace protectors and they need to create a platform in which their opinions can be heard, what they are saying, can be recorded. Once this army was created, they would then in turn, form a platform where they would work with the police [...] civilian army to teach peace, we were mainly looking at rural communities [...].²¹

Though this was an ambitious project, given the sheer size and the risk involved, it shows how, despite leaving their countries and precarity in the hostland, members of the Vigil were working on speaking back to the homeland through transnational action. Moreover, ROHR did not actually conduct its more ambitious and risky goals of creating a civilian army. The organization's partners were small CBOs with very small budgets and could not offer any significant financial assistance to ROHR. The unruliness nature of these actions is connected to arguments I made above, where the political action they took was sometimes thwarted by their own circumstances in that the capacity to fundraise was low for ROHR despite their very strong intentions. The project's overambitious, risky, and politicized nature may also have contributed, alongside ROHR's known problems of accountability. However, despite these shortcomings, the organization also managed to contribute to the civic sphere in Zimbabwe through participating in lobbying the government as well as protests that helped open up space for citizens in the country. As ROHR's coordinator in Zimbabwe argued, the organization was created also 'to create an active citizenship that is aware of what its political and economic rights are.'²²

CONCLUSION

This article has shown how unruly action and practices by diasporas give them agency and a voice as well as speak back to the homeland (Demir, 2022) in a manner that can be decolonizing. Decolonization entails breaking hierarchies of difference (Maldonado-Torres, 2016), which we see in this group of diaspora members with insecure status who work to counter practices in their hostland and homeland. By creating activist profiles as members of the Zimbabwe Vigil, the diaspora members discussed here challenged notions of deportability and therefore authority within their hostland in an era where there is increasing securitization of migration and asylum. The migrants discussed here make a conscious effort to be seen and heard, accentuating their agency and voice, which goes against some dominant narratives in the media and some literature that portray asylum seekers as passive, destitute, and in need of saving.

At the same time, diasporas also challenge homelands from afar through unruly transnational actions where they deploy the use of proxies to lobby on their behalf. This is mostly important in cases where the homeland regime is authoritarian, expanding arguments by scholars such as Van Meeteren (2012) who demonstrate how irregular migrants can challenge regimes that pushed them out. This is unlike debates in the literature that focus on how refugee diasporas can enhance politics within homelands (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2001). I argued that these actions in the quest for political inclusion in the homeland can also be understood as unruly action and politics (Khanna et al., 2013), in addition to fitting Isin and Nielsen's (2008) elaboration of 'acts of citizenship'. As the case of ROHR has shown, despite the unruly politics of the organization as well as actions of the members, it attempted to make an impact on the ground through various activities that were lobbying the Zimbabwean Government. What we see is that the diaspora, who are asylum seekers, actually hold some power and voice, and if decolonization also involves reclaiming subordinated voices (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), then members of the Zimbabwe Vigil are contributing to decolonization efforts in both the hostland and the homeland. Although citizenship laws that are hegemonic and a suspicious home country government may deny them a voice and agency, they challenge these and enhance their self-determination (Achieme,

2019). They achieve this through counter-practices and acts which help them open up other forms of being in the world (Maldonado-Torres, 2016), despite being dehumanized by these stratified systems. The article ultimately demonstrates how transnational and network activism can have important contributions to helping understand diaspora, asylum and decolonization.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This paper draws from fieldwork conducted as part of doctoral research at the University of Sussex's School of Global Studies and is therefore available publicly via my thesis.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ One of the MDC formations led by Nelson Chamisa has since rebranded itself and is now called the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC)
- ² See here for an example of a Zimbabwean who was stuck in asylum limbo: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/03/asylum-seeker-stuck-15-year-limbo-zimbabwe-death>.
- ³ Interview with Joy. London. 19/08/2017
- ⁴ Interview with Courage. London. 12/08/2017
- ⁵ Interview with Courage. London. 12/08/2017
- ⁶ Interview with Courage. London. 12/08/2017
- ⁷ Interview with Courage. London. 12/08/2017
- ⁸ Eventually, the Home Office attempted to remove some individuals, but even that was criticized as some of the individuals were political activists: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/zimbabwe-deportation-charter-detention-home-office-b1884636.html>.
- ⁹ Interview with John. London. 09/09/2017
- ¹⁰ Available here: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/zimbabwewigil/albums/72157689517853725/with/36575617344/>
- ¹¹ Interview with Tadiswa. London. 18/11/2017
- ¹² Interview with Blessing. London. 05/08/2017
- ¹³ More here <https://nehandaradio.com/2009/06/30/rohr-zimvigil-exploiting-asylum-seekers/>
- ¹⁴ The majority of the Vigil leadership seemed to have some form of resentment towards diaspora-based media outlets to such an extent there were claims that some of the paper and radio owners had used the Vigil to get their paperwork sorted out but then fell out with the leadership over silly differences.
- ¹⁵ See here a press statement by ROHR refuting this <https://nehandaradio.com/2009/06/24/press-statement-from-rohr-zimbabwe/>.
- ¹⁶ From the ROHR website
- ¹⁷ From the ROHR website
- ¹⁸ Interview with Tsitsi. London. 07/10/2017
- ¹⁹ Toi-toi or toyi toyi is a form of Southern African dance that was first used in Zimbabwe during the Liberation Movement by the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) and involves stomping of feet and chanting that include songs or slogans. The dance was also used in South Africa to intimidate the South African Police during the struggle against apartheid and is still employed by South Africans to express their grievances against government decisions and policies.
- ²⁰ Interview with Tichaona. London. 21/10/2017
- ²¹ See here for more: <https://263chat.com/civic-groups-takes-community-peace-initiative-domboshava/>.
- ²² Interview with Gwinyai. Harare. 15/04/2018
- ²³ Interview with Gwinyai. Harare. 15/04/2018

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