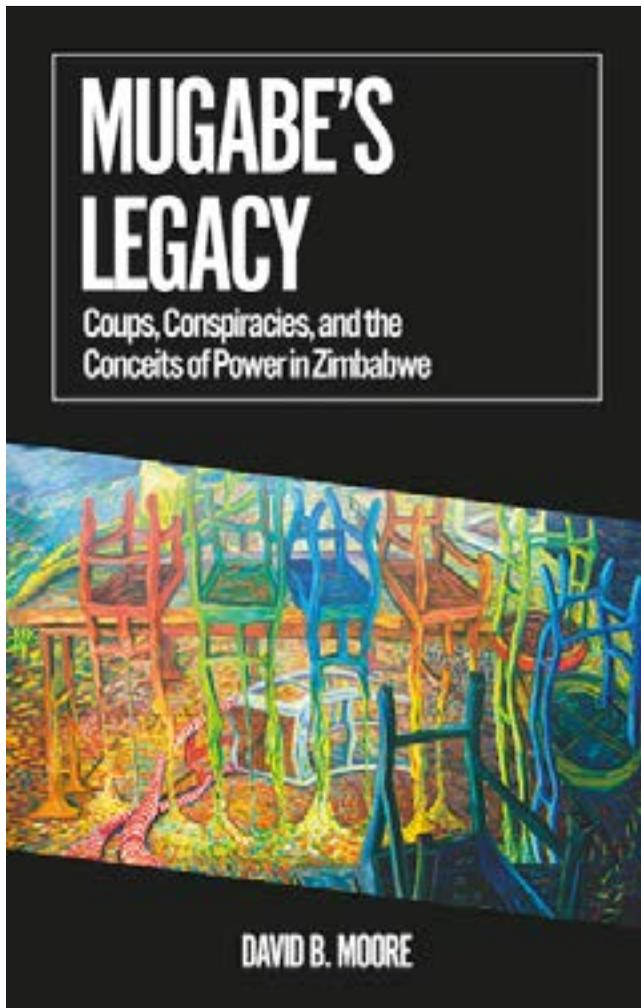


## Excerpt from Moore's *Mugabe's Legacy: Coups, Conspiracies, and the Conceits of Power in Zimbabwe*



epitaphs on SAFM's *Sunrise*. Surprisingly (to me), none of them mentioned in other than laudatory mode Mugabe's learning many of his trade's tricks during Zimbabwe's liberation war. I tried to remedy some of such lacunae at the end of the interviews on that September 6, 2019 morning, but when writing the book discovered writer Percy Zvomuya's historical delving reflected my interests. Zvomuya zeroed in on the mid-1970s moment *Mugabe's Legacy* takes as integral to Mugabe's political making: that being his ability to get rid of those he thought challenged him. Zvomuya's never-erring literary marksmanship hit on some remarkable writers' takes on history and politics, including Graham Greene, one of *African Arguments* brilliant managing editor Stephanie Kitchen's favourites. I brought Zvomuya and his interpretations to my story in these excerpts: I owe him the book's literary legacy.

Percy Zvomuya's exception proved the rule that few of the raconteurs on the death of this man of history reached below the magic 1980 cut-off date. Zvomuya recalled a story recounting that even Mugabe's mother warned his fellow nationalists back in the early 1960s. Mbuya Bona Mugabe wondered why they thought her son cared about 'your politics'. She told them that 'he doesn't care one bit about that. You don't know how cruel my son is. You don't know him at all.' Of course, the issue rests on more than what a mother knows. As Zvomuya cited Graham Greene (apparently one of Mugabe's preferred reads), 'a man isn't presented with two courses to follow: one good and one bad. He gets caught up.' That brings us back to what is special about the maelstrom that sweeps up a very intelligent son. It involves the biographies of many people, spread far and wide in space and time. Zvomuya also took the mid-1970s as a missed turning point. He cited Robert Bolaño's warning about waiting too long for the stages of history to

After an attempt at a theoretical and contextual introduction to *Mugabe's Legacy*, I dug into the main menu with something akin to the mainstay of Joost Fontein's nearly simultaneously published book on the politics of death in Zimbabwe: a death. I am sure Joost would agree that such a denouement hardly means 'the end'. My end-that-is-a-new-beginning entailed the somewhat magical way I discovered that Robert Mugabe had indeed reached the final point of his mortal coil, and my recounting of Stephen Groote's hastily rallied Zimbabwean *éminence activistes grises*'

unfold as if to counterpoise the ‘infantile and ultra-leftist’ line Samora Machel impressed on the young political soldiers daring to cross Mugabe. We were on the same track, although I am still unsure if they were childish and extreme or the best indication of how the National Democratic Revolution might have worked had it a measure of time and space. Much depends on definitions of ‘infantile’. If Frelimo’s brand of ‘democratic centralism’ foreshadowed their future, it was hardly for Machel to invoke Lenin’s swipes at those who sneered at parliamentary democracy when it was a viable option. Frelimo’s economic policies were far from Bukharin’s too. The *vashandi* feared ZANU (PF)’s road dead-ended at democracy.

Zvomuya’s *New Frame* interviews with decolonial theorist Sabelo Gatsheni-Ndlovu also invoked history’s makers and making, perhaps inadvertently contrasting these with more hifalutin endeavours. Zvomuya and Gatsheni-Ndlovu discussed why Mugabe and his peers-in-power embraced ‘violence as a mode of rule’: was it Nietzsche’s monster, that being the progeny of colonial brutality, or was it *hamartia*? Ndlovu-Gatsheni said it could have been a both an original condition and ‘sociogenesis – political socialisation’. Ndlovu-Gatsheni emphasised how the liberation struggle ‘schooling’ the aspirant rulers’ violent propensities, mentioning this at least seven times, as if it was uncontrollable. He invoked ‘tribalism’ too, although almost omitting the Ndebele and ZAPU from that sin. Then Zvomuya introduced the young *vashandi* (‘the people’ or more specifically ‘the workers’) radicals in the mid-1970s who Mugabe got rid of when tired of their critique. Ndlovu-Gatsheni dismissed the ginger group quickly: he

praised the radicals’ ability to suss out the falsity of the old guard’s Marxism-Leninism, but claimed they had fallen into the colonial trap of accepting the Westphalian idea of the nation-state. Ironically, however, the *vashandi* question relates directly to Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s claim that Abel Muzorewa and Ndabaningi Sithole [two who tried but failed to lead] ‘lost it’ because they were unwilling to ‘worship the barrel of the gun’. Sithole and Muzorewa’s losses were a direct result of the [young radicals] ZIPA (Zimbabwe People’s Army) ginger group’s dismay at the possibility of their leadership. This, to carry the

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irony to a second level, was a large component of Mugabe’s ladder to his coronation. Sithole – from 1964 until the ‘coup in [Rhodesia’s] prison’ retired him in 1974 the leader of the breakaway party that eventually ruled Zimbabwe – ‘lost it’ in the wake of ZANU national chair Herbert Chitepo’s assassination in Lusaka in March 1975. He abandoned ‘his’ soldiers to the Zambian army’s guns and disappeared to the USA, apparently to visit his sick daughter. On return, he scurried to Nyerere in Tanzania to claim his due, and then the Mozambican camps to curry the soldiers’ favour. He was too late.

Denied the freedom fighters’ support, in the late 1970s neither Sithole nor Muzorewa hesitated for a second when the Smith regime offered the vicious ‘auxiliaries’ to pave the path to one of the most short-lived governments ever [that being ‘Zimbabwe-Rhodesia’, lasting seven months in 1979].

Muzorewa’s story is sad. The liberal and nationalist forces of opposition to a plebiscite on a mild-mannered constitutional proposal pulled the (American) Methodist bishop out of his pulpit in 1972 to preside over their ‘no’ campaign. Edgar Tekere told me that the imprisoned nationalist leaders approved – indeed suggested – Muzorewa thinking it was an interim measure for an umbrella grouping. Yet Muzorewa hung on long after the Pearce Commission, treading water out of his depth until dumped. Well past his

sell-by date, his last letter to Margaret Thatcher pleaded for his family's sustenance. In mid-1981 his ephemeral prime ministership in the hybrid 'Zimbabwe-Rhodesia' long gone, he asked for \$25,500. His sons' university education needed cash. Kent State was about to expel one for non-payment of fees, the one in London was expensive. Five months on, he demanded \$30,000 for Durawall fencing, security guards and a chauffeur, because the Zimbabwean state no longer provided these. In March 1980 Peter Carrington had donated \$100,000 towards the residence. The negative reply – for which the poor prelate had to wait another month, if he got it at all – was for the Harare-based high commissioner to deliver orally: 'it would be a mistake in [Carrington's] view to commit any response to paper'. This should, Carrington relayed to Thatcher, put a stop to the perception that there is 'something of an open-ended commitment' in train. Whatever their ends, neither Sithole nor Muzorewa decried guns as means. Why did Ndlovu-Gatsheni say that their refusal to 'worship' them was why they failed?

Zvomuya's final conversation with Ndlovu-Gatsheni concluded with the Bible. If God planted the tree of knowledge in Eden, 'knowledge creates reality'. We were back to alternative truths [discussed in my introduction], seemingly out of thin air or holy breaths. It could be worthwhile to return to their pasts, to see which ones made history. That might take us beyond fleeting moments of idealist fantasy.

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Graham Greene's historicism beats Edenesque fantasies. One finds history's webs and works the best way possible within them, changes them, or exits. Who finds whom in those labyrinths, and how do they work for or against each other? For Mugabe and his Zimbabwe, we need to know more about the stage on which his workings were constructed during the early decades of nationalism and the liberation struggle – and the actors acting (not just thinking) on them. Contra Greene, history did not just catch them up. They were catching up. Some won the race. Others were ahead of it but beaten by it: that might be

the meaning of 'infantile ultra-leftism'.

Was Mugabe the only one in Zimbabwe who caught history, and made it fit his hands perfectly? Maybe for a moment: they soon went on their separate paths. The political historian's questions should be when and why.

Somewhere in proximity to this discussion, I inserted a vignette that seemed to illustrate how, as political history is caught or it escapes attempts to grasp it – is often imbued with variations on the notion of truth, i.e. representing reality as close as possible to what it might have been. When politicians are confronted with challenges to versions of history they would like to stand as their truth, it takes them awhile to shift strategies. Some are faster than others – sometimes too fast, as Donald Trump (might) indicate. Those who are not so quick-footed flounder in what Santiago Zabala might say are the large spaces in which "alternative facts" contest for the freedom to reveal themselves. And so a particular politician offered a new starting point for this book. Aside from attempting to analyse the many means by which Robert Mugabe gained power, and thus did so much to create a particular space of power for Zimbabwean politicians in his wake, *Mugabe's Legacy* also tries to account for the conceits that accrue with it. That includes believing their versions of truth will be consumed by their subjects without question.

After discussing ideas about 'development' ranging from Marx and Gramsci to magical realism, the book gets closer than these 'universal' abstractions to Mugabe and what he left us. Thus it arrives at an event that got the text moving from its initial focus on the November 2017 coup that ended Mugabe's nearly four decades of rule, to a longer view of how his power was finalised in such ignominy.

There may well be new means – universal enough, yet with closer grain and depth of field – enabling closer examination of the time and space of the above structured and processual phenomena as they wrapped around Robert Gabriel Mugabe's enigmatic 'agency' and its effects. The cure from excessive abstraction and context-and-thoughtless empiricism could be recent academic indications of a renewed Gramsci. Combine them with a theory of lying, and one has a less vague

idea of Mugabe and his moments. Percolations from a particular event – which also led me to extend this book beyond the coup to more about the man who was soon to die – inspired this way of thinking. Following a rendition of the meeting that generated at least three variations of lying, I will attempt to ‘interpret’ them given the current age of extended interregna and ‘alternative facts’ If interregna stretch beyond imagination then so can Clausewitz’s dictum that the difference between politics and war is only a matter of means. Likewise, that truth is the first casualty of war (be the expression’s originator Aeschylus or a Johnson) bears similar semantic elasticity.

This particular event, a mid-2019 Chatham House conversation with Zimbabwe’s foreign affairs and trade minister, involved at least three lies. The most important one has been transcribed and YouTubed for eternity. The other two circle around ‘public intellectuals’ within the state–civil–society–politics Gordian knot, which gets tighter the more it expands. Sibusiso Moyo (who [it is said, officially] died of Covid-19-related illnesses just as I was tweaking the last revisions on this book), famous while as a Major General he announced the ‘militarily assisted transition’, adept at defusing a demonstration threatening to move towards the State House, and later touted as a prospective president, was on the deck. He performed as well as one tutored by a World Bankish soul in the British embassy could (‘long-term gain after short-term pain’, etc., etc.).

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However, shaken by journalist Violet Gonda’s fiery questions, he faltered further when I asked him two more.

The first was about the roots and consequences of the economic crisis, arguably the source of the many crises in his country. The land invasions that started the new millennium, perhaps? Maybe earlier: the 1998 intervention to assist Laurent Kabila in the war against Rwandan sponsored ‘rebels’, wherein army officers (and Emmerson Mnangagwa, and he) got rich via what the United Nations called the ‘plundering’ of the DRC’s minerals? Second, I asked him if he was worried about the international reputation of a country where in January at least seventeen people died in a chaotic series of demonstrations, riots and killings sparked by a spike in the price of petrol. I wanted to know if a ‘briefing’ his office had apparently released after that, seemingly laying the blame at the feet of a group of democracy missionaries named ‘Canvas’, indicated his take on the root of Zimbabwe’s existential threats.

His answer(s) veered in and out of the scripts prescribed by the dictates of development discourse. He did not want to repeat what he had said a few months before at Chatham House regarding Zimbabwe’s economic woes, but did claim that ‘we learnt to unlearn the past, and as a result, we then managed to chart our way forward’. Chuckling, he remarked that ‘there are so many things, I’m sure, which have happened in your life, since you were born’. There were ‘many factors’ contributing to the crisis, ‘which came to be to the boiling point, particularly in 2008’. Fundamentally, though, ‘it was a country under sanctions’. Second, however, ‘some of the issues were, also, the manner in which we dealt with specific matters ... our own faults could have contributed’. After he said he wished he was rich, he uttered the following fascinating lines:

but all I can tell you is that all these issues, which have been taking place, are issues which were as a result of perceptions and other, which then developed into real truth or false truth, whatever the case may be. But all I can tell you is that it’s very straightforward and transparent.

I thought at the time that this was the answer to my second question. On reflection the minister might have still have been considering the DRC situation, which as far as he was concerned was all wrapped up because now 'we are very close' to Rwanda's president: the war was 'nothing personal, it was an organisational response ... to that particular issue'. Still, his final words seemed indicative of one of Mugabe's legacies—lying. Was this what 'Operation Restore Legacy' (the coup) was resuscitating? Of course, being economical with the truth is a component part of coups and conspiracies. The conceit is that your power means everybody had better believe you. Yet there are many indicators of doubt within such utterances: 'all I can tell you', twice; 'perceptions and other' unnamed contingent approaches to veracity; and after the separation (or lack of it) between real and false truths, the second 'all I can tell you' was a promise that 'it's very straightforward and transparent'. What was 'it'?

The minister's confusing words have bothered me for a long time. As well as explaining a lot about the twists and turns in Zimbabwe's political history, they also spoke to a universal concern. The scourge of 'alternative facts' as they spewed forth from the mouth and Twitter account of the past president of the United States has generated much thinking about how truths are constructed.. Before trying to deal with some conceptual takes on the generality of real and false truths, however, the other two alternative truths around this particular communication event may be worth recounting.

Starting at the beginning might present a more rounded picture. When I arrived at the Chatham House meeting, I passed a small group, presumably of exiled Zimbabweans, demonstrating against the minister and the regime he represented. Violet Gonda was inside. The seat beside her was free. I took it. She was exuberant at scoring an interview with the minister, albeit on the side of the Chatham House meeting or another with members of the Zimbabwean diaspora at Zimbabwe House on the Strand that evening. Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Lt. General

(Retired) Dr Sibusiso Moyo's diary was quite full, but we guessed that since his primary reason for being in London was to attend a media freedom conference, he would deign to keep his promise to converse with a journalist seen to be solidly in the opposition's camp.

Ms Gonda's bold questioning gave me courage to stumble along with my queries. But as the meeting closed, she received a message cancelling her chances for further interrogation: no interview for her. Her manner was too confrontational. 'Crestfallen' barely manages to indicate her sentiments on that news. We left together, made some inquiries of the demonstrators, and I went to another meeting. While I was occupied in Regent's Park a protester sprayed water on the minister as he approached his car. Ndabaningi 'Nick' Mangwana, the regime's permanent secretary for information (perhaps ironically, a United Kingdom citizen),<sup>96</sup> tweeted a condemnation of such wanton violence; Gonda heard that she was blamed for an organisational role in the demo. Tweets in her support revelled in the irony of her curtailed interview just after the minister's participation in the media freedom conference.

The day went on. Minister Moyo's meeting with the diaspora was next. The guest list was poorly organised, so I found it was easy to get in without an invitation. There was Violet Gonda, the intrepid journalist, in animated conversation with a couple of women showing off the latest wedding pictures of cabinet minister Dr Sekai Nzenza (who once worked for World Vision in Australia). After Minister Moyo announced the imminent one-stop investment window, another question period came up—mostly about business opportunities, for the good of the nation of course. When Minister Moyo belittled a journalist's scare-mongering questions that morning, Ms Gonda fired back with the issue of her cancelled interview. Soon her erstwhile friends, and many others, were booing, hissing and telling her to sit down. The moderator from Chatham House suggested she get to her question. S. B. Moyo looked perplexed. When the hubbub abated, he said he had never instructed Mangwana to call off the interview: had it taken

place, he and Ms Gonda would have been friends. Another false truth exposed.

What did they all mean? The message from a public-relations hack who thought he could protect a powerful minister (who, as with any one-time military leader, is never fully retired from the organisational means of force, but liked to talk to journalists) from a journalist's ostensible bad manners. Thus resulted social media wars, sullyng the Zimbabwean 'second republic's' claims to media freedom, and a confused minister in front of a crowd. The fickle crowd turned on a dime against the outspoken journalist. Real truths; false truths; a legacy of lies: *and* a promise to make it all 'straightforward and transparent', possibly among 'friends'. A crowd that guaranteed the

conceits of power. Was this day a microcosm of Zimbabwean politics *in toto*? To consider that this was simply the contemporary condition of world politics and its culture in miniature (there were assuredly more tears and wars in the Trump camp) might be taking things too far. So too would John le Carré's contention that a swindling father could well relieve a son or daughter (in this case him) 'of any real concept of the truth. Truth was what you got away with.' It is not enough to repeat the story about Mugabe's father abandoning him to understand the tangling of truth and power in his case. Who knows S. B. Moyo's psychohistory?

In any case, it was clear by that day's end that I would have to interrogate more than the coup. Its context and consequences would extend far before and after it. Mugabe's certain death also meant that more emphasis needed laying on the legacy already outgrowing him. The theories at hand seemed too big for that task. A few months on – during the purgatory phase of re-writing – new waves in those waters began to crest. They might help to unpack the uncertainties and untruths displayed at the London houses of Chatham and Zimbabwe – and the November 2017 events wrapped up in them.

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