

# Evan Mawarire's #ThisFlag as Tactical Lyric: The Role of Digital Speech in Imagining a Networked Zimbabwean Nation

Susanna L. Sacks

**Abstract:** Evan Mawarire's poetic video "This Flag," first posted on Facebook on April 20, 2016, mobilized an international protest movement against then-president of Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe between April and September of 2016. In the video, Mawarire built on the poetics of anti-colonial resistance and nationalization to create a rallying cry. The piece's remediation through the hashtag channel #ThisFlag created rhetorical links between digital organizing and grounded action. This literary perspective on contemporary discussions of social media and collective identity formation shows how the poetic elements of the video enabled Mawarire's claim to spread and motivate a grounded movement.

**Résumé:** La vidéo poétique d'Evan Mawarire, #ThisFlag, a été postée pour la première fois sur Facebook le 20 avril 2016, mobilisant un mouvement de protestation internationale entre avril et septembre 2016 contre le président du Zimbabwe de l'époque, Robert Mugabe. S'appuyant sur la poétique de la résistance anticoloniale et sur la nationalisation, ce mouvement a créé un cri de ralliement. Cette réparation par le biais du canal hashtag #ThisFlag a créé des liens rhétoriques entre les organisations numériques et l'action ancrée (grounded action). Cette stratégie apporte une perspective littéraire aux discussions contemporaines sur les médias sociaux et crée par la même la formation d'une identité collective. Cet article soutient que les éléments poétiques de la vidéo ont permis au message de Mawarire de se propager et de motiver un mouvement ancré (grounded movement).

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**Resumo:** “This Flag”, o vídeo poético de Evan Mawarire, foi publicado pela primeira vez no Facebook a 20 de abril de 2016, tendo gerado um movimento de protesto internacional contra o então presidente do Zimbabué, Robert Mugabe, entre abril e setembro de 2016. Apoiado sobre a poética do nacionalismo e da resistência anticoloniais, este movimento criou uma palavra de ordem motivadora. O movimento propagou-se através do *hashtag* #ThisFlag, o que deu origem a ligações retóricas entre a organização virtual e a ação no terreno. Ao associar uma perspectiva literária ao debate contemporâneo acerca das redes sociais e da formação da identidade coletiva, o presente artigo defende que os elementos poéticos do vídeo permitiram que Mawarire alcançasse o seu objetivo de propagação e motivação de um movimento de ação local.

**Keywords:** digital poetry; performance poetry; digital protests; social media; youth politics; Zimbabwean politics; network aesthetics; collective identity

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On April 20, 2016, Zimbabwean Pastor Evan Mawarire posted a video on Facebook titled “A Lament for Zimbabwe.” In the video, Mawarire reimagined the symbolism of the Zimbabwean national flag, which he wore around his shoulders, in order to criticize the state of the country under then-president Robert Mugabe and to call for citizen action against Mugabe. Later that same day, the piece was re-published to YouTube, where users debated its value and offered their own interpretations. According to Simbarashe Gukurume, “Within just a week it had approximately a 100,000 views and shares” (2017:49).<sup>1</sup> Social media users added their experiences to Mawarire’s, posting response videos and tweets linked through the hashtag channel #ThisFlag. Those responses soon dominated the conversation above Mawarire’s original post: within a year, over seven hundred videos tagged #ThisFlag had been published on YouTube. The hashtag offered a rhetoric of affiliation, connecting previous protesters against corruption, inflation, and fuel prices (News24). Their direct action, culminating in a series of protests and a national boycott in July 2016, brought the rhetoric of Mawarire’s original video to the ground, while the social media strategies of the protestors carried it far beyond the borders of the nation.

The piece’s spread, popularization, and transformation within a protest movement demonstrate the power of poetic rhetoric to frame national discourse and motivate collective action. For twenty years, Robert Mugabe’s ideological campaigns, in addition to his regime’s practices of censorship and political violence (Nyabuga 2002), had made the ruling Zimbabwean African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) “central to the birth of the nation,” as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Wendy Willems write (2009:950).<sup>2</sup> His regime thus created what Blessing-Miles Tendi has called a “patriotic history” which positioned any resistance to ZANU-PF as anti-independence (2010). These connections were cemented in musical galas and songs that “mediated a narrow national imaginary that served to legitimize continued reign of the ruling party” (Willems 2015:357). Broadcast over

radio and television, songs in support of Mugabe created a ubiquitous language and rhythm of support for the president and his party. Social media, in contrast, could allow citizens to voice their concerns. Mawarire's video offered an alternative vision of the nation, one which Zimbabweans picked up and responded to in their own pieces before rallying together in multi-national protests.

Social media publication supported and enhanced Mawarire's use of poetic language in movement-building. #ThisFlag's rapid digital uptake, and its dramatic implementation in the strikes and protests of June and July, have led scholars such as Simbarashe Gukurume (2017) to suggest that social media's connective and democratizing power uniquely facilitated the protest's growth. However, as Bruce Mustvairo and Lys-Anne Sirks illustrate in their analysis of Zimbabwean activism on Facebook, "watching alone isn't enough" (2015:331); digital discussions do not necessarily lead to grounded action. Where Baba Jukwa, the dissident Facebook page that Mustvairo and Sirks analyze, offered knowledge but little incitement, Mawarire's videos incited action while providing little new information. How did this happen?

The original "This Flag" speech capitalized upon the particular affordances of social media to encourage new routes to social action. The poetics of Mawarire's speech—his use of rhythm and repetition and his tendency toward allusion and indirect speech—identify it as a tactical poem which uniquely motivated listeners through its use of repetition and allusion. This article therefore combines formal and rhetorical analysis of the original video with thematic analysis of the first one hundred videos posted to YouTube following his original post. This analysis of Mawarire's speech demonstrates that his use of rhythm, lyrical language, repetition, and allusion—characteristics typical of poetic language—facilitated the uptake of his message online, a claim supported through rhetorical analysis of respondent YouTube videos. For the purposes of this study, the videos were coded according to theme (original Mawarire video, personal response video, news coverage, or other) sentiment (supportive or detracting), and engagement rate (in view counts, comment counts, and comment-view ratio). Based on an analysis of these videos, I argue that "This Flag" constitutes what Thomas McGrath has called a "tactical poem" (1987:n.p.), producing a lyrical rhetoric of affiliation which could circulate rapidly online.

The article opens by situating the #ThisFlag movement in the context of scholarly work on political music and literature in Zimbabwe. From there, I analyze the text and performance of the original "This Flag" video to demonstrate the importance of complex imagery and allusion to the piece's call to action. Finally, I examine how the particular affordances of social media shaped the trajectory of the movement, arguing for a reading of the hashtag itself as a form of networked poetics which draws together multiple voices to develop an alternative imaginary of political participation in Zimbabwe. This article thus highlights the relationship between the form of poetry—its short lines, tendency towards repetition, and reliance

on allusion—and the affordances of social media in the development of contemporary political movements.

### Toward a Poetry of Resistance

For Mawarire, performance poetry represented an especially apt response to Mugabe's regime, which had co-opted anti-colonial lyrics for its own uses (Willems 2015; Ravengai 2015; Bere 2008). During independence struggles in Zimbabwe, music and song were used to articulate the demands of the fighters and affectively draw together a community invested in the language of the nation. This use of song built an imagined community of sound, much as Mawarire would do with poetry. As John Kaemmer lays out in his classic studies of *chimurenga* music, "Songs [...] served to instill in the guerillas a clear idea of the goals of the struggle and the requirements of being a disciplined fighter. In this situation music was thus an important means of mobilizing the energies of the guerilla fighters" (1989:8). The songs also served as propaganda to mobilize civilians. Stephen Chifunye, in his analysis of the *pungwe* described by Kaemmer, writes: "This dynamic use of the diverse and popular forms of indigenous performing arts, for instance traditional dance, ritual dances, poetic recitation, chants, slogans, songs and story-telling, enabled the combatants to mobilise the peasants to articulate their opposition to the settler white minority regime" (1994:54). Blending traditional musical rhythms and instruments with contemporary melodies and lyrics, *chimurenga* music offered a neo-traditional view of Zimbabwe that promised to link its peoples together. The lyrics themselves helped define an emergent Zimbabwean national identity against the remnants of Rhodesian rule.

For Kaemmer and Chifunye, the music was itself tactical, both encouraging the combatants themselves and advertising their message to the communities that rallied behind them, propagating the cause of independence. Following Kaemmer, scholars have tended to focus on music over lyric in their analysis of political art in Zimbabwe. Yet, as Kaemmer's own analysis shows, the music was adaptable to a range of messages. Kaemmer found, for instance, that a range of groups adapted familiar forms of *chimurenga* music, changing the lyrics to suit their cause; he describes a "concert reportedly sponsored by Lever Brothers for the purpose of raising money for the handicapped," through which *chimurenga* bands were "bringing national music to the rural areas" (1989:40). By adapting their lyrics to suit local causes, these musicians helped develop a national musical idiom that united people behind the national party that *chimurenga* music was primarily deployed to support. In many ways, this adaptability was linked to music's ambiguity, which, as Kaemmer writes, "makes it a powerful symbol, especially in situations of conflict, since it can be interpreted in different ways by different people" (1989:42). The ambiguity Kaemmer ascribes to music is connected to the lyrics' emphasis on allusion, and to the importance of rhythm and intonation in developing support for a common cause.

Lyrical language is tied up with poetry, which is characterized by sonic elements such as rhythm, repetition, assonance, and rhyme. As Flora Veit-Wild acknowledges, “The revolutionary war lyrics, mentioned by Kaarsholm, were those of the chimurenga songs, sung at ‘pungwes’, the meetings of the guerillas with the rural population; these were collective slogans, rhymes, verses, part of the immediate day-to-day politicization of the masses in the areas of combat” (1992:264). Although Veit-Wild goes on to contend that these lyrics, rhymes, and verses should not be considered within “written literature,” their lyrics nonetheless constituted a verbal, poetic art that supported the cause of independence. As Liz Gunner has argued, “Print culture, that of the written word, must concede equality with the multiple other ways of ‘writing the nation’, namely performance based forms which have long co-existed with but not been accorded the same status as print” (1994:1–2). In the twenty-first century, as Katja Kellerer’s recent analysis of *toyitoyi* songs shows, lyrical adaptations allow musicians to mobilize the symbolic power of musical form to a range of ends, from religious to resistant (2017).

Analyzing lyrical content alongside musical performance highlights the role of rhetorical mediation in creating national and transnational movements. Following independence, for instance, the national government mobilized chimurenga music and urban grooves in a series of national galas. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems suggest that the music and imagery of the galas conflated “the state, nation, ruling party and the person of Robert Mugabe into one symbol of national sovereignty that needed to be jealously guarded” (2009:953). Further, in her analysis of performances at national galas, Willems argues that musicians used the galas to promote their own careers but, in so doing, found their messages constrained by the expectations of the government. In these “risky dialogues,” Willems finds evidence for “constant negotiations between musicians and the state” (2015:370) which required that dissident artists balance political critique with material expedience and personal safety. Chifunyise has shown that these galas framed contemporary events in the state’s favor by producing “drama that appeals to a wide cross-section of the Zimbabwean society as well as one that is easily adaptable to the theatre-in-the-round formation dictated by the structure of the Harare International Conference Centre where the gala is presented annually” (1994:54). Thus, the galas have formed part of a broader apparatus of state control—not merely censoring unfavorable works but actively producing, promoting, and disseminating favorable ones. The power of these gala performances therefore suggests the need to consider lyrical production alongside music in contemporary Zimbabwean politics.

Lyrical language, as Willems, Chifunyise, and Kellerer together make clear, offers a language of affiliation through which a movement can propagate its cause and individuals can mark investment in that cause. Similarly, the chant offers a sense of connection between protesters separated by geography and even underlying motives. But in Zimbabwe, where

broadcast media remains largely under state control, social media incurs other costs; direct rhetoric proved insufficient in the cases of Baba Jukwa, and risky for activists such as Itai Dzamara, who was abducted after calling on Mugabe to step down (Muchena 2018). Mawarire's use of lyrical expression, which is especially suited to digital publication and consumption, enabled his rhetoric to spread virally through the hashtag channel #ThisFlag. Digital poetry thus changed public discourse nationally, producing communities organized around a shared investment in the language of poetry. The hashtag—primarily a means of linking online conversations—functions in these contexts as political lyric, calling into being a community that spans digital and grounded spaces of activism.<sup>3</sup> Through its emphasis on repetition and its allusions to digitally popular poetry forms such as spoken word, “This Flag” appealed to a digital audience familiar with its generic conventions and ready to commit their own voice to its message.

### #ThisFlag as Tactical Poetry

In many ways, the structure of “This Flag” echoes a common trend in contemporary social movements; it was organized and promoted online, where social media furnished a gathering place for concerned citizens, and realized on the ground, where collective action put pressure on the government.<sup>4</sup> Social media was especially important in Zimbabwe under Mugabe. As Samuel Ravengai has demonstrated (2015), theatre outlets were directly censored by the National Arts Council. Similarly, Everette Ndlovu notes that broadcast media in Zimbabwe was largely state-controlled until the late 2010s, and the state continues to monitor independent media outlets (2015). In this milieu, social media offered a difficult-to-censor outlet for digitally savvy urban youth like Mawarire—especially since, according to a 2015 report by the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ 2015), WhatsApp makes up 34 percent of all broadband data use in Zimbabwe, and Facebook another 3 percent, making them the two most-used sites by far.

Mawarire's video, and the hashtag that grew out of it, worked across the dual-fronted nature of social media organizing that Emiliano Treré (2015) has described as “frontstage and backstage activism.” As Treré suggests, social media platforms promise controlled publication but risk endless sharing. The methods of address, especially for dissident movements, must therefore shift to account for the joint threat of exposure and the promise of an audience. “This Flag” offered “backstage” affiliations through allusions, which require a shared baseline cultural knowledge. At the same time, the hashtag channel #ThisFlag allowed the participants to mark a broad range of experiences within a single rhetorical frame, producing a “frontstage” advertisement. Mawarire's video thus provided a rhetoric of affiliation for Zimbabwe's disaffected youth, a channel of participation, and concrete tools for action.

In this section, I conduct a rhetorical and formal analysis of “This Flag” to demonstrate that the speech promoted collective action through its use of poetic and performative norms to encourage audience interactions and feedback. Somewhat unusually for political videos, “This Flag” is a carefully structured speech that rewrites the symbolism of the Zimbabwean flag. It relies on a repeated refrain, “this flag,” which punctuates Mawarire’s speech, recentering his claims after each moment of heightened emotion, and creating a collective lyricism of protest. The refrain is simple, multilayered, allusive, and deeply hopeful, allowing the audience to find themselves in his narrative. Throughout the video, orchestral music plays below Mawarire’s voice, providing a rhythm against which he speaks, his own lyrics punctuated by musical accents. Because of these characteristics of the speech—its symbolism, repetition, and rhythm—“This Flag” can be read as a tactical poem, one which provides a rhetoric of affiliation for those who would respond. Specifically, the piece functions as what Thomas McGrath (1987) calls “tactical poetry,” which is “not there to expand consciousness, but to direct it, point it, give it focus”—in other words, to focus energy and mobilize action, which Mawarire’s video famously did.

The video itself provides an intimate view of Mawarire’s person. As it opens, he leans toward his computer screen, his hand drawing back—presumably having just hit “record”—and heaves a sigh. The amateur video, featuring a lone speaker leaning in close to his computer, makes him sympathetic; he is an everyman speaking to everyman, who are in turn empowered to respond. Mawarire resists dominant narratives through the poem’s first half, breaking through what another poet has called “our culture of silence” (Centre for Creative Arts 2015) on political concerns and frustrations. Structured in two parts, Mawarire’s speech first tears down the narrative promoted by Mugabe’s regime and then offers an alternative vision for the country’s future. The story he tells—which opens “They tell me that the green / The green is for the vegetation and for the crops / I don’t see any crops in my country”—performs a shift from the alienated nation, with a radically distinct “They” in charge and “I” observing, to an “I” engaged and, potentially, a “we” in charge of the country’s future. These pronominal shifts mark Mawarire’s investments in the future of the nation as an essentially populist one.

The poem’s first half breaks apart the idealistic, official symbols of the flag, which project a rosy picture of Zimbabwe at odds with many of its citizens’ experiences. Pointing to the strip of red dividing the flag, Mawarire complains:

The red, they say that that is the blood. It’s the blood that was shed to secure freedom for me, and I’m so thankful for that. I just don’t know, if they were here, they that shed their blood and saw the way this country is, that they would demand their blood be brought back. This flag.

Even as he accepts certain elements of the national symbols—the importance of the flag, the meaning of its colors, the value of memorializing

martyrs—Mawarire rejects the official reading of those symbols. His rhetoric focuses on the future he imagines for the country, rather than the present he rejects. The shift in pronominal power reflects the new balance, as “they” who tell at the outset become “they” who have passed, subtly transferring authority from the false prophets of the regime to the true martyrs of the nation and, thence, to the speaker who imagines and ventriloquizes their responses, and from him to the protestors who would take up his call.<sup>5</sup>

Having vacated the nation’s symbols of their official meaning in the piece’s first half, Mawarire substitutes his own. His phrasing in the second half reclaims authentic patriotism by reframing what the country could be. Intriguingly, the second half of the piece is rarely reposted or reported on, as news sites prioritize the spectacle of protest, but it is this second half that offers hope and motivation. It begins by repositioning the speaker relative to the inauthentic, authoritarian “They”:

And so I must look at it again with courage, and try to remind myself that this is my country. I look at the green and think to myself that it is not just vegetation, but the green represents the power of being able to push through soil, push past limitations and flourish and grow. This is me, my flag.

Accepting the color’s official meaning while rejecting its implications, Mawarire reimagines Zimbabwe’s future in order to reconfigure the interpretations of its present. The language evokes the country’s post-2000 struggles with floods, droughts, and political disaster leading to famine and rising prices, but Mawarire identifies pride in its present as a site of resistance. Each of his symbolic reclamations moves the focus away from Zimbabwe’s past and depleted resources to its people: tenacious, carrying “the value of this land” and “the will to survive,” “which we emerge from and shine.” His piece thus imagines the intrinsic value of the Zimbabwean nation-state as tied to the people of the nation, rather than the land of the country. He thus opens up the power to “flourish and grow” to a broader Zimbabwean nation which exists beyond the boundaries of the state. While the original “they” still hold authority, “we” are Zimbabwe’s true resource—and, reminded of that, “we” secure a power to resist.

As it closes, the speech enacts its own central proposition, forming a collective “we” from an alienated “I” and “they.” This pronominal shift marks an alternative image of the nation’s past, present, and future. Mawarire closes the piece by calling explicitly for mass action:

This flag. It is my country, my Zimbabwe, we go through so much, we—we don’t look like much, even now, but there is promise in it. I will fight for it, I will live for it, and I will stand for it. This is the time that a change must happen. Quit standing on the sidelines and watching this flag fly and wishing for a future that you are not at all wanting to get involved in. This flag, every day that it flies, is begging for you to get involved, is



begging for you to say something, for you to cry out and say why must we be in the situation that we are in. This flag. It's your flag. It's my flag. This flag.

As a refrain, "this flag" quickly became a rallying cry. The closing makes Mawarire's experiences parallel to those of his viewers by reframing "this flag" as "my," "your," and thus implicitly "our" flag—not an abstraction of the state, but rather a possession to be claimed and managed by its people.

Mawarire's piece provided a model for others' engagement; in its amateurishness, it makes engagement accessible and understandable. Shortly after Mawarire published the video, the hashtag #ThisFlag began to circulate on Twitter, and users responded to his videos with their own, published on YouTube and Twitter. As a tactical poem, "This Flag" was a response to the political urgency of its moment, spurring further protest and discussion among the communities engaged by its intergeneric form; as a digitally mediated poem, it reached beyond the local community to address a diasporic audience, who took up its message in protests in Cape Town, London, Melbourne, and Washington, D.C. The rhythmic chant, in person, unites dissenting people with disparate concerns into a cohesive group, evoking a regional consciousness which spreads beyond the immediately local. Circulated digitally, the linking logic of chants is transformed into a hashtag, which rhetorically and literally links together a set of videos, Tweets, and broader interactions. As a poetic speech, "This Flag" builds on traditions of politically active performance arts in Zimbabwe; as a social media link, #ThisFlag builds on contemporary organizing trends; and as both at once, the piece created a unique rhetoric of affiliation through which a collective poetry of resistance could develop.

### **Does Social Media Drive Action?**

Using social media to address a diasporic, supranational Zimbabwean audience, Mawarire effected a performative national community which exceeded the geographic bounds of the nation. Though he acknowledges its limitations in reaching the country's predominantly rural population, Mawarire has repeatedly asserted that social media is both a natural and the dominant form of communication for young Zimbabweans. In an interview with SABC's online news program *Network*, Mawarire said that he started the movement on social media because, "for my generation, it's a very natural way of connecting and of communicating." From its name to its rhetoric, demands, and actions, #ThisFlag was a digitally mediated movement: its grounded action was organized over WhatsApp, its message spread through Facebook and Twitter, its rhetoric consolidated on YouTube, and its protests levied via international appeals. The diverse affordances of social media publication interacted synergistically with the poetic forms of Mawarire's speech to facilitate collective action on the ground.

In many ways, social media itself—its ungovernability, its supranational address, and its attachment to youth cultures—heightened the inherent threat of the #ThisFlag movement. The organizing channels #ZimShutDown2016, #Tajamuka (“We have rebelled”), and #ThisFlag, which spoke respectively to the protest’s action, its goal, and its symbol, trended on Twitter in June and July 2016. They were therefore promoted on the platform’s front page, making them more visible to more people. As Axel Bruns has argued with Jean Burgess (2016) and Theresa Sauter (2016), Twitter’s relative anonymity and decentralization make hashtag channels difficult to monitor, and thus pose a threat to governmental control. Simply being in the same Twitter network as protestors can bring protests to the attention of people otherwise disconnected from them—people who are not on digital networks, nor in urban areas, and who do not have family or friends in those positions. The hashtag channel simultaneously offers a rallying point, a way to mark a conversational topic, and a seemingly neutral space where anyone could participate in the conversation. Moreover, social media facilitates discussions both at the peripheries of state censorship and beyond the geographic boundaries of the country. The national hashtag publics incorporated through #ThisFlag extended beyond the local ones that could be managed by Mugabe’s regime through ideological claims and promoted through censor-wary broadcast media outlets.

In addition to its apparent ungovernability, social media primarily engages urban, university-educated youth, a population that Levi Obijiofor argues “are classified as elite because they hail from elite backgrounds and also because university education is seen as a gateway to securing high-profile jobs and higher social status in society” (2012:208). Education and the university-educated symbolize the nation’s promise; their disappointment is an indictment of that national promise. The anxiety of youth unemployment and dissatisfaction which Rekopantswe Mate identifies in her analysis of “youth lyrics” (2012) has been diverted into an anxiety about the power of social media as an organizing force. Mate writes, “In most of sub-Saharan Africa, there is a fairly common fear that disenfranchised youth might constitute a ‘natural opposition’ to incumbent governments” (2012:109). Faced with seemingly-inevitable unemployment in the decade since Zimbabwe’s post-2000 crises, Mate points out, many youths turned to the performing arts as a way to make a living without governmental oversight or interference. Those youths turned to YouTube and other social media sites to promote and spread their music, their poetry, and their comedy, building an international audience and promoting messages banned by the government (2012:112). YouTube’s international audience, its mass user base, and its focus on many-to-many communication thus offered an emergent platform for anti-governmental protests.

As the #ThisFlag movement gained momentum in June and July, Mawarire called for a two-day national strike. During this time, while Twitter and YouTube operated as what Treré has identified as “frontstage”

advertising platforms, WhatsApp functioned as a “backstage” organizing platform. Through WhatsApp, Lauren Young reports, the group “Tajamuka” organized a national strike on July 6 (Young 2016; Bloggo 2016).<sup>6</sup> Social media’s use as an organizing tool heightened the movement’s perceived threat; the government was alleged to have shut down access to many social media sites, including WhatsApp, in the hours leading up to the July 6 “shut down” (Human Rights Watch 2017). Where YouTube exposes individual protesters to surveillance, WhatsApp—which is end-to-end encrypted and operates purely peer-to-peer—allowed discontent to spread across the country undetected.

Together with the video’s poetic rhetoric, the user-generated format of social media provided the possibility, promise, and poetry of a reimagined Zimbabwean nationhood—a nation connected by the hashtag, even if always under threat of government oversight. As Mizuko Ito has argued in her analysis of contemporary, “networked publics,” digital publication connects not the mass mediated publics of the twentieth century, but instead “multiple, overlapping and global networks” (2008:5). Networked publics are linked, then, not by the mass address of broadcast media but by the dispersed address of the hashtag, a shift from the address of broadcast media forms. The “affective sharing” (Helmend, quoted in Lovink 2011:15) of social media may also become a figure for regional protest movements, which rely and build on the communal logic of national investment while imagining broader affective networks.

After the national strike, Mawarire was arrested and jailed on charges of inciting violence. The courts dismissed the case on July 12, after the charges had been elevated to “attempting to overthrow the government” (Dzirutwe 2016). Threats against and arrests of politically-dissenting artists have been common in Zimbabwe under Mugabe (Joseph 2014; Ravengai 2015; Zenenga 2008); Michael Bratton found that over 51 percent of Zimbabweans reported experiencing political intimidation or harassment between 1980 and 2008 (2011). However, Mawarire’s international fame and popularity seemed to have helped in his release, as his supporters held rallies outside the courthouse (Gukurume 2017). Following his release, Mawarire left Zimbabwe for South Africa, where he remained for several months after Mugabe denounced him further on July 20. While in South Africa—which is currently home to somewhere between one hundred thousand and two million Zimbabweans (Human Rights Watch)—Mawarire gave speeches at many of the major universities, rallying support and assuring students that the movement was continuing.<sup>7</sup> As he carried the flag on his back, his movement across nations echoed “This Flag’s” movement through social media channels, enacting the digital cosmopolitanism of his political claims.

Mawarire’s talks abroad were well-attended by South African and Zimbabwean students, and were posted on YouTube, allowing his celebrity to grow further. The movement’s use of social media, together with the poetry of its platform, directly enabled the participation of Zimbabweans in

South Africa, Great Britain, the United States, and Australia—many of whom organized satellite protests on “national stay-away day.” Digital formats incorporate Zimbabweans living in the diaspora, Zimbabweans who have already been alienated by and in turn have rejected Mugabe. As Shepherd Mpofu has argued, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, “new media play an important role by acting as ‘connective tissue’ among diasporians, with some online activities culminating in social or political activities and opening up restricted democratic space, while resisting state propaganda” (2013:116). For diasporic communities, as well as for what Mpofu calls “suppressed communities” such as Zimbabwe, social media provides spaces of resistance which distance and repression make unavailable or impractical on the ground.

Social media platforms, a form of what Henry Jenkins (2006) considers “participatory media,” rely on the participation and engagement of many voices. And, of course, the participation of media consumers in the production of media content alters the way that meaning is constructed. For a work to gain traction online, then, it must encourage interaction; as Lynn C. Lewis writes in her analysis of “the participatory meme chronotope,” “Recognizing catchphrases and intertextual mixing and remixing of image/text is essential for entry to the meme zone” (2012:119). Poetry is unusually well-suited to digital publication, and especially to mobile consumption; its short lines make it legible on phone screens, and its tendency toward repetition makes it repeatable. As Nathan Suhr-Sytsma has written of print poetry’s recirculation, “poetry’s typical concision meant that it could be composed more quickly than long-form fiction and reprinted more widely, whether in little magazines, weekly papers, or mass-print anthologies” (2018:10)—or, comparably, on Twitter, YouTube, or the nightly news. It is thus evident that “This Flag” operated as a poetic refrain in conjunction with the new symbolism of Mawarire’s speech to elicit direct participation, and that the hashtag channel #ThisFlag offered concrete means of doing so. In addition, the use of YouTube publication by supporters of the #ThisFlag movement offers evidence that their responses constitute a collective, digital poetics which reflect the synthesis of poetic expression with digital participation.

### **YouTube Responses to #ThisFlag: Creating Collective Poetics**

Many participants in the #ThisFlag movement mobilized social media platforms not only as organizing tools but also as rhetorical weapons against Mugabe. During the #ThisFlag protests, YouTube emerged as an especially meaningful platform of protest. YouTube video privileges the individual, whose hashtagged concerns identify her as one node in a potentially infinite movement. For the purpose of this analysis, I surveyed one hundred videos posted to YouTube with the tag #ThisFlag between May 2016 and April 2017. The videos selected were the first one hundred returned by the search “#ThisFlag,” completed using a dummy account, in order to assess

the videos that the platform most closely associated with the search. The videos reviewed fell into five primary categories: personal direct-to-camera remarks by protesters; formal interviews with Mawarire and other political figures; news features about the protest; formal public speeches by Mawarire; and informal documentation efforts, such as amateur videos of protests and community discussions.

The most common video type—representing forty-five of the one hundred videos—was the category of personal remarks, many of which offered testimony condemning the brutality of the regime. These posts take advantage of social media’s multimodal and connective capacities to imagine conversations across platforms. Social media personality Zuva Amanda Habane’s video “Feeling emotional. Being tear gassed in my own country. #ThisFlagZw” is typical of responses to Mawarire’s video. The video’s title, which is personal, descriptive, and connective, reflects Habane’s understanding of the power of social media and digital technology, which link individuals and drive the country forward. #ThisFlagZw, Habane’s idiosyncratic tag, puts the video in conversation with the This Flag protests and becomes a direct hyperlink to sympathizers in the comments.

Like Mawarire’s video, Habane’s video also features a lone speaker, framed in extreme close-up, speaking directly into a camera which she appears to hold herself. Her clothes, a t-shirt and jeans, are nice but unremarkable; her environment, the porch of a house, is mundane. The speaker uses few gestures, except for emphasis, and directs her attention to a listening and attentive “you.” Alongside its title, the video’s form imagines the content-producer as an everyman, with access to the same limited technologies and platforms as her viewers. Somewhat unusually for #ThisFlag videos, Habane’s video calls out Mugabe directly—not for his failed policies but for his age. She looks into the camera and demands, “How do you run a nation with outdated—outdated minds. [...] How do you run a nation when you are an old bag, an outdated version, and you actually refuse to update yourself. The world is going this way—the world is becoming digital. This is a new era. You need fresh minds that can work better, that can see better.”<sup>8</sup> The statement suggests that Mugabe’s blindness to social media and digital technologies mark his outdatedness—that the country cannot operate properly in the modern, digital landscape with such old, outdated leaders. Social media and the language of the movement both appealed to an important sector in Zimbabwean resistance politics: urban youth groups, frustrated with the country’s “predominantly gerontocratic” mainstream politics, and looking for “their own counter-publics, where they can openly articulate their socio-economic and political grievances, as well as counter the hegemonic political publics” (Gukurume 2017:58). As a gathering place for those looking to resist Mugabe’s rule, social media became a symbol for an imagined, youth-oriented, democratic nation.

Between May 2016 and June 2017, over seven hundred videos were posted to YouTube under the #ThisFlag tag. YouTube provided a venue for Mawarire’s language to frame others’ experiences, and for each of his

listeners and interlocutors to claim her experiences as narratable public events. Many, like Habane, shared their own experiences, either with direct government oppression or more general suffering under the fuel and cash shortage. Where international news reports—which represented twenty-four of the videos surveyed—tended to marvel at the events in Zimbabwe, Zimbabweans used YouTube's comment function to insult ignorant newscasters, clarify points they agreed with, and provide verbal applause. The circulation of #ThisFlag globally, both online and on the ground, reflected the movement's diasporic audience and offered a rhetoric for them to link their concerns. In an interview between #ThisFlag supporter Baynham Goredema and an unnamed man in Ireland—in many ways typical of the sixteen videos coded as “interviews”—the Irish-Zimbabwean speaker suggests that #ThisFlag specifically speaks to the experiences of Zimbabweans living in the diaspora, saying, “We are living in a global world—we are free to travel, you know, but we have no choice but to be here, because you guys—just a select few—you are looting our country” (“#ThisFlag—Ireland” 2016). Speaking passionately about the flag's symbolism, the video's subject decries his experiences of having to seek livelihood away from the place of his birth. In his speech, though, he frames his complaints in terms of a common rhetoric: the hashtag. The video itself was posted as a link, with the title “#ThisFlag—Ireland,” suggesting that the social media form symbolized the connection between Zimbabweans around the world, as well as offering a literal venue for their cooperation.

This viral circulation of poetry on social media produced grounded action from both immediately local and broadly transnational communities. More importantly, it called into being communities linked through their attachment to the rhetoric and world-making potential of poetry online. As Karin Barber argues, throughout Africa, “privatized media and new personal media technologies have eroded the boundaries between public and private space and given people a new platform, new ways of reaching new kinds of audiences and new means of expression” (2018:132). Online, individual actions create effects on the collective level. The relatively disempowered individual actor becomes part of a powerful group through her engagement in the production of a collective event. The poetry of protest—typified and made viral in the chant and the hashtag—thus belies conventional spatializations which presume a radical separation between on- and offline spaces.

The poetics of the chant proved key in Zimbabwe. While social media allowed protesters to advertise their campaign, face-to-face interactions were key to driving participation. As Lauren Young (2016) argues, whereas “public forums like Twitter broadcast the protest to the rest of the world,... social media doesn't easily build trust.” Indeed, prior to #ThisFlag, social media had been an important but insufficient tool in facilitating limited protest movements in Zimbabwe. In their analysis of the anonymous anti-Mugabe Facebook page Baba Jukwa, which was active in 2012 and 2013, Mutsvairo and Sirks (2015) demonstrate the importance of social media in

enabling mass responsiveness and democratizing digital space in Zimbabwe's repressive political climate. They suggest that the huge participation on Baba Jukwa's page represents a model of digital citizenship which may present a challenge to dominant government structures. Like Baba Jukwa, #ThisFlag offered a digital gathering place for the politically discontent—but, as Mutsvauro and Sirks point out, “watching alone is not enough [...] knowledge does not always lead to democracy” (2015:331). Unlike Baba Jukwa, #ThisFlag did not provide knowledge: it provided a call to action, with specific steps and a rhetoric of affiliation for those protesting on the ground.

While social media allowed the movement to spread beyond the nation's geographic borders, the piece's lyricism combined with the coalition-building of its activists allowed it to flourish on frontward-facing social media platforms. “This Flag” is thus simultaneously speech and action, a claim which immediately gives its users social position and community. The slogan “This Flag” was a deeply poetic one; its brevity, its repeatability, and its allusiveness together make it both poetic and broadly relatable. In its poetic malleability, it became a marker of affinity through which people such as Habane could express their support.

The testimony of “This Flag” models the production of group sociality through lyric language. Social media platforms—including Facebook, where #ThisFlag originated, YouTube, where it spread, Twitter, where it was discussed, and WhatsApp, where grounded events were organized—achieve their power through user-generated content, which provides a sense of democratic openness, and through their mass user base and capacity for anonymity, which provide a sense of protection. The chant and the hashtag rely on the “human microphone” effect, which requires the crowd to repeat the speaker's words, theoretically popularizing speech by ensuring the collectivity's investment in the individual's words. The “human microphone,” a term which became popular during the Occupy movement to describe crowds repeating a speaker's words to amplify them, aims to democratize the sound of a movement.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, this phenomenon coerces individual voices, compelling them to repeat another's words. The coerciveness of the chant, and the human microphone, flattens a message into its barest form. As tactical poetry, paradoxically “reduc[ing] consciousness” in the interest of motivating action, the hashtag technologizes the human voice, transforming it from an instrument of individual expression into an instrument of mass remediation.

The poetry of #ThisFlag moved with the hashtag, which exceeds the bounds of any one social media platform, to draw publics together across grounded and digital spaces. The hashtag does not directly link directly across platforms; following the #ThisFlag channel on Twitter is not connected to YouTube. Instead, it builds an affective connection, creating a rhetoric of affiliation which marks the movement's investment in the social media logics that link Zimbabwean youth while retaining its attachment to Mawarire's original piece. The hashtag public called into being and

mustered by #ThisFlag draw on the hashtag's affective and cultural connotations to build its own poetics of community. Even as the hashtag mutates with its many authors' varied intentions, its underlying connection to the poetry of protest and to the building of community is inherent in all its uses, creating an overarching lyrical connection for its many publics.

### Conclusion: Moving Digital Publics

The #ThisFlag movement showcases how poetic rhetoric can both produce grounded action and broaden the scope of national publics. Social media platforms supported popular participation in the movement; the digital networks and open publication of social media platforms both allowed a wide range of politically active Zimbabweans to participate in the movement and connected activists around the world. However, as demonstrated by Gukurume's (2017) analysis of the #ThisFlag movement, and Mutsvairo and Sirks's (2015) description of participation in the Baba Jukwa Facebook page, such passive engagement is insufficient. Instead, as rhetorical analysis of the original video, its circulation on social media, and selected responses illustrates, the particular rhetoric of "This Flag" uniquely compelled further action. The hashtag poem provided a rhetoric of affiliation broad enough to incorporate a wide range of sympathizers, while the hashtag itself provided a literal link to connect those sympathizers. Through the networked authorship of the hashtag, #ThisFlag channeled national anxieties, fears, and angers into a single international movement—one mediated through poetry and expanded on social media.

Online, the hashtag evokes the classic role of the chant in mass movements, an "imagined sound" which connects all those within an imagined polity as surely as shared information and ideals (Anderson 1991:145). By chanting together, joining their voices in a cause, students and disaffected citizens produce networked affiliations and affective poetry through which they join a broader movement. In 2015, Samm Monro (2015), the popular Zimbabwean poet and producer of the YouTube-based satirical news show "Zambezi News," predicted that "With more and more young people online in Zimbabwe sharing videos and content on Facebook and WhatsApp, we now have more and more alternative means of disseminating out content. And considering our politicians aren't going to stop being clowns anytime soon, we definitely won't be running out of things to say. So we'll keep striving to build a new country." For Monro, as for Mawarire, protest is itself a form of nation-building—and digital networks enable a broader category of affiliation beyond the geographic limits of the country.

In a 2017 interview with Monro, Mawarire explained, "This Flag is a citizens' movement. It has to remain a citizens' movement, because it's been effective as a citizens' movement. It's rallying Zimbabweans from all walks of life—different beliefs, different races, different political ideologies—to rally behind the idea of *Zimbabwe* [...] This is a place where all Zimbabweans can feel their thoughts or views about Zimbabwe



can be represented, without being partisan. That's the power of it" (Magamba TV 2017). The hashtag movement, at first a simple statement of frustration, became a movement specifically aimed to prove the power of social media to mobilize widely dispersed people to protest. Mawarire's poetic refrain became a hashtag, then a digital movement, and finally a series of live protests. "This Flag" speaks to the constitutive power of chants and hashtags to produce affective communities by linking together the demands of place, of history, and of multiple publics.

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## Notes

1. This number is likely an underestimate, as much video sharing in Zimbabwe occurs through peer-to-peer connections over such platforms as WhatsApp, which would not be captured through viewer metrics on Facebook and YouTube.
2. According to Eldred Masunungure (2006), "more than a century of authoritarianism" made the Zimbabwean people "risk-averse through a process of conditioning [...which] made them politically passive and inert," an attitude which may reflect the fact that, according to Lauren Young, "over 51 percent

of Zimbabweans had experienced politically motivated intimidation, threat or harassment between 1980 and 2009, and 38 percent had witnessed someone else being injured or killed for political reasons.”

3. For more on the links between hashtag activism and contemporary community formation, see Nathan Rambukkana's (2015) formulation of digital intimacy and the hashtag.
4. Simbarashe Gukurume (2017) offers a thorough analysis of the use of social media in organizing these protests, but largely ignores the role of poetry in them. Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) has written extensively on the use of social media services in protest movements in the U.S., Spain, and Egypt in 2011–2012, claiming that, though their internal effect was limited, they were key to building support for the movements. Together with Emilio Treré (2015), he notes that social media platforms' linking capacity and cultural fluidity have also made them key locuses of collective identity formation and alternative information sharing. Shortly prior to the beginning of #ThisFlag, activists in the #RhodesMustFall movement at the University of Cape Town used Twitter to coordinate their activities and shape mainstream news coverage, as Tanja Bosch has shown (2016).
5. The use of red stripes in flags to symbolize the “blood of martyrs” enables political factions to legitimate particular narratives of the national past: Elemine Ould Mohamed Baba and Francisco Freire, for instance, have demonstrated that the 1991 addition of red strips to the Mauritanian flag represented a shift in political narrative against the legacy of French colonialism (2019, 14–15).
6. For more on the use of WhatsApp groups to facilitate oppositional political participation in Zimbabwe, see Lauren E. Young, “Mobilization under threat: Emotional appeals and dissent in autocracy” (2017).
7. Exact estimates of the number of Zimbabweans living abroad are hard to find, in part because of the high rates of informal migration to South Africa and Botswana. According to the International Organization on Migration Zimbabwe's 2015 report, “it is currently estimated that between 500,000 and 3 million Zimbabweans are residing outside Zimbabwe” (Ocaga 2016:5).
8. Habane's video, in fact, moves between English and Shona as she emotionally recounts what happened to her. However, I have focused on the content English, here, in part to capture the parallels with Mawarire's video, and in part because of my own limited capacities in Shona.
9. A strategy popularized during the anti-hierarchical protests of 2010–2012, the human microphone eschews a unidirectional megaphone by asking the entire group of protesters to repeat the speaker's words. It thus unites the voices of the protesting crowd behind a speaker whose words they voluntarily repeat.