

## Review Essay

# Interstitial Spaces Social Collage and The Zimbabwe Cultural Center of Detroit [zccd.org/](http://zccd.org/)

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The Zimbabwe Cultural Center of Detroit and its partner, the Detroit Cultural Center of Zimbabwe, operate as portals of exchange between the places they represent. Physically, the centers began as two near-identical rooms: one bedroom each in Detroit and Harare, intimate homemade spaces designed to mirror each other. Spare but comfortably decorated with matching green paint and kitenge cloth, their design followed founders' concerns that private spaces be recognized as culturally rich, and that dominant institutions relinquish their power constructing our cultural conversations. In the three years since its inception, ZCCD has branched into other venues, to galleries and dance clubs and city streets, connecting creative workers and building networks between Detroit and Zimbabwe. Artists, writers, and musicians present, absorb, riff, and entangle their works, scaffolding connections between these distant locales.

It helps a reader to place a project—*Where is it? How does it act? What does it*

*do?* But to fully enter into conversation with this work, it's more useful to think past its container. ZCCD is best understood as amorphous and dynamic, a rich collection of exchanges passing between an ever-growing group of collaborators. Projects are flexible and experiential; spatial homelessness is a norm; artifacts exist but don't often survive. The project's best work is the connective tissue it constructs between artists and communities as they send and receive, and send and receive, across continents.

Chido Johnson, Nontsikelelo Mutiti, and Kumbulani Zamuchiya developed the framework for ZCCD in 2013. They envisioned smaller, private spaces that could function as cultural consulates, where people and ideas would be received: lived-in spaces whose existence as culture centers prioritized the lived experiences of their communities. Zamuchiya, whose bedroom in Harare housed the first Zimbabwe portal, wants to "play with the limits that separate Africa and the U.S."<sup>1</sup> ZCCD pushes against the tension of (official) U.S.-Zimbabwe relations, colonial histories, racial and economic disparity, and each culture's limited, generalized knowledge of the other. Adopting words more frequently used by nationalist bodies—consulate, ambassador, embassy—the project asserts that deep, intercultural knowledge can be built from the steady rhythm of intimate, bidirectional exchange.

Johnson and Mutiti found resonance in Detroit's disheveled spaces—physical representations, Mutiti says, "of what corruption and failed governance on an administrative level does to people the ground." "Wrinkles in the buildings," says Johnson, "show us what's really behind them." Both grew up in Zimbabwe during the years surrounding its independence, amid post-colonial turbulence, standards of living in flux. In Detroit, they see a space in similar crisis: failing economies, an exodus of citizens, a global identity fueled by limited (and sensational) media representation. In both spaces, a community's livelihood expands and contracts. In both spaces, there are thriving pockets of culture that go missing from the public record.

Johnson finds special poignancy threading this connectivity. Born in Zimbabwe and educated in local schools, he grew up speaking Shona. But his parents were missionaries, and Johnson is a U.S. citizen whose internal culture is deeply Zimbabwean. His first visit to the U.S.—to attend university in 1987—was so filled with culture shock that he returned to Zimbabwe that year. He is also white, complicating conversations about his identity, his work, and the spaces he moves within. As a partial outsider in both countries, he finds his work infused with "a raw need to connect."

And so, a portal between two spaces: Detroit, the city; Zimbabwe, the country. Harare, Hamtramck, Mutare. It is an imaginative line of fluid exchange, subverting naturally occurring and constructed boundaries: community spaces turned cultural consulates.

Artists participating in ZCCD work in call-and-response. They rarely meet in person, collaborating instead across geographic boundaries, working to dislodge geopolitical ones. In *I Wish You Were Here* (2013-present), artists from Mutare

photographed their city's architectural touch points and sent those images to Detroit. Detroit artists recreated Mutare's images as observational drawings and sent photographs of their own. The drawings became postcards, and the postcards swapped—a collection of each city's special places exchanged. Detroit artists sent The Motown Museum, Baitul Mukarram Masjid, The Charles Wright Museum of African American History, The Kowalski Sausage Company. Zimbabwe artists shared Herbert Chitepo Road, Mutare's Fire Brigade, The National Museum of Zimbabwe. Drawn by hand, the postcards call attention to intimacy. They are cultural translations rich with the texture of touch.

Of the works that have passed between ZCCD portals, Kumbulani Zamuchiya has been most moved by musical collaborations. Zimbabwean singer Hope Masike performed Eminem's *I'm Sorry, Mama* as Shona song; Detroit's Monica Blaire responded with a beat box version of *Wake Up* by Zimbabwe legend Oliver Mutukudzi. Music is part of Detroit's muscle—central, connective, and responsive. The connection is reflexive. Techno, a giant in Detroit's music scene, is rhythmic sister to Zimbabwe's Sungura. Zimbabweans have long connected to Motown. These discoveries allow collaborators to build a framework for musical exchange.

Connected via Skype, DJs Philani Majama (Zimbabwe) and George Rahme (Detroit) broadcast joint sessions within Detroit's Public Pool Gallery and Harare's Inner Café. DJs are respected collage artists and their collaborations viscerally felt. As an art form, DJ-ing layers disparateness with ease. "Collage," says Rahme, "is a very big word with too much nostalgia in European roots of the 1900s," but "bring to life that picture as a practice...it's all about taking tiny bits and making a whole."

Other exchanges passed across the ocean: T-shirt designs, gallery exhibits, a poetry buffet, nine of Johnson's Detroit students, and two professional artists—Masimba Hwati (Zimbabwe to Detroit) and Haleem "Stringz" Rasul (Detroit to Harare). It's worth noting that ZCCD freely mixes artists of all career stages: professionals, students, local participants, the internationally renowned. Hwati, who also represented Zimbabwe in the Venice Biennale, created his Detroit works within the city's upstart artist laboratory, Popp's Packing. Rasul, a Jit dancer, partnered with Harare's Jibilika Dance Trust. Plot Mhako, who heads Jibilika, watched a partnership unfold between Rasul and dancer Franko "Slomo" Dhaka. "They didn't have verbal language in common," notes Mhako, but,

In Zimbabwe, dance is more than an art. It's a way of life, each dance is a symbol. People...may not be literate in each other's languages. They can come together with dance.

The physical work is transient, ephemeral, its documentation sporadic. Tunneling around mainstream structures, ZCCD actively seeks an alternative canon. This has its benefits and its problems: it is a prolific community with a rich body of work that remains mostly undercover. But speak with ZCCD contributors and it's clear that connections between Detroit and Zimbabwe are deeply felt. "It's brilliant and it's

raw,” says Stringz Rasul. “Of course, prime infrastructure is necessary, but the rawness...allows (us) to do things (we) couldn’t otherwise, to connect at a completely different level.” It’s likely that the real success of ZCCD has little to do with what can be “properly” recorded and much more to do with what distances can be crossed.

Elizabeth Muusha is the director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, where ZCCD’s postcard exchange was shown. She reflects,

It’s a timely and valuable idea. (The) exchange project brought hope to us considering the prevailing atmosphere...due to the ailing socio-economic situation in the country...(It) has forcefully gone beyond the national physical boundaries in uniting artists in their common goal of expressing their feelings about their environments regardless of the thousands of miles in between the two cities...bringing us closer together and breaking down the boundaries that control and limit humankind.

ZCCD is deeply interested in the role artists play as cultural ambassadors. The language is specific and scalpel sharp. “Consulate” and “ambassador” are nation-words; their use asserts the national value of artists and the bridging possibilities of arts exchange. Meanwhile, ZCCD transmits its work through intimate spaces, prioritizing personal connections over the dominant, generalized narratives imposed on Zimbabwe and Detroit. In doing this, the project poses questions about who is represented, how, and why. It is art based not on cultural prescriptions, but close-quartered appeal. Our cultures, says Johnson, “are stuck in hierarchies.” In contrast, ZCCD is grounded in the idea of artists as culture workers, with those culture workers on the ground. It is also, very simply, a place to connect. Says artist Mario Moore, “It’s a home for artists, and I think feeling like somewhere is home is a great strength.”

Truly flattening a hierarchy—even on a personal scale—requires unstitching existing frames of reference. This challenge needs special attention in a time of sensationalism and rapid packaging. Our perceptions of Detroit and Zimbabwe are heavily mediated, our own narratives quickly inserted. Johnson notes that contemporary conversations about African art are most often framed in Western terms. Work is labeled “tribal” or “primitive;” art is isolated from community; theory is separated from practice. In Zimbabwe, he says, “the entire structure of discourse is different.” Mutiti observes that Western venues showcase, and therefore prioritize, black artists working cathartic narratives. This creates a loop that reinforces one history and blinds us to the fresh contemporary pieces African artists are developing. This idea, “that all work is paying homage to past events, grappling with the torment of oppression,” constrains our conversation. Detroit artists are wrapped in similar boxes. Says Mario Moore,

I just want people to actually look at the work and take from the work. I

want people to actually pay attention to what happens within each piece. I think when it comes to a Black artist creating representational work it comes with a lot of preconceived notions before they even think about the ideas within the work.

“This is very hard to talk about,” says Johnson. “We all have a lot of learning to do.” If we wish to cross a cultural gap, we need to adjust our position.

Of course the idea of an arts-culture exchange is not new. Contemporary artists regularly work across borders, collaborative processes eased by the digital age. What’s interesting is what ZCCD does particularly well. The project values smaller, independent exchanges as culturally generative. By making special use of private spaces, the project functionally and deliberately elevates intimate connections within arts practice and within the dialogue of its collaborators. Counter narratives emerge, and generalizations dissipate. In a time when global leaders regularly politicize the strength of our borders, ZCCD offers an alternative of openness, demonstrating what richness is possible when we work across distance.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are drawn from interviews with the author conducted in June, 2016.

## Appendix of Illustrations



Figure 1, Image of the Detroit Cultural Center in Zimbabwe (DCCZ), Kumbalani Zamuchiya in front of the Detroit Cultural Center in Zimbabwe, photo by Chido Johnson



Figure 2, Image of the Zimbabwe Cultural Center in Detroit (ZCCD), Chido Johnson on the steps of the ZCCD house, photo by Jon Brumit



Figure 3, Image from the “postcard project” (*I Wish You Were Here*), Detroit artist Aisha Haji taking images of Detroit for Mutare artists (*I Wish You Were Here* 2013-present), photo by Chido Johnson



Figure 4, Image of postcards, “I wish you were here” postcards, dually exhibited at Delta Gallery in Harare, ZW (2014) and Public Pool in Hamtramck, Detroit (1013) during ZCCD’s exhibit *Kumusha*, photo by Charles Mutengwa



Figure 5, Image of postcards on display, “I wish you were here” postcard project displayed at National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Mutare, ZW, photo by Elizabeth Muusha





Figure 6, Image of Rasul holding postcard, Harleen ‘Stringz’ Rasul holds a ZCCD postcard illustrating the Mutare Post Office that was made by Detroit artist Sabrina Nelson during Rasul’s trip to Zimbabwe, photo by Kumbulani Zamuchiy

THE LACK OF IT

When you finally decide to come home  
I will be long gone  
chasing day looking for a good day  
by  
to park my imaginary car  
and watch the sun rise

© By Batsirai Chigama, 2012

Figure 7, Batsirai Chigama’s Poem, Batsirai Chigama (ZW), *The Lack of It*





Figure 8, Image of ZCCD Artist Residency Exchange Program 1, Zimbabwe artist Masimba Hwati performs his piece *Detroit Sound* on the corner of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks Boulevards in Detroit, photo by Matthew Walker and Joseph Cavanaugh



Figure 9, Image of ZCCD Artist Residency Exchange Program 2, Detroit dancer Haleem “Stringz” Rasul performs at Dzimbanhete Arts Interactions during ZCCD’s Jit Exchange in Harare, ZW, photo by Plot Mhako



Figure 10, Image of ZCCD Artist Residency Exchange Program 3, Haleem “Stringz” Rasul (Detroit) dancing with Slomo Dhaka (Zimbabwe), photo by Plot Mhako

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