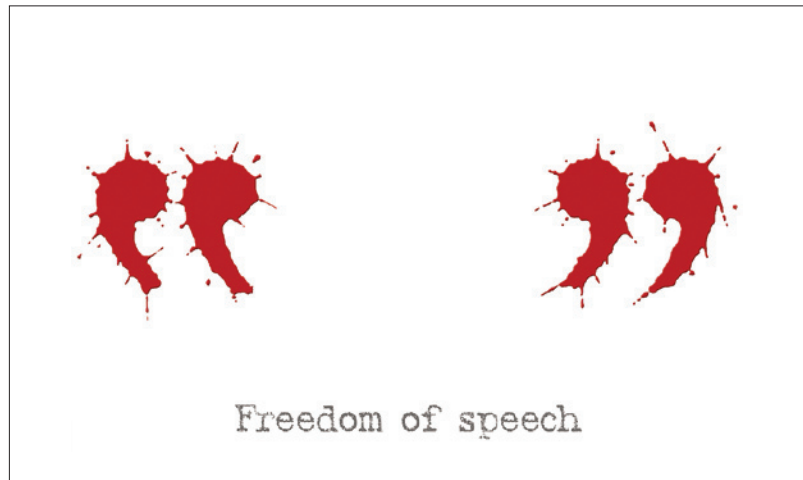


chaz maviyane-davies

SOCIAL ACTIVIST, DESIGNER, EDUCATOR

Interview by Steven Heller

American graphic design is in large part molded by exiles from repressive regimes who came to this country for a safe haven and contributed their individual visions to the growing pluralism of American practice. Chaz Maviyane-Davies, 45, born in Zimbabwe (the former Rhodesia), is one such exile. A dissident in the best sense of the word, Maviyane-Davies is the creator of a large oeuvre—what he calls “Creative Defiance”—of passionately conceived and smartly designed posters, advocating such issues as human rights, AIDS research, environmental protection, and free speech. He distributes the posters, thorns in the side of those he opposes, to the world through a continuing bombardment of e-mail missives (see maviyane.com). As an outspoken foe of President Robert Mugabe’s dictatorial rule in Zimbabwe, Maviyane-Davies, who studied design in London before setting up his own design studio in Harare, Zimbabwe’s capital, risked livelihood and life to speak truth to power. Eventually, he felt compelled to leave his homeland. In 2001, he, his wife Chiyoko, and daughter Djena arrived in Boston, where he had been offered a teaching position at Massachusetts College of Art. Today, five years into his self-imposed exile, Maviyane-Davies teaches graphic and poster design, as well as digital photography, at MassArt, and is also working on a book about his philosophy of design. In this interview, he reflects on the injustices that forced him to abandon his country of birth and the optimism he feels in the swirl of continued struggle.



Maviyane-Davies produced this commentary just hours after the Bulawayo offices of *The Daily News*, Zimbabwe’s leading daily paper, were bombed at 3 a.m. on February 11, 2002, a month prior to the presidential election.

HELLER: Chaz, you have used graphic design as a means of opposing political repression. How did your critical voice develop? **MAVIYANE-DAVIES:** High school taught me nothing and everything. Nothing, because being “colored” [in white-governed Rhodesia], my status and the basis of my education were dictated by the state. Everything, because my disregard for this filtered tutelage allowed me to indulge in what I cared for most: art and freedom. **HELLER:** How did your design vision change as you became more cognizant of the world’s and your nation’s ills? **MAVIYANE-DAVIES:** It was not lost on me that by shaping and shifting images, words, and pigment so as to trumpet dignity and denounce repression would bring the wrath of the establishment down on me. This pleased me. A distinct design language began to emerge during my formal design studies in Zambia and grew in the U.K., where I completed my undergraduate and graduate studies. London in the ’70s was a battleground of ideas and cross-cultural pollination, which invigorated me and matured my vision. **HELLER:** How much of your output is devoted

to social concerns? And how have you supported this? **MAVIYANE-DAVIES:** In the beginning, my studio’s pro-bono and self-initiated projects were also supported by commercial assignments. Our work became more visible and while many found what we did risky on several levels—most of all, going against the grain of much of the conventional wisdom of the day—it also stood out and attracted organizations needing work of this nature. **HELLER:** You have chosen the poster medium to get your voice heard, and you’ve used the internet to distribute these missives. Is the poster still the most effective means of communication? **MAVIYANE-DAVIES:** Through their sheer size and mobility, posters offer a powerful and ideal canvas to effectively carry my views to the frontlines of humanity. **HELLER:** You are persona non grata in your native Zimbabwe for the political posters you designed protesting the rule of President Robert Mugabe. How does it feel to be banned from your own country? **MAVIYANE-DAVIES:** I am not banned in the traditional sense of the word. It is my work, as you say, that causes me to be considered an enemy of the state. Being

unable to return, as I am unsure what fate would await me, is difficult. **HELLER:** Being an outcast is, however, not altogether unknown to you. You were born in Harare, Zimbabwe, when it was Salisbury, Rhodesia, which was first a British colony and then under Ian Smith became a neo-colony with apartheid-like discrimination. How was it that you got to study art in such a place?

MAVIYANE-DAVIES: Except for conventional high school classes, I did not study art then. Growing up in the lower rungs of a racist state that strangled any opportunities that existed for the likes of me became intolerable. In 1974, my chance arose to flee the country after completing my military service, and after a sojourn in Switzerland, I ended up in neighboring Zambia. There, I did my foundation course in art and eventually moved on to London, where I attained my degrees in graphic design.

HELLER: In 1980, Mugabe won election as president and in 1982 you returned to Zimbabwe. You opened a design firm, The Maviyane Project. How did you make the transition from expat to free citizen?

MAVIYANE-DAVIES: I returned to a fledgling and upbeat Zimbabwe determined to participate in the growth of the region. After a short period of re-acclimatization as a free citizen on my home soil, I realized that there were no design consultancies, so I established one in the midst of an advertising/design industry owned by whites and still dominated by pre-independence values and imagery. **HELLER:** Independence was not a cure for the ills of your nation. When did you realize that Mugabe's power-wielding was not simply the teething pains of a new democracy? **MAVIYANE-DAVIES:** The sad truth was that soon after independence, the rot of power and corruption were beginning to set in and undermine the ideals of a nation that had paid for her self-determination in blood. Ruthless and charismatic, Mugabe has never shied from using his guile to form the masses into a

compliant flock wary of a stick he would brandish unflinchingly. **HELLER:** It must have been a terrifying time. **MAVIYANE-DAVIES:** An early demonstration of his demand for total compliance was in the early '80s when he formed the Fifth Brigade [a North Korean-trained militia distinguished by its red berets and answerable only to Mugabe] and unleashed them in the Ndebele provinces of Matabeleland and the Midlands to "combat malcontents, deal with dissidents, and any other trouble in the country," as Mugabe claimed. Considering that there was very little civil unrest in Zimbabwe before this time, it was for absolutely no reason that an estimated 20,000 civilians (mostly Ndebele) were killed or disappeared. This campaign of terror forced the Unity Accord that brought an end to the violence. Signed in 1987 by Mugabe and the Ndebele leader of the opposition ZAPU party, Joshua Nkomo, it effectively dissolved ZAPU into ZANU-PF and thereby created the de facto one-party state the president had always desired.

HELLER: The ruling ZANU party was pretty ruthless and controlling of media. How did this affect you, not only as a citizen, but as a designer? Given your activism, where you threatened in any way? **MAVIYANE-DAVIES:** Throughout those times, we continued to work either alone or with courageous clients to confront and express things as we saw them, and it wasn't long before we ruffled a few authoritarian feathers. I believe what riled them most were the covers we did for a monthly sociopolitical magazine called *Moto*—meaning "fire" in Shona. Around that time I discovered from a few journalists that there was a decision from "above" to blackball me. In effect, this meant that I should not ever again be considered newsworthy in the state media, regardless of any kind of personal accomplishments.

HELLER: Did this change with time?

MAVIYANE-DAVIES: During the '90s, with the emergence of a relatively free press, it seems

I was quietly paroled from my reprimand as my name reappeared in a state newspaper again for an international award I had won. I believe my protection lay in the arrogance of a government gloating over its lockhold on 116 of the 120 parliamentary seats. To them, I was merely an artist and as long as I had no political ambitions, I was harmless.

HELLER: The 2000 election became a turning point for the downturn of Zimbabwe's fortunes. Was this when you started the internet action called The Graphic Commentaries?

MAVIYANE-DAVIES: Feeling powerless and needing to do something to keep my sanity in the center of an absurd and dangerous situation, I embarked on a visual internet campaign with one aim in mind: to raise consciousness about our situation and similar ones in the world at large. I felt I could at least try to bring about some awareness to the abuse and violations of rights being perpetrated in Zimbabwe, and more importantly, encourage people to vote. I created one or more of these graphic commentaries every day, for 30 days, until the eve of the elections, and distributed them by e-mail. **HELLER:** What was your approach in these commentaries?

MAVIYANE-DAVIES: It was simply to express the righteousness of our intentions and hope that this would inspire positive action.

HELLER: What were the consequences of such dissent? **MAVIYANE-DAVIES:** At that time everything I did was within the law and as the government struggled to make their rigged election stick, I was left alone except for a few clandestine threats by the authorities. Soon after that, it all changed, when Mugabe tore up the country's constitution to ensure that his regime would never be unseated by democratic means. I had left by then. **HELLER:** If the Mugabe government were to topple, would you return?

MAVIYANE-DAVIES: Having been exiled twice, I think I am a little more cautious now, so I would wait a while and observe the situation before I returned. 