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On Virtuality and the aesthetics of spectacle: Nationalist Imaginations of Mthwakazi and its passions of semblance

Brilliant Mhlanga & Mandlenkosi Mpofu ¹

Abstract

Social networking and the individuated privacy of the virtual space have emerged as new forms of conflating social identities and free speech for most subaltern communities. While it is clearly accepted that the notion of social networking within most African communities has always existed as part of oramedia (orality), which also gained more positive value from grapevine as a notch of communication, current trends in communication, coupled with the rise of new media have brought normative and pragmatic values in the latter day communication culture. One social networking group from Matebeleland (a region of historical complexities in Zimbabwe), the “Forum”, will be used to show how the virtual sphere has revolutionised the Habermasian public sphere. The new social networking sites enable participants to gather and connect through ‘Internet portals.’ We posit that these different fora define the extent to which engagement and free speech are practiced leading to changes in people’s worldviews. Online fora now range from different Facebook and Whatsapp groups, such as; *Inhlamba Zesintu*, *Luveve Ikasi Lami*, *Abammeli Mthwakazi*, *Not-Everyone-is-Zimbabwean*, *Thina AbaMpofu*, to websites like iNkundla.net, Youtube, and other vibrant platforms created through mailing lists and listserv, such as Forum.

Introduction

The diffusion of ICTs, which has been phenomenal in the third world over the past few years, has presented platforms to groups living in restrictive political and communicative environments. Dispersed diasporic groups from these states based in

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developed Western societies with lower barriers of accessing ICTs have also found it easier to connect with each other and with groups back home. For these groups, the diffuse nature of new ICTs given currency by the Internet offers a potential to “support new communicative relationships” and “new ways” of producing and circulating information (Mansell *et al*, 2007: 13).

For diasporic groups from Matebeleland² different social networking sites have emerged owing to unfettered access to new media platforms. The Forum also emerged due to access to the Internet with its own uniqueness. First, it is organised as a mailing group whose membership and constitution is on the basis of origination and nativity to any part of Matebeleland. The use of personal emails implies a sense of intrusion into one’s private space and has a way of breaking the individuated barriers often seen in the case of conventional social networks. Second, it takes advantage of the popularity of emails and the fact that different platforms, such as mobile phone gadgets now offer access to the Internet. Unlike Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites, the grouping of personal emails ensures that communication reaches the *intended* individuals. Forum membership is on voluntary basis and tends to follow a viral approach in which any member of the group can add a friend’s email address by way of responding to a particular communication thread. Also, messages communicated in the Forum can reach other recipients who are not necessarily in the same mailing list, in the process conjuring a kind of cascading effect, which tends to lure more people into the Forum. The Forum represents a dialogical site where participants discuss and evaluate their experiences and circumstances over the last three decades. In their study of discourses among Zimbabweans in 1990, in an older medium, the letters to the editor, Morrison and Love (1996: 40) reveal that readers/citizens’ dialogue offer the participants a chance to engage in legitimate challenges to “central political power and its individual representatives”. Through

² The official name as ‘Matabeleland’ is colonially inherited. However, given our interpretive critical discourse analysis of issues of exclusion, politics of marginality and subaltern issues and as insiders; with the advantage of ‘subjective’ insider knowledge, we have chosen to consistently spell it as; **Matebeleland**. Further, we present the post-colonial leadership’s inability to correct these as signifiers of cultural ‘phanerons’ of exclusion. This is seen as the post-colonial government’s official policy of misrepresenting Ndebele as a language. Also seen in the *official Zimbabwean Passport* (see the Ndebele translation in the second paragraph of page. 48). These serve to explain suspicions by people of Matebeleland that the central government has a policy of excluding them. These collective feelings of neglect by the people of Matebeleland are glaring as shown in in the discourses taking place within the Forum (cf. Mhlanga 2010, 2012).

these forms of evaluation shared values and objectives emerge giving impetus to calls for self-determination. Thirty-three years after independence in Zimbabwe, citizens continue to dialogue on issues of power relations, exclusion and inclusion.

The Forum tends to act as a point of confluence for diasporic groups and those still at home in Matebeleland, thus encouraging a robust engagement of issues about the idea of Mthwakazi as a separate state. It has had its own fair share of contribution to the discourses and imagination of a seceded state of Mthwakazi coined around irredentist lines. While Forum members tend to share a common vision, they are spread all over the world, and as a result few of them know each other. A common feature of the platform is the use of pseudonyms, which speaks to participants' condition of being subaltern and living in fear. This paper engages the salient issues discussed within this virtual space.

Marking the tablet of Time and Space: Social networks and the new media

The Forum illustrates the role of ICTs in offering new opportunities for the formation and consolidation of identities. Within Zimbabwe, the question of ethnicity has dominated politics since independence, not least because of the deliberate policy by government to keep sections of the Ndebele speaking people of the Matebeleland and Midlands regions on the margins of society. This policy was behind the Gukurahundi genocide from 1982 – 1988, and the sidelining of sections of the populations in opportunities in educational institutions, and in private and public sector appointments.³ Migration, mainly to the regional economic powerhouse South Africa, was strong among Ndebele communities as from the early 1980s due largely to these reasons. The traditional migration of Ndebele speaking people to South Africa is also because of close identification of Nguni groups in the two countries, which is evident in cultural life in Matebeleland, where popular South African music remains dominant. In the colonial era, the development of the mining industries particularly from the time of the post World War II economic boom, also led to significant migration from Matebeleland. Contemporary Ndebele music and art is also loaded

³ Explain Gukurahundi genocide occurred between 1982 and 1986 when the new Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) administration killed 20,000 – 40,000 predominantly Ndebele speaking supporters of Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union Patriotic Front (PF ZAPU). ZAPU emerged as the main opposition after losing elections in 1980, and was soon regarded as an enemy of the state by ZANU PF, which sought to establish a one-party state.

with these imaginations, as works by protest artists such as Lovemore Majaivana and Cont Mhlanga show. Many people in Matebeleland therefore see the trek *down South* as a journey back to their real roots, adding onto imaginations of themselves as not fully Zimbabwean.

Massive migration of Zimbabweans as economic and social circumstances took a turn for the worse at the turn of the millennium, and presented both challenges and opportunities for the marginalised people of Matebeleland, both for those who migrated and those who stayed behind. First, the dispersal of many people, particularly the young, educated and more economically productive groups, meant that efforts by the people of Matebeleland to keep their marginalisation and their aspirations on the political agenda were disrupted; i.e., in social and political discourses within the Zimbabwean body politics and thus threatening to keep the issue of Matebeleland frozen in time.

Further, the lack of regional news organisations (that focus on and are managed by the people of Matebeleland) has historically meant that spaces in the national public sphere in Zimbabwe have not prioritised issues affecting the people of Matebeleland even prior to this period. But like all marginalised groups, the people of Matebeleland have created their own alternative spheres of articulation, built around political and cultural experiences, and a shared ethnic identity based on historical imaginations, shared experiences and memories. Therefore, many migrants carry with themselves problems and conflicts that define their existence back at home. They also find themselves dispersed and estranged from their localities and from each other, often with few opportunities of face-to-face meeting even among those that have relocated to the same country, and with no immediate access to the alternative spheres back home. These shared exigencies have resulted in new forms of inscription on the tablet of time and communicative spaces; in terms of the re-articulation of the cause of Matebeleland. Therefore, in looking at the new media generated social networks, it is important not to extricate them from their social processes and contexts (Rønning, 2010: 134; Agre, 2005: 311).

New media has therefore presented fresh opportunities for these groups to reinvent their communities, network with each other and build links. A new wave of social

networking sites has emerged in which participants gather through ‘internet portals’. From around the early 2000s, for instance, a new form of news organisation, the online based newspapers, began to emerge, and were launched mainly by Zimbabweans living in the diaspora. These were a consequence of the resultant thirst for news among these communities, whose migrations also coincided with shrinking news spaces back home due to the crackdown on newspapers and journalists from around 2002 (Mano & Willems, 2008: 51 & 52). They created new platforms to articulate the new experiences associated with living in foreign environments. Commenting on another form of news organisation that emerges around this time in Zimbabwe, the “pirate” radio stations beaming into the country from abroad and also managed by migrant Zimbabweans, Ndlela (2010: 93) says their intention “to expand ... shrinking communicative spaces”. Therefore, in approaching the potential that new media technologies hold for dispersed groups, this paper does not take a deterministic approach but sees the adoption of these technologies as fitting within already existing social processes, particular forms of social yearning, ideation and realities. For example Facebook was originally designed to cultivate off-line social relations but experiences in the Arab spring presented a situation where such technologies were adapted and appropriated to suite the demands for public mobilisation and raising international awareness. This helps us to look into the “larger social processes” within which “political activities on the Internet are embedded” (Papacharissi, 2002: 14; cf. van Dijk, 2006).

Social networks as divested structures of communication and their interface with methodology

Examining the divested structures of communication using new media and the advantages emergent thereof requires a robust form of critical discourse analysis. A research methodology that attempts to engage with the social networking sites in the era of new media must embark on a more dialectical path, which embraces connections between the relationships of representation and mediation. New media technologies when engaged this way present hope for direct societal representation.

The major component of critical discourse analysis as a qualitative engagement of social reality is for researchers to reject a ‘value-free’ science. This allows for exploration of connotation, together with the firm acknowledgement that texts often

exist between two ends; production and reception. Researchers are influenced by social structure and existing forms of social interaction. The relationship between scholarship and society in critical discourse analysis is marked by bold lines of convergence; thus acknowledging the socio-politically situated nature of discourses and social reflections. As a phenomenological engagement of social action critical discourse analysis of a social network such as the Forum requires a teleological explanation related to its goals and purposes; i.e., what Max Weber referred to as the process of *Verstehen* – understanding facts by interpreting their meanings in the light of relevant social goals and values (Fischer 2003: 50). This is an interpretivist engagement of a group such as the Forum by being situated within as a member and an activist.

Critical discourse entails analysing the texts that project beliefs, values and categories embodying fundamental ideological positions. And as forms of locus of enunciation, discourses embody within them a form of re-enactment of memory and social structure as forms of social interaction. As will be seen in the case of different thematic discourses on Matebeleland and imaginations of a separate state critical discourse entails that the past is relived, re-invigorated, re-enunciated and made ‘real’ through the creation of social networks that as nodes mirror the structure of social ideation. This type of research enacts, confirms, legitimates and challenges relations of power and domination in society. It is embedded in the discursive nature of social networks. As Fowler (1991) suggests, discourse analysis allows us to explore a variety of forms of social interaction. It helps in the study of language usage and in uncovering the ideological assumptions embedded in communicative texts (Gunter 2000: 87).

In order to present a concrete appreciation of the discourses taking place within the Forum as our case study of a social network site – an analysis of the language used is presented. Language in this instance examines the context of communication; i.e., who is communicating with whom and why? It also analyses the actual constitution of the social networks being studied. Also an evolution of different types of communication and their relationship within the different discourses on Matebeleland and ultimately the cause of Mthwakazi is analysed. Meaning in this instance is not static or inherent in representation but is socially constructed through symbolic

systems and discourses. Critical discourse analysis, therefore, helps us to understand the presence of the crucial interface between shared social representations governing collective action. In that regard, discourses of power and feelings of being dominated were taken into account.

Using critical discourse analysis we analysed different aspects; such as, material significance, which entails how language is used in the creation of significance; identities – what identities is the language used constructing; connections – this links with memorialisation of issues being discussed; thus creating a link between current trends and certain historical episodes. These engagements enabled us to understand the origins of Mthwakazi nationalism as an ideology, also hinged on socially shared interpretive frameworks that allow group members to understand and make sense of social reality, everyday practices and relations to other groups (Button 1991). From this we understand that this study is about engagement of an Internet based social network of oppressed people who are engaged in cognitive discourse in their exchange of ideas, beliefs, values, and judgements (van Dijk 1995: 244).

Various themes were created as part of the discourses that usually shape different topics within the Forum. Identity issues were presented in view of the discursive accordance of the Mthwakazi identity. Second, are discourses on development issues and marginalisation of Matebeleland. Third, are discourses on Zimbabwean politics and the exclusion of Matebeleland. Fourth, are discourses on economic issues - investment and the emergence of China (particularly Matebeleland). The fifth theme presents discourses on verbal interactions in which disagreements and other related issues emerged in the Forum. A social networking group such as the Forum, which is composed of people from different backgrounds, tends to face the challenge of in-fighting and divergences of cognitive dimension. Through such disagreements we are able to glean that ideologies are cognitive and axiomatic; through socially shared belief systems of groups (van Dijk 1995: 244).

The Internet and ICTs in Zimbabwe

Internet usage has grown phenomenally in Zimbabwe over the past decade, and currently stands at over 45% of a population of around 15 million (ITU). Despite attempts by the government in collusion with the three GSM operators (the mobile

phone operators Econet, Telecel and Netone) to increase tariffs beyond the reach of the majority, there has been a steady increase of users. Between 2007 and 2009, Internet access grew by 165%⁴, pushing Zimbabwe to number 10 on the continent in terms of numbers of users.⁵ The increase in the use of mobile phones has also contributed to the rise in the number of Internet users in Zimbabwe; mobile Internet penetration increased by a phenomenal 4000% in the 18 months up to September 2011 (McCombs, 2011). McCombs also predicted that it would grow faster in the near future and was likely to change the way Zimbabweans consume news.⁶

Since the dollarization of the economy in 2009, Zimbabwe's three mobile phone operators have expanded their networks and made mobile phone lines (called sim cards in Zimbabwe) easily accessible. This followed a decade of exorbitantly high prices, particularly. The rapid growth in Internet penetration can partly be attributed to these developments. About 33% of users who access Facebook, a very popular social network among Zimbabweans, are doing so through their mobile phones (McCombs, 2011) and this number keeps rising. The proliferation of cheap Chinese made imitation handsets also lowered the barrier to obtaining a mobile phone. While previously penetration was restricted to urban and semi-urban centres, both Econet and Net One have expanded their networks across the country, to the extent that only the most remote parts of Zimbabwe are now outside mobile phone coverage.

These developments presented many opportunities and saw Zimbabweans begin new innovative ways of sending news headlines and mobilisation, such as using SMS to send campaign messages to voters, and circulating satirical messages about presidential candidates (Ndlela, 2009: 233).

A significant outcome of these developments is that not only are diasporic Ndebele groups able to socialise among themselves in their foreign environs, but they are also able to more easily link with groups back home; increasingly, even in Zimbabwe traditionally disadvantaged groups are able to have a presence online. This is significant in overcoming problems emanating from the digital divide, which is

⁴ "Zimbabwe Internet Report" from Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com) obtain on <http://newzimbabwe.com/pages/email21.18645.html> Accessed 28.04.11

⁵ I have used this period to show the trend in terms of growth in Zimbabwe.

⁶ Cited in *The Financial Gazette*, 13 October 2011

described as inequalities in physically accessing ICTs, the Internet and other computer based technologies, but also more importantly the social and cultural factors whose net effect is the exclusion of many people from using the Internet. As this paper will show, these platforms while being initiated and dominated by groups based in the diaspora, also have a significant presence of people based in Zimbabwe.

The “Vulnerable” Potential of ICTs

The Internet offers many possibilities for the extension of the public sphere, or for the creation of counter or alternative public spheres where the main public sphere is rendered inaccessible, as is the case in many repressive societies. Also, unlike older technologies like TV that have been repeatedly accused of keeping people separated (Gordon & Silva, 2011: 105) and alienated, it encourages the cultivation of both weak and strong ties (cf. Granovetter, 1973), thereby bringing dispersed groups and individuals together. The interactivity of digital technologies allows them to diminish “the significance of the old dichotomy between sender and receiver, producer and audience” (Coleman, 2005: 180); that is, unlike older “megaphone” mediums that provided an essentially one way form of communication. The Internet in particular “ideally provides, simultaneously, a participatory interface and a two-way flow of information between many different users” (Rønning, 2010: 133), which Integrates person-to-person communication, group communication, and global publishing and information provision” Flew (2005: 4) through various platforms.

No doubt some of these functions existed through older media: as Flew (2005: 3-4) observes, “new media” in actual fact “captures both the development of unique forms of digital media, and the remaking of more traditional media forms to adopt and adapt to the new media technologies”, to the extent that the boundaries between “old” and “new” are blurred.

Through its popular features, it provides virtual spaces that transcend space and time (Wright & Street, 2007: 850; Rønning, 2010: 133). The combination of horizontal and vertical communication creates the possibility for “deliberation (citizen-to-citizen communication) and ‘hearing’ (citizen-to-authorities communication)” (Tsagarousianou, 1999: 196); the Forum vividly captures both these aspects. This represents a reversal of the processes Habermas saw as disintegrating the public

sphere and ending the possibilities for a more participatory politics, whose net result was that “horizontal communication between citizens ... [was] increasingly replaced by vertical communication between mass media” (Downey & Fenton, 2003: 186). The dispersed nature of ICT/Internet based communication cultivates the creation and strengthening of horizontal communication between groups at the bottom brought together by shared “imaginings” while also permitting the same to approach centres of power with renewed confidence and defiance, which is evident where the Forum has lobbied policy makers and the government of Zimbabwe on certain issues.

The Forum represents an example of disempowered citizens, acting as an interest group and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the Internet to not only form a discursive, alternative public sphere but to connect it to the larger, national public sphere. Such a phenomenon aptly captures Craig Calhoun’s (1992: 37) intervention which turns the Habermasian-Ardonian immanent pessimism on its head, by showing how the Forum as part of civil society exerts influence on the mass-media (through online discourses as forms of news) as an established alternative discursively connected public sphere. In this way, the Forum offers its members the opportunity to mobilise and advocate on issues that affect the people of Matebeleland. The Forum is, therefore, a result of the domineering public sphere exacerbated by the oppressive state of affairs in Zimbabwe. New media technologies have therefore helped in the creation of social networks whose ethos continues to negate established nationalist discourses; especially the view of a ‘united Zimbabwe.’ Peter Dalgren (1994) in his distinction between the common domain of the public sphere and advocacy domain presents a telling exposition of the continued transformation of the public sphere with the rise of new media technologies and how established discourses tend to be challenged by voices from the advocacy domain. As a result functional differentiation emerges which John Downey and Natalie Fenton (2003: 188) suggest

...is done through a variety of media, formats and representational modes, taking into account the sociocultural segmentation of society. The advocacy domain consists partly of time and space made available by the dominant media and partly of a plurality of smaller civic media from political parties, interest groups, movements, organizations and networks. This distinction allows us to consider not only the official public sphere of the dominators, but also the public sphere of the dominated (2003).

The latter presents an interface between shared social representation and collective

action taken by those whose voices are constantly suppressed. The advocacy domain presents a conduit for the expression of feelings of being dominated. An example is the case of the Zimbabwe Football Association (ZIFA) in 2009 following the position stated by its CEO suggesting that Barbourfields football stadium in Bulawayo (Matebeleland's major city whose alleged neglect by the central government has dominated discourses invoking feelings exclusion by people of the region since independence) may not benefit from FIFA's development projects meant for the World-Cup football tournament. A story appeared in one of the online newspapers on April 4, 2009 with the following headline: "Activists fear Bulawayo side-lined for 2010 world-cup projects." Citing the Forum, the story read as follows:

...The **Internet discussion**⁷ involved prominent campaigners from the region, including Amakhosi Theatre Productions director Cont Mhlanga ... among others. Some of the activists were particularly scathing of the political leadership in the region over its silence on the matter. Barbourfields Stadium is in Deputy Prime Minister Thokozani Khupe's parliamentary constituency.⁸

The above statement presents salient discourses of protest. Accusations against the local leadership, in particular, mention of Thokozani Kupe, who would be seen as a progressive politician in the more "national" opposition movement (being vice-president of the MDC-T, the biggest opposition to Mugabe's rule) present an interesting case of conscious attempts by of the people of Matebeleland to extricate themselves from broader national political struggles as part of their attempts to not only assert their autonomy but to insist that national politics cannot resolve their problems.

Virtuality and National belonging as fossilised precipitates of a historical process

'An increasing number of people are finding their lives touched by collectivities which have nothing to do with physical proximity' (Wilbur (2000: 45). eParticipation has emerged as a new phenomenon in which communities now exist but transcending boundaries of space and time. New imaginary communities now exist as part of Internet based communities; thus creating a particular kind of 'digital culture'. Of concern here is the rise of a 'virtual community', which much like a case of haunting

⁷ Our emphasis.

⁸ <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/zifa23.19649.html>

remains notoriously difficult to define. The term virtual community presents a paradoxical presupposition of the 'real' yet imaginary community. Howard Rheingold defines virtual community as;

[...] social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (1993: 5).

Following Rheingold's definition we are able to glean the emphasis on human agency, thus leading to the formation of a community. Community refers to relations of commonality between persons and objects. Other factors would include '...a holding-in-common of qualities, properties, identities or ideas' (Wilbur 2000: 47). The concept of a community gained more traction as a political concept taken from Benedict Anderson (2006) in his concept of nations as 'imagined communities'. The notion of virtual relates to something not real, but which may be shown (like in a mirror) as the representation of something quite real. Virtuality derives its roots from 'virtue', thus in keeping with both power and morality, which Shawn Wilbur (2000: 47) says reaches, '[...] back into a religious world-view where power and moral goodness are united in virtue'.

So the virtual is able to reproduce effects like in a mirror, thus presenting itself as an effect in the absence of the real effect. Emphasis here is on the realm of appearance. In that regard new media plays the role of optical technologies by bringing to the fore that which cannot be brought into view through forms such simulation and reflection. In this case the Forum and other such political groups that extend as communities of purpose stand out as refracted reality. Different political forms and communities emerge here, as people organise themselves along lines of dissent to the status quo in Zimbabwe. Thus a new state of Mthwakazi as a separate state exists, '[...] in the hearts and minds of many', says one of the participants, thereby confirming the notion of an imagined community.

To Kellas (1991: 03) nationalism is both an 'idea' and a 'form of behaviour'. But to scholars like Eli Kedourie (1994: 01) and Anthony Smith (1991a: 51) nationalism is a 'doctrine' and an 'ideological movement'. Ernest Gellner (1983: 1) adds that nationalism is a 'political principle', which undergoes different formation stages and

is thus a kind of ‘discursive formation’ (Calhoun 1997: 3). There are visible forms of nationalism, such as dress code, presentation of a ‘national’ flag, staging of events to mark a feature of national belonging, such as the King Mzilikazi commemoration in England, the USA and in Zimbabwe by members of the Forum as a celebration of Mthwakazi national identity. Michael Billig (1995) presents these as ‘banal nationalism’. We acknowledge that these forms are neither remote nor exotic; nevertheless people use them to conjure feelings of national identity. These features of national identity cannot be ignored and are often seen through the diasporans’ patriotism and romanticisation of the homeland.

Discourses on Mthwakazi nationalism

This section will present different discourses taking place within the Forum. Using the classical case of China in which discourses of development, economic and political marginalisation, and investment are discussed the section will attempt to capture the dilemma faced by the people of Matebeleland. The Chinese case encompasses both regional and national undertones. Regional in the sense of Matebeleland as a region, inclusive of the aspirations of a people, and national in the sense of a centralised governmental system of decision-making, where decisions that have implications for the region are taken unilaterally by central government. As one member of the group observed:

...What is troubling for me is that a deal has already been made and sealed without Bulawayo’s participation. It goes without saying that the one who made and sealed the deal calls the tune here and I don't see how the City of Bulawayo⁹ can begin to negotiate a separate deal with the Chinese. [...] I think we have to concern ourselves mostly with policy to make deep changes [...].

This brings out the sense of despair of the people of Matebeleland have vis-à-vis the national agenda, and their perception of themselves as peripheral. Another participant commented on March 17, 2011 that;

Bulawayo is the only town in Zimbabwe where there are permanent roadblocks both inside the city and as you leave the city. This is not by accident, this is by design. It disrupts business and development as well. It feeds corruption.

⁹ The City of Bulawayo stands as the representative capital of Matebeleland regions

Given the enormity of summarising all the discussions that have taken place since the formation of this group in January 2006 and the challenge of space limitations for this paper we have chosen to present as sound-bites only a few selected issues. The Forum's richness stems from the diverse composition it enjoys. It is made up of people from diverse backgrounds including their areas of expertise. This as its major source of strength tends to result in different issues discussed ranging from policy related issues to major political issues. An example is the major policy debate pitting different views regarding China's investment exploits in Zimbabwe and their plans to extend into Matebeleland.

The language of discussion is not always confined to English but sometimes includes isiNdebele, which reflects the ethnicity of most members. The Forum has tackled a myriad of issues ranging from the unresolved Gukurahundi genocide, devolution of power (seen as a way of giving more autonomy to Matebeleland), to debates about the Chinese's involvement in development and investment projects in Matebeleland in particular and Zimbabwe in general. As stated above in these threads dominant discourses emerge concerning exclusion in the sense of broader cases of national development and feelings of powerlessness and questioning of legitimacy of the central governments and frustrations about opportunities. An example is the case of unfair employment of a Director of an Orphanage in Nketa, Bulawayo who had been hired from the Sally Mugabe Children's Fund in Harare in 2007/8 to manage a local NGO.

Discourse on investment and China - China's emergence in the economic and development scene has led to heated debate between those who see strategic opportunities for Matebeleland (if 'locals' are involved in the ventures), and those perceiving further marginalization of the region. A prominent policy advisor tried to calm those who see further marginalization:

I am advised that the contract with the Chinese on the Matebeleland Zambezi Water Project prescribes that: all labour employees must be residents of Matebeleland, save for the engineering specialists; all inputs e.g. building materials, must be of Zimbabwean origin.

To this another participant quickly retorted by observing that;

I'm laughing at point number one that says: "All labour employees must be residents of Matebeleland." Ongakwaziyo ukuthi yiwaphi lawo ma residents eMatebeleland azaqhathswa hatshi usemnyameni sibili? (who ever does not know which residents of Matebeleland will be employed suffers from blissful ignorance).¹⁰

This observation, while presented as a rhetorical question, expresses issues of political exclusion, marginalization and the tribalised state of Zimbabwe's developmental processes, where the people of Matebeleland see themselves as excluded. Further, it expresses shared frustrations with government dealings and offers a critique of central political power (cf. Morrison and Love 1996: 40), thereby legitimating calls for solidarity among the people of Matebeleland as the oppressed.

The group that favours engaging the Chinese argues that the project of self-determination remains their major goal. They also argue that they are informed by global economic realism and the fact that China is already a major player in Zimbabwe. The other group warns that while the argument of economic realism remains plausible the fact that issues are determined in Harare means a perpetuation of the status quo. They also express lack of trust for Chinese products arguing that they prefer dealing with China only if Mthwakazi can afford to determine her affairs. One member trenchantly argued:

I still wouldn't touch the Chinese with a budge pole! [...] a free Mthwakazi State [...] will decide democratically and choose who to engage with to the best interests of Mthwakazians and their future generations.

Another member responded:

(...)it's not the Chinese that are a problem. It's the government. The Chinese were invited there... we should have laws that say if there is a project ... to be built. Let the community under where the structure is to be located put out a tender and let it be fair. Open the economy up that way. [...] let foreign companies compete to come and do business in Zimbabwe. While your role as the Zimbabwean government is ensuring that laws are followed, and there

¹⁰ This statement captures the common feelings of discriminatory employment tendencies by public and private sector where Shona speaking residents are seen to be given preference ahead of the indigenous people of Matebeleland.

is no stealing of resources by international companies.

The discussion on Chinese investment in Matebeleland tended to have a marked political twist, with some members of the Forum arguing that it is almost impossible for the people of Matebeleland to declare their conditions to the Chinese. From this political twist discourses on the imagination of a separate Mthwakazi state could be gleaned. For example, as the discussion on China's investments plans in Bulawayo and the greater Matebeleland continues one member of the group made the following observation:

States are the basic foundations of the international political and legal order. Within a State, everything you do (at least of a public nature) is controlled by the State. You can source squillion dollars for Bulawayo or Matebeleland. You still have to go through the laws and regulations of the existing State called Zimbabwe. Now if that State is against what you do, how can you even dream of doing anything big. Under existing conditions, or reformed conditions of decentralisation or devolution, nothing will change unless uMthwakazi wields real power as that basic constituent part of the international system: the State.

This position speaks to the growing gravitas as people from Matebeleland continue to imagine a separate state of Mthwakazi as the solution to their subaltern situation. Another member of the Forum opined that:

[...] we all want to see Bulawayo develop and return to being the industrial capital of Zimbabwe. The reason why Harare may be so keen to invite the Chinese to develop Bulawayo could be simple that Harare knows that it is now almost in total control of Bulawayo. Unconfirmed statistics show that Harare now controls more than 68% of the Bulawayo economy both in the formal and informal sectors. The only sector where Mthwakazi was dominating kuse mkambo (at the flea-market) but she is also being displaced. So we should never fool ourselves that the development will benefit us. Yes we will benefit in that we are going to be their employees if we are lucky. Otherwise we are to be consumers first.

However, another strongly observed that:

As much as we are all entitled to I think everyone is correct in some way i.e. those that say that we face major policy and political obstacles while at the same time there are some who still see an opportunity to get involved in spite of the obstacles. [...] Perhaps some things are

meant to happen in parallel. I fully subscribe to the notion of encouraging devolution as well as a review of the policy framework but also believe I'm not going to wait while all that is happening.

The notion and calls for devolution expresses aspirations of self-determination. It also expresses suspicions people have of anything that is decided or undertaken by the state concerning Matebeleland. People from Matebeleland always tend to think that the government can never do things for their own good, except only if there is an ulterior motive. This is also because of deep-seated suspicions people have coupled with the common tribal cleavages often faced whereby the government tends to be seen as favouring people from Mashonaland.

ICTs and the Negation of the Public Sphere

Many doubts have been raised about the effectiveness of using the Internet for mobilising groups and for advocacy, with pessimists suggesting that some of the successes cited by scholars and activists are exaggerated if not at all part of the problematic imaginations about the seemingly magic abilities of technology. It is suggested therefore that the Internet (and any technology) be seen as double-sided (Morozov, 2011), which helps focus more productively on its potential and limitations, as a technology. Therefore, hopes raised on the basis of the possibilities enabled by the Internet through forums, email groups, social networks and other platforms that keep emerging must be tempered with grim reminders of its darker side, and those qualities that could hinder civic participation and the cultivation of discursive groups such as the Forum thereby impinging on the extension of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2001: 75). The point being that the Internet is not an inherently liberating or *positive* technology. Controversial founder of the website *Wikileaks*, Julian Assange captured this paradox:

It [the Net] is not a technology that favours freedom of speech. It is not a technology that favours human rights. It is not a technology that favours civil life. Rather it is a technology that can be used to set up a totalitarian spying regime, the likes of which we have never seen.

Or, on the other hand, taken by us, taken by activists, and taken by all those who want a different trajectory for the technological world, it can be something we all hope for¹¹.

Thus, it appears the democratising potential of the Internet is developing parallel to its darker, constricting side (cf. Morozov, 2011). Platforms such as the Forum present as many challenges and questions as they offer possibilities. Outside the restrictions brought by nervous policy makers and politicians, some of the features of the Internet, that are hailed for the possibilities they possess equally have the potential to negate participatory discussion and civic engagement. On many blogsites and discussion forums, the promotion of pseudonymity and anonymity, which is important as it allows people with concerns about their security to participate, as is the case with many members of the Forum, has opened doors to various levels of irresponsibility and abuse including serious violations of privacy and threats to the security of individuals (Rønning, 2010: 138). The Internet therefore presents both opportunities for the extension of disenfranchised groups and threats to their existence. Citron (2010: 49) underlines this double-sidedness:

The Internet has two faces. One propels us forward with exciting opportunities for women and minorities to work, network, and spread their ideas online. The other brings us back to a time when anonymous mobs prevented vulnerable people from participating in society as equals.

Papacharissi (2002: 10) notes that this technology “frequently induce[s] fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion” which is referred to as “flaming”. Flaming can be both deliberate or the result of emotions rising from heated discussions, which is usually the case in discussions involving politics, race or ethnicity. It can be described as hostile postings or threads that are intended, deliberately or not, to cause hurt or insult to one or other participants on an online platform, and there are plenty of examples in the Forum. Flaming has many negative consequences for discussion platforms and may cause some participants to withdraw or at the very least to avoid expressing their honest opinions or disagreeing with more aggressive members of the group. To corroborate the above observation, following a heated debate, which stretched for weeks, one member of the Forum observed that:

¹¹ Assange was addressing students at Cambridge University, reported by *The Guardian* March 15, 2011 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/mar/15/web-spying-machine-julian-assange/print> Accessed 16 March 2011)

I suggest that we suspend this forum until we put in place rules of participation? We can select some people, [...] to write the rules of the game. This forum has become intimidating. Some people are not comfortable participating under such conditions. Besides, there is nothing to participate in since this has turned into a mudslinging arena.

However, for us to understand the vitality of these forms of agreements and heated debates within the Forum we are reminded here of Lewis Coser's (1957: 198) conflict functionalist's perspective that:

Conflict within and between groups in a society can prevent accommodations and habitual relations from progressively impoverishing creativity. The clash of values and interests, the tension between what is and what some groups feel ought to be, the conflict between vested interests and new strata and groups demanding their share of power, wealth and status, have been productive of vitality.

Perhaps the most vivid way of emphasizing the functionality of in-group conflict, marking the progressiveness emanating from such forms of divergence was best captured by John Dewey (1930: 300), in particular on his position that consciousness and thought arises from the realisation of obstacles to the interaction of groups. Furthermore, he opined that:

Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates [...] invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving [...]
Conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity

In acknowledgement of the ingenuity and level of consciousness emanating from the sharp exchanges that had characterised the Forum one member observed that:

I am more than pleased to note that people have not been side-tracked but emerged even more solid and have gotten to know each other! With this our people will win; the struggle for a change of heart has won a minor victory, which until yesterday appeared poised to take our unity of purpose to the doldrums. To all of you I pay my profound respects.

Another recurrent concern with platforms like the Forum is that while bringing together individuals or groups who share the same identity is important for the consolidation of identities and the solidarity needed to pursue shared interests, the

idea that this is a public sphere is flawed because the composition of the group robs it of critical debate, an essential requirement for the public sphere. Instead, such forums bring “‘like-minded’ individuals” together to form “deliberative enclaves” or “mini public spheres” in which they reinforce each other’s opinions without critical reflection (Dahlberg, 2007: 828), potentially reducing them to echo chambers. In many instances, such groups are also not connected to any larger forums (Dahlgren, 2001: 76; cf. Papacharissi, 2002 & 2004). Where groups are heterogeneous and more representative of larger society, some individuals and groups take advantage of anonymity and pseudonyms to intimidate participants who hold different views (Papacharissi, 2002: 16), an issue that can also be raised concerning the Forum.

Conclusion

The paper acknowledges the role played by the Internet in providing impetus and space for the regrouping and reshaping of suppressed memory and voices such as those of the people of Matebeleland. The Forum as a social network; i.e., one organised along the grouping of people’s personal emails enjoys a kind of *prima facie* uniqueness in which participants enter into it as soon as they log-on to their emails, unlike in other social networks such as Facebook based ones or other web-based networks. This has encouraged the viral nature and instantaneity of engagement of issues. More-over, it shows how an oppressive system has enabled the creation of a virtual sphere in which members engage in different discourses using a simple mailing list.

The Forum as a space for the subaltern group has led to the re-enactment of memory, social structure and reproduction of ideas. Its individuated nature speaks to the archaeology of social interaction, the nature of different discourses on Matebeleland and their imaginations of a separate state. It acts a miniature of the much longed for space that should be traditionally located between the state and the household or citizens; which has been criminalised in Zimbabwe. The obstruction of such an important space, including the criminalisation of certain discourses has led to the re-enactment of citizenship, this time as ‘netizens’. Thus a revived critical space of citizen engagement has been re-invigorated, re-enunciated and made ‘real’ through the nodal structure of ICTs to enable social ideation. Therefore, critical discourse analysis has enabled us to critically immerse ourselves in the discourses of power

relations and domination in society by way of exploring a variety of forms social interaction.

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