

GUKURAHUNDI IN RETROSPECT: THEATRE PERFORMANCE AS A CULTURAL PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

Resistance during Gukurahundi was virtually impossible especially in holding camps such as Bhalagwe and Matopo. Gukurahundi refers to the 1983-1987 period in Zimbabwean history characterised by an unconfirmed genocide of the Ndebele minority. Upon the deployment of the 5th Brigade in Matabeleland and some parts of Midlands, the government of the day closed off media access to these areas, banning access to journalists without formal permission. While some survivors of the holding camps and *Gukurahundi* brutality have over the years shared their experiences with family members, some have chosen to remain quiet. Out of the firsthand narratives from *Gukurahundi* emerging through various platforms, an ‘alternative’ narrative is beginning to infect public opinion and discourse. It is considered ‘alternative’ because it contests the official ‘moment of madness’ (GAIDZANWA, 2015) government meta-narrative. In this article, I examine Victory Siyanqoba’s *Talitha Koum-Someone Lied!* (here in after referred to as *Talitha Koum*) as one instance of a cultural public sphere’s ability to give a voice to those who have lost theirs such as the survivors and their children in a manner that unsettles the past, bringing alternative narratives to the public and instigating debates and discourses around *Gukurahundi*.

Keywords: *Gukurahundi*. Theatre performance. *Talitha Koum*. Public sphere.

GUKURAHUNDI EM RETROSPECTO: PERFORMANCE TEATRAL COMO ESFERA PÚBLICA CULTURAL

Resumo

Resistir durante o Gukurahundi era virtualmente impossível, especialmente em campos de detenção como Bhalagwe e Matopo. Até o lançamento da Quinta Brigada em Matabeleland e em algumas regiões centrais, o governo da época impediu o acesso da imprensa a essas áreas, banindo jornalistas sem permissão formal. Enquanto alguns sobreviventes dos campos de detenção e da brutalidade no Gukurahundi compartilharam suas experiências com familiares ao longo dos anos, outros escolheram o silêncio. Dentre as narrativas feitas em primeira mão sobre o Gukurahundi que emergiram de várias plataformas, uma narrativa “alternativa” começa a infectar a opinião e o discurso públicos. É considerada “alternativa” porque contesta a meta-narrativa governamental de “momento de loucura” (Gaidzanwa, 2015). Neste artigo, Eu examino o espetáculo de Victory Siyanqoba denominado Talitha Koum (Alguém mentiu) enquanto exemplo da habilidade de uma esfera pública cultural em dar vozes àqueles que perderam as suas próprias, como os sobreviventes e seus filhos, de uma forma que perturba o passado, trazendo ao público narrativas alternativas, além de instigar debates e discursos em torno do Gukurahundi.

Palavras-chave: Gukurahundi. Performance teatral. Talitha Koum. Esfera Pública.

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Introduction

The *Gukurabundi*² period marked a dark period in the history of Zimbabwe; a period that both the governments of former President Robert Mugabe and current President have, until recently in 2020, been banished from public discussion and debate. The blockage of local and international media coverage during the this period, rubbishing of international documentaries such as those produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Daily Show and African Press by the ruling Patriotic Front-Zimbabwe African National Union (PF-ZANU), later ZANU-PF, choosing to maintain a narrow self-preserving view of 'protecting the civilians from rebels and guerrillas' (KRIGER, 2005). Yet, an 'alternative' narrative is beginning to emerge in the crevices allowing the generation of a public opinion and discourse that challenges ZANU-PF's government meta-narrative. In this paper, I examine Victory Siyanqoba's *Talitha Koum-Someone Lied!* (2018) (here in after referred to as *Talitha Koum* (2018) as one instance of a cultural public sphere's ability to generate resistive and agentive voices to those who have lost theirs such as the first and second generation survivors and their children.

The play *Talitha Koum* (2018) was written and directed by Desire Moyo and produced by Victory Siyanqoba Trust. The lead character Talitha was played by Sasha Sandys, while costume was designed by Victory Siyanqoba Trust Production Company Team (Desire Moyoxide, Bhekumuzi Khumalo, Ishmael Zulu and Antony Zulu) and lighting was designed by Saimon Mambazo Phiri. The plot revolves around Talitha, a young women who was killed by the 5th Brigade soldiers during *Gukurabundi* but is called back to tell her story, opening a window for the audience to journey with her as she exposes the violence, lies, and an alternative *Gukurabundi* narrative from the perspective of the victim. While chasing after Talitha, 5th Brigade soldiers maim, kill, rape, and dump her family and all the young active women and men in mass graves. All the infants born during this period are branded by the 5th Brigade soldiers as

² *Gukurabundi* refers to the 1983-1987 period in Zimbabwean history characterised by an unconfirmed genocide where thousands of the minority Ndebele speaking people of south-western Zimbabwe were beaten, shot, raped, burnt alive or thrown into mine shafts and/ or unconfirmed graves. In these holding camps, which have 'unconfirmed' mass graves, people dragged from the surrounding communities to be beaten, shot, raped, burnt alive or thrown into mine shafts; and lost their cultural matrices as they were deprived of family, friends, fortunes, and occupations.



‘offsprings of the dissidents’ as violence is meted on them leaving some permanently disabled. As the play draws to an end, all the young people that were killed by the 5th Brigade soldiers rise up from their graves and confront the then Prime Minister, now former President Robert Mugabe, who maintains the ‘official rhetoric’ that it was a moment of madness, but implicates himself when he threatens to kill them again; ‘vakadaa kunetsa tovarova’ (if they want to be problematic, we will beat them up).

I examine Victory Siyanqoba’s *Talitha Koum* (2018) as a window through which affected Matabeleland communities can discuss, debate, and present an alternative, albeit authentic, history of the cultures of violence that characterized *Gukurahundi*. Through this public performance, Victory Siyanqoba symbolically calls on young people from Matabeleland and Midlands to overcome their fear, discover their voices and narrate their experiential journeys detailing the varied cultures and typologies of violence meted upon them, via their parents. This liberates them to ask questions that might be difficult to pose in their public lives. The first such instance is the resistive action of telling their own experienced *Gukurahundi* stories and declaring: “Never again will the lions tell the stories of the kudus!” This declaration proposes and supposes that there is an alternative *Gukurahundi* narrative that the kudus must tell and dispel the lion’s and the fear attached to it.

This paper explores *Talitha Koum* (2018) as a mechanism to understand the *Gukurahundi* from a historical and futuristic perspective. I seek to exploit this theatre performance’s ability to present, frame and represent this painful historical period and the competing memories from a historical and futuristic perspective. To achieve this, I lean on Freddie Rokem’s (2000, p. 3) observation that;

What may be seen as specific to the theatre in dealing directly with the historical past is its ability to create an awareness of the complex interaction between the destructiveness and the failures of history, on the one hand, and the efforts to create a viable and meaningful work of art, trying to confront these painful failures, on the other.

In addition to this introduction, this paper has four major sections. In the introduction I have given an overview of the focus of this paper and characterised the case study and methodological approach. In the second section, I characterise the



cultural public sphere as a theoretical framework. The third section provides a critical engagement of the cultural politics in Matabeleland. The fourth section engages the case study production and the strategies deployed by Victory Siyanqoba in initiating and engaging in public discourse influencing debate on *Gukurahundi*.

The Cultural Public Sphere as a Theoretical Framework

The cultural public sphere derives its existence from Jürgen Habermas' (1997, p. 105) public sphere, which is characterised as a “domain of social life” where citizens “exchange ideas and discuss issues, in order to reach an agreement about matters of general interest”. The public sphere enables “information, ideas and debate to circulate in society and where political opinion can be formed” (DAHLGREN, 1990 in MACKEE, 2005 p. 440). Alan Mackee characterises the public sphere as a field

[.] where each of us finds out what's happening in our community, and what social, cultural and political issues are facing us. It's where we engage with these issues and add our voices to discussions about them, playing our part in process of a society reaching a consensus or compromise about what we think about issues, and what should be done about them. (MACKEE, 2005, p. 445)

The public sphere thus becomes a space of and for action where communities affectively communicate and, reflexively engage on their socio-political and economic situations and landscape they find themselves in. The concepts of affective communication and reflexivity invoke the cultural component of the public sphere, what McGuigan (2005, p. 435) has characterised as the “cultural public sphere.” He defines the cultural public sphere as a concept that refers to the “articulation of politics, public and personal, as contested terrain through affective [aesthetic and emotional] modes of communication” (McGUIGAN, 2005, p. 427). This articulation makes use of mediated cultural modes that include “various channels and circuits of mass popular and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life” (McGUIGAN, 2005, p. 435). The cultural public sphere thus captures the mediated hidden and public transcripts (SCOTT, 1990) as well as normative and alternative histories.



The concept of cultural public sphere is useful for understanding how modern societies are democratically organised, specifically looking at equality, freedom, justice, and comfort (MACKEE, 2005). Secondly, it enables us to examine and appreciate the role that ordinary citizens play in the creation of public culture, public policy, and nation-state dichotomy. This concept is important in the engagement of theatre performances as a public discourse that can initiate civic discussions and debates, a necessary contributory process to politics and public opinion formulation. Consequently, we can frame theatre performances as a space of action where the articulation of hegemonic politics and personal narratives can be and are contested. The deployment of the cultural public sphere as a lens for examining the role of theatre performances in shaping public discourse and influencing public opinions frames this paper as a response to Robert Muponde's (2004, p. 191) call for "alternative reading and interpretive frameworks to counter and replace the images of victimhood, 'patriotic' history and the language with which we have described our own as well as other ethnic people's citizenship in Zimbabwe."

Cultural Politics in Matabeleland

Since the independence, theatre practitioners within Matabeleland have laced their productions, performances and exhibitions with resistive strategies ranging from the use of language to counter national narratives. This kind of cultural politics exploits a variety of agentive mixed approaches. Alan MacKee (2005, p. 193) submits that these approaches

are linked by a refusal of the most straightforward versions of materialistic politics – refusing the idea that it is only 'jobs, pay and citizenship', the managing of scarce material resources in a culture, the work of the state and its legislature as real politics.

Matabeleland cultural groups' responses to the Zimbabwean hegemonic cultural politics has been towards securing a sense of group identity and creating connections between ideas and communities. From Amakhosi Theatre Productions' political satires of the late 1980s through the 1990s, to Raisedon Baya critical oeuvres caricaturing the



disintegrating social and political fabric to Thabani Moyo's *Naughty by Nature* theatrical experiments that lament the socio-political situations of a civil servant in Zimbabwe, the cultural sector has remained basically the only strategic site, besides Highlanders Football Club Home matches at Barbourfields Stadium, for public engagement, debate, imagination, and disputation of arguments. From public artefacts decorating the Bulawayo Town Hall lawns, which were later declared by the High Court to be provocative and uncouth, to various contemporary visual exhibitions such as Owen Maseko's *Sibathontisele* [We drip on them], Matabeleland cultural practitioners have contributed, influenced and characterised public discourse through their work.

Maseko's exhibition, which was banned and closed down by the Government of Zimbabwe through a High Court order on the 26th of March 2010, explored and profiled the massacre of Ndebele people by the government-sponsored 5th Brigade from 1983 until the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987. While other artworks were removed from the public domain from the Town Hall vicinity, the remaining artefacts have become a consolidation of the Ndebele people's hidden protest transcripts. For instance, one of the artefacts depicts a wearily tired man seated on a pedestal, holding and supporting his head with hands while the other is of a reedy man hard at work with a pick. These have been interpreted to be representative symbols of the domination, suffering and exploitation of Ndebele people within the Zimbabwean political and ethnic landscape. As artists produce these critically engaging works, they suffer more harm than good. For instance, after Maseko's *Sobathontisela* exhibition was banned, he was arrested and arraigned before the courts. Cont Mhlanga was forced to 'retire' from his position as Amakhosi Theatre Productions' Creative Director after he was charged for creating, directing, and producing *The Good President* in 2007. Many other artists have been forced to flee to neighbouring countries such as Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland in search of safety after the state security agents pursued them. As a result, some have continued to produce cultural content in the diaspora, extending the cultural public sphere.

In terms of content, cultural practitioners from Matabeleland have had mixed fortunes. There are some artists such as Lovemore Majaivana, Solomon Skuza, and Don Gumbo among other golden generation musicians who managed to traverse the tribal Shona-Ndebele ethnic continuum to become national stars. However, the



younger generation has faced challenges in achieving and reaching the same levels as Majaivana and others due to number of reasons. First, the ethnic-tribal wars have affected music production such that Ndebele musicians such as Sandra Ndebele and the late Beater Mangethe started producing music in in Shona because they would easily be played on radio. This is aptly observed and captured by Gibson Ncube and Gugulethu Siziba (2017) who observed that the Shonacentric coded broadcasting and creative arts market strangles Ndebele artists by either limiting their visibility or forcing them to produce their material in Shona. A practical case study manifested in the form of rowdy audience disruptions of Jeys Marabini's performance during the inauguration of President Emmerson Mnangagwa at the National Sports Stadium because the majority of the people in attendance 'did not hear what he was singing about.' As the audience disrupted Marabini's performance, they shouted and demanded Jah Prayzah to come on stage. This public indictment of Marabini, a legend in the eyes of the Ndebele, is an impeachment of Ndebele cultural practitioners as a collective and their products.

Although these generations have had different experiences in terms of the growth of their creative careers, the lament in their musical and visual products rings the same. To borrow from Brenda Werth (2010, p. 5) these cultural products "provide an optic for reflection upon the development and transformation of family discourse in relation to the state and citizenry" during Zimbabwe's post-independence period. This ability to narrate the past, present and frame the future into a coherent sequence of events and ideas represents a triumph over the repression of the past. This is however only possible, as David Dean, Yana Meerzon and Kathryn Prince (2015, p. 6) observe, "[i]f we agree that the 'real' is always present in our performances of the past" and therefore, "our performances give back to the past its own present". As such we need to view the lives of individuals represented in these cultural products, be it theatre performances, music or visual exhibitions, as micro-histories that reveal profound patterns of larger historical designs and larger existential and moral struggles. It is at this point that mediated cultural productions and exhibitions begin to contribute to the formulation of public opinions and influence policy.

The continued historical eventing and representation of the past highlights a desire by Matabeleland communities to participate in the shaping of opinions, policies,



and debates around their past, present and future. Theatre performances and/ or photographic exhibitions have the “power to reshape elements of the past” and capture “a fragment of its own historical moment for posterity” (DEAN, MEERZON and PRINCE, 2015, p. 8). Within this power and ability to reshape and capture the past, present and future through re-enactments, Freddie Rokem observes a complex double perspective critical to the formulation of public opinion. He submits;

On one hand, such aesthetic representations present a lived immediacy of the historical event, an immersion into the historical reality, including the limited understanding (or denial) of what is happening as the events unfold according to their sometimes perverse logic; while at the same time, these aesthetic representations also need some form of more general retrospective understanding of their consequences for us in the present, in particular regarding the ethical (though not moralistic) dimensions of these events (ROKEM, 2015, p. 22).

In creating this awareness of the duality latent in the historical events, creative cultural works allow a “complex interaction between the destructiveness and the failures of history, on the one hand, and the efforts to create a viable and meaningful work of art, trying to confront these painful failures, on the other hand” (ROKEM, 2000, p. 3). This duality seems to be the compelling force driving most creative cultural workers from Matabeleland to “ensure that their parent’s experiences are not forgotten, the pain is supplemented by a deep sense of responsibility” (BENHRENDT, 2013, p. 51). The following section locates the cultural public sphere within theatre performance and explores how Rokem’s duality was exploited towards drawing marginal and alternative *Gukurahundi* narratives to the public domain.

Negotiating *Gukurahundi* through *Talita Koum*

The difficulty in characterising *Gukurahundi* (as a genocide and an era) epitomises the historical trajectory of Zimbabwe as a nation. Largely, this emanates from the fact that *Gukurahundi* was a well-calculated strategy of enforcing Shona dominance and pursuing what Terrence Ranger (2003) later framed as ZANUcentric ‘patriotic history’. Robert Muponde (2004, p. 176) characterises Ranger’s notion of ‘patriotic history’ as a “virulent, narrowed down version of Zimbabwean history, over-simplified and made



rigid by its reliance on dualisms and binaries of insider/ outsider, indigene/ stranger/ landed/ landless, authentic/ inauthentic, patriot/ sell out”. Characteristically, *Gukurahundi* has been categorised in the academy as a ‘moment of madness’ (GAIDZANWA, 2015); an ‘unconfirmed genocide’ (MAEDZA, 2017) and ‘sweeping away of rubbish’ (MEREDITH, 2009) and a ‘weather event’ (GATSHENINDLOVU, 2012). Since the independence, the Zimbabwean governments of former President Robert Mugabe and current President Emmerson Mnangagwa have kept under surveillance, banned and/ censored all activities related to debating and/ contributing to the formation of a public opinion about *Gukurahundi*. This act by the government of closing all forums for public debate and discourse through all arms of state security maintained a ZANU-PF inspired *Gukurahundi* mono-narrative, first presented by Mugabe as a ‘moment of madness’, clogging out all mainstream political debates and discourses. Yet, communities in Matabeleland and some parts of Midlands felt locked in a psychological carceral, as one victim of *Gukurahundi* retorted that “upika ugqoke ezakho” (you serve your sentence while in your own clothes and house). I submit that mediated theatre performances as a public cultural sphere have been fundamentally important in allowing these subjugated and restrained narratives into the public domain, infecting public opinion and challenging policy.

Talitha Koum as a mediated aesthetic and emotional reflection of *Gukurahundi* “provide vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputations argument, which are not necessary of inherent merit but may be of some consequence” (MCGUIGAN, 2005, p. 435). This contestation between ‘merit’ and ‘consequence’ provide an in-between space or a hybrid site through which politics and societal experiences are articulated as contested domains. Theatre performances such as *Talitha Koum* and other relevant cultural activities become strategies through which Matabeleland communities foster, dispute and/ or create public opinions and cultural identities (GIORGI and SASSATELLI, 2011) related to *Gukurahundi*.

Victory Siyanqoba adopts a critical interventionist approach in *Talitha Koum*. McGuigan (2005, p. 435) observes that critical interventions “articulate widespread dissent and, in so doing, contributed to an enduring tradition of independent criticism of dominant power and ideology in the cultural public sphere.” In *Talitha Koum*, Victory Siyanqoba deploys rhetoric questioning as an aesthetic strategy of initiating



engagement, accessing consent from the community, challenging the community to action and exposing the perpetrator. *Talitha Koum* begins with Talitha's father repeatedly asking the audience if they are willing to watch and listen to their *Gukurabundi* stories; "Lingitshela ukuthi liqinisile ukuthi" [Are you really sure that you want to watch and listen to our stories]. This invokes a spirit of traditional African storytelling sessions where a granny would ask her grandchildren if they really wanted to listen to her folk stories, to generate interest from the listeners. This same strategy is like the call-and-response performance strategy that normally characterise praise poetry sessions, musical and dance shows within the Ndebele society. In essence, this strategy initiated and created a consensus between the performers and the spectators, a critical process in the formation of public opinion regarding *Gukurabundi*.

A key fundamental of the cultural public sphere is its ability to critically engage citizens and allow them to identify issues and strategies of engaging the state to deal with it (MACKEE, 2005). Theatre performances "interrogate specific events, systems of belief and political affiliations precisely through the creation of their own versions of events, beliefs and politics by exploiting technology that enables replications" (CAROL, 2006, p. 9). The bodies of the actors and those represented in *Talitha Koum* become active agents that construct their own reality in a relatively autonomous symbolic form (MYRSIADES, 1991, p. 9). Talitha and her peers who were raped and murdered rise from their graves to confront the 5th Brigade soldiers and the Robert Mugabe character, demanding an explanation as to why they were killed. It is this narrative that has been suppressed for a long time which, finds a release on the theatre stage. The proliferation of cultural exhibitions, documentaries and theatre performances have provided impetus and material to the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission's drive towards assessing the extent of the impact of *Gukurabundi* in contemporary Matabeleland. Whereas during these public hearings some people that had come forward to make submissions were arrested and charged with putting the name of the President into disrepute, the cultural sphere has of late been the strong venting and public discourse altering platform.

Theatre performances have been, in numerous occasions, deployed to set the record straight by bringing materials otherwise ignored to the public's attention (MARTIN, 2006, p. 14). Through exploring the archive, *Talitha Koum* is a play about



“perpetrators of violence, their confessions to this violence, and the strategies they develop before and after they confess to come to terms with their roles as perpetrators” (WERTH, 2010, p. 72). In the absence of a public confession(s) by known perpetrators, ZANU-PF have made access to only their own ‘truth’ as the only ‘truth’. Shria Eppel (2004: 49) observes that mainstream media failed to truthfully account for what was happening during *Gukurahundi* creating an inaccurate contextual knowledge of the landscape. Eppel observes that “reading archives of the state media of the 1980s is a surreal experience: In Bulawayo, where thousands were being massacred a few kilometres away, The Chronicle was almost silent about the atrocities, “blaming the dissidents for what little violence was acknowledged” (2004, p. 49). Within this context of suppressed narratives and inaccurate contextual knowledge for non-locals, locally mediated creative cultural products such as *Talitha Koum* provide an outlet for uncensored discursive debates at a local level.

During and post-*Gukurahundi* period, ZANU-PF created a mono-narrative that sought to discourage debate and discussions around *Gukurahundi*. Generally, to Shona ZANU-PF apologists, *Gukurahundi* does not need the attention it is getting. According to responses captures by Carl Swarr Stauffer (2009, p. 267);

For the most part, this [Shona] group believes that the estimated numbers of civilians killed have been inflated and that this is more about the Ndebele/ZAPU people ‘eating sour grapes’ because of their loss in the election polls of 1980. For these people, the ZANU-PF does not need to apologise for this historical tragedy as it was a result of ‘being at war’. In their minds, the Matabeleland people should find ways to ‘heal themselves’ and just ‘get over’ this difficult paper of trauma in their past.

As a result, Matabeleland has had to develop creative cultural strategies to resist this domination at ideological, material and status levels. These acts, which infect public discourse locally, regionally and nationally, are motivated and driven by the “force of necessity to scrutinise and live a dignified life” (LIJA *et al* 2017, p.43) within an ethnically segregated and disproportionate Zimbabwe. As subaltern cultural practice, these cultural performances challenge, negotiate and/ undermine the status quo through providing a site for the emergence of suppressed narratives such as the *Gukurahundi* stories from the victims’ perspective. From this perspective, by enabling the mediated *Gukurahundi* events to unfold on the stage, highlighting and exposing the



systematic orchestrated atrocities from the view of children of victims and survivors as well as young people such as Talita, *Talita Koum* upsets the status quo and Shonacentric hegemonic narrative.

One key feature that has remained a hot potato regarding *Gukurahundi* is the blanket amnesty granted to both foot soldiers, commanders and ZANU-PF political leadership involved with *Gukurahundi* Brigade. Eppel (2004, p. 49) submits that amnesties have played a crucial role in minimising the truth of atrocities at national level. Consequently, if crimes are not “persecuted but are rather pardoned, their details do not reach the official public forum” (EPPEL, 2004, p. 49). The ZANU-PF government, upon dissolving the *Gukurahundi* Brigade, granted a blanket amnesty and redeployed the foot soldiers, and commanders to other brigades within the Zimbabwe National Army, and Zimbabwe Air Force. To cover up for these amnesties, the ZANU-PF government always accuse those who raise questions about *Gukurahundi* to be re-opening old wounds and in so doing suppress any prospective debates.

The *Gukurahundi* systematic approach targeted at dismantling the cultural ethos of the Matabeleland communities, specifically cultural practices and language. Language was considered a deceptively political weapon that acted as a carrier of ideology and power. The choice of language for performances become a site of representation of the reality of the speaker. *Talita Koum* makes use of Ndebele, English and Shona. Mainly the victims use Ndebele as they interact among themselves and address the audience, while English is used to communicate with the *Gukurahundi* Brigade that only speaks Shona. In using Ndebele as the base language in *Talita Koum*, Victory Siyanqoba worked on recovering the loss of names, oral history and connection to their cosmology. This enabled Victory Siyanqoba to convey to the audience, the literal, metaphorical and socio-political meanings which are specific to the own culture and experiences. The refusal to speak Shona on stage; a marker of cultural and linguistic violence during *Gukurahundi*, positions Ndebele as a structural and strategic subversion of dominant linguistic practices in Zimbabwe. This strategic use of the Ndebele language as the language of engagement in *Talita Koum* reinvests the experiences of the Ndebele people with a sense of power, ownership and an active place on the stage and in the public discourse.



The strategic use of English as a *lingua franca* between the communities and *Gukurahundi* Brigade is also a symbolic refusal by these young representative characters of the cultural and linguistic domination of Shona both in their historical and present time. This symbolic refusal represents both a site for “political struggle and a coming to terms with one’s historical value” (MYRSIADES, 1991, p. 9). Linda Myrsiades (1991, p. 9) further submits that this kind of symbolic refusal also “represents the privileging of revolutionary subjectivity that frees thought from a way of thinking and feeling that are products of hegemonic domination.” Consequently, the local liberated voice of *Talitha Koum* cast and production team “writes a story that not only breaks the grip of a singular view of reality but orders its own chaotic experience as it creates for itself an understood community” (MYRSIADES, 1995, p. 11).

Talitha Koum was strategically and specifically performed within a Bulawayo festival programme and Matabeleland region for specific reasons. First, the narrative and debates around *Gukurahundi* have in most cases been moderated, challenged and debased by political players from outside the region. In localising the performance of *Talitha Koum*, focus on discourse and debates is shifted from the national to the local. This shift prioritises local narratives. Secondly, the performance of *Talitha Koum* within #IntwasaExtra, a December theatre programme of Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo grants agency and political relevance to the narratives and stories presented. Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo is a product of the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe (NACZ) that was meant to counter the dominance of Harare International Festival of Arts’ (HIFA), culturally and financially, in the Zimbabwean cultural sector. Performed on this platform, specifically created for the people of Bulawayo and Matabeleland provinces, *Talitha Koum* emerges as a specifically targeted cultural product for the people of these provinces; the provinces that the *Gukurahundi* Brigade ‘excelled’ in executing its military strategies. Within this narrative, theatre performances such as *Talitha Koum*, become a site for the initiation of public discourse and debates on cultural politics and production on a local level.

Talitha Koum exposes the deep cultural and physical violence that was meted on the Ndebele people in Matabeleland and some parts of Midlands. The play brings to the stage vivid violence scenes where the *Gukurahundi* Brigade soldiers maim, kill, rape, and violently beat and burry Ndebele speaking young active women and men in mass



graves. In one scene, the audience seemingly breaks down in remonstrations to the killing of an infant using mortar and pestle. The actors in their dual capacity as characters on stage and hyper-historians (BENJAMIN, 1999), and their subsequent spectators function as witnesses of the event, validating its authenticity as a represented historical event. The bodies of the performers, operate as ‘autobiographical bodies’ that fulfil a multitude of meaning forming functions: “it acts as a container for personal or national histories and stories; as a vehicle for the artists’ personal testimony; as ‘an addressable you’, and a witness to the trauma of the other” (DEAN, MEERZON and PRINCE, 2015, p. 13). This position grants power and agency to both the performer and the character on stage to confront and question the *Gukurahundi* historical period and the perpetrators. It is in this act of stepping out and asking the uncomfortable questions to the spectators that a new informed discussion and narrative begins to emerge especially with the young adult demographic in Bulawayo and Matabeleland.

The use of real speeches, character names and songs that were sung during *Gukurahundi* provides conflation of the historical and the present as well as challenging the perpetrators to explain their position at the time the speech was delivered and now. This ability to draw from an archive that is concrete, historically situated and relatively permanent generates an “aesthetics of discomfort through a systematic dismantling of boundaries between nightmare and reality, poetry and fact, the quotidian and the extreme” (EDMONDSON, 2009, p. 66). In so doing, theatre performance shows its power to combine the “emotional weight of storytelling with truth-telling and a sense of experiencing something happening in front of our eyes” (MARTIN, 2006, p. 14). For instance, the characters representing the Fifth Brigade and Mugabe get attacked by Talitha and other violated young people every time they fail to explain why they killed, maimed and raped people during *Gukurahundi* or revert to the default rhetoric of “a moment of madness”. This protest action is symbolic of the community’s refusal to accept Mugabe’s explanation regarding the cause and expected outcome of *Gukurahundi*. This remonstrations, which the spectators also participate in through encouraging Talitha to press on with questioning the character of Mugabe, “construct the subjectivity of the repressor figure through onstage explorations of discourses of confession and mechanisms of denial, escapism, betrayal and vengeance” (WERTH, 2010, p. 70).



Within the Zimbabwean geopolitics, the security sector has always had disruptive interest in all *Gukurahundi* activities and functions. While Peter Dahlgren (2006, p. 281) observed and advised about public cultural sphere platforms that seemed to enable public discourse debate and engagement, yet served and provided hegemonic structures with ways of managing the outcomes of the debates, in this instance it worked for the advantage of the Matabeleland community. In as much as the nation-state could have used post-performance discussions and material from *Talitha Koum* for its own gain and security purposes, the fact that this performance happened is testament to the desire of the people of Matabeleland and cultural groups to open up new discursive platforms of debate and discussions around *Gukurahundi*. In depicting *Gukurahundi* “not as an event of the remote past but as a continuous exploration of human terror through the devices of interrogation and testimony” (DEAN, MEERZON and PRINCE, 2015, p. 11), *Talitha Koum*, just as other cultural performances and visual exhibitions, revitalised the burning desire for public discussion platforms regarding *Gukurahundi* and its destructive effects on the community.

The public cultural sphere’s strength lies in its ability to allow experiential reflections to inform debate and public opinion formation. The theatre performer’s ability to present the stories of the perpetrator, victims and victims’ children from the vantage point of experience offers (new) ways of not only thinking about the disturbing contexts and complicated subject of *Gukurahundi* revealing the virtues and flaws of its source. Throughout the performance of *Talitha Koum* the audience and spectators stand with Talitha and other victims of *Gukurahundi* through interjections, protestations, denouncement and empathy. These participatory actions are key in the creation and development of public opinions and histories critical for social action and liberation of the people of Matabeleland. Further, these public remonstrations by the audience during the performance provide an expression valve which spreads into the public domain. This performance against the grain “overcome[s] both the separation and the exclusion from the past, striving to create a community where the events from this past will matter” (ROKEM, 2000, p. xii).



Creating a *Gukurahundi* Cultural Post memory through Cultural Performances

Most of the performers and activists leading the fight for the integration of the *Gukurahundi* discourse into the public domain are mostly second and third generation survivors of the genocide. At stake for this demographic is “not only a personal/familial/ generational sense of ownership and protectiveness but also an evolving theoretical discussion about the workings of trauma, memory and intergenerational acts of transfer” (HIRSCH, 2008, p. 104). Behrendt (2013, p. 51) submits that the members of this generation are “compelled to ensure that their parent’s experiences are not forgotten, the pain is supplemented by a sense of responsibility.” This collective personal, familial and/ or ethnic responsibility that pervades most creative cultural responses to the remembrance of *Gukurahundi* isolates “those elements that will convey what we *presently* understand to be the devastating extent of what was suffered in the past” (BEHRENDT, 2013, p. 53). In most cultural performances and visual exhibitions, the violation of political, social and cultural rights and identity of the Ndebele people is highlighted as fundamentally the base of what the people of Matabeleland suffered. The extent to which physical and cultural violence is represented in both theatre performances and visual exhibitions explicitly shows the depth of the traumatic *Gukurahundi* experiences the community was exposed to.

Post memory describes the “relationship of the second generation to the powerful, often traumatic, experiences that precede their birth but that were nevertheless transmitted memories in their own right” (HIRSCH, 2008, p. 103). Eva Hoffman (2004, p. xv) observes that the second generation is the generation in “which received, transformed knowledge of events is being transmitted into history or into myth.” In context of Matabeleland, this is the generation that has taken up the challenge of engaging and creating creative cultural public platforms to debate and discuss *Gukurahundi*. In their endeavour to create these platforms that foreground and demand justice for ancestral memoirs, cultural performances such as *Talita Koum* and *Sobathontisela* use “experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up” (HIRSCH, 2008, p. 106) to connect and express their awareness of their elders’ past sufferings.

Cultural performances enable performers to operate as authentic witnesses of the *Gukurahundi* genocide. As credible witnesses they must prove their epistemic



authority by knowing which platforms to speak from and who to speak to (BEHRENDT, 2013, p. 58). Those spoken to should also be aware and able to obtain and ascertain these epistemic credentials (BEHRENDT, 2013). In other words, the performer and those to whom the performance is done for should share historical knowledge of the issue engaged or debated. This enables both participants to look backward and define the present in relation to this troubled past rather than initiating new paradigms (HIRSCH, 2008).

Post memory describes the “relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images and behaviours among which they grew up;” (HIRSCH, 2008, p. 106). These experiences are transmitted so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute their own memories (HIRSCH, 2008). In essence, post memory is a structure of inter- and transgenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience (HIRSCH, 2008, p. 106-107). In remembering, re-remembering and enacting or representing these now personal traumatic experiences, cultural practitioners implicate their personal (bodies) in their performances because “experiences, while often communal in nature, are also individual, contextual and specific” (JOHNSON, 2015, p. 50). As cultural practitioners have been arrested and assaulted by security agents, their bodies together with those of the actors on stage become vehicles for memory and remembrance participating in what Katherine Johnson (2015, p. 47) terms “incorporating practices.” It is out of these practices that discourse on and debates around *Gukurabundi* can be integrated into the public discourse.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to sketch out instances where cultural (theatre) performances can instigate a cultural public sphere beneficial for the people of Matabeleland regarding the traumatic historical *Gukurabundi* period. The cultural public sphere relies on the power of storytelling to initiate debate that influence public discourse and opinion generation. Talita Koum as a theatre performance, just like other visual exhibitions such as *Sobathontisela* rely on storying the traumatic *Gukurabundi*



experiences. The theatre performance's creative strategies of telling and retelling narratives point to how strategic it is in political process of disassembling and reassembling public discourse and opinions. These become critical and fundamentally important in a situation such as *Gukurahundi*, where members of the living primary victims of the genocide are dying in huge numbers due to various causes.

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