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‘Put South Africans First’: Making Sense of an Emerging South African Xenophobic (Online-) Community

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With the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic to South Africa, a shift has taken place in the organisation of xenophobia, as xenophobic activism has adapted to the pandemic and increasingly moved ‘online’. While a large scholarship on the various aspects of ‘offline’ xenophobia in contemporary South Africa has been produced, the recent intensification of online xenophobic activism during the pandemic remains a heavily under-researched topic. The present study sets out to challenge this lack of attention given to online xenophobia in South Africa, by conducting a fifteen-month digital ethnography of an emerging South African xenophobic (online) community, the so-called ‘Put South Africans First’ movement. Aiming to understand the narrative construction of social reality in this group, data gained from the Put South Africans First Facebook page were triangulated with interviews conducted with the leadership of the Put South Africans First movement. Two narratives which are constitutive for this group will be analysed: The story of the ‘harmfulness of Pan-Africanism’ and the conspiracy of a ‘modern day slavery’. Drawing on a perspective that emphasises the entanglement between the emotional, the narrative and the digital in contemporary forms of xenophobia, the paper exposes the working of these two key narratives. The narrative of the ‘harmfulness of Pan-Africanism’ draws on the recycling of colonial stereotypes, the affect of disgust, and on the technique of reappropriating and weaponising history. In contrast, the narrative of ‘modern day slavery’ is fueled by a belief in replacement conspiracies and a dystopic longing into the future where, future generations of South African children have become enslaved by ‘foreigners’. The paper concludes by pointing out some of the specifics of the South African case in relation to xenophobic mobilisations in other parts of the world.

Keywords: South Africa; online xenophobia; affect; digital ethnography; narrative; social movements; emotion; conspiracy theory

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, xenophobic activism in South Africa has increasingly moved online. A few weeks after the South African government implemented a national lockdown on 26 March 2020, analysts from the Centre for Analytics and Behavioral Change (CABC) at the University of Cape Town launched a project focusing on possible disruptions to social cohesion that could emerge under lockdown regulations. While doing this work, the group of researchers noticed a sudden and drastic increase in online xenophobic mentions on Twitter. Anti-immigrant hashtags like 'All foreigners must leave', 'We want our country back' or 'Clean up SA' popped up on Twitter where they were widely used and circulated, with the hashtag 'Put South Africa First' – which first emerged on 27 April 2020 – used over 16,000 times in a single day.[1] While the expression of (violent) xenophobia is a well-known phenomenon in post-apartheid South Africa, the recent tendency in which xenophobia increasingly articulates itself in virtual spaces is a new, largely under-researched dimension of xenophobic activism in contemporary South Africa. [2]

The present study aims to contribute to the social scientific knowledge production about online xenophobia in South Africa by exploring how members of an emerging anti-immigrant Facebook group, called 'Put South Africans First' (PSAF), narratively and affectively construct, and understand themselves, their activities, and the social worlds around them. Specifically, this paper will address the question how social reality is constructed in the PSAF online space by attending to the manifold stories members collectively tell each other in their online conversations. A digital ethnographic approach is applied to explore what type of stories are important for PSAF members, and special attention will be given to the affective dynamics of collective storytelling by examining what 'moves' group members; that is, what they like, hate, fear, and make fun of.

While existing scholarship on xenophobia in South Africa has undoubtedly improved our understanding of the historical reasons, the political economy, and the etiology of rising anti-immigrant resentment in contemporary South Africa[3], major theoretical approaches commonly

[1] N. Krige, 'UCT Deep Dive into Xenophobia on Twitter', (September 2020), available at http://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2020-09-07-uct-deep-dive-into-xenophobia-on-twitter, retrieved 16 July 2021.

[2] For a notable exception see: V. Chenzi, 'Fake News, Social Media and Xenophobia in South Africa', *African Identities*, 19, 4 (2020), pp. 502–521.

[3] See for example E. O. Oni and S. K. Okunade 'The Context of Xenophobia in Africa: Nigeria and South Africa in Comparison', in A. O. Akinola (eds), *The Political Economy of Xenophobia in Africa* (Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 37–51; T. Adeogun and O. Faluyi 'Xenophobia, Racism and the Travails of 'Black' Immigrants in South Africa' in A. O. Akinola (eds), *The Political Economy of Xenophobia in Africa* (Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 125–133.

share the problematic premise of thinking about xenophobia as a phenomena that 'happens' to people and that is 'done' to them, instead of something that people 'do' and actively produce.[4] Most approaches rest on, what can be called a 'symptomatic perspective'[5] of xenophobia. In economic approaches, for example, xenophobia is understood as the symptom of poverty and material inequalities[6]; in psycho-historical perspectives, xenophobia is seen as the symptom of psychological entrapment in a colonial mentality[7]; and in hegemonic state discourse approaches, xenophobia is the symptom of interpellated subjects of xenophobic state institutions.[8] While I do not reject these approaches and their advantages, what I want to confront in this paper, is their underlying symptomatic style of reasoning and deterministic explanation of human behavior. Here I will approach xenophobia not as a symptom of something else; rather, online xenophobia will be addressed as the outcome of social actors actively exploring and constructing meaning and shared emotional experiences through collective interaction and storytelling processes. To attend to the ways social reality is narratively and affectively produced by PSAF members, this paper will take several steps: First, the Facebook group itself and its political context of emergence will be presented and described in more detail along with my digital ethnographic approach of studying this group. After that, I will suggest a narrative perspective with a particular focus on the affective quality of collective storytelling in social media environments for researching xenophobic online activists and their worldviews. In the main section of this paper, I explore the narrative construction of social reality in the PSAF group from two different, but overlapping angles: First, I look at stories which construct continental solidarity as 'Fake brotherhood' and convert Pan-Africanism into an idea felt to be harmful for members of the PSAF group. Next, I turn to analyse what I have called the 'slavery trope', a specific conspiracy narrative, according to which African migrants are said to establish a type of 'modern day slavery' in South Africa. I will end with a brief comparison of the South African case to xenophobic mobilisations in other parts of the world.

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[4] For a critique of this perspective regarding the field of radicalisation, see McDonald 'Radicalization', p. 15.

[5] S. Strick, *Rechte Gefühle* (Bielefeld, transcript Verlag 2021), p. 47.

[6] D. Pillay 'Relative Deprivation, Social Instability and Cultures of Entitlement' in S. Hassim, T. Kupe and E. Worby (eds) *Go Home or Die here. Violence, Xenophobia and the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2008), pp. 93–103.

[7] K. Tafira, *Xenophobia in South Africa: A History* (Johannesburg, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); D. M. Matsinhe, *Apartheid Vertigo: The Rise in Discrimination Against Africans in South Africa* (New York, Routledge, 2016).

[8] M. Neocosmos, *From 'Foreign Natives' to 'Native Foreigners'. Explaining Xenophobia in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Codesria, 2010).

The Emergence and Political Context of the 'Put South Africans First' Facebook Group

The emergence and creation of the PSAF Facebook group in May 2020 has not happened in a political vacuum. Since overcoming the racist apartheid state in 1994, democratic South Africa has been the scene of ongoing xenophobic violence and hatred primarily directed towards Black migrants from other African countries, with the xenophobic attacks of May 2008, April 2015 and September 2019 standing out in their duration, intensity, and lethality.[9] However, xenophobia in South Africa – as a deeply entrenched part of social structure and everyday experience for African migrants – has also a more mundane and less spectacular, yet still violent side to it. In survey and attitudinal research, it has repeatedly been shown that a majority of the South African population – across class, gender, age, and educational differences – holds deep anti-immigrant sentiments,[10] which some claim have intensified over time, and that a significant minority of South Africans would be ready to use violent means to prevent 'foreigners' from moving to or opening up a business in 'their neighborhood'. Furthermore, various studies have pointed out the existence of xenophobia in different subsections of society, as for example regarding the health system, educational settings,[11] the media sphere,[12] or institutions of the state.[13] Specifically looking at the police, Edwards and Freeman have shown that most of its personnel shares the anti-immigrant views of the average population, and that the police often contribute to xenophobia by simultaneously under- and over-policing African migrant communities.[14] Whole political parties and specific politicians have also been blamed for inciting hatred and violence against African migrants through their increased use of anti-immigrant rhetoric, especially during election campaigns.[15] Various scholars have tried to give this trend toward an increasing normalisation of

[9] C. Steenkamp, 'Xenophobia in South Africa: What Does it Say about Trust?', *The Round Table*, 98 (2009), pp. 439–447.

[10] A. Hiropoulos, 'Dangerous Spaces: The Structural Context of Violence against Foreign Nationals in South Africa' (PhD thesis, City University of New York, 2015).

[11] M. N. Otu, 'The Complexities of Understanding Xenophobia at the University of KwaZulu-Natal', *Journal of African Union Studies*, 6, 2, (2017), pp. 135–153.

[12] D. McDonald & R. Danso, 'Writing Xenophobia: Immigration and the Print Media in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Africa Today,* 48, 3, (2001), pp. 115–137.

[13] T. Masuku, 'Targeting Foreigners: Xenophobia among Johannesburg's Police', *South African Crime Quarterly*, 15, (2006), pp. 19–24.

[14] L. Edwards & L. Freeman, *Policing and Non-Nationals: Analysis of Police Prevention, Detection and Investigation of Xenophobic Violence in South Africa,* (African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum, 2021).

[15] S. Heleta, 'Xenophobia and Party Politics in South Africa', (September 2019), available at https://mg.co.za/article/2019-09-03-00-xenophobia-and-party-politics-in-south-africa/, retrieved 22 March 2022.

anti-immigrant attitude coupled with sporadic instances of collective xenophobic violence a name: Tafira (2018), for example speaks about a 'new racism',[16] while Matsinhe (2011) suggests the term 'apartheid vertigo'.[17] Before the PSAF-Facebook page was created in May 2020, there was an already fertile ground and favorable climate existing in wide sections of South African society on which the emerging PSAF movement could build. The establishment of the PSAF group needs to be understood in terms of this trend and must be seen as a continuation of it.

Xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa has taken a specific shape, as it is embedded in historical contingencies that gives its anti-outsider atmosphere unique political, psychosocial, and spatio-temporal configurations.[18] There are several features of xenophobia in South Africa that are particular to this national context, and which distinguish the South African case from xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments as they are expressed in other geographical and socio-political contexts. First, xenophobia in South Africa happens in a post-colonial context and in a present that is still very much marked – especially in spatial and economic terms – by a long history of slavery, apartheid, and racial oppression. The specific racialised nature of South African xenophobia, namely, that xenophobic violence has predominantly been committed by Black South Africans and has predominantly, but not exclusively, been directed against Black migrants from other African countries, is another characteristic that distinguishes the South African case from, for example, white nationalist movements in the US or Europe. And thirdly, as Kerr et al. (2019) have pointed out,[19] supporters of xenophobia in the South African context often position themselves in line with the traditions of Black resistance and the anti-apartheid movement when they make use of 'struggle discourse' rhetoric and claim to be fighting for the 'community', 'freedom', 'liberation', and 'self-determination'. Taken together and compared to other examples of xenophobic mobilisation around the world, these unique features make the South African context appear to be an interesting case to study and well suited to expand the geographical scope of a 'Northern' biased body of emerging research on digital and online xenophobia.

While the origins of the slogan 'Put South Africans First' are not entirely clear, today the slogan is an established rhetoric of various small South African right-wing political parties demanding that

[16] Tafira, *Xenophobia in South Africa*, p. 15.
[17] Matsinhe, *Apartheid Vertigo*, p. 5.
[18] Matsinhe, *Apartheid Vertigo*, p. 42.
[19] P. Kerr, K. Durrheim & J. Dixon, 'Xenophobic Violence and Struggle Discourse in South Africa', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 54, 7, (2019), pp. 995–1011.

‘foreigners’ should leave the country. Moreover, it is on social media, and especially with the outbreak of the Covid-19 health crisis in South Africa by the end of March 2020, that the ‘Put South Africans First’ slogan has become popularised as a widely used rhetoric in anti-immigrant discourse. This has been shown for Twitter, for example, which Tarisayi (2021) depicts as ‘the new battleground for attacking foreigners in South Africa’.[20] Regarding Twitter, specifically one account has been identified as being at the centre of a network creating and spreading anti-immigrant hashtags online, among them, the ‘Put South Africans First’ hashtag. The account uLerato_pillay, that investigative journalists have traced to a former soldier in coastal KwaZulu-Natal[21] is part of a closely-knit anti-immigrant online community with more than 60,000 followers, which likes, shares and retweets material, much of which serves to amplify the message that African immigrants must be ‘send back home’; that they are depriving South Africans of jobs, that they are a burden to the country’s public health system and, that they are responsible for crimes, and infrastructure damage. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, online xenophobia in South Africa has intensified[22] and anti-immigrant hashtags such as ‘We want our country back’ or ‘Clean up SA’ were widely circulating on Twitter, with the hashtag ‘Put South Africans First’ was trending on Twitter and used over 16,000 times on Freedom Day 2020. It is against this specific socio-political milieux that the ‘Put South Africans First’ Facebook group was created in May 2020.

‘Put South Africans First’: A Digital Ethnography of an Emerging Xenophobic (Online-) Community

There are four reasons why this group was specifically chosen for online ethnographic investigation. First, this group was recently established and surfaced in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak in South Africa. Second, there is high ‘traffic’ in this group; most members actively engage in xenophobic online campaigning by posting and sharing nationalistic, anti-immigrant and particularly anti-African content. Third, its membership base is noteworthy: the PSAF group can be considered one of the largest xenophobic online communities in contemporary South Africa. Finally, and in line with Kozinets’ recommendations for online ethnographic site choice, the PSAF

[20] K. Tarisayi, ‘Afrophobic Attacks in Virtual Spaces: The Case of Three Hashtags in South Africa’, *Migration & Ethnic Themes*, 37, 1 (2021), pp. 29–46.
[21] J. le Roux ‘Lerato Pillay Uncovered: Xenophobic Twitter Campaigns Orchestrated by a Former South African Soldier’, (September 2020), available at https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-09-23-xenophobic-twitter-campaigns-orchestrated-by-a-former-south-african-soldier/, retrieved 16 July 2021.
[22] Chenzi, ‘Fake News, Social Media and Xenophobia in South Africa’, p. 502.

groups is highly interactive, it has a steady flow of communications between members and a heterogenous membership base. All these reasons make the PSAF group an excellent site for a digital ethnography that seeks to keep pace with the emerging trend of xenophobic online activism in South Africa.

The PSAF Facebook-group consists of 6,600 members and its membership base seems to be quite stable, as the group has neither been growing nor diminishing significantly over the period under study from September 2020 to December 2021. While not all members are equally active, – some, especially females, are prolific with postings and comments almost every day – there is a steady flow of interacting and communication taking place within the group, with monthly contributions varying between 200 and 400 postings. Information being shared and commented in the group spans a variety of topics: among others, the discussions often center around crimes being committed by African migrants, the health hazard African migrants would pose to South Africans, government corruption, or the preferred treatment of African migrants by employers.

In this study, the PSAF-Facebook group is conceptualised as a social movement online community. Following Caren et al. (2012), a social movement online community can be understood as 'a sustained network of individuals who work to maintain an overlapping set of goals and identities tied to a social movement and linked through quasi-public online discussions'. Defining the PSAF-Facebook group in terms of a social movement online community has the advantage of recognising this collective as a broad-based participatory group in which members engage in a diversity of participatory actions and processes of collective identity building. However, at the same time, the PSAF group is also a specific type of a social movement online community which can be dually characterised as an affective network and as a mnemonic community, in which members can freely produce, train and experiment with various images, worldviews, memories, emotions, and transpersonal intensities, thereby shaping what can be called the 'emotional pedagogy'[23] of this group.

A digital ethnographic approach is particularly suited for attending to such a multifaceted type of social movement online community because it helps the researcher in adapting to a diverse set of online social phenomena and computer-mediated communications. With a digital ethnography

[23] D. Gould 'On Affect and Protest', in J. Staiger, A. Cvetkovich and A. Reynolds (eds), *Political Emotions* (Routledge 2010), p. 39.

online forums, chatrooms, and newsgroups and also blogs, audiovisual, photographic, and podcasting communities can be analysed. Following Kozinets, digital ethnography is understood here as 'participant-observational research based in online fieldwork [that] uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon'.[24] What makes this method further applicable for the current undertaking is the analytical focus on collectivities: A digital ethnographer is less interested in individuals and their personal posting of messages in online spaces. Instead, digital ethnographers focus on social aggregations and on what sociologists usually call the 'meso-level of analysis'; that is, groups, gatherings, and other collections of people. Setting out to examine complex cultural practices, relationships, meaning-making, visuality, symbolic systems and forms of communication taking place digitally are among the most important analytical interests of the digital ethnographer.

Further, a digital ethnographer studying online communities is required to be sensitive to a particular set of ethical issues that arise when doing internet-based research.[25] Researchers studying online spaces are obliged, for example, to carefully think about issues of 'intrusiveness', and of potential harm a digital ethnography might cause for a group of people. For internet-based studies, serious additional ethical questions arise, such as what is private and what is public in a digital context, and partly depending on that, how to obtain informed consent when planning to conduct an internet-based research project.[26] Unfortunately, ethical questions have not always been treated seriously enough in social science online research, especially when the object of study has been a 'repellent group'[27] in the eye of the researcher, such as certain Neo-Nazi or Right-Wing groups.[28] This is highly problematic, as research ethics are meant to protect *all* human beings from potentially adverse consequences of research participation. Bearing this in mind, the present study tries to

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[24] R.V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (Los Angeles, SAGE, 2010), p. 60.
[25] See J. Salmons, *Doing Qualitative Research Online* (London, SAGE 2016), pp. 64ff.
[26] I. Convery & D. Cox, 'A Review of Research Ethics in Internet-Based Research', *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 6, 1 (2012), p. 51.
[27] C. Gallaher 'Researching Repellent Groups: Some Methodological Considerations on How to Represent Militants, Radicals, and Other Belligerents', in C. L. Sriram et al. (eds), *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations* (Routledge 2009), pp. 127–46.
[28] See for example the article written by J. Glaser, J. Dixit, & D. Green, 'Studying Hate Crime with the Internet: What Makes Racists Advocate Racist Violence?', *Journal of Social Issues*, 58, 1 (2002), pp. 177–193, or the book chapter by C. Fuchs ironically titled 'Dear Mr. Neo-Nazi, Can You Please Give Me Your Informed Consent So That I Can Quote Your Fascist Tweet?' in M. Graham (ed.), *The Routledge Companion To Media And Activism* (Routledge 2018), pp. 385–394.

adhere to the complex and at times contradictory requirements of ethical online research as best as possible.

The empirical database of this research consists of 150 screenshots that were taken of conversations between members of the PSAF Facebook group in the period between September 2020 and December 2021. This procedure of data collection is justified on the ground that all collected data were publicly available to the entire Facebook community at the time of conducting this study. The public accessibility also reflects the fact that anti-immigrant movements in South Africa, such as the PSAF group, have recently formed well developed, visible and easy to reach mediatised counter publics. As this study's interest lies on narratives, circulating affects and collective constructions of reality, and *not* for example, on individual members and their biographies, no personal data were gathered that would allow to trace a certain individual's identity. Although this ethnography was conducted 'undercover'[29], during research no 'lurking'[30] or deception of identity took place to gain entry to otherwise inaccessible social spaces. Only material already produced by PSAF members was used and no interaction with members took place to generate additional data. I minimised potential harm and ensured protection for PSAF members through the immediate anonymisation of the collected data. This anonymisation includes blurring the Facebook profile picture of a posting, the Facebook username, as well as the specific date of a posting.

In total, 150 screenshots were taken from the media section of the PSAF group and chosen for a more detailed analysis with the computer-assisted coding software MAXQDA. This number of screenshots can be justified by the fact that additional screenshots did not add any substantial new insights to the existing body of data. The ensued theoretical saturation in turn allows this study to illuminate certain general features of the PSAF group.

Making Sense of Xenophobic Online Communities: Narratives and their Affective Resonances in Social Media Environments

On social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook affect is produced and circulates as a binding and boundary drawing technique. As Jodi Dean has written: 'Every little tweet or comment,

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[29] D. Calvey, *Covert Research: The Art, Politics and Ethics of Undercover Fieldwork* (SAGE, 2017).
[30] G. Eysenbach & J.E. Till, 'Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research on Internet Communities', *British Medical Journal*, 323 (2001), pp. 1103–1105.

every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget [in the economy of contemporary online communications]'.[31] In this article, it is my argument that we need to focus on narrative and particularly on narrative's affective 'drive' in social media environments and on the mutual interdependencies between narrative, affect and social media, when attending to the social construction of reality and 'worldmaking' practices within emerging xenophobic online communities, such as the PSAF Facebook group. In contrast to an influential tradition within affect theory which locates affect strictly outside the realm of language by setting it apart from discourse, narrative and meaning-making, namely as non-symbolised, pre-conscious and pre-discursive intensity[32], this paper contends that affect is instead to be understood as the *precondition* of language and that language itself is imbued with affect.[33] Rather than conceptualising discourse as taming affect and codifying its generative force, I concur with Lous Presser in conceptualising narrative as a 'uniquely affecting cultural'[34] form and with Margaret Wetherell's view according to which it is the 'discursive [itself] that very frequently makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides the means for affect to travel'.[35] It is in this sense, that we can speak of some forms of narratives as 'emotives', as stories that not simply have emotions as referents but are performatives, that 'do things in the world' and are capable of directly changing, building, hiding, or intensifying emotions. In this perspective, narratives are conceived as constitutional, instead of only representational of social reality: The feelings and emotions that they constitute make up a good part of their 'truth telling' capacity, that is narrative's power to make us think that a message embedded in a certain story is true, because we feel it is true. In their affective dimension, narratives entertain a close relationship to the world of emotions[36] and through their capacity to establish, maintain, or traverse social boundaries they create 'emotional collectives' and 'collective emotions'. Permeated with issues of power, truth, representation, belonging and (in)visibility, stories are fundamentally political, they have a history, reassemble memory, are culturally embedded, and are accompanied by and sometimes stand in for other types of stories.

[31] J. Dean, 'Affective Networks', *Media Tropes*, 2, 2 (2010), pp. 19–44.
[32] B. Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge, MA polity, 2015).
[33] A. Kahl, 'Analyzing Affective Societies', in A. Kahl (eds), *Analyzing Affective Societies: Methods and Methodologies* (London, Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–26.
[34] L. Presser, *Inside Story: How Narratives Drive Mass Harm* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2018), p. 51.
[35] M. Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (SAGE, 2012), p. 19.
[36] Presser, *Inside Story*.

Several scholars have pointed out the ease, speed, and intensification by which affect and emotion as it is 'captured' by language and narrative can travel in digitally mediated environments, and have shown how the economy and infrastructure of digital networks itself provides a fertile ground for the generation, transmission and circulating of affect and emotions.[37] Besides the fact that digital networks are 'networks of computers, protocological, and fibre-optic networks' – they are also affective networks, capturing people, but 'capturing' in the sense that it is 'us', the users, '[who] are producing the affective networks we inhabit, the connections that configure us'.[38] The capitalist driven economy in which digital networks are embedded, their participatory nature (people have to use them, add to them, extend and play with them, in order for these networks to work), along with the intensification and acceleration of affective dynamics in mediatised social interactions are frequently discussed in relation to increasingly furious attacks on democratic principles and the epistemic fabric of contemporary societies, such as the proliferation of fake-news, political lies and the emergence of a toxic and enraged discursive climate in mediatised counter publics. Existing studies on right-wing online activism in Europe and the US have linked the contemporary 'thriving' of white, nationalist groups and their anti-immigrant ideology to the successful manipulation of affect and the use of emotionally appealing rhetoric in their online communication on social media platforms. Bhatt, for example, who studied the emergence of what he calls the 'fascist lie' on social media, has shown how this right-wing lie is driven by the creation of (fictional) stories that merge with other stories and narratives in unpredictable ways. According to him, truth and evidence in this context is being displaced by emotional satisfaction, believability, and repeatability. As Bhatt writes, truth resides in a story's capacity to generate a particular constellation of emotions: 'Truth becomes coextensive with the condensation of a lie into a feeling of political emotion'.[39] Also for Fielitz and Marcks as well as for Strick, all researching digital fascism in Europe/US, social media's capture of emotional dynamics plays a crucial role in explaining the attraction and popularity of contemporary right-wing ideology. While Fielitz and Marcks conceptualise social media has a resonance chamber and an opportunity for bonding and networking as well as a space for effectively distributing 'alternative' stories about reality[40], Strick,

[37] Z. Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2014).
[38] Dean, *Affective Networks*, p. 36.
[39] C. Bhatt, 'The Fabulisms of White Supremacy: The US Presidential Election, COVID-19, and Black Lives Matter' (unpublished paper, 2021), p. 17.
[40] M. Fielitz & H. Marcks, *Digitaler Faschismus* (Dudenverlag Berlin, 2020).

in his theory of reflexive fascism, understands contemporary right-wing movements as 'powerhouses of feelings and affective dynamics'[41], as affective communities in which members actively work on building dissident emotional landscapes.

The conceptual thoughts regarding the nexus between affect, the narrative and the digital by scholars studying 'Western' expressions of online xenophobia are helpful sensitising devices for the current context as well. As a 'storied movement', in which bundles of stories and emotions circulate, the PSAF group constitutes an affective network that enable group members to establish and ascribe certain feelings towards themselves, others and the world around them. It is this emotional pedagogy, the fabrication and cultivation of a certain politics of feeling that lies at the core of the narrative construction of social reality in this group. In what follows, I will present two constitutive narratives – 'the harm of Pan-Africanism' and 'the fear of modern-day slavery' that have been produced and shared by members of the PSAF group. Taken together, these two narratives provide an interesting insight into processes of social reality construction within an emerging South African xenophobic online community.

'Why Should Africa Unite in Our Country?': 'Fake' Brotherhood and the 'Harm' of Pan-Africanism

In academic literature, South Africa is often credited with being the intellectual epicenter of the ideology of African renaissance and *ubuntu*, the much-cited African communal philosophy of coexistence, interdependence, and human solidarity.[42] Speaking about 20th century South African Black intellectual history, Moses E. Ochonu recently stated that this history 'is marked by a remarkable clarity of thought regarding continental and global Black solidarity'.[43] 'If anything', Ochonu continues, '20th century South African history points [to] a history marked not by separation from or antagonism towards the rest of Africa but by organisational, intellectual, political, and economic linkages with it'.[44] Now turning towards the conversations in the PSAF-Facebook group, one is left wondering what of this history of continental Black solidarity has remained. In their conversations, group members actively associate 'African brotherhood' and Pan-

[41] Strick, *Rechte Gefühle,* p. 131.
[42] C.B.N. Gade, 'The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on Ubuntu', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30, 3 (2011), pp. 303–329.
[43] M. E. Ochonu, 'South African Afrophobia in Local and Continental Contexts', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 58, 4 (2020), p. 502.
[44] *ibid.* p. 501.

Africanist solidarity with the emotional experience of something that is hurtful, that is 'disgusting' and that is discriminating against South Africans. The following video captures how the downside of Pan-African solidarity is narratively constructed by group members through othering African migrants and African countries as 'backward', 'economically underdeveloped' and 'greedy'. On 22 May 2020, a member posted a ten-minute video which shows a middle-aged Black man sitting on the front seat of a car, filming himself and complaining about the presence of 'African foreigners' in South Africa. After complaining in a rather composed manner about the illegality of 'foreigners' and about the economic burden that African migrants would pose to South Africa, the man increasingly talks himself into rage as he starts speaking about the 'underdevelopment of Black Africa'. In the second minute of the video, he says:

> I don't see how we can forge this African unity with them, these are barbarians, these are not human beings until they have demonstrated skill enough, capabilities, you know, worthy of one to be called a human being. Then MAYBE, then MAYBE [speaker is stressing these words] we should consider this African unity […] These [African migrants] are not the guys who build the pyramids […] these guys are not Thomas Sankaras, they're not Julius Nyereres, they're not Kwame Nkrumahs […] where they come from, it's a squatter camp, it's a jungle. They are here to take, to grab everything from our mouth, take everything from our children, from our children's future […] and you call them brothers.

In this passage, full of colonial stereotypes and racist denigrations, several things happen: Perceived as an undifferentiated category, African migrants are being racialised, associated with backwardness, and stripped of their status as human beings by producing an image of African migrants as greedy invaders entering South Africa. Also striking is the dehumanising rhetoric at work here ('barbarians, not human beings') and the transformation of African migrants into objects of contempt ('they are here to take, to grab from our mouth and our children').[45] Further, by reproducing and connecting colonial images of the racialised body (the African migrant) to colonial imaginations of 'underdeveloped' spaces ('squatter camp' and 'jungle'), Pan-Africanism is constructed as something that oppresses, takes away and 'hurts' South Africans. These associations are reinforced by referring to Nyerere, Sankara and Nkrumah, some of Africa's most revered anti-colonial liberators and Pan-Africanist politicians. By invoking their names while claiming that

[45] See D.L. Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York, NY St. Martin's Press, 2011).

African migrants are not like these politicians, the man affirms that African migrants would not liberate but instead oppress South Africans and ‘steal’ the future from coming generations.

The feeling that African migrants would be detrimental to the fate of South Africa is often evoked through comparisons intending to show different states of developmental progress between South Africa and Africa. Visual material is used to transport the message that South Africa is a place more ‘developed’ and ‘superior’ compared to any other African country. Two such comparisons are used here to illustrate this point; in both, racialised constructions of bodies through spaces and spaces through bodies[46] play a crucial role in creating feelings of superiority and contempt towards African migrants and towards the African continent. The first image [see Figure 1] is a picture comparing two street scenes, one showing the inner city of Johannesburg (clean, and orderly), the other depicting Lagos, the former capital city of Nigeria (as busy, chaotic, and full of people), while the second is an aerial view photograph allegedly depicting Lilongwe, Malawi’s capital city.

Figure 1. Screenshot ‘comparing’ street life in Lagos and Johannesburg (taken out of the media section of the PSAF group, February 2021)

[46] S. Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London, Routledge, 2000).

Consider how group members have responded to the screenshot, comparing Johannesburg and Lagos, titled with 'Now they want to turn our city into that junk', 'It's already like this bra', 'They are halfway already', 'Hillbrow has been taken over…Mahatma Gandhi street (Point Road) in Durban beach front taken over […]'. In this posting, the framing of Lagos as 'that junk' sets the scene for how to decode the message of the visual. Compared to Johannesburg, where there seems to be 'orderly street life' and 'high rise architecture' what group members associate with modernity and health, Lagos emerges as an undesired place, overpopulated and chaotic. In this example, 'spaces' are visually and narratively constituted as either 'modern' or 'backward'. What gives the posting its capability to set free emotions of revulsion and endangerment is not only a symbolical stigmatisation of space, but rather the idea that assumes bodies coming from 'backward spaces' do carry and transmit 'backwardness' as if a disease. The bodily stigma of 'backwardness' group members attach to African migrants has a mobilising quality as it incites members to take action, calling on them to preserve and defend 'their' spaces from what they perceive to be contagious invasion, downfall, and decay.

The next picture works differently. 'African backwardness' in this case is not constructed as something to be feared of, but rather as an object of ridicule and amusement, something to make fun of. From a birds-eye view, the picture claims to represent Malawi's capital city Lilongwe. It displays a rural area with some scattered buildings surrounded by open fields and a desert-like environment. Below this picture, uploaded on 1st December 2020, following comments were posted: 'omg :D :D :D', 'Capital…', 'What's there to steal? :D :D :D crime is associated with a demand of goods to actually steal, which there is none there', 'Seriously :D looks like Sophia Town [sic] in 1910'. What is central in this exchange is less the communication of an idea or a proposition – group members do not primarily react to each other discursively – instead, the focus lies on the creation of a shared affective experience by laughing together at somebody. While laughing together creates a powerful bond of sameness between group members, ridiculing and laughing at somebody is not only a powerful means of exclusion,[47] but it also generates a 'u-turn from being ashamed to shaming out'.[48] The last comment referring to 'Sophia Town' illustrates that members not only create affective bonds of laughing and shaming in their interactions, but that they cite history in complex ways, and re-weaponise the past. To promote their anti-immigrant political

[47] McDonald, *Radicalization*, p. 28.
[48] H. Flam, 'Emotions' Map: A Research Agenda', in H. Flam & D. King (eds), *Emotions and Social Movements* (London/New York, Routledge, 2005), p. 30.

projects, members do not shy away from tapping into Black South African's painful memories of apartheid's racial urban planning, expressed in violent evictions, home destructions, and forced population resettlements.[49] The location here referred to as 'Sophia Town' is one site from which the apartheid state removed Black inhabitants violently to fit apartheid's racialised urban order.[50] By its residents, Sophiatown was remembered as a place of cultural vibrancy, known for its bohemian lifestyle and vibrant music scene, deeply associated with politics, the anti-apartheid movement, and the liberation struggle.[51] Thus, when members refer to 'Sophia Town' they appropriate these memories of thriving cultural life, of solidarity and resistance against apartheid as well, weaponising these memories in the service of promoting xenophobia.

Rhetorically moving back in time and citing history is an emotionally charged practice within the PSAF group communications. By means of revisiting history and re-writing established historical truths, African solidarity and continental brotherhood can be *felt* as something that has always been a 'fake thing' at the same time as South Africans are emotionally and morally freed from their historical duties towards other Africans which countries have supported them in their fight against apartheid and racist white minority rule. But before turning to the group's conversations in greater detail, consider how anti-apartheid activist and today's ANC National Chairperson Gwede Mantashe remembered the time of his and other activist's treatment in African exile during the time of anti-apartheid struggle. In reaction to the xenophobic violence in May 2008, he stated that:

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[49] For work that shows the ongoing impact of apartheid's racialised social engineering programme in the present, see for example M. Abel, 'Long-Run Effects of Forced Resettlement: Evidence from Apartheid South Africa', *Journal of Economic History*, 79, 4, (2019), pp. 915–953.
C.B.N. Gade, 'The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on Ubuntu', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30, 3 (2011), pp. 303–329.

[50] Sophiatown, a northern suburb of Johannesburg, has a rich and complex history that the apartheid state never recognised, but instead sought to erase. Founded on white fears of Black people getting close to white areas, the National Party passed the Native Resettlement Act, No 19 in 1954, empowering the government to remove Blacks from any area within and close to the magisterial district of Johannesburg. Less than a year after the act was passed, it provided the legal ground to forcefully remove Sophiatown residents fifteen-kilometer southwards to Meadowlands in Soweto. On 9 February 1955 early in the morning, two thousand policemen armed with guns and rifles arrived in Sophiatown, and with them the bulldozers which razed Sophiatown to the ground. In the five years between 1955 and 1960 more than 60,000 residents were violently expelled from their homes in Sophiatown by the apartheid police. People's homes and properties were destroyed, and as in other comparable cases, such as the District Six neighbourhood in Cape Town, forced removals teared down the entire social fabric of a community, with friends, households and families being driven apart. Having erased the multi-racial neighbourhood that Sophiatown once was, in the early 1960s, the government installed a new whites-only suburb called 'Triomf' in its place. It was only in 2006 when 'Triomf' was renamed back to Sophiatown.

[51] See D. Matera *Sophiatown: Coming of Age in South Africa* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1989), as well as D. Goodhew *Respectability and Resistance: A History of Sophiatown* (Greenwood, 2004).

> Many of us, including myself, will think of the kindness we received in the poorest communities of Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Nigeria, and many other African states. We will recall that our neighbours were collectively punished by the apartheid regime for harbouring the cadres of the ANC. We will remember that our children were give spaces in overcrowded schools in remote rural villages, and when we were injured and ill, the hospitals of many African countries nursed us back to health.[52]

In stark contrast to Mantashe's memories of generous treatment from African neighbours in exile, PSAF members work on a totally different version of historical truth which centers around the claim that life in exile was unbearable and that African countries were not as supportive or kind as commonly suggested. They push against a plethora of evidence (memoirs, testimonies, archives, not to mention published histories) which show the exact opposite of PSAF historical depictions of life in exile.[53] While life in exile was not always easy especially for Black South Africans and varied considerably according to place and time,[54] the support by African countries was paramount in the fight against apartheid. It was from the backstage of exile from where much of the dramatic action of the armed struggle was orchestrated.[55]

On 17 January 2021, one group member posted a list with seventeen 'facts' about South African life in African exile. In this list one can read for example, that:

> While living in those host countries South Africans were living in camps and were not allowed to mix with the local people from those countries […] They had to have a permit which only allowed them to leave the camp for only one hour. If they came back past the given time, they would be arrested by the soldiers who were stationed at the entrance of the camp. More importantly, there has never been a South African that worked in any country in Africa. Living conditions were not good: Malaria, AIDS and other diseases killed South Africans as those diseases were very foreign and non-existent in South Africa.

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[52] G. Mantashe, 'Xenophobia is a Crime', ANC TODAY, 8, 20 (2008).

[53] For a general overview see Hilda Bernstein's pioneering anthology of interviews with exiles , *The Rift, the Exile Experience of South Africans* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1994). For the lived experience of ANC exiles in Lusaka, Zambia where the movement had its headquarters for the longest period of time, see the study conducted by H. Macmillan 'The African National Congress of South Africa in Zambia: The Culture of Exile and the Changing Relationship with Home, 1964–1990', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, 2 (2009), pp.303–329. Macmillan's work encapsulates good memories of Lusaka by ANC exiles, but also shows the hard times of life in exile, as well as how ANC exile's life experience in Lusaka was filtered through distinctions of class, race, and age.

[54] In the late 1980s, an estimated ten to fifteen thousand people (most of them members of the ANC's military wing 'Umkhonto we Sizwe') were represented by the ANC outside of South Africa, spreading throughout as many as twenty-five countries.

[55] See S. R. Davis, *The ANC's War Against Apartheid: Umkhonto We Sizwe and the Liberation of South Africa* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2018).

While 'traveling in history' and thereby influencing people has been an age-old strategy of the far-right,[56] the crucial question is how such distortions of accepted history help contemporary movements to gain affective force and make them attractive for new members.[57] This list of 'historical facts' is emotionally powerful in that it redirects the historical status of victimhood from African countries punished for supporting the anti-apartheid movement, to South Africans in exile who – in this version of historical remembrance – become the 'real' victims of past injustice. No word is said here about the evidence of other African states providing educational opportunities for young South Africans in schools that countered apartheid's racialised, discriminatory education with principles of equal opportunity, dignity, and unity of mental and manual labour.[58] According to the list 'freedom was taken' instead from South African exiles, and it was life in exile that made South Africans sick. Correspondingly, the list also hides the fact that other African states at times pursued economic policies that were detrimental to their own development due to their commitment to eradicate apartheid. Nigeria, for example, imposed embargoes, boycotts, and economic sanctions against apartheid South Africa and provided direct financial, material and, military support to the South African National Liberation Movements (both the ANC and PAC).[59]

PSAF members depiction of South African life in exile, has not only implications for the representations of the past and memories of continental history, but it also influences how people feel about the presence of African migrants in South Africa today. Using 'history' in this way not only allows group members to create a strong connection between feelings of past and present victimisation and to stage themselves as the 'real sufferers'. Moreover, it allows group members to weaponise the past as an argument for restricting and taking away rights from African migrants in present day South Africa: Equipped with these 'facts' it becomes legitimate for PSAF members to question why African migrants today 'can freely roam around in townships', 'are allowed to work' and 'can use South Africa as their playing ground'. These examples show how cultural memory, myths and images of the past can be re-appropriated and given new political and affective

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[56] See for example R. Eatwell, 'How to Revise History (and Influence People?), Neo-Fascist Style', in L. Cheles, R. Ferguson, M. Vaughan (eds), *The Far Right in Western and Eastern Europe* (London and New York, Longman, 1991), pp. 309–326.
[57] Strick, *Rechte Gefühle*.
[58] S. Morrow, B. Maaba & L. Pulumani, 'Education in Exile: SOMAFCO, the ANC School in Tanzania, 1978 to 1992', Cape Town: HSRC Press (2004), available at http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11910/7971, retrieved 4 December 2022.
[59] O. Abegunrin 'Nigeria and the Struggle for the Liberation of South Africa' in O. Abegunrin (ed.), Africa in Global Politics in the Twenty-First Century. A Pan-African Perspective (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

significance in line with the current needs and goals of a group or social movement.[60] To mobilise and attract people, anti-immigrant movements not only move back in time but they also engage actively in collective constructions of possible futures, which for the PSAF movement include dystopian feelings and the belief in a conspiracy of coming enslavement.

'I Think of My Kids Who Will Be Slaves of Foreigners': Replacement Conspiracy and the Slavery Trope

Scholars once suggested that conspiracy theories may be harmless fun and of little concern for sociological research.[61] Other than being foolish and illogical, it was thought that conspiracy theories have little or no detrimental influence over society.[62] Viewed against the recent reinvigoration of right-wing political dynamics and nationalist movements in various parts of the world (e.g., in Brazil, the United States or certain European countries) for which the use and spread of political lies, fake-news and conspiracy thinking is an essential strategy and key to successfully mobilising and attracting people to their cause, treating conspiracy theories as merely 'harmless fun' seems to be rather outdated and politically naïve. Conspiracy theories have political consequences and implications for inter-group relations and the belief in them might be even life-threatening for groups that are said to conspire against the 'in-group'. One such conspiracy theory that currently circulates globally – especially online – and is associated with far-right, white supremacist circles and movements is the so-called 'Great Replacement conspiracy theory'. Briefly, this conspiracy theory assumes that there is a plan to replace the white and/or Christian population of Western countries with African or Muslim immigrants. Compared to the growing amount of research that is being done on conspiracy theories and right-wing political mobilisation in countries of the global North, there is a scarcity of knowledge about the workings of conspiracy theories and their usage by anti-immigrant social movements in other cultural, political, and geographical contexts.

In post-apartheid South Africa, replacement conspiracy theories with a markedly anti-immigrant tone have been on the rise and there are several cases where politicians and other official figures have expressed them in their public speeches. For example, in July 2017, Bongani Mkongi, the

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[60] C. Kinnvall, 'Ontological Insecurities and Postcolonial Imaginaries: The Emotional Appeal of Populism', *Humanity & Society*, 42, 4 (2018), p. 525.
[61] D. Jolley, S. Mari & K. Douglas, 'Consequences of Conspiracy Theories', in M. Butter & P. Knight (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (New York, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2020), pp. 231–241.
[62] *ibid*. p. 232.

chief of the South African police, uttered his discomfort in a press conference on the problem of crime in the so-called 'hijacked buildings' in the City of Johannesburg, specifically referring to Hillbrow (a Johannesburg inner city neighborhood) being taken over by foreign nationals: 'How can a city in South Africa be 80 per cent foreign national? That is dangerous. South Africans have surrendered their own city to the foreigners'.[63] While Mkongi's claim of Johannesburg being populated by 80 per cent of foreign nationals is not backed up by any empirical evidence, he nevertheless went on to nurture conspiratorial thinking by speculating about a near future in which a 'foreigner' could have become the next president of South Africa. The politician and former mayor of Johannesburg, Herman Mashaba is another public figure that regularly uses outright conspiracy theories to incite resentment against migrants from other African countries. Referring to a person rolling a trolley with a cow head in it through the streets of Johannesburg, Mashaba tweeted on 13 November 2018: 'We are going to sit back and allow people like you to bring us Ebolas in the name of small business'. While it is important to take note of and examine conspiracy theories that are fostered by politicians and other state personnel, like the ones spread by Mkongi and Mashaba – as for example an elite discourse perspective would emphasise – it is also crucial to note that conspiratorial thinking is not only transferred in a top-down ideological process by (political) elites, but more and more also emerges from below at the local level . Especially under contemporary conditions of life in a digitally mediated world in which political lies and inciting rhetoric can easily be created and shared virtually with little intervention and restriction, ordinary people are increasingly involved as participants and active producers of conspiracy thinking and fake news.

The focus of this paper lies on a specific version of conspiracy theory which has emerged online and is produced by ordinary members of the Put South Africans First Facebook group in their interactions with each other. At the center of this conspiracy is the claim that African migrants would promote what Nandisa Gschwari, a leading figure in the PSAF movement, has called 'modern slavery'.[64] Consider the following Facebook post by a PSAF member on 12 March 2021: 'When you tell South Africans that the country is being hijacked while we blinded by Fake brotherhood thing, and you tell them to fight. This is important in their lives now, fighting for the future of their kids who will be soon slaves of foreigners'. What sense does it make that Black

[63] Chenzi, 'Fake News, Social Media and Xenophobia in South Africa', p. 14.

[64] Eyewitness News, '#PutSouthAfricaFirst Marches Against Foreign Nationals', (October 2020), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y0vTkTV7JI, retrieved 16 July 2021.

South Africans accuse African migrants of bringing slavery to South Africa – especially when this accusation is viewed against the historical background of centuries of slavery and white settler colonialism in South Africa? The institution of slavery, implemented by the Dutch, sustained, if not expanded under British colonial rule, ultimately leading to apartheid, was fundamental to the development of patterns of racialised economic and class relations in South Africa.[65] Centuries before apartheid, South Africa was fundamentally shaped by 176 years of slavery, a period of racialised and gendered brutality that lasted from 1658 to 1834.[66] During this period, about 60,000 slaves were brought to the Cape colony by the Dutch East India Company from African and Asian territories around the Indian Ocean. Thus, the Cape colony became not just a society in which a few people were slaves, but a fully-fledged slave society. However, the possibility of official memorialisation and narrative expression of slavery in South Africa is a rather recent phenomenon, partly enabled by the onset of democracy in 1994 and the ending of exclusively white authority over the politics of remembering the past.[67] 'During apartheid', as Wilkins highlights, 'history was used in schools, museums and memorials to justify racial segregation and school textbooks either did not mention slavery or depicted it as benign in comparison to slavery elsewhere'.[68] In post-apartheid South Africa, however, the memorialisation of slavery is evident in various sites, as for example in the Iziko Slave Lodge in Cape Town, a museum about the history of slavery in Cape Town. Following this possibility of the articulation of a certain form of remembering, I want to ask with Pumla Dineo Gqola how 'slavery' is evoked and used in the PSAF group, informing current perceptions of ways of being and their own situation in the present world.

Under a posting on 5 May 2021, in which a company in Benoni was accused of hiring '95% Malawians', group members were debating the root causes of the misery they claimed to experience and discussed which groups were to blame for their continued exclusion from the benefits of living in a democratic society. In response to a comment asking PSAF members to direct their anger at 'white businesses' instead of African migrants, one member had the following to say: 'We need to deal with our oppressors after all other Africans are out. How do we deal with

[65] D. Wilkins, 'History, Truth Telling and the Legacies of Slavery in South Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 61, 1 (2017), pp. 12–31.
[66] G. Baderoon, 'Surplus, Excess, Dirt: Slavery and the Production of Disposability in South Africa', *Social Dynamics*, 44, 2 (2018), p. 257.
[67] P. D. Gqola, *What is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Wits University Press, 2010).
[68] Wilkins, 'History, Truth Telling and the Legacies of Slavery in South Africa', p. 15.

oppressors when we have other Africans promoting slavery?' What is meant here as well as in other similar instances where group members are referring to African migrants 'promoting slavery' is difficult to understand by looking at the Facebook interactions alone, as it remains unclear, how PSAF members exactly imagine this so-called 'modern slavery' to unfold. Triangulating the digital ethnographic data with insights gained from personal interviews with PSAF members during ethnographic fieldwork in South Africa is helpful at this point. After an anti-immigrant march the group held in Pretoria on 24 November 2021, I interviewed Faith Mabusela, the national chairperson of the PSAF movement. Asking her about the recurrent reference to slavery by PSAF members, she explained:

> We mean that foreigners have become slaves in South Africa, they have become slaves. Yes, in the sense of they come into South Africa because of the minimum pay bill, minimum wage bill that South Africa has set for employees, the employing immigrants versus South Africa because they can pay them less than what the bill stipulates. That's why we are saying they're slaves because they're settling for less. That's why we see them as contemporary, modern-day slaves, they settle for less than what an ordinary South African would ask from an employer.

Strikingly, in this passage the so-called promotion of 'modern-day slavery' does not refer to South Africans as slaves, but 'foreigners' who have become enslaved. Following Mabusela's view, 'contemporary slavery' is related to exploitation in the economic sphere and introduced to South Africa by 'foreigners' who would, by readily accepting lower wages than South African citizens, further undermine the statutory minimum wage in South Africa. 'Enslavement', as Pumla Gqola has pointed out, determines 'who matters and who is disposable'.[69] With Orlando Patterson it can be characterised as 'one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from viewpoint of the master, and total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave'.[70] While economic exploitation and 'enslavement' that 'foreigners' are experiencing in the labor market is not disputed by Mabusela in the interview extract, the acknowledgement of this exploitation does not lead her to express feelings of compassion, injustice, or solidarity with those being exploited. The exploitation of 'foreigners' is not seen as evidence of their vulnerability and powerlessness, but rather interpreted as their indifference towards collective principles around fair working conditions. The circumstances forcing migrants to subject themselves to abhorrent labor

[69] Gqola, *What is Slavery to Me?*, p. 21.
[70] O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982), p .1.

contracts to earn a living are not problematised by Mabusela; instead, she reinterprets exploitative economic conditions rather as a mark of individual power that is being exercised by ‘foreigners’ against the interests of South African communities.

In addition to the meaning that is attached to ‘slavery’ by Faith Mabusela, PSAF members also use the slavery trope in a second, different way, namely, when they are referring to ‘native’ children and future generations. Consider this posting by a PSAF member on 12 November 2020: ‘So every township economy basically now has been run by people who are not of South African descent. So that's why we are saying our kids at the end of the day will become slaves, saying boss to a foreigner in the country, which is unacceptable’. In this scenario, not ‘foreigners’, but South African kids will be enslaved, and in contradiction to Mabusela’s perception, here ‘foreigners’ are not painted as suffering from exploitation, but as dominating the informal economy to such an extent that South African children will have to offer their workforce to them and refer to ‘foreigners’ as their ‘bosses’. In this case, the figure of the ‘foreigner’ is turned from an exploited subject into an imminent threat, and into a powerful external enemy that is dangerous for the future of South Africa, a sensation that is particularly strong when it is interlocked with the feared enslavement of future generations and children as perhaps the quintessential innocent group.[71] The power to convince PSAF members of a feared enslavement of South African children not least rests on the visual transportation of this imaginary in posters, pamphlets and leaflets which are produced and shared online among group members. Consider the pamphlet [see Figure 2], titled ‘Let’s Clean Soweto’, which has been produced by ‘Operation Dudula’, an anti-immigrant group closely affiliated with the PSAF movement. Days before 16 June 2021, this pamphlet circulated on Twitter under the hashtag ‘Puth South Africans First’. At the same time, it was also being posted in the PSAF-Facebook group.

[71] A. Brysk, *Speaking Rights to Power: Constructing Political Will* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 78.

Figure 2. Anti-immigrant pamphlet by the group 'Operation Dudula', calling for a march on 16 June 2021 to 'clean' Soweto (taken out of the media section of the PSAF group, June 2021)

While much could be said about the list of accusations that are raised against 'foreigners' in this pamphlet, especially regarding the collective identification of 'foreigners' with illegality and crime, or about the bitter ironies that the historically significant day of June 16th, today a public holiday commemorating the Soweto Uprising in South Africa, and the language of Black anti-apartheid mobilisation ('Come One, Come All') could be appropriated by anti-immigrant groups, I want to focus here on the iconography of this pamphlet as it visually takes up the trope of children and future generation's enslavement. Below the list of accusations raised against 'foreigners', there is a young child depicted, probably not older than ten, with a bare torso, crying and with a chain tied around the children's neck. While the pamphlet does not directly mention the enslavement of South African kids by foreigners, the image of the enchained child, symbolising 'enslavement', only makes sense in relation to the written words in this pamphlet. The connection being fostered between the written and the visual in this pamphlet is a causal one: It's *because* 'foreigners' do all of the things they are accused of, like selling drugs etc., that South African kids will end up

becoming enslaved, as suggested by the visual of the enchained boy. Together, the written and visual parts construct a crisis narrative with a dystopic dimension: Offering a radical emotional (re-)framing of reality, the narrative of demographic replacement and coming slavery must be considered a very harmful variant of conspiracy theory as it makes protest participation a matter of moral obligation and provides PSAF members with a moral justification for their immoral actions. The visual of a 'raised fist', an icon of emancipatory politics and a universal symbol of freedom struggle(s), operates as a counter-image to the crying, powerless child and infuses the march – and the work of Operation Dudula in general – with a sense of determination, legitimacy, pride, and rightfulness. The specific day – June 16th – and the specific location – Soweto – chosen for the anti-immigrant march leave no doubt that Operation Dudula, as well as the Put South Africans First movement, both claim their actions to stand in the tradition of the emancipatory fight against an unjust system of racial oppression, and as a continuation of the fight that thousands of schoolchildren fought in Soweto more than forty-five years ago, when they marched against the government's decision to introduce the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction in Black township schools. The hypocrisy lies in the appropriation of a genuinely emancipatory struggle of Black schoolchildren against the imposition of Afrikaans as well as against the injustice of white domination over their lives more generally in the service of contemporary anti-immigrant politics and ideologically motivated violence. Tapping into history and distorting the meaning of past historical events constitutes a broader strategy in the repertoire of anti-immigrant formations across the word. It is part of a global pattern of a time where political lies and fake-news flourish and the question of what is true in times of lies once again becomes virulent.

Emotionally appealing to the moral obligation of the spectator to support a seemingly honorable cause – to protect the life of children and future generations – the pamphlet [see Figure 2] achieved what it wanted from its spectators: On 16 June 2021, following the slogan 'Let's Clean Soweto' members of Put South African First and Operation Dudula gathered in Diepkloof, Soweto, claiming to march against 'illegal foreigners' and drug traders in the community. Stopping in front of the old post office building in Diepkloof, the crowd of protesters threatened the inhabitants to vacate the place or face a violent eviction. In October 2021, I interviewed Constance, a 38-year-old Mozambican woman with four children, who got evicted from the post office in the context of the 'Let's Clean Soweto' campaign by members of PSAF and Operation Dudula. Remembering that day, Constance told me, that

> […] they came when I was not home, I was out selling veggies on the street. They came and took my property and money that was there. They said they don't want anyone foreign staying here, especially people coming from Mozambique and other foreign places. We went to the police station together; the police told us it is better to look for another place to stay.

This passage depicts how members of PSAF and Operation Dudula went about Youth Day 2021 in Diepkloof, Soweto: Following the pamphlet's call, they violently evicted people identified as foreigners in the name of a struggle for 'freedom and liberation'. As Kudzayi Savious Tarisayi has rightfully observed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital sphere has increasingly become the new frontier of attacks against African migrants.[72] However, the violent evictions in Soweto clearly show that this is only half of the truth: The lies fabricated online about African migrants – such as the narratives about the harm of Pan-Africanism, Fake-Brotherhood, Replacement Conspiracy, and 'modern day slavery' – do not stay within the confines of virtual spaces. Oftentimes, they spill over into the physical world where they are translated into violent forms of protest and evictions.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the under-researched issue of online xenophobia in contemporary South Africa by providing the findings of a fifteen-month digital ethnography of an emerging xenophobic (online-) community, the so-called 'Put South Africans First' movement. While the study discusses the emergence of the PSAF community and its embeddedness in an already prevalent culture of institutionalised xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa, this paper has also pointed towards new intensifications that follow from online xenophobic mobilisation: In line with trajectories in other parts of the world, as for example in the US or certain European countries, anti-immigrant movements in South Africa have formed well developed, visible and easy to reach mediatised counter publics where traditional models of top-down ideological indoctrination are increasingly superseded by the power of affect, the manipulation of feeling rules and the telling of political lies from below and by movement adherents themselves. To capture this kind of affective and narrative worldmaking in the PSAF community, I argue for a perspective that emphasises the mutual interconnections between the emotional, the narrative and the digital. While there are several similarities in the workings of online xenophobia in South Africa compared to right-wing mobilisations in countries of the 'global north', such as for example a 'migration crisis'

[72] Tarisayi, 'Afrophobic Attacks in Virtual Spaces', p. 31.

discourse that creates and centers around the figure of the 'crimmigrant other'[73], South African online xenophobia is also distinct from these mobilisations in several respects. In the context of post-colonial South Africa, xenophobia is characterised by a specific racialised nature ('Black on Black') and by the peculiarity that both perpetrator and target groups are coming from (historically) oppressed groups, which makes it different from xenophobic mobilisations in Western countries. The specific cultural, political, and geographical circumstances also influence and shape the conditions of storytelling practices within xenophobic communities, as has been indicated through the previous analysis of the 'harm of Pan-Africanism' and 'coming slavery' narrative. Embedded in historical contingencies that give South Africa's anti-outsider mobilisation a unique political, psychosocial, and spatio-temporal configuration, the production and viral circulation of the harmful 'Pan-Africanism' and 'coming slavery' narratives breathe new life and form to the construction of xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa.

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[73] K. Franko, *The Crimmigrant Other: Migration and Penal Power* (Milton, Routledge, 2019).