

Exploring socialities on Black Twitter: an ethnographic study of everyday concerns of South African users in 2018 and 2019.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the phenomenon of Black Twitter, as it exists in South Africa. Drawing on its socio-cultural and linguistic elements, I analyse the kinds of socialities which are constituted on the platform. In the study, I do this by focusing on the key issues which drive the space by evaluating the key everyday concerns as expressed by its users. As such, the overarching lens focuses on three elements: Firstly, the idea of socialities and the way in which they manifest in online spaces; a focus on the everyday as an important site for social inquiry; and lastly the issue of 'blackness', in terms of the way it is used and understood in the South African Black Twitter context. Historically, the Black Twitter space has been linked almost exclusively to its broad base of African American users, who are significant both in terms of their numbers, and their impact on online social culture. However, in this study I engage with the ways in which Black Twitter has been adopted, co-opted and used by young South Africans. As a *bona fide* 'member' of South African Black Twitter, my approach to the study was cyberethnographic. Drawing on my access to the space, my knowledge of many of its members and dynamics, I engaged in participant observation as my primary methodology. My discussion focuses on three areas of everyday concerns, namely: gender and sexuality; race and politics; finances and the economy. These three areas emerge both as prominent sites of discussion, but also give the best insight into the ways in which young South Africans are grappling with these issues. My analysis focuses on **how** everyday concerns are handled on the platform, and I focus on the deployment of solidarity, formal language, platform-based language and the invocation of blackness. I argue in my conclusion that while the structure of the broad Black Twitter space reflects a leaning towards a digital public sphere, that the process and construction of Black Twitter's ideas and content are approached via an incomplete, fluid convivial approach.

Chapter one: Introduction

“If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning.”

– Frederick Douglass, 1857, West India Emancipation Address

Twitter has come a long way since its founder and CEO, Jack Dorsey, launched the platform in 2006. Since then, what was an unknown, unpredictable cousin of super-platform Facebook has become a platform of 321 million monthly active users (Statista, 2019). Of this number, there are roughly 8.3 million users in South Africa, with numbers increasing up to 4% each year (World Wide Worx, 2019). And while Dorsey (Twitter, 2014) initially intended the platform to encourage “sharing without overthinking, just getting it out”, the platform has come to be used in ways far beyond his initial imagining. Possibly, its most talked about export is the Black Twitter phenomenon. After a now-seminal article in *Salon* magazine (2012) which took the first stab at figuring out just what Black Twitter was, it has become the centre of debate, media coverage, academic research and popular culture. It has been described in a range of ways, including “the home of fake black radicalism” (Moya, 2018), “the greatest thing in the universe” (Davis, n.d.) and a “cultural showcase” (Engler, 2018).

There is little consensus, even amongst members, about how to define it, and some even argue that there are multiple Black Twitters - organised by geographical location, language, sub-cultures and other markers. South Africa’s iterations of Black Twitter reflect these complex crosshairs, as users have appropriated the space for a range of issues. During #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, Black Twitter became a central organising space for the furthering of the student movement’s protests (Bosch, 2016). At other times, it has been used for #CountryDuty, where individuals showcase activities like cleaning up a beach or returning lost goods to their owners. Elsewhere, it has been used, in line with global ‘cancel culture’, to excise those members of South African society deemed undesirable. Whether it was Adam Catzavelos, whose personal information was

circulating following a racist rant on the beach, or gqom musician Mampintsha who was castigated when a video of him assaulting his musician girlfriend Babes Wodumo.

While little local data exists on racial demographics of Twitter users, trending topics are dominated by the discussion of black people's content and concerns. For example, Mzansi Magic television shows, *Our Perfect Wedding* and *Date My Family*, trend highest almost every Sunday, along with MetroFM's #AskAMan segment dominating Monday trends (Twitter, 2017; Engler, 2018). Most often however, the discussion falls somewhere between mass-appeal pop culture, and once-off scandals. Black Twitter is the place where people discuss the safety of cities, how to parent black children in the 21st century, and increasingly, in line with a global "woke" movement, how to be proudly black – in everyday quietly political spaces like the home, office, and the hair salon.

Personal background and context

"The place in which I'll fit will not exist until I make it."

— James Baldwin, Date unknown

With all this in mind, I decided to take the advice of Mark Twain and write what I know. I have been a Twitter user since 2011, and a *bona fide* tweep since 2014. My initial foray into the space as a journalism student was overtly news-driven and to me, a little boring. I struggled to connect with similar-minded people. This was confusing considering the buzz around the platform at the time, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring, where Twitter proved to be more than just another social media platform, but a space with exciting potential to facilitate different kinds of future - both online and offline (Garman, 2011). Bit by bit, the space opened up, and like a magic portal or secret password, a tweet I wrote about the exhaustion of being a Kanye West fan gained serious traction and I gained entry into the world of 'Black Twitter'. Suddenly, I was following and being followed by people who looked like me, had the same daily experiences, cared about the same issues, and even where we bitterly disagreed, ended up on the same side. Just like American artists of the late 1980s and early 90s re-imagined the turntable and microphone and created hip hop (Ellis, 2014; Gilroy: 1993), it seemed as though 'Black Twitter' was reimagining the platform, creolising it and using it to create connections and conversations.

The experience of being on Twitter, and particularly Black Twitter, has been an intellectual and emotional whirlwind. From discussions about race, gender and sexuality all the way to a fight over whether Rihanna¹ should make music or clothes, Black Twitter presents a world of knives against knives. The space is dangerous, fast-moving and inevitably making its participants sharper and more aware of the liminality of online-offline dynamics, black-white (and in between) dynamics, consumer-citizen dynamics and everything in between. In the same year on Twitter, I have had a public spat with infamous (racist) journalist David Bullard and had an invitation to tea with former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela, and over the course of several years, made lifelong friends and gained over 4000 followers.

Twitter or Black Twitter helped (along with the global ‘woke movement’) to teach me what kind of black person I wanted to be, helped me gain a virtual access to my home countries (Kenya and Nigeria) and bonded me to the oppressions, triumphs and challenges of blackness all over the world - particularly in the wake of #BlackLivesMatter. The experience of being a ‘member’ of Black Twitter has fundamentally created for me, to use Habermas’ expression, a community amongst strangers.

However, I am acutely aware that my experience is not the only one, and that the platform, and the people in it, continue to unfold and practice their Black *Twitterness* in various ways. In this thesis, I will investigate the nature and content of engagements between Black Twitter users in order to understand the kind of social space it is, and the kind of online socialities it enables. In order to begin to do this, there needs to be an orientation within 2 spheres:

1. South Africans and social media
2. Black Twitter: Home and away

South Africans and social media

Since the advent of the social media phenomenon, South Africans have been active and engaged users on a range of different platforms at different times. With an internet penetration of 54% (31 million people), South Africans are primarily engaging with the internet through social media

¹ Rihanna is a billionaire musician, fashion designer and businesswoman.. She is best known for her songs ‘Pon De Replay’ and ‘Umbrella’ and her ‘Fenty’ brand of makeup, fashion and lingerie products.

(Hootsuite, 2019). Despite persistent issues regarding access to high-quality, affordable internet, and complex issues around internet literacy, South Africans continue to find ways to make what we do have, work, and work well.

Facebook, the world's largest social media platform, is home to 21 million users, and is also the 'hot' platform for corporate and brand users, in addition to the host of individual users on the platform (Ornico, 2018). In second place is the video streaming platform, YouTube, which has roughly 9 million users, including a rapidly growing number of locally produced YouTube channels. Topics range from make-up and hair, social commentary, all the way to interracial couple channels, but inevitably tackle the complexities of living in South Africa - whether this is the minimal access to high-end beauty products, or the everyday of being young and black in corporate South Africa. This growth is interesting considering the high data costs associated with video content (Goldstuck, 2018). Coming in third is the Twitter platform, with roughly 8.3 million users (Ornico, 2019). Despite a global flattening of growth on the infamous platform, interest from South Africans has remained strong, with over 300 000 new users joining the platform each year for the last three years (World Wide Worx, 2018). Instagram comes in last of the big four with 6.6 million users.

But of course, while the numbers are indicative of use on the platform, there are complex and varied reasons why South African users gravitate towards certain platforms. Factors like geographical location and language also affect where, how, and how much local users engage on different platforms. Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city and business centre, accounts for the majority of engagement on social media (Goldstuck, 2018). However, while the main metropolises used to dominate engagement, the creation of Lite (data-light) versions of apps like Facebook and Twitter, major increases in use and engagement have been seen in small towns like Port Elizabeth, Nelspruit, Bloemfontein and East London, which analysts project will begin to have an impact on who constitutes audiences in the social media space (Goldstuck, 2018).

From a social perspective, the fact that Twitter is not a friends-only platform allows for a vastly expanded set of interactions to take place, with some interesting results. As Mpofu (2019) also illuminates, Twitter has attracted local celebrities, brands, political minds and so-called influencers, and in so doing attracted their fans, followers and supporters, who constantly use the platform as a springboard to reflect on the actions of these public figures, and the trickle down for ordinary people. While Facebook encompasses e-commerce, an informal digital marketplace, which has

skewed its use locally towards a more consumer-facing space, Twitter remains a for people by people platform, in a way which has allowed its local users to feel a deep sense of connection and ownership over the discussions which take place there (Akturan, 2015).

In addition to geographical location, language both connects and separates social media users in South Africa. As the ‘lingua franca’, English continues to dominate as the primary language used by South Africans. This is, despite the fact that South Africa has 11 official languages and some of the platforms even offer isiZulu, isiXhosa and Afrikaans user interface options. On Twitter in particular however, the dynamic is slightly different. While users do engage primarily in English, there is pride attached to engaging in one’s mother tongue. Hashtags like #XhosaTwitter or #ZuluTwitter are not just indications of ethnolinguistic communities, but cultural ones as well. The use of language is adapted to suit the 280-character limit, signal ‘inside jokes’ to users of the same language group, or actively exclude users from understanding. In 2018, South Africans gained significant attention from users across the continent and as far afield as the United States and the United Kingdom for their unique use of code-switching, which most often includes the beginning of a tweet in English and then ending in a particular indigenous language. International pop star, Keyshia Cole, even began using Google Translate to engage with her South African fans. Earlier this year, she tweeted “Hi EVERYONE ... Ngiyakuthanda!!! ngiyabonga ngokungilandela” [Hi everyone... I love you!!! Thank you for following me], and committed to learning and using more isiZulu phrases (Glamour, 2019).

But the social media space is also a reflection of more ‘serious’ purposes, in line with a strong historical and contemporary history of social justice and activism, South Africans, both at the level of the institution and the individual. Non-governmental and grassroots organisations like Equal Education and Abahlali baseMjondolo (ABM)² use social media to organise members, share information about meetings, and circulate information not shared by the mass media, among other activities. In both examples, the social media space has also been used to signal that members are safe or unsafe - because of regular brushes with the South African police (Equal Education, 2017). Particularly in the case of ABM, the social media space has been used to share information about forced removals, unlawful evictions and intimidation in areas like Cato Manor and Kennedy Road in Durban, as well as Alexandra and Tembisa in Johannesburg (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2019).

² Abahlali baseMjondolo (Shack Dwellers in isiZulu) is a grassroots housing rights organization based in Durban, South Africa.

Because of these financial and security-related difficulties, ABM has used social media to replace traditional structures such as a fixed office space. The use of social media keeps costs low and allows the group to act wherever they are, without fear of retaliation.

At an individual level, community forums, missing persons alerts and #CountryDuty content is centred on achieving accountability from the government, and using a bottom-up approach for organising within communities. In Johannesburg, the 'I Love' Facebook pages which include I Love Fourways, I Love Braamfontein, I Love Northcliff, I Love Parktown North are spaces for discussion about anything ranging from missing dogs, objections to the noise created by religious institutions, tips on where to find the best deals, and strategic discussions about how to ameliorate crime and disorder (Facebook, 2019). However, these forums are primarily centred in middle class and affluent areas, and while the tone is largely congenial, these spaces often reveal tensions about gender and race, which are endemic to offline tensions. On Twitter, the social justice and information sharing agenda is expressed a little differently. Instead of formalised groups, hashtags and threads are used to keep individuals on high alert. Popular Twitter user, referred to as a #TwitterDoctor, Dr Sindi van Zyl regularly gives free medical advice, and in one instance, took to the platform to dissuade users from taking the over-the-counter headache powder, Grandpa. Trying to avoid the ire of its parent company Glaxo Smith-Kline, van Zyl used an image of a birthday cake featuring the Grandpa logo, and the 'cake' metaphor has continued to be used among Black Twitter users to signal products that are not good for you.

Like most spaces, the social media universe has been complicated by the capital imperative. It is estimated that roughly 97% of South African (or South African-based) brands are engaged on Facebook through pages and advertising (World Wide Worx, 2018). On Twitter, 87% of brands are engaged, which is significant, considering its user base is much smaller. Because of this, South African users are engaging with social media as individuals, but also, increasingly as consumers. While this could be applied to any country experiencing the same level of brand immersion, what makes South Africans different is the way in which they engage with capital. On platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, users are quick to compliment brands, but also call them out. Following an Instagram Live campaign by Volkswagen which featured presenter Nomuzi Mabena in a drinking and driving related vehicle accident, users were quick to criticise the brand for not overtly stating that the video was an advertisement (they did so over 24 hours later), and for potentially triggering victims of drinking and driving-related violence (Sharman, 2018). South

African social media darling, Nandos, has a much more amicable relationship with social media users, and is often touted as the gold standard for how brands should engage - by making use of topical South African issues, using a range of languages and being highly responsive to their online communities.

While many of these elements are reflective of global user relationships with social media, South Africans, through creativity and ingenuity, have used these platforms in unique and diverse ways. The Twitter platform in particular, at the level of the personal, community, corporate and political, has begun to emerge as a central forum where key debates happen, ideas are exchanged and the consciousness of South African society is explored. It has disrupted corporates, the mainstream media, the power of large metropolitan areas, and achieved more for diversity of languages than its counterparts, allowing it to become an arbiter for culture, politics and everyday living (Mkhize in Sosibo, 2015).

Black Twitter: Home and away

Despite being a technological platform, Twitter is also cultural. For its black users, who have come to dominate Twitter in terms of user numbers, levels of engagement, and trendsetting topics, the platform is like an online home (Sonnad, 2018). Black Twitter itself is a complex, intangible term to define. For black media scholar Meredith Clark (2015: 1) whose work dominates American research on Black Twitter, it is identified as “active Black users tweeting about issues in our community”. South African author Hagen Engler (2018) calls it a cultural showcase of black life using satirical hilarity, investigative skills, and a sometimes-militant defense of ideas. There is no portal or password: you know what Black Twitter is by being in it, and the version of Black Twitter is different depending on location and language. South African Black Twitter is not a replication of its American counterpart (Engler, 2018).

Investigating “Black Twitter as a cultural conversation”, Brock (2012: 530) says, “Black Twitter can be understood as a user-generated source of culturally relevant content, combining social network elements and broadcast principles to share information”. In the United States, the vocabulary of Twitter is driven by its African-American users, who draw phrases from their offline neighbourhoods into the online space – including phrases like “snatched”, “bae” and “slay”. Once captured online, phrases are circulated and popularised far beyond the confines of the African

American, and even American communities (Sonnad, 2018). In what is often a fractured, ever-moving space, the idea of ‘Black Twitter’ as a concept was cemented in 2014, when Justine Sacco, an American PR executive, tweeted the following: “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding, I’m white!” Understandably, the ire of both the (black) American and African arms of Black Twitter was raised in outrage. Sacco, who had a paltry 200 followers at the time of tweeting, found herself at the centre of a media storm, which resulted in her being fired from her job (Vox, 2014; BuzzFeedNews 2018). It was at this moment that people realised just how far-reaching, significant and powerful Black Twitter internationally could be.

That being said, American Black Twitter is the most populous, and most popular sector of Black Twitter. This is primarily because of the dominance of American culture as a trend map for global culture. According to Kimberly Ellis (2014), “Black Twitter is the way in which black culture shows up on the social media platform we know as Twitter”. Ellis and many other American scholars who write about Black Twitter argue that it is, in many ways, a response to the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of black experiences in the public sphere and through the mainstream media. For example, in the wake of growing concerns about high levels of police brutality against black people, Twitter became the space where the (later named) #BlackLivesMatter could emerge and gain traction through discussions, petitions, flagging of suspicious behaviour by police, and most often, videos of violent incidents (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). In this case, particularly after the spotlight was placed on the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, what was a Twitter hashtag became a worldwide rallying call for black life to be treated with reverence.

However, it is important that the black and Black Twitter experience does not become synonymous with the expression of black pain only. The American Black Twitter landscape is also effervescent, fun and downright hilarious. In response to now cult-classic HBO series, *Game of Thrones*, Black Twitter members took an alternative take on live-tweeting the show. The hashtag #DemThrones has endured since 2011, and remained a trending tag until the show’s conclusion in May 2019. Considering the show’s lack of racial diversity, some troublingly Orientalist depictions of ‘non-white’ #DemThrones was an attempt by Black Twitter to re-orient the focus of the show’s narrative and make it relatable to its Black audience. *MELT* writer Zaron Burnett III says “it’s more than a parallel fandom and a safe space — it’s the most vital conversation about the show out there”, arguing that he would not be able to stomach the show without it. Similarly, moments like

#Beychella (a renaming of the California music festival, Coachella) following Beyonce's headlining performance in 2018, and the following #Mayochella, which refers to singer Taylor Swift's 'rip off' performance are also a testament to the use of Black Twitter for centering the black perspective in matters of politics and popular culture.

In South Africa, Black Twitter is met with excitement, fear and immense curiosity. Emerging as a response to, and continuation of Black Twitter in the United States, the space has taken on its own inflection. It is described by author Hagen Engler (2018) as a space of "satirical hilarity", while prominent (and controversial) politician Helen Zille (Times Live, 2019), who is very often caught in the crosshairs of Black Twitter, has described it as a space where black privilege thrives.

Considering South Africa's complex political history, and Black Twitter's unique position as a space for millions to converge in conversation, the environment is vibrant, combative, triggering and healing all at once. At both a macro and micro political level, it is space for young South Africans to engage with one another, and to reflect on the experience of living in South Africa.

For some, the belief is that this has resulted in a divisive, dichotomous politics where Black Twitter users see themselves as woke, progressive and morally superior, while responses to Black Twitter, particularly by white people, are automatically assumed to be narrow-minded and racist, if there is disagreement (Moyo, 2018). For others, this is an oversimplification to the extent that like the American 'fake black radical' label, the intention of the space is to centralise black opinions, ideas and debates. In 2011, this contestation reared its head when Helen Zille accused singer Simphiwe Dana of being a 'professional black' (a term for people whose support for blackness becomes career-like) when Dana agreed with a tweet about Cape Town's racism (Zvomuya, 2012; Aboobaker 2011). Some felt the term was akin to derogatory terms like nigger or kaffir, while others used the interaction to show why spaces like Black Twitter are so important, because of the way in which powerful (white) people continue to dismiss black people in South African society. Mostly however, the party politicians are not central to discussions. Black Twitter is stitched together by local memes, Twitter-born dialects of existing words and slang, and is reasonably personalized.

Chapter outline

This thesis contains six chapters. This chapter (chapter one) provides an introduction and personal context to the work. In addition, it explores the way in which South Africans use social media,

particularly Twitter. Moreover, it examines Black Twitter in terms of its various American, African and South African iterations.

Chapter two will deal with the theoretical frameworks which will guide the work. The idea of socialities will be explored in order to probe the way in which Black Twitter may, or may not, be a reflection of different kinds of social organization or affiliations. In addition, the chapter will also interrogate the idea and usefulness of ‘everyday’ politics, in line with how Black Twitter creates, curates, and consolidates different ordinary people’s experiences and politics. Thread through both of these frameworks will be the consideration of the digital - to the extent that it sustains, but also changes offline dynamics. The third elements of chapter two tracks the development of the ‘black’ in Black Twitter by interrogating different ways of thinking, communicating, and practicing blackness as a political and socio-cultural category.

Chapter three discusses methodological and ethical considerations. Where the methodology is concerned, I will be unpacking the philosophy, challenges and opportunities that cyberethnography offers. I will also probe a parallel, meta-critique in which I describe my oscillation between my role as ‘member’ and researcher. Similarly, considering the current debates about whether social media content is ‘open season’, I will also analyse the ethical terrain of my field of study.

Chapter four is a discussion of the key everyday concerns expressed by young Black Twitter users through their tweets. The chapter is organised along three key themes: gender and sexuality, race and politics, as well as finances and the economy. This chapter draws on a broad base of original (anonymous) tweets in order to carve out what daily occurrences make up the bulk of Black Twitter discussion, and also tackles the ways in which these conversations unfold.

Chapter five discusses the socialities which emerge from the South African Black Twitter space. Focused on **how** issues are handled, the discussion draws together reflections on the applicability of approaches to sociality (public sphere, network and conviviality) discussed in Chapter 2. In addition, it probes the languages (formal and platform-specific) used in these tweets, and what this says about the way in which language speaks to the socialities emergent on local Black Twitter.

Chapter six concludes this study. In addition to a reflection of the study itself, it also deals with new questions this research prompts us to think about, such as the ways in which spaces like Black

Twitter can be studied. It is also a personal reflection on my dual roles as Black Twitter member and researcher, and the experience of working with cyberethnography.

Chapter two: Literature review and theoretical frameworks

Social media, Twitter, and perhaps even Black Twitter, are couched within a range of common-sense understandings. As discussed in the first chapter, these are both significant and interesting for understanding how they express different socialities and socio-political positionings. In this chapter I engage with three conceptual ‘maps’ to locate them within theoretical sense-making frameworks.

The first element of this chapter charts the concept of socialities, which includes a plethora of approaches, and applications - both in the offline and online worlds. For the purposes of this work, I focus on the **public sphere**, **networks**, and **conviviality**. The intention is to provide a complex set of frameworks to make sense of the nature and content of Black Twitter in South Africa, the ways in which users connect and disconnect, and the deeper, more ingrained socialities being established and negotiated through the discussion of everyday concerns.

The second element of this chapter deals with the concept of **everyday life**. As Maffesoli (1989) explains, its theoretical trickiness is that it is the only life ordinary people know, so, as critics ask, what is the point of studying it at all? In this section, I advance that everyday life is also a complex microsociological world whose studies are useful for the purposes of moving away from overtly macrosociological, ‘big’ politics approaches. Instead, this paradigm starts to unfurl what knowledges, ideas, and concerns are expressed through quotidian experiences, and the way in which ‘regular’ people make sense of their experiences through a space like Black Twitter. This is central to the study as Twitter users do not necessarily engage deliberately as members of various social and political categories, but as regular people who, in addition to their material and socio-political reality, are workers, shoppers, church goers, television-watchers and of course ‘tweeps’.

The third element focuses on the discussion of **blackness** as both identity and concept. While Black Twitter may connote a certain phenotypical identity, blackness is a complicated social, political, and cultural category, ever-evolving through history, political gains and losses, community integration and separation. Essentially, like Stuart Hall’s (1993) now seminal paper “What is this black in black

popular culture?” this section presents a range of perspectives for addressing what the ‘black’ in Black Twitter might mean for its South African users.

The intention of this body of literature (which is limited by its skew towards the Western canon) is not to map established frames of socialities onto the concerns of Black Twitter users, but rather to provide tools to understand what kinds of social affiliations are governing interactions, and to point to the ways in which connection and disconnection, agreement and disagreement, as well as friendship and enmity are communicated. Considering that this is a reasonably amorphous social ‘field’, these conceptions are useful in helping to understand what kind of connections and power dynamics manifest the key concerns of various local Black Twitter users.

Ultimately, South African Black Twitter performs itself through its distinct cultural vernacular. This cultural vernacular embodies language, values, history and the presence of everyday practices (Smith, 2014). As such, these three bodies of theory are exercised here in a way to make clearer the vernacular which governs and guides these daily tweets and conversations.

It is important at the outset of this literature review to recognise the limitations of the literature available in this discipline. Scholarship on sociology and media studies has been overwhelmingly dominated by what Grosfoguel (2007) describes as a white, heteronormative, Christian perspective. This means that although many of the theories discussed here are valid and useful, their epistemology is based on the social reality of a small fraction of the world. In engaging with the theory throughout this work, this study also seeks to engage more work from women, people of colour and the Global South more broadly, in an effort to (a) consider the important social realities of these identities and (b) attempt to expand the pool of knowledge from which it draws its insights. In line with the decolonial approach which governs the work, the task of this study is as much about questioning what our knowledge of social and virtual communities offers, as it is an attempt to foreground the perspectives from the Global South (of which the South African Black Twitter universe is part) in order to tell a less European-defined version of events.

On socialities

“We are social creatures to the inmost centre of our being. The notion that one can begin anything at all from scratch, free from the past, or unindebted to others, could not conceivably be more wrong.”

- Karl R. Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving* (1999)

The concept of sociality is based on the idea that individuals exist and coexist within a complex matrix of social relationships (Long and Moore, 2013). In this matrix, it is believed that we are interacting in ways that are “co-productive, and continually plastic and malleable,” as we negotiate our place inside and outside of different relationships (Long and Moore, 2013:4). The flexible, fluid nature of sociality means that it is not a category like an organisation, a community, or a system, but rather a blend of these. There are a range of positions, approaches and ‘names’ for various forms of sociality, each of which emphasises certain drivers of social connections over others. Moreover, these positions, which have developed from various fields, disciplines and empirical contexts, draw much on their immediate historical, political and social realities to make sense of the ways in which different groups connect, collaborate, disconnect, and sometimes disintegrate altogether (Amit, 2015).

In this particular work, the intention is to **explore** rather than categorise the socialities emerging on South African Black Twitter, and while there may be other social organising categories that apply, a few key positions are explored in this section. These are the **public sphere**, the **network**, **communalism** and **conviviality**. Although arguments could be made for the use of ‘community’ (a term often used when talking about digital groups), or Bourdieu’s (1993) social field, their lack of emphasis in my discussion does not mean that key features of these understandings are not integrated into the frameworks I’ll be using, or that they are not applicable to South African Black Twitter.

What is sociality anyway? How does it work?

The idea of sociality initially emerges from scientific study, where the concept was initially used to understand animal, and specifically primate groups. In this paradigm, studies of sociality are premised on the idea that socialities are formed as a fitness or survival strategy. Sociality is therefore the maintenance of an effective and cohesive group to enable a better chance of individual

protection, lower exposure to violence, and greater success through combined efforts (Dunbar and Shultz, 2010). Needless to say, this position is not entirely disassociated from human-driven, sociological positions on sociality, and this Darwinist notion offers the useful idea of loose and tight bonds where socialities exist on a continuum of close and looser “aggregations” (Dunbar and Shultz, 2010: 780). In tight-bond congregated social groups, individuals are said to be actively pursuing relationships, while looser-bond groups are driven by the desire to avoid conflict (Dunbar and Shultz, 2010). Regarding the formation of these bonds, the scientific paradigm privileges the recognition of identity, an established hierarchy, and a mutual recognition of social belonging.

Despite operating from a scientific position, Darwin’s ideas about sociality are not entirely removed from the way in which sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural studies’ practitioners have theorised the concept. In his 1934 work, “The Mind, Self And Society”, American sociologist George Herbert Mead does not depart too strongly from the scientific. He argues that the living organism, because of its inability to sustain itself entirely in isolation, must attach itself to social groups in order to procreate, build a living environment, or simply find something to eat. Nevertheless, he argues, in his most noted departure from science, that the element of **values** fundamentally shifts the logic of why human animals bond with one another (Mead, 1934). Essentially, there has to be an alignment on a particular value for individuals to shirk their selfish singleness to pursue belonging to a group. As such, he argues that sociality is premised on the constant identification, non-identification, and re-identification of others as either friend, ally, or foe, and that this is premised on humans’ unique ability to be both self and socially conscious (Mead, 1934).

How do we practise and manage socialities?

There is no consensus amongst scholars about whether the ‘social’ is a product of individual needs, or a genuine desire to connect with others. Fiske (1992) argues that it is not necessarily one or the other, and believes that while intention does drive initial social connection, there are four key “forms” of sociality that govern how those social connections are expressed. Fiske’s focus on the ‘practice’ of sociality is useful to the extent that it identifies power as a key axis upon which groups engage. These forms are important to keep in mind in order to ascertain what different forms of socialities (and power) are animated through different theories. I will outline each of them here.

The first form is communal sharing, which holds that all members of a category should be treated equally. In this dynamic, there is a focus on commonalities and a social ‘commons’, rather than individual identities. The commonality of the group is based on social categories like kinship, ethnic identity, or nationality, and is expressed through ritual sameness, such as a rite of passage into adulthood, or a religious naming ceremony. This does not mean that the group is the same in all things - they may have a communal sharing interaction or relationship based on the commonality of being Christian, but not their raced, classed, or gendered relationship. This is significant when considering Black Twitter, which may practise some elements of communal sharing by virtue of a raced or socio-cultural sameness. Interesting too in this paradigm, is that Fiske (1992) argues that a rule of ‘communal sharing’ tends to pair equivalence with an implicit or explicit sense of superiority, and that the communal nature must be concretised in order to sustain the superiority. This may provide some insight into why Black Twitter users, despite bitterly disagreeing with one another, tend to present a unified, often antagonistic stance towards those deemed outsiders (Brock, 2012).

The second form that Fiske (1992) highlights is ‘authority ranking’, where the social group is characterised by a hierarchy and a clear linear ordering of social position. Contrary to the communal sharing dynamic, asymmetry of power is the accepted, purposeful bind between individuals. Significant here is that the hierarchy also dictates treatment. So-called higher-ups have some control over the actions and freedoms of lower groups, but they are also tasked with the protection or care of the so-called “lower downs” (1992: 691). Some may argue that this is typical of a colonial mentality. In the context of my study, where “higher ups” and “lower downs” are not necessarily named in the Black Twitter space, it is interesting to think about whether such hierarchies exist, and how they mediate what concerns are expressed, and what is done with those concerns. There is also a paternalistic politics at work in Fiske’s (1992) ideas which may well be significant. It may also be a position taken from a time when the custodianship of women, black people, the disabled, and the dispossessed were the social responsibility and duty of men, white people, able-bodied, and the empowered for reasons premised on hierarchy and an assumed superiority (Quijano, 2000).

The third and fourth forms are interesting for thinking about the ways in which so-called ‘leaderless’, equitable platforms like Black Twitter could operate. Equality matching, the third

form, is based on keeping track of imbalances among members of the particular group. There is an extreme egalitarian politics at work, which includes an eye for an eye, tit-for-tat, one-for-one logic in all interactions. The idea is that equality allows the group to flourish, but a sense of imbalance (inferred: injustice) undermines the group. The fourth and final form is market pricing, wherein social 'acts' are worked out by ratio. Differently put, the proportionality of relationships is central. This is expressed through something as ubiquitous (and invisible) as the 5:2 structure of the week, where 5 days of work means 2 days of rest. Similarly, the concept of tax is worked on a strict ratio between income and what is owed. In South Africa's context, this may not only apply to forma tax, but the duty (and apparent burden) of a black tax³, where family members share in the wealth of their children. But it may come in handy when thinking about the ways in which 'worth' is ascribed on the Twitter platform based on follower:following ratios - where the ideal reported balance is 2:1 (Inc Magazine, 2018).

These opening perspectives are an important entry point for thinking about the bases upon which a range of socialities are formed and managed. However, as Amit (2015:2) notes, there is increasingly a move away from the use of single meta-concepts, which he argues are "either too vague or too general for analytical utility". Instead, as this work will advance, there is a shift away from master silver-bullet narratives which are often stretched too far, or are required to do too many things, and work for too many diverse groups of people. As Long and Moore (2013) argue, the haziness and ambiguity of socialities are its defining forms. Thus, the range of options must be seen as "evidence of human sociality's capacity to take forms" (2013:9). Indeed, it is argued that the usefulness of sociality is its open-ended quality, less buttoned down and sewn up than the idea of a "society", a concept upon which order, function, and rules are necessarily implied (Amit, 2015)

The public sphere: From Habermas to the hashtag

The public sphere is one of the most pervasive and contested approaches to sociality. Brought to the fore by Jurgen Habermas' (1989) book "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere", the

³ See chapter 4: finances and the economy for an expanded discussion on this topic

concept has endured and evolved in relation to new ideas as well as the opportunities and challenges presented by the internet age. Essentially, what digital public sphere theorists and enthusiasts are grappling with, is whether digital communities complement or substitute the public sphere, and what spaces for inclusion the internet facilitates and constrains.

Primarily, the public sphere is ideally characterised by argument, reasoning, validity and interaction with others (Schafer, 2015). In the pre-Habermasian era, public sphere gatherings of concerned citizens took place in the elite spaces in Europe. The Greeks, French, Austrians and other ‘great’ civilisations would gather to discuss the socio-political issues of the day (Schafer, 2015). For Habermas (1989), the rise of mass media, industrialism, and a capitalist world order undermined this open, horizontal space of engagement, and to his mind, corrupted it. He argues that the new society, controlled and influenced by big business, greedy (and easily corruptible) mass media, along with a fragmented set of social groups, meant that society cannot/does not meet the demands of a rational, engaged space because of this structural transformation of the public sphere. While mass media and digital celebrants have long argued that the media are actually the key entry-point for more and better debate, Habermas (1989) maintains that this is not the case for two reasons. First, because the nature and quality of debate are mediated by the key agendas, stories, and actors that the mass media highlights as important (therefore skewing what is in the public’s consideration); and secondly, because the oligopolies privileged in contemporary capitalist society mean that divergent viewpoints are crowded out, or given minimal exposure. Despite his critique of the way in which the media has affected the purpose and function of the public sphere, Habermas (1989) suggests that if approached ‘correctly’, the public sphere could still be the central space where a community is formed among strangers.

Within the realm of digital media studies, those theorists who believe in the internet’s potential for facilitating deliberation and democracy, the idea of a functioning public sphere is appealing. In this worldview, the internet offers the individual more access to platforms, technologies, and social meeting points to share ideas, debate and of course, deliberate (McChesney, 2013). However, for others, the public sphere is not the right approach for this task. For Dahlberg (2014), the public sphere is not a homogenous whole. While he strongly supports the web’s potential for deliberation, he argues that existing offline and newly-rooted online power imbalances undermine this potential significantly. As such, he takes an agonistic approach to the digital public sphere, casting “cyberspace as a space of struggle” (Dahlberg, 2014: 48).

Central to his position is the notion of **counter publics**, which embraces the idea that democracy in the 21st century also includes radical exclusion, and that the role of those in the counter-public, who tend to be counter-hegemonic, are an important social group for identifying the limits of ‘rational’ and ‘legitimate’ deliberation (Dahlberg, 2014). In many ways, the deliberative power of a digital public sphere is made possible by the recognition and consistent functioning of counter publics and their contributions. Squires (2002) uses the idea of counter publics to argue that there is a black, online public sphere. It is characterised, firstly, by enclaved publics where counter-hegemonic ideas are expressed through internal (in-group) language and discourse. Secondly, the black public sphere is marked by its counter-public status and potential ability to challenge dominant ideas and create outsider solidarity. Lastly, drawing on Fraser (1990), the black public sphere is a kind of subaltern public that works to solidify group identity and build independent thought and institutions. In the context of Black Twitter, the idea of counter publics could mean a number of things. It could mean perhaps that Black Twitter itself is a counter public to (hegemonic, white?) Twitter. It could also indicate that within Black Twitter, there may be a dominant public and counter-public struggle. However, it is also worth thinking about whether, given its size and socio-cultural dominance, Black Twitter has not itself gained hegemonic status in the African and American Twitter universes.

Another approach to the unitary public sphere is Gitlin’s (1998) notion of public ‘sphericules’. Considering the complexity of cultures, technologies, identities and mobilities in the information age, he questions the validity of a singular public sphere. Instead, like counter-publics’ proponents trying to fit this difference into an inevitable whole, Gitlin says that because our society is characterised by fragmentation, so too is the so-called public sphere. He argues instead that society is made up of individualised, interest-driven sphericules. This is much like a hashtag or group on Twitter that collates contributions to a certain topic, interest, or cultural identity (Bruns, 2014). To be clear, Gitlin is by no means in support of societal fragmentation, arguing that there is a loss of any kind of commonality. Cunningham (2001) argues that the clinging to uniformity is a Western construct. Instead, he sees the disintegration and dismantling of ‘totality’ facilitated by strong diasporic sphericules as the way towards a more egalitarian space for debate, where previously excluded groups could pursue their own interests, without being suppressed by a hierarchy of ideas and identities. As such, the key qualifiers of sphericules is that they a) do not inevitably form part of a static ‘whole’, and b) are not necessarily aimed at being counter-hegemonic, but rather culturally

plural — wherein there is no central and opposing power, but power is held horizontally across different groups (Cunningham, 2001).

The network

The idea of a network has become commonplace to describe any kind of group who is socially connected. People regularly talk about social networks and networking as a business tool, but this is not necessarily always in line with the associated body of theory. The idea of a network, or a network society, was first proposed by Van Dijk in 1991, as a response to patterns of globalisation, and these ideas were advanced by Castells and Latour (1996). From their initial point of view, the significant changes in the economy, communication, relationships and mobility were suggesting a new social dynamic that would come to ‘define’ the 21st century. In this scenario, there is a move from offline socialities to what Castells (1996) has called a culture of virtuality, where the online life is as pronounced, if not more so, than the traditional offline life. As such, these theorists suggest that society is constructed by networks which are alive: to the extent that they grow, reproduce, change, and sometimes consume other networks (Samet, 2013). Particularly where technology and digital media forms are concerned, the network constructs the human and the non-human as part of one indivisible structure where no one (neither human nor technological platform) acts alone (Latour, 1996). Essentially, like many other perspectives of sociality, the individual is continually acting and being acted upon in ways that have consequences for the structure, longevity, and strength of the network (Samet, 2013).

For Wittel, who advances a more microsociological approach to the network: insofar as its meaning and use for individuals is a “sociality based on individualisation and deeply embedded in technology” (2001: 69). This is an important departure from public sphere and other ‘whole society’ positions on sociality. The network sociality is neither normative, offering no suggestion or explanation for what a network should do, or what an ideal network should look like, nor does it operate from the perspective of a democratic world. If anything, Latour (1996) and others simply argue that the connections of networks (person to platform, person to person, platform to person etc.) are either tight enough to accelerate the strength and presence of the network, or too flimsy or fragmented to be sustained beyond individual moments. Samet (2013) also discusses the idea of nodes and hubs, through which the power function of a network, a concept, event, or topic can go from being a singular, loosely established idea, to gaining traction, collecting similar ideas around it, and creating a network wherein there is similar interest. Perhaps it could be argued using this

analogy that while the various languages, issues, memes and jargon related to Black Twitter may represent the building blocks of a network, that the issues which emerge as trends may be the nodes, while Black Twitter itself might be a main hub. Most useful here, although not stated explicitly, is the question of whether the offline or the online network is privileged. Do individuals, as digital Bourdieurists would argue, simply leverage their offline network and capital into online spaces? De Zuniga et al (2013) suggest that the online self and online network (the one that shows up on Black Twitter) is increasingly the primary space through which people connect. In this scenario, while offline social capital still has some purchase, the focus on online profiles and personas is more significant to the users themselves.

Rambukanna, using Latour's actor-network idea, also proposes that technologies on social platforms actively perform a networking function. Citing Bruns and Burgess (2017), Rambukanna argues that a technology like hashtags is one way of constituting a network, which is significant when it is used well, and less useful when used by few members. Bruns and Burgess (2017) talk about "hashtag publics" in this context, in which hashtags are used to connect, discuss, and invest in a particular talking point, so much so that a network or 'ad hoc public' is formed. Rambukanna, addressing the online/offline dynamic, further says that the hashtag is not where the network ends because it can be taken up and mechanised outside of its original platform, Twitter. For example, #BlackLivesMatter or #ZumaMustGo may have initially constituted a hashtag public, but later become part of a wider network when their contents and their ideas were used offline to create a movement and arrange offline activism events. What is perhaps missing here is a consideration of how else these ad hoc and sustained networks may be formed, considering that hashtags are not the only mechanism by which people connect and invest. In South Africa, the use of indigenous language, certain local memes, and even repeated reference to popular TV shows or viral tweets may be other ways that individuals are constituting networks (Engler, 2018).

Conviviality

While much of the theory about socialities emerges from Western contexts, this does not mean that the concept has not been thought through by global South, and African scholars. Francis Nyamnjoh (2017) argues that the dominance of African colonial history over sociality narratives has resulted in the placing of Africa within inadequate, ill-fitting binaries. Instead, he argues that African socialities (of which there are many, some with no names) are premised on the "ever-evolving messiness of lived experiences" (2017: 255). For Praeg (2014), who writes particularly about the concepts of

ubuntu and ujamaa, the reduction of these particular socialities to ‘African communitarianism’ says less about the substance of these socialities, and more about their subsumption into Western frames of thinking about social organization.

In both cases, the concept of conviviality is fundamentally anti-binary. Conviviality is defined by Nyamnjoh (2017: 262) as “the recognition and provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete”. In this version of reality, enmeshed in pre-colonial and colonial experiences, the features of sociality include certain hard-to-use, but easy-to-live ideas. The first of which is the rejection of permanent conditions in the universe: everything is malleable and flexible (Nyamnjoh, 2017). Similarly, people can and are many things at once: it is possible to be human and godlike, god and humanlike, as is the case for example with Yoruba *eguns* (spirit forces) or some South African ancestors who mediate life on earth through the spirit world (Molefe, 2019). In the western socialities discussed above, the spiritual and metaphysical world are discounted and thought of as primitive, backward, hyperlocal or traditional, rather than as alternative systems of thought (Santos, 2007; Praeg, 2014; Molefe 2019).

Mbembe (2003: 13) identifies ‘multiplicity’ as another key element of African socialities. Instead of a ‘totality’ by which everyone’s lives are organized, conviviality privileges multiples lives, lifetimes, and locations. Praeg (2017: 102) adds the important point that this does not necessarily mean an apolitical, amoral society. Particularly in relation to ubuntu, which he describes as a political economy of obligation, he argues that the ‘community’ is not infinitely accommodating, and there is a constitutive violence tied to the openness of the society, which is engaged when a member needs to be sanctioned, reigned in, or removed from the community (Praeg, 2017: 96). Politically, this is reminiscent of the strong and silent way in which the African National Congress (ANC) regulates the activities of its members (Reuters, 2017). Similarly, within the digital framework, individuals within a group may be ‘cancelled’ and ostracised from the group when their engagement is out of line with the group’s principles. Callahan (2012) argues that this does not necessarily mean a tight, authoritarian system, but rather one where joy and enmity are able to exist, and be acted upon concurrently. There is no ambition towards an eventual completeness, but rather an appreciation for incompleteness as an achievable reality that allows “an unrestrained sociality” to emerge and operate (Nyamnjoh, 2017; Callahan, 2012).

On everyday life

“The everyday is therefore the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden”

— Henri Lefebvre, *The Everyday and Everydayness* (1987: 9)

Speaking, cooking, going to work, playing. At first glance, these are banal activities conducted by almost all individuals across all social groups. Owing to their common-to-all nature, they are often dismissed by critics of everyday life studies as frivolous and unhelpful (Foucault, 1980 : 52). However, as the study of everyday life has evolved, these routine practices have begun to uncover the fine detail, complex relationships, and shifting social patterns that occur between individuals both offline and online (Kellner, 1989; de Certeau, 1989). For the purposes of this work, rooted in South Africa’s almost myopic focus on macro politics and systemic elements (Zibi, 2019), the inclusion of the everyday is essential for understanding certain dynamics. This includes how we come to hold certain macro-social and macro political views, and what day-to-day activities and practices help us to engage the social worlds in which we operate. In light of this, fundamentally it is a lens through which we can think through how online socialities, of which Black Twitter in South Africa may be one of many, are constructed through day-to-day lived experiences.

Why study the everyday if it’s everywhere?

The study of everyday life emerges from a dissatisfaction by sociologists with the limit of macrosociological approaches (Adler, Adler and Fontana, 1987; Sztompka, 2008). Guided by the logic of European modernity and the idea of ‘totality’ which privileged uniformity, macrosociological perspectives sought to understand how different social groups fitted into the broader social whole. The ‘new’ wave of sociologists found this macrosociological approach to be limiting, exclusionary and overly deterministic (Lefebvre and Levich, 1987; Crenshaw, 2004). The adoption of everyday life study emerges with the turn in humanistic studies towards phenomenology, existential philosophy, and the study of emotions by anthropologists and psychologists. Added to this is the influence of the ‘epistemic decolonial turn’: a view that the colonial version of the world left huge gaps in what we know about people and how they operate

(Das, 2008; Sandywell, 2004; Grosfoguel, 2007). As such, proponents of the study of everydayness claim the following:

To focus exclusively on the memorable, highly visible or extraordinary events of the sociocultural world is something akin to a category mistake, because to do so universalizes the atypical and ignores the overlooked norm. (Gardiner, 2004)

For Maffesoli (1989) and De Certeau (1987), both of whom are leading voices in the field of everyday life studies, the social world as delineated by political power, social capital, and the economy, is driven by the everyday. The everyday is marked broadly by the routine, cyclical and often incidental practices that stitch social worlds together. As Maffesoli (1989) argues, for people (inside and outside of academia), the everyday life is the only one they have, and the only ‘world’ through which their lives are articulated. Similarly, for some digital media scholars interested in the power of social media platforms, the creation of online ‘communities’ and social worlds is predicated upon the routine, consistent, everyday contributions made by social media users (Dean, 2014; Bruns, 2012).

One of the interesting, and still contested areas of concern for everyday life scholars is the question of purpose. For a scholar like Foucault (1980: 53), the idea of studying the everyday was only useful to the extent that it could be used to say something about broader socio-structural dynamics. But, proponents of the approach offer two responses to this. The first is that while everyday life studies can be used for this macro purpose, it *is* enough to validate the inner worlds of otherwise unrecognized people. Their contributions to the broader social world were neither considered nor included previously, or their world views were simply relegated to the category of tradition, superstition, or hyper-specific social groups (de Certeau, 1987: xi; Grosfoguel, 2007). The second response is that the everyday perspective offers an opportunity to engage in what Brekhus (1998: 43) calls “reverse marking”, whereby (socio-politically) established markers of the centre and periphery can be disrupted. The example he offers is the reverse marking of “whiteness”, and the practice of whiteness as part of race discourses which previously treated whiteness as a universal, uncontested norm, thus conflating race studies with studies of exclusively “non-white” communities. Similarly, in internet studies, the turn towards studying online identities as full, complex ways of everyday being is a disruption to the conventional wisdom and assumption that individuals conceive of their offline selves before their online selves (De Zuniga et al, 2013).

What does the everyday life perspective offer?

Owing to its location within the interpretivist theoretical tradition, the study of everyday life intends to unpack and uncover new areas of inquiry previously considered “unofficial” or “unscientific” (Sztompka, 2008; Gardiner, 2004). Combining influences from American social behaviourist studies of the 1920s and 1930s, and fully established by its use in British Cultural Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, everyday life studies operate from the emic perspective, treating each individual’s ordinary, human life as the site of the ordinary and superhuman (Gardiner, 2004; Lefebvre and Levich, 1987; methodology reading).

With this ‘small’ but significant site of study in clear focus, everyday life studies attempt to understand individuals in terms of their various cosmologies (Mignolo, 2007). The workplace, the home, the supermarket, the movie theatre are all spaces in which the individual *acts* and *is acted upon*. In the everyday life paradigm, the individual is the conduit through which these cosmologies (and our knowledge of them) is understood (Adler, Adler and Fontana, 1987). As Njabulo Ndebele (1989) illuminates in his focus on South Africa’s struggle to rediscover the ordinary, the engagement between a black shopper buying bread from an Indian shopkeeper is at once a regular, bi-weekly occurrence, but it also locates these individuals outside of previously-held macro ‘tropes’. In this exchange, the shopper is neither a struggle hero, nor an oppressed black person: instead, they are a consumer, a family member and a person who must walk a distance to buy basic goods (Ndebele, 1998). While everyday life scholars do not suggest that individuals are magically extracted from their material reality, the approach allows them to be more than pre-defined, often insufficient categories.

Closely tied to this expansion of individuals’ social location is the expansion of what is considered important for us to know about the individual. In keeping with the humanistic turn towards microsociology, the sociology of emotion is given significance. This is approached in two ways. First, in the organic or voluntary approach to the study of emotions, intuitive and instinctual responses to situations are highlighted in order to glean how individuals’ sentiments become indicative of their relationship to themselves (singular or plural), a certain person or interaction, or indeed, even a broader social situation (Adler, Adler and Fontana, 1987). Dismissed by critics who argue that emotions are too subjective to have any meaningful use, the study of everyday sentiment is far more telling than it is given credit for. In his reception study of a group of working class black

South African men, Strelitz (2004) talks to a group of young black South African men who have watched a so-called ‘gangster film’. As the movie unfolds, the men begin to cheer for the so-called bad characters and begin to jeer at the police characters. This snapshot of their intuitive, emotional response provides a necessary insight that although the film is set up to portray the cops as the ‘good guys’ and gangsters as ‘bad guys’, this is at odds with the everyday reality (and therefore response) of the young, black male audience. A study which simply looked only at the high number of tickets sold, and (somehow) the demographic of viewers, may have concluded that the film (and its preferred encoded reading) was popular amongst young black men, when the exploration of their emotional responses allowed for greater, and arguably more accurate detail to emerge (Hall, 1980; Strelitz, 2004).

The second approach to this focus on emotions is the constructionist view, which argues that emotional responses are to a degree, socially constructed (Adler, Adler and Fontana, 1987). In this Approach, while an emotional response may be deemed an instinctual response, it is also a social one. The image of men crying openly is at once an incidental, once-off reaction, but it is also a contradiction to everyday hegemonic representations of masculinity (Cole, 2015). Similarly, a woman acting assertively in her workplace, perhaps being angry and aggressive with her subordinates, is understood differently to a man in the same position. In his study of the ‘Fees Must Fall’ student protests in South Africa, Maldonado-Torres (2017), argues that the emotional and spoken responses of various groups (pro-protest and anti-protest) became telling of their political position—even when the individuals did not see themselves as responding politically. Referring to the response to students challenging the colonial university environment, he comments:

These kinds of anxiety and fear lead to multiple forms of evasion, to micro-aggressions, and to open aggressive behaviour. Anyone who introduces the question about the meaning and significance of colonialism and decolonization most likely faces a decadent and genocidal modern/colonial attitude of indifference, obfuscation, constant evasion, and aggression, typically in the guise of neutral and rational assessments, postracialism, and well-intentioned liberal values. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 8)

In this scenario, Maldonado-Torres, using the emotional response as an anchor, explains the social positioning of the fearful old guard. In particular, he mentions the concept of ‘micro-aggressions’, which are premised on the everyday, mostly covert expressions of various forms of bigotry. This is important considering that a macrosociological perspective would perhaps stop at an analysis of ‘the big questions’ around Fees Must Fall, and perhaps leave out the visceral, telling detail, that happens through body politics (Santos, 2007). Arguing that the approach moves between

the ‘concrete’ day-to-day relations and abstract social relations, Veena Das (2008) says that this is the very purpose of everyday life studies, as it allows different conceptions of scale and complexity around certain issues. Staying with the same example, Das’ view implies that ‘Fees Must Fall’, for example, is examined at the racial level of black-and-white responses or pro-protest or anti-protest, but the everyday expressions of emotion allow us to understand the small scale, intricate ways in which these abstract positions are articulated.

What is also implied in this focus on emotions is the focus of everyday life practitioners on language, particularly speaking. For De Certeau (1989), Sacks (1974, 1995), who was the pioneer of conversation analysis, and Schegloff (1974, 2007), the moment of speech is the crystallisation of a person’s relationship to the world, expressed in a moment. Discussing the centrality of speech to everyday life studies, De Certeau argues that the spoken (or written word) shows the way in which (in the present, everyday moment), individuals make and break contracts with the social world. The choice to use the formal version of a language, or a reappropriated form, such as *tsotitaal* in South Africa, *Spanglish* in the United States, *sheng* in KiSwahili, gives an indication of the individual’s relationship to the hegemonic version of a particular language (Bier and Adare, 2016). Speaking and everyday conversation is also important for understanding the ways in which different power relationships are communicated with an interlocutor (De Certeau, 1987: xvii).

In online communities, this is evidenced through ‘spoken’ contributions by different users. On Twitter for example, this includes (among other things) the use of certain fan-terms, hashtags, and abbreviations which signal belonging to a particular in-group (Brock, 2012). *Game of Thrones*, which became a cult-classic TV phenomenon, presented this dynamic quite interestingly. While the #GameOfThrones hashtag would trend each night the show was on air, collecting a broad sweep of contributions from the fan community, a hashtag called #DemThrones was started by African American viewers to make community-specific utterances about the show that the group seemed to believe only the in-group (US Black Twitter users) would value and appreciate. #DemThrones included tweets about durags (a common headdress worn by African American men), tweets written from the perspective of the few black characters (who had little agency in the show itself), and memes including black pop culture icons (Burnett, 2019). Burnett (2019) argues that #DemThrones was an incidental response to dominance of white, male fan communities, whose language and point of view tend to dominate popular opinion on shows like *Game of Thrones*. While there was no official or formal decision to craft #DemThrones as a parallel fandom, the use of similar language,

ways of speaking, and continued, (literally) everyday contributions allowed the hashtag to become a reflection of the life-worlds of this particular social group.

What if there is more than one 'everyday'?

One of the major critiques levelled against everyday life studies is that it unduly conflates the everyday with the ordinary. Sandywell (2004: 160) argues that although the idea of everyday life studies aims to remove the constraints of macrosociology, that the concept still “dehistoricizes, naturalizes, homogenizes” social experience by collapsing dominant, hegemonic ways of being into a singular ‘everyday’. Responding to Lefebvre and Bakhtin specifically—who describe everyday life as if it is a homogenous descriptor, Sandywell argues instead that what this approach really seeks to study is *the ordinary*, which is hyper-specific to individual contexts. Using this term, the approach focuses on the ways in which the ‘ordinary’ practices of individuals present a response to the ‘everyday’ dominant order, either by upholding it or disrupting it. On its own, Sandywell’s position may seem somewhat pedantic.

However, going a step further, Kellner (1989) argues that the everyday is constructed primarily by mediated representations of what a regular, day-to-day lived experience involves. In this scenario, the everyday is not a neutral and open category from which we derive and create all kinds of meanings, but a media-driven packaged normalisation of dominant ideas, through which we come to understand our own everyday either as quite ordinary, or unremarkable, or counter-cultural, or perhaps even as deviant. This is interesting not only because it helps researchers to identify this mediatized hegemonic ‘everyday’, but it also encourages researchers to think about what assumptions about the everyday they (as a person with their own life) are taking into the study. As Lefebvre (1987: 8) argues, marginality in the modern world does not represent a minority acting out against the accepted social order. Rather there is a silent, voiceless majority (quite literally over half the world’s population) whose worldview has never been incorporated into mainstream epistemological understandings of the everyday. As such, the picture of the established everyday order is, to invoke Grosfoguel (2007), a white, male, Christian, heterosexual one, and the so-called ‘everyday’ is established from a Western locus of enunciation.

Added to this consideration of multiple, geographical, ethnic, gendered ‘pluriversailities’ (Mignolo, 2007), the digital world also makes an intervention into the way in which we conceive of the

everyday. Giddens (1990) argues that the Internet and our online lives mean that our everyday lives are incredibly disembedded, fragmented, and globalised. As such, he argues that there can be no singular everyday world for individuals because they live in multiple online and offline life-worlds, through which the everyday may be expressed differently. For example, ‘everyday life’ for a researcher may include working, doing interviews, and reading, but their Instagram lifeworld presents an everyday life (through technology like Instagram stories) of morning coffee, trips to the gym, and endless social engagements. As such, Giddens (1990) claims that our life-worlds are fundamentally marked by fragmentation of aesthetics, allegiance, language interest, and layered routines. In resolving this departure from a single everyday perspective, the emphasis moves from studying the everyday in its offline singular variety (which is all pre-1990s theorists had to use), to an exploration of multiple “emergent life-worlds” in a way that rejects normative conclusions, and does not elevate or diminish the ‘value’ of experiences using our own socially driven hierarchies and online lived experiences (Maffesoli, 1989: 22).

On blackness

“To be black was to confront, and be forced to alter, a condition forged in history”

- James Baldwin, *Dark Days*, 1980

The question of blackness and black identity is first noted in WEB Du Bois’ (1903) now seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*. The field of blackness studies has since expanded, diversified and progressed significantly since then (Taylor, 2014). For some theorists, the discussion of blackness and black identity requires grappling with the history and politics of race (Baldwin, 1960; Cole, 2015). For others, questioning the logic of race is not necessary or useful for understanding blackness as it performs itself today (Brock, 2012). In other contexts, the question of blackness is an open-ended one, where the experience of blackness shapes the theory that emerges (Brock, 2012; Hall, 2007). In the context of a study of Black Twitter, these perspectives are important for

understanding what the black in Black Twitter is, how it is called upon, rallied around and discarded in everyday interactions, and hopefully, what the practice of Black Twitter by South Africans tells us about where this group is oriented on the subjects of race and blackness. In order to begin to do this, this section will track the varying perspectives in blackness studies, highlighting various points of convergence and divergence.

In the 16th century, the Western world was in a bind when it came to the treatment of colonised people (Grosfoguel, 2007: 6). At the time, the prevailing authority was the Catholic church who framed the debate as ‘Are these true men or not’ (Grosfoguel, 2007: 6). While Las Casas argued for the humanity of colonised people, based on his objection to the ill-treatment of colonised Indian communities, his respondent Sepulveda, argued that the colonised were a godless people, with an inability to rule themselves, and therefore required stewardship (control) by God’s people, the Europeans (Grosfoguel, 2007: 11; West, 1993: 262). Sepulveda’s was the accepted conclusion and direction, and it was decided that “a proper degree of terror” could be applied to these communities (MacLennan, 1986: 1; Mkhize in Sosibo, 2015).

For theorists interested in the relationship between race and blackness, this has yielded several responses. For Lewis Gordon (2007), the great debate sets the stage for the classification of (for lack of a better term) non-white people as problem people —the objects upon which decisions, violence, displacement could be enacted, because in the moment of classifying non-white people as different and inferior, their ‘race’ was a symbol for their low place in the world. For Fanon (1952: 53), writing from the perspective of a professional, highly-regarded psychiatrist, the idea of race, and being on the wrong side of it, was always the final trump card. Therefore, being black relegated anyone (even where they presented ‘white qualities’) to the “zone of non-being” (1952: 53). As he explains, when he walked into a room, reason walked out: blackness and reason were non-compatible. Anthony Appiah (1985), responding to Du Bois, Fanon and others, dismisses the race element as no more than a politically-driven organizing category, calling it an “illusion”.

There are of course, various reasons why the legacy of race has endured from the Las Casas and Sepulveda debate (Hernandez, 2001). The issue of race has often been treated in Western circles as separate from racism, owing to its discussion through authoritative kinds of knowledges like religious, anthropology, and science. However, many black authors seem to suggest that the study

and invocation of race has always been a purposive tool to further racism, arguing that such logic is not premised on ‘facts’, but prejudice. ‘Race’ is invoked as a shifting, floating signifier of difference (Hall, 2007). Ta Nehisi Coates (2014) argues that the violence of racism is a constitutive feature of any questions about race. “Racism is the father of race, not the other way around”, he says, in his divisive and enduring work, *The Case for Reparations* (2014: 53). The trouble with evaluating any of these positions is that the experience of race and racism, and therefore the way it is spoken about, is closely linked to the particular lived experience of race and racism at different times, in different places (Hall, 2007: 02:32).

What complicates this further (and perhaps is evident in this section) is that the discussions of race and racism (with specific reference to blackness) tend to occur in liberal, multicultural, and heterogeneous contexts where there is a history of race ‘issues’ (Taylor, 2014). This means that the discussions emerge fundamentally from conflict, and potentially where the question of race is either about sustaining previous power structures based on race, or doing work to debunk them (Taylor, 2014). As such, studies of race in relation to blackness studies, while accepting the ‘illusion’ of race as a real concept, must also face its reality and the way that it has and continues to be operationalised (and weaponised) in different contexts (Appiah, 1985).

While there are some theorists whose concern continues to link race, racism and blackness, there are others for whom a study of blackness is an entity in and of itself, and where the history of racism is not the central axis for understanding black identities. In an address at Portland State University, Toni Morrison (1975) argued:

Know that the very serious function of racism, is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary.

Du Bois would in some ways, disagree. In what has become his most noted contribution to blackness studies, Du Bois (1903: vi) presents the idea of “double consciousness”. Writing from the context of the late 1800s and tracing the transition from slavery, to abolition to the new stronghold of Jim Crow politics, Du Bois describes “double consciousness” as his response to his identity as an

American citizen (subject to the rights and freedoms promised in the Declaration of Independence) and his identity as an oppressed black man, operating from one side of what he calls “the veil”. In this “two-ness”, Du Bois (1903) illuminates two issues at the core of his study of blackness. The first is the sense that the nation state, which is the guarantee of protection for citizens, cannot and cares not to protect him. The second is that if the black person is to be on one side of the veil, the drinking fountain and the bus, that they must find space to band together to form a black community where the promise of freedom, social mobility, education and economic stability are possible. Du Bois (1903: 13) is critical of the ‘strides’ made by Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington to secure more opportunities for black people, arguing that any compromise in terms of affordances given to black people (Booker T did not argue for a universal franchise for example) is tantamount to a compromise of black humanity and value itself.

The question of compromise is an interesting one, which has plagued various black communities and thinkers throughout history, and highlighted different perspectives on whether or not blackness can co-exist with a hostile anti-black world order (Gilroy, 2003). In the United States, this was illustrated through the Civil Rights Movement. Dr Martin Luther King espoused a politics of non-violence, reconciliation and non-racialism as the axes of a just, functional black politics. Conversely, Malcolm X’s (initial) politics, which involved using violence and separation from white people, presented quite a different picture of blackness, despite being directed towards the same Civil Rights aims (Nimtz, 2016). Paul Taylor (2017/2018) also notes that in these politics, black aesthetics are an important factor. King’s group of suit-wearing, clean shaven followers reflected a long-held black respectability politics that Malcolm X and the Black Panther movement rejected. Once again, Hall’s linking of race and signification helps to illuminate the ways in which the politics of blackness is signified - either as a politics compatible with ‘white’ society or one actively distanced from it. This is an important legacy to the extent that it also affects the ways in which different presentations of blackness are responded to. In South Africa, during the Fees Must Fall protests, black students who remained in class were regarded as promising by their lecturers, with bright futures, and a respect for the law, while those who protested, wore political regalia and performed their rage, were dismissed by much of the mainstream media as ‘hooligans’ and ‘disruptors’ (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Naturally, these two ‘poles’ do not account for the full scale of presentations of blackness, and in contemporary circles, especially with the intervention of diverse digital content, there are also those

who sit in between (Brock, 2012). Even during his lifetime, Malcolm X's famous trip to Mecca changed his politics, and so, within the black diaspora, interaction with different people and contexts has shifted which 'version' of blackness is practised in the everyday. What is significant is that blackness seems to emerge as a set of shifting practices, and political positions, rather than a label given to those possessing a certain degree of melanin.

There is a sense too among these contributors that blackness has, and continues to be, characterized by both community and conflict. In an address, Cornel West (2019) argued that this dual-nature emerges from a group that is at once trying to recover from the shared legacies of slavery, oppression and injustice, and at the same time, trying to create new legacies different from them. What this requires, according to Hall (2007, 07:09), is a fluid blackness that is invoked through "appropriation, incorporation and re-articulation" of different 'black' ideas, as and when those within the group deem it necessary. Black Twitter may be one such situation. When writing "What is this black in black popular culture?", Stuart Hall (1993) argues that there is no "essential black subject", but rather those who identify with a common history, common everyday experience and common legacy of disaster and struggle.

Particularly in the case of the relationship between Africans and those in the African diaspora, different historical events and cultural artefacts (art, dress, music) may become symbols of blackness and black solidarity. Hall (1993) argues that the recognition of pop culture moments/people as distinctly 'black' helps to create a unified group that drives more and better representation of black culture in society. However, he argues that kind of 'singular' presentation of blackness can be problematic, because the presentation of this 'unity' removes the particularities of different temporal and geographical experiences of blackness. For example, the picture of masculine blackness is, in pop culture's lens, either the macho, cosmopolitan African American 'gangster', or the *Coming to America*⁴ style of nondescript generic African (Clark, 2014). Similarly, in the South

⁴ *Coming to America* is a 1988 Hollywood film starring Eddie Murphy. In it, Murphy plays Prince Akeem who travels from the fictional nation of Zamunda to find love and luck in the United States. Despite its popularity, it has received critique for stereotypical portrayals of African people.

African context, particularly after 1994, there is a sense of either being a radical, uneducated black person, or a ‘coconut’⁵, 702 black⁶, reinforcing and reproducing previous binaries (Mhlungu, 2016).

While these identities seem to co-exist in community, because of the rallying “badge” of blackness (Appiah, 1985), sometimes they do not. As Peres Owino (2015) explores, differences in history, politics and culture can splinter the ‘black’ global community. Drawing on his interviews conducted in the film, Owino observes that dark-skinned African Americans are sometimes called “African booty scratchers” or “monkeys” by African Americans, to signal that they are a lesser type of black person. Similarly, as Owino explores, some African Americans resent black African people because there is the perception that African people sold their descendants into slavery. In the film, one interviewee (an African student living in America) argues that because of the long history of separation between African Americans and Africans, African Americans present themselves as superior to their African counterparts because of their belonging to a first world nation. The response from another African living in the States is that African Americans do not at all belong in America either, because they continue to be treated as second class citizens (Owino, 2015). As such, what emerges is a reliving of Du Bois’ double consciousness (1903: vi). On the one hand, the reclamation of blackness as an identity creates common enemies, experiences and cultural familiarity, and on the other, continues to be a source of conflict from within the ‘community’ itself.

Thus the practising of blackness(es) in a space like Black Twitter may constitute unintended but important political communities, which are poised to elevate the “demoralized, depoliticized, and disorganized people” towards certain actions (West, 1990: 94). For Black Twitter, this is an important start for elevating tweets, arguments, hashtags and debates as building blocks for the (re)creation of black perspectives (West, 1990).

⁵ The term coconut is used to describe someone who is “black on the outside, and white on the inside”. This is meant to suggest that the person has no connection to black culture or issues, and tends to ‘perform’ themselves as white.

⁶ A ‘702 black’ is described as someone who tends to side with white people on social issues, and is likely to vote for a party with majority white voters. 702 refers to a Johannesburg-based radio station, perceived as being aimed at white listeners.

Chapter three: Methodology

“Human behaviour is an enormously complex set of things, and that mixture of underlying things is different for different people, so it's not just complex, it's meta-complex”

– Vivienne Ming, *Huffington Post*, 2013

Introduction and context

As explained in the first chapter, before embarking on this study, I had been a member of Black Twitter for a number of years. The dynamism, depth and unpredictability of the space, paired with little research on South African Black Twitter—made it both an exciting and terrifying area on which to do research. As I began my pre-research process and journaling, three key questions emerged: (1) How do I capture the complex nature of South African Black Twitter and its users? (2) How will it be possible to represent people’s experiences and perspectives fairly? And (3) What is the best method to do this kind of story?

After more engagement on the platform, and a deep read into much of the scholarship about United States Black Twitter, the research direction emerged: Exploring socialities: An ethnographic study of everyday concerns as expressed on South African Black Twitter. Emerging too, was the decision to use a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, driven by participation-observation cyber ethnography. Oscillating constantly between my identity as a ‘native’ of the space (identity: @BinweA), and my strangeness as a researcher, the research process tried to elucidate the concerns, contentions, and politics expressed by the users themselves.

Qualitative research and the search for understanding

For the purposes of this study, the ambit of quantitative research is too limited to fully explore the complexities of the engagement taking place on South African Black Twitter. While quantitative research is concerned with observable truth, generalization, and firm conclusions, qualitative researchers like myself have a less stringent set of goals in mind. Drawing on the interest in phenomenology (the nature of being) which emerged in the 1970s, qualitative research argues that the process of research should be focused on *understanding and exploring* people, rather than attempting to *categorize and explain* them and their behaviour (Babbie and Mouton: 2001: 28). As a departure point, this study is fundamentally explorative, and in light of the historical and political projects of categorising black experience both locally and internationally, a methodology which homogenized, generalised, or tried to extrapolate would not be appropriate for this microsociological study.

In the qualitative paradigm, World 1 knowledge is viewed as dependable, valuable and the ‘heart’ of the matter, rather than a site for deriving and objectifying social phenomena (Bryman, 2004: 10). As such, it departs strongly from the positivist tradition of research and finds its roots within an interpretivist tradition, which views the ‘real’ as a matter of perspective and context, rather than a definitive, objective fact (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). This was important for the study, which in many ways is asking young black South Africans what their version of ‘real’ looks like, as opposed to measuring their experience against predetermined forms of being and knowing (Mignolo, 2007). Moreover, World 1 knowledge is the central axis of the study, and as such, the methodological approach needed to be one which ratified the place of opinion, superstition, routine and other everyday principles, without necessarily trying to locate them in their macrosociological positions.

Initially, against the weight and history of quantitative research, qualitative approaches have often dismissed as being flimsy, inconclusive and in a sense, too malleable to present any useful data. However, this inherent messiness proved to be an asset and the approach was not teleological (Postill and Pink, 2008). As the study unfolded, the processes of gathering data, engaging with black Twitter users, and indeed, thinking through my position as a raced, gendered, and politicised researcher were all valuable elements of the investigation process (Babbie and Mouton: 2001: 270; Das, 2006).

Decoloniality and a new locus of enunciation

From the position of a young, black woman researcher, the apparent openness of the qualitative paradigm felt, on its own, inadequate for helping me to immerse in and ‘analyse’ the engagement of South African Black Twitter users. In as much as the study operates within academic paradigms, it operates within deeply embedded political positions as well, one of which is the measuring of ‘knowledge’ against Western standards of rationality (Grosfoguel, 2007: 6). This is called coloniality. Often conflated with colonialism, coloniality is understood as being a condition rather than a series of events. As Maldonado-Torres explains, coloniality is a condition and a legacy which “survived” the collapse of formalised colonial empires, leaving deep fissures in the way the world (and world power) was organised (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 242). Emanating from the European project of modernity, encompassed by the Enlightenment, the German Reformation and probably its most famous moment, the French Revolution, the progress of Europe towards rationality, economic progress, and ‘civilisation’ was, from this perspective, premised and indeed constituted on the oppression, dispossession and erasure (physical and epistemological) of colonized people—which is why the “subject” is the key axis for coloniality theory (Maldonado-Torres, 2016: 2). As such, in rethinking the previously unquestioned logic of the journey from pre-modernity to 21st century neo-liberalism, the theory of coloniality argues that the logic of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2009: 74), was at the heart of the imperial project, and with little globally organised challenge to its power, continues to affect all levels of society today.

This is particularly important, in the context of this study, for understanding how ‘global South’ people and lifeworlds are conceived of, and written and talked about. Although the broad umbrella of coloniality speaks to the position of the dispossessed in the world, the “coloniality of being” is expressly interested in what Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls “the physical and psychological predicament of colonised beings” (2013: 112). In the beginning, this predicament presented itself in the at-once simple and complex question of whether the colonised subject could be considered fully human, or even human at all (2013: 114). While that might seem an odd question to ask in 2019, its significance at the time became the basis for the way colonised people were treated throughout history (Goldenberg, 2009). This constituted what Said (1979) has called the creation of an “Other”, the decision that without souls, non-white people could be dealt with however those in power wanted, and lastly, positioned the colonised subject as the unconsidered, the undeserving, the unfeeling, and the ‘un-powerful’ throughout the unfolding of colonial history. The response from Fanon (1952) and Grosfoguel (2007) is to move the locus of enunciation from a focus on those

powerful people who benefit from coloniality, to focus on the dispossessed, and ensure that the formerly considered “Other”, becomes the central, driving actors for, and of, research.

This was extremely important in terms of how I conducted, and wrote about, my study for two reasons. The first reason is that it forced me to think about who the central, powerful, worthy self is, and who, in this context the ‘Other’ is. It meant consistently rethinking ideas of what ‘civilised’ or ‘backward’ utterances might look like, and forced me to think about the ways in which (even unconsciously) engagement on the platform might be a manifestation of coloniality of being, or, as was the case consistently, a strong resistance to it. In practice, it means referring to black people and ‘people of colour’ as ‘we’ rather than ‘they’, rejecting terms like ‘non-white’ or ‘non-European’, and discussing individuals as fully-formed, thinking, living people as opposed to ‘products’ of a system. The intention is to affect a greater sense of agency.

But colonialism and its lasting legacy of coloniality affected more than just perceptions of self and Other. In attempts to solidify “the exclusionary and totalitarian notion of Totality” which holds that the singular, indivisible, world is ideal (Quijano in Mignolo, 2007: 451), information and knowledge had to be brought into the fold as well. Ndlovu-Gatsheni draws on the ideas of Quijano (2007), Mignolo (2007) and other theorists like Said (1979) and Castro-Gomez to discuss the coloniality of knowledge as a kind of “epistemological colonization whereby Euro-African technoscientific knowledge managed to displace, discipline, destroy alternative knowledges it found” (2013:110). For Said, whose work on Orientalism remains a seminal text on the subject of how global South inhabitants are misrepresented and erased, this epistemicide not only included positioning European knowledge as the only useful knowledge, but actively using spaces of learning and knowledge to cast anyone outside of the “centre” as barbaric, backward, feminine (weak) and open for conquering (Said, 1979; Jaffe, 1985).

Similarly, indigenous knowledges are often dismissed as ‘superstition’, tradition or witchcraft, as opposed to simply different (**not** alternative) sources of insight. In South Africa, where cultural knowledge is still prevalent, and characters like the ‘tokoloshe’⁷ appear weekly in tabloid publications, to exclude the richness of these knowledges is to undermine the depth and complexity

⁷ In isiZulu/isiXhosa mythology, a tokoloshe (or tikoloshe) is a dwarf ‘sprite’ who visits homes to cause trouble. They are said to strike from underneath beds, and can be called upon by those using sangomas to bewitch people for different purposes.

of the knowledge being shared on a platform like Black Twitter. It was important for me to include these elements, even where I did not understand them, or have any personal experience. In many cases, this also meant holding onto certain ideas and ways of expressing ideas, even when the available body of theory was not enough or useful enough to help provide understandings or explanations. I have chosen to operate, as a basic tenet of this work, from the position that new (or underexposed) knowledges are emerging from spaces like South African Black Twitter, and my role is to give them space and credence in the analysis.

(Cyber)ethnography: The relationship of researcher, research, and the researched

This study uses an ethnographic approach as its guiding method. Unlike other qualitative methods, ethnography is less a singular organising method, but rather a handful of approaches which privilege deep, continued and consistent immersion in the area of study, the researcher acting as a research instrument, and the use of thick description to explore, describe and engage with ideas, people and contexts (Geertz, 1993; Manning 2018). While some ethnographers focus their studies on detailing the day to day micro-practices which exist in a particular group, this study adopted the ethnographic approach which seeks to elucidate, think through and make remarkable those things which are taken for granted by those within South African Black Twitter (Hine, 2014: 3). Of course, as my work is situated in a social media platform, the work also forms part of the digital ethnography and cyberethnography paradigm that remains an ever-evolving approach, re-conceived through different cyberethnographic experiences and the changing nature of internet products (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Hine, 2014). However, many elements of classical ethnographic process were adhered to, because “as ethnography goes digital, its epistemological remit remains much the same. Ethnography is about telling social stories” (Muthry, 2008: 838).

Ethnography has a strong tradition in the qualitative paradigm, often chosen by social researchers with the intention of the “enlargement of human discourse” (Geertz, 1973: 316). In this study, the intention is exactly the same. While there are studies of Black Twitter, primarily through methods like textual analysis, the tracking of hashtags, and the experience of ‘black’ African American users. As such, this initial exploratory study, which is focused on the self-creation of various socialities, the expression of everyday concerns, and underpinning all of this, a negotiation and re-negotiation of black cultural identities in South Africa, I needed a method which was more granular than grand.

As such, the deep, close interaction offered by ethnography, with its intention to enlarge understanding seemed appropriate. In many ways, my ethnographic encounter with South African Black Twitter started years before embarking on formal research, and it was important for the study to have space to make use of previous insights, trends and incidents on the platform, because social action doesn't exist in a vacuum. The work of Postill and Pink (2008) was particularly useful in this regard. Their approach to digital ethnography is premised on the idea of a messy, unpredictable web environment which inevitably may yield a messy, unpredictable research experience, and inevitably results. In line with theoretical understandings like fluid socialities and conviviality, this seemed to reflect an alignment between the thinking informing the study and the process used to conduct. Moreover, Postill and Pink (2008) emphasise strongly that "social media can also be intertwined with the qualities, political structures and histories of localities or regions", and in this study, the interaction between the online expressions of concern and the offline reality of young Black Twitter users is of tantamount importance. As such, unlike some ethnographic studies which exist purely in the offline field of the online world, the approach taken here was one in which the online environment was the primary site of interest, but the offline world is never forgotten.

In terms of the principles which governed my approach, the first was to make the shift from a Bourdieusian notion of a social field. Instead, considering the fluid and changing notion, the ethnography shifted from the classical emphasis on a field site, to trying to establish "field connections" (Hine, 2004: 2).

Participant observation: Binwe and @BinweA

The guiding ethnographic method I used to drive the study was participant observation. Participant observation is a method which entails the consistent observation of a particular population (sometimes referred to as participants), where the researcher is not merely a lurking shadow, but one who engages with the group, tries to act as they do, and tries to gain 'insider' status (Bryman, 2004; Seymour, 2011).

In my case, participant observation offered both a significant opportunity as well as some challenges. On the one hand, having been a 'member' of the South African Black Twitter community meant that insider status was in a sense, already granted. While many anthropological accounts of participant observation highlight the initial difficulty of overcoming the 'stranger'

status, this was not the case for me. I am *au fait* with the ‘main players’ in the space, the language and discourses, and having access to participants made it easy for me to join discussion threads, ask questions and make ‘sense’ of what was being talked about. Also, having a sense of some of the pre-made ‘socialities’ was helpful—including interest groups like #AcademicTwitter, #GroceriesTwitter, #JobSeekersSA, #GirlTalkZA and hashtags popularised by popular culture-driven groups like #AskAMan (taken from a user-generated content segment on MetroFM’s Monday morning show), #GirlsWithVineyards (a term taken from celebrity Bonang Matheba, to refer to girls winning, making money or succeeding), and the international phenomenon of #DemThrones. Being a part of the space as a ‘native’ also meant that it was easy for me to use South African Black Twitter language to communicate my own concerns, use my ‘influencer’ status to spark discussions about areas of research and get recommendations and answers to my own questions. This ‘home advantage’ also meant that I was aware of the ‘rules’ that silently govern interactions. I was wary not use “honghong English”⁸ for fear of being dismissed, I did not ever attempt to do research via my direct message interactions, nor did I attempt to use vernacular language or terms I wouldn’t usually use, to curry favour with the groups, as I would quickly have been chastised for trying too hard.

There were many challenges regarding my insider status which emerged as I oscillated between my roles as ‘member’ and researcher. The first challenge emerged when I started my initial journal of observations I realised how difficult it was to explain, note, or make sense of interactions I understood from being inside the space. This included trying to explain certain memes or concepts, and attempting to put an individual Twitter ‘moment’ from my timeframe into the context of previous incidents. Similarly, at times, even when I wanted to take a step back from the research, it was difficult because the Black Twitter space is both my research area, but also the place where I unwind. Tied to this, it was difficult to see my own interactions and experiences as important parts of the research, because, coming from a traditional academic and journalistic background, distance and some level of objectivity was always important. On a more philosophical level, it was difficult at times not to take for granted how ‘unusual’ certain events were for anyone outside the platform. In trying to get around this, I began to embrace these points of challenge as necessary insights for how native ethnographers can balance their roles as group member and researcher.

⁸ The term “hong hong” makes reference to a viral [video](#) meme in which South African MP Willie Madisha mocked the British accent and long English words used by former Basic Education Minister Dr Naledi Pandor

Doing ethnography

Early on in my research on ethnography, it became clear that there are about as many approaches as there are ethnographers. However, in order to structure my overall process, my focus was on structure, initiation and content (Talukder and Yeow, 2006). From a structural point of view, I was looking at what kinds of interactions were facilitated by the Twitter space specifically. From an initiation point of view, I was aware (if not wholly focused on) the interaction between discussions facilitated by the Twitter platform (hashtags which auto-collate tweets into a singular ‘issue’) and those facilitated by individuals, which was the bulk of my emphasis. From a content point of view, it was also important to earmark key topics and themes for analysis; but also, to be aware of demographic, language and cultural vernacular which drove the *way* in which topics were handled.

In terms of the steps I undertook, the first element was some pre-research community mapping (Seymour, 2011). This process involves mapping out the scope of the field(s) of connection, finding out who the key actors are [in this case, the main users who drive topical conversation], what some areas of contention may be, and orienting oneself within this. As expressed in the introduction to the chapter, there were around 2 months of inhabiting the platform to ascertain what about it I wanted to study. These initial thoughts, ideas and insights were noted in a journal and discussed with my supervisor, who helped me shape them. This was an important scoping procedure, which enabled me to take the necessary step back to recast Black Twitter as a research space. After the initial lurking period, which also included searching for “black Twitter research” and following threads about how Black Twitter users were responding to existing research, I began to (continue to) immerse myself fully. In so doing, I had to be aware of my embeddedness and the fact that reflexivity is an integral part of the ethnographic process. Because of my belonging to the space with significant followers, my cultural entrée was less about trying to understand the space, and more about looking at it from a perspective where I took nothing for granted (Collins and Galinat, 2015). At times, in retrospect, I believe that my level of embeddedness hampered my ability to make legible and explicit the dynamics at play on the platform, and undermined my ability to be metacritical of my own research process, because I knew that the Black Twitter community (for whom this work is ultimately intended) would understand it.

From October 2018 to September 2019, I used the ScreenTime App to track how much time I was spending on the platform, and after looking at the month to month patterns, I saw that I was spending about 5 hours and 15 minutes on average per day. This is significantly higher than South Africa's average, of about 2 hours 35 minutes spent on social media each day (WeAreSocial, 2019). The time spent on the platform during the research period was also higher than my 2017-2018 average of 2 hours 20 minutes on Twitter per day. This amount of time spent on the platform was absolutely necessary (albeit draining at times) because the nature of interactions is time, time of the week, month and year specific. For example, early weekday mornings revealed a lot of tweets about transport issues, feelings about work or study environments, and morning routines. Conversely, Sunday Twitter (also #SundayTwitter) is the 'hottest' day of the South African Black Twitter calendar, starting with stories from wild weekend, post-party online altercations, reflections on the week, and by evening, commentary on Mzansi Magic mega-shows *Date My Family*⁹ and *Our Perfect Wedding*¹⁰. As such, it was important to have a broad base of immersion, in order not to skew my insights based on my personal schedule. At times, this meant it was hard to draw boundaries between my use of the platform for work and for personal use. A quick browse before bed regularly turned into use into the early hours of the morning, when I would use the Voice Memo app on my phone simultaneously to record observations and insights.

This level of immersion was helpful primarily for making sure I had a continuing flow of new ideas and interactions to observe, but it was also important for the analysis. As Postill and Pink (2008) discuss in their work on digital ethnography, routine is an important organising category for understanding how and why users engage online. Routine, while less substantive than the content of tweets, was still important for understanding how socialities are being formed, and what routines and cycles are organising these socialities.

In terms of the 'style' of participation and observation, this largely depended upon what was appropriate for the study at the time. From the onset, I had earmarked South African Black Twitter users between the ages of 18 and 35 years old, and looked at tweets over the years 2018 and 2019. It was possible to limit the tweets by period by checking when the tweet was posted, because a date

⁹ A television show in which a single person goes to dinner with three prospective families and chooses their date based on their dining experience

¹⁰ A television show which tracks the final preparations and eventual celebrations of South African weddings. Each week, one couple invites viewers to share in their traditional and white weddings, along with the behind the scenes drama.

and time stamp is attached to all tweets. In terms of age, most users display their birthdays on the platform, and where I was not sure I would either search for mentions of age, date of matriculation, reference to birthdays, or in a lot of cases, I would politely ask via direct message.

The choice to delineate by age was because this is the most engaged demographic on the platform, with users in this category tending towards consistent, 'loyal' interaction (WeAreSocial, 2019). Initially this was intended to contain the study, both for practical and substantive reasons. On a practical level, the idea was to be able to be incisive about whose concerns the study embraced, and to observe a limited set of interactions within what is a massive and unwieldy social network; much the way one would not attempt to study the entirety of black South African users on Facebook. From a substantive perspective, I initially thought that if the study had been more open, much of the interaction (though useful) could be said to be the incidental contribution by users who are broadly categorised within the black Twitter space, but do not consider themselves "members". That having been said, there is a strong argument to be made for including a wider network of users, because while individuals may not consider themselves members of Black Twitter (eg AfriForum's Steve Hofmeyr or African American Black Twitter users), they are in some regards, an important part of the social world of South African Black Twitter, and make important contributions to how it operates. Ultimately the choice to delineate tightly was also because Black Twitter's mood and content shifts so dramatically and so often, a broader study would have potentially watered down the key issues which were of most import during this period: for example, its existence during an election year vs a non-election year (Kozinets, 2002).

Further to this, I used purposive sampling to determine which interactions to observe and participate in. I did this using a number of access points. For the most part my own timeline (TL) was the site of conversation, and interaction, and I would follow conversations through the replies, the associated quote tweets (where someone retweets a tweet and makes a comment about its contents) and also scroll through the accounts of users who were party to the interaction—checking whether or not the users followed each other or were 'strangers', and in some cases, also looking for evidence of offline relationships which might illuminate the detailed level of insight one individual had into the life of another.

At this point, it's important to note that my timeline could by no means be said to be representative of the entirety of South African Black Twitter. I realised this might be an obstacle to my insights

early on, so in April 2019 I made the call to unfollow many of my long-standing ‘mutuals’, people I knew personally (online or offline), lowering my following count by 100. In June 2019, I did the opposite, re-following many of the previously excluded group, but also searching for Black Twitter users who operate in a slightly different ‘circle’ to me. This included increasing the number of users in the 18-22 group, increasing the number of users who tweeted predominantly in a South African vernacular language, and users with quite different political orientation to my own (in this case, those with more centre-right leaning ideas), even though they were not expressed in those official terms. As expected, this had a remarkable impact on the timeline that emerged and the ways in which different ideas were handled. Particularly when it came to issues like marijuana use, attitudes towards (African) immigrants, gender equality, and gender-based violence, as well as relationships, education, family structures, age, and political opinion, the tone and content of my timeline shifted meaningfully as I adjusted its make-up. In addition to working with my own (and mutual) timelines, I also scrolled through the daily ‘trending’ topics, and looked at popular hashtags. I would periodically change my feed settings from South Africa, to Johannesburg to Grahamstown to see if the trending issues and hashtags would be different, and surprisingly they were generally quite similar.

One of the serious choices I had to make early on was about whether I would work overtly or covertly (as seemed to be the case with similar Twitter studies I had read). Ultimately I made the choice to work with a kind of hybrid. From the outset of my research, I regularly (perhaps ad nauseam) discussed that I was (a) planning to undertake some research about black Twitter in South Africa, and (b) once the research proposal had been approved, followed this up with more tweets about what exactly my study would entail. The reality, with this kind of cyberethnographic approach is that it is not entirely possible to know who the research ‘participants’ would be initially, and that was intentional because the study was very purposefully an inductive one. The second practical reality was that it was not possible to gain informed consent from the many hundreds of thousands of South African Black Twitter users whose tweets may have ended up in the study. This was further complicated as I could not necessarily exclude non-South African Black Twitter users, nor could I gain their informed consent either. While their threads and tweets were never the focus of the work, the intricate relationship between South Africa and other Black Twitters, as well as our global relationship to pop culture meant that they still needed to be considered as participants (Clark, 2014: 120).

Nevertheless, I was consistent in sharing my process on the platform, and using Twitter, in tandem with my journal and voice recordings, to reflect on what was emerging from my reading and interactions. When I was specifically asking a research question, or trying to make a link to a work I had read before, I was clear about the context and explained my research in a few words. Fortunately, users were extremely supportive and responsive, and in addition to speaking openly, would often point me to threads, readings, or users whose ideas I might find interesting. Because I was not doing formal interviews as part of the process, I was concerned that while I was the primary research instrument, my singular analysis might be myopic at times. As such, I regularly reached out to relevant users to ask questions, ask for translations for tweets I didn't understand (a common practice on Twitter considering there are 11 official languages in South Africa) and bolster my understanding. Anthropologist and author Lebohang Masango was a particularly helpful resource. In addition to her experience with ethnography, she also conducted a study about Black Twitter's chronicle and response to #FeesMustFall, where she grappled with many of the same challenges. She is also an active member of Black Twitter (which is where we met initially) and she regularly provided a sounding board for these methodological dilemmas.

In addition to the journals and voice note recordings I took throughout the process, every relevant conversation was screenshot and saved to a Google Drive. At regular intervals, I would comb through my folder and make additional notes, but this is the lifeblood of the data. I initially considered tracking and tagging the tweets and threads on a public platform like Delicious (Postill and Pink, 2012), but I didn't want to decide too early on what the 'organizing' analytical categories would be, nor did I want to run the risk that the tweets being used would be visible to any internet user. Because I was not able to gain consent for the above-mentioned reasons, I made the decision to present the tweets and threads anonymously, with one word redacted, so that the tweet cannot simply be typed up and searched. That said, because of the way in which tweets are circulated, shared and stored beyond Twitter, it was still possible to find some tweets, particularly by more popular accounts with tens of thousands of followers. I am still trying, as part of my commitment to these ethics, to find a foolproof manner to keep the content completely anonymous; even though many similar works argue that because these utterances are public, they are necessarily researchable. Nevertheless, it was important for my data to be kept in a private folder, which only I have access to. After several months of collection, I was quite overwhelmed by the amount of data I

had to work with. The initial plan was to collect 50 conversations, of which some would be purposively analysed. To date, the complete folder has over 150 tweets and threads.

Before I was able to use, organise or analyse this data, I used some basic criteria to exclude any irrelevant elements. As I collected tweets and threads, I used the program Botometer to check that the handles included were for 'real' people, rather than spam or bot accounts. Where location was concerned, I looked at their bio, location stamp, scrolled through their tweets, and where all else failed, sent them a (public) tweet. Where 'black' was concerned, as discussed in chapters 1 and 2, the users are predominantly phenotypically black, which in South Africa encompasses black Africans, people designated 'Coloured' by the apartheid state, and South Africans of Indian and South East Asian decent, all of whom are politically designated 'black' because we share a common history of oppression which is often expressed in culturally different ways. Non-black people were not excluded because their tweets may be the springboard for certain conversations. Personalities like Steve Hofmeyr, members of AfriForum¹¹ and the like are often at the centre of Black Twitter discussions. Age was a difficult element to decipher, but generally speaking could be gleaned from their content, asking them in a reply or DM, or checking their birthday in their profile.

Observation, selection and analytical categories

While initially, the process began with some general observations, the study required focus regarding key questions. In order to begin to uncover the kinds of socialities on the platform, the first step in my observation involved trying to answer the important, but difficult question, 'What is South African Black Twitter'?

Broadly speaking, Black Twitter (as it exists in South Africa) can be understood as an alternative, digital public sphere. Fundamentally, it consists of various tweets, threads (conversations), and multi-layered and multi-directional interactions about various issues. These interactions may be converged and organised through the use of topical hashtags (#AskAMan) or widely-circulated words and terms, when the hashtag symbol is not employed. While some of the topics are drawn from mainstream news topics and pop culture news discussion, much of the discussion emerges

¹¹ Steve Hofmeyr is a popular Afrikaans musician, who joined with Afrikaans-rights organization to champion the rights of white Afrikaans speaking people. In particular, they argue for an end to the 'white genocide' and policies like Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment, which support the advancement of historically disadvantaged population groups.

‘organically’ from an individual’s tweet, which is either phrased as a story (indicated by the word “THREAD”), a question to the group, or the stating of an opinion, all of which are then responded to by other Black Twitter members. It remains the case both locally and abroad that there is no official portal to Black Twitter or zero-sum method of joining, but inevitably members gather together when there is alignment around collective concerns on various issues (Clark, 2014). Theoretically, these practices are reflective of a ‘chain of signification’ (Hall, 1982) where an initial utterance, concern or idea gains traction and group resonance as it is built upon. Elsewhere, Billig (1995) has referred to this kind of dynamic as a reservoir of meanings, perhaps more fully capturing the non-linear, in-depth nature of this collective interest in particular ideas, and the expansion of an original idea through contributions from others. Empirically, this means that the (my) experience of being on South African Black Twitter is fundamentally characterised by the users with whom one engages, and an adept knowledge of Black Twitter’s language and unspoken response protocols. Ironically, because of the cultural dominance of Black Twitter, both abroad and locally, it represents one of the few spaces where whiteness is not the default, nor the hegemonic culture. In this way, it is one of the few social spaces in South Africa where population majority has the most clout.

With this context in mind and the central question of the ways in which socialities are constituted on South African Black Twitter, the observation process required a focus on two overarching areas. The first seeks to explore **what** key concerns are emerging from the South African Black Twitter, and secondly, **how** these concerns and inter-user connections are expressed on the platform. In order to do this successfully, I created broad analytical categories and themes which would frame my analysis and discussion along the most relevant and pervasive topics. The rationale for each of these themes is referenced below in their individual write ups.

What are the key concerns?

1) *Gender and sexuality*

Gender issues, particularly the issue of gender-based violence is a recurring ‘trending’ topic on South African Black Twitter. South Africa has some of the highest incidences of rape, femicide, and day-to-day violence against women. Violence is also meted to members of the LGBTIQ+ community, and prejudice against the community remains a pervasive issue, especially in peri-urban and rural settings (Interpol, 2018; AfricaCheck, 2019), and particularly in 2019, when hashtags like #AmINext became weeks-long discussion points. It is an issue which continues to

drive discussion and is a significant site of division amongst Black Twitter members. But it's important to note that while discussions are in some cases responsive to crime spikes or individual news incidents, casual misogyny, and the grappling with day-to-day incidents of systemic patriarchy are also central to the discussions of these issues.

2) *Finances and the economy*

South Africa has struggled in the last three years to stimulate and grow its economy, with a significant effect on the quality of life of ordinary South Africans. At a global scale too, inequality continues to rise, prompting consistent discussion, news coverage, and of course, tweets about how to “escape the capitalist hell hole”, as someone tweeted. Tied to this of course are issues about large- and small-scale corruption, the crisis of fees in Higher Education, the huge economic responsibilities of young black people, including elements like #BlackTax, and ever-increasing prices of fuel, electricity, and basic amenities. There is a sense on Black Twitter locally that there is no guide book for managing a depressed economy, and so the space acts as a sharing and learning space, spurring sub-sections like #GroceriesTwitter and #ClicksTwitter.

3) *Race and politics*

While it is the central concern of this thesis that the focus remains on everyday politics, it is important to engage with the way everyday discussions respond to party politics. Considering that 2018 and 2019 were tumultuous and eventful years for South African politics¹², many everyday discussions about these macro issues have uncovered insight into South African political attitudes more broadly. Moreover, there is an interesting relationship between the performance of politics on the platform vs the outcomes of elections. Many Black Tweepers have argued that Black Twitter distorts the political landscape because it is skewed towards certain races, classes and urban locations.

How are concerns and interpersonal connections expressed?

¹² Events include: The recall of Presidents Mbeki and Zuma, the Zuma corruption scandal, allegations of State Capture, the arrival of COPE and the Economic Freedom Fighters as opposition parties as well as the misuse of public funds by former President Zuma for his KwaZulu-Natal private residence called Nkandla

- 1) Language: How is language invoked in different ways to signal different kinds of responses on the platform? This includes the use of natural languages like English, isiXhosa, SeTswana etc., but also certain twitter colloquialisms like slay, sbwl, hate/love to see it, go monate!, professional black etc.
- 2) Friends and foes: How do people acknowledge and articulate closeness or distance to users, ideas and trending topics?
- 3) Individuals and team players: How do issues initially shared by an individual tweep get taken up as a group concern? How does a member of the community find themselves ‘cancelled’?
- 4) Privacy and exposure: What kinds of issues are approached delicately, or where a particular user response (FUBU*, queers and femmes only, black womxn only, gents, parents etc) is called for? What kinds of issues are discussed with *carte blanche*?

From the outset of the study, and during my process of participant observation, the same contrast emerged as central for me: South African Black Twitter is easy to live, but difficult to describe. But this thesis hopes to go some way to overcome this. Fundamentally, it asks two questions. What kinds of socialities are constituted on South African Black Twitter? How are these expressed through everyday concerns? The less formal way of asking these questions has guided my research and analysis and is articulated in this way: What is this ‘thing’ that I am a part of? What does it offer me and other users? In this and the next chapter, I draw on my personal and researcher observations and interactions to explore these notions without any desire or expectation for firm, neatly-categorised answers (Nyamnjoh, 2017: 256).

In terms of the structure of my discussion and analysis, to begin to get at the questions of the emergent socialities on the platform, Chapter 4 will address **what is being discussed** by South African Black Twitter users in the everyday. In many ways, this chapter brings to life the focus on everyday life, which is a guiding logic of this study. The chapter locates the unique positions held by individual Black Twitter users in terms of wider, macrosociological structures (Maffessoli, 2019). By driving the analysis through actual tweets, the chapter highlights everyday actions like speaking (writing), reacting, gossiping, and sharing as primary sites for understanding larger social worlds (de Certeau, 1987). When viewed individually, the tweets analysed here may be seen as highly personal, fragmented positions, but within the context of the Black Twitter space, which is moving and evolving on a daily basis, the everyday life focus illuminates not only how users act, but how they are acted upon (Adler, Adler and Fontana, 1987: 219). In so doing, the analysis hopes

to explicate the frivolous, the fierce, and the fad-like conversations on Black Twitter (often dismissed as ranting) as detailed and important sites for understanding the concerns of young Black Twitter users. Chapter 4 thus focuses on three key themes: Gender and sexuality, Race and politics, Finances and the economy. Each theme is discussed in relation to the content of the discussions on the platform; the prevalence of the theme as central to local Black Twitter discussions, and draws on a broad spectrum of real-life tweets and interactions to speak to what is said about these issues on the platform.

Following from this discussion, Chapter 5 will engage with **how issues are handled and discussed**, analysed in terms of the ways blackness and different elements of sociality are created and manifested in the South African Black Twitter space.

Chapter four: Discussion

O jewa ke eng?¹³ An discussion of key everyday concerns

On January 5th, 2019, a 17 year old tweep with a modest following, tweeted a simple question: *O jewa ke eng?* ('What is bothering you?'). Almost a year, and close to 17 000 retweets and countless replies and quote tweets, later, it has become a rallying call around which many discussions on South African Black Twitter have taken place. It has been used to confess suicidal thoughts (with fast responses from psychologists and health care professionals in the Black Twitter space), directly confront other users about personal, in real life(IRL) issues, promote small and medium business, and share a seemingly endless list of CVs by unemployed users. In this way, it has come to constitute a central hub through which multiple nodal conversations have unfolded, and up until the

¹³ "O jewa ke eng?" is Sesotho for 'What's eating/bothering you?'

time of writing (October 2019), the conversation continues to be robust (Wittel, 2001). Central to the rallying call of this tweet is that no topic is too inappropriate, too private, or too shameful to share with the ‘community’. It is this underlying logic that has allowed this tweet, along with South African Black Twitter more broadly, to build bonds, share wins and losses, engage in brutal online altercations and in some cases, ostracise those who have broken the unwritten and unspoken ‘rules’ of engagement. As mentioned in my methodology chapter, the key issues that remain topics of rigorous conversation, and will be discussed here are: 1) gender and relationships, 2) race and politics and lastly 3) finance and the economy.

Gender and relationships

*“South Africans have been horrified by the murder of University of Cape Town student **Uyinene Mrwetyana**. Initial reports suggest that a post office worker has confessed to raping and killing the 19-year-old. There have been calls for a “national shutdown” to protest femicide in South Africa. Women have taken to Twitter to tweet #AmINext – asking if they will become the next victim of murder”*

(Africa Check in *Polity*, 4 September 2019)

The brutal abduction, rape and murder of 19-year old Uyinene Mrwetyana was a watershed moment for South African Black Twitter. Although missing persons, mostly women and children, are posted on the platform at **least** once every day, the story of Mrwetyana, or “Nene” as she was affectionately referred to by friends and the Black Twitter community, marked an eruption of outrage about gender based violence. But this was not the first, or the 100th time, that issues of gender and gendered relationships emerged as central to Black Twitter discourse. At a macro level, it is well known that South Africa is a hotbed for interpersonal violence against women, with a femicide rate five times higher than the world average (United Nations, 2018). However, when it comes to the discussion on South African Black Twitter, the discussions are personal, visceral, and incredibly multilayered. As one tweep remarked after tweeting about a 21-year old woman murdered by her boyfriend in Orange Farm:

— “This is not just a trend. Women continue to be killed everyday”.

The issue of gender and relationship politics is immensely complex in South Africa and the complexity has played out on Black Twitter in a spectacular, and for me, jarring fashion. On any

one day, women may tweet about their boyfriends' and husbands' patriarchal expectations for the way they dress, to whom they talk, and the way they are expected to behave. But simultaneously, women express an immense disdain for men's expectations of them. This presents a reality where young, mostly black South African women are feeling more empowered. In many cases, this is characterised by women saying that they are unlikely to engage in relationships which uphold traditional gender norms. Whenever a man tweets something like:

- “I really don't like make up” or
- “These new Reeboks [women's platform sneaker] are nasty”

women are quick to respond, with tweets like:

- “Then don't wear any make up”, or
- “Are you giving me money to buy the shoes I wear?”

But the singular “Twitter feminist” archetype does not account for the position of all women on the platform. Elsewhere, women on South African Black Twitter are actively rejecting the idea that “traditional” gender roles are necessarily patriarchal. Many women on the platform cite their ethnic and cultural heritage as the basis for how they conduct themselves, and believe that deferring to men in public and private spaces, “looking after” men, and dressing modestly, represents a respect for them, and for the women themselves. One user created much controversy when she tweeted that if her house were burning to the ground, she would save her husband rather than her children, because:

- “I can make more children but I cannot make another husband”.

Elsewhere, another woman recounted feeling tired, but needing to wake up at 3am to bake scones for her husband's breakfast. These kinds of tweets are often dismissed by so-called “Twitter feminists” as attempts to separate unattached, ‘unmarriageable’ women from those who are considered to be ‘wife’ quality. The term “Pick Me” gained traction alongside these discussions. The logic was that women displaying a preference for deferring to men through their tweets are in a sense shouting “Pick me, pick me!” to potential suitors. The term has become so pervasive that it is

enough simply to call someone a ‘PickMe’ to connote their “brainwashed and desperate” status, to use the words of one tweep.

In one particularly divisive engagement, one user explained that her husband was doing grocery shopping for the first time, and showing a screenshot from her WhatsApp conversation, explained that she had to include a photo of the packet of spaghetti, in order for him to find it, because he could not navigate a grocery list otherwise. While the user thought this was an endearing anecdote, the response from both men and especially women was not so kind. One set of replies to the tweet read:

— “And this supposed helplessness, are we supposed to find it cute? How are you a grown ass adult? Nope!”

— “I don’t know what I’d do if someone went to the shops to buy flour and came back with impuphu¹⁴. They’d have to leave my house there and then And (sic) take their mealie meal with them.”

— “These dudes haven’t had their own households before or what?”

Fundamentally, there seems to be an unresolved tension regarding the way in which relationships are based on gender norms. One of the best, recurring examples of this is a tweet format made popular by single men, where they post photos of a basic, burnt or poorly prepared meal with captions like:

— “Damn, where is my future wife?” or more often, “I need a girlfriend”.

Many women instantly clap back¹⁵ saying:

— “You don’t need a girlfriend, you need to learn to cook”

And one woman went as far as to say:

¹⁴ Maize meal (isiZulu)

¹⁵ An aggressive retort or ‘comeback’

— “You see, this is what happens when aboMama put the whole burden of housework on girl children. They raise helpless, pathetic boys”.

The inference in the latter indicates that these discussions are in some ways intergenerational to the extent that long-established patterns of relationship practice, through everyday gender division of roles, are being resisted on the platform, particularly by black women.

There is no doubt that African-American and South African pop culture has had an influence on the nature and content of these debates. The examples of pop star Rihanna’s “savage”¹⁶ mentality, and Beyoncé’s apparent cultural prowess over her husband rapper Jay Z are often invoked as the ideal dynamic for successful, affirmed women. In South Africa, musician Moonchild Sannelly and performer Zodwa Wabantu are touted on the platform as the apogee of the free, unencumbered South African woman. Both women actively promote sexual fluidity, perform in little to no clothes, and in Zodwa Wabantu’s case, have reclaimed the term *sfebe*¹⁷ as a marker of a woman who gets the sexual pleasure (and financial benefits) she wants. On one occasion, Wabantu shared photographs of herself undergoing a vaginal tightening procedure, and sparked debate about what personal activities are fundamentally too private to share with Black Twitter. Sannelly’s #MoonChildChallenge featured a video of the singer twerking¹⁸ on her bed in lingerie, and she encouraged other women to share similar videos. While some felt this very public expression of body and sexuality was too much, many supported it, sharing videos of themselves twerking, stripping, and showing off their bodies. Many men on the platform were quick to thank Moonchild for the ‘campaign’, not necessarily because it encouraged women to take ownership of their bodies, but because they enjoyed watching the videos of semi-naked women. Some men even went as far as to rate the contributions by women and reacted with “disgust” memes when women with “flat asses” and “bum acne” participated.

In the midst of the trend, one tweep (a woman) responded to the viral challenge by tweeting the following: “I have one question tho. I’ll make it short n simple. Would you be comfortable seeing your Mom Sister Wife Girlfriend dressed exactly like Moonchild & participating on that

¹⁶ *Savage* refers to a woman who has casual relationships with men, and discards them once their allure has worn off.

¹⁷ *sfebe* is a colloquial term for ‘slut’ (isiZulu)

¹⁸ A dance style involving the vigorous shaking of the hips, buttocks and private parts.

#MOONCHILDCHALLENGE? Yes/no? U don't have to give reasons". Interestingly, most of the men responded by saying:

- “no”,
- “hell no”,
- “not my wife”, while one man wrote
- "HELL NO lol! Moonchild & Zodwa get paid to do those things lol"

His tweet seemed to suggest that the only reason to participate in such a challenge would be for financial gain. Perhaps too, he was signalling that for Moonchild and Zodwa Wabantu, such actions are a job, whereas this is not the “job” of mothers, wives, sisters and girlfriends. Similar sentiments were exposed in the Gamergate¹⁹ controversy in 2017. Many of the men who wrote on forums like Reddit, 4chan and in-game online forums, argued that online, women did not possess the “advantage” of their physical attractiveness, so they needed to play up to this through exposing their bodies via images and videos in order to perform for their male counterparts (Tolentino, 2018: 23). However, these same men also argued that they preferred the offline world sometimes where men’s behaviour could not be questioned by the women in their lives (Tolentino, 2018: 24). Only one man, who was berated by other male users for his perspective, said that women should do whatever makes them feel comfortable. This was an interesting contrast to the initial enthusiasm showed by men, but was indicative of another hot topic on the platform: the notion of “our women”. The phrase is often used to describe women with a direct relationship to a man or to separate South African women from women from other African countries. In the invocation of “our women” there is the implicit suggestion that there is a certain type of seemingly unattached woman who is appropriate for display and objectification. But, a man-attached woman is not encouraged/permitted to participate, because she lives and acts on behalf of, or in relation to, male counterparts.

The irony of this for many on the platform is that despite the digital performance of patriarchal, men-driven public and private spaces, South Africa is a fairly fatherless nation. Prof Johann Fourie, noted in a FinWeek (2018) article that “of the 989 318 babies born last year [2017] in South Africa, 61.7% have no information about their father included on their birth certificate”. While Fourie does not explicitly mention race in his analysis, he alludes to the prevalence in lower socio-economic status groups. Simple mathematics indicates that by virtue of South Africa’s population demographics, black women and families are most directly affected. Ironically, many black men on

¹⁹ Gamergate or #GamerGate involved conflict amongst the video gaming community, around issues of sexism and harassment via online gaming platforms. Gamergate is credited as the ‘genesis’ of incel communities.

the platform resent these discussions, arguing that women are trying to make them look bad, or that the same women who can't find their "baby daddies" are those who boast about high body counts²⁰ on Black Twitter.

One woman, seemingly tired of this narrative, invited women to share their stories of so-called deadbeat dads. She opened the discussion by tweeting:

— "Single moms, please share your stories about how you told your baby daddy you were pregnant and what was his (sic) response. I just wanna see something. Here's mine [rolling eyes emoticons]".

Thereafter she shared months' worth of WhatsApp screenshots detailing a process in which her child's father ignored her, encouraged her to abort the child, and asked her to return the money he had given for the abortion, in order for him to pay debts owed to other people. At one point, she punctuates the sharing of screenshots saying:

"God really did test me here hey. Yhoo [three laughing emoticons]. Imagine going through this Rollercoaster while you're pregnant and going though (sic) 5 million other things. I really [thought] the boy was gonna pull through [clown face emoticon]".

Within just two hours of sharing her story, over 40 other women shared their stories via direct message asking for them to be shared but kept anonymous. While many men reverted to a defensive stance, some were quick to admit that they had been complicit in similar behaviour, or called on other men to improve. One man wrote:

— "Gents, we need to a better" (A line often touted by men in the space when women encourage men to engage with other men on gendered issues), while another wrote,

— "I'm trying to undo the curse of my father's absence. People forget many of us didn't have dads, so we don't know how to be them".

Through this process, it has been interesting to me that the continuum of "liberated" to "brainwashed" people and relationships is based predominantly on heterosexual experiences. When gay, bisexual, and queer women have tweeted about being 'housewives' to their working partners, they are lauded as supportive, co-productive, and understanding. One of the great subjects of Black Twitter in the past two years has been the difficulties faced by athlete Caster Semenya. Black

²⁰ Body count is a colloquial term (US, South Africa, UK) for the number of people a person has had sex with.

tweeps have been overwhelmingly supportive of her battles against the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) and other athletics bodies, and her Twitter account is full of retweets of support from both men and women. It is interesting, however, that that seems to be the limit of Black Twitter's engagement with Semenya. Unlike other celebrities, her personal relationship with her wife, her identity as an intersex person, and her personal life are rarely probed. I am unsure whether this is because, unlike other local women celebrities, black tweeps simply don't care about her beyond her sporting prowess (unlikely). Or, as is my suspicion, that she represents a category too difficult to speak about. She is a masculine-presenting cisgender woman in a homosexual relationship in which she is the primary breadwinner. Perhaps the gender and relationship continuum engagement on Black Twitter currently does not stretch far enough to account for categories and life-worlds beyond those that provoke ostensibly 'neat' responses (Maffessoli, 1989). In many ways, this reflects a cisgender heteronormative logic that underpins many discussions on the subject of gender and the way in which men, women, and relationships are conceived.

These unspoken logics and ongoing debates were illuminated, responded to, and shattered in the aftermath of Uyinene Mrwetyana's death. In addition to protest action held on university campuses, Black Twitter exploded—with black women leading the charge. Women challenged the government and police to take action, and even called for a state of emergency to be declared. When the official government account (@SA_gov) responded by saying that women should protect themselves from difficult situations and seek the help of the police, the subtle rage that underpinned many previous discussions escalated into a fully-fledged digital war.

Shortly after the tweets by the South African government account, now suspended by Twitter, called @helpsurvivors emerged on the scene. The 'help' was simple: Users could direct message (DM) details of their harassment, assault, rape to the account, including the name and photo of the alleged perpetrator and the account would share the DM verbatim, while protecting the identity of the women (and men and non-binary persons) who came forward. The main account exposed over 500 incidents of assault and rape, and spawned various sister accounts (focused on Durban survivors, PE survivors, UCT survivors, East London survivors and Queer survivors to name a few--which have all since been suspended by Twitter), with only a few proven to be false accusations. This practice was massively transformative as an action by the Black Twitter community, and was a brave and dangerous route for the women behind the original account (self-identified as students).

At the same time, this resistance was immensely triggering for many women, including me. In addition to sharing my own story of an attempted assault via the account, I also learned that several acquaintances and friends of mine were being outed as sexual offenders, and much discussion centred on what women should do once they found out someone they know was an abuser. This was a seminal moment for women, particularly black women, to think through what it meant to practise a kind of radical, digital feminism, amidst online abuse from men who were sick of hearing what Twitter feminists had to say. There were also many men who argued that this form of activism was about destroying men online, rather than supporting women. One man wrote:

— “Feminists, feminists but you have never done anything tangible for women.. All you do is show hate for men and make noise on Twitter! Radarada²¹..”

Responding to the sense that women were out to get men online, one user provided the following perspective:

— “The term “Twitter feminist” is an assumption made by men that women, particularly Black Women are only feminists online and then they take off their “feminist coats” in their workplaces & homes and it downplays the importance & impact online feminism has made”.

For me, the question of how to respond to allegations made against friends was a deeply difficult one. I found that, despite my usual outspokenness on the platform, this moment required me to introspect offline—perhaps because we were no longer talking in abstract terms about broad gender issues, but tackling intimate, real life relationships. That approach was not good enough for one user, who used a catfish²² account @MicaylaSithole to ‘call me out’.²³ The account had been posting images of abusers named on the @helpsurvivers list, but did not tag the men themselves. Instead, the user chose to tag the abused woman, and other women whom they believed were complicit. When I questioned the logic of this approach, I said the following:

²¹ Onomatopoeia for the sound of women making noise on Twitter

²² A *catfish* refers to an online account that uses false/misrepresented information and imagery to pretend to be someone else.

²³ To ‘call someone out’ is to criticise them/their opinion publicly and demand an explanation

— “Wtf is the logic here? Use some discernment”.

The user responded saying:

— “Relax. We won’t tag you about Cedric [a close friend of mine] being on the rapey list”.

This was one of maybe two or three times that I have had someone “come for me”²⁴ on the platform, and I was absolutely shocked, devastated, and unsure how to respond. Eventually I responded by saying:

— “1. This is not the point - the point is that you/anyone don’t get to determine how and when other people respond to the horror of having abusers in their lives. 2. You calling it the “rapey list” speaks volumes about and 3. You can tag me in whatever you like but point 1 still stands”.

Thereafter I blocked the account.

I later found out that the account was run by a (real life) friend of mine, who, in their explanation for lashing out and confronting various people, including many of our mutual friends, argued that they were trying to engage in some kind of satire, and expose an apparent hypocrisy. Nevertheless, the experience and the broader conversation said much about how and what we use Twitter for, in terms of gender and relationship issues. It signalled to me that the dismissive notion of “It’s just Twitter” so often touted when serious topics come up, could no longer be said to apply to the relationship Black Twitter users in South Africa have with the platform when it comes to addressing topical, complex and urgent issues.

Race and politics

*“As the week began, word slowly began to spread about a video showing a white South African on holiday on a beach. He wasn’t in the country and was absolutely thrilled that there were no black people around. He wasn’t just racist, though, he conveyed his message using the most despicable word possible. Now, Adam Catzavelos is in huge trouble. In the video that has now been shared thousands of times, the man known as Catzavelos can be seen looking around the beach and joyfully saying “there is not a single Kaf*** in sight”. While the “Twitter police” have used*

²⁴ An originally queer African-American term used to describe direct, aggressive and pointed confrontation.

their investigative expertise to find out who Catzavelos is and who he works for, journalists looking into the matter have confirmed that the guy seems to own quite a few businesses”

(The South African, 22 August 2018)

South Africans have a long, complicated and bloody history when it comes to race and politics. After several hundred years of settler colonialism, and another 46 years of apartheid rule, the subsequent move towards a “rainbow nation”, guided by the ruling African National Congress has not been a smooth one. In many ways, Black Twitter has emerged as a central site through which young South Africans, particularly those in dispossessed categories, have come together to navigate the past and the future. On the one hand, young South Africans reject the hold of the white minority over land and financial wealth, as well as the various social expressions of racism that persist in many private and public spaces in South Africa. On the other hand, young South Africans are increasingly disillusioned with the post 1994 reality which still sees rampant inequality, high levels of unemployment and the spectre of state corruption as the norm for South African life. While the discussions remain intimate and personalised, certain key moments and incidents have sparked a return to these national issues of concern in the form of broad group discussion. It must be said upfront that the name Black Twitter does not at all connote a singular, essential response to these issues (Hall, 1993: 106), and it could be argued that there is as much, if not more disagreement amongst black people than there is between Black Twitter and its non-black counterparts.

In one tweet, Economic Freedom Fighters’ (EFF) leader, Julius Malema, used the term “dangerous blacks”. This term refers to black people in positions of power (workplace, politics) who, owing to their newfound power, will [apparently] act as oppressors of black people. His sentiment is reminiscent of African American terms like Uncle Tom, coon, Aunt Jemima and ‘house nigger’ (Bogle, 1973).

One user quote-tweeted Malema’s tweet to speak to the way in which different sentiments amongst black people are reduced to labelling and an ‘us vs. them’ politics. They wrote:

— “Clever blacks, rented blacks, 702 blacks, coconuts, white monopoly stooge et al. The list of pejorative terms used to describe free-thinking black people is growing. Sadly, these terms used to describe black people are hurled by black people.”

The subject of race is, of course, central to the logic of a ‘Black’ Twitter, but it often seems that there is a kind of definitional and functional lack of clarity about what kind of blackness is being invoked (Baldwin, 1965: 22:49). Regarding race, the question of intersectionality has emerged over the past two years as a central axis for how different black people are discussed (Crenshaw, 2004). It is not enough simply to talk about being black, one also has to consider age, socio-economic positioning, access to education, and, owing to issues around xenophobia and Afrophobic violence, the issue of nationality. However, when overt incidents of anti-black racism and racist representation occur, the response is swift and cutting. With reference to the Adam Catzavelos incident, Black Twitter understandably acted like a dog with a bone. As mentioned in the excerpt taken from an article by *The South African* (2018), black tweeps skipped the wait for an apology or statement, and decided to respond on their own. One very popular account, known for their #CountryDuty tweets, urged Black Twitter to find out as much about Catzavelos as possible, saying, “racists should trend for the wrong reason”. The now infamous ‘Twitter FBI’ was quick to drum up Twitter files, detailing Catzavelos full name, ID number, home and work addresses, cellphone number as well as those of his wife, who was a high-ranking Nike executive at the time. In addition to this, tweeps also tagged Greek authority bodies and media outlets, and Catzavelos, in addition to charges levelled against him by the EFF in South Africa, currently faces additional hate speech charges in Greece (TimesLive, 2019).

Many tweeps used the scandal more broadly to question why racist white people, who clearly have the access and means to visit and live in their European homelands, continue to live in South Africa and subject local people to their bigotry. In response to a tweet of a white expat to Ireland bemoaning the lack of employment opportunities for white men in South Africa, one tweep responded by saying:

— We so happy that you left our **SA**, for your true homeland, Europe. We so wish 4% population of minority **racist whites** in **SA** can **leave** for good the way you did, so that we can freely & easily expropriate their stolen land & resources with zero cents. Farethewell!

Others adopted the approach taken by Toni Morrison (1975) in her now famous Portland State University speech. Like Morrison, they argued that racist incidents like Catzavelos’ were a distraction from focusing on black issues, and that addressing the issue and giving it undue attention

would not change social and material reality for the offender. However, with the arrest of Vicki Momberg, who famously called a police officer a ‘kaffir’ 45 times, there was a sense that the anti-racist campaigning by so-called Twitter police was indeed having an effect on the way the state and judiciary approached cases of racism (Staff reporter, *The Citizen*, 2019).

Of course, Catzavelos and Momberg are headline examples of virulent racists who have been caught out, and who, ostensibly, have paid the price. While Momberg is due to serve time in jail (*eNCA*, 2019), Catzavelos was ordered by the South African Human Rights Commission to pay over R150 000, faces jail time, and was cut off from his family business (*News24*, 2019). However, when it came to probably the most famous case of online anti-black racism, the story became more complicated. Penny Sparrow, an estate agent, wrote a Facebook post in 2016 calling black people monkeys and asking them to stay away from public beaches (*Quartz Africa*, 2019). Within an hour, the post made its way to Twitter, and Sparrow was, like the others, investigated by the ‘Twitter FBI’, had charges brought against her and eventually fined R5000 by the Equality Court (*Business Day*, 2017). Penny Sparrow became a kind of talisman for unacceptable racism on Black Twitter, and calling someone a ‘Penny Sparrow’ or simply writing #PennySparrow became symbolic for exposing racism. In July this year, Sparrow died after a battle with lung cancer, and her death created a conundrum. How does the community, who ‘cancelled’ her and called for her career and personal destruction, deal with her death? The response from Black Twitter was bifurcated. The below clusters of tweets represent the two sets of responses:

Cluster one: *Why should we feel bad?*

— “I hope the first person Penny Sparrow meet after afterlife is Chris Hani²⁵” [laughing man meme]

— “This dude will be keeping Penny Sparrow company for a while” [image of Satan]

— “Are white people and their token blacks on Twitter seriously expecting people to be sad about Penny Sparrow’s death? A woman that compared us to wild animals, continuing a classic white trend of dehumanising us in our own country and continent. Miss me with that”

— “General feeling on black twitter about Penny Sparrow

²⁵ Chris Hani was the leader of the South African Communist Party, and a fierce anti apartheid activist. He was assassinated by the far right anti-communist Janusz Waluś

[Popular meme with an image of an old black woman saying: Am I supposed to feel sorry for that bitch? I don't]

Cluster two: *No one's death deserves to be celebrated*

— “Penny Sparrow was no angel but celebrating her death says ALOT about your character...”

— “The Penny Sparrow issue shows how forgiving as black people we are. It's to a point where people who do us wrong expect and demand forgiveness for us. RIP”

— “Penny Sparrow got us celebrating death and lung cancer... I hate it when we substitute our humility, kindness as human beings, intellectual capacity for anger, and right to be correct... We can do better than that”

In some ways, Black Twitter users are caught in Du Bois' classic double-consciousness bind (1903). On the one hand, they recognise their membership of a universal humanity, and do not want to relinquish it, but on the other, they recognise that they are still subject to racism and ill-treatment and that so often, it is black people who have to perform forgiveness, even when it not sought. Moreover, many Nguni cultures hold reverence for death, regardless of the character of the person. However, even a figure like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who is often revered by our parents' generation as an arbiter for peace, is routinely described on Black Twitter as a sell-out and a white apologist, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission²⁶ (TRC) is routinely dismissed as an attempt to placate white settlers and the Western international community.

Responding to a *Financial Mail* (2019) article which questioned the low number of prosecuted Apartheid officials, many Black tweeps trashed the Commission, telling their personal stories:

— “My father's killers were released after serving only 6 years, because they said sorry at the TRC. The whole thing is a joke”

The discussion about Mandela's brand of black leadership is often questioned, and the death of Winnie Mandela re-invigorated discussions in the space about the erasure of black, militant anti-racist action in favour of “rainbow nation” window-dressing. Particularly in the wake of Winnie

²⁶ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a restorative justice project, aimed at providing recourse and reconciliation after the end of Apartheid. The Commission could prosecute or choose to offer amnesty.

Madikizela-Mandela's death in 2018, when Archbishop Tutu was accused of trying to erase her legacy, the discussion was re-ignited. One person wrote:

— “TRC was Nonsense!!!
TRC was Rubbish!!!
TRC was Mediocre!!!
TRC was White people Project!!!!
Desmond TuTu is scam!!!!
Section 25 of the Constitution is Nonsense!!!
Thabo Mbeki is Scam!!!
Mandla Mandela is a Scam!!!
Nelson Mandela sold out South Africa. #Winnie”

What is most interesting about these discussions is that they are not black vs. white, and increasingly any kind of complicity with racism, even the subtle, insidious forms, is met with a strong response. One popular Black Twitter user commented on the ‘myth’ of the rainbow nation by tweeting:

— “Apartheid apologism & denialism are a jarring but important reminder that the politics of white supremacy that lead (sic) to Apartheid are still very popular in SA. No farce of reconciliation can hide it. And it's not just a right-wing sentiment. Liberals are very horny for Apartheid”.

The entanglement of race and everyday politics accounts for one level of political engagement on Black Twitter. However, users are still deeply engaged with macro political issues and party politics, particularly because 2018 was a pre-election, campaigning year, and 2019 was a national election year. Black Twitter became a space for discussing the merits of voting, the merits of the various options, and the ways in which young people could and should engage with political issues (if at all). Once again, Black Twitter users found themselves in a double bind because the right to vote was so hard won, but for many, the experience of democratic rule has been underwhelming at best, and shambolic at worst. One hashtag, #IWantToVoteBut, captured this excellently, and the following tweets highlight some of the key concerns about voting:

— “#IWantToVoteBut I know once you vote for them you won’t see them again until another voting time. ²⁷!!” [Includes a cartoon by Siwela depicting a citizen on a massage table being pampered by leaders of various political parties]

— “#IWantToVoteBut there’s no better party. They are all the same! They’re all sheep in wolfs skin!” [Meme of young man sitting looking despondent]

— “#IWantToVoteBut the ANC says it will get rid of corruption after 8th May. It hasn’t arrested anyone since the commission²⁸ we are paying for. What will be different after the 8th of May?”

— “#IWantToVoteBut all I hear are powerpoint presentations and no actual plan: I E, how you going to create jobs? Where you going to find these jobs?”

— “#IWantToVoteBut My parents been voting since 94 and still living in a shack, while the people they were voting for are in mansions”

One tweet outside of the hashtag also questioned the spam tactics of parties like the ANC, but more prevalently the DA, who used automated text, WhatsApp messages, and calls to campaign for voters. Many users of Black Twitter, clued up on issues of data and personal information privacy, especially in the wake of Facebook’s Cambridge Analytica scandal (Galloway, 2018), questioned how parties had accrued their personal phone numbers, and how they thought spam would elicit a positive response:

Hilariously, the user wrote: “I wonder how many votes the DA lost because they message and call like a drunken ex boyfriend.”

Once elections had taken place however, a new set of discussions emerged, chiefly about what to do with the results. In this discussion, one of the biggest insights was about the Economic Freedom Fighters’ (EFF) seemingly dismal turnout at the poll. The EFF actually gained 4% growth in the 2019 elections, the highest of all parties, but that was not the narrative on Black Twitter. The red party is well-known for its strong online presence, driven by the party’s account as well as its top executives and on-the-ground ‘comrades’. Leader Julius Malema, spokesperson Dr Mbuyiseni Ndlovu, Chief Whip Floyd Shivambu, and so-called youth voice Naledi Chirwa are daily features of Black Twitter, having ramped up their visibility and engagement with users in the run-up to the

²⁷ Get them out of here! [seSotho]

²⁸ Referring to the Zondo Commission convened to deal with corruption and state Capture.

elections. To many on the platform, including me, a self-confessed EFF voter, victory may have been at hand. But the turnout did not live up to online life, prompting many to question whether or not Black Twitter is a reflection of real life. Two users' brief conversation spoke to one perception of the dissonance between online and offline life:

User one: "The election results will be a good reminder that Twitter hardly represents 5% of actual South African society"

User two: "Especially for the EFF, the majority of their supporters are young adults who treated yesterday [election day] as a holiday"

User one: "Slept all day!"

User two: "Drank, ate and continued ranting and joking on social media about their struggles they want and changes they are entitled to!"

This is an interesting contrast to the EFF's focus on workers and unemployed people's rights, and their parliamentary uniform which features overalls and domestic worker' outfits as a signature of their connection to the working class. Clearly, their overwhelming support online from young, often middle class people has gone some way to undermining this, perhaps to their detriment.

But of course, there were those who brazenly did not vote at all. Some users take this abstention to heart, remixing the "If you don't vote, you don't get to complain" that so regularly pops up on social media in South Africa during elections. However, for some, this 'gatekeeping' of political involvement was no longer acceptable, and many questioned whether a) voting was a useful practice at all, b) whether choosing not to vote necessarily meant a disinterest in politics, and c) whether voting for a party that has been a disappointment is tantamount to 'throwing away' a vote. Another short, biting interaction unpacked this complexity perfectly.

— User one: "NO ONE! I mean no one who voted for the ANC has the right to complain about service delivery. #ElectionResults"

— User two (quote tweeting her response): “Prefect lama rights, head girl yobubhanxa! Ngeke sizwe ngaka²⁹. People have every right to complain if they give someone a mandate. Use your brain. That’s if you have one”

While extremely brash, both positions reflect sentiments held by wider networks within the Black Twitter space. While some believe that the current government can no longer be a viable option for leading this generation, others believe (like the ANC itself) that calls-to-account can be made while still supporting the most popularly-known liberation party. As the lead opposition, the DA has begun to implode, and questions are forming about whether a new set of parties is needed to respond more directly to youth issues (Naki, 2019). While Black Twitter is often dismissed as a group of keyboard warriors, there is no doubt that the sentiment and interest portrayed in the space signals broader feelings in South African political consciousness at the level of race dynamics, everyday political concerns and ultimately, who is granted our vote.

Finances and the economy

"Raising a child could be likened to a second housing bond. This is because raising a child is a long-term commitment that could last 23 years or more; including starting that first job. So, if you already have a housing bond, the child could be considered a 'second bond'," Sekese jokes.

"On a serious note, much research indicates that it costs around R90 000 a year to raise a child. On a straight line projection (no inflation or growth) that’s over R20 700 000 by the time the child reaches 23 years old."

(Parent24, 24 April 2017)

While discussions on Black Twitter may be focused primarily on the interpersonal, there is no getting away from discussions about rands and cents. Over the past few years, South Africa has struggled to maintain the promising economic growth of the early 2000s. In addition to poor ratings from international financial bodies surveying the economic prospects for South Africa, the country is also experiencing the highest rate of youth unemployment (29%) in several years (StatsSA,

²⁹ “Prefect lama rights, head girl yobubhanxa! Ngeke size ngaka” — “Prefect of rights, head girl of nonsense! We will never listen to you” [isiXhosa]

2019). The result of this stormy economic landscape is that many South Africans are struggling to thrive economically (*Fin24*, 2019). In addition to this, South Africa remains one of the most economically unequal societies in the world, and there is a racialized aspect to this which ‘colours’ the way in which different groups engage with the problem (StatsSA, 2019). Black Twitter users are often caught between wanting to access their place in the new post-apartheid economy, and grappling with generational poverty, which curtails their ability to develop. The #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 and 2016, and their immense coverage and organization through Black Twitter is one area where this tension was exposed (*Daily Maverick*, 2016).

One of the central discussions about finances and the economy centres on the issue of #BlackTax. Black Tax is broadly defined as “financial support to extended family within black communities” (*MoneyMarketing*, 2019). For many young Black Twitter users, Black Tax is an unavoidable practice, with users commenting on how they have to budget for family support from the time they start working, whether that is a part time student job, or formal, full time employment. And while the practice is generally normalized, with mounting financial pressures and Black Twitter’s demographic moving towards starting or growing families of their own, it is no easy feat. The hashtag #BlackTax re-emerged as a point of discussion earlier this year, when one person wrote:

— “Family can guilt us into unnecessary expenses #BlackTax”.

The response to this initial tweet was overwhelming, with various users discussing how their black tax system works and the pressure it places on their ability to survive. What initially seemed to me to be a practical, financial discussion turned into a deeply emotional one. Some of the tweets using the hashtag included:

— “Can’t really speak about #blacktax without getting a lump in my throat. I’m always happy to help but sometimes I get resentful towards my family members that dodge black tax subsequently causing my responsibility/burden to increase”

— “My mom told me in no uncertain terms that I need to stop fetching my life basically becoz **#BlackTax** indilindile³⁰”

One user took particular offence that black tax is no longer used for basic necessities. In his example, he is in some ways making a value-judgement about what his intentions are when handing over his money. This suggests black tax may not be as ‘no strings attached’ and magnanimous as I first imagined.

— “...you help some mothafuckaz...then they get up top and start talking **#BlackTax** and give all their miney to a pastor... shidi demete³¹...”

But not everyone who pays **#BlackTax** sees it as a burden, and many users expressed how the financial contribution is a mark of gratitude for their parents’ and grandparents’ sacrifices. One user shared the following:

— “I’m feeling a feeling. I’ve been saving up money so that I could pay for a geyser to be installed at my grandmother’s home, the home I grew up in. It happened this weekend, and for the first time in her 72 years of life, my ma lives in a house with running hot water”

I am fortunate enough to have a family that does not require my financial support, and even my parents have not had to support their parents. As such, it is a discussion I have made no comment on as a member of Black Twitter. From my perspective, this once again reaffirms that the black experience, even financially, is not a singular one, and it was important for me not to launch myself into the hashtag just because the discussion had the world ‘black’ in it.

That said, even those of us (young, Black Twitter users) who do have some level of financial stability must still contend with low levels of unemployment and meagre income. A report released by the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) in August this year noted that the median income for South African households (which supports 3 to 5 people) is

³⁰ Rephrased: My mom told me in no uncertain terms that I need to stop enjoying my life basically because she is waiting for **#BlackTax** [The phrase “fetch your life” is taken from the name of a popular song by South African hitmaker Prince Kaybee, and refers to enjoying the best things in life]

³¹ Slang for “shit dammit”

R3300, while even the richest 10% of the country take home R7313 each month (SALDRU, 2019). These are astoundingly low numbers, considering that (as per the opening statistics) raising a child can cost up to R90 000 a year. One user, who is a Rhodes and Wits educated Honours student with a full time job, lamented the bind in which young South Africans find themselves.

— “What kills me is that 4k is not enough for one person to live a middle-class lifestyle so I don’t understand why there are people acting like that’s enough for a person with a child to live lavishly?”

But the discussions are not solely negative, and the community has found a number of ways to proactively discuss the challenges associated with finances and the economy. One ‘arm’ of Black Twitter — one of my favourites — is #GroceriesTwitter. Using this hashtag, or by simply posting relevant images, Black Twitter users share information about sales, specials on basic goods, and good deals at popular retailers. These tweets are often accompanied by “RT³² to save a life” or “RT to secure the savings”. In one of my own tweets, I wrote:

— “STUDENTS: Checkers is having offering (sic) a 10% discount on your shopping until the 29th. Check their TL. RT for some breathing space in this economy man [distressed emoticon]”

The #GirlTalkZA hashtag is also a hub for a range of deals, offers, and women helping other women save money: whether it is women banding together to join a “whatsapp stokvel”, splitting courier costs on hair extensions, or organising bulk buys of products like sanitary pads, nappies or beauty soap.

One area which continues to frustrate young users of Black Twitter is, understandably, the high costs of mobile data in South Africa— relative to other African and global South countries (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2019). The hashtag #datamustfall is regularly used to put pressure on mobile networks to reduce their prices and provide better service. The hashtag’s use has also expanded to include incidents where cellular service providers have ‘cheated’ users out of data, and it would seem that the constant use of the hashtag played a role in changing legislation

³² RT is shorthand for Retweet

about expiring data bundles. Users are well aware of legislation as a result of the amount of discussion on the platform, and continue to pressurise companies like Vodacom, MTN, Telkom Mobile and Cell C. Posting a photo of a Twitter ad featuring a 1GB data deal (with a 30-day limit), one user wrote:

— “Great move @Vodacom, but 30 days? What happened to the recent ruling on data expiry? Thought you had until end of Feb this year to comply. @ICASA_org #DataMustFall”

Collectively, these issues represent a group of users who are at once feeling demotivated by the current economic landscape, but are equally committed to overcoming them. This is an overarching approach to everyday concerns, which means that the space is often characterised by a sense of being disheartened and pessimistic. However, as Kimberly Ellis (2014) argues in her analysis of African American Black Twitter, there is a long history of black cultural groups making the best out of bad situations using levity and humour. Using jokes, memes, solutions and connecting with others in the same lot, being a Black Twitter user in South Africa is a masterclass on how to turn lemons into lemonade.

This chapter cuts quickly to the ‘what’ of Black Twitter. It does so not by simplifying varied experiences into one easily-digestible mission, but by highlighting the concerns of its users. At various points in the tweeting, replying and reacting response, South African Black Twitter users are digging into their daily lives as the basis for their opinions and beliefs. Both unofficial and unscientific, these insights are nevertheless important. After all, as proponents of everyday life studies advance, the ordinary, everyday life is the one in which these subjects live, and therefore these concerns act as foundational elements for understanding broader sociological phenomena (Das, 2008). The reliance on the everyday in these and other ‘organic’ spaces is radical, decolonial, and immensely vulnerable (Mignolo, 2007), pointing to the ways in which the sharing of everyday concerns acts as a kind of glue for the South African Black Twitter experience.

That said, there are various ways of communicating being and belonging on South African black Twitter. From written language, to in-group terminology, to the use of visual devices like emoticons and popular memes, Black Twitter in South Africa is not simply a generic noticeboard for group concerns. In the next chapter, I will unpack **how** these issues are discussed and what this means for

the kinds of connections and disconnections, and of course, broader socialities constituted in the space.

Chapter five: Making sense of local socialities on Black Twitter

As South African Black Twitter has evolved, so too has its way of being. While so-called Black Twitter ancestors (users with accounts dating back to 2006) regularly call for a smaller, less ungovernable space, new entrants revel in its size and social significance. In this chapter, I will consider the kinds of socialities established on South African Black Twitter by probing the kinds of interactions between participants. From viral year-long performing tweets, niche languages and cross-cultural discussions, this chapter analyses the ways in which Black Twitter discussions facilitate co-productive (and unproductive) relationships, and new forms of social connection and disconnection (Amit, 2015).

Many of the issues discussed in this chapter take their cue from the previous one — and many of the themes unpacked in chapter four are central because they give important clues about how different subjects are dealt with. In the interests of a focused discussion, this chapter will be guided by three overarching questions that inform an understanding of the kinds of socialities constituted by Black Twitter:

1. *Why take part in Black Twitter? The reasons for sociality*
2. *How does South African Black Twitter communicate?*
3. *How do we account for the 'Black' in South African Black Twitter?*

All of the above questions will be discussed in relation to the primary research, my personal experience as participant and observer, as well as the body of literature reviewed in chapter 2.

While some theoretical positions emerge as more useful and elucidatory than others, the local Black Twitter space could be said, at one point or another, to reflect any and all of these positions. The positions which will be reflected upon are the idea of a public sphere (and its various iterations), the discursively friendly but ultimately too stiff idea of a network, and the idea of conviviality. All of these frameworks talk to a need for human beings to be connected. As such, the objective here is to uncover the ways in which socialities are constructed on South African Black Twitter, using different theoretical lenses. As with chapter four, this chapter will be strongly driven by the

utterances of tweeps in their own words, in strong engagement with the particular conceptions of sociality which they evidence.

Why take part in Black Twitter anyway? The reasons for sociality

— *“I love Twitter. I’m so emotionally attached to many people I follow even though we have never met. My heart goes yori yori ³³when your life is kind to you”*

After spending over eight years on the platform, the above tweet by one Johannesburg-based user rings true for me. While there is no doubt that Black Twitter is not always the love-fest that this tweep describes. For many it is a safe space, a kind of strange family, and a symbol that at least some of South Africa’s black youth are fully embedded in the culture of virtuality, where online life is as emotionally rich as offline life (Castells, 1996). At the outset of this work, the notion of sociality was highlighted as a central axis of analysis as a means of probing the kinds of relationships and connections forged on or through Black Twitter. The idea of sociality is predicated on the view that human beings (even in their online incarnations and practices) are engaged in complex relationships that are malleable, co-productive, fundamentally necessary, and can unfold in a myriad of ways (Long and Moore, 2013). This discussion argues that there are four key reasons for the sociality that is established through local Black Twitter. These are a) the desire to participate in a safe, albeit critical black-driven space; b) the ability to seek help for online and offline dilemmas; c) The ability to engage in a sociality based on meaningful camaraderie (even amidst critique); and d) the ability to drive an emancipatory politics - particularly when it comes to addressing race and gender issues.

In the case of South African Black Twitter, two of the important ways that relationships are governed are through type (and strength) of bond, and the kind of communication used between users. Looking at the three ‘models’ of sociality unpacked in the literature, achieving communication and “bonding” happens in different ways. From the public sphere perspectives (Habermas, 1989; Dahlberg, 2007 and Gitlin, 1998), this hinges on the ability to engage rationally in an attempt to achieve consensus. Bruns’ notion of hashtag publics would deviate somewhat, potentially arguing that in the case of Black Twitter in South Africa, consensus on the key everyday

³³ Onomatopoeic phrase for the sound of a strong heartbeat

issues and (even superficial) respect for other members is the basis for the emergence of various ad hoc publics within the Black Twitter sphere as a whole. For proponents of the network, or what Wittel (2001) later calls network sociality, it is sufficient simply to be bonded through similar interests. Perhaps despite the content and sentiment of discussions, occupying the same Black Twitter network constitutes a functional kind of sociality, regardless of how power, allegiance, and enmity are dealt with.

On one level, it could be argued that the original Darwinist perspective of sociality is not ill-fitting when it comes to Black Twitter — both in the United States where it is most dominant, as well as in South Africa. In both instances, Black Twitter emerged from a mutual recognition of blackness as a binding form of social belonging. This accounts for the first key reason for the sociality of South African Black Twitter. Beyond a recognition of blackness and black culture as important, the sociality of Black Tweepers is premised on the fundamental desire to carve out a space in (previously white-dominated) social media where black cultural life could be discussed without explanation, defensiveness or having to speak in ‘white’ or Western terms. On one level, this is an emotionally and socially driven sociality, but it is also one built from recognising that greater numbers of similarly-aligned individuals may well afford better social, cultural, and emotional freedoms for the broader whole (Long and Moore, 2013).

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the so-called “signifyin’” of black identity through performance on Twitter (tweets) emerged as a way to carve out black-safe spaces (Florini, 2014). This sense of a protected, “for us, by us” space became more important as anti-black online spaces continue to grow in size and popularity in line with American and European macro politics, although the re-emergence is present in South Africa too (Knowles, 2016). Hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, #Ferguson [the most used social justice hashtag in Twitter’s history], and in South Africa this year, #AmINext signal that while much of Black Twitter’s discussions may be light and humorous, they are also deeply concerned with the very survival of black people and blackness (Pew Research, 2016). Important too, is that viral hashtag publics like #BlackLivesMatter or #AmINext allow black communities (and their allies) to engage in black solidarity without risking the danger and potential harm of physical activism (McIlwain, 2016). These dangers are very real, particularly in South Africa, where the offline iteration of #FeesMustFall protest action was responded to with police violence and repression (Maldonado-Torres, 2017: 3). Either way, this is a sociality that goes beyond just needing a space of their own. While this is an important

constitutive reason, the action taken in this safe, but critical space, is just as important. Crucial to the practice of South African Black Twitter’s sociality is the active use of the space to uplift, question, and engage with those they recognise as part of the Black Twitter space. In one particularly scary incident earlier this year, South African Black tweeps banded together to help a family **while** they were in the middle of a dangerous situation. The below cluster of tweets tracks the original tweet and some of the responses:

Original tweet:

— “We need help. My husband and I came to what we thought was a business meeting now our potential client isn’t letting us go home. We are at no. 4 Waters Edge in Centurion”

Responses:

— “People around Centurion, please help!”

— “@NamolaApp³⁴”

— “@NamolaApp can you help?”

— “Help is on the way. The police say that there were a number of us that called. Please let us know when you’re safe”

— “@cci_network has called for help. Namola is on it. Hope all gets resolved soon and **** and hubby are safe”

Within two hours of the initial responses, the original tweep posted to say that she and her husband were safe, and that the police, called by Twitter users, had arrived and rescued them. Many tweeps responded by sharing numbers for trauma counsellors, and users who lived nearby offered to stop by (despite never having met the couple). The ability to seek help, rely on ‘strangers’, and receive help is an important part of Black Twitter’s sociality. Like the Habermasian (1989) public sphere that seeks to constitute a community amongst strangers, this is a sociality which uses assistance, deliberation and support to create community and networks of support for people who otherwise (offline) would never have the chance to connect and help one another.

— “This is by far the best app for us, tbqh³⁵”

³⁴ Namola is a free-to-use emergency services app by South African insurer Dial Direct, which dispatches police and ambulances to

³⁵ tbqh = to be quite honest

- “To think this is happening rn, this shows that when black twitter is used right it can change the world. Hope help has arrived”
- “Twitter family! God bless you all [Two teary eyed emoticons]”
- “Black Twitter people are amazing! [Heart emoticon]”

When it comes to the prevailing tone of the platform, users are not unanimous in their position on the issue. For some, the continued camaraderie of an inclusive, black-friendly space is the basis on which users interact, and for these Black Tweeps, camaraderie rather than critique should be the sociality that defines interactions. South African public figure, Vusi Pikoli³⁶ is one such individual. He has, on more than occasion this year, called for “peace and positivity” on the platform, arguing that Black Twitter only hurts itself when it is divided. In terms of sociality, this presents an interesting reflection on the ways in which ideas like community, communalism, and Ubuntu are invoked by users on the platform. In Praeg’s (2014: 23) discussion of the invocation of Ubuntu in South Africa, he argues that the indigenous philosophy has been redeployed as one in which there is unquestioning allegiance, where communities are understood to be peaceful and passive. In this popularized version of Ubuntu, and Pikoli’s Black Twitter, all sins are forgiven in favour of the belonging of the individual and the progress of the community.

But not all Black Twitter enthusiasts believe in Pikoli’s version of a communalist sociality. For others, the fundamental ability to sustain a sociality that is both safe, and critical, is premised on honest conversations which are not sugar-coated. In their conception, camaraderie and critique are not mutually exclusive, and work together in an important and nuanced sociality. In response to one of Pikoli’s tweets, another user, with a following of over 13000, argued that solidarity and disagreement are not mutually exclusive. She wrote the following:

- “Unfortunately, life doesn’t have a pause button. However, we can promote peace and positivity while dealing with things that cause hostility”

This interaction points out that participation in/belonging to South African Black Twitter is not necessarily based on a single mandate of what the space should do. It also highlights that an “anything goes” approach to a communal approach to the space is unsatisfying for some. It is

³⁶ Advocate Vusi Pikoli is the former chief of the National Prosecution Authority. He is also a civil society activist and author.

important to note, at this point, that none of these reasons for sociality are entirely sewn up. Instead, part of its sociality is a commitment to ongoing conversations (and clashes) about what Black Twitter is and does, and what its limitations are.

That being said, there are some within the space who are optimistic about what a connected and critical space can offer its members, beyond the confines of the platform. In line with cyboptimistists like Wasko (2014) who believe in the vision of various digital commons to drive social justice online, some users see the emancipatory potential as an important element of South African Black Twitter's sociality. As referenced in chapter four, the wave of Black Twitter discussion that erupted after the death of Uyinene Mrwetyana not only questioned how to deal with the issue of gender-based violence, but how such discussions should be handled in the space — and what the black community in South Africa needs to do to own and drive its own liberation. As mentioned earlier, many Black Twitter users were disappointed by delayed statements by President Ramaphosa (a self-proclaimed Black Twitter member himself since early 2019) and the South African government's official account. It is important to note that while no one was specifically asking the President or the government to respond *on Twitter*, this had been an established, routine *modus operandi* for both accounts in response to pressing national issues. It was therefore understandable that the silence on such a serious occasion was startling to members of Black Twitter. Former President Jacob Zuma also joined the platform in 2019, because, as he described in his opening tweet video, many users were using the platform blatantly to slander him and his family, so he planned to use the platform to respond. In one instance, the former President used a series of tweets to reprimand News24³⁷ and Black Twitter users for writing lies about his fiancée, based on tweets from a fake, unverified account. In one tweet, he wrote:

— “Shouldn't you have asked her first before spewing your lies? @***** _***** @News24 there is nothing to clarify, why have you not retracted the story and issued an apology?”

Because public figures like the President use the space to campaign, share political messaging, and rally support from young, black active Black Twitter users, these users are unclear about whether they are also subject to the same 'rules' and expectations as any regular user. One interaction, in the midst of the #AmINext furor, highlighted this dichotomy:

³⁷ News24 is the most viewed news site and website in South Africa, amassing millions of unique viewers each day. Articles published on the site are shared, and this particular article went 'viral' within a matter of hours.

- User one: “I think they want @CyrilRamaphosa to run the country from Twitter”
- User two (responding via quote tweet): “What we’re not going to do is reduce the very real concerns people are raising about the blatant lack of leadership and disregard for women’s safety, and just write it off to just Twitter. I get that he’s your comrade but this is an awful, insensitive thing to say”

This particular issue, and the sense of disappointment felt by users, also speaks to the expectation of Black Twitter users towards their state. While it may be the position of some that the country cannot be governed online, Black Twitter seems firmly to believe that the mandate of the government does not exist only in the offline realm, but that it is very possible (and necessary) to demand accountability, transparency and clear communication, even in a space like Twitter. In this way, the frank, determined attitude of South Africans towards politics becomes an important element of the sociality constructed in the frank, determined and highly politicized space that is local Black Twitter. That said, there continue to be questions about the limits of the web in a context where political change is difficult to achieve offline (Dean, 2014).

In some ways, this “incomplete” mandate means that while solidarity and social justice interest tend to reign on the platform, it is not uncomplicated. As discussed briefly in chapter four, there are some spaces within Black Twitter where bonding occurs more easily than in others. Those who believe in and support the notion of a broad Black Twitter in South Africa find it difficult to hold onto this when, as expressed above, their gender, ethnic or sexual identity is under attack. Proponents of a broad Black Twitter may break off into the following groups to show their allegiance to other identities. Some examples include:

- #XhosaTwitter
- #FUBU³⁸ [used to signify black only spaces; no allies allowed]
- #blackwomxn
- #blackqueers

This separation is not necessarily disintegration, and the discussion of particular, exclusive interests is an important part of South African Black Twitter’s sociality. In his essay about the New Cultural

³⁸ FUBU - for us, by us

Politics of Difference, Cornel West (2007) argues that this is to be expected. He argues (2007: 4) that beyond a singular ‘project’ which binds a community, the invocation of a shared history, shared traumas and cultural allegiances are not enough to overcome the need for specific interest groups. These Black Twitter hashtags and sub-communities point to this by carving out separate group-specific mandates which may intersect with, or entirely diverge from, the amorphous, homogenously-invoked Black Twitter. This is a sociality that is respectful of the ‘whole’ and seeks to belong to it, while concurrently recognising the significance of exclusive spaces. There are reason why this is important. First, it evidences the existence of sphericules within the broader Black Twitter public sphere (Gitlin, 1998). While the overarching group has its own ways of being and doing, the break-away groups are signaling their belonging and non-belonging, through naming, separating exclusive spaces, and invoking identity markers (black womxn, queer). These sphericules are as much functional, as they are political. As Fiske (1992) argues in his discussion of practising socialities, some groups may hold certain similarities and interests in one area, but this does not extend to all aspects of their social belonging. In the case of South African Black Twitter, this means that while black women (womxn) may have hyper-specific issues for which they need their own sphericule, they are not denouncing their location in the greater Black Twitter whole. Similarly, particularly in language sphericules like #XhosaTwitter, there is no suggestion that beyond language and a similar cultural heritage which binds the hashtag, there is a separation from South African Black Twitter more broadly. In some ways, the sphericule signals various social locations of the users, some of which they believe are not adequately catered for by the great Black Twitter mass. Second, these sub-groups may also indicate important counter-publics, or at least counter-public sentiment. In some cases, hashtags like #FUBU pop up when a particular group (women, gay women, atheist) has been under ‘attack’ by the rest of Black Twitter over a particular issue. As such, these subgroups do not only emerge like a sphericule to couch themselves within a greater whole in which they co-exist, but are actively created in strong opposition to hegemonic perspectives within the space (Dahlberg, 2007). It is a strange adjustment, in some respects, to think about a Black Twitter as being hegemonic in any kind of way. However, considering its size, busyness and well-established practices, it is interesting to think about the ways in which power affects Black Twitter’s ability to be truly open and inclusive to all its members, which was the very logic from which it emerged. Instead, like the rest of cyberspace, Dahlberg argues, it remains its own complicated “site of struggle” (Dahlberg, 2007: 48). While Dahlberg may argue that this points to the undermining of struggling voices, in this case I lean towards Cunningham (2001), who argues

that sphericules, docile or angry, are signs of an enlarged digital public sphere, where individual needs and perspectives are not sacrificed for a happy, uncontested whole.

This point does not suggest that South African Black Twitter lacks a core sense of itself, or that the project of a communal space is under threat. Conviviality is a long-held theoretical position, but when Nyamnjoh (2017) argues for a convivial approach, he notes specifically that incompleteness and uncertainty are the cornerstones of the way certain social groups (particularly in Africa) conduct themselves. As such, the debates and disagreements within the in-group, guided by a group commitment to discussing key issues, means that the solidarity in this case should be viewed as an ongoing process in which local Black Twitter users confront, defend, and potentially even rethink their own positions through engagement with those they see as one of their own. Habermas (1989) contends with this issue in his well-known concept of ‘rational critical debate’. He does not argue that the project of a public sphere is necessarily about acquiescence and consensus, but rather it is possible, as Nyamnjoh is pointing to, to engage in difficult discussions, *if* the end goal is the same. As such, while Habermas’ focus is more on the benefits of such debate, which in this case includes greater understanding, new allegiances and learning for offline life, Nyamnjoh’s focus is more about an incomplete process; and our inevitable incompleteness as human beings occupying multiple identities and realities. As such, the two perspectives, which at first seem at odds, work together. Expressed another way, while Black Twitter may represent a dynamic, local digital public sphere, it does so via a convivial method.

Particularly for South African Black Twitter users, who are constantly navigating difficult social issues in their offline and online lives, the survival of local Black Twitter for over a decade is more indicative of its solidarity than the spaces of divergence, which, to the outsider eye might suggest a fractured and therefore unproductive social group. Instead, its points of convergence and divergence indicate a robust digital sphere, which, making use of its communalist context emerges as a space for strong individual and sociocultural benefits for its members (Wittel, 2001; Wasko, 2014). Fundamentally, however, the constitutive elements of its socialities include the ability to have a safe, culturally-rich space and the reliance on a group of individuals for support and help. In terms of its tone, it is both critical and comforting depending on the topic. Despite some limits of the web space, it holds to an emancipatory sociality, keen on achieving social justice where it can. Despite its highly emotional quality, it achieves important and productive debate for its members.

How does South African Black Twitter communicate? Natural and functional language

The lifeblood of Twitter is in its use of language. Language is the key marker of friendship and enmity, connection and disconnection, and most broadly, a tweep's location in the social whole. While there are key themes that drive the content of discussion, its label as Black Twitter, or more specifically South African Black Twitter, is fundamentally related to the style(s) of communication. There are eleven official languages in South Africa, which already sets an interesting stage for the ways in which individuals communicate among themselves on Black Twitter. However, the use of formal, "official" languages" does not account for the full range of Black Twitter's socio-linguistic character. In addition to the employment and deployment of these languages, the space has also developed its own rich vocabulary. South African creolisation of language is often derived from indigenous languages, phrases in viral tweets, or "modern" twists on existing words, and this social 'custom' has transformed the way that local Black Twitter users communicate.

This vocabulary signifies happiness, ally-ship, agreement and disagreement, and in many ways, language is an important indicator of sentiment on Black Twitter. As Kimberly Ellis (2014) notes in her TED Talk discussion about American Black Twitter, and the deployment of African American Vernacular English, language acts as a way to say 'this conversation is for us, and is owned by us'. One such example raised early on is the use of #DemThrones to signify a socio-linguistic response to popular TV show *Game of Thrones* (Burnett, 2019). Fundamentally, on a text-based platform like Twitter, language is the most direct way of articulating one's own belonging to the Black Twitter space, and through conversation and use of particular kinds of language, reinforces membership and a "right" to participate (Dunbar and Shultz, 2010: 780). The hashtag #ItsTwitterCultureTo highlighted some of South African Black Twitter's language practices:

- #ItsTwitterCultureTo reply with "Ok'salayo" when you're losing an argument
- #ItsTwitterCultureTo have a gang of people that you talk to like best friends but you've never met them in person
- #ItsTwitterCultureTo start talking your mothertongue when soon as things get heated

Natural language

Black Twitter in South Africa is predominantly English-speaking online. The technical default for the Twitter website or application is English. While many of the users have an indigenous mother tongue, English is the lingua franca in the space. But, Black Tweeps are generally not interested in using perfect, British English. Spelling mistakes, poor grammar and the deliberate abbreviation of words are common. In most instances, this is an accepted practice, owing to a kind of unnamed, organic decolonial praxis on the platform, where the use of indigenous languages is a passport to conversation and interaction. As Schegloff (1974) and Sacks (1995) discuss across their work, the moment of speech (in this case, written speech) acts as a crystallisation. While individual users may have quietly-held positions and politics, and the written tweet (and the tweet it's written in) is the moment of consolidating and sharing those positions. In the context of Black Twitter's sociality, South African-aligned tweeps know that their knowledge of the space is predicated (in this case) on their access to, and knowledge of, a local language. In this way, language and its use is an important indicator of the socialities being invoked. Popular TV presenter and reality TV star, Somizi Mhlongo captured the sentiment towards the 'proper' use of English, when questioned about his grammar. In a tweet that is invoked regularly, almost like a local Black Twitter proverb, he simply wrote:

— “English is not my father”

This is an interesting comment to make, considering that most of his TV work is conducted in English. However, Somizi seemed to be signalling that in the sociality of the Black Twitter space, English had no authority. Rather, it is a sociality of many Englishes, formal, non-formal and even broken. These versions of the language are used to ensure inclusivity, and signify a less hierarchical space. The tweet's re-use seemed to suggest that this is a position many users hold. Despite Twitter's English-first framework, indigenous language is used as an important signifier of difference, reiterating the counter-public position of South African Black Twitter in the broader Twitter whole (Cunningham, 2001).

But despite the 'English is not my father' ethic, "English Olympics", as they are known on the platform, are still prevalent. It is not at all uncommon for arguing users to make fun of another's spelling and grammar. In other cases, the use of English is seen as a means to perform superiority over others. Drawing on an incident caught on [video](#) in which Member of Parliament Willie

Madisha made fun of Minister Naledi Pandor’s British-inflected English accent, users repeat Madisha’s taunt by responding to ‘fancy’ English tweets with the following variations:

- “Hong hong hong”
- “Do you ever get caught in a lie and have to hong hong out of the situation?”
- “There’s ppl here who you guys think are smart but they just hong hong hong”

In this case, Madisha’s onomatopoeic gesture has come to signify a rejection of the use of snooty, over complicated language on the platform. That said, this rejection was delivered in a satirical and humorous way. This is indicative of the way in which humour is used as a buffer when levelling critique. It is an important part of a sociality that says ‘we’ll make fun of your funny English, but we’re not trying to call you out or cancel you’. That said, the no-hong hong English is not a blanket position. In my own network of friends, many of whom are postgraduate students, writers and academics, the use of the formal register is not frowned upon. When it comes to discussions amongst this group of people, not only is formal language invoked, but there are also direct references to academic texts. Last year, a new Johannesburg restaurant came under fire for calling itself “Misohawni” (me so horny). The phrase, popularised by a song by 2 Live Crew in the 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket*, is used to mock South East Asian accents. The phrase also connotes offensive stereotypes regarding specifically Visex workers (Billboard Magazine, 2019). In response to a news article about the new restaurant, I wrote:

- “No way guys. Yoh, Edward Said must be spinning in his grave”

The tweet received over 50 retweets, and one of my followers even responded by saying:

- “Should we post them a copy of Orientalism? Facepalm”

The anti-English vs English-appropriate scenarios initially present a paradox. One might ask, what is Black Twitter’s general feeling towards English? Is it useful or oppressive? To my mind, from having seen the way it is employed, it is a question of intention and power. Within an in-group, such as writers, or academics, the use of the language is a functional tool used to convey an idea. In the case of a “hong hong” response, users are responding negatively to the idea that complicated English words necessarily equate to intelligence. They are also rejecting outright instances in which

formal English is used to make poor English speakers feel embarrassed or uneducated. In this way, South Africans on Black Twitter are, in everyday interaction, responding directly to coloniality of knowledge, and more specifically language (Grosfoguel, 2007). In the space, not being able to speak English (or any Western language) cannot be deemed a mark of a lack of intelligence. However, it is interesting that this sentiment has not resulted in more users tweeting exclusively in their mother tongues. Unlike writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’O (1986) who argue that it is not possible to be decolonial in the so-called master’s language, Black Twitter in South Africa treats English as a functional, easy-to-use language, rather than a language that connotes any kind of status or social progress.

That said, the proliferation of indigenous languages on South African Black Twitter continues to increase. On one level, this is a natural extension of the offline world, in which many South Africans engage in both English and their mother tongue. As discussed earlier, code switching is a natural part of everyday South African speaking, and is one of the ways in which indigenous languages have transferred onto the platform. In other cases, individuals use their mother tongue language to ‘call’ for other same language speakers to join the conversation -- often because the issue being discussed is culturally-specific. In other cases, the choice of indigenous language is a deliberate choice, as part of their own delinking process (Mignolo, 2007). Amongst the most popular local languages spoken on the platform isiZulu and isiXhosa rank first and second, which is in line with the proportional number of speakers in South Africa (Sibanda, 2019). Users based in Gauteng also tweet in Sesotho and to a lesser degree, Setswana, with very small communities tweeting in Tshivenda, XiTsonga and other smaller group languages. These users generally tweet in casual, colloquial forms of these languages, but are quick to point out differences in regional dialects and the ‘quality’ of the language. In particular, KwaZulu-Natal isiZulu is rated far above the isiZulu spoken in Gauteng. Similarly, Port Elizabeth or “City Xhosa” is rated below that spoken in rural areas of the Eastern Cape. Some examples of this critical, but convivial gentle teasing include:

— “Yazi that Joburg Zulu, they should name something else ngoba ayy imix mix ongayiqondi”³⁹

— “PE Xhosa = Gauteng/Joburg Zulu. That’s how bad it is”

³⁹ “You know they should just name that Joburg Zulu something because the way they mix the words, you don’t even understand”

— “The mispronunciation and bad grammar that's prevalent in Joburg Zulu makes me cringe to be honest.”

— “When I'm having a bad day, I listen to joburg zulu. Comic relief is always good.”

— “No one understands PE Xhosa including PE people [Hand on face emoticons]”

Ironically, when it comes to the use of indigenous languages, the use of formal, ‘pure’ language is a mark of status. Adapted, broken versions of these languages are considered uncultured, and many users even recount stories of being sent to rural parts of KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape or Limpopo to learn the language from their grandparents. One user even credited her grandmother with her ability to read isiZulu literature:

— Happy 81st birthday to my grandmother and best friend. She taught me how to read long zulu novels. I remember our favorite short story was “Masithandaze Nxabane” hence my love for books. Thank you for raising us and believing in us nokusifundisa inhlonipho⁴⁰

While these comments are never made seriously, or in a way that intends to mock anyone, the quality of local language is invoked as a commitment (or lack thereof) to one’s heritage. However, as the platform has opened up to include younger users, many of whom speak little to no mother tongue languages, this dynamic is changing.⁴¹

One of the other main languages spoken in South Africa is Afrikaans, but it is not popular on Black Twitter at all. However, in a remarkable and hilarious turn of events, Black Twitter turned entirely Afrikaans for 2 days this year. In the run up to the national elections, Black Twitter users began to speculate that the opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), was creating fake profiles of black users. The logic, apparently, was that the DA was struggling to gain support on Black Twitter [an important agenda-setting space for them], and so the profiles were meant to create the perception that there were indeed DA voters on Black Twitter, and that other black tweeps should consider hearing them out, and potentially switch sides. Apparently, this tactic was meant to mimic the creation of fake black Trump voter accounts created by Russian bot-makers in the run up to the 2017 American elections (New York Times, 2017). This rumour spread, and Black Twitter decided

⁴⁰ Thank you for raising us and believing in us and teaching us respect

⁴¹ See upcoming section on “underground homies”

to respond by mocking the attempted infiltration. Hundreds of Black Twitter members changed their usernames to stereotypical Afrikaans names like “Marie Koekemoer”, “Cobus de Kock”, and “Marietjie van Jaarsveld”. Users also changed their Twitter profile biographies to Afrikaans, and changed their avatars to pictures of old, white “Afrikaans-looking” men and women. For me, who joined the party a little late, it became hard to identify who was who without looking at the user’s handle. In addition to the aesthetic change to the profiles, users also began to tweet exclusively in Afrikaans. The following tweets are a sample of these:

— “almal moet Afrikaans praat”⁴²

— “Ons is a rainbow nasie”⁴³

— “Ons praat Afrikaans omdat uit die blou van onse hemel en Jan skop die ball en die ball het Jan ge skop”⁴⁴

— “Kyk daar is nie anne plek soos Mzansi hier by Twitter strate! Ons vang die beeker!”⁴⁵

As evidenced by the translations in the footnotes, the Afrikaans used was deliberately broken, nonsensical and in some cases, meant to highlight the kinds of stereotypes used in DA messaging. Some of the tweets also referenced the controversial white genocide⁴⁶ (Zulu, 2019), with users going so far as to post links to crowdfunding pages, where other Afrikaans/white people could donate money for flights to Australia. While there is no doubt that many people who joined in had no idea what the original issue was, they joined in solidarity with the group. Many users reflected later that despite the whole ‘performance’ being a mockery, it was concerning that young black users had a reasonable command of Afrikaans, in a way that Afrikaans counterparts did not for their indigenous languages.

This particular event gained easy support, because of the singular rejection of a party trying to leverage voter support from Black Twitter voters, while at once undermining their intelligence.

⁴² Everyone must speak Afrikaans

⁴³ We are a rainbow nation

⁴⁴ We are speaking Afrikaans because [section of the National Anthem] and John kicks the ball and the ball kicked John

⁴⁵ Look there’s no place like the South African Twitter streets. We take the cup

⁴⁶ The ‘white genocide’ is believed to be a rampant issue in South Africa, whereby white people (particularly farmers) are being killed in high numbers by racist black people. While there is no statistical or empirical evidence to support it, it remains a popular, highly circulated myth, particularly in right-wing Afrikaans organizations.

Most of the Afrikaans used in the tweets was simple, and much of it took excerpts from popular Afrikaans school textbooks, basic phrases taught during Afrikaans schooling and as mentioned earlier, entirely nonsensical sentences. The Afrikaans language itself was not a point of interest for the group, but invoked as a reflection of Black Twitter's perception of 'white' politics aimed at young black voters. This perception may be categorised, in light of the language use, as simple, superficial and unable to communicate with its intended audience. Yet again, the incomplete, imperfect nature of communication was its greatest strength, allowing almost any user to join and engage, and keeping the discussion simple enough for all subgroups (sphericules) to keep up with).

More broadly though, the event spoke to the ability of the group to rally support quickly for a group "project". Latour (1996) and Wittel (2001) argue that broad, functioning networks are made of different nodes, which when connected, begin to form co-productive networks. In other words, the unnamed Black Twitter structure is used as a torch to quickly rally together these nodes for a broader group project. In much the same way, the various sub-groups (language, location, interest) within Black Twitter formed a fast, temporary network to drive a point across. This example is one of many in which the platform, though immensely divided, takes on elements of a counter-public in order to resist certain ideas and events. On the surface, this kind of action may be dismissed because it is not "rational" (Habermas, 1989), but rather humorous and emotional. However, the emotional cannot be conflated with the ineffective. Indeed, as Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues in his discussion of the South African student protest, the emotional often acts as the first indicator of social reaction, despite being dismissed as rowdy, undisciplined or pointless. This frustration, performed as humour, is an important learning moment for the ways in which young black South Africans use Black Twitter to address difficult social issues, without ending up spending their daily lives being angry, combative, and undermining their own peace of mind. While they may look frivolous or not serious, interactions like #AfrikaansGate inevitably reflect an intention to engage with debate, question society and present a unified stance towards a social issue.

Platform-specific functional language

It is important to say that this study, or even a somewhat larger one, could not capture the breadth and depth of all South African Black Twitter language. The space is immensely rich linguistically, and its success relies upon the quick adoption and re-use of concepts and words — in order to make

them Black Twitter ‘certified’. In this case, certified has nothing to do with the official verification badge offered by Twitter to ‘official’ accounts. Instead, certified status is achieved when the tweep is reasonably well-known on the platform and engages consistently. As mentioned briefly in my methodology section, I took a very brief break from the platform, and despite being a *bona fide* member, missed out on new terms and could therefore not fully engage with my followers’ content. This experience also suggested to me that while Rambukkana (2015) refers to such spaces as technosocial, that South African Black Twitter is *technolinguistic* as well. Language has emerged as an infrastructural part of identifying as a member of South African Black Twitter, and in many ways acts as the “portal” or “password” that Meredith Clark (2014) says is absent from American Black Twitter. The appropriate use of terms and concepts is an essential way of signifying social belonging, friendship, desire, frustration and most broadly, participation.

One of the ways Black Twitter users invoke participation is through meme formats. Even the “*O je wa ke eng*” (What’s bothering you?) tweet, which was initially a regular utterance by one user, became a rallying call for user-generated participation (Dean, 2014). Based on the success of this tweet, similar tweets followed. The phrase “*Sco pa tu manaa*”⁴⁷ emerged on Nigerian Twitter, and unlike ‘*O je wa ke eng*’, included an image, ‘gif’⁴⁸ or video to help prompt associations. I was initially confused by the phrase, as it is neither Igbo nor Yoruba, nor any other Nigerian language. After doing a quick search for “What language is sco pa tu”, I discovered that despite appearing first in Nigeria, the phrase is taken from a kind of pidgin English spoken by popular Ghanaian musician Patapaa Amisty. The phrase was taken from West African Twitter and popularised by South Africans too, and individual users included the phrase along with their own gifs, images and videos. And so, unlike ‘*O je wa keng*’, the “game” was owned by hundreds of users, rather than a single source. Of course, like any participation game, the format needed to be understood in order for people to participate.

A new copycat format has emerged in the last month, and signalled the end of “*Sco pa tu*”, as it is known for short. This new format uses the word “*Bomboclaat*”, and also includes an image, gif of a video, and users must explain what comes to mind. The word *bomboclaat* is a Jamaican Patois curse word which may mean “fuck”, “asshole” or “sanitary pad”, depending on the context. As

⁴⁷ What do you associate with this? What does this make you think of?

⁴⁸ A gif refers to a looping, moving image file. Its full title is Graphics Interchange Format.

such, unlike the other two formats, the word has no relation to what it requires the user to do, but it is used and adopted because it has come to signify a certain action, when paired with imagery (Florini, 2014; Brock, 2012). Primarily, this and other formats are ways of generating closeness between members. Responses to *Sco pa tu* may be as simple as “It reminds me of the day I went shopping” all the way to multi-tweet threads telling personal stories. The gamified framework once again reinforces a lighthearted, easy-to-engage platform, but is premised upon the action of various users to make it work. As such, the success (or failure) of formats like *O je wa keng* or *Sco pa tu* is usually predicated upon the content’s ability to signal similar interests or provide the necessary prompt for an individual to share their contribution, knowing full well that their contribution may be shared well beyond their own followers, because of the massive reach of these meme formats (Long and Moore, 2013). As such, a contribution to these formats is more about contribution to a group project than it is about individual utterance. In a sense here too, there is a quiet Ubuntu at work. While tweeps know that their contribution may only add to the ‘hype’ of a meme, rather than be individually successful, there is a recognition that if we don’t all chip in, this meme (and perhaps the whole) space may not continue to survive.

But not all platform-based language makes use of randomly chosen words. Some popular terms are derived from American popular culture, such as “gag” or “gagged”, which refers to having one’s breath taken away by a piece of content. The term is popular amongst African American drag queens, and in its translation to South African Black Twitter, is used predominantly by women and queer men. In this way, even platform-specific language signifies a particular location within the broader community. Maffesoli (1989) puts this best, arguing that individuals have individual lives within broader social constellations. In other cases, Twitter vocabulary is derived from indigenous languages or cultural concepts. The isiXhosa phrase “*sabaweli*” — shortened to “*sbwl*”, in the interests of saving characters — is used to refer to a craving. Generally speaking, “*sbwl*” tweets refer to a craving for a sexual act, or for a kind of food or alcohol. The original version of the word does not necessarily have sexual connotations, but it was originally deployed on Black Twitter with this inflection, and so this is the way it has continued to be used. Some examples of its use include:

— “Sbwl to have my guts rearranged”

— “Sbwl a baecation. Lots of fruits, alcohol, water, music and sex”

— “sbwl' a goodnight msg from someone's son”

It is important to note that the term is not at all reserved for #XhosaTwitter, but for anyone who understands and wishes to use it. The term was briefly jettisoned, as some women on the platform felt that their expression of sexual desires was being misread as calls for attention from men. In my experience, even slightly suggestive sbwl tweets by women are often met by vulgar replies or slut-shaming. In other cases, men responded by saying that women have unrealistic relationship and sexual expectations. One woman, frustrated by this, wrote:

— “I cannot believe you guys ruined “Sbwl” term

It was meant to be fun and funny but men managed to attack women through it. Now you cannot Sbwl something for fun....

Hayi maan guys akho need for this behavior hey, It was never that deep trust me

Yoh ha.a

In some respects, language is deeply implicated in everyday concerns. While South African Black Twitter’s language is meant to be a rallying call to common, culturally non-specific frames of reference, it is always affected by its content. As is evidenced by the above example, the significance of discussions about gender have made gender issues a constitutive element of South African Black Twitter’s sociality. Even in discussions about language or an individual term, women are quick to resist the patriarchal claiming of ideas. It is hard to account for this element, because so few of the approaches to sociality deal with gender, race and sexuality, but in this context it cannot be separated from the way in which Black Tweeps interact. This is particularly the case because local Black Twitter represents a rare space where women speaking up does not threaten their physical safety.

But of SBWL is just one example. More broadly, when it comes to so-called Twitter language, the prevailing sociality is one in which language is flexible, malleable and to be played with. The initial context in which a term is used may be vastly different from the way in which it is taken up by the group, and the group meaning begins to subsume the individual’s initial intended meaning (Hall, 1980: 165). In this way it expands participation and understanding, but also constrains it in instances where these terms are invoked to exercise power over other members of the community. If a term (like sbwl) becomes “held” by a group of independent black women, it will begin to adopt connotations of a liberal, sexually independent person. However, as was the case, once it is co-opted for primary use by a different group, say black men who are resentful of independent women,

its connotation shifts depending on who owns it at a particular time. Again, the notion of counter-publics emerges as interesting here. While counter-publics are sometimes conceived of as counter to a broader whole, in this case, counter-publics emerge to claim hegemonic use of a word (Dahlberg, 2007).

But in many places, new terms do the opposite. Instead of a scenario where a fun, friendly term is made murky and combative, serious concepts may also be ‘lightened’ on the platform. For example, South African ancestors are sometimes referred to as “dead homies” or the “underground gang”. In another case, the marriage practice of *lobola*⁴⁹ is referred to by some younger users as “cow chats”. While some people respond to this with shock and disgust, bemoaning the corruption of language by “ama2000s”⁵⁰, others, including Tweleb traditional healers themselves, use these terms to demystify concepts, or remove any fear associated with them. Particularly in this realm, new non-generational, culturally non-specific language is being used to bridge ethnic and age boundaries, thus constituting the local Black Twitter community.

The language of South African Black Twitter is ever-evolving and is based on cultural relevance rather than linguistic rules. Like the discussions on the platform, the functional language used signifies certain sentiments, acts as sub-portals between different kinds of Black Twitter networks, and most importantly, distinguishes it strongly from its African and African American counterparts. It is normal practice for terms to endure for several years, while others, like a fashion trend, last barely a ‘season’. In this way, there is a convivial, fluid approach to the space, characterised by the kinds of language, performances of language, and meanings attached to them (Mbembe, 2003; Mignolo, 2007). I have no doubt that a thesis on this topic written several years ago would yield an entirely different set of highlights, and thus this section is not meant to be a pronouncement or catalogue of South African Black Twitter forever. If anything, it is the organic evolution of the space’s language that allows South African Black Twitter to endure, changing in accordance with the needs of its new and established users — beyond singular, repeated tropes (Ndebele, 1989: 67).

How do we account for the Black in South African Black Twitter?

⁴⁹ *Lobola* is an Nguni marriage procedure, whereby the couple’s family meet and agreements are made for how many cows (how much) money is to be offered by the groom, in celebration of the wedding and inclusion in the wife’s family.

⁵⁰ Broad term used to refer to Generation Z, or tweeps born from the year 2000 onwards

“When you feeling all alone
And you can't even be you up in your home
When you even feeling it from your own
When you got it figured out
When a nigga tryna board the plane
And they ask you, "What's your name again?"
Cause they thinking, "Yeah, you're all the same"
Oh, it's for us
All my niggas in the whole wide world
Made this song to make it all y'all's turn
For us, this shit is for us”

— Solange Knowles, FUBU (For Us By Us), 2016

There is no way to write this section as if it is separate from my own personal experience of becoming woke and “coming into” my own blackness. While many of the black authors referenced in chapter two have been important guides for me and many other young black South Africans, the Black Twitter space has been singular in my thinking through self and other, primarily because the engagement around blackness is consistent, highly relevant to my particular social location, and deeply discursive. But that doesn’t mean that I or any other members of South African Black Twitter have all the answers. When I appeared as a guest on a podcast earlier this year talking about working on this study, the host had some difficult questions: “Is everyone on Black Twitter black?” “Can white people ever be part of Black Twitter?” “How does being black on Black Twitter affect being black in real life?”

South Africa presents a complex case study for thinking through questions of race and blackness, and their online performance. On the one hand, the apartheid legacy of blackness focused on strict, phenotypical classifications of blackness. You were either black, or you were something else. In the post-apartheid discourse, this has shifted, and South Africans previously labelled Indian, coloured or Chinese (I think what is meant here is South East Asian) are considered black too. This conception emerges from political ideas of blackness advanced by Black Consciousness thinkers and activists (Biko, 1978). In line with Hall (1993), this marks an institutionalised end to an ‘essential black subject’, and in line with Gilroy (2003), invokes culture, experience and aesthetics

as central axes for being considered black. On South African Black Twitter, the category of black remains cultural, but also discursive and wholly incomplete (Nyamnjoh, 2017). In some instances, a quick look at a tweep’s username, avi⁵¹, or the language of a tweet, may offer clear markers that the user is black, meaning “Biko black”⁵² as it is known on the platform. But for the most part, blackness on the platform is largely consolidated through common histories and common experience which users identify as culturally significant to being black (Clark, 2014). Take, for example, this tweet by a popular black woman tweep, reflecting on experiences of black women in the workplace. Her initial tweet read:

— “I know too many black women who are in therapy or walking around broken because of a non-black woman they work with or report to. This country”

When I read this tweet, I remember reflecting on my own similar experience of a white woman manager who made significant attempts to undermine my confidence. Upon sending it to a close white, male friend of mine who knew the manager, he was shocked and replied: “I mean to be fair, I think that could happen with any kind of manager”. His response, though frustrating, was telling in terms of the ways in which certain experiences that seem ‘race-neutral’ are experienced by black South Africans in race-affected ways. Santos (2007) refers to this phenomenon in his discussion of the “abyssal line”, where certain, often unspoken, dynamics regulate the ways in which dispossessed and marginalised people are able (or unable) to act and react. I was not the only person able to relate to this particular example.

Within several hours, the original tweet received over 400 retweets and more than 62 replies, mostly from women recounting similar situations, some of which were deeply triggering in terms of my own experience. Scrolling through the replies, I observed the women were reasonably diverse in terms of the language in which they responded and the kind of job and industry they were speaking about. However, their perspectives also reinforced the sentiment that a black woman can’t respond to this kind of abuse, for fear of being labelled an angry black woman—a trope long-used to minimise and silence black women’s anger and pain (Harris-Perry, 2011; Foster and Steyn, 2008). While the discussion did not necessarily solve anything, it did what a lot of discussions on Black

⁵¹ Shorthand for avatar: a profile image used as part of the Twitter profile.

⁵² The term Biko Black refers to tweeps who are black Africans

Twitter do: they make you think, “So it’s not just me, what I’m experiencing is real”. In many ways, this sense of aligned black experiences is the Black that holds Black Twitter together: we are simultaneously recovering from a shared oppression, while trying to carve out new experiences separate from these (West, 1990).

With this, and the first section on solidarity in mind, it must be reiterated that common experience is not the only basis for connection. Conflict between different types of black people often act as the battleground for the community to think through what we (as South African Black Twitter) believe blackness is about. As the example of “702 blacks” and “rented blacks” in chapter four shows, various linguistic labels are invoked to show division and separation. In some cases, the marker for these different ‘kinds’ of black person is invoked through former presidents. Calling someone a “Zuma black” invokes an on-the-ground, indigenous language speaking, potentially radical kind of black person, while a “Mbeki black” [as I have been called more than once] is generally regarded as snobby, interested in money and big business and unlikely to engage with social justice issues. In this way, Black Twitter in South Africa invokes locally-relevant tropes as “floating signifiers” (Hall, 2007) under which different values and positions on blackness are inscribed and ascribed.

While conflict and labelling emerges as an intra-South African phenomenon, it is also a feature of the way in which South African (and other African) Black Twitter(s) engage with their American counterparts. There is no doubt that African American Black Twitter is responsible for the phenomenon’s inception, and that South African Black Twitter is heavily influenced by practices on American Black Twitter, such as the use of African American Vernacular English and ‘signifyin’ (Florini, 2014). However, some territorial tendencies have certainly emerged as the two groups try to think and fight through what blackness is (deliberately and incidentally). These battles for territory are primarily about who belongs to the black community and in some instances, who is better. As Peres Owino’s (2004) film *Bound: Africans vs African Americans* explores, long held-stereotypes have come to characterise the relationship between Africans and Americans whose experience of being black is vastly different. But as Jay-Z (2017) raps in his now famous Story of OJ: “Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga. Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga. Still nigga”. Jay-Z questions these battles by making the case that in a white-dominated world these groups are treated in the same way. However, when it comes to Black Twitter, the “still nigga” logic does not apply. The following cluster of tweets captures a set of interactions between members of African American Black Twitter and South African Black Twitter. This particular

debate raged on for several days, and uncovered a range of nasty, mostly inaccurate perceptions between the two groups. I have no idea what a ‘non-black’ user may make of this, but I imagine the idea of a “Black Twitter” would seem a complete misnomer, in light of the way these two groups interact. In many ways, international Black Twitter is a sociality based on race, whereas South African Black Twitter also strongly recognizes ethnicity as another important sub layer for one’s online (and offline) identity.

The original tweet was posted by an African American user who posted about American rapper Doja Cat (Zandile Dlamini). Doja Cat is well-known in South Africa due to her worldwide fame, but also because her father is South African *Yizo Yizo*⁵³ star Dumisani Dhlamini:

— “lord Doja Cat’s government name really sound like a Harry Potter spell”

South Africans, many of whom are proud of their indigenous names, did not take to this kindly (despite making similar jokes weeks before about American rapper Cardi B, whose real name is Belcalis Almanzar). The tweets below detail some of the responses from South African Black Twitter, and reflect it’s whip-smart, and sassy sociality:

— “Black Americans are making fun of Doja Cat’s real name (Zandile Dlamini) like they don’t name their babies Laquisha. I-”

— “This coming from people who have always been slaves in their own country. Go fight with Trump pls”

— “The truth is most South Africans wouldn’t think as slowly as Black American Twitter if they tried. I lived in Ohio for 6 months& realised they have the reasoning capacity of a toad. I kid you not. Don’t be bullied by idiots”

— “Americans can’t trace their ancestry beyond the Atlantic Ocean trip and they’re coming for our names?”

— “Go pick some cotton for massa. talk to us when you’re not being shot for breathing”

⁵³ *Yizo Yizo* was a popular local television show, which aired on SABC 1 between 1999 and 2004

But African Americans were quick to respond, posting photos of an inebriated and half-naked Brenda Fassie, making fun of South Africans' (notoriously) poor lace front wigs and in these responses, giving as good as they got.

— “You guys all tweeting from the same computer again?”

— “You're only free because of the civil rights movement. We taught you how to liberate yourselves”

— “Y'all find all those missing black women yet? Surely you don't have time for this”

This so called #diasporawar was one of many, which rear their heads on the platform from time to time. At other times, there is a great sense of unity between the groups. For example, the film *Black Panther* united both communities around the pride of an all-black superhero movie and the promise of a #WakandaForever. Similarly, South Africans on Black Twitter have been immensely supportive of tags like #BlackLivesMatter and other pro-black activist initiatives. Even in the process of working on this study, African American critical race scholars, and fellow blackness-interested users have been great allies. As I was reading about Du Bois (1903), Douglass (1855), Washington (1895) and the NAACP, these (new) friends were crucial in helping me understand black history from their perspective. African American and South African Black Twitter regularly engage in spats about the use of the word colored/coloured, with American users often dismissing tweets by South Africans. The response from South Africans is often that African Americans think they own blackness, and once again these one-liner gaslighting techniques end any possible chance for constructive conversation about the rallying call of blackness.

Ironically, I would argue, these spaces of contestation, both amongst South Africans, and in engagement with other Black Twitter groups, are the spaces through which South African Black Twitter is consolidated, through common 'enemy' ideas and people (Tolentino, 2018). In his work on Southern Epistemologies, Santos (2006) refers to a sociology of emergences as well as a sociology of absences. In this knowledge ecology, the sociology of emergences allows for new, previously dismissed ideas, to be resurfaced, talked about and used. Similarly, the sociology of absences allows us to talk about issues deemed unimportant previously, or those that have been dismissed or erased by Western-dominated discursive environments. Within the context of Black Twitter, where “black” remains a complicated label, discussions about blackness (whether civil or bitter) act as important sites for the emergence of old and new ideas about blackness. They also

show the blindspots in our understandings, and like #DojaGate, once the fighting has settled, there are moments of reflection and conversation which help individuals think through their own blackness by encouraging us to orient ourselves within a range of 'presentations' of blackness.

Chapter six: Conclusion

“At this crucial time in our lives, when everything is so desperate, when every day is a matter of survival, I don't think you can help but be involved.”

— Nina Simone, 1989, Interview with Stephen Cleary

In this thesis, I have explored the kinds of established and emergent socialities constituted on South African Black Twitter (Amit, 2015). Focusing specifically on the everyday utterances, questions, contributions and reactions of Black Twitter users, I tried to understand both the content of discussions as well as the nature of discussions on the platform. As a long time user of the platform, the decision to produce this study, was to elucidate the perspectives and processes used by Black Twitter, whose contributions may not previously have been considered scientific, or conclusive enough for academic inquiry. The second driving force for the thesis was trying to understand what “Black” or rather blackness is understood to be in this particular context, and what that means for the ways in which Black Twitter in South Africa owns and uses the label. This was important for debunking the oft-repeated logic of a singular, essential black subject (Hall, 1993).

It was important, at the outset to offer some context to the substance of this study. I did so by looking firstly at South African adoptions of social media, and secondly at the notion of a Black Twitter: as it is understood at home and abroad. Where the first issue was concerned, I discussed the idea that increased (mobile) internet penetration has affected the ways in which young South Africans talk, connect with each other, and engage with content. As the use of the mobile web and social media platforms like Twitter have expanded, so too have the ways in which they are used. Some of the key ways include the dissemination and discussion of news; the ability to engage with local and international pop culture; and as the Twitter space becomes more inundated with advertising and corporate accounts, the difficult relationship emerging between Black Twitter and corporate entities online. The group is quick to compliment, but also to berate. Where the second issue (Black Twitter: home and away) was concerned, I analysed Black Twitter's two main centres — the United States (driven by an African American community) and my research area, contemporary South Africa. It emerged that while both groups are bound together by a socio-cultural adoption of blackness and

interest in black people and culture, that their forms of expression differ. While American Black Twitter is heavily influenced by its own culture, South African Black Twitter is largely global, drawing on both local and international influences. There is however, a great degree of cross-pollination between the two groups, and many trends, platform-based terms and ways of engaging are inheritances from our American cousins. However, owing to the vastly different offline experiences, while there is some solidarity about black-specific issues, there is also a great degree of misconception, stereotyping and “one-upping” that takes place when the two groups engage with one another.

As is highlighted throughout this study, the theoretical lenses used to shape my exploration focused on three main areas: Sociality, everyday life and blackness. Where socialities are concerned, my discussion focused on the public sphere, the network and the concept of conviviality. As expressed in the work, these conceptions were never viewed as mutually exclusive, and through the production of the research, it emerged that South African Black Twitter draws from any and all of them at different times. On a structural level, South African Black Twitter is reminiscent of a dynamic, agonistic public sphere (Dahlberg, 2007) that lends itself to rational, critical debate for constructing a community with some consensus (Habermas, 2019). That said, the emergence of subgroups complicates this rational, Habermasian whole. There are multiple subgroups within South African Black Twitter. Some are simply interest or language-driven sphericules (Gitlin, 1998; Cunningham, 2001), but some emerge as strong counter-publics (Dahlberg, 2014; Bruns, 2015) aimed at questioning the overall hegemony of Black Twitter. As the South African Black Twitter space continues to grow in size and social significance, further research may be needed to analyse the ways in which (despite being a not-white subgroup itself) Black Twitter may begin to show signs of its own hegemony. Nevertheless, in this context, the space remains a site of struggle, where individual perspectives constantly bump against group thinking. The network perspective (Latour, 1996; Wittel, 2001) is useful for thinking about how interest, connection, virality, and disintegration unfold on the platform. The idea of the subgroups as nodes, which, when rallied by common interest or resistance, feed into a broader Black Twitter hub. Witte’s idea of a network sociality is a helpful tool for understanding why support can be rallied so quickly for certain issues, hashtags, meme formats and in the case of #BlackLivesMatter or #AmINext, how this action which takes place online can have important offline consequences. Nyamnjoh’s concept of an incomplete, frontier society launches the idea of conviviality to the centre of the way in which these socialities are stitched together in the everyday. Drawing on the emotional, the humourous, the spontaneous

and unfinished discussions, users engage convivially in their quest to explore certain ideas. On Black Twitter, there is no “Great, we all agree!” moment, and I would argue that where the thinking and discussing of these concerns ends on Black Twitter, they continue to percolate through other online spaces, as well as into offline everyday life.

The everyday life approach was taken in this study, both as theory and methodology. It was important at the outset to recognise that macrosociological perspectives, which sometimes subsume the particular into the ill-fitting abstract, would not be appropriate for this exploratory study (Gardiner, 2004). Instead, there was an understanding that in order to understand Black Twitter users on their own terms, the study needed to engage “the only world we know” seriously, which is our everyday, ordinary (and sometimes extraordinary) lifeworlds (Maffesoli, 1989). Instead of mapping trends, or counting hashtags, individual tweets about the banal, the unserious and the unofficial became the centre of the study (Sacks, 1995; Lefebvre, 1984). This perspective allowed me to dig deep into the earnestly-expressed ideas of Black Twitter users, and begin to see which normal issues emerged as central to our discussions. After lurking on the platform, changing my circle of followers, and engaging as a regular member, particular issues became recurrent — whether they were being discussed at the level of individual incident, or as a response to broader social, political and economic issues facing the country. These issues were gender and sexuality, race and politics, finances and the economy. While these issues may come across intuitively as the ones to include, the way they are spoken about is what is most interesting. While the sphere of gender and sexuality seems to lean towards a strong, activist sentiment, discussions about race, politics and the economy adopt a more resigned tone, with many young, educated users on Black Twitter resigning themselves to “that’s just the way South Africa is”.

That said, even where a topic is ostensibly dull, the way it is spoken about never is. One of the ways in which blackness is operationalised on South African Black Twitter is through formal language — as a way to indicate cultural belonging, a preference for the local, and increasingly, a shying away from English as *lingua franca* (even on an English-driven app). More importantly, like many spaces creolised by black people (Ellis, 2014), the space has — developed its own written and visual languages. These include terms derived from indigenous languages, those adopted from African American English, and those which have entirely different meanings offline. The purpose of these new languages is to demarcate the character and flavour of South African Black Twitter, and their constant use is a signification tactic, intended to show other users that one is part of the

‘community’ (Florini, 2014). Returning to Du Bois’ (1903) so-called problem of double consciousness, these users exist fluidly between their multiple social locations or pluriverses, allowing them to co-exist through language, connection with other users, and a protection of their blackness(es) in this strange and wonderful space (Mignolo, 2007).

As a researcher and member of South African Black Twitter, doing the work on this study was convivial itself. In some cases, my insider knowledge allowed for immense comfort, but at times some distance and strangeness was needed to avoid taking the interesting for granted. This thesis does not necessarily conclude any concrete ideas about what is emergent, but hopes only to do justice to the issues being explored by the community, and the ways in which they were discussed. Driven by their tweets in their own words, the study also concludes that the process of a constitutive sociality is an ongoing one, established and new members grapple about the “project” of South African Black Twitter. Whether the discussions are light and congenial, or hyper-personal and combative, there is ultimately a community forming a new kind of black solidarity amongst strangers (Habermas, 2019). The space may well implode and disintegrate (as it has almost done so many times) or grow and thrive — but it will work as long as its users continue to commit to a space for us, by us.

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