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Myth, memory, and political settlements in the city: compounded disadvantage and a path for plausible futures

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Myth, Memory, and Political Settlements in the City: Compounded Disadvantage and a Path for Plausible Futures

Proefschrift

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geboren te Harare, Zimbabwe

in 1994

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I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.”

— bell hooks, ‘**Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom**’ (1991: 1)

Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to my family, but in particular, my grandparents. It is a labour of love in honour of the city they called home. In honour of all the conversations surrounding Bulawayo's history, its present, and the vision for its future.

To my late grandfather, Pastor Jonathan Mathaba Dube, who witnessed the start of this thesis but did not live to see the end product – you are deeply missed. Thank you for being so invested in, and proud of, my academic journey. Though I will forever be heartbroken that you did not get to read the full manuscript, I am confident you would have loved it. I hope I have addressed all the questions we used to ponder.

To my late grandmothers, my paternal grandmother, Mrs Regina Ndlovu (née Velepini), and my maternal grandmother, Mrs Idah Mathaba Dube (née Mhlanga), thank you for raising my parents to be inquisitive about the world around them. Growing up in a home that was always abuzz with lively debates on politics and governance shaped me into who I am today. I am proud to be the first grandchild from my maternal and paternal lines to complete a PhD – a direct testament to, and culmination of, the seeds of generational intellectual curiosity.

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List of Abbreviations

AAG	Affirmative Action Group
BCC	Bulawayo City Council
BSAC	British South Africa Company
CBD	central business district
CLA	causal layered analysis
COVID-19	coronavirus disease
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ESAP	Economic Structural Adjustment Programme
FDI	foreign direct investment
GDP	gross domestic product
GNI	gross national income
JOC	Joint Operations Command
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
NAVUZ	National Vendors Union of Zimbabwe
RAR	Rhodesian African Rifles
RMGWA	Rhodesia Mine and General Workers' Association
SAMWU	South African Mine Workers' Union
SEZs	special economic zones
SRANC	Southern Rhodesia African National Congress
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
UN	United Nations
US	United States
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZCTU	Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions
ZDF	Zimbabwe Defence Forces
ZIDA	Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency
ZIMPREST	Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the structural, symbolic, and affective dimensions of urban disadvantage in Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo. It positions disadvantage not as a static outcome but as a layered process produced through political settlements, spatial arrangements, historical trauma, and affective practices of survival and resistance. Drawing on political economy, memory studies, and futures thinking, the study examines how colonial legacies, ZANU-PF's post-independence political settlements, and the centralisation of power in Harare have entrenched Bulawayo's disadvantage, while also illuminating pathways for reimagining inclusive urban futures.

Anchored in Khan's political settlements framework, the analysis traces how elite bargaining, militarised governance, and patron-client networks have institutionalised disadvantage. These dynamics are compounded by ethno-political mythologies that cast Bulawayo as a "dissident city", legitimising state neglect and repression. Empirical chapters foreground how residents navigate disadvantage, as seen through urban survival strategies, informal economies, political silences, and affective practices of accumulation such as *ukubamba zonke*, thus revealing both structural constraints and resilient agency.

Methodologically, the research employs a case-centric process-tracing approach, complemented by futures methodologies including Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) and the Futures Triangle. This design moves beyond diagnosis to reimagination, envisioning "Bulawayo 2.0" as a justice-oriented, participatory, and resilient urban trajectory. Comparative insights from African cities further situate Bulawayo within wider continental patterns of shifting capitals, uneven development, and symbolic geographies of power.

By centring citizen narratives alongside historical and statistical analysis, the study contributes to African urban studies, political settlements theory, and futures scholarship. It argues for a decolonial and justice-oriented approach to urban governance that recognises disadvantage as simultaneously historical, contemporary, and prospective. Ultimately, Bulawayo is positioned not only as a site of disadvantage but also as a space of memory, myth, resilience, and possibility.

