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

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SUMMARY

Overview

This thesis interrogates the structural, symbolic, and affective dimensions of urban disadvantage in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city. It argues that Bulawayo's marginalisation is not a static outcome of economic misfortune but a layered, historically produced condition – what the thesis calls an 'architecture of disadvantage' – shaped by colonial legacies, post-independence political settlements, and the active reproduction of myth and memory. The central theoretical contribution is a conceptualisation of Bulawayo and its people's disadvantage as simultaneously structural, symbolic, and affective. The thesis resists approaches that reduce the city's decline to deindustrialisation, governance failure, or ethnic exclusion in isolation, and insists that the symbolic and psychological dimensions through which disadvantage is narrated, remembered, and normalised are as causally significant as its material expressions.

The Problem and the Gap

Bulawayo, once Zimbabwe's industrial hub, contributed over a third of national manufacturing employment in the early 1980s at peak. By the early 2000s, that share had fallen below 10%. Existing scholarship has examined this trajectory through economic, political, and institutional lenses albeit in fragmented ways, and rarely with attention to how disadvantage is experienced and reproduced at the intersection of political economy, collective memory, and urban identity. This thesis fills that gap by centring citizen voices across generations and social positions, integrating political economy with memory studies and futures thinking, and treating Bulawayo not only as a case of decline but as a site of resilience, imagination, and contested belonging. Crucially, it positions Bulawayo's marginalisation not as an anomaly within Zimbabwe's post-independence story, nor merely benign neglect, but as structurally produced as a consequence of deliberate political choices, and their mythicised justifications. In doing so, the thesis is guided by the central research question: *how have political settlements and governance structures historically produced and compounded disadvantage in post-1980 Bulawayo, and how is this disadvantage cyclically remembered, contested, and reimagined?*

Theoretical Framework

The thesis is anchored in Mushtaq Khan's (1995, 2005, 2010) political settlements framework, which traces how elite bargaining, patron-client networks, and militarised governance institutionalise the distribution of power and resources. Applied to Bulawayo, this framework reveals how ZANU-PF's post-independence consolidation entrenched the city's exclusion through economic policy neglect. This includes the devastation wrought by the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the 1990s and through deliberate symbolic governance: the construction of Bulawayo as a "dissident city" whose ethno-political identity as a ZAPU and ZIPRA stronghold legitimised state violence and resource withdrawal. The thesis extends Khan's framework by arguing that ethno-political mythicisations function as a causal mechanism of exclusion in their own right, not merely as a byproduct of material elite interests. More specifically, it demonstrates a causal chain in which mythologised narratives of dissent legitimise

securocratic governance, buttressing patronage-based resource distribution, and ultimately materialising persistent urban disadvantage.

This is complemented by a typology of disadvantage developed in the opening analytical chapters, which distinguishes structural disadvantage (embedded exclusion through patron-client networks and centralised governance), spatial disadvantage (the racialised geography of colonial and post-colonial urban planning), symbolic disadvantage (the mythologisation of Ndebele identity as inherently militaristic and dissident), and affective disadvantage (the psychological and emotional weight of historical trauma, particularly Gukurahundi, on urban belonging and civic participation). These four types are understood as mutually reinforcing rather than discrete, forming the architecture of disadvantage that the thesis sets out to map and ultimately challenge.

Methodology

The thesis makes a methodological contribution by integrating political settlements analysis with memory studies and futures thinking as a combined analytical and anticipatory framework for studying urban disadvantage. The research employs a case-centric process-tracing design, drawing on interviews conducted in Bulawayo, Harare, and Cape Town between December 2021 and August 2024. Participants included citizens from informal vendors and youth to Bulawayo City Council civil servants, technocrats, business leaders, and diaspora academics. The composition of participants adds texture to urban governance, survival, and identity across generations and social positions. The research also draws extensively on archival material, Bulawayo City Council annual reports, government policy documents, parliamentary debates, and statistical data including ZIMSTAT and Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency (ZIDA) reports.

The author's positionality is foregrounded throughout. As a fluent isiNdebele and ChiShona speaker with deep social ties to Bulawayo, she was able to access forms of testimony, particularly around politically sensitive subjects such as the 1983-1987 Gukurahundi Massacres and ZANU-PF patron-client relations, that would be unavailable to an external or monolingual researcher. This linguistic and cultural embeddedness is treated not as a source of bias to be managed but as a methodological asset. The thesis additionally deploys two of Inayatullah's futures methodologies: Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) (1998, 2004, 2005) and the Futures Triangle (2008, 2023); enabling it to move beyond diagnosis toward the active reimagination of alternative urban trajectories.

Historical Foundations

The historicisation chapters trace Bulawayo's disadvantage from the pre-colonial Ndebele state through settler colonialism to the post-independence era. A central argument is that Matabeleland was not merely occupied like Mashonaland but conquered – a distinction that produced a durable repertoire of securitised governance, mythologised Ndebele militarism, and institutionalised spatial subordination that has persisted the ZANU-PF era. The thesis challenges colonial historiography that portrays the Ndebele state as inherently violent, drawing on revisionist scholarship to demonstrate that the state was in fact organised around accumulation, consent, and

consultative governance prior to conquest. The colonial period's racialised labour economy, job colour bar, and spatial planning legislation are shown to have systematically excluded African workers in Matabeleland from economic participation and urban rights, laying the institutional foundations for what would follow after 1980.

Key Empirical Findings

The empirical chapters examine three intersecting dimensions of disadvantage.

Political: Residents navigate a city labelled dissident, where expressions of civic identity are constrained by surveillance, electoral intimidation, and the unresolved legacy of the 1983–1987 Gukurahundi Massacres. The concept of *ukubamba zonke* [trans. “to hoard all good things”] is developed as an original theoretical lens for understanding ZANU-PF's centralisation of resources and opportunities at the expense of Bulawayo. The thesis traces this logic from Cecil Rhodes' deliberate spatial marginalisation of Bulawayo's commercial centre, through the post-independence Unity Accord of 1987, to the present-day kleptocratic elite networks exemplified by figures such as Kudakwashe Tagwirei, whose extraction of billions from Zimbabwe's fuel and mining sectors illustrates *ukubamba zonke* at its most systemic scale.

Economic: With formal employment decimated and the informal sector estimated at 90% of Bulawayo's urban economic activity, residents survive through overlapping strategies of digital hustling, informal trade, and tactical navigation of patronage networks. The relationship between street vendors and the Bulawayo City Council which is itself hollowed of authority by ZANU-PF's systematic bypassing of local government, is examined in detail through fieldwork conducted in the immediate aftermath of the August 2023 general elections, as a period of heightened repression and partisan vendor politics. The generational dimension shows younger residents displaying a pragmatic, digitally-enabled creativity that the thesis conceptualises through I. Moyo's (2023) notion of “waithustlinghood”, while the older generation remains anchored in nostalgia for the industrial city of *KoNtuthu ziyathunqa* [trans. “the place that continually exudes smoke”] – a memory that simultaneously sustains identity while foreclosing more transformative urban imaginaries.

Psychological: Chapter 7 on “uneasy peace” argues that communities' strategic silence around ‘Gukurahundi as a continuum’ (N.Ndlovu, 2019) constitutes cautious expression, produced and maintained under conditions where public naming carries existential risk, rather than an absence of political consciousness. This finding exposes the structural unsuitability of liberal peace models in contexts where the perpetrating state remains in power and accountability has been replaced by presidential injunctions to “let bygones be bygones”.

Futures Orientation

The thesis concludes by deploying CLA and the Futures Triangle to envision ‘Bulawayo 2.0’ – a justice-oriented, participatory, and economically revitalised city – set against a 2040 horizon rather than the national government's Vision 2030. The CLA maps disadvantage across four

layers: the visible litany of unemployment and informality; the systemic causes rooted in centralised governance and ESAP's legacy; the worldviews that frame Bulawayo as an opposition stronghold beyond the reach of national development; and the deep paradoxical myths of Bulawayo as a city of 'dissidents' and smoke that simultaneously legitimise its exclusion and fuel its resilience. The preferred new metaphor for the city is Bulawayo as "a nexus of innovation and economic revitalisation" – an aspiration that is not imposed from above but grounded in the informal creativity, civic solidarity, and digital entrepreneurship already visible in the city's streets. Investment data confirms that the gap between national development narratives and Bulawayo's material reality is structural rather than incidental. Closing it will require not only investment and devolution, but also historical accountability and the construction of new political imaginaries. Ultimately, the thesis argues that the politics of possibility in Bulawayo lies not in technocratic fixes, but in the contested reimagining of urban futures through citizen agency, where new solidarities and forms of governance can begin to reconfigure entrenched political settlements.