



**DISRUPTING DEMOCRACY: DEMOCRATISATION CONFLICTS
AS PERFORMATIVE STRUGGLES**

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| | <p>democratic transition. Disruptions take ownership of and re-present the past to evaluate and contest established forms of power in the post-transitional present. They thereby potentially engender conflict that can redirect the future path to consolidation. An illustrative case is a radical opposition party's disruption of the South African State of the Nation Address in 2015, which descended into violence. I adopt a mixed-methods approach that prioritises interpretive analysis and thick description. An analysis of videos of the disruptive performance in parliament is complemented by investigation of its media coverage and the real-time public reaction on Twitter. I find that the form of the performance engenders conflict; but performance is also its subject, for its function is to expose the vacuum of democratic substance behind the regime's masquerade of power. While the disruptive performance therefore serves an important accountability function, it simultaneously sets a problematic course for future democratic transition as it performs this function through moral essentialism. The South African case presents a particular type of disruption with specific functions and democratic implications. But it also demonstrates that a concern with the formal aspects of performance in general is a fruitful lens for considering the relation between observable form in processes of meaning-making, its political functions and the democratic change it can effect.</p> |
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DISRUPTING DEMOCRACY: DEMOCRATISATION CONFLICTS AS PERFORMATIVE STRUGGLES

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at disruptive political performance in the context of democratic transition. Disruptions take ownership of and re-present the past to evaluate and contest established forms of power in the post-transitional present. They thereby potentially engender conflict that can redirect the future path to consolidation. An illustrative case is a radical opposition party's disruption of the South African State of the Nation Address in 2015, which descended into violence. I adopt a mixed-methods approach that prioritises interpretive analysis and thick description. An analysis of videos of the disruptive performance in parliament is complemented by investigation of its media coverage and the real-time public reaction on Twitter. I find that the form of the performance engenders conflict; but performance is also its subject, for its function is to expose the vacuum of democratic substance behind the regime's masquerade of power. While the disruptive performance therefore serves an important accountability function, it simultaneously sets a problematic course for future democratic transition as it performs this function through moral essentialism. The South African case presents a particular type of disruption with specific functions and democratic implications. But it also demonstrates that a concern with the formal aspects of performance in general is a fruitful lens for considering the relation between observable form in processes of meaning-making, its political functions and the democratic change it can effect.

Keywords: political communication, democratisation, disruption, political performance, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history authoritarian leaders have staged grandiose ceremonies to demonstrate and reinforce their hold on power. Such displays can serve to unite a nation but also to detract attention from a lack of democratic substance or responsiveness. Throughout

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3 history, too, opposition movements have put on counter-performances. These often norm-
4 breaking disruptions may expose and challenge illegitimate uses of power where other
5 means of ensuring accountability have failed, but they may equally portray establishments
6 as deceitful for their own strategic ends. Whatever their purpose, both these types of
7 performances – establishment ritual and oppositional disruption – make use of *formal*
8 *properties*, in the sense of properties of appearance, arrangement or shape, as a means of
9 making a symbolic point. In other words, we can see their use of form not only as a vessel
10 for carrying content but as a symbol that stands for something more abstract, can facilitate
11 sophisticated argument and has complex political functions. It can also have long-lasting
12 implications for the future direction of democracy: it may serve to reinforce power or to
13 destabilise still-fragile institutions and redirect the path of transition through strategic
14 narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Price, 2015).

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Indeed, struggles over the future trajectory of the transition process can play out largely on an aesthetic battleground. In this paper I develop disruptive political performance as a theoretically and analytically useful concept in the context of democratisation conflicts. My contention is that we should pay attention to the forms through which regimes are legitimised and challenged – ritualistic demonstrations of power, on the one hand, and disruptive action on the other – for these forms and their functions profoundly influence the direction of democratic transition. Focusing here on disruptive opposition, I suggest disruptive performance as a concept that allows us to study communicative conflicts in their manifest form and thereby to query their functions of exposure and truth-telling and consider their implications for the nation's future. Approaching democratisation conflicts through the lens of performance thereby enables a deeper understanding of the political functions of embodied form in the fragile context of democratic transition and beyond, and of what disruptive actors' representations of reality might accomplish in the political space (Fuentes, n.d., pp. 2–3; Sartwell, 2010, pp. 1–2). I address the question, *how and to what ends does the form of disruptive performance enact democratisation conflicts that contest the path of democratic transition? This question helps us understand the process of political meaning-making that disruptive actors undertake and its implications for democratic transition.*

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3 I engage with this question through the case study of the disrupted South African State of
4 the Nation Address (SONA) in 2015. In the lead-up to this annual ritual, the radical
5 opposition party The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) threatened to disrupt the president's
6 speech for the first time since the advent of democracy in 1994, and the event descended
7 into chaos and violence. The issue of contention in this conflict is form – the formal qualities
8 of performance and their role in the democratic process. To the EFF, the ceremonial
9 grandeur of the SONA was 'mere performance' through-behind which the government
10 sought to hide a vacuum of democratic substance. But the EFF's claim was not only *about*
11 performance; it was also made *through* performance, namely with the formal qualities of
12 disruption signifying its inherent functions of truth-seeking and exposition of deceit. The
13 ANC on their part attributed a different meaning to the EFF's disruptive form: abuse of
14 procedure and destabilisation – a danger to a fragile democracy.

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26 The SONA case exemplifies a type of disruption that initiates a democratisation conflict. It
27 thereby highlights the importance of form in processes of democratisation where the formal
28 aspects of performance increasingly tap into the international media environment to effect
29 institutional change. Breaches of norms as symbolic performances have indeed brought
30 several unlikely contenders to power only recently. In Ukraine the comedian Volodymyr
31 Zelenskⁱy won the presidency with a landslide victory in April 2019 by replacing conventional
32 rallies and media interviews with stand-up comedy shows performed through his on-screen
33 persona. Jair Bolsonaro came to power in Brazil in October 2018 with extreme breaches of
34 political correctness in his disruptive use of language against most minority groups. The
35 relevance of the SONA disruption also extends beyond transitional democracies as we find
36 uncomfortable parallels to current developments in established liberal democracies – one
37 needs only think of US President Trump's habitual symbolic breaches of norms. The
38 approach to disruptive performance used in this article could be usefully employed to
39 explore the ways in which the relationship between experience and politics is being
40 redefined in the current politically volatile moment.

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54 I approach the contestation over the role of performative form in democratic meaning-
55 making from a perspective of political performance that is concerned with the political
56 functions and implications of the formal. I draw on literature from performance studies and
57 political performance and integrate this with scholarship on democratisation. I develop this
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3 approach in the first section and hone in on disruptive performance as a specific type of
4 political performance. I query its form and symbolic function through its engagement with
5 the past, present and future and then set this discussion in the context of democratisation
6 conflicts and of the specific case study of the South African SONA in 2015. In the Method
7 section I detail my mixed-methods approach to the analysis of disruptive performance in the
8 SONA case study. The third section sees the analytical framework applied to the SONA case.
9 I conclude with a discussion of the role of performance and ~~the-its~~ formal properties, of
10 appearance, arrangement or shape, in democratic transitions and the implications of
11 disruption for South Africa's democratisation process.
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21 **THE FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF DISRUPTIVE PERFORMANCE**

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23 Disruptive performance is a particular form of political performance that combines strategic
24 narratives of a mythical past with a breach of the formal qualities of establishment politics
25 to challenge dominant representations and effect change. In the context of transitional
26 democracy, disruptive performances may initiate democratisation conflicts. The theoretical
27 lens of performance enables an engagement with the meaning-making inherent in
28 disruptive action and a distinction between performative forms that function to support the
29 dominant from those that challenge it. But I also engage with the formal in a second sense.
30 When we approach democratisation conflicts as communicative events in which opposing
31 parties battle over the definition of reality (Voltmer, 2019), form can be seen to be the issue
32 of contention in and of itself, not only the means of playing out the conflict.
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43 **POLITICAL PERFORMANCE AND THE FORMS OF DISRUPTION**

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45 The suspicion of aesthetics in traditional political communication research views an
46 emphasis on form over content, or style over substance, as somehow diminishing to politics,
47 and even deceitful in its aims. And the functions of form *are* inherently political (Mouffe,
48 2013, p. 91). But form is not in and of itself the culprit. It is a fundamental part of the
49 political meaning that we as scholars pursue, and it is handily material and observable.
50 Sartwell argues, "[t]he political 'content' of an ideology can be understood in large measure
51 actually to be – to be identical with – its formal and stylistic aspects" (2010, p. 1). Form,
52 then, gives shape to experienced and represented reality through arrangement, appearance
53 or mimesis (see e.g. Dewey, 2005; Sartwell, 2010, pp. 83–98). And such symbolic political
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3 communication is becoming more important as the media environment is changing. Its
4 strategic use proliferates ~~in strategic uses by amongst~~ an increasingly broader range of
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7 actors on the global stage – in institutional rituals, spectacular protests that captivate
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9 international audiences, and online memes shared ~~amongstby~~ members of the public
10 (Werbner et al., 2014).
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13 This process of orienting political communication to an audience in attention-grabbing ways
14 is a social and a performative process that we can usefully approach through the lens of
15 social performance. This is:
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19 ...the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the
20 meaning of their social situation. This meaning may or may not be one to which they
21 themselves subjectively adhere; it is the meaning that they, as social actors,
22 consciously or unconsciously wish to have others believe. (Alexander, 2006, p. 32)
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28 Performance is a multi-dimensional means of communication that articulates meaning to an
29 audience through a variety of embodied forms, including gesture, voice and props, the use
30 of physical space and the arrangement of social relations between complicit or even
31 involuntary actors. Performers' access to these resources is determined by social power
32 (ibid. 2006, pp. 32–7). In transitional democracies, this may take the form of authoritarian
33 means of restricting access to, for instance, the media. While performers are constrained by
34 present conditions, they draw on a repertoire of culturally shared background
35 representations (ibid.) that serve to anchor their performance in the past and create
36 familiarity for the audience.
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45 However, in the process of re-presenting these myths and placing them in a new context,
46 political actors inevitably alter their meaning. They rewrite the past. For at the core of
47 political performance is the function of giving form – and thereby material presence – to
48 that which is absent and in that process constituting it. This is a function of Austin's (1975)
49 notion of performativity, which denotes the ability of a speech act to realise its semantic
50 contents, to not only describe the world but to intervene in it (see also e.g. Butler, 1997;
51 Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Loxley, 2007; Wodak, 2015). In other words, performers use the
52 past to orient themselves towards the future, and this is what makes their narrative
53 strategic and political (Goffman, 1959; Mouffe, 2013; Price, 2015, p. 46). As an analytical
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3 tool, the concept of performance allows us to engage with the functions and effects of
4 manifest political expression. These elements of social performance – means of symbolic
5 production, background representations, social power and performativity – are analytical
6 tools that I adopt as part of my method below. They also conceptually connect the formal to
7 its democratic and socio-political context in relation to past, present and future.
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13 Disruptive political performance is a particular type of social performance that is enacted in
14 institutional contexts. It can be defined “literally as a disruption of parliamentary business
15 and procedure, and figuratively as a disruption of the norms embedded within the ritual of
16 parliamentary debate” (Spary, 2010, p. 338). Disruptive performances can take different
17 forms and perform a number of functions ([Sorensen, 2020](#)) (~~Sorensen, 2018~~). First, they
18 may take the form of breaches of conventions and norms of formal political language. This
19 could occur both through style – such as the use of slang or swearing – and content – such
20 as offensive and disrespectful language. Second, they can breach conventions of appearance
21 typically associated with formal institutional environments. Finally, disrupters may breach
22 the conventions of accepted political behaviour by not adhering to, or outright obstructing,
23 established patterns of institutional performance, such as standard procedures, norms and
24 rituals.
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36 These disruptive forms, while oppositional and unorthodox by nature, resort to established
37 structures of meaning-making such as references to the past. As Webner *et al.* argue in the
38 context of the Arab Spring protests, “the building materials for an aesthetics of protest and
39 revolt are mined from social, political and national histories, and assembled to subvert the
40 aesthetically embodied, materially constructed edifices of tyrannical, authoritarian or
41 neoliberal regimes” (2014, 1). In their engagement with the past, disruptions reinvent it, as
42 any performance does, to develop their historical legitimacy (Price, 2015, p. 42). However,
43 disruptive forms distinguish themselves from other forms of political performance in their
44 explicit claim to challenge present instances of social power. In this sense disruptive
45 performance operates in a very particular relationship with its context of past narratives,
46 present forms of social power and reimaginings of the future.
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57 **DEMOCRATISATION CONFLICTS AND THE FUNCTIONS OF DISRUPTIVE PERFORMANCE**

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3 The process of democratisation rarely moves in a linear direction towards an inevitable end
4 goal of liberal democracy (Carothers, 2002). It faces competing narratives that manifest
5 different interpretations of what democracy means (Voltmer, 2011; Whitehead, 2002). In
6 these struggles, pro- and anti-democracy forces, but also factions within each of these,
7 dispute the nature of citizenship and power in the democratic transition process. Voltmer
8 (2019) conceptualises such democratisation conflicts as “communicative contestations” in
9 which the opposing sides battle over interpretations and representations of the past,
10 explanations and evaluations of the post-transitional present, and the visions of the future
11 that their given performances allow. While some such struggles occur within the confines of
12 institutions and others outside them, non-dominant performances at times breach
13 institutional boundaries and force their way in through a violation of norms and procedures.
14 In the context of transitional democracy, such disruptive performances are manifest forms
15 of a type of democratisation conflict.

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18 As the disruptive forms described above interact with their particular context of past,
19 present and potential futures, they perform a number of symbolic functions: delegitimising
20 the disrupted regime, exposing the truth behind the regime’s deceptive or suppressive
21 practices, claiming to represent citizens without a voice, and attracting media attention.
22 ~~One such function of a successful disruptive performance is~~ The first of these – the
23 delegitimation of the social powers that restrict and condition the disruptive performances
24 – it, which in turn serves to legitimises the disruptive action. Disruption can be both a
25 necessary and a legitimate act in conditions where the establishment’s exercise of social
26 power is perceived or portrayed as restrictive. It is therefore a key concern for disrupters to
27 represent the establishment as such in their strategic narrative of legitimacy (Miskimmon et
28 al., 2014; Price, 2015, chap. 3) – whether this strategy aims to expose wrongdoing by the
29 establishment or to grab power. Irrespective of its content or ideological persuasion, the
30 form of disruption designates the breached norms and procedures to be illegitimate and
31 only subject to revision through violation. Disruptive performances thereby adopt a
32 second ~~also~~ function of as claims to truth-telling through exposure of the establishment’s
33 practices of deceit. In this sense, disruption makes the functions of form visible: it is
34 expository in its challenge to dominant forms and their legitimacy and call for increased

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3 responsiveness and deeper forms of participation in the way in which democracy is
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5 imagined and implemented.
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8 Related to this is the third function of disruption in democratisation conflicts – the claim to
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10 represent silenced or unheard masses or minorities that have not been able to appropriate
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12 substantive forms of citizenship in the transition process ([Voltmer and Sorensen, 2019](#);
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14 [Werbner et al., 2014](#))(~~Voltmer and Sorensen, 2016; Werbner et al., 2014~~). This is especially
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16 the case where democratic transition has been concerned with institutionalising formal
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18 democratic processes but lacks the more substantive elements of democracy and becomes
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20 subject to abuse by power holders (see e.g. Carothers, 2002; Diamond, 2002; Levitsky and
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22 Way, 2010). Serving this function through an innovative use of media involves a symbolic
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24 identification between disrupting actors and ordinary people who do not feel adequately
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26 represented by the institutional establishment. In this sense, disrupters of institutional
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28 contexts practice the politics of mimesis (Sartwell, 2010, pp. 83–98) to particular
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30 constituencies. But they may also performatively bring into being such underrepresented
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32 people (see e.g. Butler, 1997; Laclau, 2005; Saward, 2010; Warner, 2002).

33 ~~But~~ Disruptive performances simultaneously address a second audience to that of left-
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35 behind citizens. In its fourth function, the very forms of disruption create a spectacle that
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37 also attracts (often international) media attention (Werbner et al., 2014) and thereby puts
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39 additional pressure on power holders. The outcome of these functions may be a
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41 reinforcement of the institutional boundaries by the establishment to prevent
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43 reoccurrences, or it may be a change to, or breaking down of, the still-fragile norms and
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45 procedures that have just begun to take root, thus giving way to a new order.

46 DISRUPTIVE PERFORMANCE IN THE SONA CONFLICT

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48 The 2015 SONA is an example of such contestation through, and about, form that resulted
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50 in a democratisation conflict. It took place in a South Africa plagued by protests over public
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52 service delivery, a lack of responsiveness from a distant ANC government and (since proven)
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54 accusations of corruption against then-President Jacob Zuma. The widening gap in wealth
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56 between public representatives and the people had become unbridgeable and was
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58 contributing to a differentiation in not only income but also democratic provision
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60 (Wasserman et al., 2018). To this day, the ANC survives on its legacy of liberating South

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3 Africa from the yoke of Apartheid in 1994, coupled with the subsequent importance of
4 aesthetic resemblance between the new black representatives and their people. In advance
5 of the SONA, however, the ANC also prevented the opposition from holding the government
6 to account through established process. President Zuma continually failed to show up for
7 parliamentary question sessions (Hunter, 2015), and ANC supporters were encouraged to
8 drown out the voices of opposition members who attempted to speak in parliament
9 (Johnson, 2013). The resultant dominance of the ANC had prevented the development of a
10 more competitive system (Voltmer, 2011). The transition process had stalled in a long-term
11 state of "liminality" between mass violence, authoritarianism and democracy (Beresford et
12 al., 2018).

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22 In this context, The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) emerged as a new radical-left party in
23 2013. They quickly became known for what some media commentators termed
24 "parliamentary hooliganism" (Calland, 2015). Promising to fight for a "second liberation",
25 their aim remains to provide not only political but also economic equality for black South
26 Africans, and disruption has become their means of doing so.

27 28 29 30 31 32 33 **METHOD**

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35 I adopted a case study approach to explore the forms and functions of disruptive
36 performance through a multidimensional, thick description of the EFF's disruption of the
37 SONA and the context of the event. The objects of study were the forms of disruptive
38 performance by the EFF in live, virtual and other mediated forms. I used a mixed-methods
39 concurrent nested design (Creswell et al., 2003, pp. 229–30) where I collected qualitative
40 and quantitative data simultaneously, using quantitative methods to reconstruct the event
41 and zoom in on smaller samples for qualitative analysis, which was given priority in this
42 article.

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51 The data used for this paper are part of a larger study that relies on a broad range of
52 communicative outputs relating to the EFF's disruption of the South African parliament on
53 12 February 2015. Together the data cover the EFF's own justification for and legitimisation
54 of the disruption in their own communications in press releases, video footage and official
55 transcripts of their live performance in parliament, tweets and other modes of
56 communication; the media coverage of the disruption as indicated by articles in four
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3 representative newspapers; and the immediate public reaction to the disruption (one
4 possible among many varied receptions) as gauged through Twitter discussions on prevalent
5 hashtags related to the event. The direct communications by the EFF dictated the sampling
6 period of all data.
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11 Twitter data was sampled through iterative identification of hashtags and keywords related
12 to the event and scraped and visualised with the open-source tool Mecodify (see Al-Saqaf,
13 2016). In a descriptive analysis of all data sources I reconstructed the event and identified
14 key acts of signification and contestation over meaning between the EFF and their
15 opponents. This resulted in diagrammatical reconstructions of key moments of the EFF's
16 performance, public reactions on Twitter, and the media coverage of the event. Together
17 the datasets of direct populist communications and their mediated manifestations set the
18 immediate context of the disruption and formed a basis for qualitative analysis.
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27 An interpretive analysis of the EFF's performance in its various modes of communication
28 formed the core of the method. I inductively coded all data relying on a grounded theory-
29 based analytical approach (Charmaz, 2006) that was informed by social performance theory
30 (Alexander, 2006). In the analysis of the EFF's performance, I paid particular attention to
31 their use of socially shared background representations to evoke the past; references to
32 social power and challenges to the present power structures through disruption; and
33 performativity as a means of reimagining and constituting the future. At the core of all these
34 is a process of meaning-making through means of symbolic production, whether through
35 dress, gesture, speech or other symbolic means of representation.
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44 **THE STRUGGLE OVER AESTHETIC REPRESENTATION IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN**

45 **STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS 2015: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE**

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49 On 12 February 2015, a red carpet led up to the steps of parliament; marching bands and
50 celebrity guests in designer dresses projected all the pomp and ceremony that bestows a
51 celebration of democracy rooted in the overcoming of the oppression of Apartheid. The EFF,
52 however, marched into parliament wearing the striking red uniforms of domestic workers,
53 clearly identifying with – and performatively constituting – the people as suppressed black
54 workers. They continually interrupted Zuma's speech on "points of order", asking him to
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3 “pay back the money” on live television. Their disruption provoked the government to
4 breach the constitution and escalate the conflict into violence when they brought police into
5 the parliamentary chamber to evict EFF MPs by force (Live1). Figure 1 shows a
6 reconstruction of the event and how the Twitter public reacted to significant moments of
7 the EFF’s disruptive performance – as opposed to Zuma’s speech – in what was termed
8 South Africa’s first social media event (du Plessis, 2015).
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20 The EFF’s act of disruption can be seen as an attempt to undermine the authenticity of the
21 SONA ritual by exposing the reality that it constructed as just that: constructed. The
22 performative struggle between elite ritual and disruption was one in which the EFF sought
23 to deploy the weapon of aesthetics to expose the lack of substance under the veneer of the
24 government’s media event. In doing so, the EFF engaged with the government in a conflict
25 over the *past*. Throughout South Africa’s brief democratic history, the liberation narrative of
26 emancipation from Apartheid has been the key to power, and with their disruptive
27 performance, the EFF claimed ownership. With this act they sought to dismantle the
28 foundations of the ANC’s *present* hold on social power. Yet the EFF’s representation of
29 political reality was not only oppositional. It also reimagined, directed and limited the *future*
30 direction for the country’s transition. I address these past, present and future dimensions of
31 the EFF’s disruptive performance in turn.
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43 **CONTESTED OWNERSHIP OF THE PAST: THE LIBERATION NARRATIVE**

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45 With their disruption of the SONA, the Economic Freedom Fighters engaged in symbolic
46 action that sought to establish them as the proper owners of the liberation narrative. They
47 did so through three means that together performed the function of delegitimising the ANC
48 regime. First, they undermined the ANC’s association with liberation and their claims to
49 realise the Freedom Charter, which states the original Apartheid freedom fighters’ core
50 principles. Second, they represented Zuma’s government as an authoritarian continuation of
51 the Apartheid regime from which the nation needed liberation. Third, they portrayed
52 themselves as reincarnated freedom fighters who would fulfil this mission.
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3 In their portrayal of the elite, the EFF berated the “hollow recitals of the freedom charter by
4 the ANC” as “pure farce” (Press1). Their proof of the elite’s inauthenticity lay in the
5 inconsistency between the strong South African background representation of the Freedom
6 Charter and the ANC’s actual world views. In fact, the EFF claimed, the ANC were
7 “implementing a neo-liberal, right wing and capitalist programme... and any talk of the
8 Freedom Charter is meant to *mislead* the people of South Africa” (ibid.; my emphasis). The
9 EFF presented this behaviour in moral terms. The ANC’s motives were not genuine, for “we
10 know... that the ANC will never nationalise Mines [as stated in the Freedom Charter]
11 because majority [sic] of its senior leaders are privately benefitting from privately owned
12 Mines” (ibid.). With such disingenuous motives, the ANC’s performance was a fabrication
13 aimed at deceiving the people. Worse, in South African politics, the false, empty evocation
14 of the Freedom Charter equates to democratic blasphemy, a betrayal of the ideas
15 underlying the struggle for independence, which in turn is a betrayal of the people and their
16 freedom.

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30 The EFF’s accusation of the ANC’s exploitation of history had an essentialist moral basis. In
31 the EFF’s claim, the elite are democratic pretenders who were using spectacle and ritualised
32 form to disguise the hollowness of their performance: “Parliament which is supposed to
33 fight corruption by holding the executive accountable has been turned into a fashion
34 parade” (Tweet1). The EFF here constructed a binary between substantive democratic
35 practice and the ANC’s concern with aesthetics. In this claim, political norms and rituals
36 were the elite’s ultimate means of constructing and exercising power and maintaining their
37 hold over the people through practices of false consciousness: the SONA was a performance
38 of deception designed to satisfy the media and dupe the people into compliance. The EFF
39 therefore portrayed institutional rituals such as the SONA as masquerades that undermine
40 the democratic function of parliament, carefully staged events designed to control the
41 elite’s front and hide the unpalatable reality by offering naturalised spectacle.

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52 Yet, according to the EFF, worse than the elite’s duplicity was their outright authoritarian
53 practices, which the EFF portrayed as a direct continuation of the Apartheid regime and a
54 danger to the practice of democratic opposition. To make this claim, the EFF evoked past
55 fears of the colonial era, for instance tweeting in advance of the SONA, “Reliable Sources tell
56 us tht [sic] whoever raises a point of order during #SONA will be taken into a parly secret
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dungeon tunnel by riot police” (Tweet2). And as he likened the speaker’s attempt at quelling his interruption of the president’s speech to Apartheid-like oppression, an EFF MP protested, “Don’t be intimidating. We finished that” (Live1). Such accusations of intimidation and dark portrayals of political conditions were not entirely without foundation. After the SONA event, the EFF were able to provide visual evidence of at least the first part of their claim that “the police were assaulting women, breaking their jaws and fracturing their chins, pulling us by our private parts” (Press2).

The EFF portrayed their own politics, in contrast to the elite’s, as a direct continuation of the liberation struggle against Apartheid: their programme “is fundamentally about the attainment of all Freedom Charter objectives” (ibid.). Their ideals were therefore a matter of realising the goals of the original freedom fighters, a quest that is morally incontestable in South Africa’s political culture. On the anniversary of Mandela’s release from prison, they used his historical legacy to establish this equivalence between democracy and an essentialist, moral value system. The latter even took on the characteristics of a religious vow: “We vowed that we will defend his legacy, the legacy of the basic democratic freedoms” (Press3).

The term ‘freedom fighter’, which was previously reserved for those who fought against Apartheid, has been so intrinsic to the construction of the EFF’s identity that it became part of their party name. By building their identity on the background representation of the liberation struggle, the EFF portrayed their political programme as a quest for freedom from oppression. They also signified this continued oppression by wearing miners’ helmets in parliament to recall the 2012 Marikana miners’ strike where the government ordered police to shoot, resulting in the deaths of 34 unarmed miners. They thereby presented themselves as playing an essential role in the transition process and implied that the freedom struggle was not yet over. Their uniform – red domestic workers’ overalls that strikingly contrasted with the formal apparel of the elite – symbolically positioned them as siding with the people in this democratic struggle against an oppressive elite and established a strong sense of identification with the majority of black workers. They called for a ‘second liberation’ from the economic inequality that the new black elite had engendered through corruption and mismanagement (Press2) (South Africa has the most unequal income distribution in the world (World Bank, 2017)).

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3 The EFF's repeated association between the ANC elite and the Apartheid oppressors of the
4 past conflated the new black with the former white elites and pitched them in opposition to
5 an equally homogenous black population who were being deprived of their sovereign rights
6 and of proper representation. While the ANC elite are black, their aesthetic resemblance to
7 the people had, according to the EFF, been undone through their behaviour in office: their
8 "whiteness" had been coming out (Tweet3); and "whiteness" here denotes not skin colour
9 but immoral behaviour. The moral dimension~~This was what~~ allowed the EFF to combine
10 white and black elites into one totality. The EFF thereby undermined the elite's aesthetic
11 resemblance to the people by replacing it with the qualities of moral hollowness and
12 authoritarian behaviour. This reattribution of meaning from appearance to behaviour
13 enabled the EFF to appropriate the form of mimesis – their resemblance to the people –
14 from the governing ANC as well as the liberation narrative that legitimised it. The EFF then
15 linked their function as representatives to the act of liberation: "Whatever it takes, and
16 however long it takes, by whatever revolutionary means, we will take over this country with
17 the aim of total liberation and emancipation... on behalf of the people" (Press2).

31 **STRUGGLE OVER THE PRESENT: DISRUPTING SOCIAL POWER**

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33 The moments in a ritual when its orchestration works so visibly, the audience know exactly
34 what to expect, and all assembled actors perform in perfect unison, are the ideal points of
35 disrupting it. When the highly choreographed and very formal procession of the president
36 entered the parliamentary chamber (Live1), all participants – except the EFF –
37 unquestioningly performed their parts and rose for the president. But the EFF remained
38 sitting. This symbolic act signified a refusal to conform to norms based on the premise of
39 pure form, especially where, in the case of Zuma, such formality served to gloss over deeper
40 democratic and constitutional issues like corruption. The EFF's disruption made visible the
41 function of form that the government assigned to the SONA: the South African elite lent
42 greater importance to their show of ritual and ceremony than they did to the adherence of
43 rules and laws in the conduct of politics. With their disruption, the EFF thereby performed
44 the function of exposing the truth behind the ANC regime's deceptive and suppressive
45 practices.

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As the chair of the proceedings of the SONA, the speaker's focus was on the purpose of the
occasion and its form being rigidly adhered to. These were her justifications for her

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3 dismissal of the EFF MPs' many attempts to redirect the occasion to a questioning of Zuma's
4 legitimacy: "It is important that this sitting focuses on the business of the day, and that is for
5 the president to deliver the state of the nation address" (Live1). This insistence on form to
6 the detriment of democratic substance was to the EFF an abuse of social power and an
7 excuse to keep tight control of the government's managed front. Their symbolic action of
8 refusing to conform to the formalities of the ritual pointed to its meaninglessness and
9 discrepancy with political reality. The SONA did not represent the *real* state of the nation:
10 "...many live in homes they do not own, they drive cars they do not own, and use household
11 furniture they do not own... This is the state of the nation" (Press2).

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14 In a refusal to accept the ritual as a legitimate exercise of social power, EFF leader Julius
15 Malema instead championed the rules of parliament, which he used to justify the EFF's
16 disruption. He presented these rules as the manifestation of democratic principles and used
17 them to legitimise the EFF's continued interruptions of Zuma's speech: "it is within my right
18 to speak as a member of this House, and remind you that it is incorrect of you to want to
19 suggest that when the President speaks, you suspend the Rules" (Live1). He directly
20 challenged and reattributed meaning to the purpose that the speaker lent to the occasion:
21 "...we *are* doing the business of today" (Live1; italics indicate verbal emphasis). The EFF's
22 "business of today" was not the aesthetics of ritual but the pressing question of Zuma
23 evading corruption charges and of fulfilling their duty as opposition of holding him to
24 account. In Alexander's terms, by pointing to the SONA ceremony's nature as a performance
25 of social power through a refusal to act out the script assigned to them, the EFF's symbolic
26 action undermined the elite's practice of social power. They turned it into a source of
27 legitimacy for disruptive action. In doing so, the EFF revealed the elite's performance of the
28 SONA ritual as inauthentic because it was inconsistent with the underlying reality and values
29 of the elite.

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32 A discursive struggle over the meaning of the SONA ritual and over the government's
33 exercise of social power more broadly was taking place. It was norms against rules. When
34 the struggle heated up after a series of challenges by the EFF and dismissals by the speaker,
35 the speaker accused the EFF of "abusing" the rules:

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3 Speaker: I am not allowing you honourable members because I have
4 explained to you that you are actually abusing...
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7 Malema: - Which Rule are you using, my honourable Speaker? Which Rule
8 are you using to deny members to raise a point of order? They are protected
9 by the Rules. You cannot be emotional about it! (Live1)
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14 In denoting the EFF's rule-bound behaviour an abuse of the rules, the speaker suggested an
15 important analytical point: where rules and institutional frameworks usually restrict and
16 confine a performance, the EFF turned them into a resource; they became part of their
17 script. In response to the speaker, Malema challenged the foundation of her social power by
18 taking ownership of democratic rules and portraying himself in opposition to the speaker.
19 He constructed a binary between rules and the speaker's "emotional" behaviour and
20 created a chain of equivalence between the elite, irrationality and ritual. In this claim, the
21 rules championed by the EFF were logical, rational and the means of conducting democratic
22 business and were being undermined by the ritual of the SONA.
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31 When the speaker expelled all EFF MPs from the House, the EFF shifted their legal argument
32 onto moral ground by referring to the speaker's lack of moral superiority authority:
33 "Honourable Speaker, you are not a bishop! I am appealing to your conscience!" (Live1). Not
34 only did the speaker have no legal foundation for her use of social power, neither did she
35 have a moral one. Taking the chain of equivalence one step further, an EFF MP added,
36 "Hopefully you still have a revolutionary conscience! [Interjections]" (Live1). He thereby
37 associated revolutionary politics and the background representation of the freedom
38 struggle with moral behaviour. The irrationality and illegality of ritual became equated with
39 immorality and deprivation of freedom. The binary that the EFF constructed through this
40 struggle was no longer simply norms versus rules; it became norms, immorality and
41 authoritarianism versus rules, morality and liberation.
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52 **THE BATTLE FOR THE FUTURE: REINVENTING POLITICAL REPRESENTATION**

53 While the establishment and the EFF engaged in an aesthetic struggle over past and
54 present, the EFF's claim to ownership of history and attempt to undermine the elite's uses
55 of social power were means to legitimise their proposed course for the future. They
56 performed a mode of representation that was a particular interpretation of mimesis as a
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3 solution to what they evoked as a crisis of representation in a stalled democratic transition
4 process. They achieved this performance through two apparently contradictory forms of
5 self-representation: identification with the people combined with extra-ordinariness. The
6 former allowed them to perform the function of giving voice to a suppressed people, the
7 latter of attracting media attention.
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13 We have already seen that the EFF signalled closeness to the people through resemblance.
14 For instance, they quite literally donned the uniform of the workers they claimed to serve as
15 representatives. While their own dress was as attention-grabbing as the designer clothes
16 that the elite showed off to the flashing cameras outside parliament, theirs was a
17 performance that was consistent with their underlying ideology. Unlike the elite's expensive
18 costumes, it served not to detract attention from pertinent political issues but to *draw*
19 attention to such issues. It was the uniform of the suppressed people of South Africa, who
20 were symbolically given voice through the EFF. Such visual means of identification were
21 enhanced by the EFF's use of the language of ordinary people. EFF leader Malema, for
22 instance, avidly used emoticons, popular memes and Twitter-specific vocabulary, such as
23 "Throwback Thursday"ⁱ (Tweet4), as well as general slang not normally associated with
24 formal political communication: "Take a chill pill. Don't be tjatjarag"ⁱⁱ (Tweet5).
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36 The EFF's reliance on aesthetic forms of embodiment of 'the people' has two implications.
37 First, it conflates the opinions of the electorate with their identity. Diverse opinions become
38 reduced to a homogenous representation, which enabled the EFF to assume the authority
39 to voice it through their resemblance to the people. Dress, gesture, slang and memes: such
40 forms and modes of physical and virtual embodiment functioned as a means of performing
41 the EFF's ideology by claiming to be one of the people; as a tool to create visibility by
42 standing out from the formality of elite norms; as an expression of intimacy in the
43 performance of authenticity; as a means of lending a voice to a silent majority. Second, the
44 EFF's embodiment of the people was a particular interpretation of mimesis and the function
45 of form, which otherwise sees any form of intermediation as "impermissible distortion"
46 (Ankersmit, 2002, p. 113; see also Sartwell, 2010, pp. 83-98). For in their role as
47 intermediaries, the EFF were not substitutes for the people. Rather, through embodiment,
48 they represented themselves as conduits of a closer and more direct relationship between
49 the people and power.
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3 But if the EFF are just like ordinary people, what legitimised their privileged position as
4 representatives? They justified this position by their “radical and militant” slogan (for
5 example, Press4), which they manifested through the forms of disruption. In this one
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7 respect they represented themselves as different from the people. Yet at the same time,
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9 their self-representation as extraordinary, in contrast to the ordinary people, also
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11 constituted the people in negative terms: if the EFF were freedom fighters, the people were
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13 deceived and oppressed by elite representatives. The EFF claimed to be ready to make
14
15 martyrial self-sacrifices to liberate the people: “There is only 25 of us and we fight in a
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17 manner that will make you think there is 200 of us” (Tweet6). Such claims in turn lent a
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19 moral bent to their role as representatives.
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22 The apparent contradiction between these self-representations was resolved through the
23
24 background representation of the liberation struggle and the EFF’s equation of democracy
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26 with freedom from (political and economic) oppression. In the transitional state of South
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28 Africa, democracy was expensively attained in living memory by the people themselves
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30 through bottom-up protest. The EFF’s self-representation as freedom fighters, who in the
31
32 liberation struggle were ‘of the people’, seamlessly combined their extraordinary and
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34 radical image with resemblance to the ordinary black majority. As liberators and champions
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36 of democracy, the EFF then held the institution of the democratic parliament as sacrosanct.
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38 The constitution, which is based directly on the Freedom Charter, is closely associated with
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40 liberation from the Apartheid regime. In the EFF’s claim, the constitution itself and its
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42 institution were to be cherished and protected at all costs from those who threatened it.
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44 They performed this claim by their insistence on obeisance of parliamentary rules in their
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46 disruption of the SONA ritual. They thus imbued the democratic institutions themselves with
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48 the symbolic meaning of ‘government by the people’ as they were created by the people
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50 through bottom-up protest in the course of democratic transition. They became emblems of
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52 victory for the silent majority.

53 CONCLUSION

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55 With their disruption of the SONA, the EFF initiated a democratisation conflict over what
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57 they portrayed as the government’s abuse of formal ceremonial powers to disguise their
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59 self-serving and authoritarian practices. Yet the EFF’s own performance demonstrated that
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form can be used in sophisticated ways and performs elaborate functions that have implications for the democratic process. In contexts of democratic transition, but also beyond, these functions include the delegitimisation of the disrupted regime, exposure of the truth behind the establishment's deceptive or suppressive practices, the representation of citizens without a voice, and attracting media attention.

~~The formal nature of disruption, through the its~~ breach of institutional forms of political speech, appearance and behaviour, the formal qualities of disruptive performance functions as a symbolic delegitimisation of the very norms and procedures ~~they~~ breaches.

Authorities' attempts at restricting conditions for disruption thereby only strengthen its function of delegitimisation. When the EFF's disruption left the ANC with violent expulsion as their only resort, the EFF's strategic narrative that connected the ANC to Apartheid was given added legitimacy. This self-fulfilling force-function of disruption is apparent in protest performances worldwide. The use of Guy Fawkes masks by protest movements such as Occupy to symbolise popular rebellion against illegitimate authority is only strengthened if a by some government reacts by s' banning of the masks; embodied occupations of squares gain legitimacy from authorities' attempts to curb them.

Such reactive responses also enable disruption to perform athe second function of exposure and truth-telling, for they aid the strategic narrative of disruption by making explicit and manifest disrupters' link between their representations of a mythical past and suppressive conditions of social power in the present. In the South African case, the EFF's disruptive ~~political~~ performance ~~conveyed the meaning that represented~~ Zuma's SONA as lacked lacking in democratic substance and covering up a derailed ~~that the~~ transition process ~~had become derailed~~; and their narrative was proven by the ANC's reaction to their disruption.

The EFF's disruption denounced the current state of post-transition as an illiberal democracy that performs the rituals of a procedural democracy without their substance (Giliomee et al. 2001). This expository truth-telling function is essential in a stalled transition process. But we also see it employed by populist actors that seek legitimacy by undermining legitimate forms of institutional power.

In the case of the EFF, The forms of disruption enabled the partyEFF to gain control of communicative processes in volatile conditions, to challenge the legitimacy of existing

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3 power holders and ensure accountability, and to articulate a nuanced normative argument
4 about the nature of democracy and the representative relationship. It gave a jolt to a stalled
5 transition process. Yet it did so by means of ~~the~~ third function of disruption, and this that
6 ~~has more worrying implications for the future of this South Africa's democratisation~~ process.
7 For in their claim to represent a suppressed people, the EFF performatively constituted this
8 people through a particular form of mimesis. This embodiment of the people did not enable
9 the promised deeper level of participation or individual articulations of the plurality of their
10 demands. ~~For Rather,~~ the EFF's interpretation of mimesis constituted the people in an
11 antagonistic and moral essentialist relationship to the elite: the South African people were
12 honest, hard workers, suppressed by a grey-suited, traitorous elite enriching themselves at
13 the people's expense. In constructing this polarity, the EFF's evocation of the people
14 reduced their pluralism conflated the people's opinions with the persons having them.
15 Political opinion was transformed into a matter of singular identity and, moreover, into
16 essentialist morality by uniting against a common enemy. This homogenisation of the
17 people through the EFF's reductive form of mimesis is also a function shared by many
18 disruptive movements in the West. Yet the representative function of disruption need not
19 be reductive. The EFF's deployment contrasts with, for instance, Occupy's "We are the 99%"
20 slogan, which allowed individuals to personalise their frames of action (Bennett and
21 Segerberg, 2013) under the banner of a pluralist form of spectacular disruption. The EFF's
22 use of ~~the forms of~~ disruption to strategically build on the past instead projected a future
23 that did not reflect the original freedom fighters' dream of a Rainbow Nation.

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43 The force of disruptive performance and its ability to redirect democratic pathways is
44 significant. As a process of political meaning-making, it has the potential to either ensure
45 democratic accountability or pave the way to authoritarianism, depending on the ends to
46 which it is employed. Its functions of delegitimising authority through exposure and truth-
47 telling, creating a claim to represent a suppressed people and simultaneously addressing a
48 media thirsty for conflict make it an increasingly prevalent and effective strategy in an age
49 of spectacle in which most people feel distrustful of mainstream politics. As a phenomenon
50 that inspires trust through the creation of conflict, it may undermine or it may rescue the
51 liberal democratic order. Either way, it requires our urgent attention.
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Disruptive forms of speech, appearance and behaviour interact with specific contextual conditions of past, present and future. They thereby function to delegitimise authority through exposure and truth-telling, create a claim to represent a suppressed people and simultaneously address a media thirsty for spectacle. The specific performance of these functions opens up certain options for the future practice of democratic politics, while it closes others. Approaching conflict over power through a performative lens therefore proves a useful theoretical and methodological tool to investigate the democratic implications of communicative contestation.

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36 ⁱ #ThrowbackThursday and the abbreviation #TBT are popular hashtags on social media where users post
37 nostalgic pictures of their past.

38 ⁱⁱ The Urban Dictionary defines 'tjatjarag' as being "over-eager and excitable in an annoying manner" ("Urban
39 Dictionary," n.d.).
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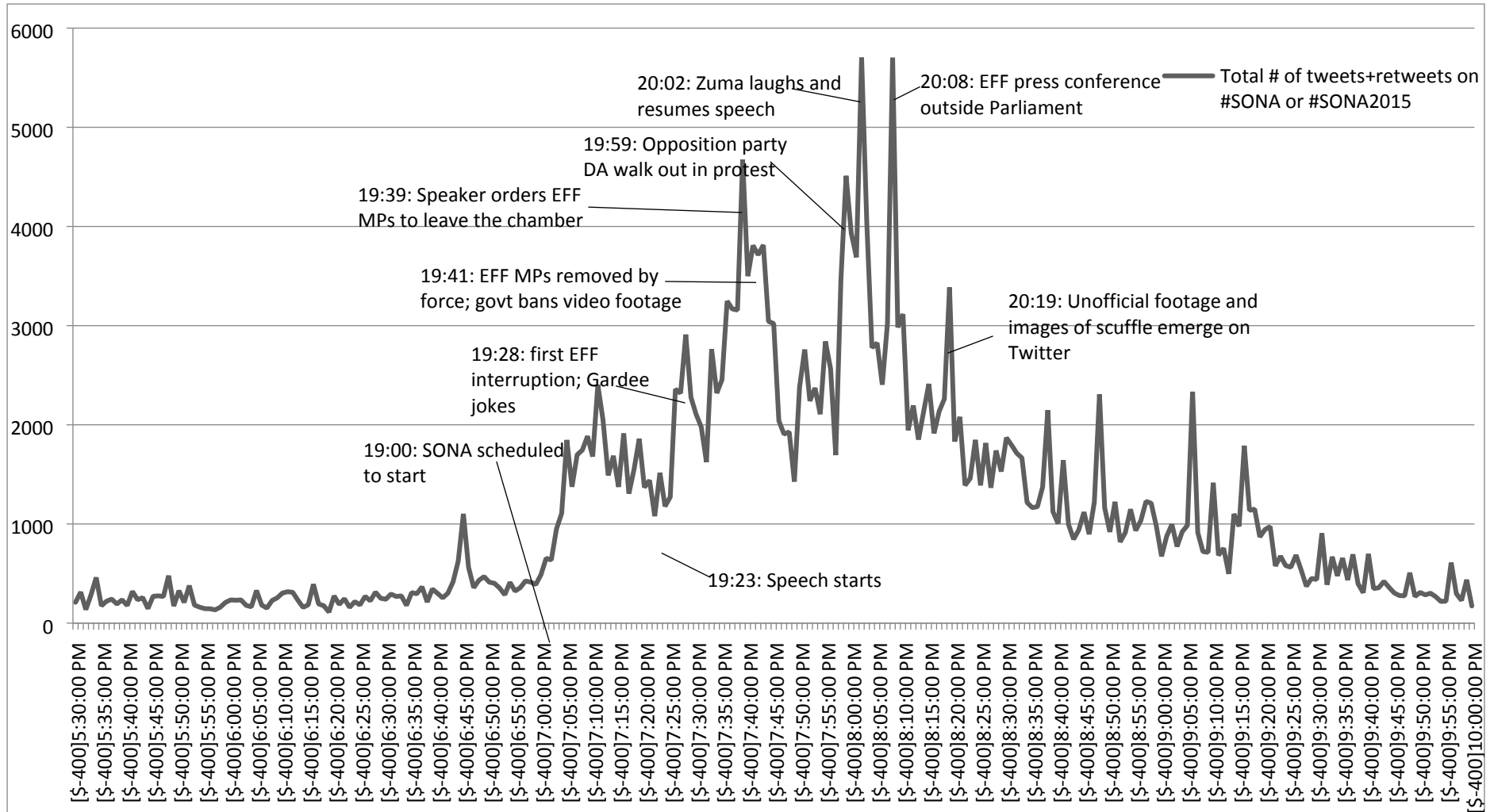


FIGURE 1: Tweets per minute during the SONA, 12 February 2015 (local time).