THE EMPTY SPACE OF FRAGMENTED INTIMACIES ON *KHUMBUL'EKHAYA*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the nature of social media 'talk' generated by reality television (TV) audiences of *Khumbul'ekhaya*, a popular South African 'docu-reality' or 'social reality' series that has aired on SABC 1 since 2006. The article uses waThiong'o's (1981) re-interpretation of the notion of 'empty space' to examine *Khumbul'ekhaya* viewers' feedback on Facebook. ~~In the article I~~ argue that this social media 'talk' reflects the fact that audiences typically treat *Khumbul'ekhaya* as an 'empty space' or a canvas which they variously re-constitute in their own languages.

Keywords: *Khumbul'ekhaya*, audience, social media, reality television, Facebook

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the kind of social media 'talk' generated by selected *Khumbul'ekhaya* audiences on social media. The objective is to examine the relationship of social media 'language habits' to the discourse of reality television

UNISA |
university
of south africa

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Communicatio
Volume 42 | Number 3 | 2016
pp. 00–00

DOI: 10.1080/02500167.2016.1272243
Print ISSN 0250-0167 | Online 1753-5379
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(TV). Aslama and Pantti (2006, 167) have noted that reality TV provides for an untraditional array of ways for constructing selfhood through the kinds of talk that it features. ~~In the article~~ I argue that the advent of social media creates not just so-called 'social television' but, rather, a nuanced shift towards particular kinds of talk generated by audiences that take to social media before, during and after watching TV. The 'voices of people who watch reality programmes' (Hill 2005, i) have been felt to be an often absent element in the critical debates about reality TV. Hill (2005, 2) argues that 'what audiences have to say about their experience of watching reality programmes' is invaluable for understanding 'the transitional terrain of the reality genre, and can enhance critical understanding of contemporary television audiences'.

KHUMBUL'EKHAYA

Khumbul'ekhaya is a popular South African 'docu-reality'¹ TV series produced by Urban Brew Studios that has aired on SABC 1 since 2006. The show has also been described as 'social reality' and 'factual entertainment' (SABC n.d.). Hill (2007, 3) has defined 'factual television' as a container for a variety of genres, sub-genres and hybrid genres where the term 'factual' is shorthand for non-fiction content. Factual TV is concerned 'with knowledge about the real world' (Hill 2007, 3), a view that endorses factual content 'as true and about real issues', and as containing 'representations of reality'. Most audiences tend to evaluate factual programmes by using 'a criterion of truth' whereby factual content is 'perceived as authentic and true to life, and audiences focus on the referential integrity of factual content' (Hill 2007, 3).

Now in its sixteenth season, *Khumbul'ekhaya* is screened every Wednesday between 21:00 and 22:00, hosted by Andile Gaelesiwe. Its popularity is reflected in a market share of up to 40 per cent (Burggraaf 2011, n.p.), about one third of well-established market leading shows such as *Generations* and *Uzalo*. The phrase '*khumbul'ekhaya*' is an Nguni term that loosely translates to 'remember home'. The series won the South African Television Award (SAFTA) for Best Factual Entertainment Programme in 2007, 2008 and 2009.

The purpose of *Khumbul'ekhaya* is to televise family reunions across South Africa, tracking down and bringing together long-lost relatives and estranged family members. The format of the show involves a televised plea, delivered on camera by the seeker or through a letter that Gaelesiwe reads. The plea is for a long lost person to get in touch with the show. Once the person is 'found', a 'reunion' is screened in a later episode. I am deliberately enclosing 'found' and 'reunion' in quotation marks for two reasons. Firstly, the actual finding rarely happens on-screen but, rather, is coordinated by *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s backstage team that includes a network of social workers, the Department of Social Development, audiences and other informants who contact the show with leads and follow-ups. Once the whereabouts of a sought-

for subject are verified, the seeker is then filmed joining the *Khumbul'ekhaya* team in a branded white (or grey) Toyota Fortuner SUV (previously it was a branded black Jeep Cherokee) and driving away to do the 'finding'. In other words, there are two 'findings' in fact – the initial off-screen finding and the latter one that is staged for the camera. Secondly, though it happens in real time, the reunion is constrained by the presence of the show's voyeuristic cameras and the editing that happens afterwards, sometimes to the accompaniment of a soundtrack. Also, it can be seen that people not only react to the camera, but are aware that they st show emotion of one sort or another. As Burggraaf (2011, n.p.) notes, '*Khumbul'ekhaya* delivers high emotion and a tissue boxes full of tears most nights.' Each episode carries a maximum of two reunions, each reunion ending with the standard interview bite or 'confessional' where the subjects appear in medium shot or close up expressing their thoughts about the action that has just ~~gone on~~.

The backdrop to the story arc of *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s script is apartheid ('apartness'), which systematically separated families, friends, and loved ones, particularly through systematic land dispossession, Bantustans, and migrant labour laws. As TVSA (n.d.) notes:

The themes in the show are often directly linked with the country's Apartheid past, the healing of our nation, poverty and constructing sustainable, strong, functional families. These themes include the stories of: migrant labourers who left many years ago for cities and are still yearned for by off-spring; family members who have been out of touch for many years; quests for identity and asking questions as to who one is, in relation to family; and families seeking closure from bereavement and death ... Other themes include political conflict that besieged our societies during the Apartheid years; stories of returning exiles; healing sibling rivalry; people who are lost; families who are torn apart by anger and pain – often including abuse of – children, women and the elderly.

The theme of restoring relationships that were split by apartheid is clear in the demography of *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s reunions, for instance. The majority of the settings of the reunions are townships, slums and rural areas, with characters drawn ~~from~~ mostly from blacks, with some coloured and Indian South Africans. Few, if any, whites have been on *Khumbul'ekhaya*. These demographic trends in *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s audiences point coextensively to the fact that whites benefitted, by default, from apartheid's 'apartness-making'. It is rare, therefore, to expect that whites would appear on *Khumbul'ekhaya*.

The healing-from-apartheid theme is a core element of *Khumbul'ekhaya* to a point where the narrative of the show links even post-apartheid dislocations to the prevailing social dislocation which began with apartheid. In the story arc, apartheid is the unseen villain that broke families apart, and *Khumbul'ekhaya* is the hero/ine, bringing them back together again. Thus, *Khumbul'ekhaya* is premised on a battle between good (*Khumbul'ekhaya*) and evil (apartheid). The televised meeting dramatises the modern vanquishing of the apartness-making, in much the same way the televised Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) 'reconciliations' sought

to use 'truth' to 'reconcile' in a way that symbolically drew a line between the 'old' and 'new' South Africa. *Khumbul'ekhaya*, with its denouement marked by hugs and tears, draws a line between the dislocations of apartheid and the contemporaneous restorative re-locations of the new South Africa.

The fact that *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s backdrop is framed by the dehumanising separations of apartheid lends the show a denouement that specifically mines the humanising tropes of 'healing' and 'restoration'. These are typically central tropes in the 'new' South Africa, and can be traced directly to the work of the TRC. In fact, one of the key reasons for commissioning the initial series was to mark the tenth anniversary of the TRC's work on admission of guilt, forgiveness, and reconciliation (TVSA n.d.). *Khumbul'ekhaya* is framed as the TRC of 'reality television'. One description of the show states that:

Khumbul'ekhaya is a heart-warming television series dubbed as the truth and reconciliation process of the soul. By facilitating reconciliation between estranged family members, *Khumbul'ekhaya* inspires viewers to reconcile and bring healing to their own families and remember the importance of 'home'. (Youth Village 2014)

The arc of separation leads to overprovision of 'healing', 'restoration' and 'closure' on screen. The source of the overprovision is the show itself. It is as if, without *Khumbul'ekhaya*, there would have been no reunion, resolution or closure. The common practice at the end of the drama, for instance, is for the lost-and-found to formally *thank* the show for *reuniting* them. The hugs and tears at the end constitute the show's 'soft-scripted', amplified outcome.

The overprovision of 'healing' and 'restoration' on *Khumbul'ekhaya* has sometimes been carried beyond the screen, to actual symbolic [participating](#) in acts of kindness. For instance, the producers of the show 'participated' in providing a house for some orphans, Ntombikhona Zondi and her three siblings, who had appeared on the show on 21 September 2011. They had written in looking for their father's family. Their father had died in 1999, and their mother in 2003, leaving Ntombikhona as the breadwinner. The Zondi siblings had been moving from one extended family member to another, ever since. In a statement, the SABC1 reported that:

After their story was broadcast on *Khumbul'ekhaya*, we received a very moving response from one of our viewers, Ishwar Ramlutchman, who was greatly touched by their plight and wanted to reach out and extend a helping hand to them. He has in the meantime built a beautiful house for them in Greytown.

As a result, *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s representatives and the Mayor of eThekweni Municipality were present at the ceremony where Mr Ramlutchman unveiled the house for the Zondi siblings. This participation in 'changing lives' is symbolic because *Khumbul'ekhaya*, of course, is unable to provide economically for any of its audiences or for any of the people it reunites. As already noted, a majority of the

settings of the reunions are poor townships and rural areas, and *Khumbul'ekhaya* is unable to 'change lives' materially, beyond screening reunions (Screen Africa 2011).

REALITY TV

There is no agreed, standard definition of reality TV. Some definitions fit better than others, depending on one's needs. Nabi et al. (2003, 304) define reality TV as programmes 'that film real people as they live out events in their lives, contrived or otherwise, as they occur'. The genre is an amalgam arising from earlier forms, for example, the game show, soap opera, documentary, and amateur video programming (Deery 2004, 2). It may combine documentary aesthetics with soap opera plots and gameshow-inspired competitions. Indeed, reality TV is difficult to define partly because of the way it combines 'forms that are themselves already generic hybrids' (Holmes 2004, 215). Five key elements of reality TV are: 'a) people portraying themselves, b) filmed at least in part in their living or working environments rather than on set c) without a script, d) with events placed in a narrative context, e) for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment' (Nabi 2007, 372–373). Huff (2006, x) notes that reality TV hits 'on all the emotions routinely manipulated in the past by scripted entertainment'. Viewers 'expect the same things from reality programs they expected from scripted entertainment. Is it funny? Is it dramatic? Is it good?' (Huff 2006, xi).

Curnutt (2011, 1061) attributes the proliferation of reality TV to 'industrial strategies that seek out specific types of real people in order to cast them on particular types of shows'. The strategies are part of a 'systematic reconfiguration of ordinary people into durable forms of talent' (Curnutt 2011, 1062). Nabi (2007, 373) argues that reality TV programmes 'are marked by ordinary people engaged in unscripted action and interaction'. As Collins (2008, 87) suggests, reality TV constructs a new stratum of celebrity value based on ordinary people performing 'the real', a point that is linked to Turner's (2006) identification of the celebration of 'ordinary people' as constituting a 'demotic turn'. Reality TV, in the demotic sense, has expanded the labour force to include nonunionised, nonpaid or low-paid contestants playing themselves, to a point where the genre might be regarded as altering celebrity production.

Why do people watch reality TV? Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007, 355) argue that the most salient motives for watching reality TV are 'habitual pass time and reality entertainment'. Reiss and Wiltz (2004, 368) have also suggested that people watch reality TV for selfish, individual motives, such as fulfilling one, some or all of the '16 different joys'. Viewers apparently 'embrace television viewing as a convenient, minimal effort means of vicariously experiencing the 16 joys repeatedly' (Reiss and Wiltz 2004, 368). Lundy, Ruth and Park (2008) have appeared to demonstrate that viewers watch reality TV because it is 'simply irresistible' –

because of the perceived escapism and social affiliation that the genre provides. Others have tended to regard the explosion of reality TV formats as, at least in part, a sign of pathological fascination with voyeurism (Andrejevic 2002, 253).

Aslama and Pantti (2006, 168) argue that reality TV is an illustration of contemporary confessional culture in which the key attraction is the disclosure of 'true' emotions. Such 'self-disclosure' promotes the transformation of TV from a mass medium to first-person medium addressing masses of individuals. Reality TV is regarded as extending the preoccupation with 'the emotions of other people' and the revelation of emotions in both private and public forums, a preoccupation which is a core part of contemporary culture (Aslama and Pantti 2006, 167; Lupton 1998). Citing Foucault (1978) and Furedi (2004), Aslama and Pantti (2006) argue that we are supposedly living in a 'confessional' or 'therapeutic' culture that celebrates individual feelings, intimate revelations and languages of therapy. Reality TV becomes central in the confession of 'one's innermost feelings' (Aslama and Pantti 2006, 167).

SOCIAL MEDIA TALK/'CLOUD' CHAT

Since 2013, *Khumbul'ekhaya* has added 'immediacy' by allowing viewers 'live access' to the show via studio calls and social media such as Facebook and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/IKhumbuleKhaya/>). Social media, in particular, is highlighted on the show through a selection of social media posts (read by the presenter from a tablet device) from people seeking their loved ones. A particularly popular platform has been *Khumbul'ekhaya's* Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Khumbulekhaya-on-SABC-1/>), which carries a selection of videos from previous shows, audience responses, and requests for assistance in locating relatives. A search of the phrase '*khumbulekhaya*' on search engines reveals that the series' Facebook page is the highest placed search result, a reflection of its popularity. *Khumbul'ekhaya's* producers are also present on the show's Facebook page where they, among other things, update audiences about the programme. For instance:

Dear fans, we won't be on tonight due to the Soccer. Can't wait to share our stories with you on 16 July again. Until then, keep warm! (18 June 2014)

Remember to watch *Khumbul'ekhaya* tonight folks! And if you need help finding your family members write to us. (11 June 2014)

Audiences are regularly reminded about the purpose of the Facebook page:

Remember to NOT post your stories here guys! *This page is for talking about the show* [emphasis added]. (21 January 2013)

Figure 1: Screenshot of the *Khumbul'ekhaya* Facebook page

The practice where audiences from all over the country, or indeed from all over the world, can comment on televised content by texting from their smartphones and other networked devices is a **completely new phenomenon in media studies**. While it is common for TV audiences to talk about what they have just watched, this has traditionally happened in actual physical spaces, whether at home or in public. Letters-to-the-editor sections of newspapers and magazines also played this role, as did research focus groups.

Social media chat is archived on remote, third-party databases that are housed on server farms euphemistically referred to as 'the cloud'. The cloud on which social media talk occurs is not only physically out of reach of audiences and show producers, but is owned and copyrighted by entities, such as Google and Facebook, which mine and monetise whatever social media chat, photos and videos are uploaded onto their platforms. The 'cloud' comes with its own situational, contextual and textual constraints, including terms of use about what to post. Neither the audience at home nor broadcasters such as the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) have any proprietary rights to the cloud. Their actions are limited, sequentially, to four things: (i) signing up; (ii) logging in; (iii) posting/sharing; and (iv) logging out.

Facebook, Google and Twitter, on the other hand, control the rest. The nature of this apparent ceding of control by audiences and traditional content providers has not been qualitatively studied.

'Cloud chat' of the kind seen today on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and WeChat is new in at least two senses. Firstly, it was *non-existent* in the pre-social media era. Secondly, it was *impossible*. There was just no way for audiences in different places to simultaneously connect on a single third-party platform to talk about whatever they were watching. Lately, audience interaction on social media platforms has given rise to a phenomenon that has been called 'social television', a reference to the coming together of TV and social media. Thousands, hundreds of thousands, and sometimes even millions of viewers now 'share' their TV experience on social media, resulting in a massive and rapidly expanding real-time TV focus group.

Lee (2013, 15) maintains that social media is not just a pervasive interpersonal communication tool, but actually fills the 'void created by the lack of real face-to-face conversations'. Wyrwoll (2014, 1) argues that new media facilitates interactivity and a 'communication culture of participation'. While many media scholars broadly agree that social media has radically changed the way audiences interact with old media, such as TV, and that the convergence and interplay of 'old' and 'new' media is a crucial element of contemporary media studies (Van Dijk, 2006), there is still a sense that normative audience and reception studies have yet to come up with methodologies and theories that uniquely and adequately map, explain and examine the nature of 'cloud' talk, particularly the relationship between interactions *on* this social 'cloud' and *outside* of it.

Holmes (2004, 220) argues that 'entire relationship between fandom and the internet has complex political implications', particularly the consideration of 'audience-text relations' (Holmes 2004, 214) in the context of the centrality of 'interactivity' in the contemporary media landscape. Interactivity expresses the 'highly self-reflexive performative and viewing strategies ... emphasizing a far greater level of polysemy' (Holmes 2004, 222). The 'promise of interactivity', Holmes argues, is a familiar and highly visible aspect of reality programming, which leads to questions such as 'To what extent do these programmes offer a space for audience intervention in, and negotiation with, contemporary cultural production?' Interactivity, for Holmes (2004, 218), means that reality programmes 'take the basic concept of feedback and, first, make it more central to the discursive organization and structure of the programme; and, second, articulate its possibilities across a range of comparatively 'new' media sites'. Unlike Holmes, however, I argue for moving away from considering the relationship between viewer and screen to considering the uses that audiences make of the 'canvas' of social media. The advent of social media appears to have changed the way networked audiences watch TV because

'talk' about TV is no longer with friends, colleagues and family members **only** but, rather, **with** strangers located in a virtual sphere.

Graham and Hajru (2013, 18) have studied the interaction of reality TV and 'net-based talk', and argue that reality TV provokes the citizen in viewers by providing 'talking points' and facilitating 'communicative spaces' whereby active audiences transform into deliberating publics. Social media would be an example of what they call the 'net-based public sphere' (Graham and Hajru 2013, 19), while the web of informal conversations that go on across social media networks constitute a kind of 'online discursive landscape' (Graham and Hajru 2013, 19). For Graham and Hajru (2013, 21), the 'net-based public sphere' is responsible for the 'transformation from audiences to publics'. Indeed, they seem convinced that 'reality TV shows can both, despite their differences, provoke the citizen in us and make us participate in public discussion' (Graham and Hajru 2013, 21). Graham and Hajru (2013, 29) argue for expanding the notion of 'political talk' in ways that promote 'the ideals and purpose of the public sphere'. In this regard, political talk ought not to be 'exclusively reserved for politically oriented spaces' but, rather, as emerging even where participants of net-based spaces 'are not there to talk politics'. The fact that the participants are not there to talk politics means that 'when political talk emerges, the chances are there for greater diversity of opinions and arguments'. This would suggest that even the kinds of Facebook talk by *Khumbul'ekhaya* audiences can be characterised as 'political'. That said, the talk of *Khumbul'ekhaya* audiences may not completely fit the kind of 'political talk' defined as 'public-spirited way of talking by referring to the common good or emphasizing the importance of the issues for society' (Graham and Hajru 2013, 29) and as increasing 'civic competence and add(ing) to our knowledge and skills needed for democratic action' (Graham and Hajru 2013, 21). The talk on *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s Facebook page, rather, seems a little too fragmented and unstable to conform to a singularly defined descriptor such as 'political'.

KHUMBUL'EKHAYA'S 'SCRIPT'

SABC 1 (n.d.) describes *Khumbul'ekhaya* as 'A touching docu-reality series tracking the journeys of real South African families who reunite or reconcile with lost or estranged family members'. The notions of 'docu-reality' and 'real' indicate *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s preoccupation with representing itself as **scripted**. 'Reality' is the noun that morphs from the adjective 'real', denoting actuality, believability, and authenticity. Nichols (2001, 100) identifies this kind of mimetic treatment of reality as belonging to the 'expository' and 'observational' modes of documentary representation. Both modes seek to 'camouflage the actual presence and shaping influence of the filmmaker' (Nichols 2001, 100). For *Khumbul'ekhaya*, evoking 'documentary', 'reality' and the 'real' gives the show 'truth' appeal that goes beyond

the contrived reality claims of other reality TV genres based on scripted action and fiction. But what about the drama, the suspense and the invitations?

Gaelesiwe's signature pose, for instance, is what I would call *dramatised suspenseful invitation*. Basically, she adds drama and suspense to the show by literally inviting the audience to join her in finding out how ~~the~~ reunion will unfold, *as if* she does not know **already** what will happen. Of course she knows what will happen, and how it will happen. Viewers know this because at the beginning of each show, she introduces that night's highlights: 'I am Andile Gaelesiwe, and here are tonight's highlights.' The highlights are always selections of what the producers of the show deem the most dramatic and interesting, often featuring tears, weeping, hugs, soundbites or rejections. The purpose of the highlight reel is to build up suspense, cuing audience about what to expect. Gaelesiwe's 'suspenseful invitation' is structured in the form a summary introduction or background, followed by the 'invitation'. For instance, 'It's been many years since Phumeza Mokoena's mother left them back home,' ~~she~~ would say, ~~for example,~~ *always* pausing and then adding: 'Let us see her story.' The camera then cuts from the studio to the outdoors, where the story begins with an establishing shot. As Bennett (2005, 364) has noted, the presenter must not be regarded as merely passively documenting 'reality'. Rather, he or she is in fact actively constructing drama, giving us an 'infotainment format' adapted from entertainment media. In *Khumbul'ekhaya* we are not shown sound crews putting lapel mics on the interlocutors who sit down to talk, even though it is clear that the sound has been professionally filtered to remove ambient sound. The sound reproduction on the show, of course, always seem a little too 'clean' to be natural.

As part of its docu-reality look, and to create the impression of the fly on the wall, the arrival of the searcher on *Khumbul'ekhaya* is made to look spontaneous. In truth, families are informed in advance that the *Khumbul'ekhaya*-Urban Brew crew is coming on such-and-such a date, and at such-and-such a time. Indeed, like all TV, *Khumbul'ekhaya* is not – and is far from being – reality. Rather, it is a representation constructed to conform to a specific telegenic format. The show has a producer (who supervises the production of an entertaining story arc that gets adequate ratings), a director (who fits together plot points in the story arc) and an editor (who splices and condenses the content to suit a fixed format). The literally ever-present presenter functions as the 'face' and chorus of the show. Gaelesiwe *comments* on the action and *leads* viewers (through voice overs) into and out of commercial breaks.

Indeed, like other TV shows, *Khumbul'ekhaya* is still a show, that is, a spectacle meant not just to attract viewers but to keep them. If *Khumbul'ekhaya* should fail to do this, it would of course fail as a show. There is, strictly speaking, no real or practical reason for *Khumbul'ekhaya* to televise reunions. Reunions are mostly personal, private events between individuals and amongst relatives. The presence of cameras and crew, instead, turn the reunions into film sets. *Khumbul'ekhaya's*

Facebook page even describes the show as ring, Andile Gaelesiwe' and as being directed by Vuyiswa Tshangela and Quinton Kgosietsile. There are frequent references to 'drama' and to 'fans' of the show, and exhortations to 'enjoy the show'. The notions of 'starring', 'directing', 'drama', 'fans' and 'enjoyment' place the show firmly in the tradition of fiction, entertainment and spectacle.

I argue that the reason *Khumbul'ekhaya* televises reunions is chiefly so as to frame the emotions of reunions as entertainment, what Burggraaf (2011, n.p.) calls 'emotainment'. *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s 'emotaining' format typically expects people to show emotion. Such emotainment is not for its own sake but for ratings. Ratings are a very specific form of currency since they can be exchanged for advertising revenue and, hence, for profit. The SABC reaches the largest base of South African TV viewers compared to local cable, and garners the most prominent advertisers. In pursuit of revenue, each personal reunion event on *Khumbul'ekhaya* is transformed into a public televised spectacle where the emotions of reunion are turned into commodity exchanged for ratings, what Andrejevic (2002, 252) calls 'the commodification of ... private lives for mass consumption'. Andrejevic (2002, 254) cites Robins and Webster (1999) who make a compelling case for the notion that the so-called information revolution is not a rupture with preceding forms of capitalist production but, rather, a continuation of their logic. Viewers will note, for instance, that the Toyota vehicle on the show is branded on behalf of a major car dealer, whilst the show advertises on behalf of the Postbank and the Post Office, the official sponsors of the show. Frequent commercial breaks interrupt *Khumbul'ekhaya* to express the logic of selling audiences to advertisers. The reality TV audience is crucial in this respect because it is 'what gets sold to advertisers' (Collins 2008, 104).

To sustain the viewers' interest, *Khumbul'ekhaya* uses its own set of ingredients, a structured 'lost-and-found' plot line, with a dramatic climax formed around the revelatory meeting of the lost and the found, and conflict and suspense maintained and amplified by the 'what if?' What if the reunion is a disaster? Thus, finding lost loved ones is represented as a norm. That is, it seems from watching *Khumbul'ekhaya* that reunion is a norm of South African life. In actual fact, however, reunion is the exception to the ordinary norm. Not only have the large majority of people who have written to *Khumbul'ekhaya* still not heard and may never hear again from their long lost relations, but the percentage of two reunions per week, or eight reunions per month, is only a minuscule percentage of the thousands of letters that *Khumbul'ekhaya* receives per year. Thus, the show essentially *inverts* reality, showing exceptions as if they were norms. Furthermore, since the most common denouement on *Khumbul'ekhaya* features hugs and tears, the following questions can be posed: Are all reunions supposed to end in hugs? Why do people always hug at the end? Why should people hug at all to mark reunion? Why do people hug at precisely the time *when* they do? Is this then not ~~this~~ acting out a 'reunion'? Why do

the hugs have to happen before the camera, and not after the *Khumbul'ekhaya* crew has left? Who decides when people should hug?

There are episodes where the reunion does not end in hugs. Typically, these are framed as exceptional. Indeed, even these episodes where the 'what if' does turn out to be disastrous, however, are still part of the show's norm. As interesting surprises, they are still premised on the act of 'remembering home', or finding-and-reuniting. This is because episodes where the formerly lost are promptly lost again do not destabilise the normative 'lost-and-found' arc, but make it even more visible and normative. This is the same sense that, for instance, the disruptiveness of homosexual queerness could be said to actually normalise heteronormativity. The surprises of *Khumbul'ekhaya* are part of the 'reunion' and 'remembering' plot, and make it even more suspenseful and compelling.

The normativity of the 'reunion' and 'remembering' plot is foregrounded in the show's omissions. ~~for instance,~~ it completely effaces and leaves out closure-less searches. A closure-less search would be akin to a cold case in criminal investigation, where there is neither evidence nor a trail. A closure-less search offers nothing for *Khumbul'ekhaya* to televise. In other words, the plot of the show does not have space or airtime to show those kinds of searches that *do not even begin* because of a lack of information on their loved ones. Although, as already intimated, the majority of cases lodged at *Khumbul'ekhaya* constitute these kinds of cold trails, only the 'hot' trails are televised. Cold cases are avoided as they lack enough 'story'; ~~however,~~ such cases are not cold to the relatives. Thus, there are two kinds of searches on *Khumbul'ekhaya*: searches that can be shown and those that cannot. The net result of this filtration and selectiveness is such that televised stories on *Khumbul'ekhaya* constitute mere tips of the iceberg. They are selections of successful searches from a huge corpus of other stories of disappointing, fruitless, unfulfilled and cold case search. Merely looking for long-lost relatives, but neither finding them, nor at least finding the suggestion of a hot trail, does not seem in itself to make for compelling TV viewing.

To a greater extent, *Khumbul'ekhaya* loosely follows the classic three act structure, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The first act introduces viewers to the *problem* ('I was separated from a loved one, and I am at my wits' end'). The separation happened, as noted, as a result of apartheid-made dislocations. People were separated because they went to look for work or because they ran away from a life of poverty and social violence at home. In act two, *Khumbul'ekhaya* arrives on the scene, providing the *plot twist*. The show confronts the problem and, through Gaelesiwé, her tablet device, and the branded Toyota Fortuner SUV (the other sponsor is the South African Post Office), offers and promises to do all it can to find the long-lost loved one. The seeker is always shown boarding the SUV as part of the *turning point*. If *Khumbul'ekhaya* were a cowboy movie, the white (or grey) Toyota Fortuner SUV would be the hero's white stallion. Several conveniently placed cut-

away shots show the Toyota driving away and then arriving at the site of the reunion. Finally, the big resolution comes in act three, with the *reunion*, the hugs and, in many cases, the tears. The producer and the editors play with this plot sequence and ordering of the story to create the most riveting story. *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s three act plotline is clear in its name: people have to be shown going back 'home' after having been lost, a format that is kept going week after week.

However, as Ndlovu (2013) correctly shows, on *Khumbul'ekhaya*, there is rarely an interest in what happens to people after they are reunited on the programme. So, for instance, it does not show how relationships unfold months or years later after the reunion. Are the lives of the reunited family members better? *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s preoccupation with the isolated, climactic act of reunion is regarded as problematic for this reason (Ndlovu 2013, 388). Why does the show not properly consider the context *beyond* the reunion? Why does *Khumbul'ekhaya* not return to find out how the people it reunited are doing? Might this be because ordinary life after the reunion is not as dramatic, pleasure-inducing, or climactic? One might even ask: Does *Khumbul'ekhaya* even want to show follow-ups? I argue that *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s entertainment format is limited to showing what the producers of the show deem to be entertaining. What is entertaining is clear in the kinds of subjects that the show's social media audiences focus on: the climaxes, tensions, revelations and soundbites.

EMPTY SPACE

This article draws on waThiong'o's (1981) re-interpretation of Peter Brook's notion of 'empty space'. waThiong'o's re-interpretation is focused on the way peasants and workers at Kamiriithu in Kenya re-made an 'empty' space into a communal **agora**, where gatherings and performances to entertain and conscientise people on the subject of power and power relations were held. The re-interpreted notion of empty space emphasises the fact that ordinary human beings do not need to set aside special spaces in order for them to gather together and perform their identities. Any space could be re-purposed to become a canvas onto which identities are performed. No 'special buildings' were 'set aside for the purpose' (waThiong'o 1981, 37); rather, 'It could take place anywhere – wherever there was an "empty space"'. Indeed, waThiong'o (1981, 42) describes the practice of re-purposing empty spaces to be a 'national tradition' of the Kenyan masses. Those traditions had been destroyed by the British colonisers, who despised creativity in those they dominated. Laws were changed so that gatherings needed to be licensed. During the Mau Mau rebellion from 1952 to 1962, the ban on gatherings 'reached massive proportions', when the law banned groups of more than five people except in cases where they obtained official permission. The government sought to 'capture and confine' the empty space in government-supervised urban community halls, school halls, church buildings,

and in actual theatre buildings with the proscenium stage, and sometimes behind barbed wire in prisons and detention camps.

I regard Facebook as an empty space in the sense that *Khumbul'ekhaya's* audiences re-purpose proprietary space into a communal agora and meeting place for a variety of purposes, what waThiong'o (1981, 57) describes as 'a heightening of themselves as a community'. Facebook's chat space itself is not meant, strictly speaking, to be an 'empty space'. Rather, it is a privately owned space, belonging to a money-making corporation which uses all uploaded materials for customer surveillance purposes and for generating revenue from advertising. Thus, says Facebook, 'you grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content that you post on or in connection with Facebook (IP License)'. Like all spaces that belong to corporations, Facebook's space is a registered trademark, ~~that is,~~ it is *already filled* by the corporation's blue 'f' logo and other pertinent branding that are prominent on the website, announcing who the owners of this space are. The Facebook brand comes with a list of eight rules, namely, that users may not:

- Use the Facebook brand in a way that implies partnership, sponsorship or endorsement
- Combine any part of the Facebook brand with your name, marks or generic terms
- Use trademarks, names, domain names, logos or other content that imitates or could be confused with Facebook
- Present Facebook in a way that makes it the most distinctive or prominent feature of what you're creating
- Use any icons, images or trademarks to represent Facebook other than what is found on this resource center
- Assert rights over the Facebook brand whether by trademark registration, domain name registration or anything else
- Feature Facebook on materials associated with pornography, illegal activities, or other materials that violate the Facebook Terms
- Modify Facebook brand assets in any way, such as by changing the design or color. (www.facebookbrand.com/dos-donts)

Facebook does not want its brand to be confused with 'partnership, sponsorship or endorsement' of those who use its services. It is against the rules, for instance, to 'Modify the "f" logo in any way, such as by changing the design or color'. By merely using Facebook, users automatically 'agree' to be bound by the company's rules. Hence, 'By using or accessing Facebook Services, you agree that we can collect and use such content and information in accordance with the Data Policy as amended from time to time'. Further conditions include, for instance, the requirement that all

Facebook users are ~~required~~ to have an active account, into which they mandatorily log in using a unique username and password. Users are also subject to the injunction that, 'You will not sell, transfer, or sublicense our code, APIs, or tools to anyone'. All these conditions represent Facebook-supervised walls, the equal of the halls, buildings and barbed wire that waThiong'o speaks of.

Khumbul'ekhaya's Facebook page is not an empty space because its owners mean it to be so. As noted, no one can 'Modify the "f" logo in any way, such as by changing the design or color'. Furthermore, Facebook reserves the right to lock out users if it should feel that they are in contravention of its terms and conditions. *Khumbul'ekhaya's* Facebook page is an empty space, rather, only because the comment threads represent what waThiong'o (1981, 44) calls an 'epistemological break' with the surrounding discourse. The comments, in this case, represent a transitive *emptying* of the 'internal order' (waThiong'o 1981, 39) of Facebook's 'terms of service', terms that constitute four walls, transforming it into a 'a heightening of ... community' (waThiong'o 1981, 57). As we will see, comments use a variety of South African languages, urban slang, metaphorical devices and colloquial references that are 'part of the people's daily vocabulary and frame of reference' (waThiong'o 1981, 58), and that – to use Ludwig Wittgenstein's term – routinely draw on a family of resemblances.

The 'family resemblance' of the Facebook comments on *Khumbul'ekhaya's* page reconstitute the page from a corporate space to a canvas where the commenters feel they are part of a community of 'producers' (Nightingale 2011) instead of just customers. The empty space envisioned by waThiong'o is one where the 'flow of actors and people between the auditorium and the stage, and-around the stage-and the entire auditorium was uninhibited' (waThiong'o 1981, 42), but also one where we are able to see 'movement from apparent harmony, a kind of rest, through conflict to a comic or tragic resolution of that conflict' (waThiong'o 1981, 54). In the discussion below we shall see how the flow of comments on *Khumbul'ekhaya's* Facebook page is uninhibited by either the limits of the show's own plot format or Facebook's terms of service, but also the movement, rest, conflict and comic or tragic 'resolution' described by waThiong'o above. This 'flow' will, as waThiong'o suggests, at times seem 'chaotic'. The overall effect, however, is to demystify *Khumbul'ekhaya*, just as the Kamiriithu 'empty space' theatre experiment demystified the process of theatre.

DISCUSSION

Intimacy expresses depth of closeness in a relationship. Why would a TV show, created by faceless producers and a crew working behind the scenes, seek intimacy with audiences? *Khumbul'ekhaya* openly tries to create a sense of intimacy with its audiences on Facebook. I argue that the reproduction of a sense of intimacy on social

media is a device that the show's social media administrator uses to keep audiences hooked. This is the essence of the following post on 14 May 2014:

Hi Friends, Something tells me that the more people that watch *Khumbulekhaya* the better chances we have in helping more people quicker. Your help and support has been and still is much appreciated so let's continue doing the right thing! Spread the word and the love always, Happy Tuesday!!

The writer of the post, whom the audiences posting on Facebook assume is Gaelesiwe, does not say what this 'something' is that tells her that 'the more people that watch *Khumbulekhaya* the better'. In this case it is ratings. The creation of a sense of intimacy is thus important for the show's quest for ratings. This, of course, is not a fact that would hardly be admitted openly, but is mentioned in roundabout ways, as the example above shows. The show's reproduction of intimacy on Facebook is framed as nothing more than the result of *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s natural closeness to its loyal viewers.

Firstly, I am going to discuss how *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s Facebook page attempts to create intimacy with its viewers. It does so through mostly one and two-liners delivered mostly in English interspersed with vernacular, mostly Zulu, Sotho and Xhosa. The content posted by *Khumbul'ekhaya* for its audiences can be grouped into four modes, namely, the:

- greeting and bidding farewell mode;
- 'f' word mode;
- other 'f' word mode;
- invitation to watch the show mode.

I shall discuss the key aspects of each of the four intimacy-creating 'speech acts'. Secondly, I shall look at how audiences respond to each of these intimacies in a variety of ways that may be described as fragmented. My use of 'fragmentation' is basically a reference to the disordering of the order that *Khumbul'ekhaya* seeks to create in its relationship with its audiences. Generally, audiences respond to *Khumbul'ekhaya* with their own one and two liners delivered mostly in vernacular. The content ~~is~~ of the audience's responses is generally of five types, namely:

- reciprocating *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s intimacy (greetings, the two 'f' words, and the invitation);
- commenting on the action;
- thanking *Khumbul'ekhaya*;
- mocking the action televised on *Khumbul'ekhaya*;
- praising the reunions and the characters therein.

Finally, I draw conclusions about the online behaviour of *Khumbul'ekhaya* and its audiences.

The greeting and bidding farewell mode

Khumbul'ekhaya typically creates rapport with its audiences on Facebook by greeting them in every first post of the day and bidding them goodnight in the last post of the day. These greetings are a core part of the sense of intimacy which the show builds. Audiences respond in their thousands to the greetings and farewells. This greet-and-response is an important element of the attempt to reproduce intimacy:

Greeting 1: *Dumelang bohle*, we hope that you're nice and warm with your loved ones and enjoying the show. (12 March 2014)

Greeting 2: Hello happy people, please note that we won't be on air tonight but will be back next week with lots of drama. Walk easy and stay blessed! (30 April 2014)

Greeting 3: *Sanibonani emakhaya* [Hello, homeboys and home girls], hope you're well and enjoying the show. Let us know which were your favourite stories that you'd like us to revisit. (5 February 2014)

Goodnight 1: Thanks for watching the show, the feedback's highly appreciated. *Nilale kahle!* (7 May 2014)

Greeting 1 is a simple salutation expressing acknowledgement and goodwill, delivered in the vernacular. The vernacular connects with the audiences who mostly use African languages, thus connecting greetings with the two 'f's of family and friends. It sets up *Khumbul'ekhaya* as caring for its viewers' personal comfort, welfare and relationships. This again links the greeting mode with the two 'f's below. The greeting also smuggles in the concern with entertainment which, as we will see, fragments the intimacy created by the greeting. Greeting 2 acknowledges the viewers, but adds important information about the scheduling of the show. This function shows the overlap with the 'invitation' mode ~~discussed below~~. The greeting ends with further expression of concern about the future health and spiritual state of the viewers, which again overlaps with the two 'f's. The information about the following week's show overlaps with the 'invitation' mode, but to which is added the promise of 'lots of drama'. Again, as we will see, the promise of drama is problematic for the reproduction of intimacy. Goodnight 1 combines gratitude ('Thanks for watching' etc.) with a goodnight message of goodwill which is in the vernacular.

The 'f' word mode

The second way in which *Khumbul'ekhaya* attempts to create intimacy with its audiences is by *befriending* them, specifically by referring to them, again and again, as friends. Hence:

- Friends, we hope you are enjoying this last day of 2013. Let's be good to each other this new year! And in the process make our country an even better place. Love and light tonight and for 2014! 🙏 (31 December 2013)
- Morning Friends. Hope you all slept well and woke up feeling great. We would like to remind you that you can catch KHUMBULEKHAYA today on SABC1 at 12:00. (15 August 2013)
- Tomorrow is Womens [sic] Day. Let us all respect and love the wonderful women in our lives. Enjoy the long weekend friends! (8 August 2013)
- Happy Monday to all of our friends!! (5 August 2013)

The friend mode functions to show that *Khumbul'ekhaya* is not just any TV programme. As the audience responses show, this 'friending' functions to put the viewers at ease, and helps generate feedback. This mode overlaps with the 'greeting' mode, such that together they make the 'friendly greeting' mode, and with the family mode that I shall touch on in the next section. The point of it all is to frame *Khumbul'ekhaya* as a selfless, public service programme concerned with nothing but nation-building, sound relationships, and the good mental, bodily and spiritual health of South Africa's citizenry. There are also overlaps with the 'invitation' mode and, like the 'greeting' and 'goodnight' mode, problematic elements in terms of the reproduction of intimacy.

The other 'f' word mode

The third way in which *Khumbul'ekhaya* attempts to create intimacy is by referring to audiences, ~~again and again~~, as family, indicated by the use of the short-form, slang term 'fam'. Thus, 'Good morning fam' and 'Good evening fam' recur throughout the posts by the producers of the show. To demonstrate the 'family-ness' that exists between the show and its audiences, the language of the posts is made to reproduce familiarity. Hence:

- Morning family! We wish you a peaceful, blessed Christmas with your family and loved ones. Remember on this day how precious family is and enjoy them. We will be on air tonight at 21h00. Love and peace! (25 December 2013)
- Morning Fam! Hope you had yourselves a good weekend and are looking forward to this new week. We would like to notify you that the show will be on

air this coming Wednesday so be sure to catch it out! Happy Monday! (1 July 2013)

- Hi All. Sorry for being quiet you know how things get in trying to help our people!! Anyway be sure to catch the repeat at 12:00 only on SABC1 (1 November 2012)

The reference to family also related to *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s construction of its own image as a charitable, selfless and philanthropic organisation which is doing a public service, free of charge. Hence:

Good Day All! Just letting you know that you can still write to us on khumbulekhaya, Private Bag X345, Melville, 2109 or fax to 086 511 7440. *All we ask from you is that you be patient with us because these things do take time and it costs nothing to you, we do not charge for our services ...* [emphasis added]. (31 January 2013)

After greeting what they assume to be everyone ('All'), the producers asks for patience on the basis that they do not ask for money to reunite people. It is not clear what the correlation is between free service and patience, but it appears that the producers are saying that impatience is a sign of ungratefulness and that people must be grateful (for not being asked to pay). The call for patience conceals *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s impatience with poor people who clamour for the speeding up of reunions, forgetting that the service is for free. The message is that poor people must be content with the current slow pace of the reunions because *Khumbul'ekhaya* is doing everyone a public service favour. However, the public service favour is only a part of the story. Strictly speaking, *Khumbul'ekhaya* is only doing itself a ratings favour. While the show might not charge for its services, the commercial breaks and the amount of adverts on the show suggest that *Khumbul'ekhaya* is a money spinner for the SABC as much as *Uzalo* or *Generations*, the two soapies that precede it on the Wednesday line up. The viewers that the show attracts to the screens are a form of money, which advertisers pay for.

The invitation to watch the show mode

Khumbul'ekhaya uses its Facebook page to invite audiences to watch the show, to update them about scheduling and other news, and even to do some audience research or, on occasions, to announce competitions. Invitations to watch the show and scheduling updates are the most frequent kind of invitation, with research and competitions the least represented. Many invitations of the first two kinds are punctuated by an emoticon, often a smiley. Below is a selection of examples of invitations to watch and participate in the show, as well as reminders about scheduling:

- Catch *Khumbul'ekhaya* tonight @ 21:00pm, PGL is advised. (7 May 2014)
- Tonight on *Khumbul'ekhaya* we show you the dramatic story of Thami. Be sure to watch! Starting in 10 minutes. (20 February 2013)
- Remember your show *Khumbul'ekhaya* is on in 10 minutes. Get ready! (20 February 2013)
- Tonight we travel to QwaQwa to assist two teenagers in finding their loved ones. Enjoy the show! (21 May 2014)
- Keep watching the show to see your favorite stories. (12 February 2014)

Invitation 1 has two surface components, a simple reminder to diarise the show and a note about the adult content of the upcoming show. The note about PGL partly functions to invite audiences to witness the adult 'drama' of the reunion. This is confirmed below by 'shocked' and titillated responses from audiences. Invitation 2, like Invitation 1, carries a diary reminder and a countdown, but adds urgency to the reminder by exclaiming 'Be sure to watch!' The name of the character ('Thami') in the reunion is also given. The countdown lends suspense. Invitation 3, like the one before it, is a reminder of urgency. Additionally, it has suspense. Invitation 4 gives details about the location of the reunion, and the number and gender of characters involved. The exhortation to enjoy the show functions as a speech act in that it seems like an instruction. Invitation 5 publishes the results of a poll of the audience's 'favorite' shows, or 'top 5 revisits'. The information is linked to other factors that I shall look at below such as drama, suspense and enjoyment.

The four types of invitation to intimacy can also be found layered in one message, as in the following:

Hello everyone, our crew are sleeping in Eshowe, KZN tonight for a reunion tomorrow! I hope you are all safe at home, waiting to watch the show soon. Enjoy! (27 March 2013)

Condensed in this message is a greeting ('Hello everyone'), a news update ('our crew are sleeping in Eshowe, KZN tonight'), scheduling information ('reunion tomorrow'), invitation to watch the show ('reunion tomorrow'), and the two 'f's of friendship and family ('I hope you are all safe at home'). Invitation can also take the form of data collection. On 13 May 2013, for instance, the producers asked:

Now we know many people watch our show for different reasons but we would like to hear from you why you love this show so much. What makes you look forward to it every Wednesday night? Let's chat friends come on!!

Finally, audiences are invited to participate on competitions involving *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s sponsors. For instance, on 1 May 2013, the following message was posted:

Sms Postbank, your name and the right answer A) or B) to 33766 and stand a chance to win up to R2500 each week! Remember sms's cost R1.50.

Reciprocating *Khumbul'ekhaya's* intimacy

The audiences respond in a variety of ways to *Khumbul'ekhaya's* attempts to reproduce familiarity and intimacy. Responses are mostly of three kinds: (1) a direct exchange, such as when the producer posts the message 'see you next week', and the audiences respond immediately with 'ok, see you next week then, Andile'; (2) an unsolicited thanking of *Khumbul'ekhaya* for its 'great show' and public service; (3) a commentary on the action on SABC 1, which takes two forms: mocking the televised action and/or appreciating the reunions and the characters.

The direct exchange is the most common because it is a response to posed questions, such as: 'Do you remember these stories?' The unsolicited gratitude for *Khumbul'ekhaya* is also highly visible. The commentary is the richest and most salient in terms of fragmentations to the reproduction of intimacy, but tends to occur less frequently than the other two. Nevertheless, it still occurs in large volumes.

Direct exchange

In the direct exchange, audiences are being addressed, and allowed to personally address *Khumbul'ekhaya* back. Hence, the following are responses to the message 'Catch *Khumbul'ekhaya* tonight @ 21:00, PGL is advised' (7 May 2014):

- I will be watching!
- cnt wait
- Iyo PGL ... Itz hot mos!
- i can't wait
- yes press play

The back and forth of the response strengthens the sense that the show and its audiences are in a relationship akin to that of friends, family and community. It appears that the audience appreciates at least the appearance of exchange.

What catches the eye, interestingly, is the shortness of these kinds of responses. The high number of two- and three-phrase comments by the audiences appears to suggest that, in fact, it may not be the content of the exchange itself that is important, but the fact that people like to see their very own post and name published and acknowledged on the Facebook page of their favourite programme. Posting a comment along with hundreds and thousands other comments adds to the 'family-ness' of *Khumbul'ekhaya*. The curt direct exchange seems to be a place holder, put there while one is waiting to watch the action. Ironically, these comments, which

are numerous, are not what the producers of *Khumbul'ekhaya* want as 'feedback' or conversation.

What the producers of the show seem to want, rather, is the use of *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s social media pages as hubs of continuous conversation about the content of the programmes. This is partly indicated in the social media invitation that Gaelesiwe offers to audiences in the middle of each show. She routinely invites the audience to log on to *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s social media pages for purposes of continuing the conversation. On the Facebook page, the producer(s) would say something like:

Enjoy the show and *remember to please give us feedback on what works on the show, what does not work and what kind of stories would you like to see more often*. We appreciate all the love and support. Thank you [emphasis added]. (26 March 2014)

Finally:

Now we know many people watch our show for different reasons but we would like to hear from you why you love this show so much. What makes you look forward to it every Wednesday night? *Let's chat friends come on!!* [emphasis added]. (13 May 2013)

These comments suggests that the kind of feedback that *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s producers want is the kind that clarifies 'what works on the show, what does not work and what kind of stories would you like to see more often'.

Gratitude

A huge number of comments are simply expressions of gratitude for the televised reunions that *Khumbul'ekhaya* makes available to viewers. Because these comments are unsolicited, they suggest that people are posting of their own volition or following the cue of hundreds other posters. Examples of such comments are:

- *mhle umsebenziwako Khumbulekaya yanga utixo anganisikelela intle intodibanisumndeni* [You are doing a great job Khumbul'ekhaya. May God bless you. Bringing families together is a good thing]
- Big ups to Khumbul'ekhaya
- *Phambili Khumbulekhaya!!! Phambili!!!*
- we love you khumbulekhaya

These comments, like the direct exchanges above, are interesting in that they consolidate the sense of intimacy that *Khumbul'ekhaya* intends to build through the five modes of greeting, 'good-nighting', friending, 'family-ing' and inviting audiences. However, like the direct exchanges, the brevity of the gratitude comments appears to fragment the reproduction of intimacy because they contain little actual content. The 'thank you's' are empty place holders that are put there in preparation

for commenting on the action. Unlike the direct exchanges, the 'thank you's' are an important form of feedback, just like Facebook's 'likes' or YouTube's 'thumbs up'. The feedback, however, is limited to merely indicating approval. There is little indication of why the approval has been given.

Commentary on the action

The most salient audience responses come in the form of comments that reflect on the televised action, either to mock it or appreciate it. These comments are of two kinds. The first are mocking and ridiculing. The following comments were audiences' responses taken after *Khumbul'ekhaya* replayed, on 8 August 2013, an episode featuring Lungelo Mkhobeni, a young man who steadfastly refuses to accept reunion with his mother. Lungelo, who is now in his twenties, tells his mother that he is not ready to forgive her for having left him when he was a child. When she asks him when he will be ready to forgive her, he tells her 'maybe next of next year'. This phrase became a punchline amongst *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s Facebook audiences, with most claiming that this episode had made an impression on them. To this day, the Lungelo Mkhobeni episode is one of the five all-time favourites on *Khumbul'ekhaya*. The other four, according to *Khumbul'ekhaya*, are 'Vivian's (story), Solomon Magagula (family that buried the wrong guy), Mandisa (*uyandibugha* [you are trying to trick me]), Khanyisile (lady that was raped by 3 men in the family that took her in and had 3 children came from that)' (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=663409970388342&id=167166663346011).

The mocking comments were unsympathetic, and mostly took the 'LOL' (laugh out loud) route. They tended to treat the episode like entertainment that they could not get enough of:

- Assh I won't 4get that episode ... Sorry mama *ndi zako bona* [I will see you] nxt of nxt year! Lol!
- One of the stories tht made me laugh like never before.
- Haw Lungelo *xolela umamakho sana*, next of next year *ndoda kwaaaaaaa kude kangaka pho ekudinga ngoku.eish* wat a punishment ummmm. [Haw Lungelo forgive your mother, next of next year young man, laugh out loud, is too far when she needs you now eish]
- Lol I want the part where his granny is shouting!
- Kwaaaaa next of next year not this year.
- *ngizokubona* [I will see you] next of next year. *yoh! azange ngihleke kanje* [Yoh! I have never laughed so hard]
- *mara nabo bayahlupa abamama* [You know, mothers can be annoying as well]

- Lol ... *nzokubona* [I will see you] next of next year ... #crawlingtoavbob
- Nxt of nxt year.

The second set of comments were more sympathetic to Lungelo and his mother, with the most sympathy expressed for the mother while many ‘prayed’ for Lungelo to forgive his mother in the spirit of *Khumbul’ekhaya*, for example:

- *ja bt lithi elokugala hlonipha uyihlo nonyoko ukuze izinsuku zande emhlabeni pls bantabasha lets shw de respect kubantui abadala.* [The first word says respect your mother and father so that your years on earth can be added. Please young people show respect to your elders.]
- blood z thicker dan water lungelo *wayephethwe ukudinwa nje qha, uzomxolela umama wakhe* babe ryt? [Lungelo was only full of anger. You’ll forgive your mom, right, babe?]
- Andile can u please *ubuyele emuva ukuyobheka ukt wagcina eyile yini kumama wakhe?* I felt sori 4 *lowayamama.* [Andile please go back and check if he went back to check on his mom? I felt sorry for that woman.]
- u l never know what da future, i hope lungelo wil not cowl back 2 her mom in future.
- Tht is painfl.
- Eish dis was a sad story indeed.
- Yes, hey tht guy I cant get him out of my mind I hope now he’s fine and forgave his mom. Thanks Andile 4 the program it helps so many ppl.
- Jah it ws painful shame, des nothing painful than 2 b rejected by ur children ... Bt then it depends if u wer there 4 them when they wer growing up, we cant blame dat boy ... Plz 4gve ur mum bhuti it wht eva anger u hed against her.
- *Hi mina ngedlela engibonangayo lemfana ufakelwe umoya ngomama wakhe futhi ngithembe ukuthi abantu abasondelaneye mamusola sithembe ukuthi uzoxola?* [The way I see it, this boy was influenced by his mother. Let’s hope that people who are close to him are encouraging him to forgive his mother.]

These comments come closest to what *Khumbul’ekhaya*’s producers want and encourage from the ‘feedback’. Ironically, these comments carry the most threat in terms of fragmenting the intimacy created by the modes of greeting, ‘good-nighting’, friending, ‘family-ing’ and invitation. This happens through inadvertently exposing *Khumbul’ekhaya*’s generic similarity to other TV shows which are fixated by ratings, drama and entertainment. That is, the comments on the action ~~point~~ coextensively ~~to~~ the very features that *Khumbul’ekhaya*’s reproduction of intimacy tries to conceal. These comments reveal the emptiness of the greetings, the ‘good-nighting’, the sense of family, and the invitation. It is the emptying of the fake intimacy that I

consider to be important for the de-scripting and re-scripting of *Khumbul'ekhaya* by its audiences, turning the Facebook page into an empty space for the performing of the audiences' own identities and not merely those limited to the two dimensional characters featured in the reunions.

CONCLUSION

When the comments from *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s audiences on the show's Facebook page are considered against the show's own devices for attempting to manufacture intimacy, it becomes rather clear that what mostly fragments the intimacies created by *Khumbul'ekhaya* are the lurking hints and references to the fact that the show is no different to other TV shows. This is particularly true of other reality TV shows where producers put people together before the camera's gaze; selectively edit footage in postproduction so that it builds towards entertaining climaxes; follow a three act story arc; and so on. Every *Khumbul'ekhaya* episode has a beginning, a middle, an end, a hook, and elements of conflict, tension and resolution. Each episode starts by setting the scene; bringing the audience up to speed about how they got there; which leads to a complication, and ends with a typical hug of reconciliation or – though not often – shrugs of disappointed rejection. Though *Khumbul'ekhaya* frames itself as nothing other than a friendly and filial bringer of healing, reunion and reconciliation, it is in truth driven first of all by the imperatives of ratings. The producers frequently refer to 'drama' to 'fans', and to 'enjoying the show', as the following selection of posts show:

Drama: Get your tissues out and be prepared to be shocked when watching tonight's Khumbul'ekhaya at 21h00! That's all I am saying for now. Looking forward to hear your thoughts after the show! (9 November 2011)

Fans: Tonight at 21h00 on *Khumbul'ekhaya* we go to Burgersfort in Limpopo. Do we have any fans from that area? (3 April 2013)

Enjoyment: Tonight we travel to QwaQwa to assist two teenagers in finding their loved ones. Enjoy the show! (21 May 2014)

Drama is problematic as an element of the reproduction of intimacy because people rarely look forward to the 'drama' of friends and family in the same way that they do to the drama of strangers. In other words, they are more likely to find it easier to distance themselves enough to enjoy other people's 'spectacles' rather than their own or those of their family and friends. The exhortation to 'Get your tissues out and be prepared to be shocked' reveals the show's cheesiness and kitschy preoccupation with titillation. The third 'f' word, fans, itself fragments the intimacy created by the other two, friends and family. Referring to one's friend or father as a fan, or one's fan as a

friend or father, immediately removes the intimacy that friendliness or fatherliness bring, since fans are often anonymous, faceless strangers. The exhortation to enjoy, just like the invitation to see 'drama', exposes *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s unfriendliness and anti-family bias by pointing to its real motive, namely, entertainment. People's own pain is rarely enjoyable; however, the pain of 'others' can be turned into spectacle, as the 'Next of next year' example above shows. Audiences fragment the intimacies on *Khumbul'ekhaya* precisely by enjoying the spectacle and pain of others. The following message posted on 2 January 2013 is revealing:

Hey Fam hope you all came into the new year with your hearts filled with nothing but love and happiness! Be sure to catch the show tonight as we go down memory lane with some of our best episodes that got the nation talking, crying, laughing but most importantly loving even more!! God Bless!!:-)

Getting the 'nation' talking, crying, laughing and 'loving even more' seem to be core aspects of the construction of drama, fans and enjoyment. It is quite clear, it seems, that *Khumbul'ekhaya* sardonically invites people to enjoy the 'drama' of an episode such as 'Next of next year'. Would this seem to be how people ~~would~~ ethically treat their family or friends?

Even the simple invitation to 'competition' exposes the problematic intimacy. Not only does the notion of competition hint at division but it fragments intimacy through, firstly, its suggestion of drama and spectacle and, secondly, through the possibilities for staging 'reality' that it engenders. This is clear, for example, in the following message posted on 5 March 2013:

Remember u can win up to R2 500 by sms-ing Postbank, your name and the correct answer (A or B) to 33766. The question is: Did Tholakele find her mother? A) yes or B) no. Sms cost R1.50.

Here, audiences are being invited to compete at guessing whether or not Tholakele found her ~~father~~. This is an example of Tholakele's story being used as the subject of a quiz, one that makes money for the SABC, Urban Brew Studios, Postbank and the SMS service providers. This is far from charitable on the part of *Khumbul'ekhaya*. Not only has a price/prize of R2 500 been put on Tholakele's story, but the invitation to 'win' is selfishly meant to increase traffic and ratings.

Khumbul'ekhaya's hidden quest for ratings adds another layer of fragmentation. This quest is mostly hidden in the invitation to watch the show, in the scheduling updates and news, and in the creation of suspense. An example is the following message posted on 6 March 2013:

Tonight we visit Paulpietersburg KZN, Durban, Mahlatswetsa in the Freestate and Naboomspruit in Limpopo to reunite 2 families. We also ask your help in finding some still missing people. Make sure to watch! *Who knows* maybe you know someone! [emphasis added].

The scheduling and news update ('Tonight we visit') and the invitation to watch ('Make sure to watch!') are followed by the creation of suspense ('*Who knows* maybe you know someone!'). Suspense is, in fact, the basic motive of the invitation to watch the show and the scheduling updates and news, as the following selection of messages shows:

- Hi Khumbul [sic] family. Tonight at 21h00 ... Do you know what is happening? (13 February 2013)
- And the COUNT DOWN begins ... 13 Feb 2013 at 21h00 only on SABC1 Mzansi Fo Sho!! God Bless! (12 February 2013)
- Tonight on Khumbul'ekhaya we bring you the beautiful story of Makhwenkwe who is living in the streets. We travel 600 km with him to find his family. Being sick, homeless and broke, will his family accept him? We also see the young Nomvula who was given away to a stranger by her father when she was very young. Will she find her father so she can get answers to some of her questions? Make sure to watch tonight at 21h00 to find out. (19 October 2011)
- Good Day Fam! Tonight we continue to bring you highlights of your favourite episodes and then we also take a look at the new developments about Vivian and Christina's story. To find out what happened after their story was broadcast be sure to tune in tonight only on SABC1 ... (16 January 2013)
- 12:00 SABC 1 is all that you need to remember if you want to catch the repeat of last night's show, and trust me you do not want to miss it!! Happy Thursday fam!! (27 December 2012)

Suspense functions to fragment *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s reproduction of intimacy precisely because it exposes the show's constructedness. As already noted, Gaelesiwé acts *as if* she does not know what will happen. She merely holds off letting the audiences know. This holding off partly explains the brevity of the Facebook posts by the *Khumbul'ekhaya* team. Longer posts would disclose too much. Shorter posts, on the other hand, whet just the right amount of curiosity.

Finally, some posts on *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s Facebook page seem to deliberately 'disobey' the producers. For instance, many messages are posted on the page by people looking for their loved ones. The producers, however, insistently discourage this practice. They clearly prefer to have people write and post to *Khumbul'ekhaya* – probably because the show's main sponsor is the Post Office. Despite these regular attempts by the producers to discourage people from using Facebook to request *Khumbul'ekhaya*'s help, dozens of messages continue to be posted on Facebook carrying precisely this information. The fact that people continue to use the Facebook page 'incorrectly' suggests that it may not be correctness per se that they are after but a sense of visibility to the thousands of fellow commenters. Such 'disobedience'

would seem to be out of keeping with the familial friendliness that *Khumbul'ekhaya* prefers. At the very least, it fragments and disorders it.

Ndlovu (2013) has studied *Relate*, a TV talk show on SABC 1, as well as *Khumbul'ekhaya* and *Forgive and Forget*. The shows are taken as examples of South African 'therapy talk shows' informed by 'the trauma-therapy approach and whose focus is conflicted human intimacies located in the family, or broken familial relationships'. Ndlovu (2013, 380) identifies *Relate*, *Khumbul'ekhaya* and *Forgive and Forget* as explorations of 'familism as a desirable value but one fraught with conflict in its practice'. These shows are driven by a 'desire to re-establish, mend, heal and make whole' (Ndlovu 2013, 380). Ndlovu (2013, 381) argues that shows such as *Relate*, *Khumbul'ekhaya* and *Forgive and Forget* 'are not simulated and attempt as far as possible, to eschew sensationalism', reserving particular praise for *Relate*, which 'eschews 'trash talk' and 'manufacturing' of guests and problems. The show's ground rules of 'no anger, no insults, no threatening language, no swearing, no shouting or fighting' give it a sense of restraint, respectability, decency and seriousness' (Ndlovu 2013, 390). Ndlovu refers to shows such as *Khumbul'ekhaya* as 'serious' talk shows, the opposite of 'tabloid talk shows'. These serious shows 'grapple with relational as well as personhood issues through the public medium of television, and thus increasing the visibility of such groups and the diversity of voices on television'. However, I doubt this. I regard *Khumbul'ekhaya* (or *Oprah*), for instance, to be a Jerry Springer in disguise, and vice versa.

I am inclined to disagree completely with the viewpoint that places 'serious' shows on the one extreme and Jerry Springer and other 'tabloid talk shows' on the other end. In the article, I show that the seriousness that Ndlovu's analysis imputes to shows such as *Khumbul'ekhaya* is itself seriously undermined by a cursory perusal of the spectacle-seeking multitudes of Facebook comments by audiences of the show. At least, the 'seriousness' of the producers of the show does not seem to be necessarily shared by most of the audiences. At least, audiences exhibit their own kind of entertained 'seriousness', partly engendered by the nature of a social media platform such as Facebook. It might be true, as Ndlovu (2013, 381) suggests, that 'the private pains expressed by the participants on these shows become part of shared public discourse when viewers discuss specific episodes in various public spaces such as minibus taxis, buses, work places, train stations and so on'. I could not, however, find evidence of this serious public discourse. It is not quite clear, in any case, if the same 'shared public discourse' exists in the same form in the virtual sphere. Scarborough and McCoy (2016) have suggested that the condemnation of reality TV shows (such as Jerry Springer) as belonging to a category of trash is evidence of cultural taste being turned into moral condemnation. Basically, TV consumers who have a moral reaction to reality TV are more likely to be from a higher socio-economic position and are less likely to consume the genre. The negative moral reaction to certain reality TV shows is evidence of a kind of socially patterned moral

reasoning that is class-based and that is concerned with the morality and immorality of consumption. Audiences with an 'exogenous locus of morality' tend to possess higher levels of cultural capital and greater education, and are less likely to consume reality TV.

Despite criticising *Khumbul'ekhaya* for lacking the complexity of *Forgive and Forget* and *Relate*, Ndlovu (2013) fails to show why *Khumbul'ekhaya* remains by far the most durable, most popular, and most watched of the three shows. *Relate*, despite being 'the most complex of the three programmes', appears to lack the mass 'appeal' of the more simplistic *Khumbul'ekhaya*, for instance. Why is that? Can it be that 'complexity' (of the kind Ndlovu attributes to *Relate*) is not necessarily an important ingredient where stimulation, gratification, popularity and ratings are concerned? ~~Here, I attempt to demonstrate that *Khumbul'ekhaya* is mostly pure entertainment and drama, and that this is what TV is really about.~~ Shows that fail to entertain are actually not that *televisually* complex, partly because they fail to grasp the meaning of TV. In this sense, I am convinced that it is the so-called complex shows such as *Relate* that are not *that* complex. If they were complex, they would not seek to flout TV's dominating televisuality (Caldwell 1995). A seemingly simplistic show such as *Khumbul'ekhaya*, on the other hand, ironically shows evidence of a genuine and complex grasp of what is needed to survive in a spectacle-bound, ratings-based system. ~~I show that *Khumbul'ekhaya* does this by commodifying the pain of separation and the pain/joy of reunion.~~ It is never the intention, for instance, of *Khumbul'ekhaya* to go where there is no drama (e.g. counselling and follow-ups after reunion), a fact picked up on quite quickly and effectively by most of the show's spectacle-seeking Facebook audiences. It must be noted, also, that *Khumbul'ekhaya* in fact does work with counsellors and social workers, but restricts their work to the off-screen background.

TV is, through and through, an entertainment medium. It turns everything that it touches into entertainment. Analyses that ignore this fact essentially ignore the fact that all successful TV shows must *titillate*, ~~while also ignoring~~ so-called audience 'uses and gratifications' (Lundy et al. 2008; Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007; Reiss and Wiltz 2004). The weakness in analyses such as Ndlovu's (2013) may be in the focus on only text-based evidence (e.g. the presenter's aura of 'seriousness') and screen-based 'therapy' (of the self-reporting studio guests) without considering the nature of the audience's own fragmented 'therapies'. Ndlovu appears to ignore a simple truism, namely, that TV shows *are not made for the actors*; rather, they are made for the audiences. It is, after all, the audiences that are sold to advertisers. The amount of spot advertisements, product placement, and sponsorship in these shows demonstrates not only the direct and indirect forms of selling that are crucial to the continued life of these programmes, but also expresses the conflation of advertising and entertainment. As Deery (2004) shows, reality TV is a key site for experiments in

‘advertainment’, that is, the merging of advertising and entertainment programming. Such programming is designed to sell as it entertains.

Khumbul'ekhaya commodifies the pain of separation and the pain/joy of reconciliation, largely through the voyeuristic gaze of its roving camera, which takes what is private and closed to outside view (pain of separation and the pain/joy of reconciliation), and makes it available to the public that is to be sold to advertisers such as Toyota, Jeep, Postbank, the Post Office, and so on. The ‘publicness of private human intimacies on television’ that Ndlovu (2013, 379–380) identifies is brought about by this commodifying, proprietary gaze. In the words of Deery (2004), the gaze of reality TV functions to ‘forcibly exteriorize the interior’. Such exteriorising, Deery argues, ‘is accomplished by and for money’ the end, *Khumbul'ekhaya* is a ‘docu-soap’, which *sells* the trope of reuniting lost South African family members in order to create its own brand entertainment. In a sense, it is hard – if not impossible – for *Khumbul'ekhaya* to entertain in such a way that it does not entertain. It is, after all, a show. Audience responses, on the other hand, are not strictly limited to the limits of the TV format. Rather, they re-write, contest, accommodate and negotiate contextually – to some extent, in their own image – what is textually available on TV.

NOTE

1. A docu-reality show is a television show that combines elements of a documentary and reality television indicating ‘a specific television format that aims to convey information content like of a classic documentary, through real-life scenes shot live, as in a reality show’ (<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Docu-reality>).

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