

The everyday experience of xenophobia: performing *The Crossing* from Zimbabwe to South Africa

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Abstract

Debates on the underlying causes of xenophobia in South Africa have proliferated since the attacks -between March and May 2008. Our article shows how exploring the everyday 'ordinariness' of xenophobia as performance can contribute additional insights not readily available in the public media or in works such as the recently published *Go home or die here: violence, xenophobia and the reinvention of difference* (Hassim et al. 2009). The claim that as metaphor the meaning of performance is discovered in the dialectic established between the fictitious and actual context, provides a point of departure for a discussion of an autobiographical one-man play, *The Crossing*, in which Jonathan Nkala performs his hazardous and 'illegal' rites of passage from Zimbabwe to South Africa. The play's aesthetic of 'witnessing', associated with the protest generation, intersects with and looks beyond a post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) aesthetic. To contextualise our discussion of Nkala's work we track trends in responses to xenophobia, including the suggestion that the attacks were underpinned by prevailing discourses of exceptionalism and indigeneity. However, the intimacy of targeting those living close to you needs fuller analysis. We will argue that the liminality of the performance event provides scope for making connections not directly 'there' at the moment of performance. This has a bearing on the 'return' to Fanon and claims about 'negrophobia' characterising many reports in the public domain on the events of 2008. In turn, this invites speculation about the re-alignments indicated here.

Seven years ago, a 21-year-old Zimbabwean man from Kwekwe told his mother he was going into the bush to fast, pray and collect firewood (his father is late). She didn't hear from him till nine months later when he called her from Johannesburg and started sending her money and groceries. It's an amazing and unique theatrical story -and yet in reality it is the story of tens of thousands of Zimbabweans who have put their lives at risk while searching for better ones. - Review of Jonathan Nkala's *The Crossing*, *The Zimbabwe Standard*, May 2009.¹

The xenophobia that happens, the attacks, I wasn't affected by those ones, but every day in South Africa here, every single day, I am affected verbally or physically, every day, it happens. Almost every day. -*Performing xenophobia: Conversation with Jonathan Nkala and Bo Petersen*, 2009.

ordinariness also suggests complicity, involving both those who are subjected to the situation, and those who do nothing to change it. Zikode's comment about 'they' and 'we' refers to an indifferent state and the poor. This points to some of the re-alignments of historical dichotomies running along race and class lines in contemporary South Africa. However, in the logic of xenophobia it seems that the 'they' – the 'unseeing' and unapproachable state of the Mbeki era – is substituted by the figure of the foreigner who, unlike the unseen state, is starkly visible and conveniently marked by physical and linguistic difference – and, importantly, by the fact of physical proximity.

Before looking at how the foreigner serves as a form of 'proxy' for an indifferent (and invisible) state, as described by Pillay (2009: 98), it is necessary to consider the role of aesthetic engagement with Nkala's performance. It is noteworthy that *The Crossing* was not primarily produced as a critique of xenophobia, and this lack of didactic intent as well as its reception as *testimonio* (especially on its home turf during the run in Harare) could account for how aesthetic engagement provides scope for deepening the conversation on xenophobia in the context of South Africa. The play evolved out of a meeting between Petersen and Nkala in 2006, when he was selling beadwork at Camps Bay beach and featuring in the odd commercial. She immediately recognised Nkala's talent as a performer and when he showed her the account he had written of his own journey to South Africa, the 'land of abundance', she saw its potential as a play. It was first performed late in 2006 as *The Journey* in Petersen's Garage Theatre and during 2008 it was developed into *The Crossing*. The script was published as part of the Junket series of new plays, together with another playlet, *The Bicycle Thief* (July 2009).

In her study of what constitutes aesthetic engagement, Penny Bundy claims that key characteristics are 'animation, connection and heightened awareness'. Bundy describes the sense of animation as 'the feeling of stimulation, perhaps exhilaration, experienced during (and possibly after) a drama experience'; as a result 'we are more aware of ourselves, of the world around us and of the relationship between the two' (2003: 1). However, Bundy cautions that animation alone is not enough: 'to engage aesthetically the percipient must simultaneously experience connection and heightened awareness' (ibid.:2). Bundy notes that 'connection occurs when percipients engage with the idea of the work at a metaphoric level' (ibid.). This understanding of the performance as metaphor is integral to the claim that the meaning of the performance resides 'not in the actual context nor in the: fictitious one, but in the dialectic set up between the two' (Bolton, in Bundy 2003: 2). In this case, Nkala's performance (the fiction) is based on his 'actual' experience, and it is the dialectic set up between the performance and the 'real' that provides scope for the meanings made here. One of the issues that emerged in our conversation was Petersen and Nkala's insistence that the audience recognise the work as his 'real-life' experience; however, Antjie Krog countered this by claiming that in performing the story aesthetic choices are made by the director, so it is in fact a 'fiction'. Her concern is that:

You say it's him and it **is** him, but it's actually not. It's very important that you make a difference, both of you, between the two personas, between who you **are** and who you perform. So the story you tell is of somebody, it's not you. It's based on a lot of the experiences you have had -but you have made choices of things you leave out and how to structure it, etc. ... This isn't **you** ... it's difficult, it's hard, but it's quite important if you want to move on otherwise you're stuck in that. And it can kill you. (Flockemann 2009: 217, emphasis in the original)

What Bundy refers to as the 'actual context' here is thus not limited to the personal 'true-life' experience, but rather refers to the recognisable social context within which the work is embedded, and which the audience recognises (connects with). In *The Crossing*, as the audience enters the venue, Nkala is already seated, apparently absorbed in making his beadwork figures. The foreigner with his beadwork is a familiar sight to South African audiences who tend to 'ignore' Nkala's presence as they chat with one another. It is only when he begins to speak that attention is drawn to him as performer. This slide from his (apparently invisible) 'ordinary' social reality to the performed story challenges the audiences' initial (stereotypical) responses by making the everyday 'visible' – as indicated in the standing ovation he regularly receives at the end.

Bundy claims that optimum conditions for aesthetic engagement include the audience's willingness to engage, as well as 'systemic detachment and playful engagement' (2003: 2) in the aesthetic choices made by performer and director. This systemic detachment and playful engagement is demonstrated in a scene where the foreigner serves as proxy for deeply ingrained anger resulting from pervasive social inequality. This scene is unsettling, in that while the audience laughs with – and at -Nkala's performance of the humiliations meted out by the tongue-lashing of an irascible trucker, this laughter is also complicit with the grotesque abuse that is being performed. At the same time, this scene also gives content to the issues of intimacy and proxy touched on earlier.

The scene serves as one of his rites-of-passage encounters in which Jonathan asks for a lift from a trucker travelling from Johannesburg to Cape Town. Jonathan only has R50, which the trucker accepts as he wants someone to keep him company. They chat as they drive through the night, until in the middle of nowhere the trucker suddenly stops and demands that Jonathan pay him an additional R30, since he has given lifts to lots of foreigners, but not for R50. Jonathan pleads with him, but the trucker is adamant:

Trucker: Boy, don't make your problems mine. Do I look like the one who gave you the poverty sentence? Now jump out of my truck before I shoot you

Khumbu: With that he pulled out his gun. I begged him for a very long time, and he swore at me for a very long time. Then he started the truck.

Trucker: OK boy, sit on the floor, not on the seat. You don't deserve a seat, you broke good for nothing nobody. Come on, repeat this after me: Ngiyisidididi.

Khumbu: Ngiyisidididi.

Trucker: I am a useless, mentally crippled piece of shit.

Khumbu: I am a useless, mentally crippled piece of shit. (Nkala 2009: 34)

In performing this scene Jonathan uses two small wire figures to represent the trucker and himself. The figures are the same size, but in performance the hectoring trucker appears to tower menacingly over the ridiculously cowering Jonathan as he parodies the exchange between them. During the journey the orgy of insults continues, as Jonathan folds his unusually tall frame uncomfortably on the floor at the feet of the trucker, who now adopts a quasi-instructive tone to his literally captive audience in a send-up of a call and response routine. The trucker quizzes Jonathan about whether he has a cell phone and a driver's licence (he doesn't), how old he is (23), and about whether he has been to school. When Jonathan replies: 'Yes sir', the trucker scoffs:

Trucker: Liar, liar, penguins can't fly! What type of school or qualification do you have? Let me see, a degree in the faculty of suffering! I mean, why you are wasting my time, come on, jump off my truck.

Khumbu: Please sir I am just like your son, have mercy on me.

Trucker: Hayibo! Oh no, you are insulting me now! I will never have a dumb, useless and broke son like you. My son is sixteen and .he can drive this truck. I have two cars and he drives his mother to church every Sunday. He has a cell phone, ID and a driver's licence. I mean is your father not embarrassed to have a useless son like you? (Nkala 2009: 35-36)

The scene epitomises the issue of proximity and difference, as well as the perverse intimacy of the encounter as the trucker speculates about the boy's father and compares him to his own son – but as a way of emphasising that he (and his son) are the very 'opposite' of the boy: 'If I were you, which I will never be, I would have hanged myself a long time ago to save oxygen for those who deserve it.' The exchange begins to assume the complicity of a scripted encounter where roles are consciously 'performed' almost by tacit consent:

Khumbu: We got to Bloemfontein and he gave two other hikers a lift. They were surprised to see me sitting on the floor and the driver started.

Trucker: Whatever you do, don't talk to this thing down there, he has no money, no phone, no ID, no licence, no father, no nothing!

Khumbu: They started a conversation and when they told jokes I laughed

Trucker: Hey, hey, hey, you are forgetting now. You are so broke you can't afford to laugh. In fact why are you listening to our conversation? You are a useless, mentally crippled piece of shit. What are you?

Khumbu: I am a useless, mentally crippled piece of shit! (Nkala 2009: 36)

Seeing the foreigner as proxy in this instance is not the same as negrophobia – a term used to define a pathology first identified after the American civil war to describe an irrational fear of freed black men. In other words, this scene described above does not simply present an example of 'self-hate', which is how the term 'negrophobia' has been applied locally, from Fanon via Chineweizu,¹⁵ to describe some of the underlying causes of xenophobia. We are not suggesting that internalised stereotypes of degraded blackness do not persist into the post-apartheid era, and this has been described by Adekeye Adebayo as a manifestation of 'Afrophobia' (2009: 15). Frequently, however, the term 'negrophobia' is used too easily to describe a complex nexus of forces at work here, and more worryingly, it is also occasionally employed as a rationalisation for the attacks.¹⁶ Instead, it could be said that the trucker is establishing his own self-worth by virtue of his 'difference' from 'this thing down here', which he nevertheless deliberately keeps in close proximity: it is not that he hates his own 'blackness', but that he hates the apparently abject poverty which the boy represents -and which he needs to distance himself from. We witness the visible enactment of power over one apparently weaker, made possible by the intimacy of being alone together in the middle of 'nowhere'. At the same time it is also an expression of displaced rage, and can be read as an attempt to validate the self by claiming and performing difference, thereby replicating dominant discourses of indigeneity and exclusivity. For Nkala, the performer, the stage becomes the space to explore and deal with the abuse he has suffered as a result of his position as an 'outsider'. For the trucker, the foreigner (mirror/proxy) becomes a space for him to 'process' the abuse he has suffered as a result of apartheid's legacy.

At the same time the very excess of the trucker's abuse also articulates his anxiety about the potential threat that this intrepid young traveller poses to the trucker's sense of his own social status. While the trucker is clearly not on the same economic level as the disaffected township youth who participated in the attacks, he appears to share their prejudices about foreigners -particularly those who, like Jonathan, exude qualities of resourcefulness and ambition, despite a lack of material resources. This recalls Derrida's comments, referred to earlier, about the 'question' that the foreigner poses which makes us question who 'we' are and what we signify in relation to the foreigner (2003: 3).

It seems that establishing difference requires a form of intimacy with the Other. In our conversation, Antjie Krog noted:

There is a perception that people stream in here because their countries have failed. So Zimbabweans come in here, but their country is failing. So you think, 'if they stream in here, they make me fail. So now, I don't actually have a choice, it's them or me, and they to me present failure' – and [to Jonathan] your play undermines

that and says, 'I actually represent success in a way.' So then people feel 'I have to get rid of you because both as failure or success, you threaten me.'(Flockemann 2009)

The Crossing, however, works on an opposing assumption, namely the claiming of commonality with strangers. In the post-apartheid context, this emphasis on commonality despite difference challenges the discourses of indigeneity and exceptionalism embraced by individuals like the trucker. As a performer Nkala achieves this 'connection' at various levels; these include his personal charm in engaging with the audience and his ingenious take on common cultural references (such as 'Cape Town, A City that Works for You'). Most significantly, perhaps, connection is achieved through foregrounding his own 'foreignness' in order to affirm commonality with strangers. This is playfully articulated in the final scene, when Jonathan insists: 'I am not telling you this story so that you feel sorry for me, no, no, no. Actually I do not feel sorry for myself.' He then lists all the resources he has acquired as a result of his crossing, including the ability to network, 'which is why I am in the company of smart people like you', and he concludes, with a pause between each line: 'And please stop admiring me/ because/ I am smart.' Despite this optimistic and self-affirming ending, it emerged that both Petersen and Nkala had great difficulty in performing the traumatic drowning of his friend Jacob, and the play is also the untold story of Jacob and those like him who have died while attempting to jump the border. The quasi-celebratory ending masks, but does not contradict, the pain of that loss. As Jonathan put it:

But, actually to me performing that, it's a way of healing again, and it's a way of saying to my fellow foreigners also that it doesn't happen to me alone. And what I understand in it is sometimes what happened to me it's nothing to what some other guys experience. There are some people who experience more than I do and I will be very happy if they can open up and tell me more stories and let them be told. (Flockemann 2009)

Hannah Arendt's claim that 'storytelling reveals meaning without the error of defining it' (in Dlamini 2009: 178) also seems apposite to the meanings of a story like Jonathan's. This, in turn, speaks to the more nuanced and layered interpretations that emerged gradually during and after the conversation with Nkala and Petersen, perhaps precisely because the playwright did not make 'the error of definition'.

As noted earlier, responses to xenophobia in the public domain range from (re)claiming the discourse of difference as a form of resistance to what is perceived as on-going neo-liberal imperialism and the 'market violence' of social and economic inequality, to a focus on the web of intimate entanglements characterising the post-apartheid era. The often complicit intimacy of attacking those close to you has been read as negrophobia; however, it is more appropriate to see this as targeting the foreigner as proxy for the state's failure to implement appropriate measures to curb poverty and inequality, as well articulating anxiety about maintaining identity (and scarce material assets). The focus on commonality challenges discourses of indigeneity and difference, where difference, instead of being employed in the

project of achieving social equality, becomes co-opted to exacerbate prevailing social schisms.

Playwright and cultural activist, Mike van Graan, notes that in performance, the '*hard questions*' that are grappled with, and the alternatives posed, as well as 'the celebration of life despite the difficult circumstances' are inevitably controversial. This is particularly the case when the 'alternative visions' presented go against 'prevailing dogmas and political, social and economic interests of hegemonic forces' (2009: 9). For instance, another aspect that came up in discussion was the way Nkala makes a 'spectacle' of himself. Making a spectacle of oneself in performance has been seen as a form of dissent, as it were, 'usurping' or reclaiming agency over one's own representation.¹⁷ In *The Crossing* the performer reclaims agency in performance (if not in actuality), and this performative enactment becomes a form of refusing, or at best playing with the 'categories' used to define xenophobia, its underlying causes and its effects on those targeted. A contributing factor here is the comedic framework which mediates and contains even the most harrowing scenes, such as Jacob's drowning, but without trivialising this trauma. This move to comedy and political satire as a vehicle for potential dissent as well as a form of psychic survival has become a popular trend not only here, but increasingly so in Zimbabwe as well, and suggests fruitful terrain for further exploration.¹⁸

As we have argued, a performance event like *The Crossing* offers scope for expanding discussions on what is commonly termed 'xenophobia' by allowing us to grapple with hard questions as well as alternative, possibly controversial visions of inclusivity. This is achieved through aesthetic engagement with Nkala's story in which the (usually absent) voice of a survivor is employed to demonstrate that the stranger amongst us is not only a helpless and resourceless victim, even though still subjected to everyday manifestations of xenophobia in South Africa. At the same time the interplay between a first-hand testimonial account and aesthetic mediations (such as physical theatre, comedy, the grotesque and spectacle) which 'usurp' dominant stereotypes, presents some productive comparisons with South African theatre of the anti-apartheid generation, as well as theatre that engages directly or indirectly with the TRC processes in current contexts.

As noted earlier, for Zimbabwean audiences the play presents a form of *testimonio*, a familiar story which represents the story of 'tens of thousands' of fellow Zimbabweans, and audience responses are characterised by a ready identification with Nkala's story. Yet, for South African audiences, Nkala's performance foregrounds commonality with the stranger amongst us, and in the process the production unsettles the familiar host/stranger paradigms by virtue of the way Nkala 'hosts' the audience in performing his story as a foreigner in our midst. It can thus be said that works like *The Crossing* insert a post-TRC turn into the current theatre landscape by claiming commonality and thus challenging the endemic discourses of difference (and of victimhood). While firmly grounded in the South African present and his remembered Zimbabwean past, Nkala's gaze is on future horizons of possibility. The 'controversial' optimism at the end of the play is itself a function of the politically unstable and even apparently hopeless situation of Zimbabwean

exiles. This offers a stark contrast to the proliferation of generally bleak and often satirical local representations of the failed achievements of the post-apartheid present. A contributing factor is that it is precisely the foreigner's marginal situation, outside the embedded burden of local South African history, that allows him to be 'free' (though vulnerable) to imagine and claim a future for himself, as expressed in the reiterated 'I' and 'me' at the end of his performance. In other words, the not-yet achieved political transformation of Zimbabwe paradoxically provides grounds for hope, even if only as a strategy for survival in a generally inhospitable South Africa.

Notes

1. <http://www.thezimbabwestandard.com/entertainment/20368-actor-takes-one-man-show-to-italy.html>
2. According to Andile Mngxitama, '[x]enophobia is the hatred of foreigners, but in South Africa there are no white foreigners. ... White settlers make up 10% of our population and own more than 80% of the stolen wealth, but we don't think of them as foreigners. It's the black we hate and attack. But it's good if we call it xenophobia because then it becomes a crime without context or history. In this way we absolve the real architects and creators of this barbarism' (in *Go home or die here*, Hassim et al. 2008: 197-198). Mngxitama adds: 'The events of the last three weeks are not caused by xenophobia; "negrophobia" is the more accurate term.' Chinweizu describes negrophobia: 'The fear and dislikes of blacks is a great disease. ... It is a psychological disease, a disease of the mind, which harvests dead black bodies every day' ('We are not all like that: the monster bares its fangs.' In *Go home or die here*, Hassim et al. 2008: 197-198).
3. Nuttall outlines the diverse intellectual histories of various strands of entanglement; the two which can perhaps most readily be associated with discussions on xenophobia are (from Achille Mbembe) the identification of the post-colony itself as 'a time of entanglement', and from the perspective of literary studies an exploration of 'ideas of the seam and of complicity', as outlined by Mark Sanders (Nuttall 2009: 2-5). Entanglement thus also involves looking at 'the intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored, or uninvited' (ibid.: 1).
4. Describing the convoluted nature of the question posed by the foreigner, Derrida says 'the question of the foreigner is a question of the foreigner addressed to the foreigner. As though the foreigner were first of all the one who puts the question or the one to whom you address the first question. As though the foreigner were being-in-question, the very question of being-in-question, the question-being or being-in-question of the question. But also the one who, putting the first question, puts me in question' (*Of hospitality* 2000: 3).
5. As Marvin Carlson (drawing on Victor Turner) notes, 'theatre is a specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded', this, together with the theatricality of the theatrical performance, combines to develop an efficacious procedure 'for an endlessly fascinating process of cultural and personal self-reflexion and experimentation' (1996: 198-199).
6. In *Asinamali*, as in many male-dominated plays of the period, gender was subsumed within an overriding discourse of race. The types of complicity explored in plays of this kind, which foregrounded homogenising categories of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed', can be described as either active collaboration, or, as Sanders puts it, an acknowledgement of complicity in injustice as a result of one's 'shared foldedness of human-being', or put more simply, a shared humanity despite difference (Sanders 2002: 8).
7. Gavin Bolton (1978, in Bundy 2003): Creating opportunities for aesthetic engagement: reflections from a drama classroom. *Applied Theatre Researcher* 4(2).
8. This conversation served as a research platform for this discussion. Those selected to participate in the conversation following a performance at UWC in March 2009 were students, researchers, theatre practitioners and writers, including

Antjie Krog. See performing xenophobia: a conversation with Jonathan Nkala and Bo Petersen, 2009: 207-220.

9. The discussion of trends in media responses immediately following the events of March to May 2008 is outlined more comprehensively in Flockemann, 'Complicit refugees and cosmopolitans: Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* in conversation with xenophobia in South Africa' (*International Humanities Journal* 6, 2008). See also Paul Ashton et al. ('The fatherless sons of violence', *Cape Argus*, Monday 23 June 2008: 15).
10. In her response, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, co-author of *Narrating our healing: perspectives in healing trauma* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007) adopts the personal tone that has characterised many responses: 'My heart aches for all our ravaged and ravaging people. Sometimes I feel I am wailing like a mourner with grief for the crushed hopes and desecrated dreams of just 14 years ago. Economic injustice is indeed right at the bowels of the problem in our country' (*Cape Times*, Friday 13 June: 9).
11. According to Devan Pillay, one of the 'underlying causes' of the xenophobic attacks is the pervasive 'market violence' that has been unleashed against the majority of South Africans (In *Go home or die here*, Shireen Hassim, Tawana Kupe and Eric Worby, eds. 2009: 98).
12. Neocosmos claims this is also the view 'regularly upheld by the press which simply takes its cue from its European largely nee-liberal sources which are reproduced totally uncritically' (2008: 3).
13. The issue of intimacy is addressed rather chillingly by Zimbabwean journalist Mavuso Dingani, who asks: '[T]he leap from xenophobia to the annihilation is huge, or is it? Or rather, is it not an intimate affair? Does one not have to live with them to know them? Then despise them; hate them enough to go to their home, break down their doors, rape the women. Does one not have to be close enough to stab, not once but a few times of course - just to make sure - then finally burn down their houses? That seems fairly close to me' (Pogroms: the revenge of the subalterns. <http://www.abahlali.org/node/3735> (accessed 10 March 2009).
14. <http://www.abahlali.org/node/17> (accessed 10 March 2009).
15. Several commentators refer to Fanon (and Biko) when describing the attacks as a form of negrophobia: In his *Black skin white masks* (1952), Fanon uses the figure of the Antillean Negro to define negrophobia as the consequence of the fact that the black man, having been a slave of the white man, enslaves himself. He argues that in terms of collective consciousness 'one is Negro to the degree to which one is sloppy, instinctual, malicious. Everything that is the opposite of these Negro modes of behaviour is white. This must be recognized as the source of Negrophobia in the Antillean' (Fanon 1952: 192).
16. Rebecca Fasselt shares our unease about the term 'negrophobia', noting that Afro-negrophobia seems the more appropriate term 'if the violence can be defined with a clear-cut label at all' (2009: 3).
17. For instance, it has been claimed that when women make public spectacles of themselves in performance (instead of being 'made a spectacle of') they own the production of their own spectacle: 'The theatrical spectacle "usurps" the

power of creation, but also assumes the right to re-view the criteria according to which the creative work is valued' (Kruger, in Goodman 1993: 15).

18. In the conversation, Kudzayi noted how this trend is increasingly noticeable during his return trips to Zimbabwe, 'because the situation gets so bad that if you don't find an outlet for it you can go mad. So if you walk through Zimbabwe now, you won't believe that the people you are meeting are experiencing the conditions you see on TV. Because they have managed to rise above their material conditions and still manage to fulfill some kind of life' (Conversation with Jonathan Nkala, 2009).

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