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# Locating Xenophobia: Debate, Discourse, and Everyday Experience in Cape Town, South Africa

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# Locating Xenophobia: Debate, Discourse, and Everyday Experience in Cape Town, South Africa

Belinda Dodson

*In May 2008, South Africa experienced an outbreak of violence against foreign Africans living in the country. Political leaders expressed shock and surprise, but there has in reality been long-standing and well-documented hostility toward African immigrants in South Africa. Several competing explanations have been put forward, with debate gaining urgency and polarization since the xenophobic attacks of 2008. After a selective review of the relevant literature to sketch the contours of that debate, this paper presents findings from research conducted with African immigrants living in Cape Town. Their experiences provide further evidence that anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviors on the part of “ordinary South Africans” toward foreign Africans are entrenched and systemic. The paper concludes by calling for further academic engagement and greater political commitment.*

In May 2008, graphic images of violent attacks on foreign Africans living in South Africa—scenes of knife- and stick-wielding aggressors, wounded victims, burning houses, and even, in the most horrific photographs, a burning man—were seen around the world.<sup>1</sup> These were soon replaced by images of people who had fled in fear of their lives to seek refuge in churches and police stations, eventually to be rehoused in tent settlements like those housing famine or war refugees. The attacks left more than sixty people dead and more than one hundred thousand homeless (Crush et al. 2008; Steinberg 2008a). They profoundly shocked both the international community and many South Africans themselves. Shamed by association with their fellow citizens’ display of barbarism, South Africans of all races took to the streets in protest marches reminiscent of the antiapartheid struggle. They carried placards with slogans such as Shame On Us, Join the Fight Against Xenophobia, Don’t Touch My Sista, and No Black in the Rainbow? (referring to Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others’ designation of South Africa as a multiracial rainbow nation).<sup>2</sup>

In the time since, some scholarly attention has been devoted to the outbreak of violence (e.g. Crush et al. 2008; Neocosmos 2008; Pillay 2008a, 2008b; Sharp 2008a, 2008b), as well as considerable effort by think tanks, civil society organizations, and the state-funded Human Sciences Research Council to understand and explain the antiforeigner attacks and make recommendations as to how any recurrence might be prevented (e.g. Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa 2008; Hadland 2008; Human Sciences Research Council 2008; Igglesden, Molson, and Polzer 2009; Misago, Landau, and Monson 2009; Steinberg 2008b). Strong differences of opinion have emerged about the root causes of xenophobia in South Africa and whether the attacks warrant the label “xenophobic” at all. While such focus on the events of 2008 is understandable and justified, much can be learned from an examination of the circumstances predating these overt attacks. Earlier, more quotidian expressions and experiences of xenophobia demonstrate how deeply entrenched anti-immigrant feeling is in South Africa and how it is manifest in the everyday lives of Africans from countries to the north.

This paper argues that the attacks of May 2008 were indeed xenophobic; that their causes lie in a complex of economic, political, social, and cultural factors, both contemporary and historical; and that less violent, “ordinary” experiences of xenophobia are part of the everyday lives of African immigrants in South Africa. The eruption of 2008, while a highly significant and deeply sobering moment for anyone concerned with protecting a nonracial, progressive, rights-based society, should not have struck anyone as a surprise. As already noted by Crush et al. (2008), this was a “perfect storm” of elements already in place, dating back well before 2008. For while the apartheid state’s hostility toward black Africa and Africans was explicit and expected, the end of apartheid did not bring a clean break with the past. The supposed “rainbow nation” has in reality been a strongly exclusionary space. Postapartheid immigration policy, cast initially in terms of “alien control,” has yet to grapple effectively with immigration and its management (Crush 1999 and 2002; Crush and Dodson 2007; Crush and McDonald 2001). Senior government ministers and officials have blamed “illegal immigrants” for placing strain on state resources or engaging in criminal activity. There have been incidents of police brutality and indiscriminate arrests of suspected foreigners, while the Lindela Deportation Centre has seen numerous rights abuses against foreign nationals. “Ordinary” South Africans, long before 2008, targeted foreign Africans for everything from mockery to murder (Crush et al. 2008; Harris 2001; Lefko-Everett 2008; Murray 2003). Statistically representative surveys have been conducted inquiring into South Africans’ opinions of foreigners, in particular foreign Africans, showing that South Africans across race, class, and gender lines hold deep-seated antiforeigner sentiments and attitudes (Afrobarometer 2009; Crush et al. 2008; Mattes et al. 1999). Little wonder, then, that the lives of foreign Africans living in South Africa—whether recent arrivals or long established; legally or illegally resident; economic migrants, asylum seekers, or refugees—are marked by discrimination, exclusion, and fear.

The paper consists of two main parts. The first presents a selective overview of the literature on xenophobia in South Africa, especially that written since the 2008 violence, highlighting the competing explanations that are emerging along with the intellectual and theoretical frameworks within which the main arguments are being developed. The second part of the paper presents the findings of primary, qualitative research conducted in Cape Town, South Africa, between October 2007 and April 2008. Migrants recorded their personal stories in solicited journals, outlining their migration histories and describing their experiences as foreign Africans in Cape Town. Quotations from these stories, collected in the months preceding the 2008 attacks, cast serious doubt on any notion that those attacks were isolated, aberrant, or the work of a few rogue elements. Rather, they provide further supporting evidence that xenophobia is entrenched and systemic in South African society, requiring similarly systemic responses if it is to be meaningfully addressed.

### **The Hate That Dare Not Speak Its Name? Competing Explanations and Intellectual Framings**

Debate about the nature, causes, and appropriate responses to the 2008 antforeigner attacks was quick to emerge but soon died down, or at least moved from more immediate media and political responses to the realm of academic conferences and journals. Demonstrating that xenophobia is a long-standing problem in the country, a significant preexisting literature details and attempts to explain discrimination against foreigners (Crush 1999 and 2002; Danso and McDonald 2001; Dodson and Oelofse 2000; Harris 2001, 2002; Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh, and Singh 2005; Morris 1998; Murray 2003; Neocosmos 2006; Nyamnjoh 2006; Reitzes 2002; Vigneswaran 2007). Much of the analysis published since the 2008 violence repeats and reinforces themes that had emerged in earlier work. At least six primary axes of explanation can be identified. These partially intersect and partially diverge.

First and foremost are economic or material explanations. In this line of argument, poor (still largely black) South African nationals see foreign Africans as competing with them for jobs, housing, and other services and resources to which they themselves feel entitled, while wealthier South Africans, black and white, resent "paying taxes to provide shelter and services to people seen to be pouring into South Africa to escape political incompetence and economic mismanagement further north" (Sharp 2008a:2). At the community level, this produces what has been aptly described as an "ethnified political economy," in which "microeconomic friction is displaced into hate-filled nationalism" (Manzi and Bond 2008). An interesting gender and sexual dimension to interpersonal competition between South Africans and foreigners has also been identified, with foreign men blamed for "flashing money around" and "stealing women from local men" (Dodson and Oelofse 2000:141).<sup>3</sup> That migration to South Africa remains heavily male-dominated

(Dodson 1998, 2008) likely contributes to both a perception and the reality of foreign men forming intimate relationships with South African women. There is also some validity in the idea of immigrants “stealing jobs”—not because employment is a zero-sum game, but because immigrants, especially those not legally permitted to work in South Africa, can be employed at lower wages and without the statutory benefits and protections attached to the employment of citizens, and thus compete unfairly with South Africans in certain low-wage sectors of the economy. A high rate of unemployment (officially 24.5 percent in the third quarter of 2009), especially among black South Africans, exacerbates the intensity of competition for jobs in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

A second axis of explanation is more social, or perhaps sociopolitical, proposing that construction of a new, nonracial sense of South African national identity after the end of apartheid inevitably meant the creation of a new oppositional “other,” and that this “other” is essentially defined as “non-South African” (Murray 2003; Peberdy 2001, Reitzes 2002). The clearest, most present manifestation of this “other” is those foreign Africans actually living in South Africa, described by Murray (2003:460) as “the ultimate strangers—the new helots—within the social landscape of South African cities.”

Closely and causally linked to this is the third type of explanation: cultural stereotyping. Increased immigration to South Africa from other African countries has brought South Africans into direct contact with foreign Africans to a far greater extent than during the apartheid era, when black immigration to South Africa was almost entirely prohibited, but for exceptions such as the temporary migration of mine labor (Crush and Dodson 2007; Peberdy 2001). Furthermore, postapartheid African immigrants have come from a far wider, more pan-African set of source countries than perhaps at any time in South Africa’s history (Morris and Bouillon 2001; Western 2001). Mutual stereotyping of foreigners by South Africans and of South Africans by foreigners essentializes and exaggerates perceived cultural differences and thus gives rise to prejudice and antagonism (Harris 2002; Morris 1998).

The fourth and fifth axes of explanation for xenophobia in South Africa lie in the realm of the political. In small-p political terms, antiforeigner attitudes are seen as being rooted in black South Africans’ acquisition of the full rights and benefits of citizenship, and their subsequent jealous protection of those rights and benefits against perceived threats of undermining or usurpation by noncitizens (Murray 2003; Nyamnjoh 2006). Certainly, there is evidence of popular confusion over which rights are universal, which apply to all who live in South Africa, and which are restricted to citizens alone, together with confusion about who is legally entitled to live and work in South Africa (Mattes et al. 1999; Crush et al. 2008). Such confusion is itself a potential source of conflict between South African citizens and those perceived as foreigners or “aliens”—who, further, are often conflated with being “illegal” and stereotyped as being dangerous and undesirable, including by the South African media (Danso and McDonald 2001; Fine and Bird 2006;

Jacobs and McDonald 2005; Vigneswaran 2007). In big-P political terms, lack of political leadership has been put forward as a factor in the production and reproduction of xenophobic attitudes (Crush et al. 2008; Steinberg 2008a, 2008b). Among senior government figures, right up to the three postapartheid presidents, attitudes toward foreign Africans in South Africa have been at best ambivalent and occasionally downright negative. Nelson Mandela himself, in a speech on the National Day of Safety and Security in 1994 just a few months after he had become president, stated, “the fact that illegal immigrants are involved in violent criminal activity must not tempt us into the dangerous attitude which regards all foreigners with hostility.” Such language became almost a leitmotif, serving to promote the association of immigrants with not just illegality but actual criminality, despite evidence that African immigrants are far likelier to be victims than perpetrators of criminal activity (Danso and McDonald 2001; Harris 2001). Rather than a lack of political leadership, this might better be seen as all too strong and influential political leadership, but in quite the opposite direction to that which one might expect of a rights-respecting, democratic state.

A sixth axis of explanation for xenophobia is denial of its very existence, best captured in the words of President Thabo Mbeki. On 3 July 2008, as reported in numerous media outlets, including the *Pretoria News*, he told a gathering in tribute to victims of the attacks that this was not xenophobia, but “naked criminal activity.” He went on:

What happened during those days was not inspired by possessed nationalism, or extreme chauvinism, resulting in our communities violently expressing the hitherto unknown sentiments of mass and mindless hatred of foreigners—xenophobia. . . . I heard it said insistently that my people have turned or become xenophobic. . . . I wondered what the accusers knew about my people which I did not know. And this I must also say—none in our society has any right to encourage or incite xenophobia by trying to explain naked criminal activity by cloaking it in the garb of xenophobia.

It is hard to disentangle all the threads in this nonexplanation for the causes of the attacks, criminal though they were, but Mbeki’s statement represents either a sophisticated form of denialism<sup>4</sup> or a staggering expression of ignorance. Whatever other material, political, cultural, or social forces might have been at work, the clear and explicit targeting of foreign nationals for brutal physical attack must surely be seen and understood as xenophobic, or at very least anti-immigrant. Contrary to Mbeki’s assertions, “possessed nationalism” seems a perfectly apt description of the expressions of hatred toward foreigners heard from the perpetrators of the May 2008 attacks. William Gumede had already noted how Mbeki’s vision of South Africa as speaking on behalf of Africa and the developing world had “not filtered down to the rank and file,” with “incidents of xenophobia against émigrés

from the rest of Africa becom[ing] increasingly commonplace on the streets of South African cities" (2007:155). For Mbeki, xenophobia on the part of South Africans could not readily be accommodated within the discourse of an African Renaissance and was therefore denied. More directly, Mbeki's weak stance on Zimbabwe and the resulting failure of South Africa and other SADC countries to intervene early and effectively in Zimbabwe's political crisis must carry part of the blame, with the collapse of the Zimbabwean economy being behind the large influx of Zimbabweans into South Africa in recent years, many of them among the victims of the 2008 attacks.

Sections of the South African academic community, too, appear to have had intellectual difficulty in naming the 2008 violence as xenophobia. Here, it is worth quoting at length the statement by the Council of Anthropology Southern Africa, issued in response to the attacks and later cited in an article by South African anthropologist John Sharp (2008a:2):

As anthropologists, we are deeply concerned, both professionally and as citizens, that these actions reflect a continuing emphasis in South African political discourse on cultural, racial and national differences. It is a discourse that, drawing on a long discarded anthropology, essentialises such differences even as it claims to celebrate them. It is a discourse that was central to colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid. It is a discourse that perversely persists to the present, now manifesting in the way the media labels as "xenophobia" horrendously violent acts where some South Africans raise fists, swing axes and pangas, and use matches to light fires as means to attack their fellows who happen to speak different languages and allegedly look somewhat different from themselves.

Intellectually discarded though cultural essentialism rightly is, being rooted in racist and discriminatory ideologies and discourses, Anthropology Southern Africa's reduction of representations of the attacks as "xenophobic" to mere labeling by the media stretches credulity. Linkages among discourse, belief, and practice are always indirect and fractured, but a South African wielding a weapon against Zimbabweans or Mozambicans on the grounds that they are Zimbabweans or Mozambicans—even if further associations attach to such labeling in terms of competing unfairly for jobs or houses or women, and recognizing that the very identification of an individual as Zimbabwean or Mozambican is to essentialize a colonially imposed national identity—does so because socially constructed discourses of identity politics have been internalized by citizen-subjects and translated into violent action, based on hatred and dehumanization of people deemed "foreign" or "other." Media and political discourses might well be complicit in sustaining identity politics, but the "horrendously violent acts" that the Council

of Anthropology Southern Africa condemnations are surely xenophobic prior to any labeling as such.

The Anthropology Southern Africa statement went on to denounce the notion of “the presence of people who are deemed to be ethnically, racially or nationally different” as the core of the problem, and thus the closing of borders to immigration as any sort of solution. Instead, “the solution lies in a politics which explicitly fosters the non-racialism espoused by the South African Constitution, that rejects and resists the power of identity politics, and that strives for a cosmopolitanism that valorizes the contributions of all who have ever settled in our part of the world whilst ensuring the freedom of association and of cultural and linguistic expression of all human beings” (Anthropology Southern Africa, cited in Sharp 2008a:2). No one can have any argument with these goals, but they are just that: goals, requiring concerted and collective effort aimed at effecting fundamental social change. And are racialism, anticosmopolitanism, narrow identity politics, and denial of cultural freedoms not themselves the core components of xenophobia? Furthermore, the Constitution that the authors uphold itself defines certain rights on the basis of citizenship, thereby in effect discriminating against noncitizens.

Identifying these contradictions and tensions in their public statement is not intended to criticize Anthropology Southern Africa, for their response to the events of May 2008 is both praiseworthy and courageous; rather, it highlights the difficulty with which South African intellectuals and social commentators have grappled with comprehending and representing the acts of barbarism perpetrated by their fellow citizens against people “who happen to speak different languages and allegedly look somewhat different from themselves” (Anthropology Southern Africa, cited in Sharp 2008a:2). In the *Guardian Weekly* in October 2008, South African writer and journalist Jonny Steinberg observed that South Africans still “appear unable to talk much about May’s violence,” finding themselves “in the midst of a very serious impasse about which they cannot speak” (Steinberg 2008a:27). In many ways, this is a hate that dare not speak its name.

Where debate continues is at scholarly conferences and in the pages of academic journals. Among its sharpest and most polarized airings has been the exchange published in August and October 2008 in *Anthropology Today* between the aforementioned Professor John Sharp, of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Pretoria, and Suren Pillay, of the state-funded Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of South Africa. Triggering the debate was the HSRC’s publication of the report *Citizenship, Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa* in June 2008, just weeks after the attacks. Sharp criticized the report for its “Fortress South Africa” approach and the researchers for their “facile labelling” of the violence as xenophobic (2008a:2). He presented the real explanation for so-called xenophobia as “the working of the global economic order” (2008:3). Rather than tighter border controls, his proposed solution is for the

South African state “to stand up to the dictates of neo-liberal orthodoxy” (2008a:3).

Pillay’s response accused Sharp of “mischief” in his misreading and misrepresenting of the report. Pillay claimed that the report neither simplistically ascribed the violence to xenophobia nor proposed a “fortress” solution. Instead:

A more effective and progressive management of the movements of people in the region needs to be put in place. . . . Citizenship, even the attractive but opaque idea of a “flexible cosmopolitan citizenship”, surely implies a bounded political community of rights and obligations under a form of sovereign order? Citizenship is, after all, as Foucault reminded us, first and foremost a political-legal construct, through which a form of disciplinary power rules. John Sharp seems to forget that. (Pillay 2008a:22)

Sharp counterattacked with this retort: “I still maintain that the ‘vulnerability’ which many poor South Africans face originates in the neo-liberal order to which capital and the state subscribe, rather than simply in unfair competition from illegal immigrants. If it is ‘mischievous’ to say this, then let mischief reign” (2008b:22).

What the Sharp–Pillay debate represents is effectively the polarization of the debate into two, ideologically based camps: the one based on political economy and a critique of neoliberal capitalism; the other based on a less materialist, more Foucauldian reading of politics, based on constructions of identity and relations of power. Pillay developed his line of reasoning in a presentation at the twelfth general assembly of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in December 2008. He pointed to a rupture between elite and subaltern classes, as described in the Jamaican case by David Scott (1999). This is manifest in forms of “subaltern self-fashioning,” which operate outside the normative frameworks of emancipatory or liberal politics and are often chauvinistic and violent in character (Pillay 2008b).

Another important scholar in this debate is sociologist Michael Neocosmos (2006, 2008), on whose work both Pillay and Sharp draw, if to different ends. Neocosmos’s views are cogently and convincingly articulated in his monograph *From Foreign Natives to Native Foreigners: Exploring Xenophobia in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2006) and in additional commentary and analysis written after the events of 2008. His central argument is that “popular” xenophobia is located within a “politics of fear,” with three core elements: “a state discourse of xenophobia,” “a discourse of South African exceptionalism,” and a “conception of citizenship founded exclusively on indigeneity” (Neocosmos 2008:587). In characterizing state discourse as xenophobic, he provides examples of xenophobic statements by political leaders and human-rights abuses by police and other state agents, similar

to those described above. By South African exceptionalism, he is referring to the widespread perception among South Africans of all races of South Africa's difference from and superiority to the rest of the African continent, and hence the neocolonial nature of much South African discourse on Africa. The politics of indigeneity to which he refers are those based on the idea, also widely held, that "indigeneity is the only way to acquire resources, jobs, and all the other goodies which should be reserved for native peoples only" (Neocosmos 2008:591), for example in implementation of the state's policy of black economic empowerment. Neocosmos's primary intellectual and theoretical guides are Frantz Fanon and French philosopher Alain Badiou, who has spoken in similar terms about the plight of the *sans-papiers* in France (Badiou 2001, 2005).

To Neocosmos, the "xenophobic pogroms" of 2008 were entirely predictable, and "the fact that quasi-fascist politics . . . have acquired a certain grip over large sections of the poor should come as no surprise" (2008:592). In fact, almost all serious scholars of xenophobia in South Africa have drawn similar conclusions about the predictability of the attacks, even if they disagree on matters of labeling, primary causation, and theoretical frameworks of explanation. The main people who claimed—or perhaps feigned—surprise were members of the national political elite, including some of those same senior government ministers whose own previous public statements had contributed to the hegemonizing of antifoigner discourse (Lefko-Everett 2008).

No one has yet fully explained either the prevalence of a culture of xenophobia in South Africa or the particular outbreak of that culture into specific acts of brutality in May 2008. What is clear is that "ordinary" or "everyday" xenophobia is deeply entrenched in South African society and directly experienced by African immigrants. Using the term *perfect storm* to capture the conjunction of historical, material, social, and political forces in what they call the "mayhem" of 2008, Crush et al. (2008) present the findings of opinion surveys conducted in South Africa in 1999 and 2006 by the Southern African Migration Project. These showed South Africans to hold xenophobic attitudes that in many ways hardened between 1999 and 2006, by which date 16 percent "of those interviewed said that they were prepared to combine with others to force foreign nationals to leave their area" and 9 percent "were prepared to use violence in the process" (Crush et al. 2008:37). Their blunt and trenchant conclusion is that "xenophobia and hostility to (particularly) other Africans is not the preserve of a lunatic fringe but represents the conviction of the majority of citizens" (Crush et al. 2008:7), arguing that the violence could have been—and may yet be—more widespread. Lefko-Everett (2008:10–11) points out, as do others, that "South Africa has seen recurrent and sporadic violent attacks against foreigners" that "in fact date back to 1994," again suggesting that the 2008 attacks, while greater in intensity and extent, were not without precedent or harbingers. Nor have anti-immigrant feelings subsided. Subsequent opinion surveys conducted by Afrobarometer (2009) in October and November 2008 found that 33 percent

of South Africans would be “likely” or “very likely” to “take part in action to prevent people who have come here from other African countries from moving into your neighbourhood.” Similar percentages applied to preventing African immigrants’ children from “sitting in the same classroom as your children,” “operating a business in your area,” and “becoming one of your co-workers.” Fully 21 percent of the survey sample felt that *all* people from other countries living in South Africa should be sent back to their own countries, with an additional 22 percent saying that those “who are not contributing to the economy” should be sent back.

Organizations such as the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand, the International Organization for Migration, and the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa have published reports on the 2008 violence against foreigners, variously detailing the events, identifying both proximate and more structural causes, evaluating responses by state and nonstate agencies, and proposing policy recommendations (Iglesden, Molson, and Polzer 2009; Misago, Landau, and Monson 2009; Steinberg 2008b). All support the view that the causes are deep rooted and systemic, and thus that the responses required to prevent recurrence of antiforeigner violence require concerted and sustained efforts by government, civil society, and international organizations. Unlike those implied by either Neocosmos or Sharp, which would require fundamental sociopolitical or political-economic change, their recommendations tend to be located within existing social, political, economic, and administrative structures, especially local and national government and the police and justice systems, and can thus be viewed as remedial, rather than radical or even reformist.

Two further points must be made about academic and policy writing on contemporary xenophobia in South Africa. First is that almost all authors recognize its origins in the racism, nationalism, violence, and isolation of the apartheid era. Policies of race-based urban influx control, racially designated group areas, and ethnic “homelands” divided South Africans and made many of them literally and legally foreigners in their own land. Still today, migrants to South African cities from South Africa’s own rural areas and former “homelands” occupy precarious social, economic, and political positions, manifested in poor living conditions, high unemployment, and exposure to crime and violence. As was evident in 2009, and already documented in earlier anti-immigrant attacks in Cape Town’s Mizamoyethu community (Dodson and Oelofse 2000), these marginalized citizens have themselves been among the perpetrators of attacks on African immigrants. The antiforeigner attitudes of the postapartheid state and society thus not only resemble but perpetuate and reproduce apartheid, scaled up from the intranational to the international level. The second point to make is the potential for geographical broadening of focus—something currently lacking in either scholarly or policy research on xenophobia in South Africa. Violence and discrimination against foreigners is, sadly, far from rare in other international contexts. In a recent issue of the geographical journal *Antipode*, for example, Henk van Houtum and Freerk Boedeltje (2009) contrast the experiences of tourists and

illegal migrants in Europe. Their article, titled "Europe's Shame: Death at the Borders of the EU," refers to the migrants, many of them African, who drown in the sea crossing, suffocate in ships or trucks, or commit suicide in detention or deportation centers. Drawing, like Neocosmos, on the political philosophy of Badiou (2001, 2005), these authors use Bauman's concept of "wasted lives" (2004) and Agamben's *Homo sacer* (1998) to characterize the political and social construction of "illegal migrants," leading in turn to "a subhuman and redundancy rhetoric which provokes racist populism" (van Houtum and Boedeltje 2009:229). South Africa, far from being exceptional or singular, should thus be seen as but one example of what appears to be a growing worldwide phenomenon of xenophobia, or at least anti-immigrant views. The rest of this paper details a local case study in a particular South African city, but the time is surely ripe for more international, comparative, and multiscalar research, combining theoretical and empirical insights from diverse geographical contexts.<sup>5</sup>

### Migrants' Experiences of Everyday Xenophobia

This section of the paper examines experiences of xenophobia as related by African immigrants in Cape Town in the months *preceding* the 2008 attacks. The author, a (white) South African now living and working in Canada, conducted the research while on sabbatical in Cape Town in 2007–2008. Similar research has been published by other scholars, for example, Alan Morris (1998) and Maxine Reitzes (2002), who have published accounts of African migrants' lives in Johannesburg. In its resonance with such earlier research findings, the discussion that follows provides evidence of both temporal and spatial continuities in Africans' experiences of xenophobia in South Africa, challenging the idea that the 2008 attacks were an isolated occurrence, carried out by rogue "criminal elements."

The research was inspired by the author's inadvertent but serendipitous contact with a Malawian man and a Zimbabwean woman, employed respectively as gardener and domestic worker in her rented sabbatical accommodation in Cape Town. Hearing their personal stories and developing interpersonal relations with these African immigrants presented an opportunity to conduct qualitative, ethnographic research to complement the author's earlier and ongoing quantitative analysis on cross-border migration in the region (Dodson 1998, 2008). Both these individuals had been educated to at least secondary-school level and were fluent in English and one or more African languages. They had wide social networks among other African immigrants living in Cape Town. Employing them as research assistants provided a means by which to access the experiences of other African immigrants. Without such an "in" to such a socially marginalized, geographically dispersed, and diverse-origin population, the research would have been extremely difficult, or even impossible. Instead of being asked to do face-to-face interviews, the research assistants were given ballpoint pens and blank

school exercise books, and were asked first to record their own “migrant stories” and then to ask other immigrants of their acquaintance to do the same. No direct contact occurred between me as the researcher and any but the initial two subjects, and thus all but these two of the handwritten journals received were entirely anonymous.<sup>6</sup> The journals were all written in English, a lingua franca to immigrants from the region. Adopting a biographical approach and accessing “migrant stories” has become well-established practice in migration studies (Gilmartin 2008; Halfacree and Boyle 1993; Silvey and Lawson 1999), and solicited journals or diaries are commonly employed as qualitative research methods in the social sciences, being used to good effect in vulnerable or marginalized communities, including in other parts of South Africa (Meth 2003).

Significantly for the argument of this paper, the research was not explicitly or even intentionally about xenophobia per se. Rather, it was designed to elicit information and opinion about the general experience of being an African immigrant in South Africa. A letter of information and invitation to potential participants outlined the general themes on which information and opinion were sought, such as reasons for leaving their home country and coming to South Africa, how they had found a job and a place to live, how their own neighbors and South Africans in general were behaving toward them, and what they liked and did not like about living in South Africa. That respondents’ personal stories presented a litany of discrimination, exclusion, hostility, and violence is therefore highly telling. This was before the May 2008 attacks had occurred, so that there was no distortion of respondents’ views by those events or their aftermath. Also noteworthy are the pan-African origins of the thirty-three eventual respondents, who hailed from thirteen different countries: Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Several were from Zimbabwe, which then was in an even worse state of political and economic turmoil than at the time of writing (2009), and there were also a number from Malawi, Somalia, and Zambia.

While it can make no claim to being representative, this was a diverse sample. Respondents included men and women and represented a range of age, education level, and length of stay in South Africa. There was a diversity of occupations, though most were in low-wage, informal sectors of the economy, even for highly qualified people (for example, the female Zimbabwean cleaner was a qualified and experienced high-school teacher). For obvious reasons, they were not asked, nor did respondents voluntarily record, their immigration status; though from their documented reasons for leaving “home,” it is likely that the stories came from people designated variously as official refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants, both legal and undocumented. Interestingly, given the constrained means of accessing respondents, the people whose stories were obtained were found to be living all over the city of Cape Town, including the Southern Peninsula, the City Bowl, the Atlantic seaboard, the False Bay suburbs, and the

Cape Flats townships; and in housing ranging from formal rental housing in middle-class neighborhoods to shacks in informal settlements. This, too, makes the repetition and recurrence of accounts of exclusion and alienation suggestive of a more deep-seated climate of xenophobia, rather than isolated incidents of neighborhood-scale conflict in one or two locations.

The material that emerged was remarkably rich and detailed, as well as being disturbing and depressing. Much of the remainder of this section uses respondents' own words to relate their personal experiences. Almost all provided accounts of everyday xenophobia in the fear, dislike, and disrespect that they encountered in simply going about their lives. These experiences were keenly felt and deeply resented. Each story was unique, though there were clear common threads. Among these commonalities were the motives, either economic or political, for leaving their home countries. Here are the words of a 26-year-old woman who had recently left Zimbabwe:

I had to leave Zimbabwe because of the economic hardships that I was facing there. . . . I was just in the process of enjoying my career as a teacher, but the money I was earning after a month was only equivalent to 100 Rand<sup>7</sup> so I couldn't budget the money, and it was not enough to buy basic foodstuff for only a week for me and my two-year-old daughter. So I had to come here for a better living.

Somali respondents, like this 16-year-old boy, described fleeing war:

We live on the border with Ethiopia and were often under attacks, . . . and life was not easy for my family. My father was already here in South [Africa]. So for fear of us being made to join the fighters my father asked me and my 2 brothers to join him.

Others spoke simply of "wanting a change," or of seeking better economic opportunities.

Regardless of their origins and motives, and thus their likely legal status in the country, almost everyone had encountered negative attitudes from people with whom they came into contact in their everyday lives, including neighbors. As is evident in the quotations below, these attitudes are themselves perceived in racial terms, with distinctions drawn among whites, coloreds, and Xhosas:<sup>8</sup>

Currently where I'm staying now, my South African neighbours do not like me at all. Sometimes when I greet them they ignore or they answer in a very low voice. Generally some of the South African people do not enjoy seeing us in their country and I have a feeling that they do not like us, especially most South African women. (26-year-old Zimbabwean female)

The coloured neighbours are very mutual and we communicate well, . . . but the Xhosas are very hostile and bitter, only a few may greet you and talk to you. (40-year-old Zimbabwean female)

Some neighbours are very friendly but others they swear [at] us saying *kwirikwiri*,<sup>9</sup> which is not right—we are all African. (29-year-old Malawian male)

South Africans in general are racists. Xhosas think they own this part of the country and no-one should invade it. This is not a good attitude. . . . We were all created by one God. We are all human beings. (60-year-old DRC female)

I live in a white community. My neighbours are very friendly and helpful. When I meet some of them, we share stories about the ever-changing weather and current affairs. . . . Xhosas, some of them are extremely nice but others are racists. I am very dark brown in complexion so they scorn and laugh at me. They also mock my accent. . . . Though I am comfortable here, I won't encourage my friends to come to SA, because Xhosas are racists. (45-year-old Kenyan male)

Explanation for such treatment at the hands of South African neighbors was seldom offered, but where it was provided, respondents typically noted that South Africans “accuse us of taking their jobs and women” (27-year-old Zimbabwean male). Also recorded were experiences of robbery and other forms of violence:

The Xhosas are a bit naïve towards us—they blame us for causing unemployment to them. But the coloureds are better and appreciate us better. Though at times they waylay us and force us to give them change or Rands for beer and cigars. (28-year-old Malawian male)

Others say just because we're foreigners we can't run business because we are getting their jobs, but it doesn't mean that. Others they rob us. But foreigners like from Malawi, Congo, Tanzania, Zambia are good to us. (34-year-old Somali male)

I am a victim of thuggery as I was beaten and my money and phone taken. . . . After being mugged twice before, I am always conscious that thieves are everywhere in South Africa. (38-year-old Zimbabwean female)

They are very hostile and often attack and rob us. Even in the streets they stop us and ask for money. We are also ridiculed and beaten for no reason. The coloureds and the Xhosas are the problem. They break into our shop and steal our goods. . . . But others are friendly and compassionate, they even come to warn me if the robbers intend to attack us. I have learnt to befriend a lot of the local boys to buy freedom. (16-year-old Somali male)

Disturbing in themselves, such experiences present warning signals of the violence that was to come. They echo the xenophobic attitudes that surveys have demonstrated as being held by large segments of South African society and the use of violence in their expression. They communicate the climate of fear and exclusion in which African immigrants in the cities of South Africa already lived, even before May 2008. Certainly they expose, as either ignorant or disingenuous, the statements by Mbeki and other members of his government that South Africans are not xenophobic, or suddenly became so for a few mad weeks one May. They hint at the enmeshed economic, social, and political foundations of xenophobia, along with its origins in the racial divisions of apartheid. As Neocosmos put it, writing after the 2008 attacks: “the chickens have come home to roost” (2008:592).

## Conclusions, Reflections, and Future Directions

Along with similar findings from scholarship dating back to 1994, these retellings of migrants' experiences suggest that entrenched xenophobia is in large part what lay behind the 2008 violence. The findings do not, however, provide straightforward evidence to help resolve the debate over the primary cause of xenophobia (or “antiforeigner violence”). Whether one chooses Marx, Foucault, Fanon, or Badiou as one's intellectual guide, much remains to be understood and explained about xenophobia in South Africa. Nor should the niceties—or sometimes not-so-niceties—of academic debate stand in the way of confronting xenophobia in all its political, social, and economic dimensions, and wherever it occurs, in either geographical space or the hierarchies of power. Geographically conceptualized analysis, examining processes operating at different scales, as well as interscale linkages, is likely to prove especially useful. Such analysis can make more evident the “nesting” of scale and process, for example local competition over low-wage jobs within national macroeconomic policies, or local micropolitics within wider relations of power and patronage. It can demonstrate the mutually entangled scales at which discrimination and exclusion are enacted and experienced, from the microscale of dwelling and neighborhood to the national level of immigration law and constructions of citizenship. Such analysis will allow comparison with other geographical and historical contexts. Also important in further analysis is to examine the opinions and attitudes of the perpetrators and not just the victims of violence. This demands ongoing, longitudinal

research, along the lines of that already being conducted by Afrobarometer, the Human Sciences Research Council, the Forced Migration Project, and the Southern African Migration Project. Only thus will it be possible to understand the mechanisms behind South Africans' violent "othering" of African immigrants and to locate it within South Africa's uneven and unfinished sociopolitical transformation.

More recent protests over housing and service delivery have seen revived expressions of xenophobia in parts of the country (BBC 22 July 2009; York 2009), though it is unclear whether any upsurge is being manufactured by the media or is an accurate reflection of on-the-ground realities. The risks of a recurrence of the events of May 2008 appear to be genuine. Even in the absence of such concentrated brutality, the everyday forms of xenophobia experienced by African immigrants are a stain on the reputation of the South African "rainbow nation"—one that has yet to register fully on South Africans' collective social conscience. Insights into African immigrants' daily lives add motive and impetus to intellectual and political grappling with these issues. They challenge academic researchers to conduct further enquiries and continue to "speak truth to power," and political leaders and policymakers to acknowledge the severity and complexity of an issue that they urgently need to tackle.

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#### NOTES

1. The man was Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, a Mozambican who had come to South Africa to look for work. Gruesome images of his death appeared in several newspapers, and his life and

death have been commemorated in *Burning Man: Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave*, a film by Adze Ugah, part of an initiative called Films Against Racism (Tolsi 2008).

2. Sources for the slogans listed here include photographs in print and online media, as well as personal communications with my relatives and friends who attended the march in Johannesburg on 24 May 2008. See, for example, [www.monstersandcritics.com/news/africa/features/article\\_1407373.php/](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/africa/features/article_1407373.php/).
3. My thanks to late South African geographer Glen Elder (2003) for highlighting the significance of this observation.
4. Something at which Mbeki has proven himself a past master on other, equally important sociopolitical issues, for example HIV/AIDS (Nattrass 2007).
5. Here, the work of Nyamnjoh (2006), comparing South Africa and Botswana, stands as an exception and promising example, albeit still within a Southern African context.
6. All were, of course, confidential.
7. The rand is the South African currency, currently valued at approximately eight to the U.S. dollar.
8. This employs the common South African terminology of *coloured*, referring to “mixed-race”; the Xhosa are one of the largest African ethnolinguistic groups in the country.
9. A derogatory term, based on scornful imitation of the accents of some Southern Africans.

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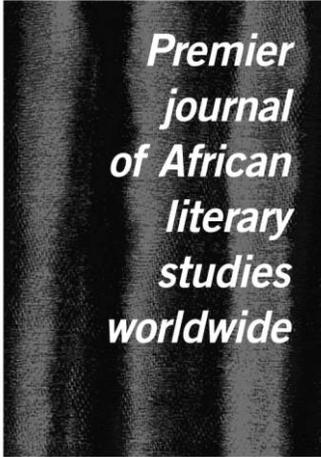
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**SPECIAL ISSUE:** *Research in African Literatures*,  
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**Aimé Césaire, 1913-2008: Poet, Politician,  
Cultural Statesman**

H. Adlai Murdoch, University of Illinois at  
Urbana-Champaign, Guest Editor

This special commemorative issue of *Research in African Literatures* focuses on the life and work of Aimé Césaire. It traces the triumphs, paradoxes, and contradictions that marked the double trajectory of his near half-century in public life, beginning not with the publication of the Cahier in 1939 but with his campaign in 1944-45 on the French Communist Party ticket for mayor of Fort-de-France and for the new French National Assembly. Césaire won by a landslide in the May 27, 1945 election, and would remain mayor of Fort-de-France for nearly 56 years, until 2001, and represent Martinique as a deputy in France's National Assembly until 1956 and again from 1958 until 1993.

A man truly of many parts, Césaire was at once poet, dramatist, essayist, and politician – with the dual role of mayor and député embodied in the last of these. Clearly, he lived and acted by and through the word, and he saw language as both tool and weapon. As a result, exploring the boundaries of Césaire's multivalent life and work provides fertile ground for literary and cultural exegesis.



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