

Xenophobia and Constructions of the Other

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Introduction

Makwerekwere is the hostile term commonly used to construct foreign Africans living in South Africa as Other. It carries with it the undercurrent of emotions – such as loathing, outrage, fear and rejection – that result in ongoing and repeated xenophobic attacks, the worst and most widespread of which occurred in 2008. The term is an onomatopoeic representation of the ‘unintelligible’ sounds of the languages spoken by foreign Africans, highlighting language as a significant marker of identity. In an analysis of the ‘ideology of makwerekwere’, Matsinhe (2011) confronts the question:

How did it come to pass that in the imagination of an African Nation [South Africa], Africa and Africans represent the negativity of Otherness? (p. 298)

He considers the role played by colonial and apartheid discourses on the inferiority of blackness in the production of ‘collective afrophobic self-contempt’ (p. 299). When the ongoing negative representation of foreign Africans in the South African press (Adegoke, 1999; Harris, 2002) and the

criminalisation of African foreign nationals as ‘illegals’, ‘illegal aliens’, ‘illegal immigrants’, ‘criminals’ and ‘drug traffickers’ (Matsinhe, 2011, p. 298)

by the Department of Home Affairs and the South African Police are added to the mix, there can be no doubt that language and discourse are implicated in the production of xenophobia.

Over a decade ago, Adegoke (1999) found that discourses circulating in the South African press pertaining to foreign African nationals and their countries were ‘systematically negative’ (p. 114). This led her to conclude that xenophobia should be addressed in schools. She recommended inclusion within the critical literacy curriculum, where other oppressive discourses such as those pertaining to race, gender, class, sexual orientation and age, for example, are given

attention. With the subsequent ongoing and widespread attacks on foreign Africans in South Africa, her recommendation appears prescient.

The article begins with competing explanations of xenophobia in South Africa and theory related to Othering. The link between apartheid discourses and xenophobic Othering is brought to bear on an exploration of *District 9*, a science fiction movie set in South Africa. All these ideas come together in the final section of the paper which offers an example of critical literacy activities relating to *District 9* and the role of movies, language and discourse in the construction of the dangerous Other.

Xenophobia in South Africa

The literature on xenophobia offers different theses to account for xenophobia in South Africa. An overview of these is provided by Matsinhe (2011, 297-298). Xenophobia is attributed to the

- need to find a scapegoat that can be blamed for crime, unemployment and the spread of HIV/AIDS (Morris, 1998 p.1130 in Matsinhe, p. 297)
- ‘sudden and intense exposure to strangers’ after extended lack of contact with the rest of Africa during apartheid (Morris, 1998 p. 1125 in Matsinhe, p 297)
- ‘alleged visible otherness’ of foreign Africans (Harris, 2002 in Matsinhe, p. 298)
- negative representations of Africa in the South African media which produced discourses that positioned foreign Africans as a dangerous other (Harris, 2002 in Matsinhe p. 298; also Adegoke, 1999)
- state’s criminalization of Africans as ‘illegal aliens’ (Matsinhe, 2011, p. 298)
- perceived inferiority of Africans compared to South Africans (Neocosmos, 2008 in Matsinhe, p. 298).

Matsinhe argues that, while all of these ideas have some purchase, none of them is able to explain why the xenophobia is directed specifically at black African foreigners. Using theories developed by Fanon (1967) and Elias (1994), Matsinhe offers an account that attributes xenophobia to the unconscious projection onto others of the discourses that produced ‘internalised self-loathing in colonised and apartheid subjects in South Africa’, that he describes as ‘the disgrace of blackness’ (2011, p. 300). With reference to Fanon and Freud, Matsinhe

argues that ‘in self loathing, the self loathers also loathe those who most resemble themselves’ (p.302). Because the real differences with the Other are slight they are magnified to render the outsider within, visible.

Physical self-presentation is put under scrutiny, graded and coded, eg in terms of dress style and haircuts. ... Attention is also paid to the shades of skin colour. The idea that foreigners are ‘too dark’ or ‘too black’ is part of the collective South African

Language is exaggerated as a marker of difference. Even where foreign Africans are able to speak an indigenous South African language, the extent of their knowledge is tested and their accents are carefully examined for signs of South African authenticity.

What Matsinhe does not appear to consider are the material conditions of unemployment and competition for scarce resources that poor, largely black, South Africans believe to be exacerbated by both legal and illegal immigration. This is expressed in the widespread discourse of ‘foreigners coming to steal our jobs’. Because access to good education and qualifications is unavailable to the majority of black South Africans, they are the most vulnerable in relation to competition for work. Because poverty and unemployment in South Africa are overdetermined by race, Matsinhe might have over estimated the effect of internalised racial inferiority.

While theories of the production of the Other are rooted in postcolonial theory (Fanon, 1967; Bhaba, 2004; Said, 1978). Thompson (1990) uses Othering as one of the cornerstones of his critical theory of ideology. In discussing the modes of operation of ideology, Thompson sees the mode of *unification*, which works to establish an ‘us’, and the mode of *fragmentation*, the operation that splits others off from this constructed ‘we’, as central to the operation of power and the dividing practices of inclusion and exclusion. According to Thompson (1990, p. 64) power works by

constructing at the symbolic level, a form of unity which embraces individuals in a collective identity, irrespective of the differences and divisions which may separate them.

Fragmentation, on the other hand works to emphasize ‘distinctions, differences and divisions between individuals and groups’ (Thompson, 1990: 65). The Other is demonized and

dehumanized. As a threat to an imagined ‘us’, the dangerous Other has to be restricted, suppressed, controlled and even eliminated. Barbaric acts of violence are born in these constructions of an alien other.

A particular vivid and recent example is the murder of a 27 year old Mozambican taxi driver, Mido Macia, on 27 February 2013 which was recorded on amateur video and disseminated through social networks. After he allegedly assaulted a police officer and took his firearm, the police tied him to the back of their van and dragged him through the streets for about 400 metres. Macia was subsequently taken to the Daveyton police station, where he died from internal bleeding caused by injuries to his head. It is widely believed that police beat him to death and the policeman involved have been charged with murder. This is just one example of the many inhumane and ongoing acts of violence directed at foreign African nationals in a climate of increasing distrust (Afrobarometer and the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, 2012).

The link between apartheid discourses of ‘die swart gevaar’, [literally, the black danger] and current discourses of xenophobia is portrayed in the movie *District 9* and co-incidental the timing of its release. Because xenophobia is spread across the globe, the movie’s relevance has not been restricted to South Africa.

District Nine

Neill Blomkamp’s film, *District 9*, was originally intended as an allegory of apartheid. It was released in South Africa shortly after the 2008 xenophobic attacks in which 67 foreign Africans were killed, hundreds were injured and thousands were forcibly driven out of their homes. The ease with which the film can also be read as an allegory of xenophobia speaks to the continuities of black othering across both these discourses. This supports Matsinhe’s thesis. In South Africa both of the discourses of apartheid and xenophobia are overtly racist. In xenophobic discourses elsewhere, racism is thinly disguised: Australia constructs asylum seekers as the threat, France – women who wear the veil, Europe – migrant workers, the U.S., illegal immigrants. The list is endless. Foucault (1970) argues that discourse is ‘the power which is to be seized’ (p. 110), precisely because of its power to shape identities. As educators we have to produce resistant

readers who understand the social effects of all forms of semiotics. The film *District 9* provides a way of entering this difficult space.

District Nine is science fiction: the story of human beings' first encounter with an alien species, which is set in Johannesburg, South Africa. Neill Blomkamp, the director who grew up in South Africa during Apartheid, wanted to make a film about segregation and the dehumanization of the racialised Other. He uses satire to do so with a light touch and his choice of genre enables him to play with the multiple connotations of the word aliens (strangers, foreigners, beings from outer space). The use of humour lowers our defences, enabling us to laugh simultaneously at both the characters and ourselves. Lying behind the laughter, however, is our recognition of our own prejudices or inaction and our own complicity when confronted with the unjust use of power.

District 9 is a film about how we relate to a species very different from our own. It is about human arrogance and intolerance when confronted by the unknown stranger. It is about fear for an *us* that justifies violence against *them*, a *they* who are different. It is about corporate greed and ruthlessness. It is about two fathers: one (the human father) willing to destroy his daughter and son-in-law to serve his own selfish ends; the other (the Alien father) striving to give his child a meaningful future. In the end it is about our ability to transcend our naturalized prejudices and to understand and appreciate the Other. As Wikus, the main character and anti-hero, comes to know the alien so do we; his transformation becomes our transformation.

The aliens are depicted as large and insect-like. They resemble the 'Parktown prawn' (*Libanasidus vittatus*, a monotypic king cricket), which although harmless instills fear in many South Africans. Frightening as the Aliens' size and appearance are, the Prawns nevertheless have human features that enable us to empathize with them. Their eyes are expressive, their facial movements reveal tenderness, and they act with an intelligence that surpasses our own.

The script is explicit about the naming of the aliens and the following sequence is presented as a collage of news reports and the opinions of ordinary South Africans.¹

¹ Each dash represents the start of a different speaker

- *The aliens, prawns, they take my wife away.*
- *The derogatory term Prawn is used for the aliens and obviously implies something that is a bottom feeder, that scavengers the leftovers. I mean you can't say they don't look like that. That's what they look like, right?*
- *The aliens made off with an undisclosed amount of cash. One bystander was hurt.*
- *What for an alien might be seen as recreational, setting fire to a truck, derailing a train, is obviously an extremely destructive act.*
- *They can take the sneakers you're wearing off you.*
- *They take whatever you have on you. Your cellphone or anything.*
- *After that they kill you. (District 9, lines 63-73)*

Notice how this description ranges across their strange appearance, the assumption of their criminality, their different values and the threat they pose to human life. The conclusion is inevitable – they must be expunged.

- *I think they must fix that ship and they must go.*
- *A virus, a selective virus. Release it near the aliens.*
- *The must just go. I don't know where, just go. (District 9, lines 57-59).*

This is later shown visually when Wikus discovers a large prawn incubator. After phoning for a 'population control team' he unplugs the nutrition supply to the prawn eggs and the 'little guys' with glee. In handing part of the disconnected life support system to Thomas, his side-kick, he says

*You can take that. You wanna keep it as a souvenir of your first abortion?
(District 9, line 214).*

Wikus' casual manner, as if murdering a new generation is an everyday occurrence, shows complete disregard for the life of the Other. Murder is committed without pause or regret.

The residents riot and the government develops plans to move 1.8 million prawns to a

safer and better location, 200 kilometers outside of the city ... so that the people of Johannesburg and South Africa are going to live happily and safely, knowing the prawn is very far away (Wikus, District 9, lines 87-91).

This is an inter-textual reminder of the Apartheid laws which confined black South Africans to rural Bantustans, the so-called ‘homelands’, and to urban ghettos. The name ‘District 9’ evokes memories of evictions from an area in Cape Town known as ‘District Six’.

District Six was named the Sixth Municipal District of Cape Town in 1867. Originally established as a mixed community of freed slaves, merchants, artisans, labourers and immigrants, District Six was a vibrant centre with close links to the city and the port. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the history of removals and marginalisation had begun.

The first to be 'resettled' were black South Africans, forcibly displaced from the District in 1901. ... In 1966, [District 6] was declared a white area under the Group Areas Act of 1950, and by 1982, the life of the community was over. 60 000 people were forcibly removed to barren outlying areas aptly known as the Cape Flats, and their houses in District Six were flattened by bulldozers. (District Six Museum, <http://www.districtsix.co.za/frames.htm>, downloaded 28 October 2010).

It was only one of many communities to be bulldozed in terms of the Group Areas Act (1950) and in the name of separate development. The use of military vehicles in the film is a visual reminder of the caspers and hippos used to control black townships during periods of insurrection in the struggle for liberation, euphemistically referred to as periods of ‘unrest’. African black townships in South Africa, like *District 9*, were built outside of the city with few roads leading in and out, enabling them to be cut off easily by military forces. The aerial shots of *District 9* are images of existing shack settlements which show how the structural effects of segregation and apartheid continue.

The signage in *District 9* holds up a mirror to old apartheid signs. The signs that include alien silhouettes appear in the film *District 9*. Humans are constructed as the unmarked norm for whom privileges are reserved. The Prawns are designated as ‘non-humans’ who are confined to the slums, denied access to places reserved for humans, and denied the right to simple amenities such as buses and benches. They are also constructed as unclean and corrosive, in both the literal and figurative meanings of the word. The old apartheid signage constructs whites (or Blankes, in Afrikaans) as the unmarked form, with blacks marked linguistically with the prefix *non*. Amenities are similarly preserved for whites only. Non-whites who transgress might expect to be shot and devoured by dogs. In these signs we see the pervasive construction of blackness as

inferior described by Matsinhe (2011), which produces the ‘disgrace of blackness’ subsequently projected onto foreign Africans (See the wording of signs in Figure 1).

Figure 1 Sign wordings

Wording of the signs in <i>District 9</i>	Wording on Apartheid signs
<p>BUS BENCH FOR HUMANS ONLY REPORT NON-HUMANS 1-866-666-6001 BEWARE: NON-HUMAN SECRETIONS MAY CORRODE METAL D-9.COM</p> <p>PICKING UP NON-HUMANS IS FORBIDDEN \$10,000 FINE INTO THE SLUMS</p> <p><u>FOR HUMANS ONLY</u> NON-HUMANS BANNED</p>	<p>NIE-BLANKES – NON WHITES ONLY</p> <p>WHITES ONLY</p> <p><u>FOR USE BY WHITE PERSONS</u> THESE PUBLIC PREMISES HAVE BEEN RESERVED FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF WHITE PERSONS <u>By Order Provincial Secretary</u> <u>VIR GEBRUIK DEUR BLANKES</u></p> <p>DANGER! NATIVES, INDIANS & COLOURED. IF YOU ENTER THESE PREMISES AT NIGHT YOU WILL BE LISTED AS MISSING. ARMED GUARDS SHOOT ON SIGHT. SAVAGE DOGS DEVOUR THE CORPSE.</p> <div data-bbox="862 968 1021 1094" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content;"> <p>Picture of a skull and crossbones</p> </div> <p>YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED !</p>

As in the case of South African xenophobic manifestations, Othering has a linguistic dimension. The choice of language, accent and grammar are clear markers of identity in this film. Shot as a quasi-documentary, the action is interspersed with news broadcasts, expert commentary, and vox populi. English is the unmarked choice of language with Wikus, the anti-hero, using Afrikaans-English with flat vowels and occasional grammatical inaccuracies. His accent, designed to capture that of an obedient apartheid civil servant, suggests both his white collar status and his level of education. His father-in-law’s accent, by way of contrast, is a University educated variety of Afrikaans-English and suggests his wealth and his power. Posh Anglo-varieties of South African English are given to the expert commentators and news readers, while African languages and second language errors are reserved for Africans on the street. The Nigerian criminals speak in a sub-titled foreign African tongue. The use of sub-titles when the Aliens

speak, shows that the sounds they are making, constitute an intelligible language of an intelligent species. This echoes the ideology of makwerekwere where the word references the the sounds of foreign African languages experienced as incomprehensible to local Africans.

The linguistic choices in the script are directed at constructing the prawn as primitive, incapable of understanding ‘the concept of private property’ and ‘unable to think for themselves’. The following sequence shows the ways in which Wikus infantilises the Prawn.

Prawn: No, it's not my house. I don't live here.

Wikus: Well, that's a pity because, you know, this ... This is nice cat food, you know. But of course it's not your house. So, we'll just have to go and give it to someone else. ...

News reader: The creatures became terribly obsessed with cat food. (District 9, lines 194 – 198).

This use of language appears subtle when contrasted with the use of images which portray the aliens as ugly savages hacking off chunks of raw meat to cart away in wheelbarrows.

But negative constructions are not reserved for the aliens alone. Traces of old-style apartheid interaction appear in Wikus' relation to Thomas, his black partner. Wikus assumes the right to wear the only protective vest, while Thomas' fears for himself and consequently for his family are trivialised. Thomas addresses Wikus as ‘boss’, which creates an intertextual reference to apartheid forms of address. Finally, the film is framed within current xenophobic discourses which construct Nigerians as drug dealers and criminals.

Sociologist: The Nigerians had various scams going. One of them was the cat food scam. Where they sold cat food to the Nigerians for exorbitant prices.... Not to mention interspecies prostitution. And they also dealt in alien weaponry.

Wikus: You have car high-jacking, there's a chop shop there, you can see that, that's somebody's car in there....

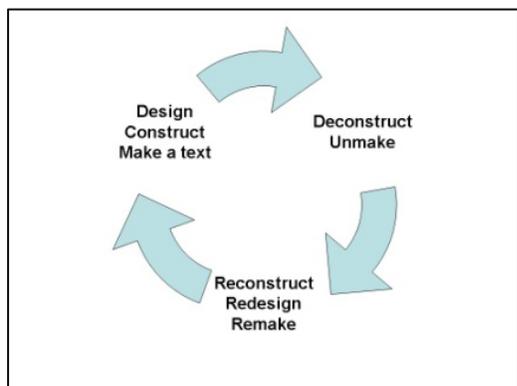
News commentator: The Nigerians in District 9 are headed by a man called Obesandjo. He's a very powerful underground figure in Johannesburg.

Wikus: You don't want to play with these boys. They will cut you in pieces. (District 9, lines 213-224).

Many of the high frequency tropes relating to foreign Africans that Adegoke (1999) found in her research can be seen in *District 9*'s construction of the Nigerians: war and violence, foreign relations, dictatorship, civil unrest and riots, economic advancement (their own), corruption and crime. In addition, Adegoke's analysis by country shows a negative evaluation of Nigeria, particularly within the frames of crime and dictatorship (Adegoke, 1999, p.91). Even as the film moves towards reconstructing the 'Prawns' as an intelligent and compassionate species, and towards transforming Wikus into a more sympathetic human being, the Nigerians continue to be constructed as unremittingly evil. This works to reinforce xenophobic discourses of foreign Africans in South Africa.

Janks (2010) describes the process of design, deconstruction and redesign as cyclical (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Janks' redesign cycle



District 9 is designed to deconstruct and satirise apartheid's practices of segregation, exclusion and othering and the violence used to enforce racist policies. The treatment of the Prawns acts as a mirror to apartheid policies and practices. It is therefore ironic that in doing so, it produces a text which, when deconstructed, shows its own forms of othering, this time of Nigerians.

Conclusion

Stories often require heroes and villains, but who is chosen for which role has everything to do with the discourses from which they emerge. These choices reflect the relations of power that exist in specific socio-historical contexts, who counts as the enemy and the patterns of naming and representation. It is important for students to understand the discourses that are instantiated

in these texts and the ways in which they form our understanding of the Other, often below the level of our consciousness. In the same way movies are a product of their place and time. Figure 5 is an activity taken from *Doing Critical Literacy* (Janks, 2014). It is designed to help students read Hollywood films in relation to the social, political and historical shape-shifting of the enemy. Discussions of the Other in Hollywood movies abound in the literature (for example, Small, 1973; Steinmetz, 2011; Shaheen, 2009).

Figure 3 Extract from *Doing Critical Literacy* (Janks, 2014)

The following pedagogical moves underpin the activities in ‘Us and Them’:

1. Students are required to uncover both the history and the ideology that lead to particular constructions of Otherness.
2. They have to deconstruct negative naming practices.
3. They have to describe the stereotypes of successive enemies portrayed by Hollywood.
4. They have to consider the possible social effects of repeated negative representations of the Other.
5. They have to find and interrogate representations of the Other in their own communities. They have to make a collage that can be displayed, compared and discussed.

Questions like these can be asked of *District 9*. The film reminds us powerfully that beauty and evil are in the eye of the beholder. The positions we take in relation to Others tell as much about who we are and the discourses that we inhabit as they do about those we construct as irreconcilably different. *District 9* invites us to consider what is lost by our refusal to engage with those who are different from us? It is clear that there is much human kind could have learnt from the technologically sophisticated ‘Prawns’. We have a sense too, that Wikus’ learning about himself, the human race and the Prawns is only just beginning. To the extent that he is everyman and everywoman, our journey into otherness, like his, is just beginning. Perhaps we will have arrived when we accept that as with the Prawns, we have a lot to learn about Nigerians.

The literature suggests that xenophobia is reduced as we come to know those whom we fear. Education has an important role to play in helping students come to terms with difference and to recognize that diversity is a resource for seeing and thinking in new ways. Knowing and accepting ourselves is a good place to begin.

Figure 3 Extract from *Doing Critical Literacy* (Janks, 2014)

US AND THEM

Anyone who has watched mainstream Hollywood movies understands the difference between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys'. Who the bad guys are changes according to whom America sees as its 'enemy' at different moments of history. The enemy is often given an offensive or derogatory name. To whom do these names refer? When and why were they seen as a threat to the U.S? How are they typically portrayed?

The diagram consists of a central circle labeled "The dangerous Other according to Hollywood". Surrounding this central circle are ten overlapping circles, each containing a derogatory name: "Terrorists", "Jerries", "Indians", "Japs", "The Chinese", "Arabs", "WHO'S NEXT?", "The mob", "Gooks", and "The Russians".

It is a pity that people tend to construct a sense of who *they* are in contrast to people who are different (however insignificantly) from them. Too often the Other is seen as a dangerous threat. Look at your own country: read your newspapers; listen to the news on TV. Who in your country is portrayed as a threat to society? Is it 'the youth'? Is it immigrants? Is it women who wear the veil? Is it a racial group? Is it foreigners? Is it criminals? Is it unemployed people? Is it people with HIV-AIDS? Design a collage - using photographs, headlines, words, cartoons - of the people or types of people currently constructed as the 'bad guys' in your own country or community. Compare your collages.

Adapted from Janks (2014)

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