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# Imagining the “other” – The Representation of the African Migrant in Contemporary South African Literature

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The presence of African migrants in South African society is a complex and sensitive topic that manifests itself in interesting ways in contemporary South African literature. The topic is complex firstly because the immigration South Africa is experiencing is so diverse: it ranges from economic migration from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, to Zimbabwean refugees fleeing famine and seeking asylum in neighbouring South Africa, to the gold and platinum mines’ employment of migrant labour from countries like Mozambique, Botswana, or Lesotho. Today one can no longer broach the topic of migration from African countries to South Africa without evoking xenophobic violence – it reached a notorious peak in Alexandra, close to Johannesburg, in 2008<sup>1</sup> and, more recently, another wave of violence broke out in April 2015. The violent nature of this xenophobia and the fact that it targets only African migrants, will lead me to explore the term “afrophobia,” as perhaps more appropriate than “xenophobia” as it is the *African* migrant who is labelled and identified as other.

This seems paradoxical in the light of the African National Congress’s Pan-African ideals embodied in its rallying cry of the struggle years, *Mayibuye iAfrika* (“Africa return”) – calling for both a return *to* and a return *by* Africa – which led to the expectation that formerly oppressed South Africans would welcome their fellow Africans. Difference and diversity as reasons for celebration (rather than hatred and segregation as in the apartheid past), were furthermore embodied by the “Rainbow Nation,” a term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and widely employed by President Nelson Mandela. When Thabo Mbeki became president in 1998, he introduced the concept of the African Renaissance: there was to be a cultural and economic renaissance in Africa, led by South Africa. If South Africa during apartheid had been Eurocentric, South Africa was now claiming its new identity as part of the African continent. The “Rainbow Nation” and the “African Renaissance,” it must be pointed out, are terms used by the governing elite, to define the new nation as African. A counter-discourse emerged however – a national chauvinist narrative that places South Africa apart from Africa. According to this discourse, the self is South African and the other: African.<sup>2</sup> Migration is furthermore a sensitive topic because of the controversy surrounding the actual number of documented and undocumented migrants present in South Africa; inaccurate data is accompanied by the fear of South Africa being invaded by African migrants. Darshan Vigneswaran, in an article entitled “Undocumented migration: risks and myths (1998-2005)” identifies three myths related to migration in South Africa and calls this myth of an invasion “the most troubling myth.”<sup>3</sup> The fact that “the available data do not allow any firm estimates of even the most basic indicators, such as the percentage of South Africa’s population that is foreign”<sup>4</sup> leads to the systematic stereotyping of African foreigners as being a threat to the South African economy, but also to South Africans in general.

Another myth Vigneswaran identifies is the idea that migration started at the end of apartheid when the electric fence that formed part of the border to the north, formerly set on lethal mode, was switched off. In reality the

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<sup>1</sup> “In a fortnight, citizens murdered more than 60 people, raped dozens, wounded close to 700 and displaced more than 100 000.” Loren B Landau ed., (2011), *Exorcising the Demons Within*, United Nations University Press, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Vineet Thakur, (2011), Who is a South African? Interrogating Africanness and Afro-phobia. [Online], Available at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/18/who-is-a-south-african-interrogating-africanness-and-afro-phobia/>

<sup>3</sup> Darshan Vigneswaran, (2008), “Undocumented Migration: Risks and Myths (1998-2005)” in Wa Kabwe Segatti, Aurelia and Landau Loren eds., *Migration in Post-apartheid South Africa. Challenges and Questions to Policy Makers*, Paris: Agence française de Développement, 143.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Budlender, (2013), *MiWORC Report N° 2. Improving the quality of available statistics on foreign labour in South Africa: Existing data-sets*. Johannesburg: African Centre for Migration & Society, University of the Witwatersrand, 86.

South African mining industry has depended heavily on migrant labour from the former South African homelands, but also from countries like Mozambique, Lesotho and Botswana since the early 1900s. "Being 'illegal' makes one a target for exploitation and victimisation by unscrupulous employers and corrupt officials. Large-scale clandestine movements of people provide trans-border criminal networks with accomplices and easy prey" (Vigneswaran 135). Yet, the third myth is that migrants are responsible for the country's high crime and unemployment rates. South Africa in reality has a culture of violence that has complex roots in the inequality and segregation of colonialism: questions that fall beyond the scope of this paper.

Is literature able to represent the migrant in ways that transcend myths and stereotypes? The aim of this paper is not to verify the presence of the abovementioned myths in literature, or to prove them wrong, but to determine whether contemporary South African literature depicts the migrant as a three-dimensional character as opposed to a threat or a statistic. Is contemporary South African fiction able to allow the reader to imagine the migrant as someone with an identity rooted in a specific culture? Is literature able to give the reader some insight into the complexity not only of the reasons for their emigration but also into the challenges these individuals face in South Africa? This paper explores the manner in which contemporary authors like Breyten Breytenbach, Ivan Vladislavić, Michiel Heyns, Deon Meyer, Angelina Sithabe, or most recently, Meg Vandermerwe, evoke migrants in their works of fiction published since 2004. With the exception of Breytenbach, these authors live in South Africa. Reference will be made to the deceased Pashwane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, published in 2001 – possibly the first novel to describe the presence of the African foreigners, pejoratively called "Makwerekwere" by South Africans, in transforming inner-city Johannesburg. Brief reference will also be made to two forms of visual art, cinema and the cartoon, by bringing Neill Blomkamp's science fiction movie *District 9* and a cartoon by the South African cartoonist, Zapiro, into the discussion.

## ***1. Why do South Africans Reject Migrants?***

### **1.1. Xenophobia and Fear**

Meg Vandermerwe's novel, *Zebra Crossing*, gives the reader access to the thoughts of the main character, Chipso. Together with her brother, Chipso has migrated to Cape Town from Zimbabwe: "Fear is a sharp word. It makes your tongue bleed. Anger is sour and fiery. Like acid indigestion. Hatred is a word that gets stuck in your throat. Xenophobia. Xenophobia is a long word. Complicated, arrogant. It thinks it is smarter than other words. It is a bully" (Vandermerwe 80).

Fear of the migrant is omnipresent in the corpus under study. The following dialogue is taken from Michiel Heyn's novel, *Lost Ground*, published in 2011. A secondary character named Vincent works as a car attendant in the sleepy Little Karoo town of Alfredville. At their first encounter, the main character identifies Vincent as foreign: "The man's very dark colour marks him as foreign as decidedly as his accent: presumably a refugee from Francophone Africa" (Heyns 8-9). When Vincent is murdered, two German tourists want to be reassured regarding their own safety. This is the dialogue that ensues at the hotel's reception desk:

'But,' asks one man, a gaunt and intense German, 'can you guarantee our safety in the hotel, if there are people shooting people?'

'Yes, you'll be okay,' says Boris. 'It's just xenophobic violence.'

'Xenophobic violence,' asks the German. 'You mean violence against foreigners?'

'That's right,' says Boris. 'That's what it means.'

'But we are foreigners too,' the German says, pointing at his wife, who's been standing in the background, manifestly bored with her husband's fussing, but now developing interest in the conversation.

'I guess you are,' Boris says. [...] 'But xenophobic violence is just for African foreigners,' he explains, 'people from the north who come down here. The local people think they take their jobs.'

'They shoot people for taking their *jops*?'

'They usually don't shoot them, they chop them up.'

'But how do you know it is just xenophobia?' the German woman demands.

'What else can it be?' asks Boris. 'That Congolese had nothing to steal.'

'I suppose it is in order then,' the man says. (Heyns 251)

This passage is self-explanatory and leads one to question the term “xenophobia,” which would imply a rejection of foreigners in general, and to ask whether the term “afrophobia” wouldn’t be more appropriate.<sup>5</sup>

“Villa Toscana,” the first of four stories that make up Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View* (2004), opens with a description of the main character observing street sellers through the windscreen of his car while waiting for the traffic light to turn green. Budlender is a statistician working on the redrafting of the questionnaires for the national census and thus has a “professional interest in immigration” (Vladislavić 5). He asks himself the following questions about the curio seller who approaches him:

Was he a Nigerian? It was time to learn the signs. A friend of his at the Bank had given him a crash course in ethnography one evening after work, over a pint at the Baron and Farrier in Old Joburg Road. He and Warren had sat in a booth, speaking softly, as if the topic were shameful, and then laughing raucously when they realized what they were doing. ‘Small ears?’ ‘That’s what I said. Little ears, flat against the skull and delicate, like a hamster.’ And the point of the exercise? Since he had been made aware of the characteristics – a particular curl to the hair or the shade to the skin, the angle of a cheekbone or jawline, the ridge of a lip, the slant of an eye, the size of an ear – it seemed to him that there were Nigerians everywhere. He had started to see Mozambicans too, and Somalis. It was the opposite of the old stereotype: they all looked different to him. Foreigners on every side. Could the aliens have outstripped the indigenes? Was it possible? There were no reliable statistics (Vladislavić 5).

This passage introduces many of the biases found in descriptions of African migrants. The key to reading it is of course the focalization through the eyes of the “youngish” South African man, Budlender. Like the other protagonists of *The Exploded View*, he is old enough to have experienced apartheid, and young enough to have a role to play in the “new” South Africa – but he is destabilized by the paradigm shift the country has undergone. The reader is immediately struck by Budlender’s rejection and stereotyping of the African foreigner. Here the narrator pokes fun at their back-slapping beer-drinking male camaraderie and then denounces these South African men’s pseudo “crash course in ethnography” that in fact amounts to scientific racism. Note the use of animal imagery and dehumanization when referring to the other: “Little ears, flat against the skull and delicate, like a hamster.” This dehumanization culminates in the term “alien.” The narrative is set in the late 1990s, in other words, during the years when South Africa was undergoing a transition that involved actively undoing apartheid in order to celebrate Nelson Mandela’s Rainbow Nation while moving towards Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance. The difficulty of achieving this transition, of bridging the gap between the old and the new, is underlined when the text recalls apartheid categories by implying that to the average, racist, “white” South African all “black” South Africans looked the same during apartheid: “It was the opposite of the old stereotype: they all looked different to him.” The invention of new categories of segregation (“Nigerians” “Mozambicans” “Somalis” “aliens”) is surprising however and calls to mind Lindsay Bremner’s troubling statement that “Apartheid is not over, it has simply been deferred” (Bremner 171).

In South Africa the inadequacy of existing data regarding the number of migrants present in the country further leads to a popular fear of an invasion by African “aliens,” as the lines from Vladislavić’s “Curiouser” stress: “Foreigners on every side. Could *the aliens* have outstripped the indigenes? Was it possible? There were no reliable statistics” (Vladislavić 5, my emphasis). Vigneswaran explains that “[d]uring the mid-1990s, working in close collaboration with the DHA, the Human Sciences Research Council produced estimates suggesting that there were between 2.5 and 4 million illegal foreigners in the country but that the figure could be as high as 12 million” (Vigneswaran 143). According to the University of the Witwatersrand’s African centre for Migration and Society, “Most sources [...] suggest that foreigners (regardless of work status) account for less than 10 per cent of the population, whatever definition is used, and also for less than 10 per cent of employed people” (Budlender 86). South Africa has a total population of 52 million (according to the 2011 census): the figure of 12 million migrants is thus unrealistic. The fact remains that past fluctuations in “official” figures, communicated by the media, set the stage for the myth of an invasion by illegal foreigners, also referred to as “illegal aliens” in Department of Home Affairs documents.

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<sup>5</sup> The term “afrophobia” was also used by Achille Mbembe in *Le Monde*, during the 2015 upsurge of xenophobic violence. BBC Africa uses it too.

## 2. Imagining the Other

### 2.1. Stereotypes

Stereotyped categories of otherness, as well as the ignorance and arrogance such categories reveal, are illustrated by the “proudly xenophobic” cartoon by South African cartoonist, Zapiro.<sup>6</sup> The cartoon’s title is an ironic transformation of the “proudly South African” label to be found on items produced in South Africa, like the hat the man depicted in the cartoon is wearing. The man points to a map of the African continent on which the names of the countries have been transformed to correspond to the common South African stereotypes regarding these countries. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is labelled Democratic Republic of Car Guard, to correspond to the work that many Congolese migrants do when they arrive in South Africa. Somalia and Angola become Some-alien and Ango-alien. Ignorance underlies the name “Dunno” for Mauritania. Egypt becomes “Pyramid.” South Africa’s failure to integrate the African continent is clearly denounced. One understands the point the Nigerian writer and novelist Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani makes when she points out South Africa’s stubborn refusal to inhabit its own African identity: “I have often referred to South Africa as a genetically modified African country. It is in Africa but not really quite like the rest of us.”<sup>7</sup>

According to Jacques Derrida, “there is no racism without language” (Derrida 331). A term one encounters in the streets of Cape Town or Johannesburg to refer to the African migrant is “Makwerek were” (plural form) or “Kwerekwere” (singular form), meaning not simply “foreigner” as some blogs suggest, but “*African* foreigner.” Phaswane Mpe explains that the word is “derived from *kwere kwere*, a sound that [the migrants’] unintelligent foreign languages were supposed to make” (Mpe 20). In *Lost Ground*, by Michiel Heyns, Vincent refers to himself with irony as, “I, a kwerekwere” (Heyns 231).

In the corpus under study, the countries of origin of African migrants often remain vague. They are perceived by others as simply foreigners from Africa, easily grouped under the label, “Makwerekwere” – a post-apartheid category that confirms Lindsay Bremner’s statement that apartheid has been “deferred.” It also points to a nationalist identity that sets “South African” firmly apart from “African.”

Possibly the first South African novel to make use of the term “Makwerek were” is *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, by Phaswane Mpe, published in 2001 – this work remains unequalled in its urgent plea for the understanding of foreigners. Mpe introduces the term “Makwerek were” at the beginning of the novel, when the narrator tells of a young man who died of a strange illness in 1990. The reader is informed that this young man was “often seen with *Makwerek were* women, hanging onto his arms and dazzling him with sugar-coated kisses that were sure to destroy any man” (Mpe 3). The strange illness referred to here is AIDS and the myth that African foreigners are responsible for bringing AIDS to South Africa is widespread and linked to other myths regarding superior sexual performance and danger. Importantly, Mpe’s novel does not reinforce such myths, but describes them with the purpose of denouncing them.

*Holy Hill* (2007) by Angelina Sithebe, depicts an African migrant, Claude Dema: he is twenty-three years of age and is the boyfriend of Nana Mlozi, the novel’s main character. Claude’s compulsive lying, together with his disarming physical beauty and criminal profile, are his major characteristics. Nana believes Claude is from the Congo, but he is in fact from Central Africa: “He told her he was from West Africa, not expecting any real interest. He was really from Central Africa but he told so many stories that sometimes even he forgot what was true” (Sithebe 135).

Interestingly, *Holy Hill* gives the foreigner a voice – Claude occupies centre stage in Part IV of the novel. It is Claude who criticizes the term “Makwerekwere,” as is illustrated in the following passage which, through the use of indirect speech, places Claude’s voice at a distance, yet gives the reader some insight regarding his feelings: “They call the black foreigners kwere-kwerek, as if they were animals. They called him a Nigerian; he hated the fact that they didn’t even care to know where he was from” (Sithebe 174). The passage below, again in reported speech, starts off with a serious reflexion on the rejection of African foreigners by black South Africans and slips into the expression of a sexual stereotype regarding African foreigners, ironically voiced by the African character, Claude, himself:

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<sup>6</sup> The cartoon can be viewed at : <https://bizlinks.wordpress.com/2008/06/18/•zapiro-says-how-it-is-in-political-cartoons/>

<sup>7</sup> Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, “Xenophobic violence: South Africa’s identity crisis” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32580807>

Everybody in his country, he said, wanted to help South Africans when they were chased by the whites – he could still remember that from when he was a young boy. He could understand, though, that they were afraid of the black men from Africa, because they knew they were big. They said the foreigners stole their women. The women loved the foreign men. When the men tried to chase them away, the women protested, marching all over the streets of Yeoville and Berea, saying, “We want these foreign men here! Because they take care of us, they give us a good time!” (Sithebe 174)

The myth that African migrants steal South African men’s wives is widespread.<sup>8</sup> A phone call from Nana’s concerned sister-in-law, Pumla, offers the following mixture of stereotypes involving supernatural sexual powers and danger of death:

“I hope you use protection. You know these people from Africa have AIDS? So, how’s he? I hear they have these giant, hem, em, you know...”[...]

“Just be careful, they can kill you. This girl ended up in hospital – once inside, the thing just kept growing” (Sithebe 185-186).

In Neil Blomkamp’s science-fiction movie *District 9* (2009), the terms “illegal aliens” and “invasion” are given a literal meaning when a space-ship breaks down above Johannesburg and the extra-terrestrials, called “prawns” by locals, are perceived as representing a demographic – and health threat. According to locals, the “prawn” steal their wives and their cell phones – and they should “just leave.” Concerns are expressed about inter-species sexual intercourse and its consequences: the cause of the main character’s painful physical transformation from human to alien is rumoured to be sexual intercourse with a “prawn.” African foreigners involved in crime – and responsible for South Africa’s high crime rate, it is implied – are present in every novel of our corpus. In the popular crime novelist Deon Meyer’s recent *Ikarus* (2015), one notes a correlation between the presence of crime and the presence of migrants; it is almost incidentally mentioned – yet firmly established. This short passage deals with an over-worked South African chief of police’s perspective on crime:

Table View is een van die snelgroeiendste metropolitaanse gebiede in die Skiereiland. En dié groei is in die laer middelklas, onder andere duisende immigrante van Nigerië, Somalië, Malawi en Zimbabwe in die Parklands-gebied, waar amper sestig persent van die misdaad wat sy stasie moet hanteer, nou gepleeg word (Meyer 28).

Table View is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the Peninsula. And this growth is in the lower middle classes, amongst others thousands of immigrants from Nigeria, Somalia, Malawi and Zimbabwe in the Parklands area, where almost sixty percent of the crime his station must handle, now takes place (my translation).

In “Curiouser,” one of the texts that make up *The Exploded View*, Ivan Vladislavić depicts Simeon Majara, a successful artist, who turns to African migrants in Johannesburg when he needs to buy African masks in bulk for one of his installations.<sup>9</sup> At a party following a closing of a successful exhibition, his friends question him about the origin of the African masks he used as raw material for his installation. He tells an entertaining story of his difficulty in obtaining the masks that enter South Africa through “a whole big secret international network” and of how he eventually worked through a fence, a Malawian curio seller (later identified as Roger) who sold him crates full of masks that had belonged to his friend, Victor:

It turned out to be very tricky finding masks, of all things. These guys are very protective of their turf. It’s a whole big secret international network, passing mainly through back doors and legal loopholes. Then I met this guy at Bruma, one of the curio-sellers, name of Roger. A Malawian. He said he thought we could come to an arrangement [...]“I’ve got what you’re looking for, but it’s difficult.” How so? “The goods belong to my friend Victor.” Does he want to sell? “Oh yes.” Perhaps we can go and see him together? “Impossible.” You could ask him to call me. Does he have a cell? “I don’t think so...he’s been dead for six weeks.” Laughter, loud enough to turn heads. Simeon had told the story before and was getting better at it. It helped that everyone was a bit tipsy (Vladislavić 127-8).

<sup>8</sup> See Meg Vandermerwe’s *Zebra Crossing*, *op. cit.*, 81, for another example.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of “Curiouser”, see Sandra Saayman (2009), “Is a South African artist an ‘African’ artist? An analysis of the questions raised by (South) African art in Ivan Vladislavić’s ‘Curiouser.’” *Healing South African Wounds. Guérir les blessures de l’Afrique du Sud*, Cahiers du Cerpac n°7, Montpellier : Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée : 83-

Cynically indifferent to the death of “poor Victor” (128), Majara goes on to entertain his friends with the story of how he had been brave enough to go to an industrial area outside Johannesburg to pick up the masks, “looking over his shoulder all the time” for fear of “Nigerian con men” responsible for “routines so standard they had names and numbers, the ‘Black Money’ swindle, the 419 scam” (Vladislavić 128-9). Majara (who refers to himself “an African”) resorts to stereotypes that betray his cynical indifference to – but also terror of – fellow Africans.

## 2.2. Beyond the Stereotype?

“Aliens,” “makwerekwre,” “prawn” – the depiction of new categories of Otherness leads one to ask whether members of the migrant community are portrayed as showing solidarity towards each other in the face of South Africans’ adversity. Meg Vandermerwe’s *Zebra Crossing* (2013) is set in 2010, at the approach of the Soccer World Cup – widely advertised as the *African World Cup* – and depicts a community of foreigners living in a building called President’s Heights, in Long Street, at the heart of Cape Town. The building is clearly inspired by Cape Town’s most notorious “Problem Building,” Senator Park, said to have housed illegal foreigners, prostitutes and drug dealers until 2011.<sup>10</sup> Central to the plot of *Zebra Crossing* is the rumour that after the Soccer World Cup all foreigners will be killed. The idea of a united community of African migrants is challenged too. The Zimbabwean brothers who accommodate Chipo and her brother, George, explain to the siblings the different categories of jobs that foreigners from different countries do:

“DRC people do all the security for these shops. They are also most of the parking marshals around here. You will find that in Cape Town. Certain nationalities, certain jobs.” [...]

“So what are we Zimbabweans supposed to do?” [...]

“What are our jobs?” David shrugs. “Mostly waiters and chefs. Sometimes cleaners. Sometimes shop assistants.” (Vandermerwe 31-32)<sup>11</sup>

In the apartment, segregation rules as their flat-mate, Jean-Paul, whom Chipo believes to be Congolese but in fact turns out to be from Rwanda, spends his time behind his closed bedroom door. In the building, there is strong suspicion of “Tanzanians from floor three” described as follows by Chipo: “I have heard about these Tanzanians before. They are known as local drug dealers and are said to enjoy impunity from the police, whom they bribe” (Vandermerwe 134). Chipo wonders why her brother is getting involved with “people like these” (Vandermerwe 134). As African migrants introduce cultural variety (through their cooking, fashion, music, language, for example) and many migrants employ South Africans, one may expect literature to also present migrants in a positive light. However, passages like the following are rare. Here Congolese *sapeurs*, “men who worship the cloth” (Vandermerwe 74) delight Chipo:

Three Congolese men are crossing Long Street. They jump the puddles as they cross in a gap between the traffic. Bright suit jackets over Dolce & Gabbana T-shirts and jeans, talking and gesticulating as they dodge the puddles that will ruin their narrow-toed crocodile leather shoes. David says that these smartly dressed Congolese are called “sapeurs” and they will go without food before they allow themselves to look like poor immigrants. (Vandermerwe 46)

Another rare example is from another early work, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* by K. Sello Duiker. Siphon, the marginalised, clinically depressed main character (diagnosed as having “cannabis induced psychosis”) embraces the presence of African migrants in Hillbrow, as has been pointed out by Rita Barnard in her essay “Rewriting the nation,” published in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*.<sup>12</sup> I feel at home with them because they are trying to find a home in our country [...] in their eyes, I see Africa.

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<sup>10</sup> A High Court Order was obtained by the Senator Park Body Corporate and all residents evicted to allow for an upgrade of the building in 2011.

<sup>11</sup> According to the 2013 MicWORK (Migration for Work Research Consortium) policy brief, in 2012 the employment rate of foreign migrants was indeed higher than that of South Africans (a reality that is at odds with the rest of the world). However, foreign migrants are employed in the informal and precarious employments with no or very basic contracts and no or very little benefits. They often do work that South Africans are not ready to accept and do this as a stepping-stone into the job market.

<sup>12</sup> David Atwell and Derek Attridge eds., (2012), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, Cambridge University Press.

I feel like I live in Africa when I walk out in the streets and hear dark-skinned beauties rapping in Lingala or Congo or a French patois that I don't understand" (Sello Duiker 454). The reference "Congo" here is probably to Kikongo (a language spoken in the Western part of Congo).

Breyten Breytenbach, who spends a part of his year in Senegal at the Gorée Institute, expresses empathy and a more subtle understanding:

The 'parkers' – scores of young men trying to make a few cents by guiding you when you parked your car and offering to look after it – were nearly all Congolese. They said they were from Zaire, refugees from war and poverty, to a man they were qualified university professors in economics and history and agricultural engineering and they'd just about weep a need for normal human interaction when you spoke French to them (Breytenbach 135).

It must be noted that in the novels under study migrants mostly are secondary characters – if these novels were movies, one would say they play bit parts, i.e. they do not melt into the background like extras but they interact with main characters superficially (like when Simeon Majara buys his masks from "the Malawian," or in *Lost Ground*, when the main character has one line exchanges with Vincent, the car guard). In the case of *Holy Hill*, Claude occupies centre stage for one out of the five books that make up the novel. *Zebra Crossing* stands apart by featuring Chipo, a young Zimbabwean migrant who is also an albino, as main character. These two examples of novels that give the migrant character a central role, do not, however, break with the dominant tendency to stereotype the other. Throughout *Holy Hill* there are scattered references to Claude's past as child soldier and they go some way to explaining his erratic lifestyle. Yet, the repeated references to his physical beauty, his six-pack stomach muscles, and on the other hand his compulsive lying, his drug dealing and prostitution turn him into caricature. The few occasions when his speech is relayed direct speech, the caricature is confirmed: "Born-again Christian "Ja. I'm born again, with the grace of God. Born again is the only way to go, honey," he stated with conviction" ( Sithebe159). His text message to Nana: *Ur the best think that ever happen to me Luv U bebe* (Sithebe 189) does not make of him a convincing adult character; he remains the unstable, juvenile other. *Zebra Crossing's* protagonist, Chipo, is a potentially complex main character. Thanks to Chipo, a whole new set of categories is introduced:

Peeled potato. That is what many in Zimbabwe call me. Also "monkey" and "sope." There are other names, too, depending on where you go. Names rhyme with shame. In Malawi, they call us "biri." They whisper that we are linked to witchcraft. In Tanzania we, we are "animal" or "ghost" or "white medicine." Their witch doctors will pay handsomely for our limbs. [...] In Lesotho, we are "leshane," meaning half-persons, whereas to South Africans, depending on whether they are Xhosa or coloured, we are known as "inkawu," meaning ape, "wit kaffir," "spierwit," or "wit Boer" (Vandermerwe 10).

Chipo has double outsider status as migrant and albino, yet she fails in places to fill out into a credible three-dimensional character. Her entry into South Africa by illegally crossing the borders and her reasons for leaving Zimbabwe, are evoked with brevity. She is confined to one room for the most part of the novel; her friendship with Jean-Paul the Rwandan tailor introduces hope of possible emancipation, but Chipo's naiveté leads to her betrayal by fellow Zimbabweans (including her brother) who will exploit popular superstitions about albinos to sell her "clairvoyance" during the Soccer World Cup betting frenzy. At the end of the novel she is their prisoner and the excipit suggests that "the Tanzanians" murder her to obtain her albino body for the purposes of sorcery. Thus stereotypes related to crime, betrayal, sorcery and the supernatural culminate in the final pages of *Zebra Crossing*.

Similarly, *Holy Hill* ends violently: Nana is murdered by the childlike, beautiful, but dangerous migrant, Claude, who stabs her to death in her bath tub with a carving knife, after raping her in the kitchen. Elements of the supernatural, present throughout the novel culminate here when Nana, seen through Claude's eyes, becomes "a thing" "a devil":

With supernatural strength, he charged, dragging the devil's feet, and threw it into the full bathtub to baptise it. [...] He ran into the kitchen and grabbed Nana's big carving knife with the horn handle. In the tub he could see the devil had grown, it was a demon, its eyes red, it gurgled at him, its long red tongue protruding grotesquely. It had fallen on the floor, weaving like a snake. [...] "Kill it!" he heard a voice in his head say. Claude obeyed and he stabbed the body in the tub over and over until it was still, its shape completely obliterated by the red water" (Sithebe 218).



This passage in which the focalization shifts to Claude's perspective, suggests the African migrant's possession by a supernatural power – the migrant perceives his former lover as a thing (“it”). He is not only dehumanized, but firmly established as demonic outsider.

### **Conclusion**

Rarely do the examples analyzed transcend stereotypes of migrants as harmful aliens. Ivan Vladislavić, Michiel Heyns or Angelina Sithabe, by portraying hollow, two-dimensional characters like “the Malawian,” Vincent-the-car-guard or Claude-the-exotic-prostitute, reflect, and denounce, the lack of real interest in migrants as human beings characteristic of South African society. The dismissal of migrants goes hand in hand with their rejection. A “national survey conducted by the South African Migration Project in 2006 revealed that 84 per cent of South Africans believed that the country was admitting too many foreigners. The same study reflected startlingly high levels of support for strong, citizen-led measures to get rid of them.”<sup>13</sup>

The above analysis reveals the importance of perspective, of who perceives, and describes, and how. To my mind, artists have as important a role to play as political scientists in interpreting data concerning the presence of migrants in South Africa – also in providing realistic representations of African migrants and their complex, layered everyday reality. Data providing accurate information regarding the positive contribution of, for example, Somalian shopkeepers in South African townships, is, I think, as vital as literature on the topic: thus journalist Jonny Steinberg's *A Man of Good Hope* describes a Somali shopkeeper who locks himself up in his shop night after night, urinating in a bottle, for fear of hostile South Africans outside.

We await the *novel* that makes the Somali shopkeeper its main character. Art – film, literature, painting, photography, music – have the means to operate a creative, layered, sensitive, and complex engagement with the other. Interestingly, passages that celebrate diversity or show *some* understanding of the stakes involved for the African migrants are focalized through the eyes of extremely marginalized characters: Sello Duiker's protagonist, Tshepo, who sees Africa in the eyes of the migrants, is clinically depressed. Breyten Breytenbach, who expresses empathy with the Congolese car guards, spent seven and a half years in apartheid's prisons for opposing the regime and gave witness to his experience in a work entitled *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, a title that defies apartheid categories and underlines his own outsider status.

Meg Vandermerwe's Chipo, both narrator and focalizer of *Zebra Crossing*, introduces the possibility of an original perspective from an albino migrant woman who, through her physical difference, challenges racist classification. However, both *Holy Hill* and *Zebra Crossing*, novels that feature African migrants as main characters, stage violent endings – murders for which African foreigners are responsible. The culmination of supernatural and diabolical elements, references to body parts used for “muti” (witchcraft) confirm the kind of stereotypes exploited in the science fiction action thriller *District 9* where Nigerian migrants are shown to eat the body parts of the alien “prawn” in order to obtain their power. Such representations bring us nowhere closer to an understanding of African migrants or their everyday reality, but simply confirm the violence of the limited – and alienating – gaze to which they are subjected.

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