

Conference Paper

(Honours Research in English Literature, Stellenbosch University)

“You become someone other than yourself when you live in isolation or live separated from those that meant a lot to you”: Xenophobia, the South African, and narratives of nation in *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*

Grace Kim

Xenophobia, national narratives, African Renaissance, South Africa

Since the opening of South Africa’s borders in 1994, there has been a worrying trend of xenophobia¹ attacks, the most recent spate of which occurred in May/June 2008. Numerous people were injured (in some cases fatally so), while homes and livings were plundered and devastated. Many of these foreigners, displaced from their homes with often nothing more than what they were wearing, moved to so-called ‘safety camps’ in fear for their lives. However, these specific attacks were shocking not because of their novelty, but rather because of what Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aziz Pahad, referred to as their “unprecedented savage[ry]”² Those that South Africans have labeled ‘outsiders’, ‘aliens’, and ‘foreigners’³ have faced severe forms of ostracism and violence, not least excluding death. Yet, this violence is completely at odds with the professed all-embracing inclusivity in the discourse of one of the dominant national narratives in post-apartheid South Africa: that of the African Renaissance. The docu-drama⁴ *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*⁵ is an attempt to understand the plight of the foreigner and not only serves as a documentary source of the experiences of foreigners in South Africa, but through a fictional framing plot also brings attention to the nature of documentation and narratives, particularly the difficulties and complexities of capturing the narratives of those considered to be others. Furthermore, the film simultaneously follows the self-reflexive interrogation of one South African’s identity. In the film, the displaced and dislocated feelings expressed by the foreigners are deliberately paralleled with the experience of the main fictional character- who is South African. The documentary thus suggests that this disjuncture between the

national narrative of the African Renaissance and reality as manifested in the xenophobia attacks can be seen as a result of the complex demands made upon the narratives of the nation to construct its identity based on relations of inclusivity and exclusivity, when those considered as insiders in the South African context are still in a state of dislocation and fragmented instability due to the irresolution of South Africa's traumatized and fractured past.

To place the current attitudes towards foreigners into context, it is necessary to note that migrant movement in and out of South Africa has had a long history. In their book *South Africa's diverse people: a reference sourcebook*, Sally Frankental and Owen Sichone point out that transnational migration is such a part of the history of the continent of Africa that "most African oral traditions relate stories about their ancestors' migration."⁶ More specifically, South Africa's own mining industry has long had associations with labour migration, with people from Mozambique, Basotho and other parts of Africa being recruited to work in South Africa.⁷ Frankental and Sichone use this as an example of South Africa's "ready tendency to assimilate strangers"⁸ yet Daniel Roux suggests that the "mining companies' predilection for foreign migrant labourers"⁹ should rather be seen as a "somewhat more sinister antecedent"¹⁰ of the current attitudes expressed towards outsiders. Because "migration was a dominant feature of the economy"¹¹ even during apartheid there was a "steady influx of immigrants."¹²

However, apartheid policies in official documentation shunned interaction with other African countries, and South Africa became increasingly isolated not only from other African countries but also from the rest of the world. The official apartheid period, extending from 1948-1994¹³, operated on a system of segregation and divided South Africa's peoples into essentialised population groups, based on race. Individuals were consequently treated unequally according to their racial grouping, and the fact that the white minority group was in power for many years, oppressing the black majority group, could not have endeared South Africa to its surrounding countries—never mind that South Africa

went on the offensive against its African neighbours in many cases¹⁴. The rest of the world eventually gave up their policy of appeasement and in outrage at the shocking treatment of the majority of this land's people, adhered to strict international trade and sport sanctions that effectively made South Africa a pariah nation.

With its transition to a democratic nation in 1994, however, South Africa found itself a country officially no longer internally divided, and was warmly welcomed back into the international scene. As a result, the discourse of the South African identity found itself facing many challenges of reconceptualization. Frankental and Sichone point out that “this new democracy [...] had to decolonize and re-Africanize its identity and to acknowledge and celebrate that which was previously suppressed and demonized.”¹⁵ There were similar challenges facing a reimagining of South Africa's place within Africa, and within the world. On 8 May 1996, at the occasion of the official adoption of the new constitution by the Constitutional Assembly, a statement was made of South Africa's perception of its international role. On behalf of the ANC, the now ruling party, voted into power in the first democratic elections, deputy president Thabo Mbeki spoke of South Africa's place in the world in a speech which has since then “become a sort of standard for the discussions of identity in South Africa because it was the first categorical statement from a leader of government that South Africa was indeed part of Africa”¹⁶.

This new statement of its international identity (to appropriate the ubuntu refrain)¹⁷ places South Africa as a ‘place that is a place because of other places’¹⁸. In the speech, Thabo Mbeki firmly acknowledged his and South Africa's roots in the African continent¹⁹. Mbeki argued for “an inclusive redefinition of African identity”²⁰. In a comprehensive listing of those who have traditionally been marginalized from official South African histories, Mbeki mentioned peoples such as the indigenous Khoi and San who have nearly been wiped out. Verbally opening South Africa's borders to the rest of the continent, he added that “[we] [are] born of the peoples of the continent of Africa. The pain

of the violent conflict that the people of Liberia and of Somalia, of the Sudan, of Burundi and Nigeria feel, is a pain that [we] also bear”²¹. Furthermore, the concept of Africanness was extended to others who are not originally of the continent, and in an extensive globalization of South Africa’s origins, Mbeki spoke of white “migrants who left Europe to find a new home in our native land” (1996:12), Malay slaves from the East, as well as Indian and Chinese slaves. Mbeki repeatedly stated the idea that Africanness is dependent on “[b]eing part of all of these people”²², tying in with the resolution expressed by the Constitution that “Africanness shall [not] be defined by [South Africans’] race, [their] colour, [their] gender or [their] our historical origins”²³. Mbeki carefully avoided a “triumphant African nationalism that vilified the colonial oppressor”²⁴ through the presentation of a “detailed and itemized history of the making of a Pan-African identity that was based on the view that Africa belongs to all that live on the continent irrespective of their backgrounds and ancestry”²⁵. The conflicts and antagonism that exists between many of these various groups were momentarily suspended and “their histories [we]re reinterpreted to make national unity rather than ethnic conflict [which is] the logical outcome of the various political struggles”²⁶. The discourse of the African Renaissance seems then to be “the reigning metaphor for a new humanism”²⁷.

However, the documented voices and stories of the real-life immigrants in the documentary *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* suggest that the narrative expressed and idealized in the “I am an African” speech is not one that corresponds with reality. *Conversations* follows the story of Keniloe, a South African man, who observes Fatima, a Somali woman, in the Johannesburg park he frequents on Sundays. After finally starting a tentative interaction with her, he learns more about her life in the war torn Somalia, and grows increasingly interested in her story. Therefore, when he does not find her in the park one Sunday, he sets off to find her. This mission provides Keniloe with a reason to interact with strangers he meets on the streets of Johannesburg, and soon it is not only the search for Fatima and her story that occupies him, but also the search for histories of others like her – foreigners in South Africa. This secondary

search ends up yielding far more successful results, for in the documentary it appears that almost every person he approaches is from another country. There are individuals, and in one case, a family, from an overwhelming number of places of origin, ranging from other African countries like the DRC, Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, to countries on other continents such as Yugoslavia (or, as the Yugoslavian interviewee points out, the Federal Republic of Serbia and Montenegro), South Korea, and Palestine. Languages heard in the film include the predominantly used medium of English, French, Serbo-Croatian, and Swahili.

The multitude of place names mentioned as places of origin and the different languages heard in the documentary suggest that South Africa seems to be living up to its expressed willingness to welcome those who do not officially belong here. This is explicitly mentioned by a Ugandan woman who says that *South Africa is the country that's given me opportunities, that's raised me up to be who I am [...], the country that's allowed me to express myself the most*. However, for many others, what matters are not the opportunities that are afforded, but the safety and refuge that South Africa offers in contrast to the places they come from. A Sudanese man fleeing from his war-torn homeland mentions that *at least I could find peace* in South Africa, while an Afghan shopkeeper points out practically that *here is no war. Here just individual domestic problem. War is mean missile is put your home. This is not a war here*. Similarly Lidija, a Yugoslavian woman describes how when *I used to walk on the streets on my own 2 o'clock at night in South Africa and everybody was screaming and shouting at me why are you going so late, and I would say because this is safe, there is no bombs. Nobody is bombing us*.

It becomes clear, however, that though South Africa is a place that offers many positive opportunities, it is not considered home for many, even for those who have lived here for years. Home is predominantly explained through their voices as the place where one has one's roots and the place to which one is personally tied to through history, identity and family. As the daughter of an Ethiopian ex-minister explains in the film, home is *where you're from, where your family's from, where your identity is*. Another Ugandan woman says that *I'm obviously South African. I've been here for like 21 years* yet she feels that she would not be able to be buried in South Africa, and concludes: *I'm Ugandan and it's something I must always remember. It's like I can't forget who it is that I am*. An interview with two Somali twins highlights the difficulty faced when dealing with the notion of home. The one girl firmly states that *Somaliland is my home*, whereas the other hesitatingly says that *I'm from Somalia but I feel South African actually... I don't belong there. Basically, I see myself belong here*. However, she wistfully concludes that even

though *I'm so used to South African culture [...] that won't change my religion or my nationality, you know, who I am and everything, you know.*

It is important to note that these responses take place in the documentary-style middle part of a three part structure, sandwiched by fictional episodes. The first of these frames the rest of the film in the context of Keniloe's quest for Fatima's narrative. Even when he finds himself increasingly involved in uncovering the stories of the strangers he meets, his search for Fatima is never forgotten. However, the first image that the viewer has of Fatima is not of her body or face, which would have given her a tangible and clear presence and identity, but rather that of the edge of her bright blue skirt as she walks away from the camera. This foreshadows how Keniloe is always trailing after her. At one point in the film, he spots her in a taxi driving past him and frantically runs after her, but is unable to catch up. Her life story seems to be disappearing in the commonplace everyday experiences of South African life of which the utilisation of the taxi (synonymous with and representative of South African transportation) is a key marker. At the same time, the motion of the taxi away from him as well as the transitory, liminal space of the taxi reminds us of his seemingly futile search for the narrative of someone who is not at home in South Africa. An attempt to contact the Somali embassy also ends fruitlessly with the telephone operator telling him that there is no such embassy in South Africa. Even a trip to the Somali community in Johannesburg seems to be fruitless after his guide leads him to a Somali Fatima and it turns out to be a different woman.

Although this Fatima is able to direct him to the Fatima he is looking for, his mission proves to be ultimately fruitless. Fatima is suspicious about his intentions and hesitant to talk to him. To his intense disappointment, she denies him access to her story: *It's my life I don't feel to talk more about my life. I'm real not interested in that story.* Her refusal to talk to him is in marked contrast to her willingness in the park. Furthermore, the impression the viewer gains of her in the park is of a *very lonely* foreigner searching for news of her mother, but Keniloe discovers that she lives with her husband and children. Another incongruity is that she is found living in the heart of the Somali community in Johannesburg in a fenced, burglar-barred suburban house. Guided by an understanding that she is a refugee displaced in South Africa, Keniloe has been searching for her in the liminal and transitory spaces of the public park, the streets of Johannesburg, and even the Lindela Deportation Centre. The idea then of the displaced and alienated foreigner without personal connection is thus dealt a blow when Keniloe finds Fatima firmly ensconced in a house indistinguishable from all the surrounding South African homes with her family and amongst her fellow Somalis. A positive reading of this film could thus hypothesize that the narrative of this foreigner has become part of the fabric of the South Africa experience after settling and adapting into South African culture.

However, a negative alternative is supported by the film's preoccupation with the process of documenting the foreigners' stories and the style of explicit narrative documentation. The importance of Keniloe's efforts to document their stories is shown in an explicit link between home and narrative when the daughter of an Ethiopian ex-minister explains that home is *where [you] don't have to explain [your]self*. In other words, in those places which are not home one has to autobiographize oneself or rely on someone else's biographization. As it is, Keniloe is initially shown to be completely ignorant and oblivious about the many immigrants in South Africa, as well as their reasons for fleeing here. As he explains to two Kenyan women who are wondering why he is so fixated on finding Fatima *I was very interested to speak to someone who has experienced that kind of a thing*. The two women are so surprised at his ignorance of a fate familiar to many immigrants, they laugh incredulously at him. To this end, Sarah Jones observes that throughout the film the viewer is never allowed to forget that Keniloe is in the processing of recording and listening to the narratives of others:

“Throughout nearly all the interviews with the refugees and immigrants, Keniloe's hands and arms enter the shot at the bottom, top or from one of the sides, holding the tape recorder. [...] [Therefore], we see Keniloe *seeing*, and are thus invited into his subjectivity, and his 'process' in coming to terms with what he sees”²⁸

Another obvious signifier of the film's preoccupation with documentation is the tape recorder Keniloe carries around. On the Fourth Sunday, while waiting for Fatima to arrive, Keniloe is shown sitting in a tree, composing a poem about her which he records with a little tape recorder: *I saw storylines unfolding before me, unfolding before me, your eyes staring at me, I saw you Fatima*. The tape recorder is from thereon used as an instrument to capture and document stories, histories and narratives, and the viewer is constantly reminded of this as it is held in front of people as they talk to him, as Keniloe sometimes fiddles with the recorder and changes the batteries, and as he rewinds the recorder to play what has been recorded back to the interviewee.

However, the latter two examples also highlight how his attempts at documentation are often foiled. Although the viewer is able to hear everything the foreigners say, the recordings are often muffled and indistinguishable from the overpowering background noises. These are typical city sounds, such as the hooting of cars, the squealing of wheels, the revving of cars, suggesting that the stories of those who do not belong to the city are silenced. This idea is emphasized at the end again when Keniloe is turned away by Fatima. As he disappointedly slumps against the wall of

her house, the everyday sounds of the city gradually increase in volume. This silencing is also demonstrated much more obviously through particular interactions between Keniloe and some of his interviewees. On one occasion, Keniloe's interview with a Ugandan woman is interrupted by a Zimbabwean man who asks *why don't you ask me why I left Zimbabwe*. Keniloe simply tells him that he is still busy with the other woman and does not have time to listen to his story. On the other hand, not everyone who is asked to share their story is willing to speak. At the Lindela Deportation Centre, this is physically enacted through the actions of the detainees who refuse to talk to him. One group of women turn their backs on him when they catch sight of him walking around, and another group of girls refuse to even lift their heads to look at him from where they are lying on the floor. They also bluntly tell him *we don't want to talk to you... [our story] is none of your damn business*.

There are also other challenges that hinder this process, such as the linguistic differences between Keniloe and his subjects. One of the first people he encounters on the streets of Johannesburg is a Congolese woman he is unable to communicate with, because she is only unable to speak English and he is unable to speak French. Here, the foreigners are shown to be isolated and separated from others because of their inability to communicate with others. This is also demonstrated when Keniloe conducts an interview with a Yugoslavian woman, and she answers a few questions in Serbo-Croatian though it is highly doubtful whether he understands. The use of an incomprehensibly foreign language highlights her aloneness and her displacement in South Africa. Although in the first example, a passerby acts as a translator, in the second case, the viewer has to rely on subtitles to understand the woman's answers. Another sign of their anonymous existence in South Africa is stressed by the fact that the names of very few foreigners are shared with the viewers. In one particularly amusing incident, Keniloe stops a Congolese passerby to tell her that he's looking for Fatima, to which she replies: *Is me!* It turns out that she shares the same name as the Somali Fatima. She, on the other hand is a bit saddened to hear that it is not her that he is looking for and poignantly says *I also want someone to look for me*. Her disappointment and her consequent disappearance into the bustle of the streets emphasize how unless a conscious effort is made to record these foreigners' stories, they simply meld into the business of the city. Their names, their stories, their actual bodies disappear into the busy streets of Johannesburg and are never seen again.

Along with this silencing of narratives, a refrain of violence and xenophobia appears threadlike through the accounts. *Conversations* starts off with a disturbing epigram which encapsulates undercurrents of violence, death, and the negligibility of human life. It reads *A Somali proverb has it that the shoes of a dead man are more useful than he is*, and this particular emphasis on marking the place of origin concerned as different from South Africa foreshadows the negative experiences that foreigners have had. To take the most obvious example, a South Korean girl is asked if she has ever experienced xenophobia to which she replies *"Yes. Racism from white*

people and black people. Both. Because I'm an Asian." Yet, xenophobic reactions are not limited to her. Robert Suresh Roberts, one of the few people who are named, born in England and brought up in Trinidad, speaks about an "elite xenophobia" in which hostility comes from a more privileged background.

Although the documentary is a constructed interpretation of reality that is "never neutral (i.e. objective)"²⁹, Minh-Ha adds that "from its descriptions to its arrangements and rearrangements, reality on the move may be heightened or impoverished"³⁰. This tension caught in the documentary appears to be a muted form of the tension made evident in the xenophobic attacks that have affected South Africa since the opening of its borders. As elsewhere around the world, this xenophobia is often blamed upon economic tensions between foreigners and nationals. In South Africa, the foreigners are blamed for being the cause of "high rates of poverty and unemployment"³¹ and for "trying to rob [South Africans] of opportunities and resources which should be prioritized for the indigenous people of South Africa"³². Frankental and Sichone write that linked with the tendency to blame economic disempowerment on the foreigners is the tendency to blame them for "for contributing to the spread of squatter settlements, [and] for crime and disease"³³. It is necessary to point out that investigation of these assumptions on several instances, notably by those involved in the Southern African Migration Project at the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, has shown that "African migrants do not take jobs away from South Africans and that in many cases their entrepreneurial skills result in the creation of new jobs"³⁴. However, this has not led to the demise of these fears.

It would therefore be a shallow analysis of this situation to situate this xenophobic tension solely in the economic context. For this reason, many critics and analysts have also suggested that this tension is intensified by the shadow of South Africa's apartheid past. Factors that Frankental and Sichone mention as contributors towards this unease and mistrust of foreigners are: "the state's obsessions with security and influx control as in the apartheid era, the policymaker's failure to develop a positive view of African refugees and migrants as an asset, and the silence of the elite on this topic (notable exceptions being the clergy and trade union leaders)"³⁵. Audie Klotz in particular speaks about a 'siege mentality' that seems to be lingering from apartheid times. She argues that "South Africa's politicians and populace retain a perception and vocabulary that are vestiges of an earlier era"³⁶—evident not only in the legislation but also in the mindset of the

general populace³⁷. Frankental and Sichone allude to this when comparing official statistics to “guesstimates put out by alarmists both in academia and in the news media, as well as by political leaders”³⁸. Although the former show no overwhelming flood of foreigners into the country, the latter “promote the belief that millions of ‘illegal aliens’ are present in the country” adding to fears that the country is being overrun. Klotz contends that “among these images of onslaught, we see a discourse of threat that again identifies external enemies infiltrating across borders”³⁹. The idea of the ‘black’ threat present in apartheid terminology is now applied to the continent as a whole, with “‘Africa’ remain[ing] a place outside [South Africa’s] territorial boundaries, an area rife with crime and political instability”⁴⁰.

However, the film seems to suggest a link between the violence experienced by the foreigner and the violence executed upon the narrative of the foreigners. Philip Rosen points out that narrativity is not only a key characteristic of films, whether documentary or fictional, but that meaning in the historical discourse also arises through this process of sequentation⁴¹. By highlighting the process of representation in the documentary, Minh-Ha points out that “the mechanics of [textual theory/practice]’s inner workings [are brought] to the fore”⁴². In this particular text, by looking at the foreigners’ stories and grappling with their continual disappearance into the background noise, the role of foreigners’ in the construction of a nation is brought into question. Anthony Marx explains this in general terms by noting how “nationalism is often purposefully exclusive”⁴³. This practice is necessitated because there is no natural collective community known as the nation and instead “fellow feeling cannot be assumed but must be built and is”⁴⁴. Marx writes further that historians and social scientists have shown that “collective sentiment”⁴⁵ often follows only after the construction of a state instead of being the reason for state-creation⁴⁶. To this end, “[s]tates have not consistently incorporated all potential internal constituents, but instead have often purposefully excluded some, contrary to the presumed imperative for pervasive unity or ethnic homogeneity”⁴⁷. Klotz refers to “the demarcation of the boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ [...] in the (re)creation of state identity and legitimacy”⁴⁸ as a critical practice.

Specifically in the South African context, many have noted how this practice seems to have played a role in encouraging the xenophobia attacks. Notably,

Reilly links the xenophobia attacks with “an understanding of the process of nation building and national identity construction”⁴⁹. She explains that expectations on South Africa to follow up on its establishment as a democratic and liberal state, and as a country participating in the well-being and development of Africa, has placed demands on its own sense of national identity which is consequently finding expression in the “exclusion of and the denial of rights to those perceived as ‘foreigners’”⁵⁰. Calvert expands upon this by noting that the post-1994 attempts to “build social cohesion among ethnic groups that historically had been kept apart and at odds with one another”⁵¹ has resulted in an intolerance toward those considered as outsiders. Following “South Africa’s redefinition of the boundaries of citizenship, belonging is based on the creation of a ‘new other’: the ‘noncitizen’, the ‘foreigner’, the ‘alien’”⁵² and these processes which “identify which specific categories of outsiders are ‘illegal aliens’, simultaneously defin[e] ‘insiders’, that is, legitimate South Africans”⁵³.

Yet, there are anomalies about South Africa’s particular brand of xenophobia which cannot be explained away by these answers. Calvert writes that “[t]hrough xenophobia is common worldwide, South Africa’s brand seems especially virulent”⁵⁴. He then proceeds to share that a 2004 survey conducted by the Southern African Migration Project shows that “[o]ne in five South Africans wants a ban on new immigrants and two-thirds back strict limits”⁵⁵. The authors of this survey warn that this is an “extremely restrictive view by international standards”⁵⁶. In fact, the Department of Home Affairs has created a counter-xenophobia unit in response to the urgency of these attacks⁵⁷. Another striking oddity about these attacks is that they have been limited to those who are black, indicating a racially motivated violence.

As Klotz has already pointed out, “like all states, South Africa continually (re)defines its identity by (re)creating ‘outsiders’”⁵⁸. However, she acknowledges that “the content behind the labels of ‘foreigner’ or ‘alien’ varies over time, as social context changes”⁵⁹. Although Klotz suggests that there has been a deracialisation of post-apartheid xenophobia by saying that “even [...] foreign football (soccer) coaches do not escape the growing antagonism towards outsiders”⁶⁰, she concedes that Africans remain the “the primary target of contemporary xenophobic sentiment and violence”⁶¹. The term ‘makwerekwere’ which is used to refer to foreigners, is even explained through reference between black South Africans and black Africans. This term is defended as “merely descriptive” by those who use it, but those who it is used to refer to consider it derogatory⁶². Particularly in the “violence-prone social relations that predominate in post-apartheid South Africa, [...] it is a term of exclusion on the basis of perceived cultural differences

between *black South Africans and other Africans*”⁶³. Cultural differences may be a factor in these tensions, but other more superficial reasons include foreigners' inability to speak any of the South African languages (as marked in the translation of ‘makwerekwere’ as ‘the babblers’), as well as differences in skin pigmentation⁶⁴.

Frankental and Sichone again point to economic factors as the reason for this race-based divide. They argue that the economic ability associated with different nationalities and races form the basis for both positive and negative stereotypes of foreigners: those immigrants that “create wealth and/or provide jobs are welcome; those who take away jobs are not”⁶⁵. Thus, fellow Africans are perceived as those who take away jobs and wealth, instead of creating or adding to wealth. However, Zakes Mda, a prominent South African writer, debunks this myth by pointing out that:

“The fear/hatred of foreigners is directed only towards those foreigners who are black. Both black and white South Africans have never complained about those immigrants (illegal or not) who are white. White immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe, have flocked into South Africa in recent years, some through illegal means. Others, such as the Bulgarian syndicates that are from time to time broken/ exposed by the police are involved in international crime. But there is never a complaint about these immigrants”⁶⁶.

Once more then, we will need to explore other avenues to attempt at a more comprehensive answer. Interestingly, Reilly argues that the way these foreigners are treated is symptomatic of the identity struggles that South Africa’s people are undergoing. She writes that “the increased levels of xenophobia among South Africans represent an ever-widening gap between the country’s attempts to restructure itself constitutionally (by altering its laws) and culturally (by changing the people’s perceptions of what it means to be South African)”⁶⁷. This is the point that the movie seems to be arguing as well, and I use the word arguing advisedly, for Beattie notes that “documentaries are frequently organized around an argument”⁶⁸. As aforementioned, the documentary film follows a certain sequencing of events within its structure, a narrative, which is a characteristic shared by both fictional film and documentary. However, Beattie distinguishes between the function of the narrative in fictional texts and in documentaries. In fictional texts, narrative “principally functions to emphasize the motivation of characters operating within a plausible world”⁶⁹, through a

relationship of “cause and effect”⁷⁰. On the other hand, narrative in the documentary form “adopts the principles of sequencing in order to advance an argument about the socio-historical world”⁷¹. In light of Reilly’s remark, it is intriguing that in *Conversations* the narrative of loss, rootlessness, and displacement is not limited to the so-called foreigners in the text, but also marks the experience of Keniloe, the South African.

As much as Fatima’s story of displaced alienation is shown to be representative of the stories of many foreigners, her story also runs parallel to Keniloe’s story, highlighting his own alienation within his own country. Keniloe’s sense of displacement is evident from the first shot the audience has of him (which is also the first image of the film). Just like the first glimpse of Fatima is of her back, this first camera shot also focuses on his back. Personal identity is thus visually denied. Slung across his back he carries a bench into the park, forming a lone figure set against all the other happy couples and people sitting there. He sets his bench down and then starts reading his book. The image portrayed here is of someone who has only the bench as a place of temporary residence. Yet, to impress upon the viewer that he is not homeless, on the Second Sunday, a woman approaches him and asks that he [*c*]ome home to which he replies that *I don’t want to*. His reluctance to do so is explained by an earlier statement that he *can’t make sense of the world*. This encounter is also given a sense of alienation by the subtitles that translate the indigenous South African language Keniloe and the woman are using. His identityless state is marked by the fact that even at this point, his name⁷² is not known to us, even though the viewer has learnt Fatima’s name and story.

The themes linked with the experience of the foreigners are also given explicit intertextual association with Keniloe through the presence of a book called *Links* by the Somali writer Nuruddin Farah. This text also deals with issues of home, identity and displacement, and Keniloe is shown to be reading it and quoting from it frequently. It is a text marked by episodes of violence, and the first voice the viewer hears is that of Keniloe’s while he is retelling a story about bored

youths who would go around the village and pretend to shoot random targets. At various times in the film he re-enacts this by ‘shooting’ at people indiscriminately with his finger. However, in a disquieting twist, these violent attacks end up with him as the final victim. At the end of each of these performances, he turns his ‘gun’ to his head and shoots himself, thus silencing himself most violently. The silencing he experiences is also portrayed in the ending of the movie which firstly shows a brief flashback to some scenes of detainees at the deportation center looking out of a holding cell, singing words of defiance against their imminent departure. This scene ends with a shot framing a small barred window in a truck door. However, this shot is not of someone (presumably Keniloe) looking into the van from the outside, but from the perspective of someone trapped inside the van. Darkness descends onto the movie screen when the window is finally shut, enclosing ‘us’ (the viewer) inside. With this evidence of his restricted entrapment Keniloe’s musings at the beginning of *Second Sunday: Have you become someone other than yourself? You become someone other than yourself when you live in isolation or live separated from those that meant a lot to you* gain particular poignancy. These words, which address an experience of loss, displacement, isolation and separation thus are voiced not only to those who are separate from oneself i.e. ‘you’, but are also words that Keniloe addresses to himself in a self-reflexive mode.

This isolation that Keniloe speaks of, as aforementioned, characterized the relationship that apartheid South Africa had with the rest of the world. However, it also points towards the separation between groups of South Africans which has formed a persistent focus in South African policies⁷³, whether in terms of the dominant ideology of apartheid, or in terms of the dominant resistant narrative of political liberation. The delineated spaces and identities that apartheid based itself are still embedded in structural remnants, and even with the “depoliticization of race”⁷⁴, there has been a subsequent manifestation of the separation of groups. Kadalie points out that an emergence of ethnic identities in post-apartheid South Africa is really an “ironic return”⁷⁵ to “ethnic identity

constructions, which were used in apartheid to justify the “construction of homelands on the basis of ethnicity”⁷⁶.

Rhoda Kadalie therefore concludes that as a result of “having been forced into racial population groups legally and politically for the greater part of their lives”⁷⁷, South Africans have developed a “schizophrenic”⁷⁸ identity. This schizophrenia finds part of its roots in the construction of various groups in which people were forced to identify with (in apartheid, this would be race-based groups; in post-apartheid South Africa this manifests itself in ethnicity-based groups), but also in the silencing of “multiple identities”⁷⁹ by “mythologies of apartheid, and of resistance to it”⁸⁰. Still today, the national self-identity is one concerned with apartheid’s legacy: cautious of allowing decades long separation continue, Nuttall and Michael argue that this fragmented country has been offered a quick fix of “an over-simplified discourse of rainbow nationalism”⁸¹, instead of allowing the categories of this compartmentalization to be worked through and processed into own cultural identities of their own making.

This new discourse was popularized by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and esteemed chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, who constantly referred to South Africa’s people as the ‘rainbow people of God’. In an attempt to “purposefully forget inconvenient images or experiences of past or present internal division, images of a common identity [...] were gradually invented, constructed, and rein-forced, often explicitly, to bolster social cohesion”⁸², and the metaphor of a rainbow was probably employed to suggest “something benign, something given in nature and therefore ‘good’, and certainly something aesthetic, associated with the blessing of rain and sunshine and the elusive ‘pot of gold’”⁸³. However, Frankental and Sichone point out that although the colours of a rainbow blur and blend into one another, “the relationship between the colours is nevertheless fixed”⁸⁴, showing once again an emphasis on separation between groups, this time enunciated in “polite proximities, [and] containment”⁸⁵. Furthermore, the employment of such a narrative assumes that South African society is “deeply divided”⁸⁶. Thus the

national narratives of the rainbow nation and of the African Renaissance are attempts to “cauterize or disguise an epistemological and historical conundrum”⁸⁷.

Marx writes that the nation is a “set of relations, which not surprisingly refer to inclusion and exclusion”⁸⁸. As a ‘set of relations’, the concept of the nation therefore relies on narratives to construct its particular conceptualization of the world as narratives “allow people to understand themselves and each other”⁸⁹. Due to the importance that narratives play in constructing meaning in everyday life, Kane writes that “narrative enables the analyst to identify and reconstruct the symbolic systems of groups, and to see the conflict between different symbolic models”⁹⁰. Therefore, despite that the official national discourse on South Africa has been one of warm welcome to others, it appears that the reality faced by the foreigner on a day to day level is that of a narrative that places them as ‘other’ and ‘alien’. However, the way people see others is closely linked to the way they perceive themselves, and Nuttall and Michael observantly remark that “[w]here racism and xenophobia re-emerge, they point to the empty spaces of the South African identity project”⁹¹. Though *Conversations on a Sunday afternoon* can at its simplest be seen as an exploration of the issues faced by immigrants in post-apartheid South Africa, the medium of the documentary and the combination of fictional and factual elements demand a closer analysis of the construction of representation and narrative. In the film, the narratives of the foreigners are constantly overwhelmed by the noise of the city, or lost in translation, or even simply denied access into documentation. These narratives speak of displacement and separation, which are also key themes linked with Keniloe’s experience. In this way, the tension that marks the foreigners’ stories is shown also to be present in the South African’s story, and ironically enough, this tension is highlighted (and not really lessened) by the employment of the rainbow nation discourse. It appears then that the xenophobia attacks should be understood in light of Zakes Mda’s illuminating remark that “South Africa’s problem is racism rather than xenophobia”⁹².

Notes

¹ According to a 1999 National Plan of Action called *Roll Back Xenophobia* which was published jointly by the South African Human Rights Commission, the National Consortium on Refugee Affairs, the United Nations Human Rights Commission, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, defined *xenophobia* as a “deep dislike for non-nationals by nationals” in J.E. Reilly. "Nation Building and the Construction of Identity: Xenophobia in South Africa." *Refuge* 19.6 (2001): 4-11; p.7

² Y. Hendler. "What are the causes of xenophobic violence and antagonism in South Africa after 1994 and how can it be addressed?" [unpublished] Stellenbosch, September 2008, p.3

³ Kadalie quoted in S. Nuttall and C.A. Michael. *Senses of Culture*. (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.10

⁴ The word ‘docu-drama’ refers to a mix of documentary with drama (defined here by Beatty as “restaging, reconstruction or the re-enactment of events often with professional actors”)K. Beattie. *Documentary Screens: Nonfiction film and Television*. (England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p.147) This synthesis has often been criticized from the assumption that ‘pure’ documentary representation is far more accurate than “misleading” (Beattie 2004:151) dramatization of fact. However, as will be discussed in more detail later, the truth of the ‘reality’ expressed in the documentary is just as debatable as fictional film.

⁵ *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*. Dir K. Matabane. Perf. T. Kgoroge and F. Hersi. Matabane Filmworks. (2005)

⁶ S. Frankental and O.B. Sichone. *South Africa's diverse peoples: a reference sourcebook*. (United States of America: ABC-CLIO, 2005) p.230

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.230

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.230

⁹ D. Roux. personal correspondence. 2008

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2008

¹¹ Adepoju quoted in Hendler 2008, p.4

¹² *Ibid.*, p.5

¹³ Daniel Roux points out, however, that “segregation obviously enjoyed a much longer history under successive colonial regimes,” 2008

¹⁴ Nuttall and Michael 2000, p.1

¹⁵ Frankental and Sichone, 2005, p.272

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 272

¹⁷ Ubuntu is short for an isiXhosa proverb found in wide use in Southern Africa: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means ‘A human being is a human being only through its relationship to other human beings’ (C. Marx."Ubu and Ubuntu: on the Dialectics of Apartheid and Nation Building." *Politikon* 29.1 (2002): 49-69, p.52. It is mentioned in the final clause of the 1993 interim constitution, and since democratization has often been used to invoke a sense of community and nation.

¹⁸ I have specifically appropriated the phrasing of ubuntu as, like Mbeki’s statement, it relies on a post-democratic re-engineering of the past. However, there is a wide-spread belief that it stems from a traditional African culture. See Marx, 2002.

¹⁹ The phrase “I am an African” which was oft-repeated throughout the speech has become the shorthand referent of this speech.

²⁰ Frankental and Sichone 2005, p.272

²¹ I use the plural form of first person here to emphasise that even though Mbeki spoke in the singular first person, as the deputy president of South Africa he is representative of all her people. T. Mbeki. "I am an African": Statement on the Occasion of the Adoption of the "Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill 1996," 8 May 1996." *Between Unity and Diversity*. Ed.Gitanjali Maharaj. (Cape Town: IDASA and David Philip Publishers (Pty) Ltd, 1999) 11-16, p.13

²² *Ibid.*, p.13

²³ *Ibid.*, p.14

²⁴ Frankental and Sichone, 2005, p.272

²⁵ Frankental and Sichone 2005, p.272

²⁶ Frankental and Sichone 2005, p.272

²⁷ Nuttall and Michael, 2000, p.59. Consequent analysis of the use of the African Renaissance discourse shows that it resorts to the race-based notion of Africanness as blackness and is used

politically in the ANC to create a “largely African nationalistic party” (Kadalie quoted in Nuttall and Michael 2000:111).

²⁸ S. Jones. "Constructing African Realities: Genre-Crossing and the City in Representations of African Screen." *Postamble* 3.2 (2007): 44-58, p.51

²⁹ T. Minh-ha. "Documentary is/not a Name." *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 76-98, p.89

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.89

³¹ Kadalie quoted in Nuttall and Michael, 2000, p.110

³² Kadalie quoted in Nuttall and Michael 2000, p. 110

³³ Frankental and Sichone, 2005, 231

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.230

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.230

³⁶ Nuttall and Michael, 2000, p.837

³⁷ Nuttall and Michael, 2000, p.37

³⁸ Frankental and Sichone, 2005, p.231

³⁹ A. Klotz. "Migration after Apartheid: Deracialising South African Foreign Policy." *Third World Quarterly* 21.5 (Oct 2000): 831-847, p.839.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.839

⁴¹ Cited in F. Ukadike. "The Other Voices of Documentary: *Allah Tantou* and *Afrique, je te plumerai*." *Focus on African Films*. Ed. Francoise Pfaff. (United States of America: Indiana University Press, 2004) 159-172, p. 160

⁴² Minh-ha, 1990, p. 90

⁴³ A. M.Marx. 'The Nation State and Its Exclusions' in *Political Science Quarterly*. 117.1 (Spring 2002) 103-126, p.107

⁴⁴ Marx 2002, p.107

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.105

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.105

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2002, p.107

⁴⁸ Klotz, 2000, p.834

⁴⁹ Reilly, 2001 p.4

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2001, p.4

⁵¹ S. Calvert."South Africa, but no soft focus." 20 January 2006. *Los Angeles Times*. 5 October (2008) <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jan/20/entertainment/et-matabane20>, 2006b

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2006b

⁵³ Klotz, 2000, p.834

⁵⁴ Calvert, 2006b

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2006b

⁵⁶ Cited in Calvert, 2006b

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2006b

⁵⁸ Klotz, 2000, p.834

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.834

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.835

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.835

⁶² Frankental and Sichone, 20005, p.233

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.233-234, Italics mine

⁶⁴ Frankental and Sichone write that “[m]akwerekwere’ are widely believed to be of a darker complexion than South Africans”; 2005, p.236

⁶⁵ Frankental and Sichone, 2005, p.236

⁶⁶ Nuttall and Michael, 2000, pp.111-112

⁶⁷ Reilly 2001, p.5

⁶⁸ Beattie, 2004 p. 17

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.19

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.19

⁷² Keniloe’s name is never mentioned in the film. The only reason his name is known is because it is mentioned in the film blurb on the DVD case.

⁷³ Nuttall and Michael 2000, p.6

⁷⁴ Kadalie cited in Nuttall and Michael 2000, p.114

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.114

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.114

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.110

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.110

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.1

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.1

⁸¹ Ibid., p.1

⁸² Marx 2002, p.105

⁸³ Frankental and Sichone 2005, p.251

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.251

⁸⁵ Nuttall and Michael 2000, p.6

⁸⁶ Frankental and Sichone 2005, p.238

⁸⁷ Roux, 2008

⁸⁸ Marx, 2002, p.125

⁸⁹ A. Kane "Reconstructing Culture in Historical Explanation: Narratives as Culture Structure and Practice." *History and Theory* 39.3 (Oct 2000): 311-330, p.330

⁹⁰ Nuttall and Michael, 2000, p.330

⁹¹ Ibid., p.406

⁹² As cited in Nuttall and Michael, p.112