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Postcolonial Violence:

Narrating South Africa, May 2008[1]

The violent attacks on immigrants in May and June 2008 laid bare some of the contradictions of the South African postcolony. Focusing on the vigorous public debate which arose in the aftermath of violence, this essay explores a moment of interpretive crisis in which the privileged stories of the nation were unexpectedly unravelled. From there, it moves to a discussion of the political investments at stake in the government's choice of the 'crime story' as dominant interpretive scheme, giving particular emphasis to what this revealed about national myth-making, the production of consensus and modalities of power in the postcolonial state.

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[1] Please do not cite.

On the 16th June 1976, 15 000 high school pupils marched in Soweto, South Africa in protest against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools. Aggressive police action sparked widespread rioting across Soweto and neighbouring townships. By the end of 1977, the protests had escalated into a "virtual communal insurrection", claiming at least 570 lives (Lodge 1983: 328, 330). In a feeble attempt at damage control, the National Party Government looked for its usual scapegoat in the figure of the outside "instigator": according to the official report, it was inconceivable that the protests could have been an expression of "the Black man's" anger or that, "by rioting, he was raising his voice against oppression and for a more democratic dispensation..." (Cillié Commission Report, cited in Lodge, 1983: 332).

The response of the South African government to the series of violent attacks on immigrants in May and June of 2008 – which left 62 dead and thousands displaced – represents a similarly disingenuous attempt to contain and manage the threat of a potentially disruptive event. In 2008, while the violence itself was far less easily interpreted, much less named, the explanations that this was evidence of 'pure criminality' or the work of a sinister 'third force' were no less desperate than the apartheid government's invention of a shadowy agitator. Aside from anything else, the events of May 2008 led to an interpretive crisis unleashing multiple, often contradictory, stories the most powerful of which involved crime. In this paper, I explore these multiple acts of naming and narration and consider what was at stake.

Whatever 'actually happened' in May 2008, the stories which were told about the violence were equally important for what they revealed about the dominant interpretive frameworks, the 'maps of meaning' or 'necessary fictions' by means of which social reality in South Africa, as elsewhere, is organised and interpreted. As Sinfield has argued, it is through "stories, or representations, that we develop understandings of the world and how to live in it. The contest between rival stories produces our notions of reality, and hence our beliefs about what we can and cannot do" (2004: 27). Like other moments of profound social disruption, the violent attacks on immigrants in 2008 were important not only for what they revealed about the stories that had come to be accepted but also for what those stories might obscure. The intense public debate generated by these events – across the press and government statement – illuminated some of the larger story-structures which shape and inform South African reality: dominant myths of the nation, privileged teleologies, definitions of the 'national character', the organisation and delimitation of the body politic and the relations of 'citizens'. In the shadow of 'inexplicable' violence, many previously plausible stories or governing frameworks were rendered unstable or cast into doubt. To revisit this moment in South African history is to return to a moment of intense political contestation, interpretive instability and narrative 'undoing'. It is also to witness a process of anxious

recuperation as political elites hurried to contain the damage either by rehabilitating existing stories or deploying new ones.

For many commentators, the violent attacks against immigrants in May 2008 were an unwelcome intrusion of irrationality into the democratic post-apartheid order. In the immediate rush to name the events, several story-strands became discernable. Stories of mob irrationality and intimations of African 'savagery' competed with explanations of xenophobic hatred, blind prejudice and post-apartheid psychosis. While some commentators were quick to fasten these events onto an existing narrative of presidential failure and government incompetence, others gave consideration to the possibility that the violence was an expression of profound political anger, a rational response to economic inequality and the failure of the state. Attacks against immigrants were also interpreted as a form of 'crime busting', either community vigilantism taken to dangerous extremes or the legitimate efforts of community members to 'purge' their neighbourhoods of crime. This latter reading of the violence led to the oddity that, arising out of the same series of events, the figure of the immigrant was simultaneously constructed as threatening criminal and victim of violent crime; the violence named as a means of dealing with crime and an act of criminality itself.

Two studies, conducted prior to 2008, of press coverage of cross-border migration in South Africa had revealed high rates of xenophobic content in the South African media (MacDonald and Jacobs 2005; Ransford and MacDonald 2001). What is instantly striking about much of the mainstream reportage in the immediate post-May period is the speed with which the image of the threatening 'alien' was replaced by a figure of abjection and suffering. This suggests that it was only as the wounded victim of xenophobic violence that the immigrant could become a legitimate focus of concern and, significantly, of material assistance. The immigrant-as-victim, it would seem, was much easier to accommodate than the immigrant. The fact that social benevolence appears to be contingent on helpless victimhood was underlined by a gradual increase in public hostility towards immigrants as the spectacle of silent suffering was inevitably displaced by real human beings.

The second notable aspect of press coverage in South Africa is the way in which it fed into, or reacted against, traditional media representations of African conflicts. Tending towards what Mamdani described as a "pornography of violence" (2009: 56), this legacy of African reportage tends to focus on only the most superficial and spectacular aspects of conflict scenarios in Africa. In the absence of historical contextualisation or attempts at sense-making, incidents of violent conflict are rendered irrational and without meaning. Far from making sense, Africans are just "peculiarly given to fighting over no discernable issue" and African wars are simply "contest[s] between brutes" (2009: 19). In an earlier study on the Rwandan genocide, Mamdani reacts to these self-serving mystifications with the suggestion

that genocidal violence, even if not apparently rational, needs to be understood as at least "thinkable" (2001: 8).

South African press coverage of the May 2008 violence reiterated the archive of unthinkable African violence through descriptions of "murderous, marauding locals" (*Sowetan*, 4 June 2008), "machete-wielding mobs" (*Sunday Times*, 25 May 2008) "baying for foreigners' blood" (*The Star*, 16 May 2008). The irrationality of the attacks was pressed home in phrases such as "mindless killings" (*Sunday Times*, 25 May 2008), "orgies of violence" (*The Mercury*, 26 May 2008) and "rampaging" residents (*The Star*, 13 May 2008; *Citizen*, 19 May 2008). Sensational headlines such as "Hunting down the foreigners" (*Sunday Times*, 27 July 2008), "Terror on the Home Front" (*Sunday Times*, 18 May 2008), "Flames of Xenophobic Hatred" (*Business Day*, 19 May 2008) and "Another Bloody Day in Alex" (*The Star* 13 May 2008) accompanied dramatic, scene-by-scene descriptions that focused on gruesome details and the gloating cries of vanquishers. In these examples, the voices of anonymous community members were accessed only in order to confirm the interpretation of mob prejudice and mindless cruelty. Many commentators were also tempted to construct apocalyptic, end-day scenarios of escalating "cycles of conflict" (*Daily News*, 19 May 2008), 'war on the streets' and "All Hell Break[ing] Loose" (*Sowetan*, 19 May 2008), the drama only intensifying as the violence 'spread' to other areas (*The Star*, 16 May 2008). This voyeuristic and decontextualised reporting rendered the violence unthinkable by denying motivation, dehumanising the perpetrators and emphasising the brutality of the attacks. It invoked the spectre of African rage and appealed to entrenched assumptions about 'mob' irrationality, 'herd mentality' and the suggestibility of rampaging hordes.

Much of the immediate public reaction to the violence took the form of moralising indignation, horror and outrage. The rhetorics of moral condemnation took a number of forms: attacks against "foreigners," shattered the "dream" of a nation founded on unity and respect for difference (Van Duk 2008), undoing "years of hard work, of reconciliation, of goodwill" (Editorial, *Sunday Times*, 25 May 2008). Named as 'xenophobia', the violence was read by some as a continuation of apartheid discrimination by those who should 'know better'. For others, it was a betrayal of Christian values, a denial of ubuntu, an inability to respect basic human rights and a repudiation of the pan-African 'family'. While some responses oscillated uneasily between inclusivist and exclusivist positions – those which assumed a collective responsibility and those which projected the 'evil' onto an inauthentic minority – moralising responses tended to confirm a simple 'othering' of the perpetrators of violence as morally or intellectually deficient, irrational or barbaric, thus unwittingly feeding into stereotypes of unthinkable African violence. Usually spoken from positions of assumed intellectual or moral superiority, condemnatory responses tended to reinforce 'us/them' scenarios and to construct the South African landscape in terms of the civilised and the

ignorant – the 'peace-loving', 'right-thinking' and the 'upstanding' versus the violent, reactionary and misled.

These divisions were easily spoken in the language of class, thus giving licence to latent class hostilities rarely voiced in such explicit terms. While some were able to recognise that those who "have the luxury to think right tend not to be found in the squalor of Alexandra or the Ramaphosa squatter camp" (Sikhakhane 2008), others raged against the 'lazy poor' and criticised a growing culture of entitlement and state-dependency (Mbabela 2008; Nyati 2008). While providing one kind of escape route, these narratives raised other unnerving possibilities, namely that of a divided or "nonsynchronous" nation (Bloch and Ritter 1977), potentially split along class lines but also fractured by multiple, often contradictory social realities, experiences and cosmologies. Thus, while on-going media images of violence and suffering orchestrated a sense of simultaneous existence and shared experience, they also unmasked profound social disjuncture. A less disturbing construction preserved the image of South African consensuality by isolating and demonising a "rogue minority of xenophobes" – "a few self-hating dunderheads and bigots" (Editorial, *Sowetan*, 14 May 2008) – who were positioned outside of the sanctioned nation. In creating a new category of discrimination – the 'authentic' versus the 'non-authentic' citizen, this narrative was able to circumvent the potential fracture of a class-based analysis, thereby delaying difficult reflections on the suffering of the poor.

Moral incredulity and outrage was also reserved for those who appeared ignorant of the philosophy of pan-Africanism, those whose actions suggested they were unaware of the role "that our continental brothers and sisters have played" in building the South African economy and in the defeat of apartheid (Nyati 2008). In the wake of these views came calls for education about the history of the pan-African movement, the anti-apartheid struggle and the role of foreign nationals in the economy. Like those arguing for the spread of humanist-enlightenment ideals of tolerance and respect for diversity, these responses were premised on the assumption that a rational argument would be enough to stay the hand of violence, as if it was simply a question of seeing the light of truth.

In this context, arguments regarding South Africa's moral obligations to 'our fellow-Africans' could unwittingly reiterate the social demarcations and exclusions intrinsic to xenophobic discourse itself. If the claims for African 'oneness' are based on the model of the family and the sealing 'ties of blood', an ideal of African unity remains dependent on the category of the other, and therefore implicitly excludes those who find themselves on the outside of the 'African family'. Other arguments, drawing on constructions of indigenous knowledges, narrated the social contract in terms of the codes of hospitality. While these discourses could allow for the possibility of the 'stranger', the models of blood and soil made an empathic response contingent on group affiliation.

The popular working-class paper, the *Daily Sun,* was possibly the only South African paper which did not explicitly condemn the attacks (Harber 2008: 163). In fact, it tended to endorse the view that South Africans had good reason to hate 'foreigners,' given their alleged involvement in crime. Narrated as part of a continuum of social unrest in the township – yet another example of the 'violence-as-usual' which township residents had come to expect – the attacks against immigrants were also represented, not as a moral lapse, but as indicative of the "people's anger and frustration" (Harber 2008: 165). Comparing this coverage with that which appeared in the middle-class paper, *The Star*, Harber points to an alarming split between 'blue-collar' and 'white collar' experience, the existence of "two nations" rather than one (2008: 161).

Public commentary in newspapers targeting middle-class audiences, however, suggests that the responses (condemnatory or approving) were not so easily mapped along class lines. These examples revealed painful contortions between righteous condemnation and barely acknowledged counter-arguments which demonised the immigrant and offered subtle justification for the attacks. In this way, it became possible to refer to 'aliens', 'illegality', 'flooding' and the problem of porous borders while simultaneously speaking of "foul bigotry" (Editorial, *Sowetan*, 21 May 2008), 'holocaust' and 'human rights'. Similar contortions were also evident in the constant slippage between the figure of the immigrant and the spectre of the criminal, a slippage which was reinforced by an insistent framing of the immigrant presence as threatening, dishonest and difficult to detect. The chief difference perhaps is that a newspaper purportedly representing the views of the poor and working class felt no compunction about speaking in the language of universal human rights whereas those in other public forums felt more constrained to reiterate the socially-sanctioned view. The impasse thus created speaks to irresolvable contradictions between ideological fiat and material possibility and confronts the limits of humanist discourse in contexts of profound social inequality.

The ambivalence and anxiety aroused by the May violence reminds us of another occasion when "alien nation" became the subject of heated public debate, namely the arguments over 'invasive aliens' and indigeneity which arose in the wake of fires on Table Mountain in January 2000. Like the 'threat of invasive aliens', the issue of so-called xenophobic violence becomes "over-determined" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 649), a nodal point upon which a number of irresolvable contradictions converge – the rights of the autochthon versus the rights of the stranger; the politics of protectionism and exclusion versus the borderless economy; the construction of the immigrant as parasite or benefactor; and the "ideology of universal inclusion" versus the limits of the provisioning 'commonweal' (2001: 650). As the Comaroffs argue, one of the outcomes of the debates in 2000 about alien nature was the "displacement of the argument about outsiders into the floral kingdom", a

rhetorical move which tended to sanction a previously unspeakable "post-racist form of racism; a form of racism that, by concealing itself in the language of autochthony and alien-nature, [had] come to co-exist seamlessly with a transnational cultural of human rights" (2001: 651). Eight years later, the violent attacks against immigrants sent these sentiments (to some extent) underground while leaving the original contradictions between ideological aspiration and material condition unresolved.

The problem of unthinkable violence and the contradictions of liberal-humanist discourse were also evident in those responses which chose to name the violence as 'xenophobic'. The temptation here – evident in references to 'blind prejudice' or the fear and hatred of the other – is to interpret the violence in exclusively psychological terms. These decontextualised readings gain force through what Harris describes as the "phonetic confusion" arising out of the suffix 'phobia' which strengthens the association with psychological pathology (2002: 178). In this way, xenophobia becomes an explanation in itself rather than a social phenomenon requiring careful historicising and contextualisation. This dehistoricising potential is given a further boost by a particular metaphorical clustering in which xenophobia is associated with 'monsters', 'explosions', 'eruptions', disease, plague, viruses and even demonic possession. By these means, xenophobia is constructed as an external phenomenon, a force of nature or an evil manifestation of the spirit world: it is an unstoppable, externalised force against which human beings are virtually helpless.

A consistent assumption across the genres of moral condemnation, including the explanations of xenophobia, was that social change could be effected through appeals to a 'higher morality'. In keeping with the idealist assumptions of the South African Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM), they also reiterated a central political 'truth' regarding the legitimacy of South Africa's post-apartheid economic order, assuming that human rights in South Africa are not only respected but achievable within existing (centrist) economic frameworks (Gumede 2005). It is an argument akin to that which suggests that capitalism could be responsive to the moral force of ethical injunction.

Those wary of feeding into scenarios of mindless violence, African barbarism or the irrational poor offered various categories of explanation – psychological, political and economic – seeking to locate the events within a precise historical and social context. In newspaper reportage, this circumspection was evident in the use of the less sensational 'men' instead of 'mobs' and in the way in which emphasis was placed on the injuries suffered by the refugees and the on-going humanitarian effort rather than on graphic descriptions of how these injuries had been sustained.

In the various psychological explanations which were offered, the assaults on immigrants were interpreted as acts of "self-hatred" (Editorial, *Sowetan*, 14 May 2008; Khumalo 2008) and "Afrophobia" (Mathe 2008), indicative of apartheid dehumanisation and a

pervasive culture of violence. In this reading, the demonised figures of violent inhumanity were replaced by the "wounded" victims of colonial and apartheid brutality (Mabasa 2008). For many, the solution lay in the balm of Black Consciousness. Also representing these actions as at least thinkable were those arguments in which the violence was construed as a response to the failure of the post-apartheid state, a reading which could draw on any number of factors to make its point – government corruption and infighting, a culture of self-enrichment, power-drunk leaders, bureaucratic inefficiency, wastage and incompetence, failed diplomacy in Zimbabwe, lax border controls, slow service delivery, rampant poverty and inequality. Unlike those narratives in which an unworthy minority was split from the general populace, these versions told a story of "average normally law-abiding South Africans" (Makhanya 2008) suddenly turning violent under conditions of extreme stress.

In my judgement, those stories which suggested a rational response could be inflected in a number of ways. First, in a direct reversal of the government's 'crime story', attacks against immigrants were configured as a form of protest against the ruling Mbeki regime, itself represented as 'criminal'. In the words of one commentator, "the foreigners are the medium in which the *gatvol* (fed up) message has been communicated" (Nyatsumba 2008). These explanations tended to be accompanied by the language of apocalypse, images of social crisis and "leaderless" communities (Molefe 2008) and frequently ended with calls for the 'lame duck' president to "step down" (Editorial, *Sowetan*, 4 June 2008). The very same criticisms could also be channelled along the routes of Afro-pessimism, confirming stereotypes of African ineptitude and corruption amid the ruins of a crumbling social order.

Finally, there were explanations which offered a left-inflected critique of post-apartheid South Africa. Stories of hopelessness, poverty and inequality spoke to the failure of the democratic project and the collapse of the state. In this reading, the violence unmasked the brutal economic disparities obscured by the myth of the rainbow nation, telling a story of black oligarchies and white compatriots looting the nation while people starved. Also enlisted in this analysis was a critique of authoritarian decision-making in government, the undermining of structures of participatory democracy and the co-option of radicals into business and government. Like the moralising arguments, these responses tended to assume the beneficence of current economic policies, locating the failure mainly in greed; it was a rare voice which questioned the "fantasies of trickle-down economics" (Buccus 2008) and called for more radical change.

While many of the pro-poor arguments were able to acknowledge the broad rationality – if not the *justice* – of the attackers' actions, they would seldom allow that people were correct in their reasoning that immigrants could pose an actual threat to their well-being. Here, the Comaroffs' attempts to situate the 'alien debates' of January 2000 within a broad economic context are instructive. In partial explanation of the intensity of affect

generated by the burning of (alien) trees, they point to the vulnerability of a post-apartheid economy abruptly exposed to the chilly winds of global market forces. It was a shift which coincided with the relaxation of controls over immigrant labour, neo-liberal 'down-sizing' and the adoption of "flexible, 'non-standard' labour, much of it done by lowly-paid, non-unionised 'illegals', whom farmers and industrialists see as essential to their survival in competitive markets" (2001: 646). In this context, "routing the alien, who has come to embody the threat to work and welfare, presents itself as a persuasive mode of confronting economic dispossession" (2001: 646). The point was seldom made in the aftermath of the violence. If defending the actions of the attackers brings one dangerously close to the atavistic figure of prejudice, it also seems difficult to recognise the extent to which the South African economy remains dependent upon the presence of exploitable immigrant labour.

It was the move to contain the threat of some of these interpretations that led to government explanations of criminality and 'third-force' interference, both of which located the threat on the 'outside' of the 'virtuous community'. To read government statements and parliamentary speeches in the first few weeks of the violence is to witness a well-co-ordinated, if panicky, process of recuperation as government set out to neutralise the threat of competing stories. Prior to these events, the government had freely acknowledged the existence of xenophobic hostilities in South Africa. Both President Thabo Mbeki's Freedom Day Speech on the 27th April 2008 and the ANC statement of the 12th May, which responded directly to the attacks, strongly condemned acts of xenophobia as "hate crimes" which go against the "values of our democratic society".[2] Two days later, on the 14th May, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aziz Pahad, cautioned against hasty conclusions and "instant sensationalism", suggesting that proper investigation needed to be done in order to "identify the root causes" and establish "whether criminal and other elements are not involved in organising violence" (Pahad 2008).

The first explicit report about the possibility of criminal activity appeared in the Statement on the Cabinet meeting of the 14th May: in this announcement, xenophobic acts had been replaced by "acts of violence" and the role of instigating criminal elements repeatedly underscored.[3] At the same time, government officials also released statements regarding the possibility of 'third-force' activities. According to Ronnie Kasrils, the violence was a "revival of [the] extreme right-wing revanchism" of the early 1990s (cited in Barron 2008). It was the work of malicious trouble makers bent on "stoking fires" (Mapisa-Nqakula cited in Mkhwanazi and Mbanjwa, 2008), "destabilising" the country and "derailing" the gains of our democracy (Zuma 2008). Paradoxically, the repeated assertions of criminality and

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[2] ANC Statement on Attacks on Foreign Nationals, 12 May 2008.
http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pr/2008/pr0512.html (Accessed 14 May 2009).
[3] Statement on the Cabinet Meeting of 14 May, 15 May 2008.
http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2008/08051511451001.htm (Accessed 14 May 2009).

'third force' disruption were also accompanied by proprietorial references to the obligations owed to "our fellow Africans" suggesting other acknowledgements insistently denied by the dominant response. Contradictory explanations that the violence may have been a reaction to poverty or poor service delivery and the rising cost of living "must be rejected with the contempt [they] deserve".[4]

Like the discourse of moral condemnation, the crime story necessitates the splitting of the body politic into 'worthy' and 'unworthy' citizens: in the words of one politician, "self-respecting ordinary South Africans" versus "outright criminal elements" (Makwetla 2008). It is also accompanied by profound shaming and delegitimisation: these were the actions of a brutal, worthless minority, hooligans and thugs, "faceless people" who acted under "the cover of darkness" (Bapela 2008). The violence was repeatedly defined as a betrayal of the history of the liberation movement and (significantly) as "foreign to South African history and consciousness".[5] These actions "soil the good name of the best of our leaders" (Mbeki 2008b) and evidence a return to apartheid discrimination. Defined also as an attempt to "reverse and undermine our historical achievements", the attacks became an assault on the nation itself.[6] Repeated references in government communication to "born frees" and "clue-less" youth (Bapela 2008) are also indicative of on-going generational tensions, registering the anxieties of a political elite relying on the achievements of the past for their continued authority.

The charge of 'criminality' was a particularly powerful shaming device since it also opened up space for other, no less damning, terms of exclusion such as the 'inhumane', the 'non-human', and the 'non-citizen'. This was coupled with a model of crime and criminality favouring essentialist rather than materialist explanations and which rationalised the targeting of deviant elements within a system understood to be essentially humane. Evident in calls for "the harshest possible action" (Malema 2008), these arguments gathered force into a powerful justification of a violent, security-oriented response, a licence to use surveillance and maximum force (Zuma 2008).

In its resonant cries for retributive justice – and the "ethics of impunity" (Mamdani 2009: 7) which this encouraged – the government response enacted an uncanny repetition of those who targeted their so-called 'criminal' immigrant neighbours and called for their expulsion in the first place. The rhetoric of removal is exactly echoed in community efforts to 'cleanse' their neighbourhoods of crime. As in other examples, the unexpected linguistic repetitions ('stamping out', 'cleansing', 'purging' and 'removal') across supposedly polarised

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[4] Statement on the Cabinet Meeting of 14 May, 15 May 2008.
http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2008/08051511451001.htm (Accessed 14 May 2009).
[5] Statement on the Cabinet Meeting of 14 May, 15 May 2008.
http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2008/08051511451001.htm (Accessed 14 May 2009).
[6] Statement on the Cabinet Meeting of 14 May, 15 May 2008.
http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2008/08051511451001.htm (Accessed 14 May 2009).

arguments suggests a single category of response. By framing the May violence as criminality – and thus legitimising the response of force – the state paradoxically offered a subtle justification of community actions, a view which would only be strengthened by repeated government calls for communities to become more involved in community policing and 'fighting crime'.[7]

A similar structure of response appears to inform the latest shift in government attitudes towards crime and crime-fighting more generally. What seems to be a growing dissatisfaction with human rights-based formulations is evident not only in former Deputy Minister of Safety and Security, Susan Shabangu's, wildly popular calls to "shoot the bastards" and "make it a kill shot" (cited in Hoskyn 2008) but also in recent, more measured, pronouncements on the need for government to employ tougher crime-busting methods, irrespective of their possible erosion of human rights. In this 'zero tolerance' atmosphere, it is striking to note the ease with which political protest itself becomes conflated with criminality. In this way, all those who seek to "sow seeds of instability in our society" (Zuma 2008) – whether criminal or protestor – invite the condemnation of the nation. With the blurring of the criminal and the activist, the way is opened for further restrictions on organised opposition and the delegitimisation of dissent. Government moves to demonise and isolate the aberrant (criminal) individual also speak to one of the central political mechanisms or formulae of post-apartheid governance, a generalised rhetoric of discreditation or shaming by means of which threatening or dissident elements of the body politic are neutralised or expelled.

It was inevitable that the ruling African National Congress government would do its utmost to render implausible those explanations which located the source of the problem in the rage of the poor, the failure of service delivery, government corruption or structural inequality. In representing the violence as the work of a criminal minority, the ANC effectively displaced a more threatening story of government failure. What was also revealed in this naming was the enormous investment in – indeed, the political necessity of – the construction of South Africa as an ethical state and the continuing narrative of South African exceptionalism. The operative state model is that of justice already attained. In the words of Essop Pahad (2008), South Africa represents the "triumph of an ideal, the victory of democracy and social justice over tyranny, authoritarianism, apartheid and colonialism". Overlapping with the fiction of South Africa's 'miracle' transition – rather than a messy compromise – it is a story which also preserves the country's cherished image of 'pathfinder' and moral beacon.

The extent of this investment in the 'goodness' of the South African state is evident in the way in which the term 'democracy', as it is used in South Africa, always carries an

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[7] See, for example: ANC Gauteng Province Condemns Xenophobia and Criminality, 16 May 2008. http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pr/2008/pr0516.html (Accessed 24 April 2009).

explicitly moral charge, referring not only to political democracy, but also to the values of non-sexism, non-racism and (less overtly) economic justice. Post-apartheid South Africa, in other words, marks the end of oppression and the conclusion of suffering. South Africans inhabit the hallowed space of the redeemed present which is also a state of perpetual grace. This 'necessary fiction' is also tied to the on-going mythologizing of the African National Congress, typically imagined, not as a political party subject to the usual constraints, but as a liberation movement, aligned with, and expressing the will of 'its people'. This tendency to narrate the postcolony as an ethical state – an inevitable condition of the anti-colonial struggle itself – sits uneasily alongside the equally commanding story, in South Africa at least, of the ever-unfolding 'national democratic revolution' in which the ANC is constructed as a revolutionary party still bent on the project of decolonisation.

In the context of the redeemed present, it becomes impossible to imagine political anger on the scale which was witnessed in 2008, and consequently much easier to deflect it onto an unworthy minority, doubly shamed because of their betrayal of such noble ideals. This model of utopian plenitude is also underscored by typical modes of government address, particularly the construction of South Africans as 'our people', a formulation suggesting intimacy, unity and benevolence as well as ownership and hierarchy. Given this idealised construction of social unity, it is not surprising that government commentators on the violence would have been particularly anxious about discordant elements in the body politic, those who had seemingly not bought into the national project and had no understanding of Congress traditions or aspirations. Especially threatening to the consensual or familial model of the state was the image of 'our people' as our antagonists. While some responded to "those who did hear" our message (Zuma 2008) with calls for ambitious programmes of ideological co-optation, ethical education and curiously, 'nation-building', the dominant response favoured the crime story since, simply by negating the threat of a fractured, dissenting citizenry, it allowed government to preserve the myth of consensuality so central to its self-representations.

That the government would have preferred the story of violent criminality over xenophobia is perhaps even more intriguing. As many commentators argued, the explanation of xenophobia threatened several founding 'new South African' myths. It endangered the narrative of South Africa's 'miracle' transition and the 'African Renaissance' and it undermined the cherished image of South African unity-in-diversity, its international reputation, its high moral ground. It raised the unthinkable possibility of African racism and challenged the belief that those who are victims of oppression cannot become oppressors themselves. As if that were was not enough, it also called into question the notion of African humanism and ubuntu and imperilled both the history and the ideal of pan-African solidarity. With regard to the latter, it is possible that it was not so much the prospect of intra-African

enmity which appeared most threatening but the revelation of an embarrassing fault line: that much high-flown rhetoric about 'our African brothers and sisters' is frequently betrayed by government practice and that, in the absence of a common enemy, it is very likely that pan-African solidarities will be undermined in the face of more compelling obligations to 'look after one's own'.

While running counter to leftist hopes in the inevitable solidarities of the poor (Glazer 2008), xenophobia in South Africa also threatened the master narrative of imperialism and colonialism which pits white racists against African victims. In this regard, the responses to the violence revealed an enormous investment in the idea of the moral South African citizen and the purity of the nation, so that violent acts against immigrants become a fundamental betrayal of the 'national character', an authentic South African identity. In the "land of Nelson Mandela", attacks against "fellow Africans" (Rasool 2008), are either simply inexplicable or evidence of a shameful fall from grace. Said Desmond Tutu, "[t]his is not how we behave" (cited in Kuppan 2008); this is not "the true face of South Africa" (Jordan 2008); "it is not in the character of South Africans to be xenophobic" (Ndebele 2008). Aside from the interesting phenomenon of mere assertion displacing fact, this ideological investment in the 'greatness of the nation' arises partly from the need to establish a clear break with the apartheid past in order to validate the state and to legitimise the present. The notion of African innocence also seems essential to the story of colonial depredation and trauma. If the narrative of post-apartheid South Africa requires the end of oppression, the narrative of colonialism requires the guiltlessness of the oppressed.

In the face of these considerable threats to the 'national character', the story of the new South Africa and the history of colonialism and apartheid, it is easy to see why explanations of criminality would have been so appealing. With the acceptance of the crime story, all those unthinkable possibilities are instantly obliterated by the legitimately-hated spectre of the violent 'criminal mob'. In this version of reality, the preferred reading of South African society and the South African citizen remains in place: 'our people' remain virtuous, innocent of the crime of racism, and all-importantly, still 'ours'. South Africans emerge with their moral rectitude intact and their principled pan-Africanism secure. All the processes of painful self-reflection are circumvented: the society is declared good and the system is sound.

All of these factors are powerfully present in President Thabo Mbeki's Remembrance Day Speech of the 19th June 2008, which simultaneously achieved both the shaming and the absolution necessary for the management, and ultimate transcendence, of this profoundly disruptive event. The speech begins by invoking the dead. It establishes all South Africans as the "off-spring" of the great leaders of the anti-colonial struggle in Africa whose vision of freedom, it is repeatedly stressed, was inseparable from the freedom of all Africans (Mbeki

2008c). The African National Congress – "Africa's oldest liberation movement" – is established, in turn, as the direct descendant of this noble tradition, the great "edifice of African hope", indeed, the "Mother of Hope" at whose breast "we have suckled" and from whence we have absorbed the lesson of our fundamental unity with other Africans (Mbeki 2008c).

Here, the violence against immigrants is framed not as a human rights issue – the obligations owed to any human being – but rather as a betrayal of ancient pan-African solidarities and the traditions of the ANC. The story of this venerable, now vulnerable, legacy establishes the magnitude of the transgression, a transgression made all the more egregious because it involves a betrayal of concrete historical figures – Tiyo Soga, JG Xaba and Pixley Seme – rather than abstract human rights. Added to this potential infamy is the betrayal of the life-giving mother as well as the repudiation of blood-ties and the negation of family. Confronted with this betrayal, South Africans must mark Africa Day with their "heads bowed in shame" (2008c).

In the efforts to establish the enormity of guilt, Mbeki's speech appears to demarcate a ceremonial space into which a penitent people could enter and find absolution. Drawing on the powerful male lineage established in the opening remarks, however, the speech takes a different turn:

> When I heard some accuse my people of xenophobia, of hatred of foreigners, I wondered what the accusers knew about my people, which I did not know …. Everything I know about my people tells me that these heirs to the teachings of Tiyo Soga, JG Xaba and Pixley Seme, the masses who have consistently responded positively to the Pan-African messages of the oldest liberation movement on our continent, the African National Congress, are not xenophobic. These masses are neither antipathetic towards, nor do they hate foreigners … I will not hesitate to assert that my people are not diseased by the terrible affliction of xenophobia which has, in the past, led to the commission of the heinous crime of genocide. (Mbeki 2008c)

In a surprising reversal, the affiliations of blood and culture become the irrefutable guarantee of innocence. By virtue of their biological and ideological inheritance – a patrimonial line of dignity and grandeur extending from the founders of the ANC to their many sons and daughters – South Africans are preserved from the xenophobic taint. Through a powerful politics of commemoration, Mbeki's speech establishes the legitimacy of the contemporary community as the values of the present are sealed in the traditions of the past.

Central to this narrative, as to others, is the assumption of African morality. Indeed, according to Mbeki, Africa's unique contribution to world civilisation – its "essential departure" from other civilisations – lies in its spirituality and its humanism (2008: 3). This assumption is

intertwined with the intense mythologizing of the moment of the South African transition, repeatedly constructed as a movement from wretchedness, through heroism, into a glorious renaissance (Posel 2005: 147, Mbeki 1997). Like HIV/Aids, xenophobia is a 'disease' – a social contaminant and an intimation of death – which threatens to destroy the fledgling democracy at the moment of its birth (Posel 2005: 148). Incompatible with the new South African narratives of regeneration, rebirth, redemption and renewal, the existence of xenophobia also appears to confirm an unthinkable colonial narrative of African recidivism, to unmask a nightmare past of barbarity and decay.

With so much at stake, it was almost inevitable that violence against immigrants would be re-coded as "pure criminality", the actions of "evil elements in our midst" who do not deserve the name of South Africans and who must be "isolated and defeated" (Mbeki 2008c). In the terms of Freudian displacement, the social shame is obscured – and thereby made thinkable – through substitution, the criminal for the African racist. Read as a classical expression of scapegoating (Girard 1986), the consensual community is re-constituted, and further violence averted, via the sacrifice of the vulnerable 'other'. In deflecting the dishonour onto the figure of the criminal, Mbeki was able to both acknowledge and disavow the social shame, thereby performing a ritual mass cleansing in which the morality of a nation was re-established and the (female) body of the ANC powerfully restored. As such, Mbeki's speech was a moment of necessary symbolic assertion in which national unity was re-made and myths of the nation reinscribed.

As the introductory sequence suggests, an inadvertent consequence of criminal scapegoating by the Mbeki regime was that it came perilously close to mimicking the operations of apartheid rule itself. The unexpected parallel was captured in the following cartoon which appeared in *Beeld* (Vosloo 2008): [8]

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[8] The cartoon reads, "This is the work of agitators!"; "This is the work of the third force". The caption is "Spot the Difference".

The apartheid grotesque continues in the postcolony through the 'necessary fictions', required for the on-going production of power. In the postcolony, the "mythologies of power" (Mbembe 2001: 108) are always in need of rewriting. Fabulation and myth-making in the South African postcolony are revealed in the dominant Christian teleology of redemption and perpetual grace; the myths of consensuality and 'one-ness' which can allow no division or antipathy; and the stories of the dead. What also becomes apparent is a "modality of power" (Mbembe 2001: 133) which relies on the criminalisation of dissent and the isolation and shaming of all who threaten disorder. If the May violence revealed lines of fracture and points of tension in the broader South African polity – social divisions, the limits of available discourse and the fragility of national myths – it also laid bare a new Manicheanism of 'criminal' and 'citizen', the reliance on a particular model of criminality which achieves the restoration of social wholeness (and the goodness of the nation) through the expulsion of a few.

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