



“XENOPHOBIA” IN SOUTH AFRICA: Order, Chaos, and the Moral Economy of Witchcraft

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Violent riots erupted in the township of Alexandra, just northeast of Johannesburg, on May 11, 2008. Local residents attacked foreign immigrants from African countries like Mozambique, Somalia, and Zimbabwe, known collectively as *makwerekwere*—a derogatory term for foreigners and onomatopoeia for someone who speaks unintelligibly, a “babbling.” Two people were killed in this first bout of violence, and more than forty injured. Over the following weeks, similar riots erupted in other informal settlements around Johannesburg, as well as in settlements around Durban and Cape Town, South Africa’s two other major cities.¹ Tens of thousands of African immigrants—irrespective of their actual legal status—were harassed all across the country in mass eviction campaigns led by angry vigilante mobs comprised mostly of unemployed young males, despite the efforts of community members and local leaders to stop them. News of the pogroms spread through the media under headlines that followed the general formula, “South Africa Descends into Chaos,” often featuring the iconic photograph of the Mozambican immigrant Ernesto Nhamuave being “necklaced” with a petrol-filled tire and set alight by a mob—an image eerily reminiscent of the internecine battles that grabbed headlines in the years leading up to the collapse of apartheid. By the end of this first wave of riots, sixty-two people had been killed and over one hundred thousand displaced and forced to seek refuge in sprawling camps erected by the government.²

These events have inspired a great deal of soul-searching in South Africa as analysts seek to explain why multiculturalism in the much-vaunted Rainbow Nation has become so dangerously unstable. As a result, an enormous body of scholarly literature has emerged that explores the many causes of xenophobia in meticulous and sophisticated ways.³ I do not intend to rehearse that literature here, or recapitulate its valuable insights. Rather, I want to explore the fact that many of the accounts that scholars have offered of the pogroms—much like accounts of xenophobic violence elsewhere in the world (e.g., Hobsbawm 1992; Malkki 1995; Appadurai 1998)—seem to focus on globalization as a primary driver. There are two main strands of this argument. One strand, which derives from Marxist or political economy perspectives, holds that neoliberal policy and structural adjustment undermine livelihoods and spur violent competition over scarce resources such as jobs and housing. A second strand, which focuses on identity politics, holds that the cultural “flows” that characterize globalization induce a state of hybridity, flux, and moral anomie that triggers the impulse to violently recreate social boundaries. Both of these theories provide useful ways to think about the recent troubles, but I suggest that we need to critically examine some of their core assumptions.

Focusing on the specific ethnographic context of Durban, I argue that the Marxist perspective is correct to claim that xenophobic violence is a reaction to neoliberalism, but only inasmuch as economic decline is experienced according to a particular cultural idiom; namely, as a crisis of social reproduction. In other words, the relationship between neoliberalism and xenophobic violence is not deterministic in the materialist sense. Building on this point, I argue that, while there are many causes of xenophobia in South Africa, we can only fully understand the phenomenon by grappling with people’s particular representations of otherness. In the Durban case, this means exploring the ways that people’s perceptions of foreigners are often—although certainly not always—informed by popular ideas about witchcraft; ideas which provide the blueprint for a moral economy that rejects the forms of economic behavior that characterize neoliberalism in South Africa, with which immigrants have become symbolically associated. Violence against foreigners is less about fixing flows and ordering anomie than about reestablishing the conditions for social reproduction and demarcating the precincts of moral personhood. I leverage data from the Durban case to articulate a critique of the anomie perspective, which imports what I will preliminarily gloss as Euro-American cosmologies of order, chaos, and violence that bear interesting resonances with the long and problematic history of ideas about race in South Africa.

A CRISIS OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Xenophobic riots coursed through informal settlements around Durban not long after they first erupted in the Johannesburg area in May 2008. There were five crucial hotspots: the informal settlements of Cato Manor and Bottlebrush, where foreigners have set up shacks amongst those of citizens; the Central Business District, where foreigners and citizens compete in the informal marketplace; the Point near the harbor, which has become a space of considerable gang activity; and Dalton Hostel, a labor barracks known for the most serious episodes of intimidation against foreigners. During fieldwork in 2011, I visited all of these areas, but given considerations of access, I focused my research specifically on Cato Manor, a recently settled community of about one-hundred thousand residents—mostly IsiZulu-speaking—that sprawls across the valley on the far side of the Berea ridge, seven kilometers west of the city center.⁴ The first major incident in Cato Manor happened late on a Friday night mere days after the incidents in Alexandra. A group of vigilantes—a core of eleven men in their thirties—tried to rid the settlement of foreigners by forcing them out of their homes, killing four in the process. Less than a week later, more than three-thousand foreigners had been forced to seek refuge in police stations and churches around Durban. While I came to know some of the perpetrators, I found that they were generally unwilling to discuss their participation in the purges. Instead of focusing directly on the incident itself, then, I sought to understand how the residents of Cato Manor conceptualize foreigners, and how those conceptualizations open up the possibility of violence.

On one of my first days in Cato Manor, I found myself whiling away the afternoon with a group of young men who were loitering around a construction site, hoping to be offered piecework. Like most labor in South Africa, none of the workers on the site were employed in any formal capacity; they were being paid in cash by the hour, and without any job security. When the owner of the building ran out of money for the renovations, they would be out of work, fired without any notice. This scene—illustrative of the structural violence of unemployment and informal labor that characterizes South Africa today (Barchiesi 2011)—provided a poignant backdrop for what the men told me once I started to steer the conversation to the topic of the xenophobic violence in the area. For them, the primary problem with immigrants is that they undermine the economic opportunities of local citizens. According to my interlocutors, they do this by both outcompeting South African-owned businesses in the informal economy, and by undercutting the labor market by working for rates far below the minimum

wage, allegedly as low as R25 per day. Thus the ubiquitous complaint that “foreigners are stealing our jobs.” In addition to job theft, the men also accused foreigners of stealing their women by wooing them with cash, outdoing the local competition because they have fewer financial responsibilities to kin.

On the face of it, these concerns about livelihoods seem similar to cases of xenophobia everywhere else in the world where people seek scapegoats for their deprivation. A popular group of leftist intellectuals in South Africa has argued that xenophobic violence is ultimately the consequence of economic decay and uneven development as a result of structural adjustment and deindustrialization (Bond et al. 2011; see also Tshitereke 1999; Harris 2002). They point out that the ANC government’s policies have sent unemployment rocketing from 13 percent in 1994 to 25 percent in 2013, or 40 percent by unofficial measures. According to the *Economist*, “half of South Africans under 24 looking for work have none. Of those who have jobs, a third earn less than \$2 a day.”⁵ Since 1994, the number of people living on less than one dollar a day has doubled, from 2 million to 4 million. Two million people have lost their homes because of forced removals and inflated rents, and the number of shack dwellers has increased by fifty percent, to the point where today more than one quarter of South Africans live in shacks (Klein 2007).⁶ The argument holds that as livelihoods become ever more precarious, competition over jobs, housing, and retail have reached extreme levels. In the face of this mounting competition, people seek to leverage whatever social distinctions are most readily available in order to lay claim to diminishing resources (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, those who believe they have the right to benefit from the promised—but as yet unrealized—fruits of liberation draw lines between themselves and the non-citizens who they believe should not have such a right.

This approach establishes important correlations between xenophobia and its broader political-economic context, but its universalizing bent tends to miss the culturally particular ways people in South Africa understand economic deprivation. The experience of neoliberalism is shot through with deeply gendered implications informed by the history of the past half-century. During the post-war period, apartheid planners—concerned about the possibility of a black uprising—sought to generate consent among urban Africans through Fordist-style “embedded liberalism” (Harvey 2005), a sort of class compromise that centered on the construct of what Frederick Cooper (2003) calls the modern “Industrial Man,” the figure of the married male breadwinner living in a formal township house and working a stable job in manufacturing, mining, or the civil service (see

Hickel 2012). This figure was central to South Africans' expectations of modernity in the second half of the twentieth century, but rapidly crumbled as new strategies of capital accumulation undermined the conditions for such aspirations and cast most South Africans into a state of abjection (cf. Ferguson 1999). This has given rise to what Mark Hunter (2010) so aptly terms a "crisis of social reproduction" (see also Weiss 2004). One of the most obvious manifestations of this crisis is the precipitous decline in marriage rates, down to less than half of 1960 levels, so that today only 3 of 10 South African adults are married. With unemployment rates as high as they are, most young men find it impossible to raise the resources they need to pay *lobola* (bridewealth) and establish their own legitimate, respectable homes.

This helps explain the complaint most frequently on the lips of vigilantes—who, remember, are mostly young males (HSRC 2008, 6)—that foreigners are taking away their jobs, houses, and women, even though the reality of it is more complicated.⁷ The point of the complaint is that they feel they are losing their grip on the most basic means of social reproduction. This is particularly true in Cato Manor, where livelihoods are even more precarious than in formal townships like nearby KwaMashu or Umlazi, and where younger men cannot access the tight ranks of unionized, relatively high-paying sectors such as mining, milling, and metallurgy. They suffer from a crisis of masculinity, having been expelled from the path to manhood that was encouraged under apartheid—that of becoming *umnumzane*, a respectable, working-class family man.⁸ Instead, they find themselves in their thirties and still living with their mothers, earning the social derision due to *umnqolo*—a "mamma's boy." Young men in Cato Manor are often subject to ridicule from their female peers, who jeer at their emasculation and accuse them of being *izahluleki*, "failures" incapable of performing their expected roles (cf. Hunter 2010). Many of the women I interviewed complained that their boyfriends, and even sometimes their husbands, were effeminate and weak, incapable of executing the duties of "true men." In short, neoliberalism has undermined the modern dream of Industrial Man—or at least nostalgic versions of it—and threatened the gendered edifices upon which it was once built (see Hylton 2012).

REPRESENTATIONS OF WITCHCRAFT

Of course, the fact that neoliberalism creates a crisis of social reproduction is not a novel argument. What is interesting in this case, rather, is the particular way this crisis is understood in Cato Manor according to ideas about what con-

stitutes a proper moral economy and what marks its opposite, which is often conjured by drawing on the logic of witchcraft.

In Cato Manor, people often draw evocative connections between their ideas about foreigners and their ideas about witchcraft, or, in IsiZulu, *ubuthakathi*. Sometimes this is quite explicit. For example, one middle-aged woman, who I will call Thandile, complained to me over tea in her sitting room one afternoon that,

When the makwerekwere come here we no longer develop, and our children no longer progress. If we have reached 80 percent then we fall back to 10 or 0 percent. For example, if I have a shop and a foreigner comes here and sets up a shop nearby, then his shop will succeed and my shop will fail. They will go up and we will go down. The only way to explain this is that they are using something . . . that they are using *ubuthakathi*. You see how they come here, they are so poor, they come from a poor country and they come across the border with nothing but a passport. There's no way that they can become rich after only three years or so here! There must be something behind it . . . they are using *ubuthakathi*. There's no other way to explain it.

This is not to say that people always explicitly speak of foreigners as witches. Some of them do, like Thandile. But the more important point is that people conceptualize and evaluate foreigners and witches as morally analogous types of persons—as mysterious, anti-social agents that disable productive and reproductive processes.

Ideas about witchcraft in Cato Manor provide a moral framework within which people evaluate economic behavior as either conducive to or destructive of “development” (*ukuthuthuka*) and social reproduction. This framework becomes a primary heuristic through which South Africans experience and respond to the present neoliberal economy (see Niehaus 2001; Ashforth 2005). Discourse about witchcraft in Cato Manor usually focuses on explaining the experience of “misfortune” (*amashwa*). Economic misfortunes like poverty, joblessness, and the consequent inability to marry are often understood not as neutral market outcomes or the product of chance, but as orchestrated by specific human agents (cf. Hammond-Tooke 1970). The people most likely to be suspected of orchestrating misfortunes are people who exhibit morally questionable economic behavior. People in Cato Manor like Thandile draw sharp distinctions between economic behavior that contributes to social production and economic behavior that serves

anti-social accumulation. Social production involves the valuable work of producing people and relationships (cf. Ferguson 2006). In the South African wage economy, this generally takes the form of sponsoring life-cycle rituals such as nubileity rites, marriages, and funerals, which build kinship. By contrast, anti-social accumulation involves the selfish appropriation of the labor and vitality of others for oneself. Anti-social accumulators hoard their cash and assets, closing them up in such a manner that they cannot be used to benefit the community.

In Cato Manor, unaccountably rich individuals are often accused of using witchcraft to help them amass wealth. One way they are thought to do this is by procuring mythical shiny snakes known as *mamlambo*, which bless their owners with an abundance of money and good fortune but only on the condition that their owners provide them with a steady supply of human blood—ideally that of their young kin. The wealth that *mamlambo* provide, therefore, requires the unmaking and destruction of kinship and social relations. In IsiZulu, this kind of illegitimate wealth is regarded as *isheleshe*, or “slippery”: it appears to come out of nowhere, tends to disappear suddenly, and, crucially, never benefits the succeeding generation. Individuals whose wealth is questionable may also be accused of using witchcraft to produce zombies (*imikhovu*), dead bodies that have been semi-revived and set to work as mindless slaves. With an army of zombie labor at their disposal, witches are able to produce and accumulate much more than their neighbors. By stealing the dead, they effectively appropriate the ancestors of other families, not only stripping those families of vital protection from misfortunes, but also making the ancestors of others work for their *own* enrichment rather than that of their actual descendants, transferring vitality and good fortune from their neighbors to themselves.

These collective representations offer poignant, almost Marxist critiques of accumulation, complete with a theory of labor power and the appropriation of surplus value. The moral claim in these accounts is that accumulation for its own sake—without honest work and fair redistribution—destroys communities and families rather than building them up. The people who deploy these idioms do not miss the fact that value does not emerge from thin air, and that accumulation requires the exploitation—indeed, even the death—of others in sort of a zero-sum game of vitality.

These ideas crop up in discourse about foreign immigrants with remarkable frequency in Cato Manor. Just like witches, immigrants are said to participate in forms of accumulation that are considered immoral and anti-social, enriching themselves at the expense of others. This adds another degree of cultural nuance

to the Marxist approach I discussed above. It may seem universal that xenophobes hate immigrants because they lay illegitimate claim to allegedly scarce local or national resources. But in South Africa's informal settlements, ideas about scarcity and illegitimacy make sense specifically within a moral economy that offers a folk theory of surplus extraction, and evaluates certain kinds of economic behavior as witch-like. Just like the young men waiting for piecework, Thandile's chief concern was that immigrants always seem to outcompete South Africans in the informal economy. In a separate conversation, Thandile told me that this is mostly because foreigners use *umuthi*, the medicinal substances used by witches, to make their businesses succeed. "The umuthi they use to get rich needs blood," she told me. "But not necessarily of their kin. Eventually it might need the blood of kin. But right now they kill South Africans. This is why there are so many murders in South Africa; it is to feed the umuthi. [Also] some of them come with zombies, which only children can see. We adults can't see them, but children can see them running all around their houses." Here, Thandile explains twin misfortunes that plague South Africa, a high unemployment rate and a high murder rate, by accusing immigrants of witchcraft.

While immigrants are often accused of using witchcraft to gain an unfair advantage in the local economy, they are not usually accused of bewitching South Africans; witchcraft accusations are normally made against intimate insiders. But, as Paul Landau (2012) suggests, this may be changing as the social context changes. There is evidence of this in Cato Manor. A local Zionist prophet, who I will call Themba, spoke at length to me about how immigrants use *mamlambo* to become wealthy. He claimed that it is not uncommon to see immigrants walking around the markets in downtown Durban with snakes, which (according to him) cost about R9,000 to procure—slightly more than the cost of a cow. I have personally never seen anyone walking around Durban with snakes, but this accusation is nonetheless quite common. Themba also explained that foreigners are known to use a special umuthi that steals the *izibusiso* (blessings) of others. "It works like a cell phone camera," he told me. "It shoots and captures your *izibusiso*. They will use small magnets and mirrors inside the umuthi and bury it in your path so that when you pass it takes your *izibusiso*. Then they can put all your *izibusiso* to themselves. They will go up, and you will go down." Here we see the same (incorrect) theory of zero-sum economics that Thandile invoked, which a number of scholars have commented on.⁹ In this case it comes with the added implication that immigrants have heightened command of technology, a claim that neatly corresponds with the common stereotype that immigrants (specifically those from

West Africa) have special knowledge of cell phones, which they can unlock and reprogram with ease. Tellingly, Themba explained that much of his work as a healer involves treating people whose *izibusiso* have been stolen from them. He told me that one of the most common symptoms is that women bewitched in this manner cannot give birth; when they get pregnant, they gestate for more than ten months and then both mother and child die—an evocative image of social reproduction gone awry.

Not everyone attributes immigrants' economic competitiveness directly to witchcraft, however. Some people point instead to the perception that immigrants come to South Africa alone, as single individuals, without family, children, and other kin. One young man I spoke to agreed that "immigrants can make do with very little money for wages because they come here with no responsibilities. If they get R25 per day they have enough to eat. They don't have responsibilities. They don't have wives, for example, so they don't need to buy airtime to give them." This statement illustrates how residents of Cato Manor accuse immigrants of hoarding their money without reinvesting it in the community through exchange. People accuse them of impregnating local women without paying bride-wealth or cleansing fines (*inhlawulo*)—the ultimate sign of illegitimate reproduction. In this sense, just like witches, immigrants are perceived to traffic in the pure commodity, accumulating only for themselves while avoiding entanglement in relationships of reciprocity, in stark contrast to South Africans who are increasingly burdened by debt obligations (James 2013). This representation is inaccurate, of course, as most immigrants remit to their home countries and are deeply embedded in transnational kin networks, while many young South African men in Cato Manor father children without providing for them. Yet the stereotype retains its power because it underscores a basic moral contrast between the production of wealth *through* kin and the production of wealth in the *absence* of kin, with the latter representing a form of value negation (cf. Munn 1986).¹⁰

Immigrants are considered to be like witches in a number of other respects as well. People in Cato Manor discuss them in the register of inside/outside distinctions. Immigrants are often called *abantu abangaphandla*, people of the "outside." This status partially explains their mysterious power. In KwaZulu-Natal, the most powerful witches are said to be foreign ones, for the "outside" registers as simultaneously powerful and dangerous. People rationalize this belief by pointing out that witches from places like Mozambique bring exotic herbs that South African healers do not know about, and therefore cannot counteract. Witches also trouble the boundaries between culture and nature. Witches are said to go

about naked (instead of clothed) during the night (instead of day), eat raw meat (instead of cooked), and associate with familiars of ambiguous taxonomy, such as baboons and bush babies, that destabilize the distinction between human and animal. These ideas seem to lie behind the allegations of some Cato Manor residents that immigrants are known to cook and eat human children. These putative acts of cannibalism signal a perceived blurring between human and animal categories; they flag an excess of nature and a deficit of culture. We might think of this through the lens of Giorgio Agamben's (1995) work on the "state of exception," whereby people who violate serious taboos assume the status of *homo sacer*, which means simultaneously "sacred" and "vile" (or, both "powerful" and "dangerous"). Along these lines, immigrants appear to live in a state of bare life (*zoe*, in Agamben's terms) rather than according to any particular mode of human culture (*bios*).

In addition, immigrants (particularly Nigerians, as the stereotype goes) are thought to be heavily involved in illicit trade in drugs, arms, and human organs. They are also accused of trafficking in goods that are considered to be fake, like counterfeit designer clothes and pirated DVDs. They are regarded as shadowy masters of the black market, capable of marshaling arcane techniques to secure wealth from hidden sources. As far as I am aware, there is no evidence to suggest that immigrants participate in illicit economies any more than South Africans do, but this characterization is nonetheless significant, for the idea of fake or inauthentic wealth is also attributed to witches and their ill-gotten gain. In other words, the trickster motif in this discourse is shifted from the use of mamlambo and zombies to the trade in drugs and knock-off Gucci. As Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2002) have suggested, these representations bear witness to an economic era where stable, honest labor in the factory has been eclipsed by risk, speculation, and blind faith in the inscrutable workings of the "invisible hand."

MAKING SENSE OF VIOLENCE

In light of the above, it seems likely that the analogies people commonly draw between immigrants and witches informed the xenophobic violence that became so serious in 2008. The anti-immigrant purges were carried out in a manner that bore unmistakable parallels to witch-hunts described in the ethnographic literature (e.g., Niehaus 2001). Both involve groups of disaffected young men as perpetrators, and both are organized around restoring the conditions for social reproduction.

While it would require further research to prove, it is also possible that ideas about witchcraft and social reproduction help explain the use of arson in many cases of xenophobic violence in South Africa, such as that of Ernesto Nhamuave. As I explained above, the kinds of misfortunes (*amashwa*) that people blame on witchcraft usually have to do with reproductive blockages; anything from getting fired from work to having a miscarriage. But the most potent and dangerous manifestation of *amashwa* is said to come in the form of lightning. Witches are thought to be able to command lightning to strike their victims' homes and obliterate them through flames. This evocative image forms the center of collective nightmares about witchcraft in much of KwaZulu-Natal: since the home symbolizes the family itself, this form of *amashwa* represents the total destruction of the material locus of legitimate social reproduction. Crucially, witches are punished with the same formula. When a vigilante group engages in witch-hunting, they seek to burn the home of the suspected witch—and perhaps even burn the witch him or herself—turning their houses and bodies into icons of their moral flaw in a sort of homeopathic correction. House-burning symbolizes the epitome of social destruction and infertility; it gives witches a taste of their own medicine, so to speak.¹¹

These same symbolic, and emotionally charged, schemes may organize the way that some South Africans act against foreigners, and this may explain why foreigners' houses and bodies became the targets of fire-related violence in 2008. In other words, far from being senseless, chaotic, and anomic, as many accounts have asserted, xenophobic violence in South Africa follows a recognizable cultural logic; it is semiotically loaded. But because most existing accounts assume violence to be purely instrumental, they fall short of explaining the use of arson as a tactic. Why are foreigners so often killed by burning? Why are they not lynched or beheaded? In light of the semiotic parameters of witchcraft analogies, it is clear that this is more than a convenient tactic of warfare. It is a bid, however heinous in its manifestation, to heal the land by obliterating the agents of anti-fertility. This explains the striking parallels between the xenophobic attacks in 2008 and the incidents reported in the 1990s, when young unemployed males burned accused-witches while chanting the words "Die, you witch; we can't get jobs because of you!" (African Eye 2007). Both attacks targeted agents of value negation; blockages to productive and reproductive processes.

The particular form of the violence used is not incidental or external to its purpose; rather, the form is the purpose itself. To draw on J. L. Austin's (1962) notion of speech acts, the violence is not simply illocutionary. It is not meant

solely to accomplish the immediate instrumental task of eliminating an enemy. It is also perlocutionary, intended to convey a broader message, in this case a message about moral order, the social good, and the consequences of their violation. In other words, the form of violence illuminates people's conceptions of the social ills at hand. And here we might think about the use of violence through the lens, again, of Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*. As I have described, the immigrant—like a witch—exists in a state of exception and thus represents, in Agamben's (1995, 86) words, “a life that may be killed by anyone” without counting as homicide. This makes it not only thinkable for people to orchestrate violence against immigrants, but also gives the violence the aura of legitimacy, for it appears to be in the service of culture and morality.

XENOPHOBIA AND COSMOLOGIES OF WESTERN SOCIAL SCIENCE

We can leverage the interpretation I have outlined above to question some of the key categories that dominate the social scientific literature on xenophobic violence. This body of scholarship developed toward the end of the 1990s as analysts attempted to make sense of the central paradox of globalization: instead of inaugurating a new era of peaceful, cosmopolitan liberalism, globalization seems to have inspired a return to rigid and violent parochialisms. In their seminal volume, Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere (1999a) sought to explain this contradiction between “global flows” and “cultural closure,” by arguing that “people's awareness of being involved in open-ended global flows seems to trigger a search for fixed orientation points and action frames, as well as determined efforts to affirm old and construct new boundaries” as people seek “to create clear markers in the flux of the globalization process” (Meyer and Geschiere 1999b, 2, 9). The same metaphors of flux and fixity underwrite two influential essays in the globalization literature: Eric Hobsbawm's (1992) “Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today,” and Arjun Appadurai's (1998) “Dead Certainty.” I focus on these particular accounts because their ideas—specifically their ideas about anomie—have informed so much of the discourse about xenophobia in South Africa.

Hobsbawm (1992) considers the rise of xenophobia across Europe to be a result of late-capitalist modernity, claiming that economic liberalization, the collapse of the welfare state, the decline of the sovereign nation, and the disintegration of traditional values and certainties has led to a general ethos of what he calls “social disorientation.” Reviewing a number of specific cases in Europe, Hobsbawm concludes, “All are comprehensible as symptoms of social disorien-

tation, of the fraying, and sometimes the snapping, of the threads of what used to be the network that bound people together in society. The strength of this xenophobia is the fear of the unknown" (7). Add to this the fact that people are competing against their neighbors for scarce jobs in a context in which livelihoods are increasingly precarious, and you have, according to Hobsbawm's analysis, a recipe for disaster. People are forced to establish claims to limited resources by defining "the others who do not belong, who should not belong, and who never can belong. In other words, by xenophobia" (8).

The assumption underlying Hobsbawm's approach is that society will naturally decompose into "anomie"—his synonym for "social disorientation"—in the absence of mechanisms for maintaining social solidarity and cohesion, such as the welfare state or the nation. For him, globalization has eroded all of the neat structures and boundaries that modernist statecraft established, and people are forced to mitigate their confusion by reasserting parochial forms of identity. But this analysis seems to rely less on actual data than on the assumptions of a social science that privileges the concept of bounded order, and that remains deeply anxious about change and flux. The model at play here assumes, to borrow Jonathan Friedman's (2002, 26) words, that "the world was once a mosaic of separate cultural units, but that with globalization these units have been opened up and culture is flowing all over," creating a process of "mixing" or "hybridity" reminiscent of a "leaky mosaic." As Ira Bashkow (2004) points out, this vision derives from structural-functionalist assumptions about the unity and boundedness of cultures (see Clifford and Marcus 1986).¹² Of course, given that Hobsbawm is primarily concerned with Europe—a cultural context to which he is native—we might expect that his anxieties about flux, flow, and hybridity are shared by the people whose xenophobia he is trying to explain. As Richard Handler (1988) has pointed out, European nationalism shares a great deal with social-scientific models of boundedness and unity; indeed, the former derives directly from the latter. But Hobsbawm never thinks of this model as a native logic particular to a specific cultural context; rather, he writes as though it were natural and universal, or at least the universal concomitant of the nation-state.

Appadurai (1998) also links his approach to a theory of anomie, explicitly citing Emile Durkheim's (1951) *Suicide*. Responding to critics who complained that his *Modernity at Large* (1996) offered too rosy a picture of global flows, he concedes that globalization has a dark side: "given the growing multiplicity, contingency, and apparent fungibility of the identities available to persons in the contemporary world, there is a growing sense of radical social uncertainty about

people, situations, events, norms, and even cosmologies” (1998, 226). For Appadurai, these uncertainties proceed from “the forces of globalization,” by which he means weakened states, refugees, economic deregulation, and deterritorialization: “It is not difficult to see that the speed and intensity with which both material and ideological elements now circulate across national boundaries have created a new order of uncertainty in social life,” specifically with respect to the differences between the categories “us” and “them” (228). Similar notions of flux and flow operate in the recent work of Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2008, 7) who, building on Filip de Boeck’s (2004) work, describe Kinshasa as “bathed in a constant overproduction of signs, an ‘overheating’ or excess of the signifier that literally leads to a crisis of meaning [and produces a struggle to] reestablish control over an increasingly overflowing imaginary.” According to Appadurai, violence becomes a useful tool in this struggle to reorder categories and define indeterminate social boundaries. Drawing on Mary Douglas’s (1966) and Liisa Malkki’s (1995) ideas about purity and category mixture, he claims that violence is exercised not simply in order to accomplish the practical task of eliminating the other, but more importantly in order to stabilize it symbolically, to mark it, to make it what it is supposed to be, to fit it back into its category. In other words—to use Meyer and Geschiere’s (1999b) terms—the body becomes a site of violent “cultural closure” in situations of categorical uncertainty.

What Appadurai gives us is an approach to xenophobia rendered in classic anthropological terms. Yet the underlying argument parallels Hobsbawm’s, despite the fact that Appadurai deals with the postcolonial world rather than with Europe. In its broadest outlines, the formula goes like this: globalization creates cultural flows, breaks down boundaries, and generates semiotic overheating; cultural flows create anomie and uncertainty; and anomie propels new and violent forms of boundary-making. Violence functions as the best method of reestablishing boundaries, much like the role that ritual was thought to play in early structural-functional anthropology. But it seems to me that the *assertion* that globalization generates moral uncertainty stands in for an *explanation*—or even an ethnographic description—of this phenomenon. The correlation is assumed rather than demonstrated with empirical evidence (cf. Friedman 2002, 33), and is thought to pertain across cultures, featuring among European skinheads and Hutu refugees alike.

I do not mean to caricature these thinkers; I acknowledge that they have theorized globalization and violence in a variety of nuanced ways. I mean only to raise questions about the keystone concept of flows and anomie threaded through

some of their work. I suggest that this approach smuggles an unacknowledged cultural model into the center of the literature on xenophobia, a model which assumes that in contexts of rapid change, in the absence of state order and clear boundaries, individuals are liable to spin off into a condition of confusion, uncertainty, and violence. At its core, this model is really less Durkheimian than Hobbesian, and as such relies on specifically Western assumptions about human nature (see Sahlins 2008). It seems to me that in contexts where Western models of personhood and society do not enjoy popular currency, applying the flow/anomie theory can lead to analytical mistakes. This point becomes particularly vital in the context of South Africa, where ideas about anomie and violence have a long and sordid history in discourses and technologies of European rule.

"ANOMIE," RACE, AND VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Following the broader literature on globalization, scholarly treatments of xenophobic violence in South Africa also tend to rely on theories of anomie and chaos. In a widely-read review of the local xenophobia literature, Owen Sichone (2008, 257) writes: "Xenophobia has been defined as one among several possible forms of reaction generated by anomic situations in the societies of modern states. The new South Africa is a good candidate for a society in a condition of anomie . . . and we should therefore not be surprised to find unusual levels of moral confusion among the citizenry." Similarly, Francis Nyamnjoh (2006, 1) claims that "the accelerated flows of capital, goods, electronic information and migration induced by globalization have exacerbated insecurities and anxieties, bringing about an obsession with citizenship and belonging and the re-actualization of boundaries through xenophobia." The basic theory, once again, is that globalization automatically generates anomie and confusion, and that xenophobic violence is a reaction to this flux. But why should we believe that people are significantly more fluxy, or culture more flowy, now than in the past? Historians of Southern Africa affirm that rapid migration, mixing, and culture contact has been a feature of the region since at least the mid-1800s, and in arguably more extreme forms than today: consider the *mfecane*, the forced removals of the apartheid era, and other periods of intense dislocation (e.g., Etherington 2001; Landau 2010). There is little evidential basis for the anomie theory of xenophobic violence, yet it retains its currency because it seems to make intuitive sense according to folk models about violence in South Africa.

Ideas about anomie underpin popular representations of the xenophobic riots as "savage" and "animalistic." Indeed, Sichone's (2008) analysis makes liberal use

of words like “senseless” and “irrational” to describe the attacks in 2008. While Sichone surely does not intend it, this representation resonates with longstanding racial tropes that associate blackness with unrestrained passion and blind impulse—the same tropes that colonial administrators once deployed to justify European overrule. Indeed, the image of Ernesto Nhamuave burning became so popular in the local and international press precisely because it fit with the meta-narrative that regards black people as naturally given to irrational violence; it provided a sort of catharsis by furnishing evidence for what many observers already believed about race. Importantly, the blackness at stake here is a blackness of a certain geographically-located class, namely, of people who live in informal settlements, or “slums.” As I pointed out above, almost all of the xenophobic violence has been perpetrated in informal settlements. There are specific reasons for this pattern, as I have shown, but most media accounts fail to do serious causal analysis and instead simply assert an association between the disordered nature of the built environment and the moral disorder that they presume to be endemic to these settlements—a folk model that posits correlations between anomie and violence.

In South Africa, slums have long been the focus of moralizing discourses about anomie (see Hickel 2012). All through the twentieth century, social scientists expressed deep concerns about culture change among “natives” who moved from rural areas to urban areas, and worried extensively about what they referred to as “detrribalization” (see Hellman 1971, 1974; Wilson and Wilson 1945; Mayer 1961). Taking a cue from Durkheim, they thought that detrribalization would generate anomie, and that anomie, in turn, might result in violence. Apartheid administrators thought of detrribalized slum-dwelling Africans as a social-evolutionary misfire; they represented a kind of matter out of place, or, more specifically, matter out of social-scientific category. As James Ferguson (2007, 73) has put it, “urban natives . . . confused and confounded the orderly divisions between traditional and modern, native and Western, and rural and urban.” In other words, they muddled the categories that underpinned the project of colonial governance. Within this paradigm, the state regarded informal settlements as “dirty,” “diseased,” and “dangerous,” for they fit neither with the image of tradition (round wattle-and-daub huts in homesteads inhabited by patriarchal extended families) nor with the image of modernity (four-room nuclear family houses laid out in a formal township grid).

These views were endorsed by social scientists of the time. Both Karl Polanyi (1944) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1945) expressed precisely these anxieties upon

visiting the region, and worried about how the existence of detribalized natives living in slums not only threatened the clarity of social-scientific categories, but—as structuralist analysis might predict—presented the potential for dangerous chaos. Drawing on these same ideas, colonial and apartheid administrators explicitly believed that people who were “in between” the traditional and the modern were plagued by anomie associated with their liminal state, and that this made them intrinsically irrational and given to riotous violence (the equation works the other way around as well, in the imaginary of European civilization: violence not sponsored by nation-states is always considered irrational). Beginning in the 1950s, the state acted on these concerns, initiating massive slum-clearance projects and forcibly relocating hundreds of thousands of Africans back into category—either putting them into formal urban townships or sending them to the rural reserves. Incidentally, Cato Manor was the target of one of the largest experiments with this kind of social engineering. It was razed to the ground in the mid-1950s and most of its residents relocated to the distant township of KwaMashu, where they could be “civilized” for the purposes of control.

In South Africa, then, anxieties about change, anomie, and violence have a long history, and have mostly been the province of mid-century social scientists and colonial administrators. They are the ones that seem to be most concerned about flux and anomie—not the people in question. Theories about anomie become prevalent in social-scientific accounts when analysts cannot understand local frameworks of order (see Haynes 2012). Analysts project their own confusion onto those they study. There is no reason to believe that Africans find globalization any more confusing than earlier epochs of social change. To borrow Ruth Marshall’s (2009, 27) words, “In a continent whose history has been marked by fluid boundaries and the continual integration of strangers, where economies have been structured over several centuries through extremely brutal forms of economic extraversion, and where radical, violent change has marked the past century and a half . . . [a]re people really more confused by globalization or neoliberalism”? Instead of assuming confusion, we need to do the difficult work of learning local patterns of order. As Jane Guyer (2004, 8) puts it, “Rising levels of what a systems scholar would see as disorder may be ordered, may have landmarks and navigational pathways, to those with long familiarity with this kind of condition.” The point I wish to underline is that to explain xenophobic violence as anomic precludes substantive understanding of what is actually going on, and, more dangerously, leaves space for folk explanations about innate racial proclivities to flourish.

CONCLUSION: Culture, Order, and Otherness

My claim has been that the flux-and-anomie theory of xenophobia epitomized by Hobsbawm and Appadurai, and apparent in scholarly discourse within South Africa, may actually reflect the anxieties of social scientists more than those of the people on the ground. This point resonates with Michael Scott's (2005) work on hybridity, as well as with recent work by Friedman (2002) and Don Kalb (2005). Scott demonstrates that since the initial critique of the culture concept, anthropologists have been preoccupied with the notion of hybridity. On the one hand, they tend to celebrate hybridity as morally superior to bounded forms of cultural difference. On the other hand, they also represent hybridity as dangerously conducive to "new forms of segmentation" and reactionary differentiation, as we see in much of the literature on globalization and violence. Scott (2005, 192) points out that these are two sides of the same coin in contemporary anthropological thought: "The relative moral values assigned to chaos and order may invert according to the point of view of the analyst . . . but the structure is constant: there is an ongoing oscillation between differentiation and integration."

As I have shown, much of the literature on globalization operates on the underlying assumption that xenophobic violence represents the urge—assumed to be a human universal—to establish order against encroaching chaos. Scott (2005, 193) identifies this as a "meta-cosmology" of anthropological theory, which posits that "all people seek to impose ordering distinctions on chaos." There is good reason to believe that the terminology of order and chaos is too particular to Western cosmology, and too loaded with moral meaning, to be applied universally. But even if we accept that the impetus to impose order on chaos is a human universal, as Scott wants to do, we need to relativize the notions of order and chaos. There are multiple understandings of what constitutes a condition of chaos, and multiple activities that are considered to most-effectively banish that chaos. In the globalization literature, chaos is understood almost exclusively as either insufficient social differentiation or an overload of signs and meaning. In Cato Manor—and, I would imagine, in other informal settlements across South Africa—by contrast, local conceptions of order and chaos are quite different. They are rooted in ideas about what constitutes a proper moral economy, and they draw on and borrow from ideas about witchcraft as value negation. The perpetrators in this instance are *not* responding to chaos in the sense of hybridity, semiotic overheating, flux, and flow; they are not concerned with purity and pollution, and they are not trying to clarify blurry boundaries between natives and foreigners in the face of fears about ethnic uncertainty. As far as I can tell,

none of these register as germane for them. If they are concerned about chaos, it is a chaos of a rather different sort.

In Cato Manor, the salient concern is that the conditions for social reproduction are under serious threat. In this respect the Marxist approach comes quite close to getting it right—it falls short only inasmuch as it fails to comprehend the constellation of symbols and meanings within which social reproduction is conceptualized. In Cato Manor, as I have shown, a cosmos in order is one in which economic activity facilitates social reproduction; where people (especially young men) have stable jobs, circulate money among kin and neighbors, and can afford to get married and establish neo-local domestic units. This notion of order is mapped onto a romantic vision of the bygone Fordist economy and its order of gender, which exists more as a spectral nostalgia than as actual historical fact (Hunter 2010). By contrast, a cosmos in chaos is one in which economic activity blocks social reproduction; where certain anti-social individuals disrupt the conditions for fertility by accumulating capital at the expense of others, by illegitimately manipulating value and exchange, and by generally taking wealth out of circulation. Given a structure of conjuncture through which new experiences are interpreted in terms of older categories (cf. Sahlin 1985), immigrants happen to appear very similar to the prototypical figure of the witch, albeit shifted from the usual register of intimate kin to the new register of foreign stranger.

This discourse on moral economy offers an oblique but trenchant critique of the policies that have demolished formal-sector employment and left people to fend for themselves in a precarious informal economy and rely on state patronage. We might say the figure of the immigrant represents the ideal neoliberal subject: individualized, kinless, uprooted, cheap, flexible, enterprising, maximizing, and risk-taking. Residents of Cato Manor refuse to celebrate this kind of personhood, and cast it as cultureless, dangerous, unstable, and destructive; in sum, as bare life, devoid of the characteristics that make a person fully human.

The violence that locals direct against foreigners, then, has more to do with reestablishing the conditions for social reproduction than with reestablishing boundaries in the usual sense. Of course, boundaries between “us” and “them” do come into play, but we have to understand the culturally-particular nature of these boundaries. Following Bashkow (2004), we need to look at the cultural construction of otherness, at how people demarcate and differentiate through symbolic contrasts or moral oppositions. In Cato Manor, xenophobia has to do with boundaries only in the sense that people are drawing evocative distinctions between *moral* beings and behavior and *immoral* beings and behavior. Indeed, there

is nothing essential about the *substance* of a foreigner in this discourse; no one is anxious about blood or essence. People do not operate with the notion that culture is a substance that fills people and flows around, which, as Friedman (2002) argues, seems to underwrite the concept of culture that operates in the globalization literature. In fact, some foreigners never become the targets of hostility from their neighbors. If they engage in key forms of ritual exchange, such as paying for bridewealth, they become affectionately known as *s'bali*, the kin term for sister's husband, and are considered attached to local families. One of the perpetrators articulated this model of difference when he told me: "We chased them out because they are different; they are different because they make their money in the wrong way. But not all of them."

In this sense, to label the violence as "xenophobia" is to mischaracterize it. This draws false equivalences between concepts of otherness in places as disparate as Amsterdam and Durban, or Germany and Rwanda, even though the xenophobes in each of these contexts are anxious about different kinds of issues and respond to them in different ways.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the violent, anti-immigrant riots that swept through informal settlements in South Africa in 2008, during which more than sixty foreigners were killed and more than one hundred thousand displaced. In the first part of the paper, I draw on research conducted in informal settlements around the city of Durban to argue that many people's perceptions of foreigners are informed by ideas about witches and witchcraft, which articulate with widespread anxieties about rising unemployment, housing shortages, and a general crisis of social reproduction. These ideas provide a semiotic environment in which anti-immigrant violence becomes thinkable. In the second part of the paper, I argue that these ethnographic data help us interrogate existing theories of xenophobic violence, which tend to see it as a reaction to the cultural confusion and social anomie that globalization allegedly triggers. This dominant approach relies on assumptions about order and chaos that are native to Euro-American culture and thus do not necessarily apply cross-culturally. I show that these assumptions have a long and troubling history in South Africa, where colonial administrators and mid-century social scientists drew on them in their attempts to manage African populations. [globalization; violence; race; cultural analysis; anthropological theory]

NOTES

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1. Steinberg (2008) demonstrates that while the Alexandra incidents were ignited by party-political conflict and ethnic feuding particular to that area, these elements evaporated as the violence "spread" to other areas and took on a more general xenophobic character. While I think this account is broadly correct, I would caution—as many others have done—that the metaphor of spreading risks obscuring the particular tensions and concerns that made violence thinkable in any given locality.
2. See Steinberg (2008) for a timeline of events and Desai (2010) for a useful overview.
3. In addition to the literature I cite in this paper, it is worth highlighting the many reports that have been produced by the Human Sciences Research Council, the Center for Sociological Research, the Center for Civil Society, and the Southern African Migration Project.
4. Cato Manor was razed and its residents forcibly relocated during the early 1960s. It was resettled in the late 1980s, and in the mid-1990s was fast-tracked for renewal as a "Presidential Lead Project."
5. "Sad South Africa," *Economist*, October 20, 2012.
6. See Bond (2000) for a comprehensive account of the rise of neoliberalism in South Africa.
7. Steinberg (2008) reports that employers do tend to prefer immigrants to South Africans in construction, security, and domestic work. Yet more than half of foreign nationals who work are self-employed, so they are not technically "stealing" jobs. Indeed, foreign nationals actually employ remarkable numbers of South Africans—at least one hundred thousand in Johannesburg alone.
8. Most of the people I encountered in Cato Manor did not come from long-standing urban families, but neither did they consider themselves tied to rural homes. They were relatively recent settlers in the area who nonetheless considered themselves to be urban, unlike cyclical migrants from Zululand who retain proud rural connections. In light of this, the idea of *umnumzane* at work here is something of a hybrid between the modern Industrial Man and the rural patriarch.
9. Steinberg (2008) argues that popular assumptions about zero-sum economics are a result of the fact that the South African economy is based largely on (unproductive) resource extraction, to the point where people have come to rely for their incomes on distribution rather than on entrepreneurship. People have come to regard national wealth as a fixed lump, and they compete for state patronage to receive grants, homes, and jobs. Yet, as Steinberg himself admits, South Africans know that foreigners do not have access to state patronage; their incomes come from work, not from distribution. So this theory fails to explain why the logic of a zero-sum economy applies to foreigners. I propose that it may have to do with ideas about witchcraft and the appropriation of fortune instead.
10. Recall the contrast that Themba drew between cows (considered a morally legitimate investment) and snakes (considered a morally illegitimate investment). The former are used to produce kinship, while the latter are used to destroy it.
11. For ethnographic explanations of witch-burning, see Bergland (1976) and Hammond-Tooke (1977).
12. Bashkow (2004) notes that discourses about hybridity take boundedness for granted at the same time as they attempt to critique it; in other words, something can only be hybrid if it begins as bounded.

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