

“Opening up to the Rest of Africa”?: Continental Connections and Literary (Dis) Continuities in Simão Kikamba’s *Going Home* and Jonathan Nkala’s *The Crossing*

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Summary

This article focuses on Simão Kikamba’s semi-autobiographical novel *Going Home* (2005) and Jonathan Khumbulani Nkala’s one-man drama *The Crossing* (2009). Both texts chronicle the odyssey of the refugee author or narrator – in Kikamba’s text from Angola and in Nkala’s drama from Zimbabwe – to South Africa. I argue that although these works picture the growing transnational texture of the South African national space, this apparent continental connectivity is fraught with new intolerances like xenophobia. Far from displaying a definite break from the hallmarks of South African writing during apartheid, such as a preoccupation with the national and a focus on social commitment, the texts stress a continuation of these characteristics while at the same time re-examining them from a new, Afropolitan angle.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel fokus op Simão Kikamba se semi-outobiografiese roman *Going Home* (2005) en Jonathan Khumbulani Nkala se eenmandrama *The Crossing* (2009). Albei tekste vertel die storie van die vlugtelingskrywer of -verteller se tog na Suid-Afrika – in Kikamba se teks vanuit Angola en in Nkala se drama vanuit Zimbabwe. Ek voer aan dat hierdie werke die toenemende transnasionale tekstuur van Suid-Afrika se nasionale ruimte uitbeeld, maar ook dat hierdie klaarblyklik kontinentale samehang deurspek is met nuwe voorbeelde van onverdraagsaamheid, soos vreemdelinge-haat. Hierdie tekste beweeg nie onomwonde weg van die onmiskenbare eienskappe van Suid-Afrikaanse skryfwerk gedurende die apartheidjare nie. (Dié eienskappe sluit in ’n fassinatie met die nasionale en ’n klem op maatskaplike verantwoordelikheid.) Inteendeel beklemtoon die tekste ’n voortsetting van dié eienskappe, en ondersoek terselfdertyd hierdie eienskappe vanuit ’n nuwe, Afropolitaanse hoek.

Introduction: Writing “Continental Connections”¹

“South Africa was opening up to the rest of Africa” (Kikamba 2005: 151), observes Kikamba’s Angolan protagonist, Manuel Mpanda, after his arrival in South Africa in the author’s semi-autobiographical novel *Going Home*. Mpanda, a refugee fleeing from political unrest in Angola, is one among a plethora of African migrant protagonists that have come to populate South African literary landscapes, particularly since the early 2000s. Most of the novels dealing with this new era of migration are written by South African authors. This makes Kikamba, an immigrant himself, an exception. Thus Phaswane Mpe’s 2001 novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* welcomes its readers to a truly pan-African inner-city Johannesburg. Next to Mpe’s largely faceless African migrants, we encounter in Patricia Schonstein Pinnock’s *Skyline* (2000) the Mozambican refugee and painter Bernard. He shares a Cape Town high-rise building with other African refugees from the “scorched fields of war” (Schonstein Pinnock 2000: 8). In Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup* (2001), Abdu, an undocumented Arab migrant from North Africa, becomes the main protagonist’s lover, whom she dubs “her oriental prince”. Claude Dema, a former child soldier from an unspecified francophone African country, now a drug dealer and Pentecostal preacher, murders his South African host and lover Nana in the closing apocalyptic scene of Angelina N. Sithebe’s novel *Holy Hill* (2007). In Heinrich Troost’s *Plot Loss* (2007), we meet Johnson, a “Nigerian of many homes and faces” (Troost 2007: 8). Yomi, Niq Mhlongo’s Nigerian character in *After Tears* (2007), is known as a swindler and document forger, while Andrew Brown’s South African main character in *Refuge* (2009) falls prey to the pretences of his sensual Nigerian masseuse, Abayomi, and the trickery of her Nigerian lodger Sunday. The list goes on.²

Although these South African texts are often written with the intention (explicit or implicit) of countering xenophobic sentiments in the country, the authors equally often fall short of sketching African migrants as fleshed-out characters. As the list above reveals, literary representations of African migrants often seem to come from a catalogue of stereotypical images

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1. I have taken this phrase from Samuelson (2010).
 2. I am not implying that all South African novels featuring migrant characters follow this pattern. I merely intend to highlight some observable trends in the literary portrayal of African migrants. Other more recent novels addressing new African migration and xenophobia are, for example, Lauren Beukes’s *Zoo City* (2010), Troy Blacklaws’s *Cruel Crazy Beautiful World* (2011), Nadine Gordimer’s *No Time Like the Present* (2012), Sphiwo Mahala’s *African Delights* (2011), Zakes Mda’s *Black Diamond* (2009), Patricia Schonstein’s *Banquet at Brabazan* (2010), Meg Vandermerwe’s *Zebra Crossing* (2013) and Zukiswa Wanner’s *Men of the South* (2010).

ubiquitous to the South African public sphere. These perceptions cast specific African nationalities in terms of generalised types such as Nigerians as drug lords (see Garuba 2011: 7). The works discussed reveal an uneasy situatedness between a rhetoric of opening and that of closure. On the one hand, these works express South Africa's reconnection with the African continent after years of isolation during apartheid. On the other hand, they also construct African migrants within a vocabulary of otherness, echoing apartheid perceptions of South Africa as a space apart from the African continent.

Kikamba's *Going Home* belongs to the emerging body of fictional, non-fictional and dramatic accounts told by African migrants themselves about their journeys to, and reception in, South Africa.³ These texts often provide a more varied picture of post-apartheid African immigration. The publication of texts by African migrant writers thus speaks of an emergence of a new trans-African culture in the country. Yet narratives such as these also overtly display the lasting – albeit increasingly fragmented – power of the nation state. Above all, these migrant narratives caution against generalising accounts of current trends in contemporary South African literary culture. These theorisations of the Now suggest a growing abandonment of the alleged hallmarks of former South African writing, notably its confinement to the national, as well as its concern with the political and social realities of oppression.

It is against this background that I will examine the two texts by African migrant writers Kikamba and Nkala. The two texts may serve as examples through which to examine proposed continuities and discontinuities in South African literature after 2000. Relating their protagonists' experiences in South Africa as asylum seekers or refugees (Kikamba) and undocumented economic migrants (Nkala) within a predominantly realist mode, both works display a temporal continuity with the alleged characteristics of earlier writing in the country in terms of aesthetic outlook, as well as social commitment. However, by positioning themselves as a new Other from

3. See also Aher Arop Bol's refugee memoir *The Lost Boy* (2009). Although only partly set in South Africa, Binyavanga Wainaina's 2011 memoir *One Day I Will Write about This Place* brings a fresh perspective to the migrant narratives mentioned, which largely focus on "spectacular" immigrant/refugee experiences. It tells the story of a young man from a middle-class background coming to pursue his studies in South Africa. Yewande Omotoso's novel *Bom Boy* (2011) and Hawa Jande Golakai's crime thriller *The Lazarus Effect* (2011) also depict the experience of African migrants in South Africa from a middle-class angle. Both novels were shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize 2012. We can, therefore, observe the emergence of a literature engaging with both the "migrant cosmopolitan" and the "migrant refugee" in the South African context, categories Pablo Mukherjee (2006) uses to distinguish "first-wave" from "second-wave" postcolonialism.

across the national borders of a democratic South Africa, their authors no longer conceive social commitment within a strictly national framework.

In addressing these concerns, this article is divided into two main parts. The first surveys recent theorisations of South African literature after 2000 against the background of emergent narratives of what Harry Garuba calls the “recent season of African migration to the south” (2011: 7).⁴ The second part analyses the two texts to address their reconfiguration of the national on the one hand, and of socio-political commitment on the other.

Theorising the South African Literary Present

In a 2010 special issue of *English Studies in Africa*, Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie propose the term “post-transitional” (a more accessible term than Chapman’s “post-apartheid” (2009) and Kruger’s “post-anti-apartheid” (2002)) to characterise the country’s literary present in terms of evolving trends that differ from apartheid themes but also from the literary engagement with the nation-building project of the 1990s. Reviewing basic trends in literary output since 2000, the authors use the notion of the “post-transitional” to “suggest something of the character of this new wave of writing, which is often unfettered to the past in the way that much apartheid writing was, but may still reconsider it in new ways” (2010: 2). This new body of writing, the authors explain, feels “a reduced obligation to the logics of political commitment and ... purposely contests the national as its overriding context. The literature of engagement that characterized the past persists, but as a feature to be overcome rather than replicated” (2010: 4). The introduction of the term undeniably constitutes a call to action to South African scholars inasmuch as it aims to galvanise analysis of the vast and increasingly diversified body of writing that has emerged in the country since 2000.

Frenkel and MacKenzie warn against reading the “post-transitional” in terms of a totalising temporal rupture, by claiming – in line with terms such as postcolonial, postfeminist, etc. – that the “post” in “post-transitional” both “is, and is not, a temporal marker, as it does refer to something moving but does not claim that the issues involved in the transition have been resolved” (2010: 4). Michael Titlestad was spurred to respond to Frenkel’s and MacKenzie’s notion through an analysis of David Medalie’s short story collection *The Mistress’s Dog*. He deems “post-transitional” a “compromised term” (2010: 119), preferring a notion that eschews any suggestion

4. Garuba is here referring to Kole Omotoso’s *Season of Migration to the South: Africa’s Crisis Reconsidered*, where the narrator maintains that “Europe and America had begun to weary him with their loud objections to immigrants from Africa. For him, then, it would have to be the season of migration to the South” (Omotoso 1994: 5).

of temporal rupture. As an alternative through which to understand the present, he advocates the notion of the “middle ground” or “living on a mezzanine level”, a phrase he takes from Medalie’s story “Crowd Control”. The phrase suggests that in South Africa we are currently “denied the symmetry and clarity of progression” that defined an earlier era but, instead, are “caught up in a world of contradictions and ironies”. Although this may be true of many (postcolonial) countries, “our mezzanine is distinctly our own”, Titlestad proclaims, and “the lived experience[s] of which we cannot yet discern [the pattern], are fundamentally local, even as we come to acknowledge that they are simultaneously transnational and translatable” (2010: 120).

Likewise, Meg Samuelson’s suggestion of a “*rearrangement*” (emphasis in the original) rather than increasing rejection of past paradigms seems more vigilant and aware of the risk of “over-categorizing what remains an emergent, amorphous body of work” (2010: 113). She notes:

If, however, the national is being cut across and re-imagined through the transnational, it seems to me that it remains the fundamental starting point for such wider endeavours; at the same time, political commitment, albeit often redefined, retains a central place in the body of work issuing into the present.

(Samuelson 2010: 113)

Migrant Narratives: Shifting Geographies and Social Concerns

The emergent body of migrant literature serves as a pertinent example against which these divergent claims may be examined. Publishing their testimonial narratives within the country, these authors and playwrights on the one hand extend the notion of South African literature, unhinging it from the boundaries of national geography or citizenship. The opening up of these texts to the African continent may thus signal the increasing turning away from the national of which Frenkel and MacKenzie speak. Yet, on the other hand, Titlestad’s notion of the “middle ground” or “living on a mezzanine level” may be helpful in relation to the growing trans-African texture of the country. For South Africa’s reconnection with the continent has proved Janus-faced, with intellectuals flying high the flag of African Renaissance and Afropolitanism, while at the same time African immigrants, migrants and refugees residing in the country are frequently victims of violence.⁵

The engagement with this contradiction between rhetoric and action also informs Kikamba’s and Nkala’s texts. Against it, Kikamba’s evocation that

5. This violence found its most brutal expression in the so-called “xenophobic attacks” of May/June 2008, in which more than 62 people lost their lives (Hassim, Kupe & Worby 2008).

“South Africa was opening up to the rest of Africa”, with which I began, appears in a different light. Although clearly indicating a move away from apartheid’s closure towards the continent as a whole, the progressive aspect cautions us against reading this spatial unlocking as an unambiguous indicator of a reduced relevance of the nation in contemporary South African literary culture.

Parallel to their engagement with the (trans)national, migrant narratives display a similar “*rearrangement*” rather than “*abandonment*” (Samuelson 2010: 116, emphasis in the original) of the old notion of socio-political commitment. By addressing the issue of xenophobia, migrant writers, alongside their South African counterparts, give renewed currency to the notion of the writer as social critic that was common during apartheid. The resurgence of the writer as social critic was recently called for by, amongst others, poet and academic Kelwyn Sole. In connection with the rumours and realities of xenophobic violence accompanying the much-lauded hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, Sole issued the following statement:

It strikes me that – in these days where so many SA writers are being caught in the commercial imperatives surrounding our literature, and the consciousness that goes with it – there should be a place for the writer-as-activist or writer-as-witness to emerge again. This canker on our society seems an obvious subject and place to raise one’s voice.

(Sole 2010)

In the analysis that follows, I examine two concepts in more detail: the national and social commitment. I do this against the backdrop of Kikamba’s and Nkala’s texts, of which I provide a brief summary below.

Kikamba’s fictional memoir and Nkala’s autobiographical one-man play follow the same basic plot structure common to testimonial refugee and migrant narratives throughout the world. Both authors leave their home country in search of a better life in South Africa, Kikamba for political, and Nkala mainly for economic reasons. Kikamba’s *Going Home*, which won the Herman Charles Bosman Award in 2006, traces the journey of Angolan refugee Manuel Mpanda, who decides to return home from exile in what was then Zaire in 1992. But political unrest in his home country leads him into exile once again, this time to South Africa. Arriving with hopeful expectations and envisioning the host country as a land of plenty, his dreams of a better life are soon shattered by the hostile realities of xenophobia. The novel opens with Mpanda being assaulted by South African policemen who, in spite of his possession of a valid refugee permit, incarcerate him in the notorious Lindela Repatriation Camp. It is from this place of physical confinement that Mpanda, acting as first-person narrator, recounts his odyssey into South Africa to a fellow detainee.

Whereas exclusion and homelessness appear as inescapable realities for Kikamba’s main protagonist, Nkala’s play, by contrast, evinces a more

optimistic tenor. *The Crossing* is the final part of a trilogy of autobiographical plays. The play spans Nkala's youth and adolescence in his home community of Mbizo, in the small town of Kwekwe in central Zimbabwe, up to his life-changing decision to flee the country's harsh economic conditions, together with his best friend Jacob, in search of a more prosperous future in South Africa. The young man's tale of their perilous journey across the Limpopo River to South Africa reverberates with coming-of-age motifs. Dreaming of "life in abundance", the character Nkala, who is referred to by his middle name Khumbu in the play and played by Nkala himself, overcomes a number of hurdles to reach Cape Town at last, where he becomes an actor and playwright.

Reframing the National

Above all, Kikamba and Nkala afford us the opportunity to interrogate the notion of South African literature, and to consider its "hospitality" towards texts by non-citizens. Published in South Africa and drawing heavily on personal history, these two works deal with the shared experiences of African migrants in the country. In doing so, they bridge the divide between local South African literatures and those from elsewhere on the continent. Kikamba's and Nkala's accounts add a new dimension to local narrative preoccupations with the theme of xenophobia by foregrounding the witness's point of view. Both authors introduce into the current South African literary landscape a previously absent outsider perspective. At the same time, they bring to the surface contradictions and cleavages in the social fabric of the young democracy that is manifestly failing to live up to its constitutional promise of "belong[ing] to all who live in it" (Republic of South Africa 1996).

As well as rewriting the local, *Going Home* and *The Crossing* establish connections with refugee and migrant novels and autobiographies across the globe, resonating with Leon de Kock's assertion that recent writing in the country has "hungrily embraced a larger membership of "world literature" (2009: 31). Within scholarship on transnationalism, refugees and migrants are often perceived as emblematic figures of the "transnational moment" (Tölölyan 1991: 3), undermining and questioning the sovereignty of the nation state. As Giorgio Agamben argues in "We Refugees", "by breaking up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, the refugee throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty" (1995: 117). One might therefore argue that the production of novels, autobiographies and plays by African foreign nationals in South Africa further testifies to the belated arrival in the country of the "global age of migration" (Crush & McDonald 2000: 3). Nkala and Kikamba attest in their works to the transnational restructuring of the South African nation by depicting

networks of migrant and refugee communities and invoking a spirit of Afropolitanism. Yet, their characters repeatedly experience the authority of the nation state in designating and demarcating belonging and in assigning political rights. In this way, too, the texts seem to occupy Titlestad’s middle ground between the old national confines on the one hand and a new opening towards Africa and an embrace of Afropolitanism on the other. Titlestad’s architectural metaphor of the mezzanine seems particularly useful here inasmuch as this coexistence of closures and openings for Nkala’s and Kikamba’s migrant protagonists appears intricately connected to space. The “in-between condition” and the “constant sense of suspense” that characterise Titlestad’s mezzanine capture both the migrants’ experiences at official sites of immigration control such as border posts, the Department of Home Affairs as well as in social spaces of entertainment. My first preoccupation in what follows is to look in more detail at the portrayal of state power in the two works. I then draw attention to pockets of Afropolitanism that emerge in the realm of evening leisure in Kikamba’s novel and in the theatrical space itself in Nkala’s play.

Reinforcing and Decentring National Sovereignty

Interactions with state representatives, particularly the police, who arbitrarily arrest and transport Mpanda and Khumbu to Lindela Repatriation Centre, thwart Agamben’s liberatory and resistant vision of the refugee or migrant. Yet, in contrast to the dominant apartheid binary of oppressor and oppressed, the two works suggest a triangulation of relations; in both narratives state representatives frequently undercut national sovereignty. Kikamba’s portrayal of Mpanda’s experience at the Home Affairs office resists a simple Manichean division between state power and migrant submission or resistance. Obtaining (temporary) residence no longer seems bound to the fulfilment of legislative acts. Over and above this, Mpanda and the other migrant protagonists have to negotiate with state-appointed personnel whose motives and actions may not necessarily be steered only by the intention to defend national interests. Highly expressive of the multiple forms of authority that Kikamba’s migrants face is an encounter between the warden and people waiting in the queue in front of the Home Affairs building:

Shortly before eight, after a long wait, a whisper ran like a shiver from the head of the queue to its tail: the warden was coming. Like a herd of sheep at the approach of a wolf we turned our heads. Waddling along with his huge body and a disproportionally small head, he brandished a big black club, the mere sight of which hushed everyone. “This is my country,” he said, beating his chest. “I am the one that keeps order here and I never bluff. Ask around if you are a newcomer. When I say queue up,” ... “you queue up!” ... “You

disobey me, you bear the wrath of my faithful companion.” He exhibited the club, holding it high enough for everyone to see. “I know people hate me. I don’t care. I am only doing my job.”

(Kikamba 2005: 142-143)

The warden with his blunt physicality is exerting power over the de-individualised group of migrants not only in his capacity as a representative of the state but at the same time, unequivocally, in his own person. Conflating in his mind the entire geographical territory of South Africa with the minimal space he guards as the warden of the Home Affairs building, he posits himself as a sovereign ruler of the country. His occupation as a warden, therefore, serves as a springboard for establishing his own self-identity through fierce physical intimidation. Highlighting the disproportionate body-head relation of the warden and quoting his personifying reference to his club, Mpanda caricatures the commonplace violent behaviour of some South Africans towards African non-nationals. By assigning to the warden a spectacularly grotesque body, Kikamba ridicules the enactment of power through sheer physicality. In the standard post-colonial manner of “speaking back”, he thus turns on its head the dichotomous allocation of different temporalities to South Africa and other African countries. It is now the South African who is framed in terms of a “primitive” overpowering physique rather than “modern rationality”, as his comparatively small head appears to suggest. While there are echoes here of Mbembe’s figure of the postcolonial African autocrat with his grotesque corporeality (Mbembe 2001: 106), the scene remains locked, however, within a framework of binary temporalities.

Nkala’s *The Crossing* stages both the decentring and disintegration of state power at the border while simultaneously stressing its symbolic force. This is particularly achieved through the play’s employment of the spectacular and the grotesque. Nkala frequently includes intermedial references to popular culture into his play. For example, he compares the impossibility of clandestinely “jumping the border” in the vicinity of Beit Bridge border post⁶ to a potential sequel of the Hollywood action blockbuster *Mission Impossible*. It is through the play’s blending of two very different realms of spectacular representation that Nkala exposes the constructed quality of the migrant or refugee as spectacle and at the same time provides a scathing critique of the restrictionist immigration regime.

This referencing of popular culture particularly comes to the fore in the border-crossing scene. As they do not possess enough money to bribe border officials, Khumbu and Jacob join a group of migrants to swim across the river at a point 200 km away from the border post, where security is less tight and the main challenge is simply to reach the other shore. Approaching the riverbank, Khumbu is overcome by fear because he cannot swim. In the

6. The main border crossing between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

following description of the passage across the Limpopo, the subversive self-representation as comic spectacle gains a grotesque edge:

Khumbu I had to face my fears. I then joined Jacob and the others who were already in the queue to pay the local guys, who had a brilliant plan to cross over. Their plan was simple and straight forward: “Titanic reloaded.”

The actor takes out a prop and demonstrates as he explains the working of the Titanic.

They took a big tree trunk They tied two pieces of wire on both ends. The one guy, our captain, would use the wire to steer the ship, so would his second-in-command. Then we, the passengers, would slightly touch the Titanic with our left hands and then paddle with our right hands. That sounded like a piece of chocolate and vanilla cake.

After about thirty minutes of paddling, a guy second from me lost control of the situation, and I only saw his hands waving helplessly in the river and no one made an effort to save him Branches flown by the current hit my legs but I felt much stronger than Arnold Schwarzenegger and Baby Jakes Mahlala [sic] put together.

(Nkala 2009: 23-25)

When reaching the other side, he realises that his friend Jacob was one of the “passengers” who lost hold of the branches and drowned. Yet Khumbu is unable to report his death as he is now “an official border jumper, an illegal immigrant, a cockroach, a kwerekwere” (Nkala 2009: 25).

Unlike Kikamba, whose Home Affairs warden bears a resemblance to Mbembe’s reutilisation of the Bakhtinian grotesque body in the figure of the postcolonial ruler, Nkala deploys the grotesque to characterise the measures taken to circumvent state authority at the border. The grotesque effect here does not so much stem from an “overemphasis on bodily functions” (Veit-Wild 2005: 232), but rather the co-presence and insoluble entanglement of the comic and the tragic in the crossing of the river. As Yael Renan contends, the grotesque pits “the comic and tragic against each other, and ... join[s] them together in paradoxical and subversive combinations” that “frustrate both comic release and tragic catharsis” (Renan quoted by Hamdan 2006: 23). Indeed, Philip J. Thomson makes a similar point, stating that in opposition to the “[t]ragi-comedy”, which “points only to the fact that life is alternately tragic and comic”, the grotesque “has a harder message. It is that the vale of tears and the circus are one” (1972: 63). The irresolvable tension between comedy and tragedy at the heart of this scene (and suffusing much of the remainder of the play), makes it impossible to position Nkala/Khumbu as either abject victim or resilient agent. In this way, the play destabilises the sovereignty of the state as the force that determines

who may be welcomed in its territory. For Nkala the comic and the grotesque thus constitute vital theatrical strategies in his restoration of the undocumented migrant as an ambivalent figure, characterised by the unsettling concatenation of resilience and vulnerability.

Far from trivialising the circumvention of state power, Nkala draws attention to the grotesque workings of the burgeoning sub-economy at the border that promises migrants the access the state denies them. Khumbu and his fellow “border jumpers” not only have to be weary of state border patrols, but also of the feared “maguma-guma” (gangs that rob “border jumpers”), who partake and claim their share in the sub-economy. As Kihato observes in a different context, these economies “resist official border restrictions and develop new “rules of the game” that at once subvert sovereign codes and laws and at the same time reinforce the significance of the physical border” (Kihato 2011: 73). We can conclude that Nkala’s performance of his passage across the Limpopo decentres the state’s authority, yet through its deployment of the grotesque also unmasks the crass violence and asymmetries structuring the migrants’ path of gaining entry into South African national territory. Mbembe frequently emphasises in his work that the postcolony in Africa represents a space where conventional notions of sovereignty embedding power within the nation state no longer apply, but where self-interested actors often hide “behind the mask of the state” (2003: 35). Drawing attention to these parallel power structures that mimic the state, the two texts relate the South African experience to the various forms and manifestations of postcolonial power elsewhere on the continent. They thus also stress the need to reinvigorate the still sorely lacking dialogue between South African literary studies and the wider context of African writing. In this sense, Kikamba and Nkala rewrite rather than renounce the category of the national.

In some respects, the forms of exclusion that Nkala’s and Kikamba’s protagonists experience reverberate with migrant and refugee accounts throughout the world, yet they cannot be dissociated from the specifics of the South African context. The local is thereby conceived as a space at once intricately connected to the global and as also bearing distinctly individual characteristics. Anti-immigrant attitudes and new forms of nativism, Mpanda learns, have to be viewed in connection with continued perceptions of economic exclusion dating back to the apartheid years. A taxi driver tells Mpanda: “It’s over on paper. In reality there is still apartheid. The economy is still in the hands of a minority. We black people are suffering. We must liberate ourselves economically” (Kikamba 2005: 126). The first-person plural pronoun in the phrase “we black people” here is not an inclusive marker of blackness that transcends South Africa’s borders, but it appears to be exclusively tied to the national. Kikamba’s and Nkala’s reflections on South Africa’s reconnection with the continent, therefore, remain suffused

with ambiguities and contradictions, spaces of disconnection as well as of connectivity.

Glimpses of Afropolitanism

The Johannesburg of Kikamba’s protagonist is a space of both overt hostility and of Afropolitanism.⁷ That is to say, Afropolitanism usually expresses one’s connectedness to “knowable African communities”, but also of a life that transcends “cultures, languages and states” (Gikandi 2011: 9). In this sense, Afropolitanism is a form of “worldliness”, born out of a “critique of primary affiliations” and a “rediscovery of [a] shared history of entanglement” (Mbembe 2011).

In *Going Home*, however, Afropolitanism is not experienced as an everyday reality but only as a fleeting emotion confined to the space of the open-air bar, “La Terrace” where

[i]t was Koffi Olomidé’s latest album *Ultimatum* that seemed to draw the most people onto the dance floor, foreigners and South Africans alike. Soon people were swaying, bending and throwing their arms in time with the ndombolo rhythm. One fascinating thing about the place was the unusual bond between South Africans and black foreigners. Things like “kwerekwere” were never said here.

(Kikamba 2005: 187-188)

The music of Congolese singer and composer Koffi Olomidé, who may be termed an Afropolitan artist committed to the cultural politics of his country but at the same time leading a life across the boundaries of the national, seems to foster an Afropolitan spirit among the dancers. This spirit leaves no room for essentialising, hierarchical articulations of difference and non-belonging inherent in the derogatory term “kwerekwere”. “La Terrace” thus allows for the introduction of what we might call an Afropolitan imagination; dancing on a busy dance floor presupposes a heightened awareness of the movements of others. According to Bollen, the dance floor “demands, in the openness and closeness of relations to others, an exchange and

7. Afropolitanism has recently become a controversial and contested term, particularly in light of its uncritical, celebratory usage as a marketing strategy of the increasingly corporatised university in South Africa (see Praeg 2011). Moreover, the concept has been criticised for its universalising impulse and its predominant association with the African diaspora (Ogunlesi quoted by Tutton 2012). It appears that theoretical accounts on Afropolitanism – like those on cosmopolitanism – need to take into consideration how being located in a particular geographic space may inflect Afropolitan identities. We may therefore begin to speak of Afropolitanisms or rooted Afropolitanism.

alternation of kinesthetic experience through which we become, in a sense, less like ourselves and more like each other” (Bollen 2001: 300). Yet for Mpanda, the dance floor becomes a place of physical longing for his wife: “Dancing with one hand caressing my belly and my arm stretched out and slightly curved as if to hold a partner I soon began to visualise Isa, my Isabel. I could feel the soft touch of her body” (Kikamba 2005: 188). While Olomidé’s music and the space of the bar seem to temporarily transform the order of relations (the social marginality of African migrants steps into the background and gives way for an encounter of the Other on more equal grounds), Mpanda’s painfully felt absence of his wife mitigates a mere celebratory reading of the dance floor. Moreover, this form of dance floor Afropolitanism is spatially bound since it is located in the realm of evening leisure activities and remote from more mundane, everyday interactions between migrants and citizens.

Nkala’s short play, by contrast, does not feature any such instance of intratextual “Afropolitan bonding” between a group of South Africans and African migrants. It comments only on the author’s individual encounters with South Africans, which have been both positive and negative. I would argue that he, however, also creates room for a possible emergence of a more transnational, Afropolitan spirit on an extratextual level through active engagement with the (South African) audience during the performance of the play. Disrupting the general passivity of its spectators, the play features instances of direct address, and the performance is usually followed by a question-and-answer session with the actor and playwright, as well as the possibility of informal conversation after the play, when the audience is encouraged to buy Nkala’s wirework figures.

Bringing South African audiences together with Nkala as a Zimbabwean actor and playwright, the space of the theatre itself may offer a realm for South Africans to think Africa and African migrants in a different manner. As Anton Krueger puts it,

[t]he performing arts are visible to a group gathered together in a shared space and in this way the theatre is able to create contexts of cultural and economic exchange Theatre is capable of creating a community and even, possibly, transforming the perceptions of that community.

(Krueger 2010: 26)

For Krueger this transformative potential of theatre, its way of working against fixed identities, makes it such a valuable part of our cultural landscape today. The theatre can, in this way, be conceived as a counter-territory to the fenced-in South African national space described in Nkala’s play. Juxtaposing national and theatrical space, Nadia Setti notes that “one can be (wel)come to the performance without having to give one’s name at the entrance The power of the nation-state’s laws to control entries and departures can be suspended in the theatrical space” (2009: 331). Staged in a

space without exclusive borders, Nkala’s performance opens up room for conversation across the usually sharply defined spatial and intersubjective boundaries.

It is through this conversation that the audience – usually the average (still largely white middle-class) South African audience – is also confronted with its own complicity in stereotyping and excluding the foreign Other (see Flockemann et al. 2010). While we cannot claim that the feeling of complicity is shared by all audience members,⁸ the production nonetheless appears to encourage a questioning of everyday encounters between South Africans and other African nationals. Such an interaction appears to take place towards the end of the play when Khumbu relates how he sold wire figures on Camps Bay beach after his arrival in Cape Town. The stage directions indicate: “*The actor moves into the audience, selling the wire-and-bead craft to about three audience members, saying: Good afternoon, Madam/Sir, would you mind if I can quickly borrow a minute from your precious time, just to market the works of my hands and my mouth?*” (Nkala 2009: 39, emphasis in the original). Reminded of the (Zimbabwean) street traders they regularly encounter in their everyday life at traffic light intersections or in public spaces, audience members may begin to rethink their either annoyed rolling up of their windows or cathartic acts of human generosity. For Khumbu/Nkala defines himself as part of the gathered theatregoers: “I belong to this smart community” (Nkala 2009: 40). Articulating the mutual entanglement of audience and actor/playwright may thus be read as an instance of the play’s Afropolitan vision. Yet this space, one has to concede, is tied to the situation of economic exchange in the theatre and therefore just as transitory as Kikamba’s dance floor Afropolitanism.

“A Canker to Raise One’s Voice”: Xenophobia and Political Commitment

We can observe a similar dualism of continuity and discontinuity in the notion of political commitment in the two works. A central motive of writers during apartheid, the literary histories commonly tell us, was to expose the lies of the apartheid system. Aesthetic concerns, as Oswald Mtshali (1976: 127) famously proclaimed, were subordinated to a “language of urgency”. This tendency of apartheid writing to generalise has to some extent been

8. Helen Freshwater reminds us that “[t]he common tendency to refer to an audience as ‘it’ and, by extension, to think of this ‘it’ as a single entity, or a collective, risks obscuring the multiple contingencies of subjective response, context, and environment which condition an individual’s interpretation of a particular performance event” (2009: 5).

qualified by critics like David Attwell, who in his book *Rewriting Modernity* makes a case for the existence of modernist experimentalism in black South African writing. Similarly, Louise Bethlehem (2001, 2009) argues that close attention to the figurative language of writers during apartheid undermines the ethically prescribed wishing away of the intrinsically mediating nature of language. Statements on the presumed distinguishing characteristics of the “post-post-apartheid” and “post-transitional”, however, tend to fall back on broad claims, rather than taking into account more differentiated views of this kind.

Although writing both as victim and witness of post-apartheid injustice, and to some extent reflecting the tendency of testimonial narrative to speak at the same time for an oppressed collective, Nkala and Kikamba do not see their works as originating in an immediate urgency to oppose a feeling of degradation. Kikamba, in an interview, had this to say: “In my book, *Going Home*, there is a need to educate people that foreigners are not all bad. I wanted to change perceptions of local people to immigrants in South Africa. But I’m not under any pressure, I just write” (Kikamba quoted by Tolsi 2008). Emanating from this statement is the ongoing desire for a literature of social relevance that is, however, uninfluenced either by external collective demands or by a socio-aesthetic programme.

Some reviewers praise the book for its content and its urgent political message rather than for its aesthetic value, finding in it no “grand literary gestures” (Whitty 2006). Others describe the author’s language as stilted (Isaacson 2005) or accuse him of monotony and singularity in the depiction of his characters (Loker 2005). In this sense, *Going Home* also seems to display major continuities with writing during apartheid. Koen Guiking (2005: 13), in a review for the *Sowetan*, highlights the notion of “documentation” and speaks of the apparent “mimetic fidelity” (Bethlehem 2009) of the text. During the so-called “xenophobic attacks” of May 2008, Maureen Isaacson, reminded of the immediate social relevance of the novel, wrote in the *Sunday Independent*: “Kikamba’s immigrant tale comes back to haunt us this week” (Isaacson 2008: 17). The reception of the novel, then, appears to be dominated by readings that conceive it as “supplementary” to the text of history, a phrase J.M. Coetzee, criticising the novels of the time, employed in his controversial 1987 *Weekly Mail* Book Week address “The Novel Today”.

While there is undeniably some truth in such readings, and I by no means intend to extol the literary merit of Kikamba’s text nor dispute its topicality in light of the recent violent expressions of anti-immigrant sentiment, they nonetheless fail to do full justice to the novel. For the perceived relevance of the content may well lead to an a priori foreclosure of the aesthetic dimension. In the context of apartheid writing, Bethlehem (2009: 225) poses the pertinent question – “[w]hat collusions between the political and the aesthetic are misrecognized when the relation between the two is

represented as one of necessary collision?” *Going Home*, it seems, demands what Hedley Twidle, in his recent account of South African literary non-fiction, calls a “method of cross-reading”. This transgressive mode of reading intends to eschew the old binaries of “‘the novel’ versus ‘history’; ‘aesthetics’ versus ‘raw experience’; ‘committed’ versus ‘formalist’” (Twidle 2012: 24), acknowledging that as Amy J. Devitt (2000: 700) argues, “texts must not only always participate in a genre but always participate in multiple genres simultaneously”.

Kikamba’s multilayered images of home as a desired yet ultimately elusive space, for instance, point towards the important dimension of the figurative in the novel. The home Mpanda initially occupies in Johannesburg is “spacious and airy” (Kikamba 2005: 128) and seems to match his expectations of a better life in South Africa. Yet, as his financial situation becomes increasingly difficult he is forced to share this space with more and more fellow migrants, depriving him of a safe and private home, a place he can retreat to from the often hostile city. The language of welcome and openness, which initially characterises the description of his first Johannesburg apartment, is overtaken by his emphasis on the cramped nature of the flat where the only room left for visitors is his kitchen. Mpanda’s living quarters in this sense also emanate the “constant sense of suspense”, which for Titlestad lies at the very heart of “living on a mezzanine”. The narrative portrayal of Mpanda’s increasingly constricted personal space thus effectively mirrors the novel’s overall trajectory from hope to disillusionment.

Less important to critics reading the text in terms of its documentary quality, is the question as to what the fictional text offers us on the level of *fabula* that reaches beyond and complicates common conceptualisations of migrants and citizen-foreigner relations. The friendship between Mpanda and a South African named Smith, for instance, introduces an interesting angle to the novel’s preoccupation with migration. Smith cannot easily be slotted into the either/or categories of hospitable, liberal or outwardly hostile South African that dominate some of the previously mentioned South African texts. What characterises Smith’s relation to Mpanda, is a contradictory combination of welcome and rejection, friendship and exploitation, paternalism and generosity. For while Smith replicates public discourses of xenophobia by openly advocating a more rigorous curb on African immigration, he also befriends Mpanda, often hosts him for dinner and assists him financially. Seemingly differentiating between Mpanda as a “genuine” political refugee and “these aliens” (Kikamba 2005: 156) entering the country “illegally”, his choice of words at other times reveals a confinement of Mpanda within the vocabulary of the needy migrant, “bothering” (Kikamba 2005: 159) him for help.

At the same time, Mpanda no longer occupies the position of innocent victim in his relationship with Smith. To ensure his immediate survival, he

becomes complicit in his own degradation and that of African non-nationals in general by not voicing dissent during Smith's frequent prejudicial tirades against the "illegals". Crafting Mpanda in terms of his own complicity, Kikamba breaks through the Manichean world view in which migrants are pitted against citizens and victims against perpetrators. Thus, Kikamba appears to follow in the footsteps of earlier socially committed writing, while at the same time acknowledging the entangled identities (Nuttall 2009) of all actors involved. Rather than exemplifying the discontinuities of the "post-transitional", I suggest that Kikamba's text inhabits Titlestad's middle ground of contradictions and ironies.⁹

Like *Going Home*, Nkala's *The Crossing* was not primarily born out of a desire to make a political statement of any sort against the humiliating treatment of African foreigners in the country – even though the play is now increasingly used as educational theatre, performed in schools throughout the country. According to the author, the play arose from a personal encounter with a South African millionaire, who, himself living through a personal crisis, sought solace in Nkala's comparatively rough tale of hardship and survival. Nkala transformed his story into a play after a meeting with acclaimed South African director, actress and author Bo Peterson, who worked with him as editor and director.

Yet the play also resembles the "theatre of testimony" (Kruger 1999) of the 1970s and '80s. This form of theatre practice, according to Kruger, engaged with "politically provocative topics, such as the pass laws, prison conditions, workers' rights, and, to a lesser degree, the condition of women" (1999: 147). Nkala's play, in particular, lends itself to the collective outlook of testimonial theatre, as his individual life story speaks for the many Zimbabwean migrants who have also fled the harsh economic conditions of their home country. He, however, does not try to subsume the experience of Zimbabwean migrants as a collective to his own (Flockemann et al. 2010). While the common impulse of various theatre forms and practices before the transition was to denounce the repressive apartheid state, Nkala's play displays a less clear-cut oppositional stance towards the South African nation. This becomes particularly evident in the closing scene of the play, which stages Khumbu's endeavour to integrate into his new social surroundings:

9. The recent debate on the nature of the political novel in the post-apartheid era, sparked by the suggestion that crime fiction could be "the new direction the 'political novel' is taking in contemporary South Africa" (Eagan 2010: 17), seems to render statements on the decline of the political somewhat outdated. In an article published in the *Sunday Independent* in June 2012, Kelwyn Sole had this to say: "With the benefit of hindsight, I would suggest that it is now possible to question the validity of assumptions about the 'end of the political' made at liberation" (Sole 2012: 16).

The actor ... gets back onstage, shouting greetings to audience members:

Khumbu Howzit! Bonjour! Molo mhlobo wami.
I am not telling you this story so that you feel sorry for me, no, no, no. Actually, I do not feel sorry for myself. I feel honoured and blessed in this ... It has taught me to be brave. That is why I am onstage, telling my story. It has taught me not to let situations rule my destiny, but to go out there and look for what I want. That is why I am in the city that works for me. It had [sic] taught me to “network”, that is why I am in the company of successful people like all of you. It had [sic] taught me to be smart, that is why I am in the company of smart people like you at a very beautiful house.

(Nkala 2009: 39)

Khumbu's/Nkala's outspoken rejection of the victim status so often ascribed to African refugees, alongside the overt claim to ownership of his story, thus comes to stand as a counter to common representations of the foreigner from the continent. Yet, the repeated, celebratory emphasis on personal agency, in conjunction with the recurring assertion of his resemblance to the audience contained in the phrase “like you”, also partly affirms the traditional idealist trajectory of the coming-of-age format, in which the growth process of the hero/heroine is resolved by their (re)integration into society. The ending of the play, accordingly, presents Khumbu as an individuated hero, shaped by and accustomed to his new social surroundings. In the context of the prose genre of the *Bildungsroman* as a “novelistic correlative to the socializing project of human rights law” (Slaughter 2007: 7), Slaughter underlines that both law and novel conceive the individual as an essentially “social creature” and recognise “the process of individuation as an incorporative process of socialization, without which individualism itself would be meaningless” (2007: 19). In Nkala's case, the telling of his story has earned him a temporary residence permit in South Africa on the grounds of his “cultural capital” and the “educational value” of his work (Haw 2011: 9).

The localisms in the cited passage such as “Howzit”, the Xhosa greeting “Molo mhlobo wami” (“Hello my friend”, a phrase also used in a popular, award-winning Telkom television advert) and as the reference to the City of Cape Town's slogan “this city works for you”, seem to display his effort at integration into his host society. All of these phrases form part of South Africa's reformed post-apartheid advertising industry with its attempt to foster nation building by portraying a multilingual, multicultural rainbow nation united by its consumption-oriented lifestyle (Ives 2007: 154). Nkala's reference to the success of his audience and the “beautiful house” in which the performance is held, resonates with this jargon. The play, therefore, entails a critique of the violations of his human rights by the South African state articulated from within the prewritten national discourse. Rewriting South Africa's earlier theatre of testimony from the angle of the African

foreigner, who is eager to claim his position within the nation, Nkala's play demonstrates that new forms of political commitment continue to be intricately intertwined with the national.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to delineate the emerging genre of migrant writing and drama in post-apartheid South Africa. It has become evident that the categories of the nation and the political retain a notable relevance in *Going Home* and *The Crossing*. Whereas terms such as "post-postapartheid" and "post-transitional" literature, coined in the late 2000s, convey the increasing turning away from these alleged hallmarks of apartheid writing, I have argued that the two works analysed give credence to Samuelson's argument for a "*rearrangement*" (2010: 116, emphasis in the original) of these notions. Although they give room to fleeting actualisations of an Afropolitan vision, both works discussed here also evoke new practices of exclusion that curb the emancipatory potential of effusively celebratory transnational imaginings. In this sense, both novels reflect de Kock's reading of the prefix "trans" in "transnational" in his analysis of contemporary South African fiction. The prefix, according to de Kock, "creates a cusp between the national and what lies beyond it, not a severance" (2009: 31). Titlestad's metaphor of the mezzanine aptly captures the contradictions and ironies, and the incessant intimidation by state officials alongside the pockets of Afropolitanism that shape the lives of the protagonists in *Going Home* and *The Crossing*. In the political sphere, the temporal in-betweenness that characterises the mezzanine prominently found expression in the controversy around the ANC's "second transition" policy documents in June 2012. In the words of Mbembe, the debate shows that South Africa "is still caught in this interval, between an intractable present and an irrecoverable past; between things that are no longer and things that are not yet. This is the stalemate many would now like to end" (2012).

While continuing to play a role in the works analysed here, the notion of commitment is transferred to a non-national Other and articulated with less urgency and without any underlying socio-aesthetic programme. This should allow critics to depart from reading the texts primarily as witnesses to social reality and its epochal change. Rather than rejecting the central notions of the national and commitment, Nkala's play and Kikamba's fictional memoir therefore testify to the presence of both continuities and discontinuities in the current usage of these concepts.

One might conclude, in view of this, that if South Africa is to truly pursue an "opening up to the rest of the continent", the meaning of the phrasal verb needs to be extended beyond its primary designation of "allowing access or passage" to encompass, in its figurative sense, the opening up of the "inner"

self to the Other. A greater intensity of dialogue and conversation beyond that of border access and economic relations may in this way contribute towards shifting the texts’ incipient and fleeting Afropolitanism from the mezzanine level to inhabit the whole “house” of the South African nation.

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