

Chapter Sixteen

Metaphors of Migration: Zimbabwean Migrants in the South African Media

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The rise of xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa, culminating in the horrendous attacks on migrants in May 2008, has been extensively documented in a number of studies.¹ The role of the South African media in creating and perpetuating xenophobic stereotypes has also been analyzed in depth.² One of the major features of media reporting on migration in the 1990s was the emergence of a homogenizing discourse in which all migrants (legal or undocumented, male or female, skilled or unskilled) were lumped into overarching categories such as “aliens,” “illegals” and “foreigners.” No substantive distinction was made between migrants from different parts of the continent or globe. Indeed, migrants from neighbouring countries (with a long history of migration to and from South Africa) were as “foreign” (and unwelcome) as post-1994 migrants from further afield. Classification as an “alien” or a “foreigner” automatically implied that an individual migrant was necessarily party to the negative characteristics of that group – whether as bringers of disease and crime, takers of jobs or consumers of “our” resources. Media reporting on immigration in the 1990s was overwhelmingly negative and unanalytical.³

Media reporting after 2000 became a little more even-handed and analytical but overall remained disturbingly negative.⁴ One feature which has been less remarked

upon was the disaggregation of the previously monolithic categorization of "migrants as threat." Media sources began to spell out who was threatening and for what reasons. Nigerian migrants and Somali refugees, in particular, came in for particular criticism for their supposed penchant for drug-dealing and "dishonest" trading practices respectively. But what of Zimbabweans? How were they perceived and represented in the South African media at a time when migration from that country to South Africa was on the increase?

This chapter examines how the South African media understands Zimbabwean migration to South Africa. Particular attention is paid to the dominant metaphors that are used to characterize migrants themselves. The chapter argues that unlike Nigerians and Somalis, Zimbabweans are not associated with any one "national characteristic." Rather, all of the negative stereotypes that used to be applied to "aliens" and "foreigners" in general are now routinely applied to Zimbabweans. In other words, xenophobic media discourse has disaggregated to the level of national origin but no further. Zimbabwean migration to and from South Africa is a highly complex and variable phenomenon. There are many different "types" of migrants and just as many motives for migration. The implications of this migrant movement for both countries also varies considerably. None of this complexity and variability is allowed into the homogenizing media discourse targeted at Zimbabweans.

Globally, there is a surprising degree of consistency in the dominant negative metaphors used by the media to describe those deemed to have "violated" national territory and sovereignty or are poised to do so. The most common "metaphors of migration" include the depiction of migrants as threatening foreign or alien bodies; migration as a "natural disaster" (such as a flood or avalanche); migration as an aquatic process (migrants "flowing" or "pouring" into a country); migrants as a "burden"; and military metaphors as, for example, the state "battling" or "fighting" a foreign "invasion."⁵ All of these elements are present in contemporary South African media responses to Zimbabwean migration, sometimes individually, more often combined.

In order to create a database for study, two general sources – *SA Media and News 24* – were used. Both of these electronic websites source stories from a cross-section of hardcopy and electronic newspaper outlets and feeds (such as the South African Press Association or SAPA). The database spanned the period 1999-2006. Headlines and content were scanned for metaphorical representations of Zimbabwean migra-

tion and migrants. The articles were then classified in terms of their dominant migration metaphors, or combinations thereof. The results of the analysis are discussed in this chapter.

THE MIGRANT AS ALIEN

SA Authorities Confirm Wave of Illegal Zim Aliens: South African authorities have confirmed reports showing that the massive influx of illegal immigrants into the country shows no signs of abating. A total of 2,386 illegal immigrants have been arrested by the South African police since December 29, Limpopo police spokesperson Ronel Otto said on Monday. These border jumpers entered the country through the various border posts, including Beitbridge, Pontdrift, Groblers Bridge and Stokpoort (Mail and Guardian 30 January 2006)

Plan for Flood of Zim Aliens: The South African government is said to be considering building a second detention centre in Limpopo to cope with the influx of illegal immigrants from Zimbabwe (The Citizen 25 July 2006)

Zim Aliens Still Flow In (News24 30 January 2006)

Illegal Alien Appleseed Quits SA: Bongo Maffin musician Adrian Anesu Mupemhi "Appleseed" has gone back to Zimbabwe. Last night, Mupemhi voluntarily left South Africa for his home country after contravening the Aliens Control Act (Pretoria News 4 April 2002)

Secure Carriages on the Way: The government is about to introduce specially designed train carriages for the deportation of illegal aliens bound for Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Sowetan 31 March 2000)

Thousands Sent Home to Zimbabwe from SA: In a sign of intensifying crackdown, on Zimbabwean illegal aliens, South Africa deported 2345 Zimbabwean at the weekend (Cape Times 23 May 2002)

Illegal Aliens Die in Smash (Pretoria News 27 September 2002)

Ruling Limits Arrest of Illegal Aliens (Pretoria News 23 April 2003)

In popular western culture, the term "alien" obviously connotes hostile and dangerous non-human beings from outer space.⁶ While this term is obviously not meant to be taken literally in migration discourse, its metaphorical associations concerning "otherness" are clear. "Aliens" are, metaphorically-speaking, extraterrestrial – not of this earth (let alone this country) – different, strange, unknown and undesirable. The popular cultural connotations of the term are certainly not lost on the South African media who use it with a blithe disregard for context and truth. "Aliens" are completely foreign and different, hostile and unwelcome, a threat to the culture, way of life and economic livelihood of the citizen.

The extraterrestrial other is always particularly suspect because it cannot communicate in the "language(s)" of the host nation.⁷ South Africans are somewhat more accepting of migrants who speak South African languages through common ancestry (those from Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland).⁸ Migrants from other African countries, including Zimbabwe, are denigrated as *makwerekwere* because they do not speak the language of the local people. Seemingly unaware of the origins and highly insulting nature of this term, President Mbeki argued in the South African Parliament that there was nothing offensive or xenophobic about it.⁹

The alien metaphor is often associated with the idea of contamination of a healthy body.¹⁰ Antigens, or foreign particles that enter the body and elicit an immune response, are compared to "aliens" who are suspect because they cannot speak the "language" of the body.¹¹ In South Africa, the term "alien" is also extensively used in popular environmental discourse to describe non-indigenous plant species. "Alien" vegetation (even if it has been in South Africa for hundreds of years) is seen as a major threat to the viability of indigenous plants. Campaigns to root out and destroy "alien" species have been a constant, high-profile feature of post-apartheid South Africa. The same language of threat and contamination is used to describe migrants and plants deemed "alien:"

The phobia, which started out as a diffuse sense of misgiving, has congealed into an active antipathy to what is perceived as a shadowy alien-nation of "illegal immigrants" [their emphasis].... just as, in the plant world, invasive has become locked adjectivally to alien. Popularly held to be "economic vultures" who usurp jobs and resources, who foster crime, prostitution and disease, these Doppelgänger anti-citizens are accused – in uncanny analogy with non-indigenous flora – of spreading wildly out of control, and of siphoning off the rapidly diminishing wealth of the nation.¹²

Although the use of the term “alien” to describe non-citizens is still common in other parts of the world (notably the United States), its usage in South Africa is highly problematical. The term is closely associated with the racist immigration policies of the apartheid era, embodied in the Aliens Control Act of 1991 and its predecessors.¹³ In 2002, a new South African Immigration Act replaced the Aliens Control Act. The term “alien” is not used at all in the 2002 Act, a concession by its drafters to the opposition of human rights groups to the retention of incendiary language in the new legislation. The Act refers to all non-citizens as “foreigners” (which is an improvement but hardly dispels the negative connotations of “otherness” associated with the term “alien”). However, while South Africa’s official immigration discourse now eschews the term “alien,” the media has been extremely reluctant to jettison it, so strong is the emotive negative weight of the term.

The application of the term “illegal alien” to Zimbabweans has led to a new variant: “the Zim alien.” The continued use of the metaphor to describe Zimbabwean migrants, in particular, is therefore very deliberate, stripping them of their humanity, emphasizing difference and marking them as outsiders that do not belong. As such, they are undeserving of basic respect, rights and freedoms, a sentiment with which most ordinary South Africans agree.¹⁴

The “alien” is not only unnatural and unwelcome, it is also illegitimate and threatening. The South African media is certainly not alone in its association of irregular migration with illegality.¹⁵ “Illegal aliens,” “illegal immigrants” or simply “illegals” are terms used by states worldwide to describe anyone who is not wanted but who comes anyway. The UN, the Global Commission on Migration and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) propose that the term “irregular migrant” be used to describe those in a country without proper documentation, a proposal not popular with nation-states who prefer to see border transgression as a criminal rather than unauthorized act. The South African media has continued to make copious use of the terms “illegal alien” and “illegal immigrant” to describe Zimbabwean migrants.

Thus, the very act of being in South Africa is criminalized by the South African media. Only rarely is there reference to the many thousands of Zimbabweans who are in South Africa quite legitimately, as professionals, students, traders, visitors and the like. Attention is focused on demonizing, on making illegitimate and dangerous, the presence of all Zimbabweans. When the South African Police Services release the results

of "crime-busting" operations, for example, they normally list (together with the arrest of murderers, rapists, hijackers and thieves) the number of "illegal immigrants" they have apprehended. They are rarely called "*suspected* illegal immigrants." Guilt is assumed and, in many cases, created. The police are notorious both for their destruction of documents and demands for bribes.¹⁶ The measure of the success of a crime-fighting blitz is often the number of migrants arrested. There is an inherent contradiction here. While it might be argued that these migrants are "breaking the law" and therefore engaged in a "criminal activity," migrants suspected of being in the country illegally are not given the right to due process or a fair trial accorded other suspected criminals. They are rounded up and deported as expeditiously as possible. Little has changed in this respect with the Immigration Act of 2002 which has singularly failed to protect migrants from the more egregious violations of their rights licensed by the Aliens Control Act.¹⁷ The media – particularly newswire services such as the South African Press Association (SAPA) – simply parrot the police interpretation of their own activities, uncritically reproducing these police press statements which link migration with crime.

By defining migrants as criminals, without any evidence of criminal activity, the media conveniently overlooks the immense contributions they make by working hard for low wages and by creating jobs for South Africans. The "illegal Zim alien" metaphor exaggerates the severity of a victimless technical offence. Migrants who cross outside of legal channels, though, are committing offenses of a much different nature than the prototypical criminal. Their "crime" is not to cause harm or to steal but to work and make money to send home to starving relatives. The metaphor dehumanizes the migrant, disqualifying serious media debate on such questions as why people come to South Africa, what service they provide when they are there, and why some find it necessary to avoid the legal channels that they respect.

MIGRATION AND DANGEROUS WATERS

We voluntarily switched off the apartheid electric border fence. But the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe is forcing us to think about how to contain the avalanche of illegal economic and political refugees from Zimbabwe. Failure to do something about this risks hostility from our unemployed and poor directed at the foreigners flooding into South Africa. If the hostility

is minimal now, wait until our economy slows down (News 24 7 October 2006)

Zim Aliens Flow In (News24 30 January 2006)

Zimbabweans Pouring into SA (Mail and Guardian 30 January 2006)

SA Authorities Confirm Wave of Illegal Zim Aliens: South African authorities have confirmed reports showing that the massive influx of illegal immigrants into the country shows no signs of abating (Mail and Guardian 30 January 2006).

Illegals Flood Across River as Limpopo Subsides: As the Limpopo river subsides, following the devastating floods in February, illegal immigrants are beginning to flock across the border from Zimbabwe into South Africa again (The Star 18 August 2000)

Botswana Faces Flood of Illegal Immigrants (Mail and Guardian 30 August 2001).

Growing Tide of Refugees (Cape Times 23 May 2002)

The Unstoppable Tide (Mail and Guardian 3 October 2003)

Holding Back the Human Tide: Every month thousands of Zimbabweans are caught trying to enter South Africa illegally. But poverty will drive them to do it again (Sunday Tribune 3 February 2002)

A report on this page exposes the futility of the government's attempt to stem the tide of thousands of illegal immigrants flooding the country in search of better life (Pretoria News 25 September 2005)

Metaphors from the natural world are particularly common to describe the movement of Zimbabweans into South Africa. Migration is not, however, considered to be a "natural process" so much as a "natural disaster" deeply threatening to all South Africans. Zimbabwean migrants do not migrate as individuals or in small groups. Rather they come in "floods," "waves" and "tides," swamping everything in their path. "Alien body" and "natural disaster" metaphors are regularly combined to give added emphasis to the destructiveness of the disaster.

In other words, this is not a tidal wave or avalanche of "people" or "migrants;" it is one of "Zim aliens," "illegal immigrants" and "illegal foreigners." Aquatic meta-

phors suggest large-scale, excessive, uncontrollable and dangerous inflows of water.¹⁸ Migrants "pour" they do not "trickle." They come in "waves" and "floods." The borders of the nation-state, unless systematically and comprehensively fortified, provide no defence against the tide. While some suggest that the disastrous tide is "unstoppable," others argue that it should and must be stopped through more draconian measures.

The penetration of borders by migrants is amplified in the discourse of migrant-receiving states by the "metaphor of the container."¹⁹ National territory is represented as a contained space of fixed size or volume.²⁰ The three salient spatial structures are the interior ("us"), the exterior ("them") and the boundary (the physical and metaphorical line that divides us from them, insiders from outsiders). This schema "grounds conceptualizations of one's country as a closed container that can be sealed or penetrated."²¹ The container metaphor denotes a bounded area protecting what is within from external danger. Penetration of the boundary of the container implies the contamination of its contents, "them" symbolically and illegitimately penetrating "us."²² Penetration is a dangerous and illegitimate act with destructive consequences primarily because "what is inside is close to the self, and what is outside is also outside the law."²³ Container metaphors also arouse fears of a build up of large numbers of undesirable migrants within. Once inside, the migrant is a *makwerekere* to be feared, ostracized and insulted.

South Africa, too, is represented as a fixed and bounded container with immutable boundaries that divide people into two groups: insiders and outsiders, the in-group and the out-group, South Africans and "Zims." Mandela's "rainbow nation" has become a closed container whose boundaries are being transgressed by massive numbers of Zimbabwean migrants. A particularly common variant of boundary-transgression in South Africa is the idea that migrants do not cross or travel across borders, they "jump" or "hop" them. The metaphor, while appearing to describe how borders are crossed illegitimately, is designed to convey the fact that migrants have a fundamental lack of respect for the line between the two countries. In fact, as research by SAMP has shown, Zimbabwean migrants do have a basic respect for the existence and integrity of national borders. This is not to say that there is no border transgression. Rather it is to argue that the metaphorical representation of transgression both exaggerates its prevalence and perpetuates an image of migrants as displaying criminal intent and a callous disregard for national sovereignty.

MIGRATION AS INVASION

Illegal immigrants are law breakers who pose a threat to South Africa by placing a heavy strain on the country's resources (Sowetan 11 February 2000)

Deporting Aliens just a Futile and Costly Exercise (City Press 29 May 2005)

Foreigners are Stealing our Birthright: Musina, on the border town of South Africa and Zimbabwe has supposedly been taken over by illegal immigrants, some of whom obtained South African identity documents fraudulently. Some of the Zimbabweans have taken over RDP houses meant for poor South Africans while others cross the border illegally to claim child grants for their children (The Star 6 February 2006)

The department of home affairs has taken a financial knock from the influx of illegal immigrants (News 24 23 July 2006)

As hundreds of Zimbabweans flock into SA daily, the repercussions are said to have been felt mostly by the Department of Health, which has had to deal with increasing numbers of patients, putting pressure on hospitals (The Citizen 25 July 2006)

The influx is impacting negatively on the municipality's capacity to provide basic services as we are over-stretched (The Star 6 February 2006)

Military metaphors in South African reporting on Zimbabwean migration to South Africa have three basic elements. First, the country is experiencing an unwanted "invasion" by hostile forces. Second, the state is engaged in a fight, a battle, a war to contain migration. Third, the invaders consume resources and deprive citizens of what is rightfully theirs. The trope of "invasion" has deep roots in South African political and media discourse. In the apartheid era, the politicians and the media fed the white populace an unrelenting diet of images about their country being invaded from the "north" – by the so-called "black peril," the red peril and (even historically) the clandestine migration peril. While the country is no longer embroiled in an actual war, the militaristic language and imagery of a country still at war is very much present in reporting on migration. This is now a country under siege from "illegal aliens" emanating from the rest of Africa.

South African press coverage of migration from Zimbabwe is full of images and claims about the burden that the invasion places on South Africans. The manipulation of numbers is particularly important here. The greater the number, the greater the burden. No one knows exactly how many Zimbabweans are in South Africa (legal or undocumented). In the absence of reliable numbers, the media is free to invent its own numbers. Zimbabweans supposedly threaten the viability and stability of "the nation" by endangering its physical and moral health, and its ability to provide services, employment, and to control crime. They place a heavy burden on South Africa's housing, welfare, education, health and immigration services. Zimbabweans, in general, are also stereotyped as "job stealers" with a detrimental effect on the employment situation by depriving South Africans of work opportunities. Zimbabweans are takers not creators of opportunity. This view fails to recognize the role of migrants and immigrants in generating employment opportunities for South Africans and contributing to the country's skills base and social and cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

During the xenophobic carnage that swept South African townships in May 2008, the media was quick to distance itself from suggestions that it was in any way responsible for the outrage. Indeed, with the exception of the tabloid press, most news sources reacted with a degree of outrage and condemnation. In the many explanations advanced for the violence, however, few were prepared to directly tackle the issue of xenophobia. Indeed, ex-President Mbeki's astonishing claim that there was no xenophobia in the country was reported as a matter of fact. While the media can work itself up over Mbeki's HIV/AIDS "denialism," no such criticism was directed at his xenophobia "denialism."

The media is distinctly uncomfortable with the reality that xenophobia is a pervasive and deep-rooted phenomenon in South Africa. The reason is not hard to see. It is impossible to answer the question "Why are South Africans so xenophobic?" without addressing the issue of the culpability of the media. That the media are not simply responding to events but actively shaping South African popular opinion on migration is incontrovertible. Media xenophobia in migration reporting was identified as a serious problem in the 1990s. The evidence was ignored and nothing was done. So the negative discourses around migrants and migration, with their accompanying fleet

of pejorative metaphors, have continued to exercise their pernicious effects through to the present.

What has changed over the last decade is the growing focus on one particular migration movement, that from Zimbabwe. All of the metaphors that used to be applied to African migrants in general have been increasingly focused on Zimbabwe and migration from Zimbabwe. Clearly, Zimbabwean migration to (and, of course, from) South Africa has increased significantly. But does it warrant the labels "flood," "tidal wave" and "avalanche?" Even if the numbers were in the millions (which they clearly are not), the media's response would be unjustified. In fact, the media seems completely unable to refrain from slipping into highly provocative language designed to alienate, stigmatize and dehumanize the migrant. The media may not have directly incited the violence of May 2008, but it certainly prepared the way.

NOTES

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- 6 G. Lakoff and S. Ferguson, *The Framing of Immigration* (Berkeley: Rockridge Institute, 2006).
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- 9 Ibid, p. 15.
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- 21 P. Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 118.
- 22 Charteris-Black, "Britain as a Container," p. 575.
- 23 Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse*.