Seeing Johannesburg Anew: Conviviality and Opacity in Khalo Matabane's *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*

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In the early months of 2017, the South African cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria saw over 30 immigrant shops looted, homes burnt down, and a mass anti-immigrant march. This violence was sparked, according to some commentators, by Johannesburg mayor Herman Mashaba's proclamation that '[migrants] are holding our country to ransom and I am going to be the last South African to allow it'.¹ Its targets: foreign nationals from other parts of Africa, including Somalis, Nigerians and Zimbabweans, who were drawn to South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994 for the physical safety and economic prosperity it seemed to promise. These events seem an uncanny replay of similar attacks in 2015, when King Goodwill Zwelinthini's remarks brought about mass violence in KwaZulu-Natal (Desai 2015: 247–248). They further echo the riots of 2008 which began in the Johannesburg township of Alexandra but spread out across the country. In total over 100,000 people were displaced and 62 so-called foreigners

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(including black South Africans of smaller ethnic groups) were killed (see, *inter alia*, Landau 2010: 213–214; Strauss 2011: 104; Desai 2015).

The 2008 riots themselves did not come out of nowhere but, as we will see, reflected hostility building since apartheid ended and democracy as well as a ‘new’ South African nationalism was inaugurated in 1994. As Achille Mbembe argues, to understand and effectively counter the logic of ‘nationalism’, ‘national interest’ and ‘national security’ driving this consistent hostility and violence against immigrants—habits of thought and action themselves imposed on the African continent through the process of colonisation and lodged ever more securely in place through the racialised intensification of global neo-liberal capitalism—requires rethinking basic understandings of identity, sovereignty, social ties and political membership, in a way that allows us to deprioritise borders and emphasise ‘flows, networks and circulation’ (2017a, b). Mbembe writes: ‘To come up with an entirely different paradigm consonant with the deep spirit of our own [African] history, we explicitly need to embrace our long-held traditions of flexible, networked sovereignty, mutual security, integration through incorporation and of universal right to temporary sojourn (hospitality)’ (2017b).

This is a massive task, to be sure. Yet some years previously, in their collection *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008), Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall pointed to part of the way forward when they highlighted modes of reading the city based on the encounters and interdependencies that make up quotidian urban life. By examining the city as something composed of ‘actual bodies, images, forms, footprints, and memories’ as well as ‘infras-structures, technologies and legal entities’, they suggest, Johannesburg can be productively redefined as an ‘Afropolitan’ zone (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008: 8, 24). Turning the focus on the individual as he or she makes the city, materially and imaginatively, and in relation with others—rather than reiterating a gaze that clumps people together into groups with differential claims to a city that pre-exists them—decentres the mass prospect created through nationalist logics of interest, security and exclusion and the borders this prospect necessitates.

In this chapter, I pose Khalo Matabane’s experimental film *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2005) as a visionary text that helps us imagine such an approach, as it conjures Johannesburg anew by examining the desires and lived experiences of citizens, refugees and immigrants as they intersect in the city and ultimately revives at least the dream of this city as a site of hospitality. I use two main theoretical lenses to parse this film: *conviviality*

and *opacity*. The first speaks to everyday encounters across race, gender, ethnicity, and other relevant social distinctions which form the weave of postcolonial urban life and which can, at least in Paul Gilroy's famous formulation, generate a creolised, vibrant and welcoming counterculture to the sharpening ethnic definitions and divisions of modern society (2005: xv; see also Nowicka and Vertovec 2014: 344). As Magdalena Nowicka and Steven Vertovec put it, conviviality is fundamentally concerned with 'how to make spaces more positively interactive, or conversely how spaces might become more convivial through everyday practices and routines of people inhabiting them' (2014: 350). While it has many resonances with cosmopolitanism, it seeks to take more fully into account the unequal power relations lurking in cosmopolitical theory and grapples with the limits of multiculturalism as a model for society (Gilroy 2005: 59; Nowicka and Vertovec 2014: 346). It is also fundamentally bound up with feeling and affect (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2011). As I will show, Matabane's film is centrally about how ordinary interactions (or what Gilroy calls 'ordinary virtues and ironies [of] listening, looking, discretion, friendship' [2005: 67]) in the parks and streets of Johannesburg—with all of their affective intensities—may bridge the deep rifts between people of different races, genders and nationalities who inhabit this specific urban space.

While highlighting how tracing and feeling solidarity is key to combatting old and new forms of segregation, however, Matabane is careful not to romanticise everyday encounters. Indeed, his film shows just how tenuous the ties created through them can be as it underscores the need to unsettle assumptions regarding easy translation across difference underlying many understandings of conviviality.² For this reason, I turn to Édouard Glissant's (1990) concept of opacity. Glissant suggests how European (or in the case of Matabane's film otherwise privileged by virtue of citizenship) subjects tend to demand 'transparency' from others in order to classify them as fully human, as people deserving of respect and hospitality (1990: 189–190). Yet, 'to feel in solidarity with [an Other] or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to "make" him in my image' (Glissant 1990: 193). Rather, what is called for is 'respect for mutual forms of opacity' both of the individual of specific communities (Glissant 1990: 194). How to come to this respect for opacity is a key dilemma represented in *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*. The close reading of the film below suggests that developing habits of vision or attentiveness that encompass conviviality and opacity together may be

crucial for bringing into being a critically ‘Afropolitan’ space—one that acknowledges difference and conflict while being open to the other and in fact made in common with him or her, and one based in local models of flow and circulation to which Mbembe (2017b) points.

Matabane, who came of age more or less with the start of the country’s democracy, has been hailed as a key member of a new generation of young black filmmakers (Moyer-Duncan 2011: 72). He spent much of his early career making activist documentary films. As he notes in an interview with Audrey McCluskey, he sees the ‘essence of filmmaking’ as ‘a response to injustice’:

What do I feel about a world that has so much inequality in it, so much injustice, and [such] lack of compassion, even from black people. My films are like a little guerilla warfare. That’s how I like to think about filmmaking – war against [oppressive] systems. (2009: 122; see also Moyer-Duncan 2011: 73)

Such an orientation is clear in works leading up to *Conversations*, including *The Young Lions* (1999), which traces how militant revolutionaries from the MK (the armed wing of the ANC) experience ‘freedom’ and *Love in the Time of Sickness* (2001), focused on the impact of HIV and AIDS. Work following *Conversations* (2005), itself generically hybrid, has turned towards feature films but continue a politically focused and issue-based approach, as evident from titles like *State of Violence* (2010) and *Nelson Mandela: The Myth & Me* (2013).³

The issue he tackles in *Conversations* is the influx of migrants to Johannesburg from war-torn regions that occurred after the end of apartheid and the relationship that South Africans have to these immigrants. If the film precedes the xenophobic riots of 2008 and their more recent iterations mentioned in this chapter’s opening, Matabane draws attention to gathering rainclouds announcing a storm (Moyer-Duncan 2011: 73). As many scholars have pointed out, South African democracy was marked by a paradox regarding foreign immigrants and asylum seekers from its very start (see, *inter alia*, Peberdy 2001; Landau 2010; Strauss 2011: 104).⁴ Sally Peberdy, for example, details how, on the one hand, the ANC promulgated a progressive, human rights-based constitutional order that values diversity and offers certain protections to all individuals living in South Africa regardless of citizenship. It also reached out towards the rest of the

continent through African Renaissance discourse. On the other hand, officials and organs of the state discursively and operationally excluded non-nationals and black African non-nationals in particular (Peberdy 2001: 16). She shows convincingly how the ANC's national project, which had the positive aim of providing a sense of belonging to all South Africans after the exclusions of apartheid, was built on a xenophobic logic that stressed the difference between citizens and non-citizens and their entitlements (2001: 24, 28–29). Black Africans from outside of South Africa were the main foils in this process and were depicted as endangering the moral health of the nation, increasing criminality and draining scarce resources (Peberdy 2001: 21, 24–25). To counter such perceived threats, legal regulations originating under apartheid were ratcheted up, with reductions in permits for temporary workers, more border policing, 'increasingly draconian measures to raise the rates of identification, arrest, detention and repatriation of undocumented migrants' and orders for the denial of 'access to services like healthcare, education and utilities to undocumented (and other) migrants' (Peberdy 2001: 16–17, 21–23).

Reflecting such policies, by the late 1990s, South Africans of all races viewed African immigrants with suspicion (37% seeing them as a threat to jobs and 48% as a 'criminal threat') and in 1998 'fully 25% of the nation call[ed] for a complete ban on migration' (Danso and McDonald 2001: 115–116). There were also scattered but consistent reports of violence against immigrants. Loren Landau argues that the history of apartheid rule combined with ANC statecraft of the kind indicated by Peberdy both encouraged poor black citizens to see foreigners as 'demons' stopping the success of transformation and created a 'demon' of violence where these poor black citizens were willing to take matters into their own hands when they saw the government unable or unwilling to deliver its promises (2010: 216–217). This second demon grew in strength as time passed from 1994 with 'the evident failures of the national rebirth' in the form of economic transformation and future prospects (Landau 2010: 226–227). Landau quotes one South African speaking approvingly in the wake of the 2008 riots: 'We are not trying to kill anyone but rather solving the problems of our own country. The government is not doing anything about this, so I support what the mob is doing the get rid of foreigners in our country' (2010: 229).

Immigrants thus found themselves in a precarious situation. Ethnographic studies of Johannesburg in the late 1990s point to a set of common experiences. Of his interviews with Congolese and Nigerian immigrants, Alan Morris reports: 'The overwhelming view among the informants was that South Africans have little or no empathy for their plight' (1998: 1124). They faced an exclusionary racism and violence including police brutality, they suffered financially because of employer discrimination, and they lacked the safety of legal protections that come with legal papers or citizenship (Morris 1998: 1122, 1129–1133). Longer narrative accounts echo these hardships, stressing how they result in a long-term alienation from South African society. I have written elsewhere about Simão Kikamba's semi-autobiographical novel *Going Home* (2005), which recounts an Angolan refugee's painful experience of trying to make a life for himself in Johannesburg but getting constantly locked out of his home, the city, and any sense of future (Bystrom 2016: 140–144). Jonny Steinberg captures a similar experience in *A Man of Good Hope* (2015), which tracks Somalian refugee Asad Abdullahi from Somalia through Africa to South Africa. Shortly after arriving in the Johannesburg district of Mayfair in early 2004, Abdullahi is reunited with an uncle and looks forward to a new life. Yet, as Steinberg chronicles, Abdullahi's uncle's murder in his shop in Port Elizabeth only a few months later makes a mockery of this dream, becoming the first in a long line of violent instances (including his own attack as part of the 2008 riots) that force Abdullahi ultimately out of South Africa. Steinberg describes Abdullahi's existence in South Africa in the following manner: 'On his shoulders rests the incessant burden of dodging his own murder' (2015: xiv).

This then is the setting of Matabane's filmic intervention. *Conversations* was sparked by a conversation that Matabane had with an Eritrean refugee woman while travelling in Germany (McCluskey 2009: 121; Moyer-Duncan 2011: 73), an encounter which had strong resonance both on the local/personal and the global levels. In one interview, Matabane describes the film as a 'love letter' to the Eritrean woman (McCluskey 2009: 121). In another, he describes it as a 'love letter' to his country itself, stating: 'In making this film, I wanted to understand the people who left their countries because of these wars and were shaping and being shaped by my country. The film is...a love letter to my country, a provocative one that will force us to debate our attitudes towards our refugees' (Writing Studio n.d.).⁵ The 'love letter' is a perhaps unusual genre through which to call out prejudice and to ask for change, but it speaks to emotion invested in

the dream of transformation, of a hospitable and just South Africa made possible in 1994 and cherished by South Africans and immigrants alike.⁶ It also lends a sense of urgency as this dream runs out of time, and what Matabane sees as greed and apathy threaten to turn the country into something else, driving him away from it (Moyer-Duncan 2011: 73).⁷

The plot of Matabane's 'love letter' is straightforward. A South African poet named Keniloe, who 'can't make sense of the world', happens to encounter a Somalian refugee named Fatima in the park in Hillbrow one Sunday afternoon. He is reading Nuruddin Farah's *Links* (2003), a novel about the Somalian civil war. When Fatima sees him reading this novel, she stops to find out if he is Somalian. The next Sunday, Keniloe encounters Fatima again. This pattern is repeated for a third time, when the poet convinces her to tell him her story of the war. Moved by her testimony, he decides that he wants to write about her. However, when he goes to the park to look for her the following Sunday afternoon, she has vanished. The film then chronicles Keniloe's attempt to find Fatima, asking strangers in the park and on the street if they know her. In the process, he records their endlessly multiplying stories of war and displacement.

What is not straightforward is the film's formal construction—and I will focus on just two elements, its principle of contingency and its insistent blurring of the line between 'reality' and 'fiction'—which allows Matabane skilfully to both trace and enter into flows of what Kathleen Stewart (2007) calls 'ordinary affects' in ways that may help to suture together Johannesburg's divided population. 'Ordinary affects', Stewart argues, are 'the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingences and emergences' (2007: 1–2). 'They work not through "meanings" per se, but rather in the way they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds. Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible' (Stewart 2007: 3). Phrased slightly differently, they are 'a tangle of potential connections... They surge or become submerged. They point to the jump of something coming together for a minute and to the spreading lines of resonance and connection that become possible and might snap into sense in some sharp or vague way' (Stewart 2007: 4).

What I am calling the principle of contingency underlies the structure of the film and characterises much of its style. Matabane notes in an interview: 'There were no rehearsals... I wanted to make a film that was like life

itself, to go into the unknown' (Machen 2017). Using this framework, with no script, in 19 days and on a shoestring budget (Sosibo 2006; Moyer-Duncan 2011: 73), Matabane is able to trace the emotional intensities that arise from accidental encounters as they 'surge and become submerged', and sometimes 'snap into sense', to echo Stewart's (2007: 4) language. The first of these exists between Keniloe and Fatima. Keniloe, as I have noted, begins the film immersed in *Links*. Farah's novel documents the struggle of Jeebleh, an expatriate Somali, to come to terms with the chaos in Mogadishu. The city Jeebleh finds seems bereft of human connection, as he discovers on arrival by witnessing an airport 'game' in which armed youths take potshots at disembarking passengers and kill a woman and a child before his eyes (Farah 2003: 15–16).⁸ As Keniloe reads out the description of this airport 'game', he, like Jeebleh, confronts the question of war. What does it mean to live through such conditions? What happens when the bonds that tie people in a certain place together come undone? When even the most basic human solidarity is stripped away? These questions are transported to Johannesburg as Keniloe acts out the part of the airport youths, pretending to shoot random passers-by using his finger as a gun, and then turning the trigger on himself.

It is while Keniloe is swept up in these questions that Fatima appears, a shimmering apparition. In her brief testimony to him, she shares the experience of watching her father and brother being shot next to her, of being shot herself, of being evacuated from the hospital in Somalia to Kenya and eventually sent alone to South Africa. The visual frame is so close up to Fatima's face that you can almost feel her sorrow leaking from her eyes and nose, and with a series of cuts to black as she herself falters or begins to cry, suggests an absolute immersion in her experience. Keniloe is, in a way, able to momentarily live in her skin, and this exchange binds him to her. I think here of Sara Ahmed's definition of emotion as a point of conjuncture between a person and an 'object' or 'other', when something or someone presses into us and we respond to him or her; emotion becomes a kind of glue sticking us to others in particular configurations (2004: 6).

Keniloe's refusal to become unglued, his quest to maintain the surge of affect binding him to Fatima, is what inspires him to search for her after she disappears, and sparks a series of further contingent encounters that resonate with each other and turn the city *otherwise*. In his journeys up and down the streets of Hillbrow and eventually beyond it to Yeoville, Berea and Mayfair, looking for someone who might direct him to Fatima, he meets two women who remind him: 'most of us are refugees'. 'What',

they ask, 'do you want in particular about Somalia?' These specific women left Kenya to avoid female genital circumcision. Keniloe also meets people fleeing from chaos in the DRC, a former child soldier from Uganda, a woman who escaped the military dictatorship in South Korea, a family who had moved from Gaza so that the children would not grow up surrounded by missile attacks, and a shopkeeper from Afghanistan. While none of these stories has the same sticky power for Keniloe as Fatima's, they each have their own 'punctum' (Barthes 1980).

Keniloe's interviews with these refugees are interspersed with meetings with others immigrants who came to Johannesburg for 'greener pastures'. These could be financial, as in the case of the male undocumented workers from Malawi he interviews at the Lindela Deportation Centre who followed an old road to South Africa to escape poverty. 'We are all Africans', they state again and again to Keniloe; in a pan-Africanist updating of the abolitionist mantra 'Am I not a man and a brother?', they argue for better treatment because 'we are all blacks and brothers'. Migration can also be an intellectual pilgrimage. The desire to be part of a global experiment in multi-racial democracy is articulated by Trinidadian intellectual Ronald Suresh Roberts. Describing South Africa as his home, Roberts claims: 'home is a notion that has to do with where you feel that what you are doing matters. To be part of what South Africa is doing now is something that matters to everyone in the world'. While Roberts' statement gets laden with irony by his own stories of experiencing xenophobia and the stories of mistreatment told by many refugees and migrants, it also offers a dreamscape of what South African society could be.

The picture that comes together from these interviews, each seemingly as accidental as his first meeting with Fatima in the park, is of Johannesburg as a place of refuge for thousands of souls who have lost their homes and have not quite been able to forge new ones. They register the kinds of discrimination and indignity meted out regularly to immigrants at this time. However, despite such experiences, they also show affection for the city and value the relative safety of Johannesburg's streets.⁹ Lirija, a Serbian woman who came to South Africa six months after the NATO bombing in Belgrade in 1999, recalls for Keniloe watching bombs fall around her in the street, seeing burnt people hanging in whole or part from windows of damaged buildings, and eventually having her own house burnt down. While she stands on a street in Hillbrow in front of a building that looks, one might think, bombed out, she draws attention to the marked difference between Johannesburg and Yugoslavia. 'I go out on the street at 2am and people ask

“Why are you going out so late?” But this is safe, there is no bombs, nobody is bombing us’. Such a feeling is reiterated in testimonies from Gaza and Afghanistan. The idea that South Africa provides, or *could* provide, a space of peace is echoed again and again.

Keniloe’s search for Fatima thus turns into a project that both places him in an affective network with others and reconfigures the imaginative social geography of the city. The memories of violence that these migrants share with Keniloe help to redefine Hillbrow as something *other*. Rather than a site of strife and disintegration, inhabited by groups suspicious of each other, the city becomes Stewart’s (2007: 4) ‘tangle of connections’. The ordinary encounter in the park highlights and conjures into being a convivial urban space shaped by citizens and non-citizens alike. Or, to use the language of affect, which as I already noted is central to the operations of conviviality, it is a ‘bloom-space’ of narrative, full of stories waiting to find expression, and to be linked to others in a chain of voices—which, I might also add, is the kind of solution to social disintegration that Farah (2003) proposes in *Links*.

The spectator is not exempted from this expanding chain of voices, since Matabane seems to want to inspire in his audience the kind of response that Keniloe has to Fatima—to create a contingent prick that instils a desire to know more, to connect further. This is underscored by the documentary style of the film, and here I come to the unstable relation between its ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ worlds (see McCluskey 2009: 120; Moyer-Duncan 2011: 73; Machen 2017). Keniloe is a fictional figure, as are certain characters such as Keniloe’s wife and a mysterious preacher who visits him in the park. However, the majority of the characters seem to be real inhabitants of Hillbrow, Berea, Yeoville and Mayfair.¹⁰ Fatima, for instance, plays herself in the film, and there is Ronald Suresh Roberts. Matabane thus calls for a mode of reading or viewing which, as Hedley Twidle describes in another context, ‘plays across different genres and addresses rather than remaining trapped within these protocols of exchange that thrive in an endless series of tired oppositions’ (2012: 24); though he does so, and as Stephen Clingman responds to Twidle, not to mark ‘the boundary between fiction and non-fiction’ but to explore it as a ‘space of contiguity and crossing, the space of navigation’ (2012: 52). Such generic instability allows Matabane to explore the importance of fiction in shaping what Stewart (2007: 3) terms our ‘social worldings’ without sacrificing the immediacy of the connection created by authentic testimony.

Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon, however, is not a simple celebration of the power of storytelling to create emotional ties between people or to turn the city into a space of refuge. It is also a warning about the failure of connection, the way positive affect can become ‘submerged’ or lost, or flip into anxiety, discomfort, or disavowal. In other words, it shuttles between the production of conviviality and the insistence on opacity. This becomes crystal clear at the conclusion of the film. Here Keniloe finally finds Fatima’s house and asks to record her story, as he has recorded so many others. She refuses. ‘I really don’t interest that story’, she says and shuts the curtain.

There are of course many possible explanations for Fatima’s reaction: she might find Keniloe strange and his persistence a burden; she may not be interested in making connections with (male) South Africans given other places she looks to for home and community; she may fear repercussions for speaking with him; the events he asks her about may be too traumatic to return to. These are just a few of the options, and each of them could likely be expanded and supported by recent research.¹¹ But rather than trying to pin down explanations, I prefer to follow Thomas Keenan’s example and interpret Fatima’s refusal ‘as an act and not simply as a message’ (2004: 447). This is first and foremost an act of refusal. Reminding us of affect’s undecidability, of the power any party in the circuit has to arrest its flow or deflect it in a new direction, Fatima refuses to participate in the emotional economy her prior testimony set in motion and severs the relation between her and Keniloe. In the process, she highlights the distances that remain even once paths and stories have crossed. Anders Høg Hansen importantly speaks of reclusiveness in another contribution to this volume (Chapter 12). Similar in spirit, I code this refusal as a demand for opacity in Glissant’s (1990) sense, as a claim to keep oneself unknown, to fail to be transparent and available for the purposes of another. Positively stated, it is a claim for agency and integrity of the self, the ability to chart one’s own course, and to keep the secrets one desires.

This insistence on opacity leaves Keniloe, in Cara Moyer-Duncan’s felicitous term, ‘flummoxed’ (2011: 74). Yet the break or caesura of a foreseen narrative also opens the possibility of him coming to a different relation with Fatima and refugees and immigrants more generally. One reaction might be to recognise misrecognition, for Keniloe to face that what he thought about Fatima, his sense of understanding her, was a projection, and to ask what factors allowed this misrecognition to occur. As he looks for Fatima that fourth Sunday in the park, just before he realises she’s gone missing, he records the beginning of a poem: ‘I see rivers running to the sea/ I see

storylines unfolding in front of me/ I see you, Fatima'. The unfolding of the film prompts us to ask: Did he really 'see' her at all? A related line of questions opened by this encounter addresses Keniloe's position vis-a-vis Fatima as a writer in particular, and the ethics of his quest to tell her story. James Dawes, meditating on journalists and storytellers who write stories of atrocity, raises the following concerns:

Who nominates you to publicize pain and suffering you can walk away from? How does one avoid the trap of commodifying intense suffering to elicit maximum effect (or career advantage)? How do you resolve the paradox that your audiences hunger for these images and stories of calamity both because they want to understand the world and their moral responsibilities to it, and because they are narrowly voyeuristic? (2007: 166)

Further: how do you deal with the hope of victims who think something will change for the better because they tell you their stories, when it is very likely the case that nothing will change? What about the risks of re-traumatisation (Dawes 2007: 174–177, 181)? Such queries call into doubt some of Keniloe's under-examined ambition regarding Fatima's experiences and require a reckoning if his project is to go forward.

These questions, of course, pertain not only to Fatima but also to all the others whose stories Keniloe has captured—suggesting a need to return to and reassess these earlier interviews. Indeed, Fatima is not the only one who resists Keniloe's questioning. One young woman from Ethiopia critiques him from inside her testimony, saying that she wishes to return 'home' to Addis Ababa so she won't have to explain herself to everyone all the time. Even more reclusive are the women that Keniloe tries to interview in the Lindela Deportation Centre, who hide their heads in their hands when he approaches them on a picnic bench. Unwilling to give up, Keniloe searches for women to interview inside the female hall, and the women lay down on the floor and cover their faces, clearly wary of being captured on camera. Keniloe's actions vis-à-vis these women are actually disturbing in his blindness to their desire for opacity.

The importance of such a reflexive turn to (re)examine Keniloe's interactions with the refugees and immigrants is reiterated in the film's closing sequence. This is a flashback to an earlier scene of the men at the Lindela Deportation Centre as they are herded behind bars and readied for transit to their home countries. In some ways, their is the most troubling story uncovered by Keniloe, because their self-representations touch a raw

nerve—sparking uncomfortable affective relays. Their calls for solidarity based on a shared blackness, noted above, are mixed in this particular scene with an impish resistance; they refuse to be contained by the role of the victim that many other interviewees feel comfortable with and they themselves take on at times and instead make up a song that highlights their agency and willingness to flout whatever South African barriers might be thrown at them. The lyrics—which insist that deportation is ‘useless, useless, You’re wasting your time. I will come back’—seem designed to stoke the fears of nativists even as their call for open borders, the ability to migrate like the birds, and to seek hospitality in other parts of the continent tries to undercut them. These men are enigmatic figures both available and unavailable for co-option into the story Keniloe wants to write, or rather temporarily available, until the window onto their jail cell closes or a moment and a mood shifts into another.

Like Keniloe, indeed with him, spectators are offered the chance to engage in such reflection, and with it the opportunity to build a more complex understanding of both those pushed towards Johannesburg by war or poverty and their own position in relation to them. Beyond the emotional glue, whether understood as pity, empathy or something else entirely, that comes from stories of victimhood is an opaque subject that may or may not conform to either hostile desires for eviction or beneficent desires for inclusion. They have their own agendas, logics and dreams. Working to undercut the logics of exclusion thus involves not only the need to figure out how to engage with and feel for the traumas and experiences of immigrants and refugees, but also that of respecting their desires and the limits they put up; to find ways of living with mismatches, disappointments, parts and paths that may not fit into pre-imagined plotlines. This is not easy. There is no instruction manual.

The image of the closing curtain or shutting window sits uneasily with the image of the city as a ‘bloom-space’ of narrative and its production of convivial culture. Yet Matabane’s provocation is precisely to ask how these fit together, to raise questions about what exactly his love letter means and what to do from there, which themselves extend well beyond the boundaries of the film and are ultimately up to the spectator to answer. As Moyer-Duncan puts it, ‘Matabane refuses to offer his audience a tidy ending, ultimately raising more questions than answers’ (2011: 74).

Asking such questions is, I would argue, the heart of the film as a political and aesthetic intervention. Just before explaining that *Conversations*

was meant to both help him understand refugees and to serve as a ‘love letter’ to provoke fellow South Africans to debate their views on immigration in a quotation cited above, Matabane notes: ‘This film...is my form of protest but also a symbol of my faith in cinema that it can contribute to socio-political change’ (Writing Studio n.p.). *Conversations*, however, is not exactly typical of consciousness-raising genres. Its experimental hybrid form and weird soundtrack are too alienating for a mass audience.¹² It engages partially but not wholly in a project that Helene Strauss (2011) identifies as ‘cinema as social recuperation’—where, she argues, more widely available anti-xenophobic films like Adze Ugha’s *The Burning Man* (2008) give needed depth to South African visions of immigrants, beyond reduction to suffering or bare life, by creating affective, bodily centred stories.¹³ Rather, I would argue that the film’s profoundest political edge comes by calling into question the boundaries between the ‘imagined’ and the ‘real’ in the hopes that this might trouble other entrenched boundaries—like that between ‘citizens’ and ‘foreigners’.

Resisting any singular categorisation as ‘fact or fiction, imagined or real’, the filmmaker points out how ‘in our daily lives we all move between the real and the unreal, the conscious and unconscious’ and suggests that his film aims to capture this ‘bizarre’ aspect of life (Machen 2017). Matabane’s interest in exploring the way fiction, the felt and the imagined, moves into and shapes our lives and ‘social worldings’ (Stewart 2007: 3) is reflected in the important role Farah’s novel *Links* plays in setting Keniloe on his path. It is also modelled by the way fictional scenes between characters tend to flow into documentary encounters. Moving from these examples, the film can be seen to offer itself out as a puzzle for spectators to inhabit. Here, fiction is a cognitive and emotional training ground for spectators to enter into; structured around actual conditions and modes of oppression, but inaugurating a process of imagination that stretches the self, connects it to others, opens options and builds habits of perception, identification and questioning. I return to the suggestion made above that the film asks spectators to join the chain of stories that Keniloe constructs as he tries to ‘make sense of the world’—looking again at a city that contains real possibility, examples of endurance, determination and creativity, and also many kinds of anger, despair and confusion—but with both open hearts and a respect for distance, an understanding of what one fails to see or know, a readiness to cope with unexpected turns. These are all needed to allow all the inhabitants of Johannesburg to flourish together.

From one angle, the events of 2008 suggest that Matabane's faith in the power of cinema is misplaced. From another, this xenophobic violence then and its echoes in 2015 and 2017 only underscore the need to sharpen imaginative capacities in the way *Conversations* offers. Doing so may allow us to begin to see anew and properly the people who share and co-produce our city spaces—in Johannesburg, from around the world but especially from the African continent—and from there work with them to solidify affective ties and create the actual groundwork for the politics of movements, flows and links of which both filmmakers and social scientists dream.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, 'Ground Up', <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-02-24-groundup-mashaba-has-incited-xenophobia-says-immigrants-spokesperson/>; 'South Africa Xenophobic attacks', <https://www.npr.org/2017/02/25/517262398/south-africa-xenophobic-attacks>; 'In South Africa', https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-south-africa-a-surge-in-xenophobia-leads-to-violence/2017/02/24/dbf8d864-fecf-4d14-b6f5-3a25d8c46b61_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6fc56358be25 and 'Xenophobic violence', <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/03/xenophobic-violence-rainbow-nation-170301075103169.html>.
2. While as Nowicka and Vertovec have pointed out, 'Conviviality and conflict lie close to each other' (2014: 346), there seems to me not enough attention to conflict in conviviality studies.
3. For a filmography, see McCluskey (2009: 129), Moyer-Duncan (2011: 72), and the entry 'Khalo Matabane: Filmography' on Indymedia: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1988834/?ref_=tt_ov_dr.
4. See Bystrom (2016: 121, 138–139), for a previous overview of these paradoxes and attitudes to immigration in this and the following paragraph, drawing on Perbedy, Danso and McDonald and others.
5. See Matabane's interview 'Proudly South African Filmmaking: Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon', with *The Writing Studio*, available online at <http://www.writingstudio.co.za/page1340.html>. Last accessed May 2012.
6. Peter Machen (2017), referring to Matabane's description of the film as a 'love letter to South Africa', notes that: 'It is a love letter that acknowledges a bittersweet South African reality that borders on schizophrenia...while the country offers a global embrace, it is also a nation full of ingrained prejudices, institutional discrimination and xenophobia'. Moyer-Duncan also refers to this quotation (2011: 74).
7. Moyer-Duncan points to a piece by Sosibo which underscores these conditions and Matabane's sense of disorientation: 'I feel displaced', Matabane

notes, 'the country feels foreign to me and I just don't recognize it' (Sosibo 2006; Moyer-Duncan 2011: 73). Similarly, Matabane states to McCluskey that 'I feel a real sense of displacement. I completely feel like a refugee. I feel I don't belong' (2009: 127).

8. For a more detailed reading of *Links*, see Bystrom (2014).
9. Helene Strauss's brief summary of the film is apposite here: 'The documentary-style conversations he [the "fictionalized poet"] has with the people [migrants he encounters while searching for Fatima] function as a meditation on the memories, stories, experiences and vulnerabilities that bind human lives together. As such, the film presents a colourful picture of the richness and complexity of migrant experience, thus indicating that social existence for these people operates along a differentiated scale of significance that cannot be defined solely in terms of absence of legal or civil rights' (105).
10. Matabane discusses the origin of the characters in his *Writing Studio* interview (np). See also Moyer-Duncan (2011: 73).
11. Speaking to a potential lack of interest in being fully tied into the South African community, for instance, an article of note by Landau (2014) shows how migrants in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa are not always focused on remaining in their 'host' countries, but use bottom-up modes of 'tactical cosmopolitanism' to achieve partial forms of inclusion in 'estuaries' or landing zones seen as temporary environments, while remaining oriented in multiple directions, towards other places and communities.
12. While the film garnered international critical reception and local and international prizes, it had a very poor showing in South African box offices (Moyer-Duncan 2011: 74–75).
13. As Strauss notes, 'cultural production on the topic of intra-African interactions within South Africa [can be] an important resource for resisting the epistemic distortions that inform hostility directed at those perceived as outsiders' (2011: 104). It does so, at least in Ugah's film, by 'expand[ing] the terms through which migrant subjectivity is commonly conceived' and highlighting the 'lived, affective body'—as well as social connections spun around this body—at the heart of discussions of migration that often reduce migrants to stereotypes of pain and suffering (Strauss 2011: 104). Such 'social recuperation' can 'reweave[e] the complex affective and interpersonal threads that constitute the experiential fabric of migrant subjectivity' (Strauss 2011: 107). *Conversations*, as we have seen, takes a slightly different approach, focusing less on detailed individual narratives than on how the accumulation of stories create a collective weave, and pressing more forcefully on the ethical questions of how to know and engage others (though Strauss also sees this question in Ugah's film [2011: 112–113]).

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