

We All are Makwerekwere: Xenophobia, Nationality, Dance and South Africa

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It's 1998 in Durban, South Africa and I'm in a minibus taxi heading for the university where I'm both teaching and studying dance. Kwaito superstars Boom Shaka's "KwereKwere" is playing loud on the speakers, making the windows shake. Kwaito draws on South African music genres such as Maskanda, with influences from artists such as Brenda Fassie (our Madonna of the townships), British and American dance, and hip-hop music, and is sung in the township vernaculars of Tsotsitaal and Iscamtho. The song's title is South African slang for African nationalities living in South Africa and has onomatopoeic roots replicating how Black South Africans would describe African languages spoken by their fellow Africans. Post-apartheid South Africa has seen the rise of horrific violent xenophobic attacks by a minority of Black South Africans on African nationalities such as Nigerians, Somalis, and Zimbabweans. Two decades later, the term *Makwerekwere* is used in a derogatory manner to refer to African migrants. When analyzing the rise of xenophobia in South Africa, it is important to recognize how apartheid has left a legacy—a memory—of "the other" that manifests in xenophobia. As Bronwyn Harris, former Project Manager at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation states, South Africans have been disciplined to hold "a *dislike*, a *fear*, or a *hatred*" of the other (Harris 2002, 170).

During the apartheid era isolation was not only external from the outside world due to sanctions and restrictions on international travel, but also internal as South African society underwent an internal isolation as

people were racially segregated. The Population Registration Act of 1950 forcibly defined race based on "appearance and lifestyle" and not descent (Posel 2001, 102). In post-apartheid South Africa, government, sports, and media organizations promote a "new South African" national identity in an attempt to unite a previously segregated society. Literary scholars Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael suggest that "[e]mergent alongside a new-nation discourse, The Foreigner stands at a site where identity, racism and violent practice are reproduced" (Harris 2002, 169). Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagining communities as nations offers an awareness of the flaws within imagined communities as this seduction creates notions of belonging and not belonging, which can result in divisive, jingoistic, and even violent performances of nationality. Feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young (2005, 150) rightly warns that it is dangerous to "romanticiz[e] 'homeland'" as this imagining of community can create "rigid distinctions between 'us' and 'them.'" This imagined community of the "new" South Africa and its distinction between an "us" and "them" has contributed to the rise of xenophobia. In a news report on the anti-xenophobia Peace March held in Durban in 2015, a protestor held a placard with the word "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabany*" on it. This refers to *Ubuntu*, an isiZulu term that is also a way of being: "a person depends on others to be a person" (Teffo 1996, 101). It appears on the protestor's placard to remind South Africans that we are dependent on each other, and



Flatfoot Dance Company's *Homeland (Security)* (2016). Choreographed by Lliane Loots. Performed at The Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, Durban, South Africa, April 6–10, 2016. Photographed by Val Adamson. Dancers, from left to right: Sanele Maphumulo, Zinhle Nzama, Sifiso Khumalo, Kim McCusker, Tshediso Kabulu and Jabu Siphika.

we have kinship with other nations: we must resist the boundaries of “us” and “them.” Through the mobilization of bodies marching against xenophobia, we see *Ubuntu* in play.

A contemporary dance work that explores *Ubuntu* is Flatfoot Dance Company's trilogy *Homeland* (2016) in which choreographer Lliane Loots responded to the xenophobic attacks in Durban where the dance company is based. Arts journalist Caroline Smart writes that the first part, *Homeland (Security)*, sees “Loots and the dancers respond to [the] false notion of belonging to a nation state” (Smart 2016). There are strong choreographed moments in *Homeland (Security)* in which reference is made to the often-fraught journeys that migrants make, with many of them forced to leave their homes due to violence. At one point, three of the dancers stand close together side-by-side

suggesting perhaps a security fence, the type that is used to define the border between South Africa and its neighbors. Another dancer walks up behind this wall of bodies. Through the use of choreography, the division of “us” and “them” is physically broken as these three dancers turn to face the lone dancer and move to gently lift the dancer over their heads and place the dancer with care in front of where they are standing. This is an example of *Ubuntu*, as for this choreographed movement to be successfully executed, all four dancers have to work together; they are dependent on each other. (See photo.)

Contemporary dance in South Africa draws on a variety of dance forms including contact improvisation, Graham-based technique, Hawkins technique, Release technique, ballet, popular dance forms such as isiPantsula and Gumboot, ballroom dancing, Kathak, Bharatanatyam,

traditional South African dance languages like Ngoma, and everyday movement. Nuttall and Michael suggest a creolized space as a framework for thinking about South African culture so as not to erase difference but to highlight the “complex process of making connections” (Nuttall and Michael 2000, 6). Contemporary dance in South Africa embodies creolization in both its form and its practice, and this is extremely evident in the second part of the trilogy, *Migrations at the Feet of Kali* (2016), in which a creolization of Kathak, contemporary dance, and hip-hop is used to explore “intersecting histories of Indian indentured laborers, Black migrant workers and White privilege” (Craighead 2017). It is important to stress here that according to arts journalist Adrienne Sichel the origins of “South African contemporary dance has been, to a large extent, a political act of defiance and activism” (Sichel 2012, 108). It makes use of what Ann Cooper Albright terms a responsive dancing body that “engages with and challenges static representations of gender, race, sexuality, and physical ability, all the while acknowledging how deeply these ideologies influence our daily experience” (Albright 1997, xiii). Flatfoot Dance Company draws on this foundation of activism in contemporary dance to dance in resistance against a nationalist discourse that invites xenophobia.

In 2017, following another wave of xenophobia that gripped Durban, Ruggedeyes and Girl Ruggedeyes, influential South African dance vloggers, posted a YouTube video where they danced the Bhenga as a way to protest against the xenophobic attacks. Bhenga dance is associated with Gqom, a relatively recent style of House music from South Africa that is itself influenced by House music from other countries and draws on Kwaito. Journalist Huw Oliver writes that “uploading YouTube videos of the genre’s associated dance, the ‘bhenga’ – all wavy arms, toe taps and wobbly knees – has become a fad” (Oliver 2016). In Bhenga, the dance style is influenced by the Kwasa-Kwasa (a dance style from the Congo) and dancers stress their flexibility with a sense of fluidity and ease. In his interview with Gqom producer Julz da DeeJay, DeeJay explains: “When you ‘bhenga’, you aim to create this very intriguing image of flexibility. The moves are intended to attract an audience, drawing people into a circle as they writhe” (ibid.). Bhenga both in its accessing of other African dance styles and in its physical form actively seeks to be expandable. In the video, the choreography shows the dancers changing direction with ease, moving with a softness as if almost their whole bodies are malleable multi-directional joints; their bodies seem to have no center, no suggestion of grounding, but rather a wave-like quality that ripples out beyond the screen and brings

their audience into the dance. In the YouTube video, Ruggedeyes states that they dance against xenophobia showing their awareness of how dance can be mobilized against xenophobia. Ruggedeyes’ and Girl Ruggedeyes’ choice of Bhenga with its fluidity, multidirectional movements, and a core commitment to be inclusive by drawing the audience into the dance, actively supports their anti-xenophobia position. In “New Durban Bhenga Dance: Stop Xenophobia” Ruggedeyes’ and Girl Ruggedeyes’ dancing bodies are an apt example of Randy Martin’s position that “dance displays, in the very ways that bodies are placed in motion, traces of the forces of contestation that can be found in society at large” (Martin 1998, 6).

In closing, South African dance culture highlights our connections to others by exploring our shared histories and our common dance languages. It offers strong examples for why and how South Africans need to remember and stress *Ubuntu* in response to xenophobia, a version of segregation. Dance creates opportunities to stress our interconnectedness, resist the narrative of “us” and “them,” and echo the peace marcher’s placard “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabany.*” As a nation of peoples who were defined by our appearances—and our accents—by a fascist racist state, it is vital that we seek out and stress our interconnections with others; to be us, we have to stress how we South Africans are *Makwerekwere*, too.

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