

PROBLEMATIZING MINOR TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES AND PATTERNS OF OTHERING IN MEG VANDERMERWE'S *ZEBRA CROSSING*

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ABSTRACT

In her debut novel, *Zebra Crossing*, Meg Vandermerwe privileges the voice of Chipu Nyamubaya, an albino girl from Zimbabwe, to capture the gripping and tragic experiences of African immigrants in South Africa. This article problematizes the notion of minor transnational identities by interrogating the relationships between South Africans and those they refer to as outsiders, and the relationship between the African immigrants themselves vis-à-vis culturally held beliefs about albinos and LGBTs. In the process, we demonstrate the patterns of the idea of Otherness brought about by racism, xenophobia, homophobic prejudice and insensitive discrimination. The article reveals how Othering debunks the ideology of African connectedness by bringing out the apparent contradictions in the values of *Ubuntu*.

Keywords: transnational identity; pattern of othering; albinism; LGBT; Africa's connectedness; xenophobia; *Ubuntu*; *Zebra Crossing*

Introduction

This article explores the intricacies of migration and minor transnational identities as represented in Meg Vandermerwe's debut novel, *Zebra Crossing*.¹ Using the notion of minor transnationalism, the article problematizes migration movements across African borders. It argues that these movements cannot be defined as homogeneous or trivialized as simple acts of crossing borders from one country to another. It highlights the devastating consequences of being a minor transnational immigrant as it interrogates the concepts of borders, identity, displacement, xenophobia, homosexuality and albinism. The novel offers nuances to the minor transnational immigrant's experiences, and demystifies the notion of *ubuntu* in South Africa and the belief that South Africa is a safe and secure haven. Although the movement across borders is voluntary, this essay problematizes the border concept by arguing that minor transnational subjects do not cross physical country borders only: there are myriad borders to be crossed as they struggle to craft an identity that can enable them to be accommodated in the new South African environment. Hence, the article

interrogates the physical, emotional and psychological, social, economic and political borders amid toxic surroundings as represented in *Zebra Crossing*. The numerous borders are represented by the zebra's many stripes, which symbolize the complexity of minor cultures and minor interactions with other cultures. The article's argument transcends binarisms, particularly the black and white racial boundaries, in a bid to interrogate unspoken and hidden boundaries that Chipo and her brother George and other immigrants have to cross. Chipo's predicament is further complicated by her albinism, a condition which remains 'unspeakable' in some Zimbabwean settings. Thus, whilst both the male and female migrants are marginalized and segregated as outsiders, the female migrant is faced with a matrix of challenges from her male counterparts.

A brief synopsis of 'Zebra Crossing'

Meg Vandermerwe's novel *Zebra Crossing* was inspired by the xenophobic attacks in 2010 when South Africa hosted the Soccer World Cup. Set in the notorious Long Street of Cape Town, *Zebra Crossing* chronicles the immigrant experiences of Chipo and her brother, as well as those of other migrants from elsewhere in Africa who have either legally or illegally crossed the borders of their countries into South Africa. The novel privileges the voice of a young Zimbabwean refugee, Chipo Nyamubaya, to narrate the immigrant's harrowing experience in South Africa. Chipo's plight is further complicated by the fact that she is an albino. She and her brother George cross the Zimbabwean border illegally to live with two friends, David and Peter, who are cousins to a distant relative. One other foreign national, Jean-Paul, a tailor and widower from Congo, lives with them at President's Heights in Cape Town. In her desperation to win David's love, Chipo consults Dr Ongani, who promises to 'stop suffering' and 'win loved one' (*ZC*, p. 104). When Chipo fails to pay Dr Ongani, tragedy befalls them all. Dr Ongani exploits Chipo's albinism. What follows are the gruelling experiences she suffers, first as an albino and secondly as a female migrant. The albinism stigma combined with the marginalization of the girlchild in African societies creates unbearable hindrances for Chipo. Hence, she is doubly oppressed and discriminated against.

The environment and minor transnational experiences

As the novel begins, it is the fear of victimization by his white boss, the General, that drives George to run away from Zimbabwe, forfeiting his and Chipo's weekly wages. Staying in Zimbabwe would therefore have meant being jobless, as the General was a rich and influential man in Beitbridge (*ZC*, p. 10). In desperation, George decides to cross the border into South Africa to look for a job. The vulnerability of Chipo and her brother continues in the host country. Before he leaves for South Africa, George associates South Africa with prosperity, job opportunities and plenty of food: 'In South Africa there are plenty of jobs [...]. We won't have to crawl on our hands and knees to earn a pittance' (*ZC*, p. 11). However, a closer examination

reveals that immigrants are not welcome, and as such they can never establish a relationship with the host land. Vandermerwe succinctly points out that they are unwelcome because they do not belong. South Africa is a host land where they 'sit on one buttock because they must not sit comfortably lest they be asked to rise and leave'.²

Even though South Africa offers Chipo and other African immigrants hope for a new life and a place to stay, they have to endure chilling violence – the violent xenophobic attacks and atrocities which are a threat to their livelihood. More strikingly, they have to contend with the social disconnect among the immigrants themselves. Peter explains these divisions to Chipo and George; for instance, the Somalis own *spaza* shops (small informal grocery shops operated from home), keep to themselves, and 'only employ family or Xhosa speaking locals' (*ZC*, p. 30), while people from the Democratic Republic of Congo do all the security work, Zimbabweans work as waiters, chefs, cleaners and shop assistants, and the locals own the carts from which they sell meat and *boerewors* (traditional sausage made from minced or pounded meat) (*ZC*, p. 31).

In addition, President's Heights, the building in which Chipo, George, Peter and David live, subjects them to extreme poverty and dehumanization. The building is characterized by the 'washing hanging from every window and mismatching curtains flapping like tattered flags in the wind' (*ZC*, p. 28). The bedroom in Peter and David's flat is occupied by a Congolese tailor, and the other four (Chipo, George, Peter and David) share one room, with Chipo sharing a mattress with her brother. As Worby points out, Zimbabwean immigrants are 'beset by a complex set of material demands and ethical constraints' which include the 'demand to physically host and provide for relatives and friends in unending succession'.³ Thus, the Zimbabwean and other African migrants form a social milieu in which they maintain social relations in the host country. However, the social relations are not easy to sustain as 'new forms of identification that negotiate with ethnic, national and cultural boundaries are formed'.⁴ In the novel, the social boundaries constructed among the African immigrants prove to be more difficult to cross and elusive than the physical geographical boundaries between countries. According to Janine Dahinden, the social differences are a result of unequal access to, and unequal distribution of, material and non-material resources and social opportunities.⁵ Ironically, these divisions among the migrant community are evident not through the xenophobic attacks, but through how minor transnational migrants network with and treat each other.

The ethnic divisions could be attributed more to the fact that there are different types of migrants. Dahinden identifies and defines four types of African migrants based on transnational mobility and locality. Mobility refers to the 'physical movement of people in transnational places' and locality means being 'rooted or anchored socially, economically and politically' in the host country. In other words, 'multiplicities of forms of existence' are created in different spaces.⁶ According to Dahinden, the first type of migrant (localized diasporic transnational formations) experiences a one-way migration from the country of origin to the host country.

The migrant settles in the host country and is integrated socially and economically. The second type refers to highly localized, physically mobile transnational formations, and is characterized by regular movements between the home country and the host country. However, the immigrants are high localized because they have their principal residence in the host country, where they are employed and have their children living with them. The third type, transnational mobiles, refers to people with high mobility but a low degree of local anchorage. These are transnationals who are constantly on the move and are socially integrated in both the country of origin and the host country. The intention is not to settle in the host country, but to improve their quality of life. Lastly, transnational outsiders are migrants with low mobility and a low degree of anchorage. This group includes asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who have no residence permits and are often employed in the informal labour sector.⁷ This typology implies that the identity construction of migrants is linked to the constraints and opportunities of the localities in which they find themselves, and this results in them developing ‘forms of transnational social spaces’.⁸ Using Dahinden’s typology, the Zimbabwean immigrants in *Zebra Crossing* belong to the transnational outsiders’ category. Chipo, George, Peter and David are asylum seekers who do not have the right to travel because they do not have legal travel documentation. Hence, they do not have the freedom to move back and forth between Zimbabwe and South Africa. In this article, we aim to transcend the transnational boundary to examine such immigrants’ experiences, focusing on transnationality in minority cultures. We further interrogate the patterns of connectedness among minor transnationals in *Zebra Crossing* to reveal their multiplicity and complexity.

The trauma of displacement and Othering is ever-present in the lives of minor transnationals. Without citizenship, in a country where xenophobia remains the ‘chief mechanism for dispersing and regulating power, status and material resources’,⁹ the Zimbabwean migrants face numerous challenges, including the danger of psychic disconnection, which manifests itself in different ways in their lives. For example, David degenerates into alcoholism after Jeremiah, his gay lover, disappears without any trace; and the Congolese tailor Jean-Paul is obsessed with his sewing machine as he tries to get over the brutal murder of his wife and child back home. Psychically wounded, Jean-Paul lives in isolation, disconnects himself from everybody else and ‘cooks, eats and even washes in his own room’ (*ZC*, p. 30). The psychic disconnection and trauma of migration are also evident in Dr Ongani’s scam to heal people, and in how he later uses Chipo’s albinism to make money. Ultimately, the scam culminates in his and other migrants’ arrests and the brutal murder of Chipo.

Problematizing human and non-human borders

The term ‘border’, particularly in Africa, is not as simple and straightforward as it sounds. The problematics of ‘border’ in *Zebra Crossing* are encoded in the multiple human and non-human borders that Chipo, her brother George and other

immigrants have to cross. The immigrants are victims of multiple oppressions that are inherent and internally generated among themselves, or externally induced by the stifling South African environment. The present article's intention, therefore, is to unpack the different meanings attached to the concept of 'borders' and to interrogate how the minor transnationals' identities are constructed and problematized through difference, prejudice, separatism and patterns of Othering.

The most obvious definition of a border to Chipo is the one crafted at primary school by her headmaster, Va Pfende, a veteran of the Zimbabwean war of independence. According to Va Pfende, 'it was the imperialist murungu, [...] he came long ago, dividing this continent like the carcass of an ox, and kept the lion's share for himself' (*ZC*, p. 7). This definition recognizes borders as man-made structures; from Va Pfende's perspective, the British colonialists created borders because they were greedy. The immediate implication would be that people are painfully divided because of the borders that greed created. Hence, in the Prologue, Chipo says that borders are politicized, because in reality,

no borderlines are tattooed across this earth. Forests and valleys, deserts and rivers, they know nothing of borders. Instead, they exist only in the minds of politicians, who guard their manmade borders with soldiers in uniform, wearing black boots and carrying clipboards and AK-47s. (*ZC*, p. 8)

Chipo's perception of borders envisions a world in which the human and non-human entities are interconnected, and this perception seeks to challenge the ideology of man-made borders.

The Musina border is one of the man-made borders that Chipo and her brother crossed when they were 'illegally' smuggled into South Africa. The subtlety of Vandermerwe's analysis of borders at this stage suggests that they are 'products of the colonial system',¹⁰ conceived of as man-made threats that reveal man's violation of the environment. Chipo's and Va Pfende's definitions of borders reveal how human interference with the environment impacts man's livelihood and identity. However, Chipo's immigrant experiences in South Africa make her aware that Va Pfende's perception of a border is not only limited, but oversimplified. She realizes that a border is a multifaceted concept that defies singularity in its definition. Going back to her classroom days, Chipo redefines the term border when she says:

If I were in that classroom today, I would raise my hand and answer: A border is a place where barbed wire and high fences block your way.

It is where you are not wanted, but where you must nonetheless go.

It is where you must wait, terrified as you are, for the right moment to take your chance and dance with fate, while high above you in the starlit sky, the migrating swallows pass back and forth, unhindered.

A border is where you must say goodbye. You cannot afford to turn and look back; the past is the past [...].

Borders rhymes with orders. You follow your brother's orders.

You have no choice. Time to go forward, he says. To look forward.

A border is where you swap home for hope. (*ZC*, p. 8)

In *Zebra Crossing*, migrants from neighbouring countries flood into South Africa hoping to benefit economically from the 2010 FIFA World Cup. They have no proper homes to provide them with security, comfort and love; all they have is hope: 'I didn't leave Zimbabwe to sleep on the street in South Africa like a stray dog' (*ZC*, p. 35), says George. He and the other immigrants hope to make enough money and then go back home to Zimbabwe. However, to achieve this, they must cross multiple human borders that include, among others, albinism in Chipo's case and homosexuality in the case of David and Jeremiah.

Patterns of othering the 'Othered'

There are two broad patterns of othering the 'Othered' in *Zebra Crossing*. The first is the othering that takes place against a group of people with some form of common identity. This pattern operates at two levels. At one level, it is the othering of all immigrants to South Africa by mostly Black South Africans; at another level it is the othering that takes place among members of the immigrant community themselves, based on their national differences. The second broad pattern of othering concerns the attitudes of individuals within both the South African and the migrant community towards those who are different. The individuals considered here are Chipo (the albino), and David and Jeremiah (the homosexuals).

Zebra Crossing presents a South African community in which identity is primarily premised on difference. Despite its 'rainbow nation' philosophy, which seeks to reinforce the concept of *ubuntu* as an inherent value among South Africans, the novel chronicles a society that is fraught with internal contradictions, prejudice and segregatory laws. The challenges faced by Chipo, her brother George and their friends, David and Peter, transcend the problem of the colour line or racism to include xenophobia, homophobic prejudice and insensitive discrimination against those who are considered different. Consequently, inter-/intra-group and ethnic boundaries are constructed, ultimately resulting in a tragic ending – Chipo's gruesome murder.

Thus, South Africa's efforts to enhance the project of nation building in the warm-up to the 2010 World Cup proved futile as the mega-event brought into sharp focus glaring national divisions and threats of xenophobia.¹¹ Notably, for South Africans, the national divisions and the conceptions of identity and otherness are deeply rooted in their past, the apartheid rule. Edward Said points out that it is important for people to fully comprehend the pastness of the past, while at the same time realizing that the present is always informed by the past.¹² In other words, the way people perceive the past affects their interpretation and understanding of the present. According to Lichtenegger, 'Apartheid represents an ideology; an ideology which captured the minds of thousands of people, shaped their identity, and led them to commit atrocities for reasons which cannot be understood by outsiders.'¹³ For the South Africans in *Zebra Crossing*, it would seem that the past is not concluded, but continues to define their identities in different forms.

The South Africans' treatment of, and attitude towards, immigrants could have cascaded from their past experiences when they were dehumanized and Othered

under apartheid. However, having gone through the system of separatism, segregation and prejudice, one would expect the South Africans to craft a different system that accommodates other people, especially black people of different nationalities. This expectation is premised on the kind of support and reception they received from other African countries as well as countries outside Africa during their own dark days of apartheid. On the contrary, South Africans reinforce internalized racism through racist tendencies towards people of their own race. Hence, the 'Othered', who is specifically a Black South African, continues the 'Othering' process. David's favourite museum exhibit, a wooden panel with carvings, aptly captures this problematic identity. Commenting on the picture, David says, 'In my humble opinion, whoever made this carving, and it must be very old, has made the servants and the masters African' (*ZC*, p. 54). The carving reverses the master-servant status quo and depicts masters who are black instead of white. The picture constructs the black man as the perpetrator of the injustice suffered by the marginalized and the migrants. The oppressed takes over the oppressor's role and continue to perpetuate violence and to victimize fellow black men.

In *Zebra Crossing*, the immigrants are treated as the Other, that is, 'the definition of the self by differentiation from other social, national, or racial groups'.¹⁴ At the Department of Home Affairs, they are inferiorized and treated as unworthy. Chipso observes that officials view them as 'fleas that need their heads squeezed off' (*ZC*, p. 36). In other words, they are undesirable and are associated with vampirism because they depend on South Africa for survival. They carry the temporary asylum-seeker's permit all the time, without which they would be arrested and deported. George draws parallels between the asylum-seeker's permit and the passbook laws during the apartheid rule. As a result, the African immigrants are prejudiced at all levels – social, ethnic, national and racial. Hence, the immigrant's identity in *Zebra Crossing* becomes problematic because it is not shaped by skin colour alone but is constructed by nationality as well. It is an identity ascribed by others, more specifically by Black South Africans.

The system of difference and separatism is also manifest in the allocation of days for each nationality at Home Affairs. For instance, Zimbabweans were served on Mondays and Thursdays, Malawians and Nigerians on Wednesdays, and Somalis on Fridays (*ZC*, p. 36). These national categories or collective identities serve to identify each immigrant with a specific national group, determined by nationality. This classificatory system shows how Otherness contributes to an understanding of collective identities. David tells the story of a Zimbabwean man who was denied medical treatment at the hospital and died as a result. George is attacked by a ticket vendor who mistakes his girlfriend for a local South African lady and so accuses him of 'stealing their women' (*ZC*, p. 81). In other words, being a Zimbabwean meant that George was a thief who was there to snatch away beautiful women from local South Africans, and therefore he should not have a relationship with a South African girl. What is most worrying about this incident is that the police actually arrest George, while the vendor is set free simply because he is South African. Thus, the law enforcers are also prejudiced against the non-locals. Implicitly, the author

seems to argue that given the South Africans' experiences during the apartheid era, one would think that they would easily embrace the immigrants. The examples of segregation and separatism show how South Africans have reconstructed their past to pass on their suffering to the immigrants in the present. However, such a perspective should be acknowledged within the context of a society with a weak sense of nationhood as it emerges from apartheid oppression and racism.¹⁵

Another pattern of Othering is evidenced by the reservation of specific jobs for specific nationalities. One's nationality determines one's profession, as well as possibilities and limitations: 'Certain nationalities, certain jobs' (*ZC*, p. 31). George is also quick to label the Congolese as thieves. Despite George's vows that he would not work as a maid in South Africa, he gets a job in a Mexican restaurant cleaning plates and mopping floors (*ZC*, p. 35). The Senegalese, Isaiah, an accountant by profession, works as a waiter. Jeremiah, who has a Master's in electrical engineering from the University of Zimbabwe, also works as a waiter, and David works in a bead shop. Such hidden xenophobic experiences problematize the immigrants' identities since they are doubly oppressed. For them, both race and nationality are the categories 'according to which spaces were formed and disrupted'.¹⁶ Thus, an immigrant's life in South Africa meant learning to eke out a living by doing menial, precarious and underpaid jobs. In such a context as this, the immigrants are forced to negotiate a new identity in an environment that emasculates and treats them differently.

Albinism is another problematic identity explored extensively in *Zebra Crossing*. At a cursory glance, the novel seems to debunk the myths and stereotypes associated with albinism. Giving Chipo a voice not only increases her visibility, but also affirms her existence as a human being. However, Chipo's trajectory shows that she is Othered at multiple levels. At birth, she is abandoned by her father because he mistrusts her mother. At school, she is constantly ridiculed and humiliated as other girls tell her that she is a 'Sssope' (*ZC*, p. 42) and will never get married. At church, the pastor bars her from receiving her special blessing; he claims that she bears the mark of a 'sope', a curse that 'signifies the sins of her parents' (*ZC*, p. 66). Her mother repeatedly reminds her that she is 'not like other children' (*ZC*, p. 23), and her brother calls her 'Tortoise' (*ZC*, p. 11). Chipo acknowledges her difference when she says, 'I'm the only sope I know. Is that why I am lonely?' (*ZC*, p. 20). She also says that 'Name rhymes with shame' (*ZC*, p. 10), which underlines how she is shunned by society in general and hence constructed as abnormal because of her condition. Doubly embodied as an albino and an immigrant, Chipo is faced with a far more complex struggle for selfhood and self-actualization than the rest of the immigrants. Consequently, as a member of this minoritized group, she sees herself as an outcast or misfit.

At the level of the individual pattern of Othering, Chipo tries to craft a new identity for herself in Cape Town. In her struggle against albinism, oppression and domination, she shows how she is Othered as an albino and as an immigrant Zimbabwean girl in the crippling and constraining political and cultural environment. In a bid to win David's love, in spite of the knowledge that David is gay and

in a relationship with Jeremiah, she consults the nefarious Dr Ongani, whose nationality, significantly, remains unknown in the novel. One might argue that his connection to Chipo, George and other immigrants is also problematized. He befriends them not out of compassion, but for self-aggrandizement. This relationship reveals the potentially exploitative nature of humanity, thus countering what is taken for granted – the popularized spirit of *ubuntu*. Hence, when Chipo fails to pay Dr Ongani's fees, she finds herself condemned to an inescapable money-making scam that results in her death. Dr Ongani takes advantage of her physical condition and claims that she has magical powers to predict the results of the World Cup soccer matches. When all goes wrong, her brother George, Dr Ongani and the other members of the group are arrested. Chipo is murdered and mutilated by some Tanzanian criminals for 'muti' (traditional medicine). At this juncture, the novel re-inscribes the myths surrounding the condition of albinism. In Tanzania, 'we are "animal" or "ghost" or "white medicine"'. Their witch doctors will pay handsomely for our limbs. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, they call us [...] living dead' (*ZC*, p. 10) says Chipo. Her transformation into a ghost re-establishes the myth that albinos do not die: 'I start the day by putting myself back together. Dead hand, dead heart, dead leg, dead head. From head to foot I make the puzzle of me fit, and that which in life I found ugly I now find beautiful' (*ZC*, p. 157). Chipo's transformation into a ghost narrator further problematizes her identity as she transcends all human and non-human boundaries, crafting an existence that denies her singular and monolithic albino identity. One might argue that in death Chipo assumes a new identity as an eternal presence, or a dual existence that reinforces the fact that identities are never complete but are constantly in a state of flux.

A further individual othering of the othered is the homophobic behaviour directed against David and Jeremiah. Unlike South Africa, where the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community enjoys legal recognition and therefore relative acceptance, homosexuality in Zimbabwe is demonized. The former President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, believed it to be an un-African practice.¹⁷ He described homosexuality as a filthy disease that destroys nations, and homosexuals as worse than dogs.¹⁸ This heightened level of homophobic belief endangers the lives of homosexuals in Zimbabwe and makes it challenging for them to come out openly to identify with their sexual orientation. Once in Cape Town, David and Jeremiah transcend the homosexual border and identify with LGBT community life. However, the disclosure brings hostility and criticism from Peter, George and Chipo.

Peter, David's twin brother, hates Jeremiah with a passion. He openly complains that 'David is spending too much time with that Jeremiah. I don't like him' (*ZC*, p. 51). When he is told that David had gone to a free concert with Jeremiah, he frowns and says: 'What is he doing, going to listen to that ngochani music?' (*ZC*, p. 51). 'Ngochani' is a derogative Shona word meaning homosexual. He also describes Jeremiah as being 'as dry as last week's toast!' (*ZC*, p. 46), thus Othering him as different and unacceptable. On another occasion when drunk, Peter tries to block David from leaving the house, asking whether he is going out with Jeremiah and

about the sort of bars they go to. For his part, George derogatorily calls Jeremiah ‘Choirboy’ when he is not around (*ZC*, p. 50). George constantly taunts Jeremiah for his impeccable appearance, sense of etiquette and intellectual engagement. On the other hand, Chipo’s homophobic response to David and Jeremiah’s relationship is complicated by her undying love for David. She fails to acknowledge David’s gay identity even after discovering the truth at the Sea Point gay bar. She others David by this denial and by calling him derogatory names:

David. . . a ngochani? No. I shake my head. I can’t believe it.
 Moffie
 Buttock Beak
 Homo
 Homosexual
 Pédé
 Gay
 Festering Finger
 Ngochani. (*ZC*, pp. 110–11)

The expression of these sentiments draws the reader’s attention to the inter-group’s homophobic tendencies. The continued derogatory name-calling constructs David and Jeremiah as not only different but also alienated and Othered by the other.

Animalizing and naturalizing African migrants

The problematic nature and complexity of the immigrants’ identity is made apparent in the symbolic connections with different animals in the novel. By associating animal imagery with the immigrants, the novel denotes a pejorative attitude towards African immigrants in South Africa. For instance, Chipo notes that ‘Refugee sounds like flea. That is how we are warned, many at Home Affairs view us. Like fleas that need to have their heads squeezed off’ (*ZC*, p. 36). The comparison to fleas shows the precarious and vulnerable existence of the immigrants in South Africa. However, we argue that the flea symbol problematizes the immigrants’ existence and identity. From one point of view, the parasitic nature of the flea seems to imply the parasitic nature of the African immigrants that feed on South Africa to survive. Another point of view is drawn from the poem ‘The Flea’ by John Donne in which the poet talks a girl into bed.¹⁹ Arguably, because the flea has sucked blood from both the persona and his mistress, their blood is intermingled in the body of the flea, making them one flesh. If the mistress crushes the flea, the implication is that she would be killing him and additionally herself.²⁰ One is therefore tempted to extend this analogy to the symbol of the flea in the novel *Zebra Crossing*, because of its parasitic nature, the assumption is that the flea has sucked both the immigrant’s and the South African’s blood. Consequently, it can be argued that by squeezing off the heads of the fleas (the immigrants), both South African nationals and the immigrant community are killed. The analysis of the flea as a symbol of unity thus suggests the need to eradicate the inferiorization and Othering of other nationalities.

The flea symbolizes a border that allows one nation to define others as unworthy – a border which needs to be transcended to achieve peace and harmony between different nationalities.

Another dimension of the flea symbol concerns the multiple stages of metamorphosis that the flea goes through. Symbolically, the stages represent the multiple identities of the immigrants shown in the text. According to Hall, 'identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture' but is 'always in the process of formation'.²¹ This definition relates to the problematic identities in the novel *Zebra Crossing*, and implies that the identity of the African immigrant is multifaceted and defies a singular definition. Hence, we argue not only that defining and labelling the status of migrants is complex and fluid, but also that the terms used are often pejorative.²²

Chipo is referred to through pejorative animal images such as monkey, tortoise and rat. While small animals such as these echo her vulnerability and powerlessness, when George calls Chipo a tortoise, he also articulates the 'animalness' of her humanness. Although the tortoise is vulnerable, docile and slow and symbolizes longevity and perseverance, Chipo does not survive long. Like the markings on the tortoise's shell, Chipo is 'divided' and cut into pieces by the Tanzanian thugs. Therefore, animalizing Chipo as a monkey or tortoise (*ZC*, pp. 13; 76) reinforces her difference and inferior status. Using the same line of thought, one would argue that the language used to describe Chipo conceptualizes her identity as the Other of the other and distinguishes her from everybody else. Animalizing and naturalizing Chipo thus reflects the albino as dehumanized, inferior, powerless, and above all different. This seems to be the central claim of the novel, that there is a connection between animal degradation and the subordination of Chipo because of her albinism, and the perception of African migrants in South Africa in general. The markings of the tortoise's shell demystify the idea of a unified African identity or a stable identity for Chipo.

Thus, the multiplicities and problematic forms of Chipo's identity are articulated through the animal terms used to describe her. The symbolic association between the derogatory terms and animal symbolism used to define her identity reinforce the despised status of the albino. The language is also used to justify Chipo's vulnerability and the multiple levels on which she is Othered. She explains how people living with albinism are naturalized and animalized in different African countries:

Peeled potato. That is what many in Zimbabwe call me. Also 'monkey' and 'sope'. [...] In Malawi, they call us 'biri'. They whisper that we are linked to witchcraft. In Tanzania, we are 'animal' or 'ghost' or 'white medicine'. Their witch doctors will pay handsomely for our limbs. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, they call us 'ndundu' – living dead. In Lesotho, we are 'leshane', meaning half-persons, whereas to South Africans [...] we are 'inkawu', meaning ape. (*ZC*, p. 10)

Stigmatized and dehumanized by these terms, Chipo is thrust into a space of abjection in which she remains marginalized and minoritized.

The problematic identity is further reinforced when Chipo is compared to a zebra. George notes the sharp contrast of the black hair braids that Chipo uses and

her pale scalp. He says, 'Your hair. You look like a zebra!' (*ZC*, p. 76). Chipo's hairstyle is seen as weird and unbefitting, and she immediately removes the braids. On the one hand, the metaphorical negation of the zebra and Chipo may be seen as reinforcing the Othering of both Chipo as an albino and the zebra as an animal. On the other hand, Vandermerwe's effort to create a relationship between women and other animals seems to be premised on the belief that 'everything is a fabric, a whole, a world in which all are entangled irrevocably in each other's oxygen tubes. One big knot.'²³ Chipo's albinism therefore needs to be explored and problematized in its multifaceted dimensions. From one point of view, the zebra analogy reinforces the 'derogatory connection society frequently imposes when equating femininity with animality'.²⁴ One might argue that *Zebra Crossing* shows the connections between the unjustifiably minoritized groups, the human others and animal others. However, instead of undoing the albinism myths that emphasize Chipo's difference, Vandermerwe does not transform this negative equation of albinism with animality into a positive experience.²⁵ When used figuratively in the immigrant's context, animalization functions to reinforce the inferiority and marginalization of the transnationals in *Zebra Crossing*.

In the Prologue, Chipo re-imagines a space in which the meaning of 'border' is deconstructed to encompass human and non-human nature, as she 'rises with the living, the sun and rock pigeons chorus' (*ZC*, p. 7) and her memory 'gathers round like specks of slowly spinning dust' (*ZC*, p. 7). She envisages a world that transcends borders between the dead and the living, nature and humans, and the human constructed borders. In this space, nature and Chipo are intimately connected in a web-like existence where no one element is more important than any other, 'problematizing constructions of identity in geographically bounded terms by exploring the heterogeneity, porosity and mobility of the many borders that criss-cross our globalised world'.²⁶ Likening her memory to 'specks of slowly spinning dust' shows the precariousness and vulnerability of 'communities shaped by the experience of migration'.²⁷ Naturalizing Chipo's experiences deconstructs the notion of borders as fixed and impenetrable. Beyond the September night on which she is murdered, Chipo has crossed many borders, including the life-death border. This is corroborated when she says:

I have crossed that and other borders many a times. Flown so high above them that below looked like an infant's patchwork puzzle. Flown so low that I could smell the dust and see the dry seeds waiting patiently for the rains to come and split them open. On these journeys I have seen that in reality, no borderlines are tattooed across the earth. Forests and valleys, deserts and rivers, they know nothing of borders. Instead they exist only in the minds of the politicians who guard their manmade borders with soldiers in uniform, wearing black boots and carrying clipboards and AK-47s. (*ZC*, pp. 8–9)

Ironically, the multiplicity of the nature of borders is realized by Chipo after her death. In the spirit world, seemingly impassable geopolitical borders are crossed freely, with no soldiers chasing after her. This also demonstrates the fact that sustainable peace requires a realization that 'no borderlines are tattooed across the earth'; rather, economic motives are the primary drivers of violent conflict and border

constructions.²⁸ Significantly, these borders are politicized, insisting on straight-jacketing and simplifying the complex web of issues that shape the immigrant's identities in *Zebra Crossing*. In death, the politicized borders are non-existent as Chipo's spiritual identity allows her to exist with the forests, valleys, deserts and rivers. This naturalization that only materializes in the spiritual realm deconstructs man-made boundaries and borders and reaffirms the importance of balance between different orders of being. The text demonstrates a strong connection between Chipo and the natural elements, making us realize that human beings are part of a web-like existence in which they co-exist with the environment.

'Ubuntu' in *Zebra Crossing*

Desmond Tutu describes *ubuntu* in the African context as, in general terms, the very essence of being human.²⁹ He succinctly captures this in his observation that *ubuntu* is the belief that a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself.³⁰ This definition acknowledges that, as a philosophy of humanness, *ubuntu* transcends all cultural borders and differences of beliefs and values. In addition, as a traditional African philosophy, it is defined as communicating, caring and sharing with humans in harmony with all of creation.³¹

The 2010 FIFA World Cup hosted in South Africa was intended to embrace such values of *ubuntu*. In *Zebra Crossing*, the slogans of the marketing campaign for this mega event – 'It's time. Celebrate Africa's humanity' (*ZC*, p. 34) and 'South Africa welcomes the world' (*ZC*, p. 81) – captured the spirit of *ubuntu*. However, the negative construction of the African immigrant community as 'different and undesirable, and as Other' heralded fear as they were threatened by South Africans.³² Whilst there was hope that the 2010 World Cup would construct a unified African identity and union among different nations, the migrant community was the target of violent xenophobic attacks. George believes that because of the World Cup, 'the whole world will want to be in South Africa [. . .]. The World Cup [. . .]. First time it is being played on African soil' (*ZC*, p. 14). It was meant to be a symbol of peace and solidarity, 'a unique international fellowship of humanity that transcended and demolished the arbitrary walls, borders and barricades constructed around race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion and geopolitics'.³³ But this was not the reality on the ground. There was a sense of 'prejudice, division and opposition between national groups'³⁴ as the migrants were denigrated and segregated. George is warned, 'just you wait. When the World Cup is finished, we will drive you foreigners out! If you stay, you will burn' (*ZC*, p. 81). This is corroborated by Chipo, who says: 'Before, we looked forward to the arrival of the World Cup. It was something to be celebrated. But now we no longer trust it' (*ZC*, p. 86). In addition, George and Chipo have to go through the excruciating process of getting asylum-seekers' permits. The assumption that the World Cup would provide stable identities for all in a 'Rainbow Nation' is thus heavily contested by the lived reality of the immigrant community. Fixed identity categories are seen as problematic and, for both Chipo and other

migrants, should be regarded as a constantly shifting signifier of multiple meanings. Given this aggressive attitude to the Other, the World Cup prompts nuanced interpretations of the immigrant's identity.

However, in this toxic and aggressive environment in which they are constructed as thieves and as undesirable, Chipo, David and Jean-Paul exude remnants of humanness that are counter-intuitive. Contrary to Chipo's animalized self, she is constructed as loving and compassionate. She shows concern for Jean-Paul and wonders why he lives such a lonely life (*ZC*, p. 92). She feels sorry for the woman selling dusters in the rain, and the young woman who leaves President's Heights at six-thirty and returns late, sometimes as late as eight in the evening (*ZC*, p. 70). Chipo acknowledges each individual as unique and respects them for who they are, with the exception of her homophobic attitude towards David and Jeremiah. Similarly, David respects and values Chipo and Jeremiah regardless of who they are. Through Chipo, David and Jean-Paul, *ubuntu* is shown as a philosophy that demonstrates how humans are harmonious beings who are 'thoughtful, considerate, sensitive, generous, wise, humble, and understanding'.³⁵ These are virtues that interconnect human beings in a web of social causality and reciprocity; hence as Jolley contends, all humans regardless of their social status, race or ethnicity are respected and acknowledged.

Jean-Paul is also constructed as compassionate, sensitive and generous. He acknowledges that Chipo is normal and African (*ZC*, p. 44) and even advises her on the dress material to buy to suit her complexion. He offers her a job as his assistant and he is the only one who remembers her birthday. Moreover, he does not question Chipo's albinism; nor does he emphasize her difference but accepts her as part of the web that makes humanity. Similarly, David accepts her unconditionally and treats her with care and love. He protected her at school when other children harassed her or called her a monkey, and acknowledged and appreciated all Chipo's good work. Both David and Jean-Paul embrace Chipo without segregating her. Most strikingly, at a symbolical level, David's web of humanity is inclusive of animals, as seen when he protects the rat that George has found in the flat and wants to kill. Vandermerwe could be intimating that treating others with kindness and humanity and embracing *ubuntu* ideals renders the physical, ethnic, geographical and figurative borders porous and permeable.

Chipo's identity construction, on the other hand, is problematic and exclusionary. Although David accepts her albinism, blinded by love, Chipo fails to do the same when she discovers that David is homosexual. Whilst David holds on to the key elements of *ubuntuism*, Chipo reconstructs his identity, reducing him to a Moffie or Ngochani.

Conclusion

Xenophobia in South Africa is seen in the negative attitudes and violent behaviour towards black African immigrants. In 1994 and 1995, armed youths demolished houses belonging to immigrants in the township of Alexandra and demanded that they leave the country. In May/June 2008, South Africa experienced another spell of brutal

attacks in Alexandra and informal settlements around Durban in which several immigrants were killed, injured or displaced. The violent xenophobic attacks resurfaced in 2009, 2015 and 2018, directed at non-nationals from countries such as Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Somalia. Local residents accused the foreigners of taking their jobs, houses and wives, and in some cases they were seen as carriers of diseases such as HIV/AIDS. The spate of violent xenophobic practices has since escalated, the attacks being most common in urban areas such as Johannesburg, Kwazulu-Natal, Durban and Cape Town. Because of its destructive nature, xenophobia has become a significant area of concern. As a result, an enormous body of scholarly literature on xenophobia has emerged which explores the causes and nature of the attacks. For example, Buxbaum (2017) analyses representations of xenophobia in three South African novels; Wilkinson (2016) examines Othering and ideals of *ubuntu* amidst the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa; Bronwyn (2002) identifies xenophobia as a new pathology in South Africa, and Hickel (2014) explores the 2008 xenophobic attacks and how immigrants are linked to witchcraft.³⁶ The recent increase in writing about xenophobia in literary genres in South Africa is an attempt to search for a solution to this problem, specifically given the context of immigrants and their transnational identities, and to explain the significance of xenophobia to the identity formation processes of African migrants. The present article has problematized the notion of minor transnational identities by interrogating the relationships between South Africans and those they refer to as outsiders, 'foreigners' or 'makwerekwere', as depicted in *Zebra Crossing*. The immigrant's identity is further complicated by culturally held beliefs vis-à-vis albinos and LGBT identities. In the process, the article has demonstrated the Othering patterns resulting from racism, xenophobia, homophobic prejudice and discrimination. By bringing out the apparent contradictions in the values of *ubuntu*, the article has revealed, further, how the Othering of others debunks the ideology of African connectedness. We conclude that it is only by unravelling and eliminating the atrocities of xenophobic attacks and by championing the values of *ubuntu* that national and African unity may be achieved.

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NOTES

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- ⁶ *Ibid.* p. 51
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