

IMAGINING XENOPHOBIA: LIFE ORIENTATION, LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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This article argues that if the learning area Life Orientation is to give substance to the recommendations of the James Report (2000) values will have to be imaginatively apprehended and reinterpreted in each life situation. This article explores ways of using language and literature study to give imaginative access to xenophobia, a key social problem in South Africa (and beyond) and so taking Life Orientation beyond the letter of the law to honouring its 'spirit, purport and objects' (Constitution 39.(2)). The three literary works used in this case are Judges 12 (New International Bible), Snow Falling on Cedars (David Guterson) and Welcome to our Hillbrow (Phaswane Mpe).

Life Orientation, as a learning area in the school curriculum, is meant to promote social competence. Among other things, it must aim to give substance to the recommendations of the James report on *Values, Education and Democracy* (James 2000), and so to enable learners to live by 'the values that underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom' (Constitution 39.(1)(a)). However, teaching values is difficult. Values are dynamic, in the sense that they have to be imaginatively apprehended and reinterpreted in each life situation. If they are not, articulated values all too readily degenerate into the fixed tokens of pious or political correctness: the letter killing where the spirit would give life. This article uses language and literature study to suggest ways of giving imaginative access to a key social problem, xenophobia, and so of taking Life Orientation beyond the letter of the law to honouring its 'spirit, purport and objects' (Constitution 39.(2)). Particular ways of discussing language and the issues raised by literature may make for readier imaginative access to key Life Orientation concerns.

Xenophobia is a major issue in contemporary South Africa, both as the country attempts to overcome the divisions of its past and as it deals with the implications of its new openness for immigrants and refugees and internal migration. The 'spirit, purport and objects' of the *Constitution* (39.(2)), which represents the formal values of the new state, are under pressure from on the ground. Racism, a form of xenophobia, does not die by decree, and tends to recur in various racial groups as the ideal of countering historical disadvantage is overshadowed in the not infrequent self-interested scramble for advantage over people from other racial groups – or in reaction to this process. Regional chauvinism, reinforced by the apartheid state except unintentionally in Gauteng, asserts itself again in resentment at urban newcomers from other areas who have different customs, speak other languages and compete in the same labour pool. The most serious othering, however, is reserved for black people from elsewhere in

Africa. Labelled *Makwerekwere* on account of ‘a sound that their unintelligible foreign languages were supposed to make, according to the locals’ (Mpe 2001, 20), they are particularly vulnerable, both in communities and to officialdom: lightning conductors for other frustrations.

These attitudes are likely to be there in all South African classrooms to some extent. Understanding them and beginning to deal with them are thus important parts of the ethical education of school pupils. But they are elusive. Xenophobia, however translated, is by definition wrong and rejected. Yet xenophobic attitudes are intimate, operating beneath the surface, carried in the ways language is used. A viable approach to understanding xenophobia must probe the ways in which language carries values and broach the subject through imaginative recognition. In what follows, three texts are used as a basis for opening up the issues.

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We start with something ancient whose relevance has to be discovered. The Shibboleth story from the Old Testament book of Judges, written three thousand years ago, shows the features of xenophobia clearly. The incident happened in a period of bloody conflict. The tribes of Israel were in disarray, and were faced with a terrible enemy in the Ammonites. A large body of Israelites called on Jephthah, a mighty warrior, to come out of exile and lead them, in the first instance against Ammon. He did so and was victorious. In the wake of the battle, the related Israelite tribe of Ephraim, which had refused to help defeat the Ammonites, took advantage of their cousins’ battle weariness to challenge Jephthah.

The men of Ephraim called out their forces, crossed over to Zaphron and said to Jephthah, ‘Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We’re going to burn down your house over your head.’

Jephthah answered, ‘I and my people were engaged in a great struggle with the Ammonites, and though I called, you didn’t save me out of their hands. . . Now why have you come up today to fight with me.’

Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, ‘You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh.’ The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, ‘Let me cross over’, the men of Gilead asked him, ‘Are you an Ephraimite?’ If he replied, ‘No,’ they said, ‘All right, say ‘Shibboleth.’” If he said ‘Sibboleth’, because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of Jordan. Forty two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

(Judges 12.1-6. NIV)

The whole story is a drama of inclusion and exclusion: who is on our side and who isn’t. The criteria shift all the time. What is constant is that the lines of inclusion and exclusion have an apparent or real moral basis. Long before this story begins, Jephthah had been sent into a kind of ‘exile’ because his brothers were embarrassed to acknowledge their father’s son by a prostitute. ‘Common decency’ dictated that he was not fit to be recognised by the family or to move in Israelite society. They draw the line excluding him. The stance of apparent righteousness which defends this line is all too familiar in a variety of situations. Yet in times of real trouble, as the story shows, the moral ground can shift so far as to make the outcast into the leader of the nation.

The second point arises from this. The moral basis is secondary to the will to assert one's power. If one has power and wants to demonstrate it, it is easy to draw a line and invent a moral justification for doing so. The Ephraimites should have helped Jephthah and the other Jews ward off the threat of the Ammonites. There is no question about it in terms of the ethics of the time. Perhaps, short-sightedly, they felt that not participating would win them favour with the Ammonites, and hoped that their fellow Jews would perish in the battle with this terrible enemy, leaving more of the land to them. With the Ammonites astonishingly defeated, they find the cousins they refused to help standing even more strongly in the way of their territorial ambitions. This calls for a new strategy, with aggression being seen as the best form of defence, particularly as they are fresh and Jephthah's army is battle-weary. They draw a new line, falsely accusing Jephthah and his followers of not calling on them but instead choosing to leave them out, and they threaten to burn down Jephthah's house over his head in 'righteous' revenge. Jephthah faces them with confidence, speaking of 'I and my people', and takes those people with him. There is a battle, and the Ephraimites are roundly defeated by the army which they had thought weakened by the earlier war.

Now the line between the two groups remains, but has a new significance. The Ephraimites no longer have the power to assert the line, and would like it to pass away. As the vanquished they would rather blend in with their fellow Jews whom they have been fighting. However, those who have been so scandalously treated by them have no desire, in victory, to forgive their treacherous cousins. In a situation where identities are not as clearly evident as might suit military convenience, Jephthah's people need a means of distinguishing friend and foe. The Ephraimites have their own regional pronunciation of Hebrew, and it is this which gives them away. The difference between *Shibboleth* and *Sibboleth*, which had probably been joked about under other circumstances, literally becomes a matter of life and death.

The purpose of using this story is not to bring in the Bible by the back door. For Biblical or Religious Studies, Jephthah's exploits have other resonances which are deliberately excluded here. The key issue for our purposes is recognition. Life Orientation which is more than a subject scheduled on the timetable must cultivate the ability to make connections and perceive relevance and expand horizons. There are linguistic and ethical aspects to this.

At the basic level of language, 'Shibboleth' has a widespread contemporary meaning in English as a trivial practice which is used to distinguish members of a group or class. Knowing the story from which the term came into English puts the learner in a position to use or understand it more imaginatively. It may also lead to a discussion of accents and their possible significance. What decisions are made by learners in the class on the basis of accent or the way someone speaks? More sophisticated language points also suggest themselves. For example, the pragmatic significance of Jephthah's words, 'I and my people' is worth attention. The British queen would have said, 'My people and I'. Jephthah's way of saying it means that he is putting his personal authority on the line. At this critical moment, by asserting his leadership and a distinctive identity for the collection of people brought together *ad hoc* in the face of a particular threat, Jephthah makes a new and lasting social group possible. When the people follow him again, this time against their Ephraimite cousins, the social group is firmly constituted. He then leads Israel till his death six years later.

The ethical aspects promise profitable debate and rich insights. First, the possibility of the outcast becoming the leader of the nation firmly qualifies over-easy, socially-complacent moral judgements. This possibility should be real enough to South Africans with the figure of

Nelson Mandela prominent in memory. Making that connection with our own recent history invites discussion of other complacent moral judgements in our post-apartheid society. Next, politically expedient moral outrage is all too familiar in international and local politics, sometimes with devastating consequences. An enemy is invented for immediate political motives, and violent action is thereby justified. Recognising this process and discussing its implications opens up a range of practical and ethical insights of great importance for building democracy. Enemies are always constituted, of course. When a group poses a real threat and perhaps takes the initiative in attacking, considering them an enemy is possibly warranted. But even then war is not always the only option. Diplomacy may achieve the political objective without costing lives. Xenophobia pushes towards war. Finally, the Gileadites slaughtered the straggling Ephraimites when the war was over, even though thousands of them wanted to rejoin Israel. Was this right? Vigorous argument is likely on this point. It will present opportunities for developing an awareness of circumstance and the importance of contextual ethics.

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David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* opens up complex issues of xenophobia in the modern world. Its pertinence for the Life Orientation curriculum is as a widely available and compelling story, removed from South Africa, and so inviting various kinds of relevance to be discovered in the South African classroom. The novel was published in 1995 and the film appeared in South African cinemas in 2001 and is now available in video.

Snow Falling on Cedars is set on one of the most beautiful places in the United States: a tree-covered island north of Seattle in what is effectively an inland sea. One could hardly think of a more peaceful place, better designed to foster the great freedoms of the American constitution. The island was settled by Scandinavians, Germans, Anglo-Saxons and Japanese. The Japanese had a hard time to start with, but, fulfilling the terms of the American dream, succeeded by hard work in establishing themselves on small farms. One might say the same for the other settlers, even if they generally started from a higher base. By the 1930s, even in the years of the great depression, the ethnically diverse people of the island accepted one another, supported one another, and, increasingly among the younger generation, played together. The stars of the baseball team were Japanese. That is status indeed.

Then came the Second World War. The United States entered the war only after the bombing of Pearl Harbour in Hawaii by the Japanese. At this point, it had no doubts about the loyalty to the US of Americans of German descent, despite the major conflict being with Nazi Germany, but it arrested all its citizens of Japanese descent and put them in concentration camps. If they volunteered for military service in Europe, they were allowed to leave as soldiers. If not, they stayed in the camps. Many Japanese Americans were terribly exploited in this time. They lost their hard-won land and their possessions. Even those who served heroically in the war in Europe, were still viewed with suspicion and animosity when they returned. Their treatment in those years is a text-book case of the arbitrariness of xenophobia, but the novel looks back on that period only in exploring the unexpected persistence of xenophobic attitudes to Japanese Americans in recent times.

The story is organised around events long after the war: the death of a German American fisherman and the trial of a Japanese American for his murder. In the event, it turns out that

the man died in an accident and that Kabuo was nowhere near him when it happened. However, the official interpretation of evidence and the treatment of the accused, up to the point where the case collapses, testify to the power of xenophobia to distort perception and to build false community. Even more insidious is the lack of faith in social institutions that prompts the innocent Japanese American accused to offer a false story.

In the passage that follows, Nels Gudmundsson, the defence attorney, comes into Kabuo's cell with the sheriff's report on the dead man's case in a manila folder and confronts his client.

'I'd rather know I can trust you. So before you read what's in that thing, tell me a story that squares with its details and exonerate yourself in my eyes. Tell me the story you should have told the sheriff right off the bat, when it wasn't too late, when the truth might still have given you your freedom. When the truth might have done you some good.'

Kabuo, at first, said nothing. But then Nels dropped the manila folder on the mattress, dropped it and stood directly over him. 'It's because you're from Japanese folks,' he said softly; it was more a question than a statement. 'You figure because you're from Japanese folks nobody will believe you anyway.'

'I've got a right to think that way. Or maybe you've forgotten that a few years back the government decided it couldn't trust any of us and shipped us out of here.'

'That's true,' said Nels. 'But –'

'We're sly and treacherous,' Kabuo said. 'You can't trust a Jap, can you? This island's full of strong feelings, Mr Gudmundsson, people who don't often speak their minds but hate on the inside all the same. They don't buy their berries from our farms, they won't do business with us. You remember when somebody pitched rocks through all the windows at Sumida's greenhouses last summer? Well, now there's a fisherman everybody liked well enough who's dead and drowned in his net. They're going to figure it makes sense a Jap killed him. They're going to want to see me hang no matter what the truth is.'

'There are laws,' said Nels. 'They apply equally to everyone. You're entitled to a fair trial.'

'There are men,' said Kabuo, 'who hate me. They hate anyone who looks like the soldiers they fought. That's what I'm doing here.'

'Tell the truth,' Nels said. 'Decide to tell the truth before it's too late.'

(Guterson, pp.390f)

There are three voices in this passage. Gudmundsson's, Kabuo's, and the voice of the xenophobic community which both of them refer to. This latter is not a phantom thing, and will become more realised and powerful as the story progresses. Gudmundsson's voice is reasonable in the circumstances – a foil for the emotions and the xenophobia in the situation he is dealing with. Kabuo's reading of xenophobia is accurate and his response understandable in the circumstances. However, in opting for obfuscation and non-cooperation with the court, he has reproduced some of the features of what he is resisting. He offers a public image of himself which complements the identity of the dominant group. By othering them, he preserves his dignity. But he also validates the fiction about people of Japanese origin that has been lurking in their consciousness since the war. This complicity of the victim in the xenophobia against him runs against binary victor-victim notions. Life is not that simple. Discussion of this point opens up new possibilities of understanding social

processes and intervening in them. It can help learners better understand and prepare for their role in the complex and sometimes apparently perverse processes of social transformation.

The passage also raises questions about institutions. 'There are laws . . .', says Gudmundsson. 'There are men . . .', says Kabuo. The laws – the vital institutions of social equity – are vulnerable to the stories which human beings tell. Dealing with an encoded social reality, the laws provide a logic for applying the social codes, not a means of interrogating them. The death of the German American has been a traumatic event in the life of this community, and it has a deep need to make sense of it. Kabuo is proved only too right that the people will 'figure it makes sense' that the Jap killed him. They will and do construct a story which validates their xenophobia and has all the semblance of reason. However, their purpose will have little to do with reason. Quite arbitrarily they have chosen to hate Japanese but not Germans, and they want to exercise their power without regard to facts: as Kabuo says, 'They're going to want to see me hang no matter what the truth is.' The prejudice is brought into courtroom practice. Discussion of analogous situations of blind prejudice identified by learners can lead deep into the complexities of South Africa in transformation, not least into the operation of its institutions.

A passage this complex offers exceptional opportunities to examine the pragmatics of language use. Consider the first paragraph again.

I'd rather know I can trust you. So before you read what's in that thing, tell me a story that squares with its details and exonerate yourself in my eyes. Tell me the story you should have told the sheriff right off the bat, when it wasn't too late, when the truth might still have given you your freedom. When the truth might have done you some good.

Nels Gudmundsson speaks in frustration at Kabuo's not having told the truth when so much is at stake, and he puts a lot of rhetorical pressure on his client to open up. Fair enough. But describing it that way hides important aspects of what is happening here. First, Gudmundsson's way of reproaching Kabuo appeals to the fairness of the system, and the system is significantly not fair. He is already wrestling with the awareness that even if Kabuo had told the truth he would almost certainly still have been accused. In a sense, then, part of the pressure on Kabuo comes from his lawyer's revealing his vulnerability and from the failure of this articulate man to find appropriate words. His frustration enacted in the way he uses words is also an appeal for help. Secondly, although Gudmundsson is a lawyer, he somewhat surprisingly dismisses the sheriff's report with its important evidence as 'that thing'. As a pragmatic language act this is complex. His concern is still within a legal frame of reference, because he uses the legal term 'exonerate' when he might (in keeping with phrases like 'squares with' and 'right off the bat') have used a colloquial term like 'clear'. In fact, dismissing the report as 'that thing' is mainly about his legal role in this specific situation, and not about the report itself. As Kabuo's lawyer, he needs to have a relationship of trust with him, both so that he can depend on certain facts, and so that he does not find himself paralysed as the defence attorney by being caught between the institutional hostility of the prosecution, the xenophobic hostility of the community and the alienated hostility of his client. Calling the report 'that thing' vividly emphasises to Kabuo that they share something of the same perspective, just as it reflects Gudmundsson's awareness that, without Kabuo's evidence, the report is of little value to people genuinely seeking the truth. Thirdly, and perhaps most important of all, the rush of 'when' clauses in the latter part of the paragraph signal that he cares for Kabuo. He speaks to him almost as a father or an uncle might.

In the end, Kabuo does cooperate. Gudmundsson puts up an able defence. The jury has on it one person who cannot be persuaded of Kabuo's guilt: a voice of reason as in the famous film about a jury, *Twelve Angry Men*. It looks as if good sense will prevail. But the outcome of the case depends on none of these people. The pattern is broken only by the introduction of incontrovertible evidence that Kabuo cannot be guilty. The case is dismissed definitively. However, that does not mean a simple happy ending. The wider issues linger and trouble. The xenophobic attitudes against Japanese Americans which had been consolidated into a plausible story are now exposed for what they are. What had become a major element in the self-image or sense of identity of the dominant citizenry can no longer be sustained once the story has been exploded, except by wilful self-deception. Guterson leaves the painful and disconcerting implications in a powerful silence. In the South African classroom, this ending can be used to open up discussion of the traumas of transition for white *and black*. The secure framework of apartheid attitudes which defined identity for so long is not so easily abandoned, and the danger of falling back on elements of the discredited model by default is always there.

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Something of the complexity of the ongoing South African transition to democracy finds imaginative expression in Phaswane Mpe's novel, *Welcome to our Hillbrow*. The novel reflects the hybridity of the modern condition particularly in a fascinating and terrible place like Hillbrow: 'our Hillbrow of milk and honey and bile, all brewing in the depths of our collective consciousness' (41). Through its distinctive use of language and of appropriation of generic conventions from different cultures, the novel suggests the excitement and vitality and danger of the city, beneath the surface of which lie the distorted claims of traditional rural pasts, insecurities about belief and identity that issue, both in the country and in the city, in terrible prejudices and xenophobia and an incapacity to deal with AIDS.

Welcome to our Hillbrow is written in vividly African idiom. In the excitement after a Bafana Bafana soccer victory, cars are driven wildly through the streets and one knocks over and kills a seven-year-old child. It is a hit and run case.

The traffic cops, arriving a few minutes later, found that *the season of arrest* had already passed. Most people, *after the momentary stunned silence of witnessing the sour fruits of soccer victory*, resumed their singing. (2)

The parts I have italicised have something of the self-consciously clever overdescription common in school essays, but they are used with such confident irony that they have imaginative authority. This is a real voice. Throughout the novel, there is a kind of poetic playfulness with language. When the main character has to write a testimonial for his one-time lover who was unfaithful to him but who has clear talent, his distanced professionalism is captured in the words: 'the strokes you made on your computer keyboard resulted in the following' (32) – an effective testimonial. She gets the job. Other phrases which give the language its distinctive flavour transfer directly from Sepedi. A constant love partner is the 'Bone of your Heart' (24). A failed love relationship is 'the now-ruined kraal of love that we had once made our shelter' (32). And 'Scars are always a spring of wisdom, as the saying goes' (51). Learners should have pleasure in identifying and discussing the African features of the English. They can be helped to see that this authentic voice makes the struggles with prejudice and xenophobia – and their implications for denial about AIDS – intimate, and so less readily avoidable.

The novel draws on various genre conventions. I shall discuss three. The implications of each of these are worth pursuing in class discussion. The novel uses directed narrative – a naturalistic conversational narrative addressed to a person who is always imaginatively present, in this case a close friend. Like real conversation over a period, this allows use of the full range of registers and styles, and permits personal comments and extensive language play. But the person addressed, Refentše, a university lecturer, is dead, having committed suicide when he was unable to live with his horror and distaste at the social practices of his home village, his sense of his own fallibility after being unfaithful to his partner, Lerato, and his despair at her infidelity with a close friend. He is not just a convenient rhetorical device, however, but is conceived of as alive and accessible through appeal to a distinctively African sense of an afterlife in the ‘world of the Ancestors’(47). This genre allows ongoing exploration of meaning in a partnership with the Ancestor. The figures who have died are in a kind of heaven, living on and carrying on learning. Their heaven is neither a place of perfection nor a purgatory. And it is not in any sense a place of retreat from the challenges of modernity. But that genre, too, is qualified. On the last page of the novel, when it has served its purpose, we are told that heaven ‘is the world of our continuing existence, located in the memory and consciousness of those who live with us and after us’(124). That is not necessarily reductive. By using a post-modern sense of constructedness along with an intimate sense of tradition, the narrative holds the various and often irreconcilable claims on the sophisticated African city dweller from the rural village of Tiragalong in creative tension with one another. The unresolvedness opens up ways of celebrating life at the same time as it allows prejudice and xenophobia to be explored and their implications to be felt.

Welcome to our Hillbrow explores the meaning of constructedness through the repeated theme of storytelling. In his last days, Refentše wrote a story in an attempt to find relief for ‘a heart’s load of love and guilt and grief’ (54), but the story refused to be about the pains of romance:

... as you started writing it, it turned into something else. It became instead a story about an HIV-positive woman from Tiragalong, who was ostracised by her fellow villagers when they learnt about her health status. The Tiragalong of your fiction said that she deserved what she got. What had she hoped to gain by opening her thighs to every *Lekwerekwere* that came her way? She was a child who had, in effect, committed suicide. And, as Tiragalong well knew, the cry of a person who has committed suicide is a drum; when it plays we dance. So in your story, as in real life, Tiragalong danced because its xenophobia – its fear and hatred of both black non-South Africans and Johannesburgers – was vindicated. (54)

Within the story of Refentše is the short story he writes about this woman. She, in turn, is confronted with the realisation that ‘a conscious decision to desert home [Tiragalong] is a difficult one to sustain. Because home always travels with you, with your consciousness as its vehicle.’ So she, too, pours ‘all her grief and alienation into the world of storytelling’, writing ‘a novel about Hillbrow, xenophobia and AIDS and the prejudices of rural lives’ (55). Storytelling itself becomes a means of understanding and dealing with the contradictions and tensions of urban life in the face of the impossibility of leaving behind one’s past and the more restrictive culture that embraced it. This, too, leads deeper into an understanding of cultural context.

The woman of Rafentše’s fiction wrote in Sepedi, perhaps to reach the people of Tiragalong whom she could not leave behind. This was a ‘big mistake’ (56).

She did not know that writing in an African language could be such a curse. She had not anticipated that publishers' reviewers would brand her novel vulgar. Calling shit and genitalia by their correct names in Sepedi was apparently regarded as vulgar by these reviewers, who had for a long time been reviewing works of fiction for educational publishers, and who were determined to ensure that such works did not offend the systems that they served. . . . Now, for nearly fifty years, the system of Apartheid had been confusing writers in this way. Trying to make them believe that euphemism equals good morals. (56)

'Shit' is, of course, not a 'correct name' in the sense that 'genitalia' is: a word of the same order would be 'excrement'. It is also somewhat disingenuous to argue that using the correct names in English and Afrikaans biology textbooks, often with illustrations, speaks of a cross-linguistic inconsistency. Standards for fiction in English and Afrikaans should be compared with standards for fiction in the African languages. However, these 'errors' in argument build the passionate character of the narrator. One, correct, implication of this argument is that writing in English allows far wider boundaries of tolerance in these matters. The reasons for less leeway in African language fiction may be both internal to the cultural traditions involved and a product of Apartheid puritanism. But the narrator's most important point is that the habit of euphemism in South Africa has a systemic force with major political and social consequences. The habit of euphemism makes it extremely difficult to deal with the realities of cultural confusion and prejudice and disease that are a real threat to the country. *Welcome to our Hillbrow* is an attempt to break through inhibiting conventions of using language to address matters of major import: matters that make the oppressed complicit in oppression. The people of Tiragalong who castigate and reject the writer character are in fact, 'together with the moralistic guardians of change', destroying her 'keen intellect' (58) although they do not know it.

And even if they had known, would they have cared? It was probably better, in their estimation, that she faded away. Because she dared to write things that were critical and showed up their prejudices. (58f)

Some of the most powerful writing in the book reveals superstitious prejudices and xenophobia as at root the same. The pragmatic function of prejudicial and xenophobic stories is to impose meaning rather than seek to find it.

Refilwe [the past girlfriend who asked Refentše for a testimonial] rewrote large chunks of the story that Tiragalong had constructed about you, which was that you committed suicide because your mother had bewitched you. In an attempt to drive your heart from the Johannesburg woman, Tiragalong had said, your mother had used medicines that were too strong. They destroyed your brain. . . . Tiragalong's story was constructed when your mother slipped and fell into your grave on that hot Saturday morning of your burial. As Tiragalong believed, only witches could fall into a corpse's grave on burial. Medicine men had confirmed that. . . . So the Comrades of Tiragalong, in order to cleanse the village, had necklaced your mother to death. . . . Refilwe could not rewrite the death of your mother, but she rewrote the version of your suicide. In this version of things, you had been bewitched indeed – but not by your mother; by a loose-thighed Hillbrowan called Lerato. . . . But worse still, the woman is not even a Johannesburger, Refilwe had intimated. I hear from reliable sources that her mother comes from Durban. But her father is a Nigerian, who fled his war-torn country. . . . Apparently, the mother had been struggling somewhat. She lived on lice, so to speak. So she was quite happy to find this Nigerian. You know *Makwerekwere!* When they love you, they simply dish out all these monies they have to you. Drug-dealing being such a business, you can always be sure to be well off with a Nigerian man. . . (43f)

Clearly, if stories can be used to engage with and explore the changing world, they can also be used to evade it. Nothing of the story Tiragalong concocts is any help in coming to terms with reality, but it creates an illusion of having everything under control. The notion that Refentše's mother caused her son's suicide because she used supernatural medicine improperly stems from her slipping into his grave. Interpreted within a particular frame, this proved to the villagers that she was a witch. The frame was already there. Unnamed medicine men had confirmed tradition regarding those who slip into graves at funerals – in terms that covered all eventualities. As the community's hold on reality is displaced by the imposed story, the Comrades, supposed to be politically enlightened youth, use terrible modern methods for supposedly traditional purposes: to 'cleanse the village.'

Refentše's mother did, of course, have a role in his suicide. But it was not one which she or anyone else in Tiragalong could understand. He was unable to speak to her about his distress because 'She hated the Hillbrow women with unmatchable venom – a human venom so fatal it would have put the black mamba's to shame' (39). Ironically, she shared most and perhaps all of the prejudices which led to her own cruel death, and it is those prejudices which prevented her from providing 'any possibility of sanctuary' (40) in her son's hour of need.

Refilwe's alternative version directs the fears and the hatred of Tiragalong away from itself and onto various forms of what is foreign. In her 'vengeful story' (44), she gets her own back for Refentše's refusal to take up with her again (34), and paints his Lerato as a 'loose-thighed' foreigner, daughter of an impoverished woman from Durban who lived with one of the drug-dealing *Makwerekwere* from Nigeria for the money he lavished on her. Every detail is xenophobic, and the fiction is widely if not universally believed in the village, though there is no indication that those who believe it have any crisis of conscience over the necklacing of Refentše's mother. Characteristically, also, the xenophobia is not dispelled when Tiragalong is shocked later to discover that Lerato, far from being a *Lekwerekwere*, was the daughter of one of their own.

This much is pretty bleak. Yet the story of Refilwe's own life in the last third of the novel holds out some hope. Each of the kinds of evasion discussed above is worth defining and exploring further in class. But so is Refilwe's further career. She goes to Oxford to study, and there develops a deep, loving relationship with a Nigerian, undercutting her xenophobic assumptions one after another. After a while, it becomes clear that both of them have been HIV-positive for a long time. He didn't infect her, nor she him. Both know that the infection can't be blamed on others. They take responsibility for it. When Refilwe returns, she is dying of AIDS. She faces prejudice for the AIDS and xenophobia for her relationship with the Nigerian. Superficially, her fate could be seen as poetic justice. However, the novel does not present it that way. The main focus is on the humanly good changes in her: 'You know that you are not the same Refilwe that you were' (122). The lesson is a hard one but it is hopeful. Xenophobia can be defeated. Faithfulness in love is possible. Prejudice can be overcome. And, despite all the difficulties, AIDS can be seen for what it is. The price is a willingness to engage imaginatively with the realities, in the face of painful and sometimes terrifying imaginative evasion.

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This article began with a plea to use the imagination and a knowledge of the pragmatics of language to explore values in teaching the Life Orientation curriculum. It closes with another

version of the same plea. Imaginative works must not be used as convenient springboards for predetermined topics, for that would be to miss the main contribution that they can make. The dynamic context of interpretation which they provide is vital for entertainment of values. The issues need to be discussed in relation to the story, thereby allowing the dynamics of narrative to prompt and qualify the discussion and promote the making of connections. We have to give scope to the imagination in these matters, for it is through imaginative intelligence that values are intuited and sustained, and that we can find ourselves ‘continually reconfiguring the stories of our lives’ (Mpe124) to make engaged sense of our world.

NOTE

The sections on Shibboleth and on *Snow Falling on Cedars* have been substantially adapted from a paper I delivered at the English Academy International Conference in Pretoria in 2002. That paper will be published in the refereed proceedings of the conference (Ridge in press for 2004). It provides much more extensive treatment of xenophobia encoded in a wider range of discursive and imaginative texts. To sustain the flow of argument in an article mediating between language studies, literary studies and the Life Orientation curriculum, I have not been explicit about scholarly and theoretical influences. It is appropriate to acknowledge the main ones here. As will be plain to many readers, my approach to discourse issues in a post colonial context derives significantly from the foundational work of both Michel Foucault and Edward Said. More recently, Raj Mesthrie’s distinctive insistence on the historical situatedness of language use has been a salutary and welcome influence in a political and academic milieu which is largely impatient of history. Finally, I owe a great deal to the work and example of Jan Blommaert and Stef Slembrouck, scholars who are refreshingly open to the unexpected in language and social behaviour.

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