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Aliens as Immigrants: Reimagining Xenophobia in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9 by* Ashton Lauren Kirsten

Abstract

Neill Blomkamp's 2009 AfroSciFi film, *District 9*, is set in a dystopian version of Johannesburg, South Africa. The film chronicles the landing of an alien race, and these aliens are derogatorily referred to as "Prawns" and are treated as second-class citizens within their new locale. The residence (and marginalisation) of the Prawns in a squatter camp known as 'District 9' sparks public outrage and goes so far as to cause riots in the city centre. I aim to analyse *District 9* in terms of our socio-political climate with regards to the rise and prevalence of xenophobia and xenophobia-related protests and attacks. Xenophobia is a recurring trauma that unfolds on South African soil, largely because residents believe that foreigners present a threat to their employment opportunities and their livelihood. Foreigners are victims to the deprecatory slur of being 'alien', id est. being from somewhere else. In *District 9*, the Prawns serve as a metaphor for immigrants that have been given refuge in our country, only for them later to be disrespected and rejected by the general public for supposedly socioeconomic reasons. The film highlights current socio-political events under the guise of science fiction, thereby causing South Africans to potentially consider their own treatment of 'aliens'. Blomkamp's film serves to challenge African notions of the 'alien' and question the xenophobic violence present in the "Rainbow Nation". This narrative influences the positioning of Africa in a speculative future as it makes the vision of a dystopian future tangible.

Neill Blomkamp's critically acclaimed AfroSciFi film, *District 9* (2009), is set in a politically dystopian version of Johannesburg,

South Africa. The film is shot in the style of a documentary which is intended to lend a sense of credibility to the narrative, and chronicles the landing of an unidentified alien race in Johannesburg. These aliens are derogatorily referred to as "Prawns" because of their strange, crustacean-like appearance and reputation as bottom-feeders. The Prawns are shown to be treated as second-class citizens within their new locale, and their presence is radically resented by locals. The state-sanctioned residence (and marginalisation) of the Prawns in a makeshift squatter camp / informal settlement known as 'District 9' triggers widespread public outrage, the occurrence of violent acts, and the sparking of protests in the city centre. Not only does the film engage with South Africa's more recent history of xenophobia, but also critical social issues such as Apartheid social engineering and forced removals (Moses et al. 155).

I aim to analyse *District 9* in terms of our current socio-political climate with regards to the rise and prevalence of xenophobia and xenophobia-related protests and attacks in South Africa. Xenophobia is a recurring trauma that unfolds on South African soil, largely because residents believe that foreigners present a threat to their employment opportunities and, in turn, their livelihood. However, according to data collected by the United Nations, foreigners "typically do not compete with locals… They are starting little businesses and employing South Africans more often" (Steinberg 6). Foreigners are victims to the deprecatory slur of being 'alien', id est. being from somewhere else; those who are unfamiliar in a particular setting. Blomkamp's film was released in 2009, just one year after the outbreak of xenophobic attacks in Gauteng: on the 11th of May 2008, a wave of violence and vitriol flooded over South Africa, resulting in the deaths of 62 migrants, and hundreds more foreign individuals being attacked, raped, and their homes looted or even destroyed (Nord & Assubuji 2).

South African legal theory will be used to outline the phenomenon of 'aliens' and their effect on our perceptions of belonging and international (or even intergalactic) humanitarianism. I believe that in *District 9*, the Prawns serve as a metaphor for migrants who have been given refuge in our country, only for them later to be disrespected and outright rejected by the general public for supposedly socioeconomic reasons. Within xenophobic rhetoric, migrants are

often derogatorily deemed as 'aliens', and I will draw on this parallel when analysing the film through a socio-political lens in a South African context.

Although the outbreak of xenophobic violence in 2008 sent shock waves through the country, it is by no means a new concept; South Africa has a long history of hostility towards perceived outsiders. Since the achievement of democracy, this disgruntlement has been channelled into a "non-racial nationalism that specifically targets foreign Africans as a threat to prosperity" (Klotz 172). Despite the preamble to our Constitution specifically stating: "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity" [1] , South Africans seem to neglect the fact that migrants are then in turn also granted the rights outlined in our Constitution: the core of the matter remains that they live in our country and should therefore share in our Constitutional privileges. In reality, as Klotz (172) states, refugees and migrants are exceptionally vulnerable to mistreatment by both the police and the general public, who actively perpetuate stereotypes of criminality. Foreigners have increasingly become the target for discontent as national pressures and issues are unapologetically attributed to their presence in the country.

During the transition to democracy, South Africa still remained ambiguous with regard to their commitment to refugee rights (after a volatile history reaching back to more than a century before). Many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) set out to criticize the blatant ill-treatment of asylum seekers (Handmaker). The Aliens Control Act (No. 76) of 1991 grossly lacked protection for asylum seekers, and was a last-ditch effort by the Apartheid regime to keep the country free of migrants and refugees. The Act allowed for indefinite detention of 'aliens' and a general lack of judicial review over proceedings (Klotz 192). Post-Apartheid, new laws have been formulated which are far more pragmatic and philanthropic in

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[1] Preamble to the 1996 Constitution. Accessed online at: http://www.gov.za/documents/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996-preamble. Accessed on 3 May 2018.

nature. The Refugees Act (No. 130) of 1998 allowed for asylum seeker permits and limited detention time to thirty days. Furthermore, a refugee could receive an identity document, work in the country, and receive benefits such as state medical care and access to education. Section 27 of this Act also states that after five years, the refugee could receive the opportunity of permanent residence in South Africa (Klotz 193).

In May 2008, dramatic displacements took place in Alexandra township and the surrounding areas of Johannesburg because of the "culture of violence" towards foreigners. Individuals were left with no choice but to leave their (burning) homes and flock to the nearest police stations, community centres, and churches, in an attempt to gain protection. The targets were predominantly foreigners, but many of these victims did not qualify for international aid and assistance because they were not officially refugees (Klotz 198; Steinberg). As a result, most of the assistance came from small-scale community-based NGOs.

The opening scenes of *District 9* depict the Prawns' aircraft hovering inexplicably over Johannesburg in 1982. Visuals of the projected dystopian setting consist of traffic, mine dumps, pollution, protest, and overcrowding; all of which can be seen as real, tangible issues in Johannesburg. Blomkamp's representation of a dystopia is firmly rooted in the South African reality experienced by locals on a daily basis. Blomkamp then presents a series of 'interviews' by locals in order to give viewers some idea of the overarching context, and to gauge the general feeling of the residents towards the aliens. The common thread that connects these interviews is the expression of feelings of mistrust, discomfort, and hostility: the mere idea of aliens is unscrupulously and unashamedly rejected by the general public.

Through these interviews, the viewers come to understand that at first the ship was simply hovering over the city and its passengers were contained within it for three months. International pressure was put on South African authorities to enact a reconnaissance mission of sorts. The government then elected a private organization, MNU [Multi-National United], the world's second largest weapon's producer, to assist with this exploratory endeavour. MNU staff members "physically cut their way in [to the ship]", and discovered

hordes of malnourished, "unhealthy", and "aimless" intergalactic creatures living in absolute squalor (*District 9*).

In an attempt to "do the right thing", the government established an aid group which transported the aliens to a "temporary" relief camp just underneath the ship. Numerically, there were supposedly "a million of them [the Prawns]", and as a result, there was inadequate space, planning, and infrastructure to accommodate them. Therefore, what was meant to be a temporary holding space soon became fenced due to public pressure, and it soon became "a [militarised] slum" (*District 9*). Visual representations of the 'slum' mimic the archetypal township layout emblematic of Johannesburg – densely populated corrugated steel shacks made from scavenged and discarded urban materials, and an obvious lack of infrastructure and police presence. The arrival of aliens in Johannesburg "triggers neither panic nor innovation from the local government but instead an atavistic return to the protocols of Apartheid" which "fit neatly into existing multinational administrative protocols" (Marx in Moses et al. 164).

There is an attempt to grant the aliens "proper status and protection", but this does not seem to materialise. Instead, the government designates certain areas, like the inner-city, as non-Prawn areas. Signs are posted on lamp posts and street signs legitimately banning "non-human loitering" from the daily happenings of Johannesburg, thus, they have no way to generate an income, or supposedly usurp the income and space designated to legal citizens. As a result, the aliens resort to crime as a means to survive, and go so far as to partake in "extremely destructive act[s]" (*District 9*). Once more, this representation echoes the Apartheid-era's concerns, specifically, the designation of whites-only public spaces. The Other is kept separate from the public and the public feel physically threatened by this Other even though this situation has been created and perpetuated by the government with the supposed goal of protection of public interest.

Interviews with citizens show resentment towards the Prawns, as one citizen aptly puts it: "They [the government] are spending so much money to keep them [the Prawns] here, when they could be spending it on other things" (*District 9*). Thus, if the Prawns had not landed in South Africa, it is believed that the government could have used that money to assist in the citizens' ease of living. This is the

primary notion that is perpetuated with regard to xenophobia: the 'aliens' are recipients of state resources that could be otherwise used to better the nation, specifically for those who 'belong'.

It is established that the Prawns will be unable to go back to where they came from, as their ship lacks the machinery essential to its flight. MNU Alien Affairs is a resultant branch of government set up to "try engage with the Prawn on behalf… of humans" (*District 9*). MNU and the South African Police Force (SAPS) conduct raids when weaponry is found within the district, and this obviously leads to a rise in tensions. The authorities are uncomfortable with the idea of the disgruntled Prawns having their own weapons as this is a threat to national stability and state control. This public-alien tension manifests itself in rioting against the Prawns, very similar to what happened in Johannesburg in May 2008: The 'aliens' became cast as the scapegoat for the nation's socioeconomic woes. In *District 9*, we see that in Thembisa, citizens rioted for three consecutive nights in an attempt to remove the Prawns from their settlement. One resident remarks that "If they [the Prawns] were from another country, we might understand, but they are not even from this planet…" (*District 9*). History has shown us time and time again that irrespective of their origin(s), 'aliens' would not be accepted into South African society and prejudice would still be rife. This diplomatically noncommittal attitude is echoed in the resident's use of the word "might" with regard to 'understanding' – a certain degree of uncertainty is openly communicated.

After twenty years, public pressure forces the government to move the Prawns out of Johannesburg. A permanent residence camp is set up for the Prawns outside of the city, but it is just short of being penitential as it is secluded, encircled by high fences, contains only the most rudimentary shelters, and is enmeshed in barbed wire to keep the inhabitants within the state-regulated confines. This moving of the Prawns serves as the catalyst for the film's narrative, as the Prawns are both unable and unwilling to move from their squatter camp to their new settlement: they have claimed District 9 as their own, despite the squalor, and they refuse to be rezoned. This act of resistance to the state-imposed forced removals as well as the film's title hint at the Apartheid-era rezoning in District Six. During the 1970s, 60 000 inhabitants from District Six were forced from

their homes to make place for a white technical university. The then-leader of the National Party in the Cape Province, P. W. Botha, described District Six as "a blot which the government has cleaned up and will continue to clean up".

Klotz (195) interestingly notes that because of how Nigerians are stereotyped, they are less likely to be accepted as refugees because "[Nigerians] tend to be viewed as drug-dealers by locals, the police, and the media". This additional layer of 'Othering' can be seen in *District 9* as Nigerians live within the same district as the Prawns, and are represented as dealers of alien weaponry (which they cannot use because they do not have the necessary alien DNA) and are seen to be divided into criminal gangs. The Nigerians are seen to take advantage of the Prawns by trading their invaluable intergalactic weaponry for tins of cat food (the Prawns' favourite food). Here Blomkamp controversially depicts both human and intergalactic 'aliens' as perpetuating notions of criminality and consumerism, as this is the view of the general public. Lucy Graham (in Moses et al. 161) states that although the film engages with the xenophobic rhetoric, it can also be seen to perpetuate it. This portrayal was so unflattering that the Nigerian government spoke out about the film, denouncing the portrayal of gangs and drug-dealers as inherently Nigerian. Furthermore, Nigerian author Nnedi Okorafor unapologetically used her acclaimed novel *Lagoon* (2014) to address and write back to Blomkamp's inflammatory positioning of Nigerians in AfroSF.

Although highly problematic, Blomkamp can however be seen to deliberately over-simplify this notion of 'alienness' in order to bring the troublesome xenophobic notions of our country into focus – he (naïvely) uses racial stereotypes to show South Africans their national follies and shortcomings in order for them to potentially shift their perspectives and assumptions. Michael Moses (in Moses et al.) notes that:

Described as leaderless workers stranded on earth, the "[P]rawns" are represented *en masse* as violent, uneducated, lazy, and dangerous. They live amid filth and spend their time picking through mountainous piles of garbage and refuse. They routinely sacrifice principles, personal loyalties, and even family ties for tins of cat food. They vomit and urinate copiously and unashamedly in public places.

Given to theft, sexual license, kidnapping, physical mayhem, and casual murder... If the Nigerians are a throwback to the negative colonial stereotype of the "primitive" African, the "[P]rawns" correspond to both the old stereotype and a new one, no less negative for being up-to-date: that of the shiftless, violent, and degenerate urban African lumpenproletariat.

The South African government has perpetually been concerned with the displacement of groups of people that they do not believe fall neatly into their agenda. The marginalised are always at the mercy of the government, both then and now. South Africa's turbulent history with regard to the 'Other' continues to seep into modern-day politics by means of the dominant xenophobic discourse. Blomkamp highlights this historical trend in his film and I believe that he does so in order for us to consider our collective attitudes towards migrants: the discourse is flawed and the ideas are out-dated and ignorant. In short, South Africans need to reconsider their standing in terms of 'alien' philanthropy.

I believe that the film highlights current socio-political events through the cognitive estrangement inherent to SF, thereby causing South Africans to potentially (re)consider their own situation and treatment of 'aliens'. Blomkamp's film serves to challenge African notions of the 'alien', and question the xenophobic violence present in the supposed "Rainbow Nation" (a multiracial or multicultural country). This narrative influences the positioning of Africa in a speculative future as it makes the vision of a dystopian future tangible; if social ills and xenophobic lenses are not done away with, our society could very well be as dysfunctional and insufferable as the Johannesburg portrayed in *District 9*.

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