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These ones that are here now, these Zimbabweans are thieves; they must take them home now—they just come to steal our jobs, our money, and our women.

—Anonymous

This statement, uttered by an anonymous South African interviewee in 2008, at the height of the xenophobic attacks in South Africa, spells out what is at stake in this paper and my current project as an artist/painter. Unbeknownst to the speaker above, his use of adjectives and pronouns does a few things at once: it abstracts and recodes “them” and “our,” expresses an irreconcilable gap, and unequivocally implicates the southern African region and its treatment of black African immigrants. This is how I inscribe myself into this text and the context. For a long time before these attacks, I had had visceral reservations towards black foreigners coming into my country, Botswana. Needless to say, I was young and naïve, yet the fact remains—I did have negative affective reactions to black foreigners, whom “we” continuously put under the general title *makwerekwere*—or simply “MaZim,” an abbreviation of the noun used to describe Zimbabwean nationals, MaZimbabwe. So this paper serves as a working-through of this dilemma, of being implicated in both the physical and epistemological violence towards black foreigners. The questions I am addressing are: How should one make meaning of what is normatively called “nationalism” in one’s specific region? And how can we account for the perseverance and fixity of national identification in the age of globalization, transnationality, and the so-called fluidity and multiplicity of identity

formation? Having noticed the dangerous deterioration of relations between foreign nationals and natives in countries like Germany, Zimbabwe, South Africa, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States, these questions have become increasingly crucial. To address this unforgiving force between blood and soil, I think nationalism needs to be reconceptualized as protonationalism, namely, as something in relation to the nation as an abstract form.

The nation-state, by all means a modern invention, has been the de facto source of national identification. By many accounts, nationalism has been formulated in two basic ways: the structuralist approach, which places emphasis on the conditions of identity construction, and the modernist approach, which calls to attention the material and historical conditions under which a nation-state emerges. Both models, which are proximate to the postmodern theorization of identity, stress the multiplicity and fluidity of identity construction. By focusing on the constructed-ness of identity, as well as on its political and social reality, the models' account of nationalism can be defined as follows: nationalism signifies an identity formation primarily because late modernity produced a persistent awareness of the contingent and socially constructed nature of identity; all the weight is put on the modern conceptualization of identity as an open and contingent form whose structure is inflected by politics, culture, and intersubjective exchange. Nationalism is fundamentally understood as “ties to the circumstances of one’s birth”; it is, as Gayatri Spivak says, a recoding into claims of ancient birth.¹ Conceptually, nationalism privileges the *statelily-ness* of a nation as a point of reference for one’s identification process. Hence the normative explanation of nationalism insists that it is built upon the idea of an idealized, shared, and uncompromised past. Consequently the

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Nationalism and the Imagination* (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2010).

nationalist impulse uses this as an instrument towards providing alibis, both for the outcome of the present and as justification for future aims. History, then, is the support underneath any nationalistic sentiment. To be more precise, the idea of history I am using here is not about a shared and synchronic-idealized reality; rather, my use of the term refers directly to the material that forms the psyche. Very simply, I am referring to the history of the human subject, or as Jacques Lacan would say, the history of the unconscious. Nationalism is not about territorial autonomy; it is not about sovereignty or the state or “politics,” or ideology, or politics of the nation-state. Nationalism as such has everything to do with everything that comes before the nation-state. So for us to be able to understand the essence of nationalism, we have to remove its association with the nation-state, because trying to understand nationalism through the nation-state is always an approach that has sabotaged itself. By connecting the nation to the state, the hyphen produces an arbitrary connection between the idea of the nation (*natio*) and the concept of the state. The primary culprit is the “state,” which is well documented to be a peculiar Eurocentric term from the fourteenth century. The word “state,” via Latin and old French (*estat*) and German (*staat*), always travels with all of its baggage from its relative, “estate.” These denotations tie the state to land, therefore form strong connotations between land, sovereignty, “politics,” and the visceral negative affect code-named nationalism. Sovereignty comes directly from the idea of the nation-state, which sees itself as the sole authority for creating laws and with the firepower to enforce and sustain them within a sharply defined and consolidated territory.

The nation, on the other hand, is about land but differs in texture. In early accounts, the nation is defined along the lines of an aggregate of communities and

individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture, and history so as to form a distinct people. It is worth pointing out that unlike a state, a nation is not always sovereign, nor is a nation always a state and vice versa. But both state and nation depend on the libidinal investment that founds, with full force, an identification process with one's conception of origination, as tied to a particular piece of dirt. "Nation" comes from the Latin root *nasci*, to be born. The idea of being born invariably implies that there is an exact point of genesis—an origination of the ties that mold one's identification with so-called place of origin together with its peopling. For this reason, it is easy to see how such conceptualization becomes part of the nationalist alibi. To be born, to all of a sudden come out of something, as a human subject, always already implies that something inextricable to you bore you; ergo, you and whatever you came from have common breeding. This is the falsity that accompanies such thinking about nationalism that has to be undone. The task is to get rid of the notion of genesis. Again, the state has more to do with sovereignty, law, and force. The nation, on the other hand, can be viewed as a naturalized and dependable political constituent, the foundations on which states, governments, and their policies hinge. This ideological construct was the creation of Europeans in the nineteenth century. With this in mind, the following question then comes to the fore: Since the nation-state is a modern (European) invention, how can one make sense of the nation-state, or nationalism, in southern Africa—not forgetting that its implantation in the continent is even more recent, i.e., since the "scramble for Africa"?

Of course the structuralist and materialist approaches are important in their approach to formulating national identification, yet their limitations have prevented these approaches from explaining why national identification is so fixed and durable, and not

fluid. Yes, identity formation and group identification have to do with semiotic negotiation, but this is not the full story. What these approaches cannot account for, which Freud was all too aware of, is affect, or the libidinal organization of groups. Libidinal bonds overdetermine the identification process. As already stated, my proposal is that in order to address the question of why it is that human subjects can voluntarily commit their lives just to protect their flag, their patch of dirt, we need Freud through Lacan. Undoubtedly, many theorists and writers have used psychoanalysis to account for national identification, and have also highlighted its limits. Jacques Derrida, amongst others, has warned that psychoanalysis should rarely be used for cultural critique because it is uniquely, culturally specific in its origins and as a discourse. Hence I engage with it cautiously.

An important attribute of a nation is its own self-awareness, in other words, recognizing itself as such. First, by recognition I am referring to the practical definition of the word. Recognition, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a technical term that denotes the *explicit acknowledgement* of the *independence* of a country by a *state* that formerly exercised sovereignty over it. In addition to this, recognition can be understood as the mental process or act whereby things are apprehended (separate from but additional to comprehension) or as belonging to a particular known (experienced) category, usually distinguished from the process of recall. Thus recognition involves the affirmation of positive status or social esteem.² So then, misrecognition, not as absence of cognition (*méconnaissance* for Lacan), is the actual removal of recognition, i.e., disrespect. To put it differently, disrespect accounts for the instance when self-respect is

² Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996).

lost, namely the loss of “the ability to relate to oneself as a legally equal interaction partner.”³ In other words, such a denial of rights (civil, political, social) signals the violation of the intersubjective expectation to be recognized, or more concretely, self-realization.

Recognition by the other is a practical relation to self, that is, it is a “practical feeling.” The only way a subject can identify with himself is through the support and approval of his traits and peculiarities by the “subject’s partner to interaction.”⁴ The term Axel Honneth uses here is “honour”—the “affirmative relation-to-self that is structurally tied to the presupposition that each individual’s particularity receives intersubjective recognition.”⁵ Thus, crucial on the cognitive side of subject formation is the ability of the subject to comprehend itself as object (self-objectification) *and the character of decisiveness that accompanies the intention to experience oneself as oneself in encountering an object of (and within) one’s action.*⁶ To quote Hegel, recognition marks the event where “one is recognized as immediately counting as such, through his being—but this being is itself generated from the concept. It is recognized being.”⁷ Therefore, “man is recognition.” Not only is the idea of nation-state crafted around the *demand* for recognition, the nationalism that arises from nation-state is built upon its history. Nationalism lays claim to the past as part of its attempt to manage the present and vindicate its goals for the future; *history* is the bedrock of nationalism. Once more, history here is what Lacan called the *history* of the subject; namely the unconscious material that structures demand and desire. What I propose then is to think of

³ Ibid., 74

⁴ Ibid., 75

⁵ Ibid., 22

⁶ Ibid., 82

⁷ Cited in Axel Honneth, “Crime and Violence,” in *Struggle for Recognition*, 42

nationalism through the nation, in the strict sense, i.e., the nation as an abstract form, nationalism before the nation-state. This is my simple idea: nationalism, contrary to conventional belief, comes before the nation-state. Again, there is no nation-state, no nation, before nationalism.

To work through the idea that nationalism precedes the nation-state, I have used two concepts of language, or textuality, since all languages are *texts*. The first one is language as written and spoken, *la langue*, or semiotic material. Following this definition, I am in support of the argument that it is through this text, through literature, that nationalism is partly built. Returning to Spivak, literature transforms “history into cultural memory, it suggests that we have all passed through the same glorious past, the same grand, national liberation battles.”⁸ The imagination, Spivak says, feeds nationalism. And as we all know, literature holds the place of the imagination because it is only through this form that we can come to recognize the imagination. She goes on, “Nationalism is the product of a collective imagination constructed through remembrance.”⁹ So yes, semiotic play is important in understanding national identification, yet it only tells the half of the story that is totally legible. But to move on to the more untraceable part that forms national identification, I will quote Spivak yet again:

*We lack the cognitive faculty to know nationalism because we allow it to play only with our imagination, as if it is knowledge.*¹⁰

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Nationalism and the Imagination* (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2010), 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

The key words here are “as if”; this “as if” identifies the unbridgeable space between the so-called knowing subject and the libidinal bond, plus the idea of identifying with a particular group. In other words, the “as if” conveys the inability to know how the object is cathected, and more importantly how an equivalence is created between a libidinal bond, our judgments, and our actions. To be sure, this is all that we have, not knowledge, but *equivalence*—a relation towards the object. Figuring out what this means is the role of the next form of the text, not *la langue*—language—but the “mother tongue”: *lalangue*, one of Jacques Lacan’s neologisms, through which he explains the materiality of language and its relation to affect and knowledge. I argue that nationalism arises out of a singular mixture of *jouissance* (the unmitigated fulfillment of being that is the aim of human desire but cannot be satisfied by any object) and *lalangue*, which is to say that nationalism has no Cause; it insists on its ex-istence. For this reason, nationalism can only be comprehended as protonationalism; the thingness of nationalism that insists on genesis without Cause or course.

Before getting to the concept of *lalangue*, I want to outline the general way within which Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has thought through nationalism; in doing so, the concept on *lalangue* may have enough ground to stand on. Lacanian abstraction accounts for nationalism in two basic ways: first, it proposes that nationalism is structured by the particular ways in which communities organize their enjoyment. So we tend to answer such questions as, what makes you a Motswana? or what makes you South African, or Zimbabwean? etc. by listing the things we think are singular about our cultural identity, everything from how we celebrate weddings, our customs, music, and rituals of mourning, to the particular food we eat and what is signified by each of these elements.

Therefore the organization and experience of enjoyment is key. Second, national identification or group identification is also structured around a projected outsider who is said to come and steal our enjoyment, our *jouissance*. Recall the first two lines at the beginning of this paper: *These ones that are here now, these Zimbabweans are thieves; they must take them home now—they just come to steal our jobs, our money, and our women*. Why is this the case and how does this negative affect come about? To answer this, we can address a related and more basic question: Why is it that we keep desiring, regardless of the fact that our desires are sometimes met with some form of *jouissance*? The answer, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, is that because we experience partial enjoyment, we continuously fool ourselves into believing that it is in fact possible to experience more enjoyment, full *jouissance*. Affect is always coupled with *jouissance*, and *jouissance* is coterminous with the paradox of partial *jouissance* plus the delusion of capturing full *jouissance* or, in other words, dissatisfaction. The reason for this is purely that *jouissance* does not exist in its entirety. *Jouissance* is the unmitigated fulfillment of being that is the aim of human desire, yet no object can satisfy it. As Lacan would say, *jouissance* “insists as an ideal, an idea”, *it is only a possibility that thought allows us to conceptualize*. Or, as Bruce Fink posits, “since we can conceive of its possibility, it [full *jouissance*] must be.”¹¹ *Jouissance*, then, comes from something like an outside, “outside in the sense that it is not the wish, ‘Let’s do that again!’ but rather, ‘Isn’t there something else you can do, something different you could try?’”¹²

Jouissance and fantasy are the forces that drive our identification acts. It is because we go through limited experiences related to a *jouissance* of the body that we

¹¹ Bruce Fink, “Knowledge and *Jouissance*.” *Reading Seminar XX* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 35.

imagine the possibility and promise of recapturing our lost *jouissance*; the enjoyment we think we once had, the original grand state of our nation. Here we have the crucial moment where one experiences the impossibility of fully satisfying one's desires—which in turn provokes dissatisfaction. Not only is this dissatisfaction the result of the limited experience of *jouissance*, it is also the result of fantasy. Fantasy ensures dissatisfaction or the impossibility of full enjoyment in two ways: first, it promises a harmonious resolution to social antagonism; and second, by covering up this lack, we are able to construct an alibi—literally, an elsewhere wherein we project the reason for the failure of experiencing full enjoyment. Phrased differently, fantasy cannot satisfy desire because that would be impossible; rather, the aim of fantasy is to construct and sustain desire; it is only through fantasy that we learn how to desire. The outsider is said to have stolen our rightful enjoyment—the enjoyment that is granted by being born on a particular patch of dirt. We imagine this projected outsider to be experiencing more enjoyment. We imagine a full enjoyment, the failure of which we project onto an outsider as a way of projecting the full realization of this enjoyment onto the future—after we get rid of this outsider. And this is exactly what Freud meant when he said that “the creation of a libidinally invested shared identity depends on the existence of a remainder that receives the manifestation of aggressivity.”¹³ The presence of this remainder, the outsider, prohibits the full self-actualization of my nationhood purely because the outsider is different and because he stole my enjoyment. Here concepts/ideas are differentiated from their representation, resulting in the representation as the only *remainder*—“these ones, those Zimbabweans, these *grigambas*.” This is how repression works: affect is displaced

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. No. 6. W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), xx-yy. {Please add page numbers for quote.}

and rearranged; the association between affect and thought is dislocated. Why? Because repression has to do with ideas, with signifiers, and not affect.

What this means is that the xenophobic attacks can be seen as the result of what happens when something powerful is repressed long and hard enough. The sudden violence in South Africa continues to puzzle many people not because it was violent, but because it was incredibly sudden. This is the nature of a symptom; it manifests itself as a place-holder for repressed material. But again, this is not the topic of my paper. Here I take issue with the inability to pin down the cause and meaning of nationalism in southern Africa. And this brings me to the last part of my proposition: the concept of *lalangue*. *Lalangue*, which Lacan introduces in Seminar XX, is a combination of the word language and its definite article—in French, thus creating something unique to the language in which it is spoken. For this reason, Lacan defines *lalangue* as the mother-tongue: the first language that we learn before we even learn how to make sense of things. Before we are able to rationalize through a reality principle, we operate through this first tongue. It is this procedure that leads to proto-nationalism, because *lalangue* is a concept that is sensitive to how we come to cathect things. After all, *lalangue* can be seen as one of the first objects we cathect—we invest an intense amount of emotional energy in this first tongue, which we believe is unique to us and therefore imagine that it is derived from us. Alas it is the other way round; it is only through language, *lalangue* included, that we can be able to put a finger on something called our psyche, our conscious and unconscious. One more time, this is my argument: nationalism arises out of a singular mixture of *jouissance* and *lalangue*. This is the substance that compels the formation of a nation, and compels individuals to believe in their nation-state's

autonomy, special heritage, and democratic institutions. A nation persists only as long as its distinct forms of “jouissance continue to be materialized in a set of practices and transmitted via national myths that structure these practices.”¹⁴ Jouissance again is defined as the incomplete paradoxical enjoyment that cannot be fully represented in meaning, yet actually does invest meaning. Lalangue is the part of language that, despite the *investment* in meaning, carries no actual meaning. Thus lalangue is the equivalent of *ab-sens*, non-meaning, i.e., the part of the materiality of language that exists but carries non-meaning. The prefix *non* is key; it highlights lack, expresses neutral negativity and the intentionality of not meaning—i.e. intentionally not wanting to ascribe significance to something. Lalangue, by repeating the two syllables of the phrase *la langue*, demonstrates the symptomatic use of language; it reveals the moment where we can recognize enjoyment in language—enjoyment only, not meaning! Then lalangue is meaningful non-sense. It is meaning created through enjoyment and not through conceptualizing. Meaning is eradicated by the mother-tongue because the mother-tongue is literally “idiosyncratic material that only carries its peculiar materiality.”¹⁵ This is how we can come to understand a word like *grigamba*. This Xhosa term is used to refer to a dirty little animal, a dung-beetle, and the apparently indistinguishable ugly “noises” that the foreigners make when they speak—their nonsensical *grigamba* language. *Grigamba* names something purely for the sake of communicating; it stands in for the negative affect that is displaced onto the black foreign national—*them*! So the word, from a particular mother-tongue, “represents a certain untranslatable idiosyncrasy relating to the very materiality of the signifier, the sonic material which differentiates one language

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Duke University Press, 1993), 112.

¹⁵ Michael Lewis, *Derrida and Lacan: Another Writing* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 211.

from another; and it refers to *lingua*—the meaningless physical tongue.”¹⁶ It is no surprise that the tongue is at the center of this issue. As an organ, the tongue is responsible for producing significant speech. By manipulating this organ, we produce signifiers that cannot avoid referencing this physical organ. “It is an organ that also actualizes itself as the wholly physical organ of tasting and food manipulation. To emphasize this physicality is to emphasize the rooting of the signifier in materiality, and ultimately in infantile or primeval need, which first stirred us to communicate.”¹⁷ Therefore, not only is the tongue responsible for our peculiar idiosyncrasies and gastronomic pleasures, it is also through the tongue that we can enunciate our national histories and rally support for our demand for recognition.

To conclude, Lacanian abstraction makes it clear that *jouissance*, desire, and fantasy combine in a specific way to create the affects that form nationalism. More precisely, a singular and regionally specific combination of *jouissance* and *lalangue* produce this thing called nationalism. Yes, semiotics plays its role, as do history and economics. But nationalism is not really about ideas, and it is not purely about political procedure and democratic institutions; rather, nationalism has everything to do with enjoyment and libidinal investment, namely the thingness of desire and the partial experience of enjoyment. In other words, the libidinal bond between members of a group “always implies a shared relation towards a thing. National identification is by definition sustained by a relationship towards nation qua thing.”¹⁸ It manifests itself to us as our thing, the nation-thing. The thing before the nation-state is key in approaching this problem of nationalism in the region. Nationalism, which is always a protosubstance,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

¹⁸ Žižek, Slavoj. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Duke University. 1993.

does not have a cause; it is an ideal idea that insists on its ex-istence. Thus, I believe, to understand it—the *thing*—we have to stress the need to dispel genesis as just an old and useless idea, and at the same time seriously consider the cultural specificity of enjoyment when dealing with the history and politics of a desired region.

Meleko Mokgosi is an artist who works within an interdisciplinary framework to create large-scale project-based installations. By working across figurative (history) painting, cinematic tropes, psychoanalysis, and post-colonial theory, his practice interrogates the specificity of regionalism in order to address questions of nationhood, colonial and anti- colonial sentiments, and the perception of historicized events. His artwork has been exhibited nationally and internationally at venues including the Botswana National Gallery, The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art Museum, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. He lives and works between the US and Botswana.