Crowds and Powerlessness: Reading //kabbo and Canetti with Derrida in (South) Africa

Rosalind C. Morris

What links the post-Enlightenment humanist discourse on the animal to that on Africa? What traces of being otherwise can be excavated from within the linguistic memory and narrative traditions of those who have, historically, been asked to signify “Africanity”? And when is the possibility of being otherwise that against which purgative violence is organized? Reading back from contemporary South African discourse on the human and the African, as framed by the problem of foreigners, animals and their rights, this chapter revisits Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd’s material on /Xam mythology. Reading in light of Derrida’s late work, The Animal That Therefore I Am, it not only seeks the traces of /Xam thought about possible conceptions of human-animal being, but also seeks to bring that thought to bear on Elias Canetti’s rendering of /Xam myth in his monumental work, Crowds and Power. Under the specter of “xenophobic” violence, as it materialized in South Africa in 2008, we conclude here by considering how and why the predicament of being simultaneously modern and African is articulated in contemporary South Africa as a question of the animal as citizen, by figures as diverse as Thabo Mbeki and J.M. Coetzee.

For Anne, Antjie, and Ingrid

“They are animals. They treat us like animals.” This statement, uttered by a Somali immigrant in South Africa following a recent eruption of what has been called “xenophobic” violence, expresses an obvious and commonplace sense of othering. It is a nearly universal gesture to abuse others by naming them as animals. But if one listens carefully to these words, one can also discern in them something more specific. Here, animality designates the kind of being that lacks compassion, that does not care for the suffering of others, and that disavows others precisely by withholding from them a capacity to suffer. It stages a complex mirroring between compassionless humans and suffering animals. It is the kind of statement made possible only in the aftermath of Jeremy Bentham’s extraordinary rephrasing of the question of humanity’s relationship and obligation to its animal others. “Can they suffer?” he asked. Derrida reminds us of the importance of this question, and its partial displacement of language and Reason as the definitive and exclusive attributes of humanity at a turning point in European history (The
Animal 27). We will have occasion to consider Bentham’s intervention in some detail below, but in the meantime I wish to focus on the logic and idioms structuring local understandings of the recent violence in order to draw out what was, and is, the problem of Africanness in South Africa today. Only then will it be possible to understand its relationship to the animal question.

The events of which the above-cited, anonymous immigrant spoke erupted in May of 2008, when a series of violent, collective actions were aimed at individuals identified as “foreigners.” These so-called foreigners were residing in poor townships of major metropolitan centers, especially Johannesburg and Cape Town. Alexandra Township, of Johannesburg, was the putative origin of this phenomenon, but it was also observed elsewhere, and, though largely contained, it continued to manifest in more rural regions quite remote from the wealthy centers of capital. The violence directed against so-called foreigners was remarkable for its rapidity, intensity and organized, collective nature. It was also remarkable for its cruelty. Victims were chased from their homes, their property burned or otherwise destroyed. Many were physically assaulted by groups, pummeled with household implements and left unconscious or presumed dead. Women with small children were not spared. Most horrifyingly, some people were burned alive – in that form of execution which arose in South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggle called “necklacing.”

In Gauteng Province alone, sixty-three people died in these assaults, which took place over a period of less than one week, and approximately 100,000 people were rendered homeless. Police, eventually backed by the military, managed to restore order to those townships where the violence had occurred, and massive counter-protests, featuring the slogan, “Shame on Us,” emerged almost instantaneously. Explanations of the violence have tended to invoke the class differences that now operate in a country that foreswore a fuller revolution and the politics of redistribution in the interest of peace and the creation of black capital. Working class and unemployed South Africans responded to the events of May 2008 with a commentary that, no doubt, captures much of the truth of the situation, if not the nature of the violence. Staggeringly high unemployment rates (exceeding forty percent in many townships), inadequate housing, and poor, sometimes non-existent services (water, electricity and sewerage) have generated an economy of severest scarcity. Every new body taxes these already stretched resources. Moreover, a government effort to provide housing through the Reconstruction and Development Program, which erects about 180,000 houses per year, has in some places been subverted. Bribery and corruption have permitted some people to access housing ahead of those who are merely “in line” for such benefits, and some of those thought guilty of bribery are non-citizens, or have