

**Active Witnessing-Lefika la Phodiso's Response to the South African Xenophobic Crisis**

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**Introduction**

In 1993 I founded a Non-Government Organisation called The Art Therapy Centre' /Lefika la Phodiso, initially developed to deal with the affects of violence and trauma associated with the struggle against apartheid. Over the years the organisation has become the 'developmentally needed object' to assist in addressing the impact of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, with its ramifications of multiple losses, and continuous trauma. The organisation's work extends to working in schools, with AIDS orphans and vulnerable children, educators and guardians, and offering training programmes for mental health workers and responding to national crises. A training programme has evolved into what is called 'Community Art Counselling', which addresses the gaps in access to education for community workers and increases the therapeutic reach in under-resourced areas.

**Abstract**

This article will explore an example of an intervention by Lefika la Phodiso, as a primary psycho-social provider in one refugee camp (Strydom Park), servicing approximately 1000 displaced individuals. I will contextualise some of the political and social conditions leading up to the xenophobic attacks in South Africa in May 2008, resulting in what became a refugee crisis.

An approach to thinking about this work relates to the discourse of what Simon Clarke calls Psychoanalytic Sociology:

... a psychoanalytic sociology addresses in parallel the complex interrelationship between socio-structural and psychological factors, there is if you like, after Fanon (1968) both a political economy and psychodynamic of social phenomena.(Clarke; 2003: 153)

Some of the analysis of the situation reveals trans-generational object resonances that as a South African, generates the question “*Have we been here before...?*” The philosophical and applied approach of Lefika La Phodiso is psychoanalytically informed, using Group Art Psychotherapy methods as developed within a South African context over the past 14 years. The intervention in the refugee camp involved individual and group support, an exhibition that provided a representation of voice and memory and an education program as part of a re-integration process that Government failed to provide. The process transgressed many therapeutic boundaries, yet responded directly to the community's need for being actively witnessed in the face of gross human violations. The narration is by the author, with multiple voices represented in this article including those of the counselors, project manager and the refugees. Presenting this article provides another valuable potential voice to those who were silently removed with very little trace.

### **Theoretical framework**

As is traditional with any therapeutic intervention, it is important to outline the theoretical approach and provide interpretations and understandings usually based on that particular area of focus, affiliation or identification. The approach Lefika offers, is an outcome of experiential training in the use of internal and external object relations. Winnicott’s contributions are multiple, and inform the overall provision of holding, providing a symbolic ‘good enough mother’, the facilitating environment, where the potential to find or create transitional objects and a potential transitional space is possible, and an innate belief that creative living is synonymous with healthy living. (Winnicott; 1958; 1976)

Christopher Bollas’ work is particularly relevant, as he has developed a way of thinking about the use of ‘objects’ as extending beyond those relational ‘objects’ of significant others that we have internalized and make use of in our daily lives, including the use of actual ‘objects’ or experiences that we draw on that assist in either ‘elaborating’ or ‘conserving’ different parts of ourselves. (Bollas; 1992)

Another core psychoanalytic concept that offers a valuable theoretical framework for thinking about the refugee intervention, is that of ‘introjection’ as developed by Hungarian psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok. ‘Sandor Ferenczi, the inventor of both the term and the

concept, defined ‘introjection’ as the process of broadening the ego” (Abraham and Torok, 1972: 127). Nicholas Rand who translated their work wrote this comment below, in an introduction to a volume of their writings, capturing the essence of their thinking:

Suffering that is recognized as such by others facilitates its gradual psychic assimilation or introjection. Explicit acknowledgement of the full extent and ramifications of the patient’s suffering is one of the analyst’s crucial functions. Whether with our own strength, with the help of loved ones, or with an analyst if need be, we must be able to remember the past, recall what was taken from us, understand and grieve over what we have lost to trauma, and so find and renew ourselves. (Rand, 1994: 12)

This statement encapsulates the objectives of our work in the camp and the work that followed, a core need to assist in individuals re-finding their voices and selves that were violently interrupted and interfered with.

Our objective was foremost to provide an outlet for emotion and feeling in a way that could be heard and seen, thus freeing up internal space to develop and elaborate more active and alive parts of the self. This is achieved by providing an extensive ‘aesthetic tool kit’ including words, feelings, dreams, memories, metaphors and art materials that may or may not be utilized. The core provision is a safe space where anything is possible and there is room for the unconscious and conscious parts of the self to find expression.

The philosophy of our organization is to provide ‘safe spaces’ in which to work. Michelle Atlas, an Australian Volunteer project manager who coordinated this project, articulately defined ‘safe space’.

The notion of a safe space is a common concept used within psychoanalytic theory. A safe space is created through a feeling of safety within external and/or internal structures. An external structure can be anything from a room or studio, with art materials and furniture for conducting sessions with clients, to a tent or piece of land in a refugee camp. Internal safe spaces evolve through the harnessing of trust and rapport between a counsellor and a client, wherein the client feels safe to explore and discuss personal issues, concerns and experiences, in order to understand and process them. (Atlas; 2008)

## **Political Context**

Early in May 2008 unrest began in Alexandra Township when a gang of men raided a hostel where many foreigners were living. They brutally beat, raped and pillaged from hostel dwellers, blaming ‘foreigners’ (called ‘aliens’ by some) for taking away their jobs, housing, and women and accusing them for being responsible for crime. Meetings were held by the Alexandra Residents Association, where a decision was made to rid the township of all foreigners. It started on a small scale with gangs of men raiding foreigners' homes and threatening their lives, threatening them with rape and insisting they leave the location - their motto was “They must leave or die”. The area at the centre of the violence was known as ‘Zulu Territory’ dominated by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Violence mounted and spread to other areas including the Ekurhuleni district, the centre of political violence in the 1980’s and early 1990’s, between the ANC and IFP. The horror in this area culminated in the stabbing, beating and burning alive of a Mozambican miner named Ernesto Nhamuave. This image appeared on the front page of a newspaper, showing bystanders, including children, laughing. Alex Eliseev, a journalist for The Star newspaper wrote an article on ‘A Torn Narrative of Violence’, and the manner in which he described the adrenalin, avoiding tear gas and rubber bullets, bodies strewn on the roads, marching and chanting gangs with traditional weapons, painted a familiar image reminiscent of the context in which all my work began.

Perhaps the torn narrative is the result of coming too close to the bloodshed...or maybe it’s just the way I’ve remembered it.” (Eliseev, 2008: .27)

The violence and intimidation spread, being directed at other locals that spoke languages besides Zulu – the Vendas, Shangaans and Xhosas. These individuals had crossed the boundary from rural to urban settings, and thus were labelled - ‘other’. A headline appeared in the Mail and Guardian newspaper late in May after the attacks had spread: ‘Apartheid-era practice raises its head in Gauteng’. Tests were conducted on people standing in food queues where they were asked to say arbitrary Zulu words that are no longer used or are obscure, including the words for elbow and toes or establishing how people pronounced the word ‘coke’.

For almost 30 years during apartheid, officials used a pencil test to classify some coloured people as black and others as white. Race classification was dependent on

whether the pencil slid off your hair (that made you white) or got stuck (which made you officially black). (Ndlovo, 2008)

Fourteen years into South Africa's democracy and the same methods are used to discriminate and oppress individuals based on difference.

The constitution states that there needs to be 'strong protection of all people within our border'(Vavi, 2010), seemingly to include the humanitarian responsibility of taking care of the millions of refugees from Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Mozambique etc, seeking humane conditions, employment and an escape from poverty. However, local South Africans are also struggling socially, economically and emotionally, where the levels of poverty, a 34% unemployment rate, crime, AIDS and HIV related deaths and illnesses are escalating. We are faced with increases in food and fuel prices, and people that were promised RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) housing from Government are still living in informal settlements and shacks, while government officials are receiving enormous salary increases, involved in multi-million rand business deals and are seemingly using tax payers money for private or illegitimate purposes. There are clear divisions between haves and have-nots, reminiscent of the apartheid era, however, at this point in South Africa's history, not necessarily along 'colour' divides.

The outbreak of the xenophobic violence brought to the fore a toxic manifestation of competition for meagre resources, revealing what seemed to be a disregard for human rights, difference and human life. The rejection of foreigners in the context of macrocosmic disintegration of moral concerns in the country, holds a resonance with the concept that, 'a society reveals itself perhaps most clearly in the phenomena it rejects, excludes and confines.' (Clare, in Szekacs-Weiz and Ward, 2004: 13)

Crush and Dodson (2007) wrote an enlightening paper 'The Lost Decade', illuminating how 'despite the political and social transformation set in motion by the collapse of apartheid and the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa's migration policy remained mired in the past.' (p.438) The concept of 'violent othering' has persisted and continued since the apartheid era. South Africa's immigration policy was not amended until 2004 - which clearly indicates that apartheid thinking rooted in racial and gender discrimination continues to inform current policies. There are still no policy guidelines on how to manage refugees in the Home Affairs Office.

By early June, refugee camps were set up in areas far outside the main cities. The UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) supplied the tents, supported by Save the Children (2008). By this time the violence had subsided, 62 people had died, hundreds were injured and tens of thousands had been displaced from their homes.

Lefika La Phodiso trained community workers as Community Art Counsellors from the time of the transition towards a democratic government in 1994. The majority of Community Art Counsellors, of all generations, experienced apartheid at some time in their lives. Many of these counsellors grew up and still live in the areas that were most affected by the violence then and now. This political history is important in locating the texture of the inter-subjective and inter-relational realities of those involved in facilitating spaces for internal and external expression in the camps and those involved in receiving psycho-social support. For many the re-traumatisation and reactivation of aspects of the sameness of experience was deeply felt.

It raises questions about how I feel as a black person. Do we feel like we are less because of the colour of our skin, because of the language we speak? I don't know. It was something that was happening a long time ago, during the apartheid government. They would separate black people depending on the language you were speaking. If you were a Zulu they would allocate an area where there were Zulus only. It's happened again, and who is to say you are any less because you are a Tsonga person, or a Zulu person. It's not only happening to the foreign people it's also happening to the residents of South Africa. I don't know what it is about language. We associate a person with the language that they speak and in terms of their behaviour. Now you are afraid of who you are. Even if you tried to adopt the other language you are not welcome because of where you come from. It's also happening in politics, people are saying 'now it's about time we have a Zulu president'. So it's happening from our government and now there is a pattern. It's continuing, and we need to break that chain. We're teaching the next generation to discriminate. But where would you go if you are not being accepted here, in South Africa? If you are from South Africa, which country would accept you?" (Ntombi Sangweni, Community Art Counsellor)

### **Decision to Act**

A psychologist who doesn't speak about the situation nowadays is not neutral, but taking a stand by remaining silent. (Ornan, 2007: 167)

As with any national crisis, Lefika La Phodiso has a tradition of calling a meeting with all the Community Art Counsellors to determine our level of involvement as an organisation. The xenophobic crisis was a complex socio-political arena where individuals within our group had their own perceptions and ideologies around the issue. As black South Africans they were in a difficult position of being sympathetic to the cause of the refugees, but simultaneously being afraid of the backlash within their own communities as to their affiliation. Some of them were personally ambivalent and conflicted about their involvement in the project. Some were financially driven to do the work but felt morally torn. Somehow, their conscious knowledge of their fear and ambivalence facilitated their capacity to engage with courage and willingness, balancing the precariousness of reciprocity of inter-subjective relationships.

As an organisation involved in providing psycho-social support, our ethical question always is, 'do we have a moral obligation to act?' Despite multiple contentious issues, the consensus was to act and within that shared capacity for concern, we worked closely with the Human Rights Commission and the Centre for The Study of Violence and Reconciliation to offer our services as a primary psycho-social provider.

A continuous thread of questioning, or as Bollas may name the 'infinite question' is the function of providing a space for emotion at a time where basic human needs are not being met. Clarke in his paper on Psychoanalytic Sociology and the Interpretation of Emotion cites Williams: 'Without emotions, social life, including our decision making capabilities and our ability to make informed choices amongst a plurality of options would be impossible.' (Williams, 1998:76 cited in Clarke, 2003) This emphasizes the interconnectedness between intra-psycho change that generates change at a political and social level.

Paola Freire's assumption holds that when one is filled with an overwhelming situation, a position of muteness descends where one cannot move. Our role in such an extreme situation would be to lift the structuring of muteness and transform it into a structure of expression to bring about change. As therapists, we have a responsibility to speak out, and to facilitate a space where speaking out can occur. To do this, the creation of a shared language is necessary, both ideological and dialogical, a language that promotes 'cultural action for freedom'. (Freire: 1972) In instances of trauma and exposure to stressful situations, language is often unavailable, and image making therefore becomes a safe way to express some of the

difficult situations which people experience. Language, in this case, was also a barrier for many people who could not communicate in their vernacular, and art-making provided a valuable bridge to being understood and heard.

Lefika therefore acted to provide desperately needed safe spaces for traumatized and bereaved community members to process their grief and challenging life circumstances, and to harness a sense of identity in contained, psychodynamic group processes. Meaningful therapeutic engagement and art making were interwoven in a sensitive and contained therapeutic approach, to facilitate the expression and exploration of issues and concerns.

### **Thokoza Police Station- first ‘safe shelter’**

With the outbreak of violence, ‘foreigners’ fled their homes and areas to seek refuge. The Thokoza police station located in what was known in the 1980’s as the ‘street of the dead’, was renowned for the high incidence of violence during the apartheid era; it again became a significant site - this time offering a temporary shelter from injustice and terror. Lefika la Phodiso came to assess the refugees' needs and see how we could help.

Individuals were queuing to register as ‘refugees’, ‘foreigners’, and ‘victims of xenophobic violence’. Adults stood in long queues and set up temporary homes in the large community hall. Homes were reduced to what could be carried on their backs in neat packages. The sick were placed in adjacent rooms. Children played unsupervised outside in unsanitary water. Not anticipating any immediate intervention we came without materials. However we had a bag of clay in the car and we sat near the parents helping to clean baby’s noses, facilitating a space without common language in which children could play. Fragmented images that were dislocated, suggestive of having been up-rooted, and cooking utensils were created. Children showed us their hands with a red marking in the centre of their palm. This was their ID marking- marking as ‘other’ as ‘foreigner’. From this first encounter, the importance of providing a space to ‘introject’, to externalize what was going on internally was powerfully felt.



## **Processes of providing an art therapeutic space in the camp**

While listening and providing a space for understanding was the primary task of the Community Art Counsellors, the other tasks at hand that transgressed boundaries of what is understood as 'therapy' could not be anticipated. In the context of being in the camp, engaging with the residents, bearing witness to the horrors that they had experienced, their sense of futility and hopelessness- listening was not enough.

Each day one or two art counsellors would enter the camp and walk from tent to tent to gather those that wanted to join a group. The children would emerge, sometimes in hundreds following the blue trunk of art materials to the UNHCR tent. Different configurations of groups would form- educators, women, men, adolescents and children of all ages. At times their therapeutic encounter would occur in the physical space of a tent, or it may have been while walking towards the food queue and at times out on the grass or under a tree.

### **Case study of an adolescent group (14 -20 years old) facilitated by Mokgadi Rakabe (Community Art Counsellor)**

Whenever the young people related their experiences their sad faces looked down, and sometime you only saw their tears rolling down their cheeks. When the teenagers were relocated to other schools, nearby to the camp, they again went through struggles of difference and discrimination from some of the other learners. The process of art counselling therefore explored notions of difference and finding ways of developing a positive attitude towards race and culture, focusing on awareness of positive qualities. (Mokgadi Rakabe, Community Art Counsellor)

Newspapers were offered as the primary material on a day when access to the trunk of art materials was unavailable. The group were asked to tear the newspapers into pieces and strips. While tearing they were asked to speak about the process and free associate. Some of the individuals were noisy and laughing, while others were very quiet. The tearing of the paper became a metaphor for the struggles and loss, they had experienced. The group spoke of their loss of identity, the physical loss of their certificates, belongings, books and the feelings of anger for their situation. They said that they would never trust their neighbours again, as they were living happily next to them, when suddenly they became enemies. The group spoke about the sound of the paper and how it reminded them of the fighting, and some discussed their fear

of death. Many participants spoke of the experience of being attacked and hiding under the bed, watching their houses being burnt with petrol. Some members of the group spoke about what they would like to do when they were older; becoming a doctor, pilot, engineer, or teacher. Moses (pseudonym) spoke about losing hope and not knowing what he wants to be when he grows up as he cannot attend his school anymore. There was also discussion about identity and the confusion in the camp, as some children (and adults) were South African nationals, but were still beaten and had to seek shelter in the police station.

The group was visibly affected by the tearing process. In order to contain and support the session, Mokgadi introduced a second part to this process. She suggested using the torn paper as an opportunity to transform and to unify the experience, ensuring that participants felt involved and heard. The process became about finding a way to elaborate a negative experience into a potentially positive/hopeful outcome. As a group they collected the remaining pieces of paper and decided to create something beautiful and bold – a child/doll. They used pieces of cloth and the paper to create the body and head, and masking tape to combine the pieces. As the group was creating they laughed and shared ideas as to how to collaboratively create ways of joining the hands to the body.

The result of the process was a doll made up of fragments of the paper. The group emerged out of the tent unified, holding the doll, laughing and joking. They transcended their initial racial disputes in the group, and experientially shifted some of the group dynamics pertaining to difference and mixed nationalities. The group process allowed the children to express their concerns, fears and sadness but also brought the participants together, to create a unified image, symbolic of hope for their future.

They were thankful for having people from an organisation to listen to them, and to give them support and courage to face their challenges. (Mokgadi Rakabe)

The newspaper was an ‘evocative object’ that elicited feelings in response to the experience. Another term that describes the process that Bolland uses is ‘aleatory object’ which suggests that the ‘object’ plays on the individual in an unexpected way.

## Case Study of Mother and Baby (Sarifa and Ernest)

A large part of the work we did in the camp was offering an empathetic and engaged presence. This function, while not seemingly obvious, provided a much needed sense of feeling witnessed and recognized. This portrait of a baby and a mother and a mother and a child, photographically captures some of the significant transformation that occurred within a period of two weeks. When first encountering this baby it was without its mother – at three days old. This baby was revealed when a neighbour, stripped away layers of blankets to show this ‘miracle’ that was born in the tent. She seemed proud that within such harsh and dire conditions life could exist.



The mother appeared and did not engage at all with the baby, she seemed profoundly depressed and emotionally numbed. When she fed the baby there was no eye contact and the holding seemed difficult

people knew about the medical care and when asked if she items, which she She was not sure if she where she would live,



for her. It seemed not many presence of this baby. As all provisions had been withdrawn, needed anything, she had a list of needed for both her and the baby. could stay with her husband, and was worried about the baby’s

survival. Winnicott’s saying, ‘There is no such thing as a baby. Only a baby and a mother’ (1958), seemed to reflect the dynamic of this scenario.

We bought the provisions and gave them to her within a couple of days. She seemed pleased but again did not show any kind of animated response. During the weeks before seeing her again, she was held very much in mind, by the many counsellors who sat in supervision thinking about her, and by other psychotherapists who wondered about her internal world.

On meeting again two weeks later, and seeking her out to make contact, she was pleased to see us. She went into the tent and brought the baby out and fed it while being watched. It seemed as if both the ‘holding in mind’ and a physical holding in providing essential items for

her and her baby facilitated some significant shift in the relational dynamic between her and her baby. The hidden baby could be seen together with the hidden internal delight that was previously buried within the deadness of the situation. This vignette offers some evidence of the function of emotional containment and witnessing, in facilitating hope.



### **Case Study - Active Witnessing**

With the camp threatening to close, provisions and services had been withdrawn which resulted in an uprising of anger and some violence. Our counsellors were told to stay away, and there was ambivalence about returning in the face of potential threat to their well being. As an organisation we met and felt that it would be important to offer a ‘debriefing’ with all of those that were involved in the psychosocial programme we offered over the past five months. As the director it was felt that I would co-facilitate this session.

While walking from tent to tent to assemble the participants, women appeared and gathered their neighbours and friends. As we walked, the energy was agitated, and it felt like the formation of a vigilante group. The children ran into the tent to draw on large rolls of paper that we had thought initially would be for the women. The women gathered under a tree and all simultaneously started to shout at Ntombi and tell her of their grievances, dissatisfaction and terror of not knowing what their futures held.

Lefika La Phodiso was the only remaining service provider at a time when the community’s priorities were food, shelter and safety. Maslow’s<sup>1</sup> hierarchy of needs came to the fore in my mind and what we had to offer at a time like this felt insignificant and ‘soft’. I was plummeted into ‘action mode’ perhaps as a defence against an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. I suggested that we could help make their voices more heard. I informed them that we had a video camera, and a digital camera and reminded them about having an exhibition at the Constitutional Court, a context where there may be potential for action be taken to assist them in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often represented as a pyramid, with the largest and lowest levels of needs at the bottom (physiological basic needs), and the need for self-actualization at the top (psychological needs).

I suggested that I could take portraits of each person and show the photograph with the narrative of their feelings and what their needs and wants were. At that point a documentary film maker suggested we also use the video camera. We asked if that was something that they would want to participate in, and whether they wanted to use the video camera as a tool to make their voices heard. They all chose to be involved. They continued forcefully expressing themselves but now, systematically, one by one, each woman moved into the centre of the group, took the platform, looked into the camera and emphatically expressed their pain and fury and emotively spoke and cried their stories. Despite not having a common language, and many languages being spoken simultaneously, the inter-relational impact was felt. They were all talking at the same time at one point, in different languages, Portuguese, Zulu, Sesotho and possibly other languages.



Ntombi patiently listened and reflected. The women were very angry and were shouting about the fact that since they had moved to Boksburg their facilities were much worse. As she translated what she could, some of the content revealed the horrors of living in the camp. One woman R said she had not received her medication for weeks and there was no medical attention. Someone else K said that meals were no longer regular and they didn't know what they were going to get and when they would get it. One woman spoke of how her children were not safe in the camp and some children had been raped. Many voiced that they did not know what was to become of them as they didn't have an ID document. Threats circulated in the camp, that people without the correct documentation revealing their South African citizenship or asylum seeker status, would be bussed back to their countries of origin when the

camps were officially closed. R said that her daughter, a social worker was born in South Africa as well as her grandchildren and had identification documents but she did not and was afraid of being separated from her family. She was sick, elderly and unemployed with no relatives in Mozambique –her country of birth. Others spoke of husbands who were either legal or illegal but having a different status to them, the implication being that they would be separated from their loved ones.

One woman came forward and explained how her aging Mozambican husband had his eyes gouged out in a xenophobic attack and is now blind. After the initial violence he returned to Holomisa on the East Rand, where he looked for work. He was brutally attacked, his home was burnt and his furniture stolen. She lost her foot in the violence and is now partially disabled. She has to take care of her husband and neither of them is able to work.

Each person witnessed the other silently while they took the platform - and somehow at the end of the women's testimonies, they were more united, calmer yet at the same time more agitated and the atmosphere had an air of activism about it. It felt as if the women were bearing a deep internal wound that was palpable, the impact was an almost unbearable sense of hearing and feeling and needing to act.

This process highlighted the importance of language and voice as a powerful authentic expression of the self. Appadurai emphasises that the area that is most compromised with disenfranchised groups is their capacity to give voice to their views. In the situation of the refugees, they became dependent and infantilized by not being able to source their own income, food or shelter (Appadurai, 2004). Within this context of the limited resources in the refugee community expressing their autonomy, our intervention almost unconsciously activated a mobility of being.

After the process of this very powerful embodied verbal experience, we invited the refugees into the tent, and asked if they would like to create anything of what they were feeling or thinking individually or as a group. It seemed as if further psychic elaboration of the power of their expressions would be useful, using the vocabulary of another medium. Image making was very much part of the language of expression during their time at the camp. They looked for pencils and rulers and chose to each have their own piece of paper. Almost all of them chose materials that were potentially more cognitive, as what they were making needed to be read.

This process seemed to be about digesting, of re-wording and recreating their verbal expressions into a form that could be grounding and potentially empowering. They wanted these texts to be read by others and they wanted to be recognised. They had room to think - after they had expressed an enormous amount of emotion. Some who were illiterate and could not write or read, or who wanted to convey their message in Zulu or English or a language other than their own, asked L, the only English speaking member of their group, to translate and transcribe what they wanted to say for them. Ntombi was also available for translation. Almost all of them wrote a testimony of what they wanted – to concretize their pleas for houses, safety, and to be issued with an identity document that would allow them to stay in a country they knew as home.

This process seemed to shift something in the women. The multiple testimonies using their verbal and imaged words facilitated a more empowered position of claiming the right to have a voice that could be seen and heard. The media had tried to enter the camp while we were there and were not given permission. The photographs and video and their images provided evidence that could be witnessed in the face of the refugee residents' isolation and silent horror.

Ntombi's reflections on her presence in the camp holds the essence of her internal capacity to bear her own and others' expanse of emotion, and to know that this unconscious and conscious self benefits from an available other or container.

Towards the end of our time at the camp I thought maybe we shouldn't be there. At first the community was provided with what they needed but the minute that those provisions stopped they became very very angry. I thought maybe we should have gone to the camp for the few months and then stopped our work but then I think we kept on going back because we wanted to build trust with the community, and we went back because of what we'd already experienced.

The minute we arrived in the camp we were welcomed, especially by the children. So, when I was thinking 'no I don't want to go back there', I'd think of those children and feel that we could say to them 'we can't provide you with what you need at this moment but we can listen and empathise with you'.

I think we did a good job because we're now having an exhibition to educate people and to bring about awareness. We didn't plan for this. We're showing the other side of the camp, which people didn't see in the news and the newspapers. So we went there and we witnessed what was happening in the camps, and we saw that these are very innocent people who are suffering. (Ntombi Sangweni, Community Art Counsellor)

Reflecting on the counsellors' counter-transference and inter-subjective responses to their experiences confirms the importance of their own training. Their training encouraged and insisted on an investment in their own intra-psychic and interpersonal exploration, making use of 'the evocative object world'. (Bollas, 1992, 2009)

The resilience of both the refugee community and the Community Art Counsellors was constantly being challenged. There were ongoing threats of closure of the camp, evoking uncertainty, insecurity, anger and resentment amongst the refugees, and in a parallel capacity evoking fear, helplessness, rejection, exhaustion and uselessness in the Art Counsellors. The Art Counsellors were visibly burning out and expressing that they were not sure they could continue the work. They became the scapegoats for many of the refugee residents' fury and anger with South Africans, and while they were consistently there and available emotionally for the residents, their trust was always being tested. There were onslaughts of undermining remarks including; 'You South Africans are always so well dressed- you never struggle' or 'How do we know the food we are getting is not poisoned?' etc. This question seemed to aptly address both the quality of the real food as well as the emotional food that was available.

In our de-briefing and supervision sessions with our counsellors they said the work was impacting on their home lives. They relayed personal vignettes of exchanges and sessions with their group members and cried. The plight of these people who had become part of their internal worlds, whose futures looked so bleak made them feel hopeless and helpless. Over time, and with the predictability and continuity of their presence, the refugees did start to trust them and were able to experience South Africans not only as persecutors but were also able to internalize some of the 'good breast' or the 'good enough' other. (Klein, 1975, Winnicott, 1971)

It seems important at this juncture to include one of the senior Community Art Counsellors, Phumzile Rakhosa's testimony written soon after the camps closed.

Working at the refugee camp has been an overwhelming experience. Thinking back on my time in the camp brings me feelings of sadness and pain. Pain brought about by the uncertainty of where these people are going to go.

During the last days before the closure of the camp I saw some of the refugees on the news. Some of them I could identify – people who we were working with, and there they were, sitting on the streets, filmed for TV. I saw Mario, one of the men from our adult male group. He was on TV saying ‘I don’t know where to go, and I’m sitting here on the streets, and there is no sanitation’. Knowing that these people are really helpless, and that they don’t have anywhere to go brings back the pain. You look at that person and you have a personal relationship with them, and it brings you back to where you were. The TV keeps bringing it back to you, and you cannot respond to this person like you would normally talk to them at the camp. It makes you feel so helplessness as you can’t say anything. The police were threatening them, as they can’t sit on the streets forever and so you know, and can see, that this experience hasn’t ended.

This was a very different experience to our regular groups. Normally when a group ends people continue with their lives, but this is very difficult end to sit with. My ending with the people at the camp was not the proper ending that I had wished. The circumstances didn’t allow for a proper end. With constant talk and threats of the camp closing it was very difficult for one to know when the final day was. As time progressed and threats of closure increased it became scary to go there, as with so many false endings the refugees were beginning not to trust anyone.

During debriefing with Lefika, we had a session where we reflected and created art. I didn’t know what to create, so instead I was just playing with the art materials, and I just put all the different colours of paint into the image. The image I created has no ending and no beginning; it doesn’t have a structure, which is what I think I was experiencing. We were working in a condition, which didn’t have any structure. All we could do was try to provide a safe space for those people to be contained. So, I chose a small piece of paper and created no image, no one colour, no picture. The colours have all blended into each other. It’s a true reflection of how I felt, and what I still feel

now, as this experience doesn't end. I am still digesting it. You see it in the newspapers, on TV, and sometimes you even go to the mall and see some of them.

These people were being exposed to continuous traumatic events and we were seeing it live. It was something that was being lived. You would see it every day in the camps. People coming up and talking to me and saying things like 'I don't have any space to bath', 'the food has run out'.

This experience has made me very sensitive to how people treat foreigners. I remember I was at a PEP store buying airtime, and a man had just bought a stripped carry bag that they take back home or on travels. This man worked at Nandos. He was dressed in his uniform, and was about to pay when the cashier at the PEP store said 'are you buying this bag because you're going back home?' This man said 'no, I'm not going anywhere'. And the clerk said 'no man you must go, if you go there is one less problem in this country'. And I was there, and I felt like if I intervened how many others would feel the same? So I kept quiet. This experience changes your perception of how people treat and talk to foreigners, and maybe it's been happening in front of me all along and I didn't see it! I wanted to say to that man 'don't worry, I don't feel the same'. (Phumzile Rakhosa, report, 2008)

### **Decision to publicly bear witness – Exhibition**

A month after the closure of the camps, Lefika hosted an exhibition at Constitution Hill (where the Constitutional Court is situated) exploring the refugee experience. This gave further expression to this process of having a more public domain for having the refugees voices heard – and their voices in a language that holds a connection to their deepest emotional, internal objects.

The role of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis during this time, and at most times, inhabits the precarious position of maintaining a rigorous code of confidentiality while offering an extraordinary opportunity to gather important intra psychic material that reveals evidence and thus potential material, to effect socio-political modification.

The exhibition challenges some of the cornerstones of psychoanalytic psychotherapy in that the work created in the refugee camps within the context of a safe therapeutic space is made public. This process of exhibiting evolved as we engaged with the residents. The complex

counter-transference inter-relationships between the psyches of the refugees and the Community Art Counsellors revealed a sense of helplessness and powerlessness that the therapeutic engagement did not entirely address. The lack of Government support and adequate international support further facilitated the collective decision to place the work and voices of these men, women and children in view.

Avissar powerfully states:

While aspiring to change and well being, therapists cannot just stand aloof and passively (and almost unwittingly) take part in the continuation of hardship and distress. Remaining silent, ignorant or passive would make us accomplices to the production of human suffering and would constitute a betrayal of our basic values as therapists (Avissar, 2008: 170).

Since the shift of power towards a democratic government, the drive to implement change has dissipated. Over the past 15 years there has been a gradual decrease in a shared moral and humanitarian value of a 'rainbow nation', a non-racial, non-discriminatory, democratic, free thinking culture. There has been a disintegration of the value for human life reflected in the increase of indiscriminate acts of violence. The polarised structures of our economy are a major contributing factor to the strife that ensues. The need for a re-investment in speaking out as way of implementing change seems essential, particularly when the fibre between what is political and what is personal is so frail.

### **Re-integration Education Programme**

At the time of the camps opening and again at the time of them closing, there were vague allusions to a programme of re-integration in the communities most affected. They have remained allusions, despite a few attempts at addressing this disintegration of human values on a community level by some NGOs. In response to the passivity of South African society, Lefika engaged in a re-integration project in partnership with The Department of Education and UNICEF to work with educators and children from areas most affected by this national crisis.

The workshop provided a reflective space, triggering educators' early experiences of being discriminated against, of being in the victim position. In being given a directive of creating an image of a time in their lives that they felt they belonged and a time where they felt they didn't,

a multitude of memories and associations emerged. The educators began to reflect on a position of accountability, responsibility and recognition of their own guilt in this current situation. There was an unexpected identification of a sameness of experience. An educator who was willing to share her experiences created an image of herself when she was pregnant.

I remember a long time ago when I was staying in Thokoza. It was during the time of political violence. People were killed, injured and raped. I left everything in my house and ran for my life. Seeing this exhibition reminded me of that situation. I know what it feels like to lose everything you have, it's like losing your identity.

Educators were confronting repressed or forgotten trauma from the past. It was an opportunity to engage in developing empathy for the places they have inhabited and do inhabit internally and externally and to extend that empathy for those experiencing similar experiences in our current history. Another educator remembered a time during the apartheid era when he was not allowed to use a whites-only toilet and accessed his feelings of humiliation and shame. Another's response in an image had the words, 'feel like disappearing, want to die, and cry.'

The seemingly blunted initial responses were shifted after going through the experience of the exhibition and the workshop, of engaging verbally and visually within an inter-relational group structure. The reactivation of sadness and despair at their past traumas allowed something alive to emerge out of the silence of encrypted collusion.

Sibongile Nhlapo, a very active Community Art Counsellor in this process, wrote a piece that encapsulates the nuances of the tenuous intra-psychic and inter-psychic relationships.

At home, I saw the violence on TV and as it progressed and spread I wanted to help but I did not know how. When the ATC called on us to help, I was there in the team at Wadeville. I saw the temporary tents. Temporary tents were white and clean but the insiders were damaged. I saw handsome men queuing for food, hungry. It did not matter much, as I thought it was not forever, it was temporary. The children that we saw for the first time were uncontrollable. I felt sore when children told how their parents panicked in the rush to save them. We let the stories unfold, we held them the best way we could.

I would go home and see my children and wonder whether they knew how lucky they were, to have a home, shelter and food. Every time I would go to Wadeville, I'd really want to offer myself, thinking things would get better. All they wanted was help; all we could offer was containment and love.

During the women's group we sat and listened and absorbed as they were telling us of their loss, the pain and the agony. It reminded me of my own, only there was no one to hold me; I was there to hold them and that gave me solace.

When I heard that they would be moved to Boksburg, it was like I would lose them. When they moved I drove the whole of Boksburg looking. We found them worse than before – helpless, hoping, dependent, sick, frustrated and all. I saw their helplessness and felt it deep in my own body. I could not always sleep at night. I would wake up and follow all the channels, to see whether the UN, that they trust so much, would help. Nothing more than food and security.

It broke my heart to see healthy, strong, willing, able men fall apart before my eyes. One day, when I went to Boksburg and reached the tents, I could not help but vomit.

The last day I called twenty-two ladies for discussion and they just wanted to kill me. I watched groups of people wanting to protect and kill me at the same time. The frustration was overwhelming for all of us. They were tired of me. I was tired of them. We were all tired and we all cried as the last day was near for them to go. Mine also had come. As I looked at their loads prepared for departure, it was my relief too that it was also my own departure. Also, it had been Mr Mbeki's departure. So many departures. No hope. What is temporary? So, forever temporary or temporary forever? I drove away. Am I away? I will forever think of them. (Sibongile Nhlapo, 2008)

## **Conclusion**

This article is inconclusive, as the psycho-social and political dimensions of this work precluded any kind of follow up research and engagement with this refugee population. The majority of individuals had no choice but to participate in a 'forced migration' back to their countries of origin, and because of the lack of a comprehensive re-integration programme, those that remained could not return to their previous places of residence, as they were still unsafe. Many took refuge in the Central Methodist Church, which has also since been

disbanded because of the vast levels of abuse and unsanitary conditions. A programme has been established by the Department of Cooperative Governance in collaboration with the United Nations Development programme to ‘strengthen communities through diversity and peace.’ (McGregor, 2010) Government has still not adequately addressed the gaps in policy or humanitarian responses to refugees and migrants.

Our approach and desire as an organization was to provide a voice and space for the traumatic experiences to be elaborated into a generative space, and to facilitate and engage with the resident’s resilience and ego strength. While the evolution of the relationships with the individuals we worked with could not be elaborated upon, the elaboration of creating more psychically aware, alive and engaged empathetic spaces continues in our ongoing work as an organization.

We also hope that we have increased their chances of being heard and that the reassures which lie buried in crypts will become the delight of their owner and can be made to work to the benefit of us all. (Abraham and Torok, 1975: 156)

On 10 May 1994, fifteen years almost to the day before this xenophobic outbreak, Nelson Mandela was sworn in as the country’s first democratically elected President. In his inaugural speech, Mandela said that he would want to free South Africans from poverty, suffering and all forms of discrimination. He ended his speech with the following words

Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another... the sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement. Let freedom reign. God bless Africa!

(Mandela,1998: 151)

Never again... is happening again.

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