CHAPTER 1

Introduction

We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood [sic]. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face.¹

Steve Bantu Biko in 1973

“Have you heard that there is xenophobia in Balfour inMpumalanga?” Freedom, a Zimbabwean teenager, asked me in February 2010. I knew Freedom from the previous year, and thus I also knew that his question about “xenophobia” did not refer to xenophobic attitudes as such, but, rather, to violent attacks on foreign Africans. I had met Freedom at the Central Methodist Mission (CMM) in inner-city Johannesburg where he then stayed and schooled, like a number of his young compatriots who had come to Johannesburg on their own. Now he stayed at the premises of the Methodist church in Jabavu, Soweto, and so I asked him if he was afraid that “it” would also come to Soweto. Not now, the young man responded, but after the FIFA World Cup.² For the time being Freedom perceived the gaze of the world on the host country of the soccer spectacle to be on his side.

Xenophobia, an irrational fear or dislike of foreigners or something that is regarded as foreign or strange, has probably always been an issue in human communities, but in recent years, as international migration has expanded worldwide, xenophobia has become an increasingly manifest and discussed concern in many societies. In migrant-receiving countries in the Global North xenophobic images of the foreign other are often linked with thriving anti-immigrant extreme-right parties, and similar images of the unwanted stranger identified with crime and competition feature in the immigrant-receiving countries of the Global South.³ Among migrant communities themselves new, at times exclusionary, identities also form or old ones take on new meanings vis-à-vis the situation of displacement, transition and resettling.⁴ Like most

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¹ Biko 2004c, 108.
² Fieldnotes 12.2.2010.
³ See Castles and Miller 2003, 1–9, 14–16.
⁴ See e.g. Appiah 1992, 165.
social phenomena, international migration has the potential to impact on identity construction and reconstruction in both positive and negative ways. In either case, these encounters between worlds intensify interrelated questions about identity, belonging and morality. The dynamics also apply to South Africa, as my encounter with Freedom illustrates, where xenophobia towards black African migrants has been a much-debated topic in the media and academia, especially since waves of xenophobic violence swept through the country’s inner cities and townships in May 2008.

Alongside the growing attention given to xenophobia, ubuntu (Nguni: humanness/humanity) continues to be a notion widely referenced in South Africa. The term is used to denote an African and South African communal, humane and hospitable philosophy, worldview or lifestyle. According to the ubuntu philosophy, people exist in a web of relationships, as exemplified by the often quoted proverb umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (Zulu: a person is a person through other persons). Due to this interdependent nature of human existence, if one person’s dignity is violated, it is said that other people are also affected. Since the dawn of its democracy, ubuntu has been a prominent notion in the public discourse of the ‘new’ South Africa and a tool in the nation building project: President Thabo Mbeki, for instance, called for reflection on how “we can use [the notion of ubuntu] to define ourselves as South Africans” in his 2005 Heritage Day speech. Besides being used by politicians like Mbeki, the term also crops up in the speech of other actors such as the clergy and business people. Ubuntu is used in a myriad of settings, from promoting reconciliation between people to selling alarm systems and the services of armed security guards. So, as Munyaka and Motlhabi argue, “[t]he word Ubuntu has not been immune to misuse and overuse”. Yet, it appears crucial to explore their remark on the importance of understanding “what Ubuntu is since we believe its meaning and effects are still relevant today”.

In this book I set out to examine the possibilities and limitations of ubuntu (approached as a moral notion) at the grassroots level in inner-city Johannesburg. The inner city has been deeply affected by international migration as the first destination of many of the poorer migrants from the African continent who head to the City of Gold in the hope of sharing in the

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5 The proverb is referred to in different Southern African languages in public discourse and in academic writing.


7 Munyaka and Motlhabi 2009, 64.