Introduction

This cartoon by Zapiro (pseudonym of Jonathan Shapiro) was first published on the 25th of May, 2008, in the South African newspaper The Sunday Times in response to the eruption of xenophobia-inspired violence in South African townships in the course of that year. During this time, groups of black South Africans felt threatened by immigrants from other African countries, claiming that the latter were moving in on
resources and job opportunities supposedly designated for “real” South Africans. “Foreign” property was destroyed and burned, hundreds of people were attacked, and thousands were dislocated.1

The effectivity of the cartoon consists, as far as I am concerned, of its multi-layered critique of both the disconcerting surfacing of xenophobia and the circumstances under which this violence erupted. The cartoon condemns the violence by bringing to mind the reconciliatory and inclusive discourse that is often associated with the increasingly popular term “ubuntu,” especially since its implementation in the truth and reconciliation process. On the one hand, the cartoon suggests that this discourse is past its prime. After all, people having experienced both division and reconciliation in such a relatively short period (i.e. both the end of apartheid and the campaign for reconciliation that followed in its wake), would surely not allow the ostracizing of one group by another? On the other hand, one could say that an ubuntu-inspired discourse is alive and well, but has been transformed in the course of time. In the cartoon, ubuntu’s reconciliatory and peaceful tone, as well as its association with a universal humanity, has turned into a way of determining who belongs to the “new South Africa” and who does not. In other words, this term, which is frequently associated with hospitality, empathy, forgiveness, and respect for human dignity (to name but a few of its connotations), is utilized by those who claim to understand its repercussions in order to condemn, violate, and exclude people who supposedly do not know what it means. In addition, Shapiro refers to the fact that, during the xenophobic attacks of May 2008, people were asked to name certain isiZulu words that were slightly archaic as a way to distinguish between foreign and South African isiZulu speakers (Ndlovu). The irony lies in the fact that ubuntu, too, is an isiZulu word. As such, the very term used to emphasize the importance of community in post-apartheid South Africa has become a shibboleth which supposedly protects this community from “outsiders.” It has become a boundary marker, a yardstick against which to measure others, a tool for exclusion.

In this way, the cartoon meticulously brings to light some of the issues involved in the analysis of ubuntu as a concept as I will undertake it in this essay. Next to ubuntu’s humanitarian interpretations, I will mostly discuss some if its ambivalences in terms of tensions between inclusion and exclusion, individuality and communality, and autonomy and relationality. Considering ubuntu’s increasing popularity, this is a necessary approach: it is the name of a popular computer operating system, it is being used in South Africa’s PR campaign for the 2010 soccer world cup, and the promotion of ubuntu values was even part of the Congress of the People’s (Cope) agenda as formulated for the 2009 elections.2 However, even though to know what ubuntu means and to claim one practices its values is apparently considered desirable in the South African context, as the term is being used more and more broadly, its meaning becomes less and less specific. Although this lack of specificity is not