'UBUNTU' AND 'RACE': BEING WITH OTHERS BETWEEN TWO DISCOURSES

The following conversation was held at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, on June 23, 2011. The conversation was convened by Rosalind Morris (RM) and Antjie Krog (AK), and included Yvette Christiansë (YC), Jacob Dlamini (JD), Hlonipha Mokoena (HM) and Njabulo Ndebele (NN).

RM: This is the first conversation convened by the SEFIKA project on questions of race, blackness, whiteness and African philosophy. Thanks everybody for coming and agreeing under very short notice and difficult circumstances to get together. This discussion is about learning to ask questions, learning to think with others differently. Let's begin by putting the questions we wish to discuss on the table.

NN: The... question I'd like to pose is... partly embedded in the notion of dominance and opposition implied by the notion of race, and the fact that, if there's whiteness, then there is a notion of blackness, whatever that is. I'm intrigued by the fact that within the notion or the contemporary discourse of blackness, there's a silence about ethnicity. In all the talk about race and so on there's been no resurgence of a Zulu nationalism or a Sotho, Pedi – or whatever nationalism. Is it because the non-racial vision [espoused by the ANC] has partly succeeded in extinguishing ethnicity in favour of race? Is the silence about ethnicity a positive thing? Can we use the mechanisms that allowed us to move away from ethnicity to arrive at a genuine non-racialism?

Steven with Sight Seeing Bus, Doornfontein, Johannesburg, 1960. Photo: David Goldblatt

HM: I have more historical questions. One of the dilemmas that I find myself in is that I can't really think outside of the historical moment that we are in. Whether we like it or not, in South Africa, we are already racially inscribed by the moment in which we are living. It may sound strange to say, but in some ways I'm not particularly curious about the racial context that I'm in. Because it always seems to be just there - I can do nothing about it. What I'm curious about is what race has meant historically. Have we always thought that just because we have brown skin, we are therefore black? When in history can people identify themselves racially, and think of that as a political identification rather than a social identification? Take the slave society here in the Cape where, if you had a certain skin tone, you were not allowed to wear certain things. You had to wear shorts, for example, if you were a man, to signify that you were a slave. Two totally independent things are linked together by race and by social status. So I'm more interested in those kinds of issues than in my current predicament, in 21st century in South Africa!

JD: Like Hlonipha I've also been seeking and finding solace in the archives. And one of the most interesting things for me about working in the archives, is the discovery that I make each time I look at the old records, especially of the Native Affairs department, about the emergence of blackness as a category of identification. What is remarkable about those records, especially the department's annual reports, is that these Native Affairs officials track what they called the emergence of race consciousness or racial consciousness. For example, the district officer for the northern district would say that, "The natives are starting to wear western-style clothing and building their houses in a rectangular fashion." But this is also the emergence of racial consciousness. What it says to me is that if we can have blackness emerging and someone tracking it - surely it should be possible to do the opposite. It says to me, there's nothing natural about this identity. I say this knowing that it's not easy, but we need a different kind of imagination; a different kind of thinking; a different kind of language.

YC: How can one not look to the archives, because that is where the languages we live with now are coined. And one of the things I find again and again in the archives is this anxious effort to fix a subject or persons into categories. You talk about the clothes and visible signs; this says to me that one doesn't know what a slave is intrinsically. You must make that person signify as such, so that you can then fold back into them an idea of something that

appears intrinsically to be a slave. This is why that kind of archival research is important, because there is a way of tracking a thought process that becomes a bureaucratic process; a systematic process; a philosophical system – and all of these things begin to overlap and produce real practices that go on and on. In another context they will become catch phrases, they will become labels and categories, from which there may also arise resistance and a desire to force change. When there's awareness of a need for something different, then the archive also begins to show us how those new languages begin to develop, not only in opposition, but often in a form of opposition that becomes an overdetermined and simplified binary. There's a persistent binarism in the languages that we use to speak of the archive. For example, there's no pristine south and pristine north, the idea of north and the idea of west always shapes itself by masking what it got and what it extracted from its others, in order to create its identities.

RM: I am the only person who comes from outside of this country, and I perhaps have a different perspective on some of the questions that animate local discourse in our conversation.

To talk about race now, for me, blackness, whiteness, colouredness (not just here, but elsewhere) requires always the question of what is being organised in terms of the allocation of rights, the distribution of resources, the question of social justice and, simultaneously, what has been foreclosed by those categories. I think race is probably the most powerful universal typology of human difference that has ever been produced because it lives at the intersection of biological and cultural discourse, and because they are always transforming one into the other, always masking enormous, complex differences within each category: by solidifying an image of a more radical difference between them, but by virtue of extreme sleights of hand and defacements of all the traffic that always goes on between them. As a social scientist, I'm especially concerned with the ways in which it is made to do a kind of work in the organisation of power and inequality. It's an enormous double-bind to use it as a basis for liberation. I'm very sympathetic with the ambition to find grounds on which one can act collectively in the interest of collective goals, to feel oneself part of a collective subject; this is a necessary and a desirable thing, always at the risk of annihilating the need to recognise the many differences, and the need for individual forms of agency and individual subjectivity within. But when undertaken on the basis of race, these drives to collectivity always risk re-inscribing the systems of exclusion by which they work.

Michael Herzfeld makes that point that people claim ethnicity and act on the basis of what he calls 'public intimacy,' primarily in the face of foreigners or others who are perceived as, in some ways, strangers. It's a complicated relationship, which one in another time would have called a shame and pride dynamic, but he uses the language of public intimacy to talk about the elaboration of a kind of defensive but publicly elaborated kind of performed ethnicity.

AK: That sounds like the Comaroffs' argument, that ethnicity allows people to bargain for some piece of the economic pie.

NN: I'm intrigued by the suggestion that ethnic blacks, underneath "the South African thing", feel comfortable, that a collective South Africanism gives them comfort, or that they don't feel that they need to justify their ethnicity, at least at a national level, because there is no ethnic fight. There is in fact an ethnic convergence, seemingly, around the nation. Do English-speaking South Africans actually feel ethnic? Is there an English ethnicity? There's a certain universalism about English, so there is a sense in which the English and the silent multi-ethnic black have an unspoken confidence - and the Afrikaner is uncertain.

HM: The South African public is a shifting set of identities. South Africans, I don't know how we do it, but it seems that South Africans are always changing their mind about things, and so one day it's okay to wear a T-shirt that says "one hundred percent Zulu" but the very same person will be in a shebeen in Soweto, drinking with people from all ethnic groups. And he'll say, "We are just here to drink, you know. Who cares that I'm Zulu and you are Sotho." I think somehow, ethnic identification isn't as much of a crisis as we may imagine it is. One of the reasons why we talk about these issues in terms of crisis is because we've actually escaped ethnic warfare or civil war. Now, it's almost like we want this self-fulfilling prophesy to happen: falling apart because of race and ethnicity. But because it isn't, we keep looking for it. And I think that is the real anxiety in South Africa: why is it that we are waiting for this moment of strife and conflict? I think it has to do with the fact that we ourselves haven't quite internalised what has happened to us in the last seventeen years.

RM: I think one of the most powerful institutions mediating the emergence of ethnicity in this country is the museum. In the first five or ten years after the

end of apartheid, most of the museological projects were devoted to the excavation of political histories: Robben Island, Constitution Hill, the women's jail, the District 6 museum and so forth. Oral history projects across the country aimed at finding out people's experience under apartheid, about their exposure to state violence. But increasingly, one sees museum projects devoted to cultural, ethnic and regional-specific kinds of issues. There's a risk in severing questions of ethnicity and culture from more political questions and from more general and generalisable questions, a risk of turning ethnicity into a fetish or at least an object of over-investment. I worry about those cultural histories that generate statements like: "In Europe, you were still painting yourself with woad but we were trading with China." It's a kind of empire envy. But globally-speaking, cultural preservation has become a powerful instrument not only for attracting international investment, aid and so forth - but for mobilising local sentiment.

I think another important question, which we have all mentioned at different moments, concerns the rural/urban divide. That seems to be one of the most powerful determinants, along with class, of these ethnicizing relations.

AK: Mandela started by drawing everybody in. When the Truth Commissioners were chosen he insisted that there should be an Afrikaner, a Zulu. Tutu wasn't there because he was a Xhosa, he and Boraine had human rights records. It felt insulting to be allowed in on the basis of ethnicity. At one stage there was a debate among Afrikaners: Should we not also have a sort of king? Should it be Van Zyl Slabbert or FW De Klerk? Because obviously government can only deal with you as an ethnic group, and you need someone to negotiate on your behalf. I challenged the Afriforum to take up the case for a black and an Afrikaner person, but they said their only legitimate negotiation space with government depends on being Afrikaners.

JD: It seems to me the biggest challenge is how to place yourself in the shoes of another and try to understand what it means to live in a shack along the N2 on the Cape flats. And I think if there is a moral failure, never mind the failure of imagination, it is this inability to put yourself in the shoes of another — how do we help engender a new sense of empathy?

RM: But what you described now as a quintessential place of otherness is a place of complete economic destitution, and it's a class description and it's not a description of ethnicity or race. It's based on radically different life experiences, but not on anything that could be biologised or inscribed as a cultural tradition.

AK: I would say that race plays a role in the way that poverty is lived. A social worker once told me that the moment whites become poor they are degenerate, nothing holds them together. While just across the street would be black people who are even poorer, but the way in which they deal with that poverty is through a structure of assistance.

YC: An anecdote. Peter Vale wrote about the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging and their anxiety in the 1950s about poorer Afrikaners, particularly those who lived in the grey areas. Having grown up in a grey area, Doornfontein, I don't think there is anything grey about it. There were Afrikaners and they were considered poor white people. But there were also non-Afrikaner white people, who were also considered poor whites. "Poor whites" was the lumpen category that was used. And the Afrikaanse Christelike Vereniging and different churches always came to look after the Afrikaner whites. Whereas, when we were very poor, nobody was coming to actually help us. We had stokvels: Okay, this week you go and you pool your pay cheque and you help; some of it goes to this person and that pays their groceries, the next week it's your turn to get the bit of money. I'm wondering what it means for those poor Afrikaners, who are now living next-door to poor black people. How do they see themselves? Are they embarrassed by themselves because they have let their whiteness down? Because the burden of whiteness must be profound for them. Historically, white was supposed to be privileged and white was supposed to rule the world.

But it was also flexible. After school, where I grew up, you could all go and play on the playground of Doornfontein primary school, except if the *madala* chased you off. But if that happened, then we all got chased off, regardless of what colour you were, because no children were supposed to play on the playground after classes. Playing was not going to school though. If you were not white and you wanted to go to that school, you couldn't. Sometimes one of the children would turn around and say to you, "hey, fok off jou hotnot" or whatever, and then you would say, oh, okay, now you are white and I'm not. But then tomorrow you would just be playing together again.

HM: Part of the reason why it seems that black people live better with poverty is present in the way

that we greet each other. For black people, it's totally acceptable to say, hey, *I'm Hlonipha ubika ukuhlupheka* (you are reporting on your poverty). People will listen empathetically for hours. You can list all your troubles and how much money you are paying in rent. Whereas, I think in other communities, it is seen as shameful to report on your poverty. When I was a child we went to the house next-door because there was going to be a wedding at my house and we were going to ask them if we could use their tap and their basins - and then a cockroach crawled up the wall. Now there were no cockroaches in my house, so I started screaming to the child of the house: "There's a cockroach crawling up your wall. Kill it! Kill it!" And the adults were sitting around and talking about taps and basins, and I started screaming about the cockroach. When we got home my aunt told the story to my grandmother and my grandmother said: "You don't do that in people's homes. It's their cockroaches, you mustn't point them out. Leave them alone." And that's the first time as a child I got to realise that I was better off than other people, but that it was not my place to point out that I was better off than other people. But it has to do with a much bigger issue: That together with internalising what being black in South Africa means, black people in some ways have also internalised the idea that being black involves being poor too. And so, in internalising that, you create a social language for talking about poverty that's not about exclusion. You don't exclude the poor and put them out by themselves. But it's about inclusion; when you see somebody who is poor, you actually bring them closer to yourself rather than distancing them and say, ooh, they are poor, therefore they should be out there somewhere.

RM: (L)ast night as we were driving home, during torrential rain, the first thing we said is "Can you imagine? The Flats are all flooded tonight. It must be hell." So this is what struck me, that that experience of poverty as exposure to the elements was the evidence of what you spoke about as the grounds for the greatest distance between you and that other person, the distance that would somehow obstruct your being able to imagine the consciousness of that other person. It's not that I don't think race is a factor, race clearly organises and determines that the vast majority of people – almost everybody who is in that predicament – is not white. That is the historical legacy of the organisation of populations and the distribution of power in this country. But when one says that those racial categories cause or enable capacities, that blackness enables one to deal with poverty in a way that is still generous and capable of caring for others and so forth, then it's a question of causality for me. Is it a matter of, as you say, the cultivation of and internalisation of an anticipation of poverty, which requires people to share resources and so forth? And also, to produce forms of hospitality and caring that make life liveable and also maybe worthy? I don't think that's a question one can ever answer. But what we have just been speaking about is a concern with what some people call degradation, with the failure of whites in that same predicament. Is there a function or a causal structure of whiteness? Or is that a function of the expectation of privilege, which, when not experienced, leads to selfishness, anti-sociality and defensiveness vis à vis the privilege that was supposed to have been guaranteed in this country for those inhabiting whiteness or Afrikaner identity? Let me conclude the thought here, because it seems to me that is the case: that the expectation of privilege leads people in the moment of this loss to behave in the worst ways with other people. And I'm not sure whether racial solidarities and ethnic solidarities are not broken in the moment that you have the emergence of a very powerful, new black elite. In other words, solidarity in poverty can't be racialised in the same way when there is a black bourgeoisie. How much generosity is shown to the person who comes to the door of a BEE grandee looking for a cup of sugar, I don't know. But I assume that eventually there will not be a lot.

NN: I just want to interject a meaning that I read from the story of the sharing of poverty and escape, and Verwoerd saying let's not give these people any pension because they can take care of themselves. There's a sense in which they take care of themselves. There's a sense in which Verwoerd was doing and saying only what he knew because that is how he thought you handle pensions with your [his own] people: You set in place a structure of governance that supports that sort of thing, distributes pensions and so forth. But when it comes to others, Verwoerd didn't know them, but knew something about how they shared, so he advocated letting them take care of themselves. There is a certain historical logic there, which I think I have an understanding for. But that understanding then poses another challenge for a so-called democratic society that is now projecting and representing a black interest. The question is: To what extent are we willing to create a political and economical system that is informed by the culture of sharing, even if it's driven by poverty or whatever, so that at a community level, the capacity to share is supported in a structured, political way that would change immediately and officialise the

sharing and so on. I think that the black bourgeoisie who don't share, they are operating outside of the structure of sharing that we were talking about. To the extent that they are outside of it; they are working within Verwoerd's system. But what are the possibilities that they can work within another system, informed by the sharing that we see all over in the communities? That is the question.

JD: That, for me, raises another set of questions. A biography of Malema is coming out and the author [Fiona Forde's *An Inconvenient Youth: Julius Malema and the New ANC* was published in August 2011] is using the idea of the cannibal to help explain what Malema is doing. That is how we've come to consider the black bourgeoisie, and it is something that we are going to have to confront. What does that mean? It's beyond not sharing; it's consuming those around you. Then there is something else that historians have begun looking at in the archives. They are trying to establish, if it is at all possible, what the word *ubuntu* meant when it was first recorded by colonial historians. For example, the expression *inkosi yinkosi ngabantu*: a king is a king through the people – is recorded early on. But the terms and discourses of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabuntu* – a person is a person through the people – do not appear in those same archives. According to people like Jeff Guy, you don't find that until ZK Mathews's dissertation in the early 20th century. In view of a liberal humanistic ethos, while also trying to contribute something to the concept of universalism, people like Mathews took this idea that *inkosi yinkosi ngabantu*, and translated it into a liberal republican idiom, saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.' The king or inkosi vanishes and the egalitarian, collectivist people emerges. That is one possible source for where the idea of *ubuntu* as we now understand it, actually comes from. But we've come to understand it as something pre-modern. We say that it's something ancient. We make it define difference when we talk about what it means to be African and human. We don't talk about this historical emergence, but it's quite profound that you can actually trace the idea of *ubuntu* and the ethical responsibility that comes with it. If we can at least historicise it and say it comes from ZK Mathews and it comes from AC Jordan - these are the intellectuals – we can do something political with it.

AK: In fact, you cannot know where the word came from, or how it was used before the whites recorded it. That is the problem with the archive. We only have evidence of what interested the historians or the colonial authorities. It is possible that both senses of the word *ubuntu* were in use, or that one or another was being used in different contexts, but that only this particular meaning of *ubuntu* was granted importance. After all, the early whites were monarchists.

YC: I agree with Antjie. We cannot let ourselves be completely trapped by the self-referentiality of the archive. Otherwise, the archive merely becomes the proof of the success of the colonial project. The question for me is how we can learn to read these documents in a way that recognizes that they are all we have from this early moment, but that that is not all there is. Maybe we should start by asking what factors made the issue of *ubuntu* of such interest that it was actually entered into the archive. The other question is, what other phenomena are registered in the archives under names other than *ubuntu*, but that we might today understand to be evidence of its existence.

RM: Yes. And there are other questions. We don't have to argue that something must be historically specific and socially constructed, in order to say that it has political utility. Nonetheless, if there was a reason why early liberals turned to *ubuntu* as an idiom for the value of collectivity, that in itself deserves attention. Jacob, can you give us some dates? When do you think — or when do the historians think — *ubuntu* acquired this less monarchist meaning?

JD: This will be in the 1930s.

RM: This is the general moment of the emergence of African socialism.

JD: That's it, totally.

RM: Perhaps it is even more interesting to think about a possible inversion in the meaning of *ubuntu*. I think it is marvellous, that there are these germinal possibilities in other forms of thought and practice that are not recognisable or don't originate from within the democratic order, but that can be mobilised and transformed and made to speak to the new contingencies and exigencies, and a more socialist communitarian kind of ambition. So, a kingly tradition can be said to shelter thought of its alternative. Not that the other (kingly) forms are not also still present as desires, but that there are elements of older traditions that can be made to function in the service of a different political form that is truly revolutionary: there is something within that old

tradition that can be made to transform itself in a way that's enabling and liberating, and opens into an entirely different structure of possibilities.

AK: I would like to push the conversation around this interconnectedness. Magema Fuze said "nothing penetrates whites, so you cannot praise them." I found that an extraordinary formulation. Part of me wants to accept that we all share important values, but another part, that has grown up here and lived in this country, feels itself to be in the presence of something that nothing from where I have come, even the sharing, is similar. And there is something in me that feels that what I am experiencing is also not the Levinasian "you" calling forth the "I". Njabulo discusses the fact that the two Afrikaner generals who spoke to Mandela couldn't come up with a strategy of negotiations [in 2007's *Fine Lines from the Box: Further thoughts about our country*, Ndebele refers to a conversation described by journalist Allister Sparks in his 1994 book *Tomorrow is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa's Negotiated Revolution*]. Njabulo suggests that it was because they were raised in a culture oriented around protecting white privilege. I want to push it further. Why don't whites come up with a new strategy about land? Because they cannot conceive of a world that they share with blacks in intimate ways. This notion of seeing oneself intimately connected with others brings about the possibility of a new space. But my fear is that in this attempt to formulate a concept of interconnectedness it will again be whites who are formulating it, but with the vocabulary that they have grown up with. Whites will start explaining *ubuntu* in terms of western philosophy. What is it then that we are talking about? Is it just a general, "Ja, we all care"?

JD: It seems to me that what we should be striving for is solidarity. We are looking for some notion of solidarity that's all-encompassing. And to do that, perhaps what we should be looking at is democracy, not as an end goal, but democracy as a process, a radical democracy that is constantly trying to evolve towards something better. I think this is connected to solidarity. It seems to me that what we have denied about our own history and what we continue to deny about our own history is a very strong tradition, and I'm using the word tradition loosely, in this country of racial intimacy.

NN: I'm fascinated by the notion of racial intimacy. I had lots of time to find out how to express this perspective recently when I was asked to do a short consultancy with Artscape. They have a project called the "Indigenous Arts Project" and were debating to paralysis what this thing is on the board. So they asked me to come in and assist. And as I was looking at the issue it suddenly struck me that the point of divergence was around the notion of indigenous. One side is essentialist, and it defines what is indigenous as African and every other thing as not indigenous. It gets complicated in the Western Cape because if only Xhosa qualifies for indigenous, there's lots of other stuff that gets left out. And it suddenly occurred to me: Is there anyone among us who is a South African born here, or who has come from somewhere or other, who actually can claim not to have something in him of the other?

It struck me that there will be very few such people. That what we do actually share is a sense of having in each one of us what the other is. But in a sense we have been rejecting the implications of this, because it seems that each of us, to various degrees, wants to hold onto some notion of purity that has not been tainted by the other. But in fact, it's impossible to find such purity. And if we accept that, then what are the implications of that in redesigning the socio-political, economic realities? So I said, maybe what we should be looking for is not indigenous arts, but what constitutes the South African experience when it is articulated in the various media of art. One is looking for something totally different, which involves all of us in the journey, and that outcome does not exclude the ethnic. One does not exclude the other, but there is a constant cross-fertilisation and the bigger pool is being fed by the others. It gives me more possibilities for newness, innovation, creativity and so on, and finding it in places where you never thought ... that's what this expression of racial intimacy is germinating in my mind.

AK: To what extent will this be dominated by the people who dominated the discourse of the past? If you leave the thing to democracy, it's a particular kind that will then be underlined, emphasised and strengthened. And although Afrikaners could be said to share a culture of sharing, it's a particular kind of sharing: I will do something and you will do something back. I want to say that it's not the sharing we talk about. It's bigger than that. The fact that this country is where it is at this very moment is because there is something bigger than the ordinary notion of ... even sharing.

NN: Racial intimacy is not an end point. You find it through the experience of interacting with others, and then over a period of time, sifting out what doesn't work and holding onto what works and gives results. And then partly also, some of the practical manifestations from that policy are about how you agree in a multi-lingual society. Let's take it at a community level, if we believe or entertain the notion that language carries these attributes, and a particular gaze. I know if that if I try to speak German the world changes ... when I speak Zulu... you keep changing the gaze. The world looks different each time you enter into another language. So if we accept the potential power of this, can we translate it into an agreement that South Africans should at least learn not less than four languages in the schooling system? But you will have the capability to enter at least four living spaces that will make you imagine the world in a different way. It's a policy issue — can we do that? If we say we will, can we spend? And if you're creating communities, can we agree that we have to pay for what we get? So it's crucial that you start a tax base where it never existed, even if it's ten Rand a month or a year. To go back to Verwoerd, who says let's not pay for them, we say we'll pay for this because it supports the intimacy that is there. But right now, all that stuff is not paid for — or we are not paying for it.

YC: Who at this table can claim to be a hundred percent anything? Racial intimacy: it's not just racial, or ethnic, or cultural. At school you learnt one set of things, and at home or on the pavement you learnt a different knowledge. And you learnt to expect disappointment and at the same time not to be disappointed – because that was the way things were. You learnt that, today a white boy is playing with you, and tomorrow he will go in the gate of that school, and if you dare cross the threshold and greet him in front of his friends, you cannot be surprised if he smacks you in the face. But then tomorrow, you will play again. And you realise that he is humiliated and he doesn't even know why he's humiliated, except that it's something to do with white and black.

The notion of intimacy was always implicit in the immorality act, and we tend to think it – racial intimacy – meant sex. I'll never forget the famous case of the Indian woman nurse and the white young Jewish doctor at Baragwaneth Hospital. The immorality squad was hiding microphones in the bedroom of her apartment, and following them for months and nothing happened. They were perched in the tree outside her apartment. And one day he drove her home ... and somebody at Baragwaneth told on them - but they weren't intimate. The immorality squad saw her go into her bedroom and they saw the young doctor follow her, and, voila! carnal knowledge. Maybe nothing happened, but the idea of racial intimacy was always already carnal. And being coloured, you felt that you were the sign of that. You were the walking sign - you learnt this. In private, you see only family. Then when you go out into the street, you have to carry yourself in a certain way because you are coloured. That's where the big pressure to be respectable comes from. It's huge. The notion of racial intimacy was deflected in the long, complicated, history of apartheid and, because it was carnalised, it was for many people a thing of shame. I think that's why many people wanted to pass, because the passing was running away from this thing of shame towards something - what? Something that itself was hybrid: whiteness. The idea that whiteness was hybrid was also masked. There's something about mixed racedness that gives the public's secret away all the time. We have always been listening and exchanging, whether we like it or not. Whites too.

I want to touch on mixing, cross-fertilisation and exchange, and the idea of *ubuntu* in all its complexities and rupturings —even the idea of *ubuntu* that so animated Oprah in her very hokey interpretation of it. If we think about this, it is something that is part of an ongoing conversation, even when it's part of a cartoon. People are talking about *ubuntu* from all sides, and *ubuntu* is now not a foreign concept to all kinds of people. I do think that it is a possible point of convergence, because in some ways it is an imagined thing. It is a claim we make on ourselves, like the idea of nation. Or, to bastardise Benedict Anderson's anthem, it's an imagined community of horizontal relations and not only a community structured vertically by ethnicity, by genealogy, by bloodline and narrow notions of affiliation. But actually, it is a possible daring. Another language for it would be democracy in a political structure, and maybe you can disagree with me. But I'm also listening to the way that we're talking, because I think even when we're talking about the burden that falls on Afrikaners ... and I just want to say that I wasn't only talking about Afrikaners as having a burden ... I think that one of the things that I've learnt is that at some point burden is also responsibility. Implicit in what we're talking about and what we are also trying to find a language for is that we are still happy to negotiate the notions of division: We say this group has this and that group that. At some point there is a slippage between Afrikaners and whiteness, and a slippage between Zulu, Xhosa and blackness. These

things are still working their way in, and they are haunting the corridors of what we are trying to say. But we are also talking about the positive things that are born of cross-fertilisation and interpretation. We are in a moment in time when much of what we are talking about as pastness is actually translation.

HM: It's so difficult to explain why you have to let concepts like *ubuntu* live their own life. I'm trying to think of an equivalent. For example, *tsotsitaal*. It is a language in that you can sit down and chat in it for half an hour and have a decent conversation, but there are no dictionaries for this language. If you hear a *tsotsitaal* term and you go on line, you may find that somebody has put together a dictionary - but it's five years old. Nobody is bothering to update it. And the language has changed, so the dictionary is useless. I think the idea of having clear-cut definitions is in itself a western obsession. It is as if you want something to be defined so that you can be comfortable with the idea that you've been invited into that meaning, but the people who use the term don't really care much about whether or not you know *ubuntu* when you see it. When you fall and somebody helps to pick you up and puts your groceries back in the bag, people will say that is *ubuntu*. You have acted in a human way by helping somebody else. Now, how do you then write a dictionary definition of that? I mean, how do you sit down and say *ubuntu* is when you help somebody pick up their groceries if they fall or whatever. I think this obsession with specificity is in itself a problem, because you are constantly asking people to fix themselves and say this is who we are. And then once you have finished writing the dictionary, it has already changed and people have moved on and, like in *tsotsitaal* are constantly adding words. I'm trying to tempt us away from desiring definition. Maybe the thing that we should be desiring, is the doing.

Refugees from Zimbabwe given shelter in the Central Methodist Church on Pritchard Street in the city. 22 March 2009.
Photo: David Goldblatt

RM: I also think the question changes when one is thinking about the project in terms of the future. And that's the crisis of South Africa today, to the extent that one can't actually leave it to do its own thing. The problem is that, under quite transformed class and other social circumstances, one can't have any surety that solidarity or *ubuntu* is part of the repertoire of daily, habitual practice, even if it was originally so. Under those circumstances, unfortunately, something that was organically/consciously/culturally known suddenly requires formalisation. And it's a dangerous moment because you can formalise it and kill it. But what one needs to be doing is not so much formalising it or abstracting it, but delineating the possible ways in which it would manifest itself in practice. I think that teaching can be considered in its terms. It's a different question then, the pursuit of definitions, but it becomes a question when one wants to bring about a social transformation where there is a huge risk of producing something monstrous. You can definitely ossify something to the point that it is unusable. And every culture or every society that goes through radical change loses a great deal in that process, of formalizing what it fears will be changed unrecognisably. But it's a risk you have to take.

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