

Review Article

Who Is an African – A Wasted and Wasteful Question?¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay is framed around another question, namely, whether the central question of *Who Is an African: Race, Identity and Destiny in Post-Apartheid South Africa* is not in fact a wasted question. My effort is located within the backdrop of my previous reflections on xenophobia as well the broader literature on questions of Africanity. Starting with the summaries of the various sections of the book, I provide a critical summary of the book contents. I then proceed to place the essays under critical scrutiny, doing so in dialogue with relevant literature. My submission is that the question, ‘Who is an African’?, remains potent, but that it is largely wasted in this book, given the considerable disconnect between the majority of the essays in the book and key literature on the subject on the one hand, and the unevenness with which the essay authors respond to the central question of the book, on the other.

General Introduction

I see the growing crowd encircling me, baying for my blood, buoyed by the chilling soundtrack of “Shangaan” chants in the background. Will I kneel before my killers? Will I plead for my life like the necklace victims of the 1980s? Will I feel the thud of the first brick bumping off my thick “Shangaan” skull? Will I sneeze when the smell of petrol rises up my “Shangaan” nostrils as they pour it over me in preparation for the inevitable? Will I make a last-ditch effort to escape – dashing through the crowd like a mad bull – only to invite a rain of kicks, stabs and beatings? Eventually, engulfed in a vibrant, flaming fire, I will do the Ernesto dance – the death dance of the Mozambican man who was burnt to death in May 2008. Xenophobia is not a threat against foreigners. It is a threat against me, and you. It threatens the very foundations of our country and our shared humanity.²

I concluded an opinion piece in which I imagined myself as a victim at the mercy of a bloodthirsty xenophobic mob with the above words. Although the scenario was made-up, my overall imagination had some basis in fact. All the sixty two corpses bequeathed to us by the so-called xenophobic attacks of 2008 were black Africans, including twenty one black South Africans. Through this opinion piece

1 The editorial assistance of Dr Kuzipa Nalwamba is hereby acknowledged.

2 Quoted from Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “I Could Die Soon” *Mail and Guardian Thoughtleader* (29 July 2010). See Online: <https://thoughtleader.co.za/tinyikosammaluleke/2010/07/22/i-could-be-killed-soon/> (Accessed 16 January 2019).