The Station, Camp, and Refugee: Xenophobic Violence and the City

It was midday when we arrived at Cleveland police station. The station is situated south of the city in an industrial area where light manufacturing industries and motor vehicle dealerships are interspersed with blue-collar residences. Two flags fluttered lightly in the winter breeze at the police station's unmanned gates: one South Africa's national flag, and the other the South African police flag. A single boom gate with a makeshift wooden guardhouse marked the station's entrance, which, like most South African Police Stations, was sprinkled with the standard brown brick architecture, a faded red tin roof with a blue gutter system skirting the buildings. Police stations always evoke an irrational sense of foreboding for me, so as we entered the police grounds, I was glad I was not alone. I was there with two other volunteers who worked for a human rights organization. At the very least, I thought to myself, if something happened to me at the police station, someone would know about it.

As we parked our car, we asked a passing policeman where the displaced people were, and he directed us to a courtyard at the back of the police station, between the police offices and holding cells and the barracks that provided police housing. A young man in red overalls and a helmet manned the gate into the courtyard. We realized that the security detail responsible for securing the fleeing migrants was the notorious “Red Ants.” Many of those in the Cleveland courtyard had encountered the Red Ants, or heard of their raids in the inner city. Working together with the City of Joburg and the police, they are known for the military-style tactics with which they evacuate inner city residents from condemned buildings, resulting in homelessness, dispossession of property, and the arrest of “illegal aliens.”¹

The xenophobic violence had began a week earlier, on May 11, 2008, in Alexandra Johannesburg, a township in the northern parts of the city adjacent to Sandton, one of the city’s wealthiest areas. For 15 days, foreign migrants and some South Africans were systematically attacked across various locations in the country, resulting in the killing of 62, displacement of thousands, and the loss of millions of Rand worth of property. Attacks in Cleveland informal settlement began on May 18, 2008. Five people were burnt and beaten to death, 50 hospitalized, 15 shops were vandalized and looted, and 10 cars burned. On the same day, about 300 people fled to the Cleveland police station to seek refuge from the violence. Edward, a Kenyan man who lived in his shop a few blocks from the police station, had been asleep on the night the gangs broke into his electronic repair store. They stole the electronic equipment and tools and set the building alight. He managed to escape by begging for mercy and promising that he would leave the country. As we entered the courtyard, the irony of the situation was not lost to us. Foreign migrants, who ordinarily avoid the police, and have violent encounters with the Red Ants, were now dependent on them for protection. With no homes, and threats of death, their hope for survival from the violence on the streets was the one place they dreaded most, the police station.

Through three separate yet interrelated vignettes, I explore the practices of state agents, the camp as a place constructed within a particular juridical framework, and the figure of the refugee and their interactions with each other, as a microcosm of what is happening in the city. Using these three registers, this chapter provides texture to relationships between space, state, and refugee. First, it allows us to recast our understanding of the city’s margins in relation to the center—highlighting the way actors often considered marginal to the city, co-produce urban practices that transform the very nature of the state. Second, it magnifies urban relationships, allowing us to see the nuances and contradictions of the interactions between the state and migrants. I argue that the crisis not only provides us an understanding of how an emergency context creates specific institutional practices, but it also amplifies our understanding of everyday relationships. Based on migrant experiences of the xenophobic violence in 2008, this chapter illustrates migrant’s liminal lives in Johannesburg revealing how the violence has helped reinforce the ambiguity of life in the city.

Camps have been a site of scholarly interest as a means for understanding sovereignty and the nature of power in the modern state.