The end of apartheid and the advent of democracy have resulted in the forceful reintegration of South Africa into the global economy. One result of this has been the development of a new migratory sub-system centred on South Africa. Rather than attracting international migration from Europe and Asia to South Africa, as had been the case prior to 1994 and the dawn of democracy, this new system attracts migrants from surrounding states in sub-Saharan Africa. These migrants are attracted by the promise of economic prosperity, a supposed cosmopolitanism arising from the idea of the ‘rainbow nation’ with its championing of diversity, and an apparent commitment to the rule of law enshrined in the country’s much vaunted post-apartheid constitution.

Migration from other African countries to South Africa has traditionally been of the ‘labour-migration’ type (Adepoju, 2006, p. 25), primarily focused around recruiting mining labour from eastern and southern African countries with English or Portuguese as colonial languages. However, recently migrants from the francophone region of the continent have begun to see South Africa as an alternative ‘from the traditional destinations such as France, and to a lesser extent Belgium or other African countries such as Ivory Coast’ (Lekogo, 2006, p. 207). Bouillon suggests that ‘French-speaking African immigrants in South Africa are a marginal if not a negligible reality’ but that they are particularly distinguished by ‘their socio-cultural differences in language, dress, hair, behavior etc.’ (1998, p. 3). Despite their distribution throughout the country, there is some evidence that these more recent francophone immigrants are tending to favour Cape Town as a destination over other cities (Lekogo, 2006, p. 208).

Concurrent to this rise in international migration, the country has experienced a rapid increase in urbanization as rural South Africans
move to the cities from which they had been forbidden under apartheid’s Group Areas Act,³ in search of what the ruling African National Congress calls a ‘better life for all’. These newly arrived national migrants have established themselves in informal settlements around major cities or in the decaying inner city areas of Johannesburg in particular. Here they come into direct contact with migrants from other African countries and compete with them for shelter, employment and other social services such as health care and education in an environment in which all of the above resources are scarce.

This competition has given rise to tensions and to a particular stereotypical image of African migrants as inherently criminal and determined to ‘steal’ jobs, houses and women from South Africans living in the same poverty-stricken areas. This has resulted in what Loren Landau, drawing on Agamben, has described as:

‘Zones of Exception’ in which South Africa’s normal legal provisions are suspended or circumvented in an effort to regulate and alienate the country’s non-national population. Within these zones, vigilantism, extortion, illegal arrests and deportations are becoming normalized as the South African state, acting on behalf of its citizens, works outside its own commitments to universal rights and administrative justice in an attempt to assert its territorial sovereignty. (2005, pp. 3–4)

In May 2008, the above tensions reached boiling point in a seemingly spontaneous eruption of popular anger in which people from other African countries living in South Africa were, forcibly and without warning, evicted from their homes and from their communities across the country by marauding bands of South African township dwellers (see the Introduction to this collection). Ironically, of the 62 people killed in this violent series of events, 21 were South Africans mistakenly assumed to be foreign because of their darker than average (for South Africa apparently) skin colour, leading to comments that the attacks were not only xenophobic but negrophobic – an internalized hatred of blackness (Mngxitama, 2008).

One year on from the attacks of 2008 some of those displaced returned to their countries of origin, a few found new communities within the country, but most returned to the communities from which they were displaced. Here they continue to eke out a precarious existence.

The attacks of 2008 are unlikely to be the last incidents of violence against the migrant community in South Africa nor were they the first