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UBUNTU STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURE

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Ubuntu Strategies in Contemporary South African Culture

Hanneke Stuit

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Ubuntu Strategies
in Contemporary South African Culture

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aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
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Hanneke Hendrika Stuit

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Introduction

Ubuntu[1] Unchained: A Travelling Concept

[1] It may seem odd to place a footnote in the title of the introduction, but it is absolutely necessary to stake out, from the very beginning, that the word ubuntu will not be flagged typographically in this dissertation because of the project's theoretical interest in ubuntu as a concept amongst others, rather than as a word from a vernacular that is considered foreign to the language I am writing in. At the same time, by not italicizing and thus stressing the linguistic uniqueness of this word, I mean to signal my complicity in an appropriation of the term that is inevitable in my project.

Figure 1. "Xenophobia and the Meaning of Ubuntu."

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 that swept through South African townships that year. It was directed at immigrants from other African countries (particularly Somali refugees), because these foreigners were perceived to be moving in on resources and job opportunities supposedly designated for "real" South Africans (Gumede). Although xenophobia aimed at people from other African countries has been a distinct problem in South African society since at least 1998, the course of events in May 2008 was particularly violent (Neocosmos 588). "Foreign" property was destroyed and burned, hundreds of people were attacked, and thousands were dislocated.[2]

The effectiveness of Zapiro's cartoon resides in its double critique of both the disconcerting surfacing of xenophobia and the historical-moral circumstances under which it erupted. The cartoon manages to condemn the pogroms by also criticising what

[2] See the *Mail and Guardian*'s special report on xenophobic violence: <http://www.mg.co.za/specialreport/xenophobia>; reports by the BBC and *The Guardian* at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8070919.stm> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/20/failing-itspeople>.

Michael Neocosmos has called the "discourse of exceptionalism," which is based on the idea that South Africa is more industrialized and democratic than other countries in Africa. According to this logic South Africa should be celebrated as "the world's envy" because of its reconciliatory and inclusive discourse initiated after the end of apartheid (590) – a discourse commonly associated with the increasingly popular term "ubuntu." Ubuntu is generally conceived of as an interpersonal dynamic often described by the proverb "a person is a person because of and through other people" that emphasises qualities like generosity, hospitality, friendliness, compassion, a willingness to share and an interest in the common good (Driver, "Truth" 219; Tutu 34-5). More specifically, Zapiro's use of ubuntu refers to its function in the process of reconciliation that was initiated after the end of apartheid and in which ubuntu became closely related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) emphasis on national unity and reconciliation through a public staging of truth telling and forgiveness.

On the one hand, the cartoon suggests that this discourse is past its prime. After all, people who have experienced both division and reconciliation relatively recently (i.e. during apartheid, at its end and in 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 indeed alive and well, but is represented as having transformed in the course of time. In the cartoon, ubuntu's reconciliatory and peaceful tone, as well as its association with a common humanity, is turned into a tool for exclusion that can be used to determine who belongs to the "new South Africa" and who does not. Here, ubuntu is ironically represented as a strategy for those who claim to understand its repercussions to condemn, violate, and exclude people who supposedly do not.

In a very literal way, Zapiro's use of ubuntu also 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; see also Gibson 703). The irony resides in the fact that ubuntu, which is also an isiZulu word, is thus automatically staged as an anachronism, as something that is conspicuously old-fashioned. As such, the very term used to emphasise the primary importance of an inclusive community in post-apartheid South Africa is rendered archaic, but also turned into a shibboleth that supposedly protects this community from "outsiders." The cartoon presents ubuntu as a boundary marker for belonging and national identity, a yardstick against which to measure others, while simultaneously pointing out the irony of this use. In addition, there is a distinct sense that the joke is also on the newspaper reader, who, by interpreting the cartoon, also appropriates the meaning of ubuntu.

In this way, it meticulously and concisely brings to light the fundamental ambiguity that marks ubuntu, which focuses on inclusive and harmonious relations with others, but also runs the risk of turning into a tool for exclusion. The cartoon thus foregrounds issues of community formation, exclusion, and power that also figure in the analyses undertaken in this dissertation, the focus of which lies on various applications of ubuntu in which the concept is continuously (re)appropriated and (re)shaped. As will become clear, it is in these contexts of strife and ambiguity around many of the appropriations of ubuntu that the term's crucial value as a drive for peaceful solutions comes to the fore most forcefully. Assessing this drive as crucial for any attempt to think relationality critically, the present analysis is geared towards the question of how ubuntu's existing applications allow us to think possible (re)significations of the term that aim for more inclusivity and reduce exclusion to an absolute minimum. By bringing ubuntu into contact with other notions that focus on relationality and community, this project seeks to formulate relationality in a fashion that aims to avoid conflict, but does not reduce the importance of difference and diversity.

I position ubuntu as an orientation towards existence that allows for a recognition of, and as such provides a space in which to give shape to, the inevitable embedding of people in their surroundings, whether social, cultural, environmental, historical, political, or all of the above. It is the investigation of the spaces in which ubuntu is formed and reformed, instead of the ways in which a quintessential notion of ubuntu can be said to be represented in contemporary South African cultural expressions, that will be the predominant focus of what is to follow. In other words, I am particularly interested in how ubuntu is continuously (re)shaped in contemporary South African cultures and I will argue that an analysis of different types of cultural objects sheds new and critical light on what has become known as a much appropriated and misused African worldview that is often conflated with monolithic and all-encompassing claims to a common humanity in the discourses related to it. The objects under discussion range from political discourses in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Durban Squatters movement, to literary discourses as represented by some of the work of Nadine Gordimer, Njabulo Ndebele and J.M. Coetzee, to the photographic work of Zanele Muholi as well as commercial discourses in which ubuntu is used to sell products or improve company policies.

Before I can describe how these objects will be approached, however, it is necessary to stake out the points of departure that this study adheres to and that prefigure some of the contents of this investigation of ubuntu. First, a preliminary introduction to the concept is necessary, which is intended to somewhat familiarise the reader with the vast domain of what can by now easily be termed "ubuntu discourse" and

from which ubuntu's problematic reliance on the notion of a shared common humanity comes to the fore. In the second section, I will further explicate the discursive approach of this study, which allows for an analysis of ubuntu that aims to keep track of the power relations involved and on the basis of which it becomes possible to regard ubuntu as a (relational) strategy. Finally, I will turn to ubuntu's close association with the notion of hospitality in order to show that from this association ubuntu emerges as a continuous negotiation of the inevitable conditionality of human relations and the term's consistent reliance on an ideal of openness and inclusiveness in the striving for harmonious relations.

Ubuntu, Description of: The Problem of Common Humanity

As is the case for many (if not all) concepts, possible meanings of ubuntu are highly contextual. There is no such thing as "the" meaning of ubuntu. Besides, working with ubuntu teaches one very quickly that it remains a rather intuitive concept until one can "see" how it works in practice, for instance in the truth and reconciliation process. In addition, the wide applicability of the term, as well as the central role of processuality in it, causes my answer to the question "what is ubuntu?" to be necessarily different every single time. Nonetheless, a short introduction to the term "ubuntu," and most importantly, to the ambiguities in it, is indispensable.

Scholars have resorted to a number of approaches to provide a description of ubuntu, varying from historical to linguistic, philosophical and anthropological. Also, there are myriad ways in which ubuntu has found application in discourses that are educational, philosophical, political, ecological, psychological, rhetorical, and theological, as well as in public policy, information technology, law, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC), marketing, and human resource management. This listing in itself already suggests that it is beyond the intention and scope of this project to discuss all of the above; this treatise is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, it intends to raise the issues and trajectories at stake in using ubuntu as a concept, in what could be denominated as a thoroughly interdisciplinary "ubuntu discourse."

The lion's share of writing on ubuntu reflects the view that it is a traditionally African concept that is based on a focus on community, expressed as the recognition that a person "is incomplete unless he or she maintains an active connection with the society or culture of which he or she is a part" (Libin 126). As historian Christoph Marx wryly observes, "no historical evidence has been produced to substantiate this alleged community culture" and "references to 'tradition' are made to suffice" (52). If, indeed,

the specifics of ubuntu tend to escape description, it must be remembered, as Johann Broodryk observes, that "[u]buntu cultural norms have been orally transferred from generation to generation over a long time, and have never been produced as literature or written form" (qtd. in Mnyaka and Mothlabi 216). This element of orality in ubuntu's history might have had repercussions for the current accessibility of the concept in a setting of academia that focuses on written sources mostly. Nonetheless, philosopher Christian Gade's research into such written sources about ubuntu ensures us that the earliest written reference to ubuntu actually dates from 1846 and Mark Sanders convincingly analyses the writings of A.C. Jordan published in the 1970s (which draw on the work of Tiyo Soga from the 1860s) as an attempt to use ubuntu values to deal with the inevitable complicity of black intellectuals in the apartheid system (Gade 303; Sanders, *Complicities* 124-126).

Despite an awareness that a "synthetic definition of *ubuntu* would always be inadequate" and that "scholars address those characteristics of the concept of *Ubuntu* that mostly appeal to them" (Saule qtd. in Mnyaka and Motlhabi 217), Mnyaka and Motlhabi claim that, generally, ubuntu reflects a way of life, "a spiritual foundation, an inner state, an orientation, and a good disposition that motivates, challenges and makes one perceive, feel and act in a humane way towards others" (218). Qualities associated with this disposition can be succinctly summed up as "brotherliness, togetherness, hospitality, solidarity and mutual support of each other and the community within which one exists" (Barben 6).

Most of these associations are epitomized in former Archbishop Desmond Tutu's interpretation of ubuntu, which is also the main source of ubuntu's link with theology. Ubuntu, like many of the other notions of relationality under discussion in this study, indeed has theological influences, as evidenced by Tutu's use of it in the TRC process and ethnophilosophic interpretations of the term that place ubuntu explicitly in the context of African religion. However, the aim of this dissertation does not allow for an investigation of the relation between ubuntu, African philosophy and the role of religion therein and these issues will not be separately discussed beyond their relevance for the discursive approach of ubuntu that is the focus of this dissertation.

For now, I will restrict myself to Tutu's description of ubuntu as it came to the fore in the TRC process, which has become seminal. In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, written by Tutu after having chaired the Truth Commission, he pits ubuntu against a Cartesian logic: "It is not 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong.' I participate, I share" (35). Indeed, this short quote sums up ubuntu's associations with community, sharing, belonging, and the reliance on these notions for becoming "truly" human by embedding oneself in one's surroundings in a fashion that

strives for social harmony. At the same time, however, it also immediately foregrounds an ambiguity in ubuntu with regard to inclusion, in the sense that not belonging anywhere, or not wanting to belong or share, can easily be considered deviant to the qualifications of the norm. Indeed, what is considered to be communal and what is not, when one "belongs" and when one does not, and, consequently, who sets the standard for what is "human" and what is not, are central questions in ubuntu theory that often remain untouched.

Some divisive significations attached to the category of the human in ubuntu thought come to the fore as soon as one takes a closer look at the way ubuntu is most commonly defined by the isiXhosa and isiZulu proverb "*ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu*" – which is spelled and translated in several, broadly correlating ways, but most often as "a person is a person because of other persons." According to Christian Gade, the use of this linguistic reference dates from after 1993 and is common to this day (313, 318).[3] The word "ubuntu" in itself belongs to the vocabulary of the Southern African Bantu languages, and more specifically to the subgroup of Nguni languages of which Zulu, isiXhosa, Ndebele, and Swati (amongst others) are yet again subgroups (Herbert and Bailey 216). Nearly 80% of the population of South Africa is said to belong to the Bantu language group, which would suggest that most people in South Africa know what the word "ubuntu" means (Outwater, Abrahams and Campbell 136).

This is not the same, however, as claiming that it is prevalent as a worldview, although it is suggested that ubuntu is present in the form of solidarity as a strategy to communally counter extreme poverty, as in South African townships (see Marx 52; Mbigi and Maree 1; Mokgoro, "S v Makwanyane," par. 307). Allister Sparks, for instance, describes ubuntu as a "participatory humanism, which has survived the urbanization of South Africa's industrial revolution and is visible today in the communal spirit of the ghetto townships" (Sparks 14). Yet, a different perspective on the prevalence of ubuntu in South African townships comes to the fore in a collection of interviews conducted by the uBuntu Township Project. When two groups of people (aged between 17 and 20 and between 31 and 50) from various townships were asked whether they thought ubuntu was still "alive," most interviewees responded that they felt the presence of ubuntu to be swiftly waning, because of the increase in violence due to poor living conditions (see *uBuntu in Everyday Life*).[4]

3 Some noteworthy sources that Gade does not mention in his article, but that explicitly take this proverb as a reference point are Sparks 14; Mnyaka and Mothlabi 218; Barben 6; Battle qtd. in Libin 126; Krog, *Ik Spreek* 34; Driver, *Truth* 219; Gianan 63-4, Gathogo 46, and the work of Mark Sanders.

4 The perception of ubuntu as "lost" will be discussed in more detail in the second chapter.

To return to the linguistic origin of ubuntu, however, Herbert and Bailey claim that Bantu languages conform to the "frequent onomastic tradition where a group self-identifies as '(true/real) people,' reserving ethnonyms for outsiders" (50). It can be deduced, then, that the word "*bantu*," which translates as "people/persons," would not apply to individuals who are not considered to be a part of the language community. This notion is supported by the contention that, in Nguni languages, white people are referred to in derogatory terms, which adds an ethnic flavour to ubuntu (Coertze 113). This ethnic division is not merely a racial matter, but also involves nationalist and cultural issues. The word "*makwerekwere*," for instance, which is spelled and pronounced differently according to the language it is used in and which is a derogatory term that some black South Africans use to denote black Africans from other countries, is one example of these cultural, nationalistic and linguistic means of division (Riwiyegura).

An ethnophilosophical perspective reveals that, in the all too broad context of community formation and personhood in Africa, the relation between being human, being part of a community and belonging to that community is all but causal. According to John Mbiti, for instance, the fact that someone is born into a society implies inevitable contact with and formation by the values current in that community, but does not automatically mean one is considered part of the community in question:

> Physical birth is not enough: the child must go through rites of incorporation so that it becomes fully integrated into the entire society. These rites continue throughout the physical life of the person, during which the individual passes from one stage of corporate existence to another. (141)

"Full integration," then, is not dependent only on physical human existence, but rather on how this physical existence is incorporated by the community to which one wants to, or is supposed to belong. One's position in such a "corporate existence" is not static, moreover, but subject to a movement through a number of stages, suggesting a notion of linear and hierarchical progression.

South African philosopher Dirk J. Louw describes such stages as crucial components of the formation of personhood. The very process of "becoming a person through other persons," which is, as we have seen, a popular way to summarise ubuntu, cannot be fulfilled without completing a prescribed route:

> According to traditional African thought, "becoming a person through other persons" involves going through various community prescribed stages and being involved in certain ceremonies and initiation rituals. Before being

> incorporated into the body of persons through this route, one is regarded merely as an "it", i.e. not yet a person. *Not all human beings are therefore persons*. Personhood is acquired. (Louw, "Challenges" 18, emphasis mine)

This view on personhood as acquired reveals a certain standard with regard to the notion of the human in ubuntu thought. As Mbiti has suggested, one has to be born into a particular society before one can be initiated into it. However, only by going through "various community prescribed stages" and performing "certain ceremonies and initiation rituals" can a person relate to and be constituted by other people who have also followed this "route" and are taken to be socially constituted in a similar fashion (Louw, "Challenges" 18). As such, people are born "human," but need to go through a communally prescribed process in order to fully realize the potential of their humanity into personhood.

Describing personhood and belonging in these terms not only suggests that the route to belonging is externally predetermined and imposed, but also that it is impossible or at least very difficult to aspire to belong to a different community than the one one was born in, or to belong in a meaningful sense to several communities at the same time. This separation of humanity from personhood, placed by Louw at the basis of ubuntu thought, relies on a specific filling out of the category of "the human" that introduces the very hierarchical split ubuntu discourse ostensibly seeks to avoid. As such, "personhood" only seems to apply to very particular forms of relationality and considerably complicates the concept of ubuntu by rendering it less inclusive than it purports to be.

As will become clear in the first chapter, where a similar approach to relationality is discussed in the context of the TRC, the notion of the human in ubuntu thought is organised around a double logic that holds up the inviolability of human dignity on the hand, yet installs a moral bar based on a restricted notion of the very term it aims to hold up as sacrosanct. In this logic, the respect for human dignity can be compared to the logic of obtaining personhood. A similar gesture is evident in some interpretations of the relation between ubuntu and legal issues.[5] In the introduction to *Ubuntu and the Law*, for instance, Drucilla Cornell also implies that personhood is acquired:

---

[5] This overlap comes as no surprise, since law discourse pertaining to ubuntu and the discourse related to the TRC have a common origin in the post amble to the Interim Constitution of 1993. This post amble explicitly mentions ubuntu and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1. I have chosen to elaborate on the TRC discourse because of its wider cultural repercussions. In the field of law, discussions about ubuntu were triggered by its central role in overturning capital punishment in the Makwanyane case, where the main judgment as well as all the concurring judgments by the Constitutional Court, in various levels of explicitness, referred to ubuntu

> We come into the world obligated to others, and in turn these others are obligated to us, to the individual. ... It is only through the engagement and support of others that we are able to realize a true individuality and rise above our biological distinctiveness into a fully developed person whose uniqueness is inseparable from the journey to moral and ethical development. (3)

Counterintuitively, it is exactly this "journey to moral and ethical development" that restricts the possibilities of thinking ubuntu as a concept, because it places this development exclusively within the framework of legislation. From the perspective of ubuntu as law, someone who acts exclusively out of self-interest (read: commits a crime) has become detached from their "ethical human being" after which it becomes the task, in Cornell's formulation, of the community that practices ubuntu as law, to bring this person back into contact with their humanity (5).

Although this is an understandable and humane perspective when considered from the position of the law (and its enforcement), it also, besides implying that ethical action is always in concordance with the law, pins ubuntu down as a normative interpretation of what it means to be human. In order to be regarded as persons who realize their humanity to the fullest extent, individuals are expected to conform to behaviour patterns that are considered desirable by the community. In this way, this particular use of ubuntu, formulated through the law, introduces the issues of power and authority that this study seeks to address in uses of ubuntu: who determines what is normative and who decides how these normative concepts, in this case, should be enforced? In other words, relating ubuntu to the law as a conflation of ethics and law runs the risk of failing to transcend ubuntu as a strict adherence to normative notions of relationality and forecloses alternative imaginings of ubuntu. Indeed, as Mnyaka and Motlhabi remark about the relation between person, community and ubuntu, this can lead to the perception that manifest "qualities of individualism" are invariably considered as harmful for the community and can result, as is also suggested by Cornell's description of crime as a loss of humanity, in the "'derecognition' of another person's humanity" including ostracism and rejection (224).

---

in making the argument that the death penalty was an infringement on the right to life ("S v Makwanyane"). Most ensuing discussions revolve around the term's potential for giving shape to South African jurisprudence within the larger issue of combining South Africa's Dutch Roman law with indigenous law systems (see, for instance Mokgoro; Cornell and Van Marle), although it is also considered as unsuitable for this role (Keevy) and as compromised in its potential (Bohler-Müller, Kroeze). Ubuntu was eventually not carried over into South Africa's Constitution, which was installed in 1996.

As philosopher Daniel Herwitz points out, ubuntu can function as a concept that hampers individual development, especially that of women in patriarchal societies, because it is "a practical ethics which is community preserving and communitarian in form" (xxvi). Herwitz somewhat problematically relates this description to an interpretation of ubuntu "as a traditional form of life in which persons are formed and take on identities *only* in terms of whole villages" (xxv, emphasis mine), but is quick to add the following:

> To return to ubuntu is to do so critically. My point is the further one: that to render ubuntu into a philosophical signifier and (in the national push) to recast this concept in as many ways as possible is already to have subjected it to an operation of modernity, one that converts moral practice into moral theory and thinks ubuntu comparatively, vis-à-vis various philosophical doctrines about community, justice, decency, and humanity. (Herwitz xxvi)

Although Herwitz' formulation suggests a rather rigid interpretation of ubuntu as a pre-modern and exclusively moral term that can only find new meanings in the "neonatal" South African nation state associated with modernity, it does allow for the development of the concept and touches closely on the investigation of ubuntu intended here, which aims to ask how ubuntu can constructively relate to other notions of community and intersubjectivity, rather than to focus on how ubuntu can be turned into a successful moral prescription for a society that will inevitably keep excluding ways of relating that are "foreign" to its norms.

R.D. Coertze, an anthropologist who has conducted idiomatic research into the use of proverbs in Bantu languages, claims that ubuntu is developing towards increasingly inclusive interpretations. Although Coertze does not specify the historical periods he refers to in his research, it still gives a (welcome) sense of the ways in which ubuntu as a term has developed. Apparently, the use of ubuntu was, initially, quite particular and did not include descriptions of it as a disposition or abstract concept, which is contrary to Christian Gade's claim that ubuntu was mainly referred to as "human nature," "humanity" and "humanness" in written sources ranging from 1850 to 1979 (307). Instead, concrete situations "between relatives, friends or persons having common interests or speaking the same language" determined its meaning (Coertze 115). The solely positive connotations of the term are of a later date, too:

> Originally these terms meant the essence of being human. This indication theoretically included both the positive and the negative qualities found in man. (113)

Thus, the representation of ubuntu as an attitude of goodwill towards humans in general seems to be a later addition to an earlier concept that stressed concrete situations of interdependency.

This change from a specific and concrete signification to a more general and unequivocally positive one occurred in two major semantic shifts that ubuntu has undergone in South Africa. The first was the result of the "accelerated contact [of Africans] with Western civilization through employment in industries" and the concomitant urbanisation of South Africa (Coertze 115). Since Coertze does not give any dates, his description only allows for a rough approximation of a period somewhere between 1910 and 1930. This process of modernisation led to the disruption of traditional social structures, because the financial necessity to move to the city and live away from home increased the contact between people from different groups and backgrounds. This way, the concept broadened to include people from work, the same (urban) neighbourhood, or with similar interests.

When large parts of the population started to convert to Christianity, ubuntu became even more generally applicable. The idea that the individual has certain rights as a human being was, it must be noted, not yet part of this formulation of ubuntu, but came about during the second semantic shift, located by Coertze in the 1990s. During this period the content of ubuntu "became completely determined by the demands of a modern lifestyle," but was most significantly influenced by the fact that it "became the consciously chosen pivotal theme in the envisaged process of nation-building and modernisation in South Africa" (115).

The fact that ubuntu has been subject to change over time is also implicated in the description of Mogobe Ramose, who pinpoints growth and processuality as the distinguishing characteristics of this "normative ethical category" (Ramose 324). Ramose explains that the word "ubuntu" can be divided into two parts: ubu- and -ntu. The first part "evokes the idea of being in general." The second part, -ntu, is the stem of the word and should be understood to refer to something which has a temporary state. Thus, being is not static, but always in a condition of becoming (324-5). The two parts combine into a whole, or rather, a whole-ness:

> It [ubuntu ethics] is flexibility towards balance and harmony in the relationship between human beings and between the latter and the broader be-ing or nature. (326)

Ramose's description of ubuntu as flexibility towards harmony crucially acknowledges the importance of change and flux in the concept (a discussion which will be

taken up in the second chapter) as well as the importance of the relationship between people and "the broader be-ing or nature." This latter aspect, which according to South African poet, journalist and scholar Antjie Krog includes "ancestors and the universe" will not be explored in this dissertation, which focuses on the relations between subjects and their communities (Krog, "This Thing" 355).[6] Ramose's definition is particularly insightful, however, because it also implies a sense of conformity that foregrounds possible tensions in ubuntu philosophy between the pressure of the "search for individual excellence with personal value often measured in terms of success" and the need to be an integral part of a community "where one's value depends on responding to communal responsibilities" (Wilkinson 356).

In rigidly gendered systems, conformity to communal norms can be particularly restrictive, both for the individual and for the group to which this individual relates. In the case of feminism in South Africa, for instance, black women may find themselves doubly bound, both by patriarchal and racial structures.[7] As Dorothy Driver has suggested in the context of black women's writing and the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa in the 1970s and 80s, ubuntu can be enabling as well as divisive and restrictive. In this discourse, a reliance on ubuntu's emphasis on the importance of group solidarity allowed the movement to oppose and organise itself against what it perceived as harmful Western individualism ("*M'a-Ngoana*" 233-4).[8] Yet, a discrepancy existed between the dominance of the male/masculine voice of Black Consciousness discourse and its simultaneous inclusion of women "in the community as those whose solidarity must be courted" in order to achieve freedom for black people as a group (235). A closer look at this discourse reveals that "any hospitality offered to women by its philosophy of *ubuntu* depends altogether on a particular definition of womanhood"

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6 For a discussion of ubuntu from the perspective of environmental issues, see Lenkabula. For ubuntu and ecology, see Murove.

7 I do not want to reduce gender issues to the relations between the categories of men and women, but refer to feminism here because of the specific role the history of feminism in South Africa plays in how we can think ubuntu. I will return to the question of gender in Chapter 1, where I discuss ubuntu in the context of the TRC, and in Chapter 3, where I analyse the role of community formation in the work of South African photographer Zanele Muholi.

8 See, for instance, Steve Biko's famous contention in *I Write What I Like*: "Ours is a true man-centred-society whose sacred tradition is that of sharing. We must reject, as we have been doing, the individualistic cold approach to life that is the cornerstone of the Anglo-Boer culture. We must seek to restore to the black man the great importance we used to give to human relations, the high regard for people and their property and for life in general; to reduce the triumph of technology over man and the materialistic element that is slowly creeping into our society" (96).

(234), namely that of black women as strong mothers who provide, through care and support, a platform for the male struggle against apartheid (235-6).

By analysing the work of black feminist Ellen Kuzwayo, Driver attentively suggests, however, that this selfsame trope of the strong mother is a place where "the possibilities for an African feminism begin to emerge" (237). As such, the ubuntu philosophy of the Black Consciousness movement restricted black women's role in the struggle to that of a traditional notion of motherhood but also provided them with a platform from which to launch their own conception of maternity. In line with this argument, Ksenia Robbe compellingly argues, in her comparison of Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* and Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue*, that, though in different ways, both these women constructively relate their roles as mother to a wish to transform society "along the lines of *ubuntu*" (228). Instead of merely conforming to the communities in which the term "motherhood" has received its shape and allocated position, then, these writers put forward the notion of the maternal voice as a "strategic position" from which to "imagine a more inclusive social order" that recognizes the historical and local specificity of both the community and its individuals (Robbe 228).

The implication of this reading of motherhood for ubuntu is that it postulates ubuntu as a highly gendered discourse forged in a time of great racial tension that exists alongside its more common interpretation as a humanistic and universalistic viewpoint on community. It not only shows that ubuntu has several meanings that can effectively co-exist, but, more specifically, it draws attention to the possibility of strategically forging and applying these different meanings. It is this potential of multiplicity and renewal that ubuntu can exercise from within its own as well as other discourses that I intend to focus on in this dissertation.

Ubuntu Strategies: No Outside to Discourse

Before I stake out how I intend to identify and analyse some of these as yet unformulated trajectories of ubuntu, there is one particular propensity of ubuntu that I want to repudiate at the outset, namely the assumption that it is an exclusively African notion of community-oriented thought that is most effectively defined when contrasted with "Western individualism." Firstly, such a dichotomy between Africa and the West actively works against ubuntu's premise of inclusion and inevitable relationality and secondly, it essentialises the diversity present within both traditions. Identifying ubuntu as an exclusively African philosophy that is distinct from Western traditions of thought invokes Odera Oruka's categorisation of ethnophilosophy as the positing of

a particular "Africanness" that results form a uniquely African way of thinking which is assumed to be similar throughout the continent (120-1). Indeed, as I have argued above, ubuntu is strongly tied to a Southern African context, both in an etymological and a social sense, but it is not, by definition, separate from other philosophical traditions. Several studies, for instance, emphasise similarities between ubuntu and other strands of thought usually associated with non-African geographies.[9] Therefore, this study approaches ubuntu in terms of Odera Oruka's interpretation of African philosophy as a body of philosophical work that pertains to Africa in a geographical sense and where it is "admitted that cultural dissimilarities can cause disparity in philosophical priority and methodology but not in the nature or meaning of philosophy as a discipline" (123).[10]

This study is not about African philosophy, however, nor is it about the nature or meaning of philosophy as a discipline. It is about ubuntu and aims to analyse how this concept is elaborated in different contexts, both in a practical and in a theoretical sense. From these uses ubuntu emerges, to speak with Mieke Bal, quite literally as a concept that travels. A lot. Indeed, as Bal reminds us, concepts are never stable and "are hardly ever used in exactly the same sense" (*Travelling* 29). They are constantly altered and metamorphosed as a result of their movement through time and across various disciplines, where they encounter new contexts, new objects, and also other concepts.

Ubuntu has taken off, landed and created new (or perhaps simply more) connections to different contexts, both in- and outside (South) Africa.[11] In South Africa, ubuntu is widespread, and it has been used as a guideline for, amongst other things, national unity and the creation of competitive advantage in businesses, but also as a product, a commodity, or a service in the form of, for example, the Ubuntu Security company in Pretoria, Ubuntu liquor stores, and, last but not least, catchy logos on t-shirts (see figures 1 and 2). A few examples of how ubuntu has crossed South African

9 Some of these strands are, for instance, analytical philosophy (Metz), Levinasian ethics (Sanders; Gianan), *jen* and *loob* philosophy from China (Gianan), Confucianism and Platonic-Aristotelean traditions (Bell and Metz, see also Lutz), and *Bildung* (Letseka). J. Teffo even suggests that ubuntu philosophy is "encapsulated in all the philosophies of the world, though it might be articulated and actualized differently" (qtd. in Mnyaka and Motlhabi 220).

10 Ethnophilosophical works that are still cited as authoritative in the case of ubuntu are, primarily, Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* and John S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*. More recent examples can be found in Gathogo, Lenkabula and Mnayaka and Motlabhi.

11 Gade's research into written sources on ubuntu available online suggests that this growth is in tandem with the mention of ubuntu in the Interim Constitution (Gade, especially 319). This occurrence of ubuntu has, as I have mentioned earlier, triggered the vast research fields of ubuntu and the law and the role of ubuntu in the TRC process.

Figure 2. Ubuntu liquor store in Soweto, Johannesburg.

borders are the Ubuntu distribution of Linux, which is an open-source software system based on a concept of sharing and co-operation, the management bestseller *Ubuntu!* by Lundin and Nelson, the fact that the American basketball team the Boston Celtics live by "ubuntu" (Toscano), or Bill Clinton's conviction that it is the way forward for the British Labour Party (Coughlan). Apart from this, it has been suggested for use in US diplomacy (Frawley Bagley) and it is the name of a fair trade cola (see figure 4). Apparently, ubuntu, despite what some regard as its excessive proliferation, boasts a huge appeal.

This dissertation deals with some of these itineraries, but also investigates new ones. The aim is to find out, by tracing some of the effects of the dissemination of ubuntu, what these different uses tell us about the concept and its potential for formulating an inclusivity that is neither partial nor asphyxiating. In what is to follow, the focus will thus be organised around some of the historical contexts and objects that ubuntu has already encountered and geared towards the concepts that have not been related to it as of yet. I will argue that overlaps exist between ubuntu and other concepts, which include but are not restricted to precarity as described by Judith Butler, Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the author-hero relation, Levinasian responsibility, Jacques Derrida's hospitality, Manuel DeLanda's notion of the assemblage

and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's multitude. More importantly, links between ubuntu and concepts pertaining to relationality, intersubjectivity and community can also be actively created in order to keep essentialising gestures, both with regard to possible meanings of ubuntu and the division between Africa and the West that often accompanies its use, at bay.

Figure 3. Ubuntuism shirt by UbuntuBotho.

These relations, whether old or new, are, however, not neutral. Even a brief glance at the history of South Africa suffices to raise awareness of the sites of contestation in which ubuntu came to be what it is today. It is from these sites of contestation – by which I rather broadly mean colonialism and apartheid – and the violence that resulted from the asymmetrical power relations on which they are based that ubuntu's crucial value as a drive for peaceful solutions comes to the fore most forcefully. The truth and reconciliation process is only one example of this. Yet, to return to Bal's description of the travelling concept, ubuntu, like any other concept, is itself also invested with certain power relations and is "never simply descriptive, but rather, programmatic and normative" ("Working" 8). This is why this dissertation relies on a discursive approach to ubuntu, which, through its acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of power in everyday practices, is pre-eminently suitable for making these relations, and how they are formed, visible.

Sara Mills describes discourse as "a set of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalised force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way individuals act and think" (62). This set of statements in principle determines what it is possible to say at any given time within a given community or society, a "sayability" that includes individual ideas, social practices, and cultural beliefs. As Foucault notes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, discourses can thus not merely, in a linguistic sense, be treated "as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (49).

Figure 4. Ubuntu cola.

Discourse, although firmly grounded in language and disseminated by language, encompasses a much wider array of social practices.

My use of the word "discourse" leans on this general description, and more specifically on Foucault's observation that a discourse exists by grace of the exclusion of the alternatives to its own generated notions of what is true, sayable, and even reasonable. According to Foucault, these "possible alternatives are not in fact realized: there are a good many partial groups, regional compatibilities, and coherent architectures that might have emerged, yet did not do so" (66) as a result of how power is strategically implemented in discourse:

> A discursive formation does not occupy therefore all the possible volume that is opened up to it of right by the systems of formation of its objects, its enunciations, and its concepts; it is essentially incomplete, owing to the system of formation of its strategic choices. (67)

The aim is not to "complete" ubuntu discourses in any way – this is, in any case, impossible – but, as I have already mentioned, to unearth some of the discursive formations that have occurred and can occur due to the strategic choices made with

regard to ubuntu discourses. By analysing some of the discursive formations around ubuntu and the power relations involved, the "possible alternatives" that were not realised because of discourse's exclusionary mechanism might be tracked and recovered, which is to say reinvented. The discursive approach in this study amounts to the attempt of making alternatives visible and locating possible moments of change.

As Michel de Certeau has remarked with regard to Foucault's notion of discourse, the fact that certain practices are foregrounded at the expense of others does not mean that any society can be reduced to its dominant discourses (48). Indeed, it is "in this multifarious and silent 'reserve' of procedures" that the productive force of the consumer practices that de Certeau analyses in *The Practice of Everyday Life* should be located (48). As such, de Certeau tries to make visible "the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop" and that allow us to look at the excess of signification that is inherent to inhabiting any system (xviii). As became clear from Driver's analysis of the use of ubuntu by black women in the Black Consciousness movement, however, ubuntu discourse actually consists of various practices that do not necessarily comply with its dominant formulations of humanity and community. These alternatives may, as de Certeau argues, escape detection by the system in which they develop, but that does not mean they are not determined by it. Dominant discourse makes sayable what is in concordance with it, as well as what is alternative to it. In this sense, the alternative and potentially subversive practices that de Certeau describes are, counter to Foucault's formulation, just as much a part of discourse as its dominant strain, even if discourse often succeeds in excluding alternatives to a large extent. Alternative practices and, in the case at hand here, alternative meanings and uses of ubuntu, often exist in the lee produced by dominant discourse and it is there that the ability "to organize both spaces and languages, whether on a minute or a vast scale" arises (de Certeau 48).

In order to clarify this position with regard to discourse, I lean on de Certeau's argument that consumer practices make the system that is forced upon them "habitable, like a rented apartment" – an elegant statement embedded in the distinction de Certeau makes between strategies and tactics (xxi). Strategy is associated with the system in which consumers live (the apartment), whereas the term tactics refers to the ways in which consumers make these apartments their own. Despite this tendency towards habitability and proprietary, however, acts associated with tactics are not about "having" or "owning" a space in the traditional sense of the word. In de Certeau's model, tactics can only poach on a space that has already been fenced off by

someone else – a fencing-off that is strategic, because it literally creates an outside to the relations that are central to this space:

> A strategy assumes the place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, "clienteles," "targets," or "objects" of research). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model. (xix)

When read through the lens of the relationality that is central to ubuntu, strategy could then be regarded as a "generation of relations" (between people, texts, or concepts) that is restricted by circumscription, whereas tactics are associated with forms of relating that aim to transgress the spatial boundaries set out by strategic positions.

So, what does it mean for ubuntu to be designated as a strategy or a tactic? The main reason for applying this distinction, or, at least, to do so most of the time, is that each term makes visible different aspects of the role of normativity in what it means to relate to others. Associating ubuntu with strategy points towards the power relations at play in the ways in which the term has been posited philosophically, politically, culturally, and commercially in recent years. It clarifies when we are dealing with a circumscribed use of the term, which constructs relations that enforce their own proper space and thus might close off ubuntu's aspects of openness towards and inclusion of what is other to it. Therefore, it is also necessary to investigate the tactical side of ubuntu, which lends visibility to those practices that might escape notice in a focus on dominant discourses of ubuntu, notwithstanding the fact that tactical uses poach on these dominant discourses.

In some case, however, both strategies and tactics can be deployed against a dominant system. As Ross Chambers shows in his *Room for Maneuver*, the difference between strategies and tactics could then be read in terms of resistance and opposition. In this case, a strategy refers to a counter-move that is visible to the system and is, as such, easier to oppress. Tactics, or oppositionality, avoids "overt challenges to the prevailing situation" and by evading detection, thus has the ability to use "the characteristics of power *against* the power and *for* one's own purposes" (10). Thus, applying the distinction between strategy and tactics allows me to flesh out issues of power within dominant discourse as well as in the oppositions to it that could become obscured when a strategic and circumscribed positing of a *proper* space, whether this space is textual, visual, social, political or theoretical, is conflated with a tactical "reading into" that is aimed at making use of these spaces without claiming them.

The way this distinction, and the tensions in it, will be applied throughout this work is itself both strategic and tactical. It is strategic because it delimits the space of this study, but also tactical because, from the perspective of de Certeau, scholars could be regarded as consumers of the discourses imposed on them and as persons who are trying to make these systems "readable" for themselves as well as for others. Indeed, the reader, like the consumer, "insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation; he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one's body" and in this way makes the text inhabitable (de Certeau xxi). As this image of the text consumed to the extent that it becomes one with the rumblings of the body of the reader already suggests, a considerable level of appropriation is inevitable in the process of reading, and, by extension, in tactics as well. The close readings on which this research is based are thus not merely an intersection of the objects and the concepts in which the one has the potential to change the other and vice versa, but also imbued with the discourses that have formed the person performing the reading.

This person being an outsider to the context of South Africa automatically implies that some of the ways in which ubuntu has been thought and the objects placed in conjunction with ubuntu will be appropriated by the readings performed in this work – a gesture that could be considered imperialistic. However, the way in which the objects in this study are read aims to acknowledge this appropriation and to turn these readings into moments in which novel perspectives on ubuntu, as well as on the objects that have conditioned these perspectives, become possible.

This self-reflexive dimension differentiates the method of close reading as it is performed in cultural analysis, and as it will be pursued here, from that in New Criticism. Instead of looking for that one true, but hidden meaning of the text, close reading in cultural analysis aims to make visible how the encounter between theory and object affects both: "Theory and object involve each other in a productive relationship of reciprocal intersubjectivity," in which the cultural analyst places "herself in the exchange as an interlocutor" (Peeren 3). The objects have thus not been selected because they are "about ubuntu" in the strict sense of the word, but rather, because they suggested themselves as capable of saying something about ubuntu in the course of the research of which this dissertation is the sediment. It is one of the basic premises of this study that ubuntu, in turn, also has a lot to say about these objects. In this way, the practice of close reading ties in strongly with ubuntu's main feature of relationality, which recognizes that a person's life is strongly influenced and partly determined by their relations to others. From this similarity, it can thus be deduced that ubuntu as a concept also does not stand on its own.

Indeed, since "ubuntu" is a word that requires explanation for most people that encounter it, it is often described by using other concepts, like generosity, friendliness and hospitality. Especially this latter term is strongly associated with ubuntu to the extent of conflation, and has amplified the impression of ubuntu as a radical openness towards what is foreign or "other." As became clear from the above, however, I intend to investigate the tensions that arise between strategic and tactical approaches to ubuntu and, in line with ubuntu as inevitably relational, set out from de Certeau's idea that any countering of dominant discourses is located within them. This presupposition problematizes the possibility of an "absolute other" that lies at the basis of the theories most often associated with hospitality, like those of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Before I continue, therefore, with a more detailed description of how this project investigates the tensions between strategy and tactic, self and other, and individual and community, tensions from which ubuntu emerges as a way to think through these problems, it is necessary to elucidate some of the assumptions on which the conflation of ubuntu with hospitality is based.

Ubuntu and Hospitality: Negotiating the Conditional and the Unconditional

A rather succinct description of the interrelation between ubuntu and hospitality that by Nelson Mandela, who is beyond the shadow of a doubt the most famous personification of what many people understand ubuntu to mean. His life reflects a constant struggle for a political freedom on the basis of equality that he both practised and personified, first as an icon in the struggle against apartheid and, afterwards, as national and international peacemaker. Mandela formulates ubuntu as follows:

> A traveller through our country would stop at a village, and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of ubuntu, but ubuntu has various aspects… ("Ubuntu")

In this formulation, hospitality is regarded as one of the "various aspects" of ubuntu and suggests that this hospitable attitude is considered to be self-evident.[12] Mandela's

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[12] A similar image arises from most of the interviews collected in *uBuntu in Everyday Life*. From 40 interviewees, consisting of two age groups (aged between 17 and 20 and between 31 and 50)

shift from the past tense to the present tense at the end of the sentence further underlines this: it actively moves ubuntu from an association with an almost anecdotal and nostalgic village scene (created by the word "would") to a self-evident and "natural" present-day practice, thus positing it as a continuous custom or tradition that has remained more or less the same over time.

One of his biographers, Elleke Boehmer, pointedly remarks upon "the consistency with which Mandela always upheld in particular the traditional ideal – but equally the reinvented tradition – of *ubuntu*, of mutual responsibility and human fellowship" (91).[13] Contrary to Mandela's suggestion that ubuntu as hospitality is self-evident, however, Boehmer's description of ubuntu as a "traditional ideal" and a "reinvented tradition" recognises ubuntu as a social construct and, in this context, posits it as something that is not yet realized – an ideal that one actively has to strive for, but that might turn out to be, eventually, unattainable.

With regard to hospitality in Nguni societies, about which Mandela, as a Xhosa born in 1918 in the Eastern Cape village Mvezo, is presumably speaking, anthropologist Monica Wilson's analysis of the first recorded encounters between European seafarers and Nguni people in Southern Africa provides an interesting addition to the self-evident sharing posited by Mandela. According to Wilson, the status of strangers logically depended on whether they were individuals or members of a large group with a leader of their own (52). Even though "the chiefdoms of Southern Africa made provisions for strangers," a large group would obviously constitute a threat to the existing social order (51).[14] Travellers and individuals, however, were provided for, as long as they adhered to the customs of the tribe. From seventeenth- and eighteenth-century diaries Wilson furthermore infers that individual survivors of shipwrecks, irrespective of race, were absorbed completely into indigenous societies. In this way, entire villages were formed that consisted partly of people of mixed descent, but where everybody answered to the native chiefs (52-4). Significantly, Wilson continues to suggest that strangers were also welcomed because they added to the power and authority of the chief:

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living in various townships, most responded in terms similar to those given by Nelson Mandela when asked about the relation between ubuntu and how to treat visitors or strangers. Julius Gathogo sometimes equates what he calls "African hospitality" with ubuntu, while at other times he regards the latter as merely an aspect of the former (42).

13 Yet, interestingly enough, the word "ubuntu" does not figure in Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*.

14 The dynamic of inclusion with regard to individuals and groups will be taken up in Chapter 3 in the discussion of ubuntu as an inevitable relationality, not to one, but to multiple others.

> Among the Xhosa, at least from the seventeenth century, every man was "a shield of the chief" and therefore under his protection: to injure a man was to injure the chief who represented the state. (55)[15]

The more shields a chief commanded, the more powerful he would be. The term "shield of the chief" itself already implies that being under the protection of the chief meant that the chief's subordinates were expected to protect him in return. As such, the welcoming of strangers is revealed as a conditional process that depends on hierarchical structures that create obligations between the parties in question.

A famous example of such an interaction between chiefs and strangers is that of BaSotho King Moshoeshoe, who welcomed refugees from the wars of destruction waged by Shaka Zulu and the British into his chiefdom.[16] If they chose to stay under his authority, the chief allowed these refugees to maintain their own language and cultural values, and treated them as "full" members of society despite cultural differences. According to South African scholar and writer Njabulo Ndebele, King Moshoeshoe practiced "counter-intuitive leadership" by realising that he, as a leader, found himself in an unprecedented situation requiring the creation of a new psychosocial space. Taking in the refugees on their own terms, Ndebele argues, prevented the violence and aggression to which they were subjected by the conflicting dominant factions surrounding Moshoeshoe's chiefdom from being transferred to his own community (*Perspectives* 11). As Antjie Krog also points out, it is exactly by allowing the existence of "strange" elements in his chiefdom and by providing for them that Moshoeshoe was able to forge a sense of peaceful unity that, I argue, tactically countered the violence threatening the borders of his kingdom (*Ik Spreek* 36-7). Even within this tactical countering, however, the issue of authority and, in this case, leadership, reveals a hierarchical structure at work.

Xhosa writer A.C. Jordan takes this kind of tactical hospitality to the next level by placing the stranger centre stage in his notion of community. In his reading of reverend Tiyo Soga's essays, "The Believers and the Pagans," ubuntu is formulated as the distinguishing factor between Christians and "pagans:"

> The converted has lost ubuntu [generosity, respect for man irrespective of his position]. The pagan can no longer expect hospitality amongst the

15 The use of the word "state" in this context is, of course, an anachronism.

16 For a more extensive reworking of the history of King Moshoeshoe, see Antjie Krog's *Begging to Be Black*. King Moshoeshoe ruled what is now Lesotho, an independent kingdom completely surrounded by South African territory.

> Christians. Soga gives an instance of a pagan traveller who spent a cold night in the open veld because none of the Christians in the village would admit him into their homes. (Jordan qtd. in Sanders, *Complicities* 124, insertion by Sanders)

As Mark Sanders argues, Jordan's linking of the loss of ubuntu to a lack of hospitality turns ubuntu into an attitude that prioritises the provision of hospitality to strangers over taking care of people who are already part of the community in question (*Complicities* 125). According to Krog, Jordan's reading even implies that the destabilising effect of the stranger obliges communities to carry "responsibility for the stranger as an essential component of the collective as such" (*Ik spreek* 39, my translation[17]). The constant reinvention of this figure of the stranger is the only way in which a community can provide itself with the self-reflexivity needed to keep it "healthy" (37-9).

This destabilisation of identity is, according to Sanders, exactly what the word "ubuntu" performs on a linguistic level: "Ubuntu operates a certain dispropriation," which "refers to an identity not being proper, or identical, to itself" (*Complicities* 126; *Ambiguities* 8). The maxim of ubuntu, rendered by Sanders as the Zulu proverb "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," casts the subject as fundamentally split because it exists by virtue of what is not the self, what is other and thus strange to it. The linguistic structure of the proverb explicitly shows this dispropriation at work. Sanders argues that *umuntu*, which is the singular form of *–ntu* and can mean both *a* human being and being human *as such*, has no "proper" sense until it is related to the plural form of *–ntu*: *abantu*. A provisional and grammatical translation then reads: "the being-human of a human being is realized through his or her being (human) through human beings" ("Reading" 13-4). Thus, the fact that the meaning of *umuntu* grammatically depends on how it is activated by *abantu* implies, for Sanders, that *abantu* "relies on an otherness of umuntu that divides it from the inside" (*Complicities* 126).

This grammatical exchange between singular and plural in ubuntu prevents, in contrast to more communitarian interpretations of the term, the possibility of taking the relations between the individual and the community for granted:

> Attending to the syntax as a whole of the formulation and its variants – instead of merely glossing over ubuntu as "generosity, respect for man irrespec-

17 The lecture from which I quote here was given in English, but published in Dutch: "Jordan leek de nadruk te leggen op de verantwoordelijkheid voor de vreemdeling als wezenlijk bestanddeel van het collectief als zodanig."

> tive of position," humanity, respect for human dignity, the subordination of the individual to the collective – brings ubuntu to life as an ethics of responsibility standing watch over one-sided interpretations. (Sanders, *Complicities* 126)

It is this ethics of responsibility – based on a sense of identity that recognises this identity is not proper to itself – that Sanders relates to Jordan's reading of hospitality as ubuntu.[18] So, if one follows the logic that being human, in the Zulu maxim, depends on how this humanness is concretely activated through other human beings (and other ways of being-human) that differ to such an extent that they effect the dispropriation championed by Sanders, the role of the stranger becomes, indeed, pivotal:

> One's human being is folded together with the other, the human-being of the other; and that other is the stranger. That is why ubuntu is, in a fundamental sense, hospitality. (125)

Such a reading of ubuntu, although it unearths the importance of the role of what is strange to any community, does not (and this is equally true of the descriptions of Krog and Mandela), however, follow the logic of human beings as "folded together" to its full extent; it does not critically address the fact that being "folded together" relies on a folding of the stranger into the self or the community, implying its otherness is, in ubuntu thought, although potentially unsettling in its otherness, also always partially knowable; the stranger is recognizable as a guest. In other words, the stranger is recognized as different, yet as potentially belonging to the categories of the community and is thus, by definition eligible for hospitality, if only temporarily. As such, ubuntu seems to rely on a notion of the other in which the community or self as host remains the leading perspective from which the analysis begins, which Sanders conflates with the absolute and unknowable other as it comes to the fore in his reference to Levinas. I will return to this issue of otherness in Chapter 3, and will just add here that the usual interpretation of hospitality in ubuntu discourse does not recognize the possible fluidity of the binary that lies at the foundation of the construct of hospitality, namely that of host and guest and the distribution of power that accompanies it.

18 The use of the word "ethics," both in the quote by Sanders and in this dissertation, refers to its definition as first philosophy by French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who relates ethics to the undeniable demand of responsibility for the other that arises from the "face to face" moment between self and other. I will return to this theory in greater detail in Chapter 3, where I discuss the relation between ubuntu and responsibility.

This lack of manoeuvrability in the way ubuntu is presented as hospitality relates to the distinction Derrida makes between conditional and unconditional hospitality. In this distinction, conditional hospitality is based on convention and tradition, mostly. Literally, it depends on certain conditions, described by Derrida as "a right to or pact of hospitality" (*Of Hospitality* 25). Thus, it refers to the materiality, customs and systems of exchange implicit in hospitality, as well as to the power relations that automatically come with such customs. Absolute hospitality, on the other hand, breaks with this pact:

> To put it in different terms, absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.) but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (*Of Hospitality* 25)

However, as Derrida contends even before further specifying the distinction: "in saying this, once more, we are taking account of an irreducible pervertibility" (25). A pervertibility, I would say, both of the concept of absolute hospitality itself, and of the distinction he makes between the two concepts: a radical openness involves an enormous risk for the one opening up, while this radical openness itself cannot exist without referring to a set of conditions regarding hospitality that are relinquished, yet referred to in being denounced. As such, absolute hospitality appears as a way of relating to others that is presented as preferable over conditional hospitality, yet as one that needs to be harnessed by circumstance in order to exist. This compromised existence, in turn, destroys at the outset any possible formulation of absolute hospitality.

Derrida describes this problem more elaborately in an article fittingly titled "Hostipitality," a play on words that denotes the inevitable contamination of hospitality with hostility, which could refer to the vulnerability of the host and guest involved, but also takes into account the discursive violence inevitably inflicted on absolute hospitality, rendering it impossible. In this way, Derrida argues, hospitality is poised on the difference between its two inflections; it "remains on the threshold of itself" and thus remains unknown ("Hostipitality" 14). It is always about to enter into existence, but as soon as it does, it destroys, at the outset, any possible formulation of the ideal of absolute hospitality.

By looking at the ways in which hospitality can become organised around the axes of gender, or along racial and nationalistic lines, as Mireille Rosello has done in *Postcolonial Hospitality*, the notion of absolute hospitality is complicated further. As becomes clear from Rosello's study, it is not just the formulation of hospitality as conditional that hinders the achievement of its "unconditional" version. When she argues that "no discussion of hospitality can ignore the troubling elimination of the female figure from the primordial guest-host pair and how hard it is for women to be treated as guests," she also points towards a problematic elision at the basis of the concept of hospitality (*Postcolonial* 119). In addition to Derrida's argument that relations of hospitality are not necessarily benevolent, Rosello demonstrates that these bonds often conceal cultural prejudices and can pose a threat to all parties involved (*Postcolonial* 12).

In a very literal way, ubuntu is, by some critics, regarded as just that: an obviation of precarity and vulnerability. According to South African journalist and writer Allister Sparks, for instance, ubuntu is a social and cultural system that came into being for quite particular reasons, the most important aspect in its development being Africa's demanding climate. In pre-colonial times, the scorching heat, alternated with periodical floods, made it impossible to rely on predictable gains from the land. The quantity of food oscillated between abundance and lack. Therefore, entire communities were sometimes dependent on the help of others to survive. Over the course of time an ethics of interdependence evolved which functioned as a kind of "insurance, with a man giving as much as he can on one day in case he is in need on another" (Barben 6). Thus, the uncertainties of life as a farmer dependent on the African climate could be counteracted:

> African societies cushioned themselves against … capricious changes of fortune by building elaborate systems of mutual support. If disaster struck one person he could turn to another for help, and the same went for whole communities… Thus was created a social security system of reciprocal obligations that supported and protected the individual and at the same time demanded certain commitments from him in return… (Sparks 12-3)

Reciprocity, as it comes to the fore in this perspective, and also in Derrida's conception of conditional hospitality, indeed revolves around commitment and obligation. Because both individual and community invest in this mutual bond, they are allowed to rely on it. If the bond is compromised, the protection it offers falls away.

This is exactly what Derrida seems to argue against in his take on conditional and absolute hospitality, where he insists that to relinquish the pact of reciprocity would create the possibility to escape from restrictive social bonds and the abusive associations they have. However, what needs to be taken into account in any discussion of social formations, especially when ubuntu's incessant dynamic between the individual and the community is involved, is that the bonds that tie people together are, more often than not, both restrictive and enabling. In the schema of reciprocity as offered by Sparks' example, the protection offered by the system is, logically, attained by an adherence to how it functions. However, the need to rely on this social security system might or, just as easily, might not arise. To give or to invest, from this perspective, is thus not based on the assumption that the person giving will be reciprocated, but emphatically hinges on the *possibility of non-reciprocity*. Without this factor of possibility, ubuntu would be reduced to a figure of economic exchange based on obligation alone. In this case, however, if reciprocity does not occur, the system will still work, in a literal sense, for others who do need it. Ubuntu, in this description, thus implicates a form of survival depending on a relationality in which generosity is vital, but reciprocity is optional. This logic negotiates the impasse Derrida locates between conditional and unconditional openness, because it involves a form of calculation that aims to obviate precarity for all parties involved, yet also relies on generosity, in the sense that giving does not automatically imply exchange.[19]

Of course, as was noted with regard to hospitality earlier, precarity still exists in the possibility of abuse. Indeed, the logic of the possibility of non-reciprocality only functions under the assumption of the generosity and benevolence of its participants. Does ubuntu still work if you have nothing to share? And what happens, for instance, if hospitality, as a social event, is itself considered to be contentious? What happens when hosting or residing as a guest is involuntary or when the pact between host and guest is jeopardised as a guest overstays his/her welcome? Or, put differently, what happens when a sojourner stays so long that the temporality commonly associated with hospitality changes into an extended stay, or even a permanent one?

Looking back at the Zapiro cartoon and its double-edged critique of ubuntu as a boundary marker in community formation, it becomes clear that these questions touch the heart of the entanglement between hospitality and ubuntu, as well as the issues of power that are concealed in it. What Sanders seems to gloss over when he

[19] The mechanics in which ubuntu comes to function as a negotiation of Derrida's division will be further taken up in Chapter 1. The role of property in ubuntu is taken up in Chapter 4, where I discuss ubuntu and processes of commodification and politicisation.

describes ubuntu as necessarily based on a dispropriation of the subject, is that ubuntu is often performed, at least partly, as a moral concept that aims at keeping identities demarcated and coherent, rather than opening them up to fluidity and change. As my discussion of the TRC in Chapter 1 will demonstrate, ubuntu, like hospitality, does imply a radical openness towards the human dignity of others, yet constructs this openness as a moral priority that is not negotiable in essence. Sanders' claim (following Keenan's reading of Levinas and Blanchot) that "to regard responsibility as residing in the acceptance of the uncertainty of knowledge as a basis for agency, and of the instability of the subject and agency" results in a reading of ubuntu as a "nonmoral discourse of ethics" that is urgent and potentially constructive ("Reading" 8), but does not recognise that both hospitality and ubuntu function under a double bind of conditional and unconditional openness that invariably welcomes those that are already recognised as "not other" more readily than it does "the stranger."

Indeed, the idea that the forms of hospitality and ubuntu that appear to us as most "desirable" in the sense that they strive to function on a basis of equality and inclusion, are, in fact, paralysed on the threshold of their own existence forms a major impasse that cuts to the quick of everyday life, both on a small and a large scale. It influences everyday relations between individuals, between groups, and between individuals and groups. The impasse comes to the fore in how we treat our friends and family and in how state apparatuses shape our lives. This is exactly why distinguishing between strategies and tactics in a reading of ubuntu might prove useful. If the conditional aspect of hospitality necessarily corrupts the possibility for absolute hospitality, then, in practice, a notion of absolute and idealistic hospitality can also inform a conditional approach to it. As such, it appears to make sense to consider the threshold of which Derrida speaks a more permanent place of residence, rather than something to step over in order to come home.[20] Rendering visible the tactics in ubuntu discourses, which necessarily change along with or effect change in the strategic space of dominant discourse, provides a possibility to think the temporal and the transitory as a starting point from which to consider a continuous return to and negotiation of the intersection between what Derrida has called the conditional and the unconditional as constructive of insights into ways of relating that aim to include, but not to ingest.

[20] I take the ability to think of the temporal and transitory as a starting point from Rosello's article "Rudimentariness as Home."

The starting point of this study's analysis of the tension between the conditional and the unconditional in the various and widespread appropriations of ubuntu is the politically fraught context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This choice was not made because of the political use of ubuntu, which is, in any case, not new to the South African context. As was discussed earlier, the Black Consciousness movement made use of the concept in the struggle against apartheid. Additionally, a course entitled *Ubuntu Botho* was taught in schools in the Kwazulu homeland at the end of the 1970s that introduced students to the ideology of the Inkatha Freedom Party by creating a notion of good citizenship through a correction of "white history" as it was taught in schools in South Africa (Golan 120-1).[21] The TRC forms a starting point because ubuntu's link to the notion of reconciliation and national unity in the 1990s represents a particular historical moment of dramatic political and social transition with an impact that still reverberates in South African culture. The significations that became attached to the concept during this period are pivotal for any subsequent use of the term and thus forms the beginning for my discursive analysis of ubuntu, which aims to throw light on the power relations at play in recent uses of the term and to look for possible ways of thinking about ubuntu that have been silenced by one of ubuntu's most dominant uses.

The first chapter will return to the issue of common humanity and posits it as a discursive construct that potentially causes exclusion. Ubuntu's implementation in the TRC's discourse of reconciliation and national unity resulted in the term's entanglement in two discursive strategies: one in which it facilitated the rehabilitation of the dignity of victims of human rights violations in an individualized and psychological dynamic, and one in which it promoted an adherence to this dynamic as beneficial, even necessary, for the nationalistic project of reconciliation. As such, ubuntu came to revolve around the contradictory use of the notion of common humanity that is claimed to be all-inclusive yet installs, at the same time, a benchmark for a moral standard.

This situation, however, also forms the site of alternative formulations. From the discussion of a number of poems from "land van genade en verdriet" by Antjie Krog,

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21 The so-called "homelands" or "Bantustans" (*tuislande* in Afrikaans) evolved from the reserves that were created in the South African Republic from 1913 onwards. These reserves were used by the apartheid government to create designated areas where each black ethnic group was allotted its own "homeland," thus reserving South African citizenship for the white minority. Some of these homelands were declared independent from South Africa in the 1970s and 80s. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which has a long history of conflict with the ANC and which is known for its Zulu nationalism, originated in the KwaZulu homeland, in what is now KwaZulu-Natal (*South African History Online*).

who envisions a “humane” language that recognizes people’s vulnerability to (discursive) violence, forgiveness comes to the fore as a locus from which it becomes possible to act upon a dominant discourse while being positioned in it. This double and complicit position of the subject in language and discourse is then brought to bear on the formulation of forgiveness in one of the meetings concerning the Guguletu Seven case, which allows for a reading of ubuntu, not as an essentially shared humanity that is taken for granted, but rather as a constant re-invention, through the negotiation of people’s various interests, of what could be considered “human.”

Chapter 2 extends the reading of ubuntu as a convergence and negotiation of a set of different interests as it comes to the fore in the first chapter and aims to think relations as conglomerations rather than as demarcated, fixed groupings. It does so by analysing how the transition from one (set of) discourse(s) to another influences the ways in which the protagonists in Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me* and Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* relate to their surroundings. This focus on transition is intended to open up discussions about the intersections of ubuntu’s use as a delimited concept and potential boundary marker with the role localised and spatial contingency play in how subjects relate to each other. The discussions of the novels introduce the possibility to think intersubjective and communal relations as clusters that change over time and that might have to be discarded in favour of new groupings with relational possibilities that extend those offered by familial, sexual and historically defined relations. In this sense, thinking of ubuntu as a convergence of interests opens up an interpretation of the concept that counters the presentation of ubuntu as a future perfect, in which the insistent reference to ubuntu and common humanity as “lost” posits it as a reference to an idealized past and the need to recover ubuntu as a projection of this past into a predetermined sense of the future. Rather, the reliance on contingency introduces the notion of the future anterior, which takes the unknowability of both past and future into account and looks for a basis of responsible action in these conditions of uncertainty.

Yet, I will also argue that in a postcolonial setting where the existence of some sort of unitary identity (either of individuals or of groups) is greatly complicated, an obvious political need to posit one still remains. From this perspective, in order to realise recognition of one’s basic rights in the public sphere, it may be necessary to go about ubuntu in a more strategic, rather than tactical fashion. This need will be addressed in Chapter 3, which, through a focus on responsibility, explores the possibility of thinking ubuntu as an ethics. In order to do so, I critically read Zanele Muholi’s photographic series *Faces and Phases* and its aim to obtain public space for fluid notions of gender, sexuality and race. The chapter discusses how Muholi’s work can be useful in

providing an ubuntu-oriented alternative in relation to the problem of multiplicity as it comes to the fore in the work of Levinas, who describes the face to face moment as an originary relation, one that brings community into being.

The value and necessity for a concept like ubuntu as a convergence of interests is foregrounded by the discussion of the question of where ubuntu can be said to diverge from the Levinasian concept of responsibility, a discussion that centres on the notions of otherness and complicity. From this discussion complicity, when read through ubuntu, emerges as an activation of the individual's relation to his/her surroundings rather than as a paralyzing contradiction that inhibits the individual's agency. This possible location for an ethics of ubuntu is further explored through a reading of Ndebele's novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, which posits a view on community construction that takes undecidability into account without losing sight of the regenerative potential of communality or the responsibilities implied in maintaining communal ties.

Since the idea of ubuntu as a convergence of specific spatial and temporary interests which need to be responsibly negotiated can help to give an enabling shape to the way we are related and actively relate to others, the fourth chapter will explore how ubuntu is "used" in everyday practice. By tracing some of the effects of the popularity of ubuntu, I chart how these practices can meaningfully relate to the concept's potential for social cohesion and possible use to effect change in the public sphere. More specifically, this chapter investigates the role of affect in the interpretation of ubuntu's use in "market-oriented" approaches by analysing the marketing of Ubuntu Cola. It also examines ubuntu's relation to private property in the light of the term's emphasis on sharing and group solidarity through a discussion of general trends in ubuntu management discourse and by looking specifically at the Ubuntu Linux computer operating system.

Taking the connection between things and people that emerges from these case studies as unavoidable, I try to locate points of entry from which to begin an analysis of how ubuntu can serve to re-think how people can effect and affect material alignments in their dealings with each other. This leads me to the final case study of this dissertation, which deals with the politics of Abehlali baseMjondolo, better known as the Durban Shack Dwellers Movement. This movement can be read as a combination of Hardt and Negri's theory of the creation of the common through politically organising the poor with an ubuntu-inspired model of consensus politics. The chapter traces the make-up of this movement, which operates on the local level and aims to adapt its form and actions to the issues at hand. In doing so, it further actualises the notion of ubuntu as a convergence and negotiation of interests and seeks to provide at least

one way in which to imagine what could be called a politics of ubuntu that seeks to enfranchise people, but not at the expense of excluding others.

Chapter 1

Ubuntu and Common Humanity in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Introduction

When, in 1994, the apartheid regime was finally ousted after almost fifty years of complete control over South Africa, the new, democratically elected government decided on a course of action (set in motion by the interim government) that was intended to address the country's divisive past and prevent the violence that dominated South African society from spiralling further out of control. To this end, it installed a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which operated from 1996 to 1998, although it took until 2001 to complete the amnesty hearings and until 2002 to publish the last volume of its report. The TRC consisted of three main structures: the Human Rights Violation Committee, the Amnesty Committee, and the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee. The tasks at hand for these committees were, respectively, to unearth what had happened during the apartheid years from 1960 to 1994 by way of staging testimonies of victims and surviving family members of victims; to grant amnesty to perpetrators who made "full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to acts associated with a political objective"; and to offer some form of reparation to victims (*Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995, NURA*).

These divergent tasks were part of the TRC's overall aim to make a connection, as its full name suggests, between "truth" and "reconciliation." In other words, by revealing knowledge about the past, it hoped to reconcile intensely divided groups in South African society, or, at least, to open up possible dialogues between them – a logic that is repeated in the slogan used by the TRC: "Truth. The road to reconciliation." However, as Zapiro's take on this slogan suggests, this road is all but self-evident, nor easy to map.

Figure 5. "Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Chasm."

This cartoon, which first appeared in *Sowetan* on 27 May 1997, poignantly suggests that the connection between the two sides of the gap is not even on the map held by former Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was the chairperson of the Commission. In this way, it performs a frustration of, or, at the very least, a challenge to the TRC's logic of reconciliation. More explicitly, the absence of a bridge suggests that the link between truth and reconciliation cannot be taken for granted; rather, it is assumed, and, in the best-case scenario, yet to be built.

In addition, the cartoon differentiates the difficulty of crossing the gap. After all, within the structures of the TRC, it is more problematic for the victim (here represented by the man in the wheelchair) to reach reconciliation than for the perpetrator (the man in the suit). Whereas Tutu and the white man could theoretically jump to the other side, the man in the wheelchair cannot reach it in any way. This difference could be read as a reflection on the Commission's structure, which carried within it a disparity in terms of legal leverage: it was able to grant perpetrators amnesty, but it was restricted to merely forwarding suggestions for reparation to the newly elected government. Thus, the TRC process provided immediate protection to perpetrators in the form of amnesty, but subjected the material support for victims to "potentially permanent political and bureaucratic delays" (Marx 54).

This fraught context of reconciliation is important to the concept of ubuntu for several, interrelated reasons. First of all, ubuntu features prominently in the TRC's founding act, which makes it one of the basic principles of the Commission's work (*NURA*, see also *TRC Report Vol. 1*, 8 and 103). Secondly, its implementation in the TRC's work, as one of the first discourses that emerged in South Africa to counter and work through the horrific oppression of apartheid, offers a crucial opportunity to see the term "at work" and foregrounds the necessity to think of ubuntu as a discourse with a distinct working practice located historically at a moment of dramatic political and social transition that has left very few aspects of South African culture untouched.

Thirdly, as I will argue in this chapter, the way ubuntu was implemented in this process, namely through a rephrasing of a fundamental "respect for common humanity" as the basis for reconciliation, explicitly relates it to the TRC's investment in reconciliation on a personal and communal level, as well as to its drive for national unity (*TRC Report Vol. 5* 435). From this perspective, the TRC's reliance on ubuntu could be said to have fulfilled the role of "an ideological concept with multiple meanings" that is used to blanket the unequally divided legal possibilities of its mandate (Wilson 13). It must be noted, however, that ubuntu forms just one of the many layers in the TRC's discourse, which range from nationalism, religion and law to media and psychology (see Posel and Simpson 11; Verdoolaege, *Reconciliation* 27). The focus in this chapter

lies on how the TRC's discourse on nation-building through forgiveness relied on and interacted with the concept of ubuntu and how this interrelation has influenced possible significations of it. The TRC period in South Africa is a crucial starting point for a discursive analysis of ubuntu, which aims to throw light on the power relations at play in the use of the term and to look for possible ways of thinking about ubuntu that have been silenced by one of ubuntu's most dominant appropriations.

This chapter first explicates the use of ubuntu that emanated from the Commission's directive, before moving on, in the second section, to a discussion of how ubuntu became interrelated with forgiveness as the preferred mode of interaction between victims and perpetrators in the process of reconciliation and nation-building. The relation between ubuntu and forgiveness will be discussed through the lens of Desmond Tutu's autobiographical work *No Future Without Forgiveness* as well as through his profound influence on some of the Commission's most "famous" hearings. Forgiveness, I will argue, is staged as exemplary in the achievement of reconciliation and the creation of new communal bonds. Together, these sections investigate how ubuntu, phrased as a respect for common humanity, is caught between two highly entangled discursive strategies: one in which it is staged as facilitating the rehabilitation of the dignity of victims of human rights violations in an individualized and psychological dynamic, and one in which it is staged as promoting an adherence to this dynamic as beneficial, even necessary, for the nationalistic project of reconciliation. The interrelation of these stagings, I will argue, revolves around a contradictory use of the notion of common humanity that is claimed to be all-inclusive yet is installed, at the same time, as a benchmark for a moral standard.

In the third section of this chapter, through a discussion of a few poems by South African poet, journalist and scholar Antjie Krog, written in response to her work for the Commission as a reporter, forgiveness will be read not strictly as a tool for nation-building, but more generally as a subjection to the norms and values in light of which forgiveness is asked for. Krog's vision on forgiveness, and especially its link to the idea of a "humane" language that recognizes people's vulnerability to violence, makes clear that forgiveness can represent an uncritical acceptance of the discourse one is subjected to, but can also be a locus from which it becomes possible to change, or at the very least, act upon a dominant discourse while being positioned in it.

This double position of the subject in language and discourse is, then, in the last section, brought to bear on the formulation of ubuntu in the TRC process as a shared humanity that is taken for granted. In this section, I propose, through a focus on one woman's particular interpretation of forgiveness and reconciliation in the Guguletu Seven case, a reading of ubuntu that does not start out from an "essence" of humanity

that is universally shared, but rather one that posits ubuntu as a constant re-invention, through the negotiation of people's various interests, of what could be considered "human." This reading is based on the recognition that any consolidation of the notion of ubuntu (or of the human) risks becoming just another dominant discourse in need of questioning.

Ubuntu and the Mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Legally, the Commission was based on the National Unity and Reconciliation Act (NURA) of 1995, which was prefigured by the postscript to the 1993 interim Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Contrary to the interim Constitution, drafted in a mutual effort by a whole range of political parties and institutions during the CODESA negotiations, this postscript was added only after both CODESA negotiations had failed, and national and international pressure forced the National Party (NP) and the African National Congress (ANC) to come to a final negotiated settlement. Since the NP was reluctant to give up its political and economic influence without compensation – according to Richard Wilson, the NP was anxious to safeguard its electorate's claim to private property as much as it needed protection from retaliation – the parties agreed on installing an organ that would attend to amnesty measures, and the NP and ANC added a clause concerning this issue to the otherwise democratically agreed upon interim Constitution (Wilson 7-8).

The reference to ubuntu in both the amnesty clause and the founding Act of the Commission (NURA) places it at the heart of the truth and reconciliation process, and demonstrates how firmly entrenched in South African public awareness the authors presume, or, perhaps, desire ubuntu to be. The following is an excerpt from the interim Constitution, with the passage quoted by the Act in quotation marks:

> The adoption of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge. "These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimisation." (qtd. in *TRC Report Vol. 6* 3)

As Mark Libin observes, the word "ubuntu" is, remarkably, rendered in one of the vernaculars without italics or quotation marks, as if it is as straightforward to English-language readers as the ones surrounding it. Libin suggests that the word thus paradoxically gains extra emphasis, "as though the call for communal regeneration may be located only in an emphatic understanding of the concept of ubuntu" (126).

Libin is certainly right in signalling the central position of ubuntu in this discourse of communal reconciliation, but the actual position of the word "ubuntu" in the Act is not further scrutinized. Doing so reveals that the distinction between ubuntu and victimisation made in the Act prefigures a contradictory leaning on victimhood in the discourse of reconciliation. In the passage, ubuntu features in a list of three apparent binaries – understanding/vengeance; reparation/retaliation; ubuntu/victimisation – of which the poles are presented as mutually exclusive. For instance, there is room for understanding, but not for vengeance. This stylistic manoeuvre determines the way the rest of the phrase is read: the first part of each binary is emphatically preferred over the second one. As a result, reparation is rendered as preferable over retaliation and ubuntu over victimisation.

The preference of reconciliation over retaliation is understandable, especially in the context of the momentum of South Africa's transition from apartheid to a democratic government and the obvious need to prevent further violence and more casualties after the time of the negotiations, during which the country "verged on anarchy" (Thompson 254).[1] However, it is precisely from within this frame of reconciliation that a difficulty with regard to victimhood arises. For how does one, reasoning from the governing principle of the oppositions in the Act, realize reparation without distinguishing victims? If reparation is opposed to the identification or categorization of people as victims, how can the needs of those who suffered under apartheid be met? Paradoxically, by constructing reparation and ubuntu as the opposite of victimisation – both in the sense of "making victims" and "being victims" – it seems to compel these "victims" to give up their claims to reparation, whereas "perpetrators" gain immediate protection from the fact that, in this particular passage, retaliation is located on the negative side of the binary construction. Does not ubuntu, when positioned in this way, put a spoke in the wheel of materially emancipating those who suffered from apartheid most? Does it not become a pretext for not tending to reparation at all?

It needs to be acknowledged, however, that the TRC process embodied more than a legal mandate and a fact-finding mission into human rights violations committed

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1 For a more elaborate account of the political and civil unrest during the CODESA negotiations, also known as the Multiparty Forum, see Thompson (252-7).

under apartheid (by those enforcing it as well as by those opposing it). As its report states, it also sought to provide these "truths" in order to further the psychological rehabilitation of individual victims – an aim reflected in the hearings (especially the Human Rights Violations hearings), which focused on the particularities of the loss experienced by victims.

The public hearings, which were covered daily by the media and which still reverberate through South African cultures, are considered to have left the most influential and lasting impression of the Commission's work, more so than its seven-volume report (Sanders, *Ambiguities* 3-4; Posel, "History" 131; Cole 167-8). As theatre scholar Catherine Cole convincingly argues, this impact was a carefully orchestrated effort on behalf of the Commission, which "embraced performance as a central feature of its operations" (167).[2] One aspect of this orchestration involved the selection by the Commission of those testimonies that would be suitable for public hearings from all the narratives made available to them and the media's subsequent selection of "which portions of each daylong hearing would be broadcast on television and radio" (180).[3] Cole suggests, however, much like Sanders, that the effects of this orchestration were neither anticipated nor controllable by the Commission and that its format also provided people with an opportunity to relate their experiences:

> Yes, everyone had to perform, but the structure and format of live hearings also allowed room for those moments when individual agents took charge in unscripted and unexpected ways. In such moments, I argue, the TRC performed truth most potently. (186)

Although to fully go into the much contested notion of "truth" or the "public, embodied, and performed dimensions" of the Commission's work is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to consider the notion of agency implied in Cole's emphasis on performance with regard to the role of ubuntu in the TRC process (Cole 167).[4]

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2 Of all the Truth Commissions around the globe, Cole argues, with reference to Priscilla Hayner, the South African one was "the most public and publicized truth commission the world has ever seen" (Cole 172).

3 For an account of the role of the media in the TRC process, see Krabill.

4 Because of its double mandate of revealing facts about the past as well as offering reconciliation, the TRC distinguished four kinds of truth: factual or forensic truth, personal and narrative truth, social truth, and healing or restorative truth (*TRC Report Vol. 1*, 110-114). Many scholars have critiqued the Commission's treatment of this concept. See, for instance, Deborah Posel's claim that "this rather creaky conceptual grid does not bear the weight of critical scrutiny"

It was through the staged process of giving testimony, facing perpetrators, and showing forgiveness that victims found ways to reclaim their sense of selfhood; they were, in a way, rehumanised. As Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela argues in her account of her work as a clinical psychologist with Eugene de Kock, one of apartheid's most infamous security policemen, this "rehumanisation" of victims occured in two ways. Those who died were reconstituted and withdrawn from oblivion by the revelation of what happened to them whilst the victims who survived, through performing the particularities of their stories, were restored to some form of mastery over a situation that had completely overpowered them before. What is more, the fact that victims were now in a position to forgive means they effectually occupied a position of control over their perpetrators:

> The victim in a sense needs forgiveness as part of the process of becoming rehumanized. The victim needs it in order to complete himself or herself and to wrest away from the perpetrator the fiat power to destroy or to spare. It is part of the process of reclaiming self-efficacy. Reciprocating with empathy and forgiveness in the face of a perpetrator's remorse restores to many victims the sense that they are once again capable of effecting a profound difference in the moral community… Far from being an unnerving proposition and a burdensome moral sacrifice, then, compassion for many is deeply therapeutic and restorative. (Gobodo-Madikizela 128-9)

This description of the psychological dynamic of forgiveness closely relates to the logic behind the TRC's quest for reconciliation, where, ideally, with a perpetrator expressing remorse, granting forgiveness can provide the victim with a sense of empowerment that comes from a reclaiming of "self-efficacy."[5] What is more, by responding

("History" 133). Still, this subdivision of truth should be regarded as the Commission's acknowledgment of what Posel calls "the genealogical conundrum" of Truth Commissions generally: the difficulty "to reconcile the claim to authoritative, objective truth along with the recognition of both the epistemological limits and ethical risks of such a claim" (126-7). For Posel's more elaborate critique, see "The TRC Report: What Kind of History? What Kind of Truth?"

5 Obviously, not all exchanges between perpetrators and victims can be said to have unequivocally followed this route. Take, for instance, the (in)famous amnesty hearings of Jeffrey Benzien, a former senior member of the South African Police anti-terrorist unit who used the so-called "wet bag" torture method to extract information from detainees. During these hearings victims requested to interrogate the perpetrator themselves. Even this, however, does not necessarily suggest they "gain the upper hand," nor does forgiveness seem to be the primary agenda. As Krog points out in *Country of My Skull*, Benzien quickly turns the tables on one of the interview-

with empathy to perpetrators, victims can feel psychologically restored because their personal effort of forgiveness *also* contributes to a larger project of moral regeneration, in this case that of national unity and reconciliation staged by the TRC.

From the perspective of ubuntu, however, this focus on the psychological benefits of the rehumanisation of the victim may seem a particularly one-sided way of approaching the effect of the process of reconciliation. It basically installs the perpetrator as an accessory to the dynamic between the (victimised) individual and the broader community, but does not address the possibility of reciprocity between victim and perpetrator. As will become clear from the next section, Desmond Tutu's definition of ubuntu as "what dehumanises you, inexorably dehumanises me," implies that both victim and perpetrator gain access to rehumanisation through forgiveness (Tutu 34-5).[6] In this way, Tutu's description extends the possibilities for an involvement in the process of reconciliation to both parties. However, as the psychological dynamic discussed above already suggests, this process rests on a very particular interpretation of "rehumanisation," and, as a consequence, of the category of the human. The next section delves deeper into this matter by focusing on the entanglement of ubuntu and forgiveness in Tutu's formulation and by discussing how the foregrounding of forgiveness in some of the TRC's public hearings clears the way for the creation of a discourse that posits forgiveness, and its adherent notions of ubuntu and humanity, as a catalyst for national unity.

Ubuntu, Forgiveness and Nation-Building

Since he acted as the chairperson of the Truth Commission, it is not surprising that Desmond Tutu, who was Archbishop of the Anglican Church at the time, exercised an enormous influence on the TRC process and is often considered to have been its spir-

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ers who asks him to re-enact the wet bag torture method on a volunteer during the hearing, by reminding the interrogator how quickly he gave up the names of fellow activists under duress of this method, thus re-installing control over him (110). For an insightful and detailed analysis of this event, see Sanders' chapter on forgiveness in *Ambiguities of Witnessing*.

6 Nelson Mandela is famous for a similar logic with regard to victimhood. In *Long Walk to Freedom* he writes: "I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness… The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity" (751, see also Bell 86).

itual leader.[7] His presence during many of the public amnesty and human rights violations hearings, his appearance in the media reporting on these hearings, his foreword to the TRC Report, and his writings about his work as the Commission's chairperson, which have been published worldwide, are only some of the ways that signal Tutu's close association with and shaping of the Commission proceedings. The fact that the autobiographical *No Future Without Forgiveness* has become a seminal reference in talking about ubuntu signals the importance of Tutu's formulation for the development of the concept as well as the influence of, in this case inspiring, leadership for the meaning of ubuntu.

In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, which was published a year after the provisional TRC report was submitted to the government, Tutu stakes out the importance of ubuntu for the notion of forgiveness in the TRC process. Before he does so, however, he explains why, faced with the logistic impossibility for the South African government to organise juridical proceedings modelled on the Nuremberg trials and the moral impossibility to offer general amnesty, South Africa opted for a "third way" to deal with the past, namely to offer an individual and conditional amnesty that centred on the notion of forgiveness. Although Tutu mentions several more specific reasons for this – such as South Africa's lack of funds to organise comprehensive trials and the unreliability of the South African judicial system in the experience of most of its citizens (27-8) – he concludes by explaining that the option to organise reconciliation through amnesty and forgiveness was in concordance with "a central feature of the African *Weltanschauung*" that lies at the basis of people's ability to forgive:

> *Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "*Yu, u nobuntu*;" "Hey, he or she has *ubuntu*." This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. They share what they have. (34)

In this description, ubuntu is presented as specific to the Nguni languages and as difficult to translate. Yet, it speaks of the very essence of being human, which suggests that a definitive notion of "being human" can only be fathomed by speakers of these languages. To remedy this divisive logic, the passage moves to a description of how

[7] As I have mentioned in the Introduction, the relation between religion and ubuntu will not be discussed in this dissertation. For the role of ubuntu in Desmond Tutu's theology, see Michael Battle's *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* from 2009. For a succinct account, see his "A Theology of Community: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu."

the notion is used in a specific utterance. From this turn of phrase, ubuntu, which is explicitly related to sharing later in the passage, paradoxically surfaces as an individual attribute. It is something that people can possess. The fact that a specific phrase is used to suggest that it is praiseworthy to have ubuntu furthermore suggests that it is notable when this attribute is actually recognised in people. In other words, there are also (many) people who do not have it and ubuntu cannot be taken for granted.

After giving several characteristics of a person in possession of ubuntu with which we are familiar from the Introduction, the description continues to a more elaborate and general plane:

> It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "a person is a person because of other people." It is not "I think therefore I am". It says rather: "I am human because I belong." I participate, I share. A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has a proper self assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (Tutu 34-5)

Here, by pitting ubuntu against a Cartesian logic that implies an isolated and self-sufficient sense of individualism, the nuanced, yet crucial difference of what it means to be human in ubuntu thought comes to the fore. From this perspective, the phrase "a person is a person because of other people" does not just imply that people exist in inevitable relation to others and that they cannot be "fully human" without respecting these relations, but also, more radically, that "to be bound up" in each other's humanity means that to be human means to acknowledge that all individuals are *a priori* tied together and that *as a result of these ties* they are collapsed into each other. As Tutu explains further down the page: "What dehumanises me, inexorably dehumanises you" (35).

As such, Tutu's description of ubuntu represents what Sanders calls a "radical reciprocity," namely that there is, "in *ubuntu*, no opposition, strictly speaking, between altruism – living for the other (*autrui*) – and self-interest" (*Ambiguities* 96). This is what Tutu means, according to Sanders, when he says that forgiveness is "the best kind of self-interest" (*Ambiguities* 96; see also Tutu 35). When phrased in this way, forgiveness is no longer associated with the aporia Derrida observes in it, namely that forgiveness can only exist when it forgives the unforgivable, but becomes "the very

condition of possibility for human-being understood according to *ubuntu*" (Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism* 32-3; see also Sanders, *Ambiguities* 96-7).

Unfortunately, Sanders does not dwell on what the notion of human-being according to ubuntu exactly entails or on why the aporia of forgiveness makes this notion possible. As I pointed out in the Introduction, Derrida locates a rather similar contradiction in the concept of hospitality, where an absolute or unconditional sense of the term collapses as soon as it is put into practice (*Of Hospitality* 25; "Hostipitality" 14). It needs to be emphasised that ubuntu, as I argued there, can be formulated as a negotiation of the dilemma described by Derrida, rather than as a matter of being tied together merely because human beings coexist. In other words, it is exactly as the negotiation of human coexistence on the limit between the conditional and the unconditional that ubuntu emerges. Not because, as Sanders claims, ubuntu represents a "radical reciprocity" that "just exists" and involves a total absence of calculation – as became clear from the earlier discussion of hospitality, the role of reciprocity in ubuntu revolves around the possibility of not occurring – but because in ubuntu, the notion of calculation, which is grounded in particular moments of existing with others, comes to the fore as a vital, though not unproblematic, part of existing relationally.

I read Tutu's description of ubuntu as an understanding – that has occurred to some people, but not to others – of belonging to a greater whole where one person's welfare or destitution is unequivocally related to that of the others. Indeed, as Tutu argues, ubuntu does not stop at a recognition of commonality in existing, but also involves the attempt to respect this "being folded together" in one's actions. However, there is a pronounced difference between assuming that the various interests people have can be equated simply because they coexist, and the idea that these interests are indeed both different and interrelated, in the sense that one person's interest effectively influences the other's. The first interpretation closes down dialogue on what it means to be human, whereas the second opens up the possibility to engage with multiple perspectives. In extension to this point, and contra Sanders and Tutu, then, a sense of calculation is not opposed to ubuntu, but in some cases even necessary, because it allows for the recognition that to aim for harmonious social outcomes is indeed *hard work*, and might require the conscious negotiation of different interests.

Indeed, the way forgiveness was put into practice in the TRC process reveals some of the problematic issues involved, especially on a larger scale, in a reading of ubuntu that does not acknowledge the necessity of negotiation but assumes that everyone has the same interests. It is clear that the Commission, as a result of political negotiations between strongly divergent parties, worked from the realisation that different interests were indeed at stake. However, the way it sought to align these differences

through its premise that "reconciliation is based on respect for our common humanity" suggests that these differences are subsumed to a unifying reading of what "humanity" means (*TRC Report Vol. 5* 435).

This unifying gesture was further aggravated by the fact that Tutu's idea that some people seem to have ubuntu whereas others do not was arguably extended to the instalment of a certain moral preference for what "common humanity" came to mean in the TRC's discourse of national unity. As such, the TRC's implementation of forgiveness as an instrument to elevate affectively powerful personal exchanges to the level, not merely of the communal, but of a unitary experience of national healing and reconciliation, has compromised the possibility of a critical approach to the notion of ubuntu as theorised by Tutu in *No Future Without Forgiveness*. In order to make visible alternative formulations of ubuntu that look past the TRC's gesture of nation-building, I will first analyse how the TRC's discourse emerged in some of the Commission's hearings.

The first public hearings that the Commission organised took place in Port Elizabeth in April 1996 and set out to investigate the abduction, assault and killing of the Cradock Four, a group of anti-apartheid activists. This event was to become "a model for future hearings" and was characterised as follows in the TRC Report:

> The four days were extremely emotional and dramatic. The witnesses included the families of the well-known "Cradock Four," community leaders assassinated in 1985; individuals and the families of those who were killed or injured in bombings carried out by revolutionary activists; and people who were detained, tortured, or victimised in other ways. Deponents were sometimes stoical, almost matter of fact, but others succumbed to tears or expressed their anger as they relived their experiences. The panel of commissioners and committee members was visibly overcome. The public sat silent and spellbound during the testimony, but was occasionally moved to angry murmuring. Tea and lunch breaks were marked by singing and chanting of political slogans. (*TRC Report Vol. 5* 3)

It is apparent that the recounting of the victims' experiences affected the people present. The commissioners were "visibly overcome," the audience was "spellbound" and "occasionally moved to angry murmuring." Footage of the hearings clearly reveals

the palpability and intensity of these sentiments (*Long Night's Journey Into Day*). This affective aspect of the hearings played a crucial role in the logic underlying the Commission's work. Victims who were expressing their personal experience, their grief and their loss publicly were considered catalysts for reconciliation. Even people not taking part in the process directly were believed to be influenced by the resonance of this affect with their own personal experiences:

> People came to the Commission to tell their stories in an attempt to facilitate, not only their own individual healing processes, but also a healing process for the entire nation. Many of those who chose not to come to the Commission heard versions of their own stories in the experiences of others. In this way, the Commission was able to reach a broader community. (*TRC Report Vol. 5* 168)

The ability of people to "tell their stories" about these matters in public, then, would, in concordance with Tutu's interpretation of ubuntu, work towards both individual healing and healing in a broader, communal sense.[8]

However, the Commission did not merely aim to restore relations between individuals and between individuals and their communities, but kept explicitly addressing the need to create a sense of national unity. In volume five of its report, the Commission claims, for instance, that its much contested and criticised suggestions for reparation awards to victims of human rights violations adds value to the process of "truth-seeking," not only because it reflects the acknowledgment of suffering by the state, restores the dignity of victims and affirms the values and interests advanced by those who suffered, but also because it raises "consciousness about the public's moral responsibility to participate in healing the wounded and facilitating nation-building" (*TRC Report Vol. 5* 312).

Similarly, although apologies or displays of remorse were no condition for the granting of amnesty (which depended on the political motivation of the crime), acknowledgement of the victims' suffering by the perpetrators was considered and represented as highly beneficial for the object of reconciliation and nation-building,

[8] Much has been said about the problematic of the division between victims and perpetrators in the Commission's mandate and its subsequent separation of the human rights violation hearings and the amnesty hearings. Whereas victims were allowed to tell their stories in their own way, perpetrators in the amnesty hearings were often subpoenaed and subjected to cross-examination by lawyers or committee members. This distinction, however, became somewhat blurred in the actual process of the hearings, as the interrogation of Jeffrey Benzien by his own torture victims, discussed in an earlier note in this chapter, indicates.

as will become clear later in this section. Thus, individual citizens were held accountable for the creation of what Commissioner Wynand Malan, in his criticism of the Commission's one-dimensional approach to truth (despite its subdivision in four categories), has called "the building of a new national myth" (*TRC Report Vol. 5* 442).

The accentuation of ubuntu in the TRC process plays a definitive role in the creation of this myth of national unity. According to Christoph Marx, the TRC's emphasis on the importance of community functions to separate negative racist connotations from the notion of cultural nationalism and allows this latter form of community formation to re-enter the realm of acceptability (54). This leads to Marx's claim that ubuntu is the "Africanist version of integral nationalism" (58). Much like the process of community formation in the readings of ubuntu by Mbiti and Louw, in which the very concept of personhood is dependent on going through certain community prescribed stages (see Introduction), not to participate in the process of reconciliation prescribed by the TRC equals a failure to undergo a crucial rite of passage, and thus a failure to become part of the "new South Africa." Although Marx' use of the word "Africanist" points to the possibility of a reverted racial logic that he seems to unambiguously associate with the patriarchal and tribal associations of ubuntu, the fact that race has officially been deconstructed as a category for exclusion with the end of apartheid does not necessarily change the logic of community formation through nationalism.

This becomes clear when the TRC's instigation that common humanity needs to be respected is read through Benedict Anderson's formulation of the relation between nationalism and kinship in *Imagined Communities*. As Anderson has argued:

> Because the country is always referred to in terms of kinship and home, it comes to be regarded as something to which one is "naturally tied." … So too, if historians, diplomats, politicians, and social scientists are quite at ease with the idea of "national interest," for most ordinary people of whatever class the whole point of the nation is that it is interestless. Just for that reason, it can ask for sacrifices. (144)

Yet, ubuntu, when read, with Marx, as integral nationalism, turns Anderson's classic perception of the nation as "interestless" around, because the notion of common humanity installed as "natural" and self-evident by the TRC, which is based, in Tutu's terms, on conflating one's own interest with that of someone else, actually poses the nation as the ultimate conglomeration of interest – a guardian who has everybody's interest at heart. As such, it is exactly the nation as the natural keeper of interests that

can ask for sacrifices, instead of its "interestlessness." Crucially, though, the notion of sacrifice for the sake of the nation in this process remains central.

On a number of occasions during the hearings, this ubuntu-inspired aspect of the unifying and nationalistic impetus of suffering and sacrifice was emphasised by Desmond Tutu's response to victims' testimony. During the Cradock Four hearings, for instance, Tutu, in his role of Chair, addressed the bereaved as follows:

> We are proud to have people like you and your husbands, and the reason why we won the struggle is not because we had guns; we won the struggle because of people like you: people of incredible strength. And this country is fortunate to have people like you. … And that she, your daughter, should say, "I want to forgive, we want to forgive," after what she has experienced and seen what happened to her mother and to her father, and she says, "we want to forgive, but we want to know who to forgive." We give thanks to God for you, and thank you for your contribution to our struggle, and thank you, even if it was reluctant in a sense, rightly, thank you for sacrificing your husbands. (*TRC Report Vol. 5* 359)

It is crucial that this passage features in the TRC report, which stages it as a successful instance of human dignity being restored to victims. This successful instance literally rests on Tutu's acknowledgment of the widow's contribution to the struggle against apartheid and the suffering that this entailed while it highlights, at the same time, the willingness of one of the widows' daughters to forgive. This emphasis, thus, becomes part of the restoration of human dignity.

However, what the context of Tutu's words in the report does not and what the full transcripts do disclose (as does the coverage of these hearings in the documentary *Long Night's Journey into Day*) is that the widows of the Cradock Four (treated as a cluster by Tutu) were not really interested in offering forgiveness to the killers of their husbands. In fact, they opposed the amnesty applications of the policemen in question. The only one who showed the willingness to forgive, applauded by Tutu, was the daughter of one of the widows. So the singling out of this young woman by Tutu and the subsequent reference to this speech as a success story in the TRC report effectively silences the actual course of this hearing and its aftermath.[9] One could say, therefore, that, in this case at least, the specific truth finding and revelation of suffering on the part of the

[9] The policemen who applied for amnesty for the killing of the Cradock Four were denied amnesty, because one of the victims was not a political figure.

next of kin is interpreted in such a way as to fit the need to represent the hearings as successful. The quoted instance thus emerges as an attempt to forge national unity out of the personal sacrifice of the victims and their next of kin through an ubuntu-inspired notion of forgiveness that is highlighted by the chairman in the hearing.

As Annelies Verdoolaege points out in her analysis of the transcripts of the Human Rights Violations hearings, what seems to be an agenda of prioritising and emphasising reconciliatory statements that centred on forgiveness was openly pushed by several Commissioners during the hearings ("Dealing" 299-301). What is at stake in this focus on forgiveness is, however, most clearly revealed in one of the most notorious special hearings, during which Tutu's emphasis on forgiveness came spectacularly close to public refutation. I am referring to the nine-day Mandela United Football Club hearings (MUFC), also known as the Winnie hearings, during which Winnie Mandela's complicity in human rights violations was closely examined.[10] Although many people stepped up to testify, Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela vigorously denied all allegations by discarding statements as either "ludicrous" or "ridiculous" (Krog, *Country* 391; MUFC hearing transcript). By refusing to admit to any role in the violence that clearly emanated from her direct entourage and by deeming testimonies from victims hallucinatory, she forcefully disrupted the ultimate goal of the hearing, namely to have a public figure like herself engage, as a perpetrator, with her victims and affirm the reconciliatory narrative of the TRC under full media attention. For, in order to achieve reconciliation and unity, it needed to be demonstrated that the TRC "worked," that people like Winnie Mandela, the "Mother of the Nation" and one of the key figures in the struggle against apartheid, acknowledged the process of truth and reconciliation.

Therefore, when the hearings were drawing to a close on the ninth day and Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela remained adamant that she was innocent, Tutu, in his official role as chairperson of the Commission, but also as a close friend of the Mandela family, tried to change her mind one last time:

> "If you were able to bring yourself to be able to say: 'Something went wrong…' and say, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry for my part in what went wrong…' I beg you, I beg you, I beg you please. … You are a great person. And you don't know how your greatness would be enhanced if you were to say, 'I'm sorry…

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10 The Mandela United Football Club refers to the members of a football team sponsored by Winnie Mandela who formed her entourage and were considered to function as her bodyguards. They were recognizable by their sports uniforms and track suits (see MUFC hearing transcript).

> things went wrong. Forgive me.'" And for the first time, Tutu looks directly at her. His voice has fallen to a whisper. "I beg you."
> Time freezes. Tutu has risked…
> everything. (Krog, *Country* 391)[11]

Tutu, by literally begging Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela to show some form of remorseful involvement in the hearings, is indeed risking "everything." His effort lays bare the crux of the problem: without the establishment of a bond between antagonistic parties on an individual level, the work of the TRC will not be able to resonate on a larger, national scale. At the same time, the fact that Tutu goes so far as to beg Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela to apologise (he is, in fact, begging her to use the opportunity to apologise, for which, in the logic of the TRC, she should be begging in the first place) suggests he is openly pushing what could be called a "strategy of forgiveness" intended to create its own "proper" moral space, to speak with de Certeau.

This does not merely demonstrate the importance attached to the notion of forgiveness in the process of reconciliation, but, more importantly, also reveals how the emphasis on forgiveness silences alternative discourses on reconciliation as well as on ubuntu – a gesture that resonates with Deniz Kandiyoti's argument that the emancipation of women can serve as a marker for the agenda of a particular movement instead of actually improving the situation of women. According to Kandiyoti, female nationalists often had to "articulate their gender interests within the parameters of cultural nationalism, sometimes censoring or muting the radical potential of their demands" (388). Social progress, then, does not necessarily mean improvement of the position of women:

> Wherever women continue to serve as boundary markers between different national, ethnic and religious collectivities, their emergence as full-fledged citizens will be jeopardised, and whatever rights they may have achieved

[11] I have referred to Krog's book here and not to the official transcript. In a way, Krog's so-called fictional account is just as much a transcript of these hearings as the original ones, because they are based on the material she recorded as a radio reporter. On the other hand, Krog's work offers only a selection of what happened during the hearings, whereas the official transcript attempts to give a full account. Interestingly, the flaws and omissions in the actual transcripts make them difficult to follow and raise questions of reliability, much like Krog's narrative framework. Krog discusses the Winnie Hearings in chapter 20 of *Country of My Skull*, entitled "Mother Faces the Nation" (367-94).

> during one stage of nation-building may be sacrificed on the altar of identity politics during another. (Kandiyoti 382)

Kandiyoti's argument focuses primarily on postcolonial situations in the Middle East and in South East Asia, but her point can be extended to the South African context. The interests of the widows of the murdered Cradock Four, for instance, are, in line with Kandiyoti's point, initially subsumed to the common interest of black liberation and, later on, once the political paradigm has shifted, to the empowerment of a discourse of reconciliation. As I have mentioned, these women are crucial testifiers in what the TRC has deemed a "model hearing" and are also represented in the report as an example of the restoration of human dignity to victims. In this way, they are turned into an example twice over. Furthermore, the case of the Cradock Four widows (I am aware of using these four women as a cluster here; they are, of course, not a homogenous group) is mentioned, among others, under the heading "Silences" in the chapter on special hearings on women (*TRC Report Vol. 4* 295). This section in the report, which unambiguously states that some of the women testifying to the suffering of their husbands were themselves harassed, detained, and tortured, does not mention any testimony about the violation of their own rights.[12] As such, the report, while signalling an awareness of the fact that the gendered nature of violence is often silenced, actually repeats the gendered bias it aims to address by not going into the gendered specifics of what it considers to be its "model hearing."

In this particular section of its report, the TRC indeed contends that to remedy this situation would include a change at its very base, namely in its formulation of what constitutes "gross human rights violations." The general description it gives of these is as follows:

> "[G]ross violation of human rights" means the violation of human rights through – (a) the killing, abduction, torture or severe ill treatment of any

[12] Fiona C. Ross compellingly argues, after having investigated the renderings of some of the testimonies given by women before the Commission – taking into account receptions of the testimonies in the press as well as in the local community in which the testimony was given and the repercussions of both the experience of testifying itself and the subsequent responses on the person in question – that the Commission's line of questioning obscures different kinds of violence because of its explicit focus on the body: "Different forms of violence are obscured, violence is reified to that which is inflicted on the body, and is further concretised in relation to sexual harm" (93). In this way, the political activism of the woman whose case Ross analyses, which formed the nexus of the responses from her direct community, was elided in favour of a discourse of sexual abuse.

> person; or (b) any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command or procurement to commit an act referred to in paragraph (a). (*TRC Report Vol. 4* 290)

However, as the report acknowledges, the description of "severe ill treatment," for instance, did not include "apartheid abuses such as forced removals, pass law arrests, alienation of land and breaking up of families" (290). As such, those crimes that could be considered to have had the largest effect on *communities* in South Africa cannot be addressed, strictly speaking, as human rights violations and, as such, also remain unavailable in the Commission description of the category of the human. Furthermore, statistics show, according to the report, that the brunt of the effects of these crimes against the community was carried by "black women living in former homeland areas" (290).

By organizing these special "women's hearings," then, the Commission sought to acknowledge the gendered and racialised nature of gross violations of human rights, as well as its own repetition of this problem in its description of the concept. The importance of this gesture is not to be underestimated, especially in terms of its investment in upholding the equality of persons in terms of the human rights discourse so evident in South Africa's Constitution. At the same time, however, the TRC's indirect description of the human, formulated through violations of human rights, fails to attend to the fact that this description is both gendered and racialised and contradicts its own ubuntu-inspired notion of humanity as inevitably related. Thus, the TRC's separation of women as representative of their own suffering from their position as representative of that of others seems to adhere more closely to a human rights discourse than to the TRC's ubuntu-based mandate, suggesting that the two are not to be conflated.[13]

Dorothy Driver notes that, in the TRC process, the concept of "*ubuntu* and its cognates [hospitality and forgiveness] are feminised through ideological reformulation" and, like Kandiyoti, suggests that this relates to a more general problem in which

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13 Richard Wilson, for instance, has famously claimed that ubuntu "conjoins human rights, restorative justice, reconciliation and nation-building within the populist language of pan-Africanism" (13). Although insightful with regard to the issue of Constitutionalism at the basis of the mandate of the TRC, his study fails to acknowledge that human rights discourse and ubuntu are two different strains of thought with their own philosophical traditions that mutually influence each other in the TRC process. Since the focus in this chapter lies on ubuntu, forgiveness, reconciliation and nation-building, I will not pursue this interrelation any further, but as far as I am aware, there are no detailed analyses of ubuntu's use in the TRC and its relation to human rights.

women are "being used iconically and metonymically to represent both the concept and the practice [of ubuntu] (as indeed they often represent other concepts – justice, liberty – in relation to which they have been marginalized)" ("Truth" 220). The problem with this gesture is, however, not necessarily located in the fact that women came to represent the suffering of others and the capability to forgive, but that the very correction the TRC attempts to make to its mandate by organising the women's hearings undermines both its own reliance on ubuntu and the way ubuntu has functioned tactically in black women's intellectual history in South Africa.[14] Especially in the latter formulation of ubuntu, as Driver convincingly argues, women have used ubuntu to broaden the concepts of "community" and "woman" in their "own self-definition and practice as simultaneously and inseparably individual and community selves" (221, 223; see also "*M'a-Ngoana*"). In other words, it is exactly through the tactical use of ubuntu as a radical alignment of one's own interest with that of another that black women have been able to formulate and exercise social and political agency in the struggle against apartheid.

Although soundly reasoned from the perspective of ubuntu, this view of both ubuntu and forgiveness as feminised (both in a strategic and in a tactical sense) still begs the question whether the conflation of different interests is equally constructive when held up against the unstereotypical image of a black, female perpetrator and individual accountability is at stake.[15] As we have seen in the case of the MUFC hearings, Winnie Mandela is staged in a special hearing in order to tie her name to the project of national reconciliation and Tutu tries to persuade her to admit to, take responsibility and apologize for her role in human rights violations in Soweto during the 1980s. Tutu, reasoning from the idea that different interests are fused, needs to stage Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela's accountability as a necessary sacrifice for national reconciliation, thus posing the nation as the larger interest that her personal actions need to be subsumed to.

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14 Driver makes another crucial point about these hearings, namely that by separating the focus on sexual abuse evident in the women's hearings from "mixed hearings," the TRC missed out on a revolutionary opportunity to address sexual abuse in general "as a social act, thereby putting into public discourse the question of its status as political, it might have opened up debate about what happens to women and to all those others who are placed in what is conventionally thought of as the 'feminine' position in an intensely masculinist and patriarchal culture" ("Truth" 225).

15 Of the perpetrators that appeared before the Commission, not many were women. Mrs. Winnie Madikizela Mandela was an obvious exception. Although it is usually assumed that most of the perpetrators were white, about 80 percent of the amnesty applicants were actually black (*Long Night's Journey into Day*). Nevertheless, the most prominently staged perpetrators were predominantly male and white.

In line with Kandiyoti's argument, one could say that Tutu strategically attempts to relocate the iconicity of Madikizela-Mandela's identity – reflected in her honorary name "Mother of the Nation" – which was forged at a specific moment in South African history from one particular framework of identity politics to another.[16] Although mind-boggling with regard to the evidence gathered against her, her attitude during the public hearings can be read as a refusal to acknowledge the Commission's claims of authority. Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela effectively negates a determination in terms of its discourse by categorically refusing to present herself as a perpetrator and posing her own authority as non-negotiable.[17] This forecloses the possibility of reading her situation in terms of a victim-perpetrator dichotomy and, as such, distorts the binary on which Tutu's strategy is based. As a result of this strategic clash, in which both parties are positing a conceptual space around the notion of "responsibility" differently, some of the problematic aspects of the post-apartheid construction of community are made visible and questions are raised as to what kind of community is being constructed. With what other communities must this community co-exist? And who determines the way they are organized? Who is to be judged, punished, grieved, or acknowledged as such and, what is more, by whom? Beyond the signalling of a need for national unity in the Act, these issues of authority are not adequately addressed by the ubuntu-inspired discourse of reconciliation.

In her account of the Winnie hearings in *Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog implies that Winnie Mandela's response to Tutu's plea does mark, if only a meagre, acknowledgment of the fact that "things" somehow went wrong:

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16 Winnie Mandela's honorary name "Mother of the Nation," which evokes the stereotyped notion of the care of the mother as a crucial building block for the strength of social cohesion, forms a shrill dissonance with the alleged crimes against humanity that have taken in her household and her instigations to violence on a broader communal level. For a thorough treatment of the notion of motherhood, femininity and Winnie Mandela, see Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and for an insightful, more general treatment of the trope of motherhood, home and nation in South African women's writing, see Meg Samuelson's *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?* As Ksenia Robbe points out, considerable overlaps exist between the "mother of the nation" trope in both anti-apartheid and Afrikaner discourses (*volksmoeder*) (57). Robbe notes that no comparative study has yet been made of this trope in contemporary English and Afrikaans discourses (59 n41). Robbe herself starts such work in the seventh chapter of her dissertation, with regard to the work of Ellen Kuzwayo and Antjie Krog (227-269).

17 Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela, although subpoenaed by the TRC, never applied for amnesty and thus was granted none. However, since the hearings, she has not been tried or convicted for the human rights violations the Commission strongly suspected her to have committed or masterminded. In 2003, she was charged with and convicted of theft and fraud, but was not imprisoned because the High Court overturned the theft conviction.

> To Stompie's mother, how deeply sorry I am. I have said so to her before a few years back, when the heat was very hot. I am saying it is true, things went horribly wrong. I fully agree with that and for that part of those painful years when things went horribly wrong and we were aware of the fact that there were factors that led to that, for that I am deeply sorry. (*MUFC Hearing Transcript*; Krog, *Country* 392)

As her response shows, Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela does not admit to her role in "the fact that there were factors that led" to things going "horribly wrong," yet Krog suggests she is still forced to recognise the TRC's discourse. However, one could just as easily argue that Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela's so-called apology hardly extends beyond her expressing regret for the fact that the apartheid era was rife with violence. She explicitly does not ask for forgiveness, which marks a refusal of this term's implication of individual accountability, and refutes the TRC's discourse of reconciliation through forgiveness.

However, Krog's contention that it is the acknowledgment of the TRC's discourse (or moral standard), rather than an explicit apology accompanied by forgiveness that matters here is a point worth making, but not because it implies, as Krog claims in *Country of My Skull*, that everybody is "for the first time contained in the same frame" (393). After all, any frame is bound to be viewed differently by different people, as Krog's own multilayered account of the Winnie hearings already suggests. It is important because it opens up the question of what it means, or can mean, in terms of ubuntu, to have to accept a discourse that is imposed on you. Thus, despite the ways in which the TRC discourse's championing of forgiveness silenced alternative formulations of what it means to relate to other people, I will discuss, in the next section, how Krog manages to relocate, in her own work, the question of forgiveness from a submissive adherence to an imposed discourse towards an open-ended discursive responsibility.

Forgiveness and Discursive Responsibility in Antjie Krog's "land van genade en verdriet"

Although Antjie Krog has emphatically distanced herself from the term "ubuntu," her work is instrumental in the analysis of ubuntu and its relation to the TRC process. Like Tutu, Krog also argues that ubuntu should be regarded as "the essence and foundation of the TRC process," but claims the term itself is no longer suitable to describe its underlying notion of communality, because it has become contaminated with the view of "ubuntu as superficial and confusing, as agenda and ideology, used by the

powerful to present political, legal and/or personal religious agendas" ("This Thing" 354). Therefore, Krog reserves the newly invented term "interconnectedness-towards-wholeness" to refer to the instances of communality that carried the momentum of the Commission's work.

Technically, Krog's redubbing of this communal worldview allows her to distance herself from what she considers to be overly political and critical overtones in most TRC related research. However, she omits to circumscribe precisely how the new term differs from the ones in whose tradition she places it (African communitarianism and ubuntu). Besides, in addition to the fact that the term is excessively long, the overlap between interconnectedness-towards-wholeness and ubuntu is substantial; like ubuntu, Krog's term revolves around notions of interconnectedness and the importance of relations with and to one's surroundings for the development of the individual.[18] As a result, the added value of launching a new term instead of writing a critique of the use of ubuntu in TRC criticism remains somewhat oblique. What is more, by relinquishing ubuntu as a term, Krog effectively isolates the worldview she aims to describe and blocks a dialogue with previous and future uses of ubuntu. As has become clear from the previous section, this ideological/political side is indeed part of ubuntu's implementation as a discourse besides its powerful psychological dynamic. Changing its name, however, does not change the effect of ubuntu's double bind in the TRC process. For this reason, I will continue to read Krog's work from this period as a TRC-specific approach to ubuntu and to the role of forgiveness in it.

One of the most evocative ways in which Krog approaches the issue of forgiveness is through a cluster of ten poems called "land van genade en verdriet," published in 2000, six years after the official end of apartheid, in the collection *Kleur Kom Nooit Alleen Nie*.[19] This collection, like the influential *Country of My Skull* (1998), was partly written as a response to Krog's experience of working for SABC radio as a reporter on the TRC proceedings, particularly its hearings, and the poems in "land van genade en verdriet" offer an exposition of some of the issues involved in coming to terms with the complex aftermath of apartheid.

In her article about reconciliation strategies in *Kleur Kom Nooit Alleen Nie*, Marlies Taljard suggests, rightfully, "dat geen bevredigende oplossings [vir kulturele en rassespanning] gevind sal word, sonder dat daar doelbewuste versoeningsstrategieë aangelê word nie" (143), and sets out to investigate some of these strategies through an

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18 I will discuss Krog's "interconnectedness-towards-wholeness" in greater detail in the second chapter.

19 The English title of this cluster of poems is "country of grief and grace" (Krog, *Down* 95).

exploration of liminal positions in the collection.[20] Although Taljard explicitly points to language as exactly such a liminal position from which to conceive of strategies to coexist with others peacefully, especially with regard to the undermining of singular meaning and the discussion of the abject, she does not discuss the strategic, or rather, what would in terms of de Certeau be called the tactical potential of the position of the subject or poet within language as a mode of reconciliation. This position of the subject in language, as formulated by Krog, is crucial for any understanding of ubuntu that seeks to acknowledge the linguistic and discursive aspects of existing relationally and I will argue that Krog's impetus for a provisional creation of a common humanity is formulated through forgiveness, not as an unequivocal tool for reconciliation, but more broadly as an acknowledgement of the subject's ineluctable complicity as well as possible agency in language.

I will focus on the eighth poem from the cluster, because of its explicit focus on forgiveness in the coda. Furthermore, its use as an epigraph (in English) to the seventh volume of the TRC report, which was intended as a kind of monument to the victims of apartheid and consists of the names of those identified, ties it closely to the discourse of reconciliation the Commission aimed to achieve.[21] I shall give both the Afrikaans and the English version (*Kleur* 42; *Down* 98).[22]

> vanweë die verhale van verwondes
> lê die land nie meer tussen ons nie
> maar binne-in
>
> sy haal asem
> gekalmeer na die litteken
> aan haar wonderbaarlike keel

---

20 Taljard's argument translates as "that no satisfactory solutions [to cultural and racial tension] will be found, without the application of conscious reconciliation strategies" (translation mine).

21 Like Ingrid Jonker's "Die Kind" and Diana Ferrus' "Vir Sara Baartman", Krog's "vanweë die verhale van verwondes" is another poem strategically related to a specific political and historical moment after the end of apartheid. All three were written by women in Afrikaans and later translated into English.

22 The English version of the poem also features in English in Krog's *Country of My Skull* (423) and a volume of her poetry in translation, *Down to My Last Skin*. For a Dutch translation, see *Kleur Komt Nooit Alleen* and *Wat de Sterren Zeggen*. For a more elaborate reading of the group of poems "land van genade en verdriet" in relation to Judith Butler's notion of precarity, see Stuit and Jansen.

in die wieg van my skedel sing dit
ontbrand dit
my tong   my binneste oor   die gaping van my hart
sidder vorentoe na die buitelyn
van ‘n woordeskat nuut in sag, intieme keelklanke

van my siel leer die retina oopgaan
daagliks – ‘n duisend woorde
skroei my tot ‘n nuwe tong

ek is vir altyd verander. Ek wil sê
vergewe my
vergewe my
vergewe my

jy wat ek veronreg het – seblief
neem my
met jou saam

*

because of you
this country no longer lies
between us but within

it breathes becalmed
after being wounded
in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull
it sings   it ignites
my tongue   my inner ear   the cavity of my heart
shudders towards the outline
new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

I am changed forever I want to say
forgive me
forgive me
forgive me

you whom I have wronged, please
take me

with you

In this poem, the country is described as having somewhat recovered from the turmoil of its past, its "wondrous throat" as somewhat healed by the stories of the wounded. The opening line, "vanweë die verhale van verwondes" immediately presents the reader with a reflection of the importance of individual testimony in the TRC hearings, and, by implying that this is the reason for recovery, calls to mind the Commission's logic of national healing (which is in turn validated by the Commission's use of this poem as the epigraph to volume seven of the report). The reference to the scar on this wondrous throat ("die litteken / aan haar wonderbaarlike keel") brings to mind a sense of completed restoration, which is also reflected by the medical motto of *Kleur Kom Nooit Alleen Nie* ("Wondherstel is die herstel van die integriteit van beseerde weefsel"[23]) and the fact that "land van genade en verdriet" features in the section named "Wondweefsel." There is time to take a breath, an image that sets up a sense of relaxed tension, while the threatening aspect of a scar on a throat remains visible.

The third stanza continues to describe the image of the skull as a cradle where Krog locates the ignition of a new set of words: "'n woordeskat nuut in sag, intieme keelklanke" (*Kleur* 42).[24] This image of the skull refers back to the second poem in the cluster where it is explicitly mentioned as the location from which a "medemenselike taal" (humane language) becomes possible (*Kleur* 38; see also Appendix). The reader is also reminded, however, as was the case with the image of the scar on the throat from the first stanza, of the violent ambivalence of this language's emergence when we read that it wells up in a soft, defenceless ("weerlose") skull, an image that leans in on the word's more usual and sinister connotations, and thus sharply evokes a tension between creation and destruction, of enabling and threatening aspects of physi-

23 "The recovery from a wound is the recovery of the integrity of wounded tissue" (translation mine).

24 All Afrikaans verses will be given in English translation in the footnotes: "new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals" (*Down* 98).

cal existence.[25] Nonetheless, by excavating this new vocabulary or, rather, treasury ("woordeskat"), the lyrical I is able to open up "the retina of its soul" and reach out to the other. By enlarging the capacity for receptiveness towards the other, the subject can now consider sounds that were unfamiliar before as intimate.[26]

The sense of communality evident from these first three stanzas seems to align the creation of a new "medemenselike taal" with the TRC's discourse of reconciliation. Louise Viljoen, too, relates Krog's mention of a new, humane language to the description of the nation or land, more specifically, to the country or land as a suffering female body ("Kleur van Mens" 34). This language, Viljoen notes, is closely associated with the diversity of voices that has become available because of the stories of the wounded and is qualified by Viljoen as follows:

> Te oordeel hieraan sien Krog dus die konsep van 'n medemenselike taal (wat die vermoë het om te kommunikeer, simpatiseer, skuld te bely en vergifnis te vra) eerder as enige spesifieke taal, as die basis vir 'n nuwe nasie of kollektiewe identiteit in post-apartheid Suid-Afrika. (34)[27]

In this quote, Viljoen describes the humanitarian language as having the capability to communicate, to sympathise, to confess and to ask for forgiveness, and claims Krog places emphasis on the conceptuality of this possible language over any specific language.

Of course, this humane language is indeed conceptual to a large extent, if only because it has hardly budded. It is described in the sixth poem as "dié brose oopvou van 'n nuwe, enkele medewoord" (*Kleur* 41).[28] However, as I have argued above, its concept is explicitly related to the stories of the wounded and is, as such, grounded in a reference to a very specific practice of language use motivated by the TRC context. What is more, the meticulous construction of the qualifications of this language in the

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25 The skull is a predominant theme both in "land van genade en verdriet" and other work by Krog. It returns in the eighth poem in the cluster under discussion here and obviously also features in the title of her famous work on the TRC, *Country of My Skull*. Unfortunately, the space of my dissertation does not allow further analysis of this theme.

26 Krog here might refer to the difficulty for non-native speakers to learn how to pronounce the clicking sounds in, for instance, Zulu or Xhosa, or perhaps to the difficulty of learning to say the guttural 'g' that is so prominent in Afrikaans.

27 "Judged by this, Krog sees the concept of a humane language (which has the capacity to communicate, sympathise, confess and to ask for forgiveness), rather than any specific language as the basis for a new nation or collective identity in post-apartheid South Africa" (translation mine).

28 English translation: "this warm fragile unfolding of the word humane" (*Down* 99).

course of the cluster merely enumerated by Viljoen reveals aspects of this language that exceed description: the humane language envisioned by Krog is actually already performed in the poetry and is thus staged as a language act that has tangible effects on the concept of this humane language as well as on its user.
As became clear from my earlier discussion of the metaphor of the skull from which this language wells, for instance, it cannot be uniformly approached as an unambiguous healing of the wounds of the past, because it also depends on an association of destruction. Similarly, the use of the word scar ("litteken") suggests that these wounds will remain visible over time. With regard to the effect on the language user, we now arrive at a significant turning point in the text. In the fourth stanza, the lyrical I has acquired a new tongue by the sensibility towards others and their words. The Afrikaans version even suggests that the lyrical I has *transformed into* this tongue ("skroei my *tot* 'n nuwe tong," emphasis mine). As a result, the speaking subject as a whole is reduced to the image of the part of the body that is used for pronunciation and which is, of course, a word used as a synonym for language. In other words, the subject's apprehensive rapprochement and openness to the new language taking shape around it has fundamentally changed him/her:

> ek is vir altyd verander. (*Kleur* 42)[29]

This line, however, does not end here, but continues to prepare the reader for the consequence of this change in the coda of the poem, which features the lyrical I literally begging to be forgiven and not to be left behind:

> ek is vir altyd verander. Ek wil sê
> vergewe my
> vergewe my
> vergewe my
>
> jy wat ek veronreg het – seblief
> neem my
> met jou saam (*Kleur* 42)[30]

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29 English translation: "I am changed forever" (*Down* 98).

30 English translation: "I am changed forever I want to say / forgive me / forgive me / forgive me / You whom I have wronged, please / take me / with you" (*Down* 98). Note how this triple plea echoes Tutu's words to Winnie Mandela at the end of the MUFC hearings: "I beg you, I beg you, I beg you please" (Krog, *Country* 391).

The very fact that the change in the subject, occasioned by language, is not where the poem ends, but rather, clears the way for its coda, suggests that to be changed is not enough. Indeed, the subject wants to use the newly acquired language and express this change ("ek wil sê"). The plea to be forgiven is, thus, not just a request at the address of someone who has been wronged, but also a speech act located from within the new, humane language that has changed the speaking subject.

Elsewhere in the group of poems, the image of the voice also symbolizes the rapprochement of the self to the other (Stuit and Jansen 62), but as Sanders has pointed out, the modality of the "wil" in the phrase that precedes the plea is ambiguous; it creates suspense as to whether forgiveness has indeed been asked for, or whether it is merely an expression of wanting to do so. Sanders describes it as being "situated indefinitely between a constative about a wish and a subjunctive of hesitation and deference before an addressee" (*Ambiguities* 139).

Indeed, since the addressee is the one who has been wronged, to ask for forgiveness amounts, in this poem, to being put at this addressee's mercy. To ask for forgiveness in these terms means to surrender to the authority of the new discourse and radically exposes one to the possibility of being denied altogether and being left behind. For several reasons, this position could thus just as easily amount to a re-inscription of violence. Not only because the tables could now be turned on the one asking for forgiveness, but also because the person addressed as a victim might not want to be identified as such, or, alternatively, the victim's notion of what s/he has suffered might not correspond to what the perpetrator thinks s/he has done. This "phantasy of violence and counterviolence" on the part of the perpetrator is inextricably linked to both reparation and complicity because it reveals that "what links one to the other in responsibility is violence" (Sanders, *Ambiguities* 141, 144).

This does not mean, however, that an attempt at rapprochement cannot and should not be made. Indeed, the drive for "medemenslikheid" remains strongly tied to language throughout the group of poems, despite the fact that language is not merely a location for reconciliation, but also a site of contestation and complicity. The third poem "woordeloos staan ek," for instance, is centred on the loss of linguistic agency on the part of the "I," who is at a loss for words when attempting and failing to capture in language the people "wat bewend-siek hang / aan die geluidlose ruimte van ons onherbergsame verlede" (*Kleur* 38). In desperation, the speaker implores:

> wat sê 'n mens
> wat de hel dóén 'n mens
> met dié drag ontkroonde geraamtes, oorsprong, skande en as (*Kleur* 38)[31]

Indeed, what is one to say or do when the past is inhospitable to language? Can any past fall out of the frameworks presented to us by language and discourse in the first place? The lack of words ("wat sê 'n mens") seems to obliterate a sense of agency ("wat de hel dóén 'n mens") with regard to the past, which for Krog often involves her ambiguous desire to break away from her Afrikaner background while cherishing it at the same time.[32] In the poem, being speechless flows into feeling powerless, reflecting an assumption about the close association of agency with language, which has been constructed, as we have seen, as a site of contestation and violence, as well as a location for regeneration. This inevitable bind between violence and regeneration is caused by the fact that, in a very literal sense, words must, as Krog's opening question of this poem already suggests ("waar sal my woorde vandaan kom?" "whence will words now come"), come from somewhere.[33]

As Judith Butler points out in *Excitable Speech*, the fact that subjects are both subsumed and enabled by language, is exactly because agency in using language is partly an illusion. The fact that subjects are vulnerable to speech acts renders language, like discourse, ambivalent: language introduces us into society, community and discourse and thus enables our existence as subjects, whilst simultaneously exposing us to the limitations of the relations and discourses of which language is a part. Because language is always in a sense imposed upon us, it is automatically implied that it always already exists outside the subject. It both precedes and exceeds the subject and the subject only exists in a small part of its larger historicity. In a very literal sense, the subject "has its own 'existence' implicated" in what s/he speaks (*Excitable* 28).

This is, then, quite precisely, the location of linguistic agency that renders visibility to how our responsibilities can be organised and how we can deal with the complici-

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31 English translation: "what does one say/what the hell does one do/with this load of decrowned skeletons origins shame and ash" (*Down* 96).

32 The fifth poem in the cluster touches on the issue of genealogy in more detail. For a more general analysis of Krog's treatment of genealogy (especially in relation to that of motherhood) and cultural background see, respectively, Louise Viljoen's articles on the relation between Krog's writing and that of her mother in *A Change of Tongue* and a similar ambivalence in Krog's work in relation to her female literary predecessors, both published in 2007. See also Viljoen's *Ons Ongehoorde Soort*, for an encompassing discussion of Krog's work.

33 The words "waar sal my woorde vandaan kom" explicitly refer to Psalm 121.

ties that language forces upon us. According to Butler, a subject can never be responsible for the fact that s/he is interpellated, addressed, or for the ways in which this takes place.[34] However, agency does exist in the response. We can be and are responsible for the way we deal with being both subjected to and enabled by language, for the way we respond to the historical chain of language of which we are part:

> The responsibility of the speaker does not consist of remaking language ex nihilo, but rather of negotiating the legacies of usage that constrain and enable that speaker's speech. (*Excitable* 27)

To return to the reading of Krog's poem, then, this perspective makes clear that the lyrical I's plea for being forgiven is grounded in the realisation of its responsibility in language. The speaking subject in Krog's poem is aware of being complicit in having wronged the addressee, and places itself in a radically vulnerable position by acknowledging that to be interpellated by a new, humane language, of which the addressee is representative, opens up a re-framing of the subject's "legacies of usage" (Butler, *Excitable* 27). This way, especially in its Afrikaans version, the poem performs a negotiation of the lyrical I's complicity in the legacy of apartheid that is so closely associated with Afrikaans and a "medemenselik" usage of it as performed in the poem. As such, the poem (and the group from which it is taken) reflects both on the effects an alteration of language could possibly have on our frames of reference in general, especially on our relations with others, while at the same time performing an attempt at such an alteration by the speaking subject. The reference to a "medemenslike taal" should thus be understood as a kind of discursive responsibility, in which the speaking subject literally minds his/her words. In the poem, this responsibility translates as an acknowledgment of the speaking subject's position in language as potentially violent and of the simultaneous potential to change language's implied frames of reference through a radical openness to the voices of the wounded.

Krog's emphasis on forgiveness in the poem "vanweë die verhale van verwondes" in particular stages the radical vulnerability on the part of the interpellated subject that is necessary for any shift in language to occur. The tangible concern of the lyrical I about being left behind by the addressee underlines that one needs to be interpellated by a (dominant) discourse in the first place in order to be able to constructively

[34] According to Althusser, ideology "recruits" individuals as subjects by hailing or interpellating them, like in his famous example where a policeman hails someone in the street (301). The individual turns around because he or she recognizes the hail as being addressed to him or her. This is a subjection to ideology that Althusser calls "interpellation."

negotiate one's own complicity in the legacies of any language. Thus, Krog's suggested need to make oneself available for, and vulnerable to, interpellation by conforming to the discourse in the light of which forgiveness is asked for – something Winnie Mandela refused to do – is further aggravated by the recognition of the lyrical subject in the poem, that *not* to be offered forgiveness, not to be interpellated, and thus not to be granted legitimacy, constitutes an even bigger threat to the position of the human subject and forecloses the subject's capability to change.[35]

The possibility of not being interpellated, or not to be recognized as a subject by discourse at all, comes to the fore in Butler's work on precarity, where she emphasises the differentiation in how subjects are engaged by discourse, if at all. It is crucial to recognise, according to Butler, "that lives are supported and maintained differentially, that there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe" if oppression is countered in any effective way (*Precarious* 24). As Krog's attempt at creating a humane language also suggests, this physical violence is, although not exclusively, the result of an antecedent violence on the level of discourse, the dominance of which determines what is vulnerable, grievable, even human: physical violence "in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization which is already at work in the culture" (*Precarious* 25).

Of course, it is exactly this deeply rooted interrelation between discursive and physical violence that the TRC aimed to reveal and distance itself from in its treatment of South Africa's apartheid past. As was discussed above, in its stead, it aimed to install a new frame of reference in which "respect for our common humanity" was taken up as the nexus for reconciliation. In order to achieve this, it relied, much like Krog's poem "vanweë die verhale van verwondes," on the broader effect of the affective force of its hearings which was exercised and performed through a striving for forgiveness embedded in a sharing of grief and loss in a public setting.

Similar to Krog's poem and the TRC's discourse, Butler, too, relies on the notion of suffering and loss in the creation of the notion of a common humanity:

> I propose to consider a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions. (*Precarious* 19)

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[35] From this perspective, ubuntu could be read as a giving over of oneself to the other, a gesture to which I return in Chapter 3 with regard to Levinasian ethics.

Seemingly in line with Tutu's interpretation of ubuntu as the acknowledgment of the fact that relations to others profoundly influence the human subject, Butler stresses that a relationality constitutional of the subject is ineluctable. As soon as we are born, we enter a world in which our bodies fulfill a public role: "Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine" (*Precarious* 26). However, where Tutu emphasises the strengthening aspects of being connected to others, Butler focuses on the human body as vulnerable; by being inevitably attached to others, one is always at risk of losing these attachments. Moreover, by being exposed to others, one is always at risk of being exposed to violence (*Precarious* 20). From this premise of vulnerability, Butler intimates that if such a thing as a "human condition that is universally shared" exists, or could exist, it would be in the acute experience of this vulnerability: "for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous we of us all" (*Precarious* 20).

Yet, as is evidenced by Butler's rather general phrasing ("I propose," "has to do with") and as the context of the TRC also suggests, particular situations of loss and mourning considerably complicate the political application of this "tenuous we." It is not possible to assume that such a community is out there, ready to be found, because people are exposed to each other; this would amount to contending to the notion of a shared human condition uncritically, without acknowledging the fact that it is highly likely that different people experience loss and grief differently. As Dominick LaCapra has noted, "Post-Apartheid South Africa … face[s] the problem of acknowledging and working through historical losses in ways that affect different groups differently" (697). Conflating the historical specificity of loss into a more general and abstract notion of what LaCapra calls absence "would facilitate the appropriation of particular traumas by those who did not experience them, typically in a movement of identity-formation that makes invidious and ideological use of traumatic series of events in foundational ways or as symbolic capital" (712).

It is exactly this uneasy relation between the contention that there is something intrinsic to humanity in loss that everyone can relate to and the question of the category of the human as dependent on discourse that plays such a crucial role in the analysis of ubuntu in the TRC process. As the reading of Krog's treatment of forgiveness makes clear, it is not possible to arrive at a language that attends to the notion of common humanity ("medemenselik") without recognising the double position of the subject in language as both complicit to violence and capable of change through vulnerability. The discursive responsibility that arises from this situation holds true for ubuntu, as much as it does for any other discourse.

From this perspective, the possible ways of thinking ubuntu are thus also grounded in an awareness of the differentiation present within these discourses, both with regard to how the vulnerability of the subject to discourse is distributed differently across the world and with regard to how these interpellations are experienced. For if, as Butler suggests, the notion of the human is different every time it is utilised in discourse, how is it possible to claim, as she also does, that the experience of grief and loss can be a basis for common humanity? Rephrasing this issue with regard to ubuntu, the question then becomes whether we can think the relationality between people that lies at the basis of ubuntu beyond the discursive. I would like to suggest, keeping Krog's poetry in mind, that this conundrum can only be navigated through an awareness that our very capability to relate to others emerges in the negotiation of different experiences within particular discursive fields.

In the next section, I will attempt a provisional formulation of such a negotiation by analysing what has been hailed, amongst others by Krog, as a textbook example of how ubuntu and reconciliation work in the TRC process (*Country*; *Ik spreek*). This particular moment, like Krog's poem and Tutu's statements in the public hearings, also clearly posits forgiveness as a dominant way to think about humanity. Although the statement initially seems to merely reinforce the discourse in which it takes place, it also elucidates how a tactical approach to and use of this discourse allows the person offering forgiveness to exercise what I have called, in the context of Krog's poetry, a discursive responsibility that is constitutive of the notions of common humanity and ubuntu it seemingly evokes.

Re-inscribing the Human: Ubuntu and Common Humanity

I will focus on the testimony of Cynthia Ngewu, who lost her son in what came to be known as the Guguletu Seven shooting. At the time of this shooting, South Africa was in a state of emergency, which was (although temporarily suspended in 1986) proclaimed by P.W. Botha in 1985 and lasted until 1990. Towards the end of the 1980s the South African government found itself pressured by increasing violence in the townships and the State of Emergency was decreed in order to contain civil unrest. Effectively, this meant that the government was no longer restricted by law in its fight against "terrorists." As a result, the townships became the nexus of anti-apartheid resistance and a true battleground, with fights breaking out daily between the population and the police, as well as between more conservative anti-apartheid organisa-

tions and youthful UDF members.[36] The government sided and conflicted with the different organisations as it deemed fit.[37]

In the shooting, which was the result of an ambush by the security police in Guguletu township near Cape Town in March 1986, seven young men, allegedly members of the armed wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe, were killed.[38] One of these men was Mrs. Ngewu's son, Christopher Piet. Here is what Mrs. Ngewu said after having met the killer of her son, who requested a meeting with the family of his victims so that he could ask them for forgiveness:

> This thing called reconciliation… if I am understanding it correctly… if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back… then I agree, then I support it all. (Krog "This Thing" 356; Praeg 374-5, pauses in originals)

In her article on the role of forgiveness in the process of reconciliation, Krog remarks that Mrs. Ngewu's statement "spells out the full complex implications of being interconnected-towards-wholeness and the role of reconciliation in it" ("This Thing" 356). She breaks down Mrs. Ngewu's logic as follows: because of the principles of interrelatedness explained by Desmond Tutu as ubuntu above ("what dehumanises you, inexorably dehumanises me"), the killing of Christopher Piet implies that the perpetrator not only harmed his victim, but himself as well. He robbed himself of his humanity,

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36 The UDF (United Democratic Front), founded on non-racial premises in the 1980s, was one of the biggest anti-apartheid coalitions that united many organisations, one of which was the ANC. See *South African History Online*.

37 For more information on this period, see Robert Ross' *A Concise History of South Africa* (chapter 7, especially pages 177-8), which deals with the 1980s-1990s period in broad, internationally contextualized lines, but also pays attention to the importance of tribe-related issues and occult violence. Roger Beck's discussion of this period in *The History of South Africa* (chapter 9, especially pages 176-180) is more elaborate, but does not offer as clear an overview of causes and consequences as Ross does. Beck rightfully stresses that besides tribal tensions, issues concerning differences between generations, between rural and urban factions and between political views (for example, armed struggle vs. negotiation), and between different interpretations of Zulu traditions (especially in Natal most of the rivalling factions were all Zulu speaking) need to be taken into account (177). For an even more elaborate analysis of this period, see Leonard Thompson's *A History of South Africa*, chapters 7 and 8, especially pages 235-246.

38 Lindy Wilson's 2000 documentary *The Gugulethu 7* describes in detail the events surrounding the shooting and the TRC's fact-finding mission regarding this case.

so to speak. Of course, Mrs. Ngewu's humanity, too, has been profoundly affected by her son's death and to offer this perpetrator a chance at restoration by giving him the forgiveness he asks for means that her own humanity can, at least partially, be restored as well. Krog claims that "it is precisely this understanding and knowledge of inter-connectedness-towards-wholeness that underpinned most of the testimonies delivered before the TRC…" (357).

In extension to Krog's reading we can see how Mrs. Ngewu's statement quite neatly evokes the logic of reconciliation generally advocated in the TRC process, while it simultaneously renders visible the double and somewhat contradictory notion of the human that lies at its basis. On the one hand, reconciliation is read as a restoration of the category of the human. Mrs. Ngewu performs ubuntu as described by Tutu by showing an acute awareness of the fact that her own humanity, as well as its restoration, is deeply caught up with the actions of the policeman. As a result, she actively seeks a way to reformulate their relation in a constructive way that seeks to harmonise. Yet, this attitude of ubuntu constructs the notion of the human as an alienable rather than an inalienable trait, as something that can or cannot exist at a certain point in a person's life, as discussed in the Introduction. Explicitly, it suggests that the category of the human is unilaterally related to the category of the "good." By committing violence against Mrs. Ngewu's son, the policeman failed to recognise the humanity of Christopher Piet, but also committed a crime against the humanity of everybody involved, losing his own in the process.

As we have seen, this notion of the human is also implied in Tutu's formulation. Some people have ubuntu, and others do not. However, this conception of some people having a "better" conception of what it means to be human than others is at odds with the TRC's more general and fundamental respect for common humanity that is presented as inalienable and self-evidently implying a certain condition that all humans have in common. Commissioner Wynand Malan, in his minority position in the fifth volume of the TRC report, phrases this quandary as follows:

> The restoration of their dignity is to an extent an unhappy choice of words. It [human dignity] is a legal concept. Victims carried themselves with dignity, even when they broke down. In its deepest sense, human dignity cannot be bestowed on someone. The "reforming" old order failed to understand that human dignity always exists. It cannot be bequeathed. It can only be acknowledged. (*TRC Report Vol. 5* 444)

From this perspective, Mrs. Ngewu's statement performs the double notion of the human at work in the TRC's use of ubuntu. The recognition of the fact that human dignity could not have been lost in the first place, yet can be restored through a process that emphasizes this selfsame inalienability, in fact installs this contradictory notion of the human, in which violence is excluded from its category and thus becomes impossible to address, as a moral standard.

Thus, the discourse that Mrs. Ngewu reinvigorates represents a dominant conception of how humanity should be conceived of according to the process of reconciliation. It is, in fact, an example of how the observation that the notion of humanity is a discursive construct comes to bear on the function of ubuntu in the TRC discourse, which posits the notion of humanity in ubuntu as a very particular, historically located social construct, rather than a universal guideline for human relations. Crucially, with regard to Krog's call for a discursive responsibility in her poems in "land van genade en verdriet," we see here that Mrs. Ngewu, although contributing to the dominant strain of TRC discourse, is, at the same time, an agent in the particular instance in which the meaning of humanity is re-iterated.

Philosopher Leonhard Praeg claims that it is through "equivocations" like Cynthia Ngewu's that "reconciliation and forgiveness came to stand for an African appreciation of 'our shared humanity' and to metonymically represent the meaning of ubuntu" (375). So ubuntu only partly underpins Mrs. Ngewu's statement; rather, the statement was constitutive of what ubuntu came to signify in the context of the TRC process. Praeg emphasises that Mrs. Ngewu's gesture is therefore not, strictly speaking, an act of reconciliation, but an act that makes reconciliation possible.

Mrs. Ngewu's role and discursive agency in this process are represented by the repetition of the word "if" in her definition of reconciliation. According to Praeg, this signifies that she is not altogether sure whether the TRC related discourse is an adequate description of what she is experiencing, while her acceptance of it despite her doubts about its accuracy in representing her individual case ("then I support it all") signals her preference for the potentially positive social effects of this statement over emphasising her personal ordeal. I agree with Praeg that Mrs. Ngewu seems to be making a conscious decision about her confirmation of the discourse she finds herself interpellated by. Yet, I would like to emphasise that her repetition of the word "if" does not necessarily express uncertainty, but, rather, points towards a very specific conditionality: Mrs. Ngewu supports reconciliation *if*, and only *if*, it means that humanity will be restored to herself, the perpetrator, as well as to "all of us." The fact that she is cautious about her phrasing ("if I am understanding it correctly") only underlines her

awareness of the discursive responsibility she is taking towards her son, herself and her son's murderer, as well as to a broader community.

As Praeg persuasively argues, however, this also means Mrs. Ngewu will have to accept, for the sake of the parties involved, that this discourse will always, in Butler's sense, exceed Mrs. Ngewu's position in it. The very workings of ubuntu as displayed by Mrs. Ngewu are a signal of "the irretrievable loss of what we had to forget or allow to slip away unarticulated in order for there to be a shared discourse on reconciliation, forgiveness and, the sign that unifies it all, 'ubuntu'" (Praeg 375). Effectively, then, in order for there to be a common discourse on reconciliation, bannered under the concept of ubuntu, Mrs. Ngewu, despite the fact that she explicitly states the conditions of her cooperation, has to relinquish, to some extent, the possibility of an incommensurable response.

The implications of Mrs. Ngewu's tactical decision to accept a certain level of incommensurability in her response and the role such decisions play in the TRC process can, perhaps, be more adequately analyzed by looking at the Zapiro cartoon from the introduction to this chapter a second time. As was discussed, the TRC discourse on reconciliation relies on a connection between the two sides of the gap that separates truth from reconciliation. It is obvious, however, that such a bridge is emphatically absent from this cartoon. As such, it depicts the frustration of the TRC's assumption that "the road to reconciliation" would be paved by its search for "truth," represented by Tutu reading the map for two stereotypical figures depicting victims and perpetrators under gargantuan amounts of media attention. In line with the discussion of ubuntu in this chapter, the absence of the bridge suggests how ubuntu came to function as a bridge in this process, and thus actually makes visible what is not there.

If we take what happened to Mrs. Ngewu and her son to be represented by the word "truth" in the cartoon, and the word "reconciliation" to reflect the ideal the TRC discourse that interpellates her strives for, then the invisible bridge refers to Mrs.

Ngewu's tactical decision to accept a certain level of incommensurability in her statement, to accept that there were certain things she could not say in order for there to be a discourse on ubuntu. As such, the cartoon visualizes (through the bridge's absence) how what Praeg calls "the work of ubuntu" is invisible in its own discourse.

To note the invisibility of the bridge, and thus to suggest that the work of ubuntu will have to remain veiled from sight, is, however, not enough. What this assumed and invisible bridge might look like is crucial when talking about possible meanings of ubuntu that are silenced by its role in the TRC process. Therefore, I argue that the bridge does not consist of a conflation of the interests of different people that is taken for granted, as suggested by Tutu's formulation of ubuntu, but, with Praeg, I claim that ubuntu entails, in fact, *hard work*. In addition, I argue that this work consists of a clustering of interests, by which I mean particular stakes, concerns, or benefits individuals or groups can have in a given situation, through careful negotiation.

If the discourse of reconciliation allows Mrs. Ngewu to help herself, the policeman, but also, as she states, "all of us," by talking to this man and considering to offer him her forgiveness, she is willing to subscribe to it. In this sense, ubuntu apparently provides for her needs, even if her act of potential forgiveness seems to offer only a partially adequate representation of the entire scope of her personal experiences, as suggested by Praeg. Nonetheless, even though all partakers in this process may very well have their own separate goal(s), it is in everyone's best interest to contribute to the gist of this particular moment. Explained in terms of Zapiro's cartoon, everybody needs to get over the assumed bridge.

Like Krog, then, although for different reasons, I consider this a moment of fully-fledged ubuntu. Not because, as Krog suggests, Mrs. Ngewu's action allows a move towards the fullness or wholeness of the self – a wholeness that is undermined by the vulnerability entailed in relating to others – but rather because it allows for a formulation of ubuntu as a negotiated merging of different, but coinciding, interests aimed at overcoming a breach by kick-starting a common effort. When formulated as such, this moment of ubuntu meets the need to recognize that subjects are relationally constructed, while respecting their autonomy at the same time.

My emphasis on the word "moment" in relation to Mrs. Ngewu's statement is intentional. After all, one cannot expect different interests to remain aligned; moments pass, goals and interests change. As such, a convergence of interests is mercilessly temporary and ubuntu, when read through this framework of negotiation, emerges as a process of constant evaluation, in which the conception of the human on which it relies, is necessarily also in flux. Mrs. Ngewu's attitude towards the murderer of her son, then, suggests that ubuntu in the TRC discourse implies an essential standard of

what should be considered the category of the human, yet also opens up a reading of ubuntu that primarily revolves around the constant re-invention of what the category of the human entails and what it means to be human in relation to others.

Conclusion / Next

In this chapter, ubuntu has been discussed in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from which it emerges as an ambiguous term that is awkwardly located between two strands of the TRC's discourse. On the one hand, its role in the process of reconciliation has resulted in ubuntu's close association with the nationalistic agenda of the South African government of the 1990s. This agenda places its emphasis on the importance of community as an ideological strategy that aims to straddle the structural disparity between the Commission's ability to grant amnesty to perpetrators, yet merely forward suggestions for reparation to the government for victims. Such a view risks, however, a failure to acknowledge the empowerment that ubuntu and forgiveness have provided for people who suffered gross human rights violations and who have had to live with the consequences in a framework that failed to recognize their suffering in the first place. On the other hand, a focus on ubuntu's empowering aspects and its potential for bringing people closer together in a setting rife with division and violence can risk developing a blind spot for the power relations involved in how this potential can be put to work ideologically in specific discourses. Both of these positions towards ubuntu risk becoming just another dominant discourse that is strategically imposed and in need of subversion.

As I have argued throughout the chapter, it is from within this double bind of ubuntu in the TRC process that alternative formulations also become possible. In the analysis of Krog's poetry, for instance, the role of forgiveness in the TRC's discourse, as the dominant mode of achieving reconciliation, provides, at the same time, a position from which to formulate alternative ways of thinking about what it means to relate to other people within a particular dominant discursive field. As the analysis of Krog's poem "vanweë die verhale van verwondes" makes clear, it becomes possible to see, from within the emphasis on forgiveness, that it is exactly the bound position of the subject in discourse that also provides him/her with the capability to make decisions in how s/he relates to others.

With regard to ubuntu in the process of reconciliation, then, it is absolutely crucial to note that Tutu's formulation of ubuntu as an essential part of being human, which some people possess or master more than others, understandably posits a respect

for common humanity as the greatest good, yet installs the preferred expression of this communality through ubuntu as a moral standard. If what dehumanises you automatically dehumanises me, ubuntu comes to reflect an essential fusion of the interests of different individuals that belies the discursive aspects of our realities. More precisely, this logic fails to acknowledge the fact that, in the TRC process, a new community is constructed around an assumed and delimited notion of the human, which fails to acknowledge its own potential discursive violence.

Perhaps there is no way to get around the fact that ubuntu generally, as evidenced by the double function it was made to perform in the TRC process, runs the risk of installing an essential and unchanging notion of the human as non-violent and "good." Yet, as the reading of Mrs. Ngewu's interpretation and performance of this logic makes clear, this risk also opens up a reading of ubuntu that is based on the negotiation of different interests, rather than on their conflation. Such a negotiation must, as will become clear from the next chapter, be necessarily temporal, if it is to remain conscious of the constant need to keep the category of the human, and the meanings of relation that flow from it, as open as possible. In the next chapter, therefore, I will further investigate possible ways to think the temporal aspects in the double bind that is imposed on the subject by its own vulnerability to others and to discourse. What are the consequences on the concept of ubuntu if one is to perpetually balance the strategic and the tactical, the dominant and the subversive, and finally, the autonomous and the relational? In other words, what does it mean for ubuntu to be described as a convergence and negotiation of interests?

Chapter 2

Ubuntu in Transit: From Divisive Pasts to Open Futures

Baggage: Introduction

– For God's sake, Sibo … It's done. It's happened. I don't want to deal with it now. It's political life, we held everything together in exile better than any other movement did, now's not the time to start stirring up trouble. There may be a purpose, I don't know, something else planned for me. –
– Hai you! What purpose! You are going to grow a beard and all that stuff and infiltrate – where? What for? Where can't we just get off a plane at an airport and walk in, now? We're not living in the past! –
– That's exactly what you're saying – we are – there was a plot against me because of something that happened outside, done with. For God's sake, let's sleep. –
She lay beside him stiffly, breathing fast. – I don't sleep. I can't turn over and forget about it. –
– Listen, woman. – He sat up with effort. – You are going to be there, now. In there. Here at home in the country. Keep your mind on what you have to do, you have to work with everyone on the Executive, don't make enemies for private reasons. – …
– On principle. Ever heard of it, Didymus. *On principle*. –
– You've got a lot to learn. Let me look after my own affairs. –
– Your affairs are my affairs. Have I lived like any other woman, hubby coming home regularly from work everyday? Have I known, months on end, whether you were dead or alive? Tell me. And could I ask anybody? Did I ever expect an answer? Could I tell our child why her father left her? *Our affairs*. –
– Not now. Not in politics, where you are now. – (Gordimer 99)

This scene is taken from Nadine Gordimer's 1994 novel *None to Accompany Me*, which is set in the turbulent times just before the first democratic elections in South Africa. After spending years in exile, Didymus, Sibongile and their daughter Mpho Maqoma are finally able to return to South Africa when political prisoners are released and the organisations opposing apartheid unbanned.[1] Once returned to their home country, the Maqomas continue their political efforts in South Africa's transitional phase, but Didymus and Sibongile come to find that their roles in the Movement have changed. Having played a key role in the struggle against apartheid in exile, Didymus is unexpectedly voted off the Movement's Executive, while his wife, Sibongile, is voted on. The

1 As Isidore Diala has pointed out in his "Interrogating Mythology: The Mandela Myth and Black Empowerment in Nadine Gordimer's Post-Apartheid Writing," references to Nelson Mandela are only made indirectly in *None to Accompany Me* (42).

cited passage describes the row Didymus and Sibongile have the evening this shift takes place. Sibongile is angry with Didymus because of his resigned attitude and feels he should be upset about being betrayed by his comrades.

His take on the situation contrasts strongly with Sibongile's insistence on "principle," which she accuses her husband of lacking. The salient repetition of the word "now" throughout the excerpt, but especially in the final line – "Not now. Not in politics, where you are now" – combined with indications of location ("in," "where") denotes an emphasis on the importance of time and place. Sibongile's notion of their affairs as permanently entwined as a result of their loyalty is countered by Didymus' insistence that this loyalty includes flexibility with regard to the effects alterations in time and place have on them, their relationship and the Movement. Since Didymus feels the country and the Movement need Sibongile more than ever, he subsumes his own interests and feelings (about being betrayed, about being put in second place professionally, about his marriage) under the bigger heading of the political weight of the transitional period. Didymus thus also makes clear that their relation is not an unchanging precept. The principles of what Didymus and Sibongile share and how they share it are constructed as being subject to a context that stretches beyond both of them.

This insistence on how circumstances have changed something that previously seemed fundamental to the marriage of the Maqomas launches us straight into some of the topics discussed in this chapter, which revolves around the notions of change, transition and temporality in possible conceptualisations of ubuntu. Drawing on the previous chapter, in which ubuntu was formulated as a recognition and tactical negotiation of the convergence of different interests in the face of a common humanity strategically imposed by the TRC, this chapter investigates in greater detail what it means for ubuntu to be described as a convergence of interests that is inevitably contextual. As became clear from the previous chapter, ubuntu as a negotiation of interests emerges from its double function of providing openness towards others while simultaneously delimiting this openness in order to provide social cohesion and stability in a time defined by the search for new frames of reference. This chapter will revolve around the questions of how such a transition from one (set of) discourse(s) to another takes place and how the notion of transition influences intersubjective relations.

The focus on the notion of transition in relation to ubuntu refers to two specific moments. One is historical and pertains to the period of transition after the end of apartheid. Historian Leonard Thompson has described this period as "the political transition," which he dates between 1989 (the year in which negotiations between

Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk were initiated, leading to Mandela's release in 1990) and 1994 (the year in which South Africa's first democratic elections took place). The transition period, however, does not have such a delimited end, since the final Constitution was not in place until 1996 and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was an essential part of the transition period, remained active until as late as 2001. These specifications lead to the question what transition is, what it is one is transitioning away from and, consequently, where transition leads. When is transition supposed to be over? Does it ever really end?

Assuming that there is no way to be certain, the provisional answer to these questions will be taken up in a conceptual approach to transition. More precisely, this chapter aims to think ubuntu and the relations it makes possible *as* transitory. To think of ubuntu as transitory is not intended to exhaustively track ubuntu's persistent surfacing in South Africa's transition period (of which the TRC context is only one example), but rather to further investigate the conjunction of ubuntu with the notion of "transition." As was mentioned in Chapter 1, the idea of ubuntu as a convergence and negotiation of different interests is temporary, since interests are unlikely to stay the same over longer periods of time. Considering ubuntu's exclusionary potential, i.e. the ambivalent role it played in the TRC years and its potential use as a shibboleth, a focus on transition might prevent ubuntu from being used to consolidate (and close off) existing communities and instead help to forge new, more fluctuating and provisional ones – consisting either of people, texts or concepts – that cannot be predetermined.

Having said this, it may seem ironic that this chapter will be structured along the lines of what seems to be a predetermined itinerary. The sequence "baggage, transit, arrival" – which, like the scene with the Maqomas, is taken from Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* – reflects a journey, by aeroplane for instance, for which the time and place of departure, duration of the flight, possible transits, and arrival are (largely) predetermined. The structure of such a journey allows me to express my intention to read ubuntu outside of its TRC related context, which I have taken as my starting point in this dissertation, and to investigate some of the encounters (with other theories, objects and texts) that occur as a result of this itinerary. There is, however, no set destination. Instead, in what follows I will assess how such meetings might help in the construction of unexpected transitions and arrivals that diverge from those of more consolidated points of view about ubuntu.

In the transit sections of this chapter, each of which revolves around the analysis of a novel, two such itineraries will be discussed. The first section analyses the main proganist from *None to Accompany Me* (1994), Vera Stark, who befriends the Maqomas

from the opening scene during apartheid, while the second section focuses on Mrs. Curren from J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990). Neither narrative is about ubuntu in the strict sense of the word, but each is set in the transition period in South Africa and deals with some of the issues the changes associated with it raise with regard to the ways in which the protagonists, as white middle-class women, are used to deal with the people around them. They find that with political transition, the familiar relational organisation of their lives becomes either obsolete (as in the case of Vera Stark) or untenable (as in the case of Mrs. Curren).[2]

Even though *Age of Iron* was written before the end of apartheid and set during the State of Emergency, whereas *None to Accompany Me* clearly investigates a post-apartheid situation, the later novel will be discussed first. The treatment of *None to Accompany Me* in the first part of the transit section, where it will be linked to Manuel DeLanda's work on assemblages, allows me to further flesh out the idea of ubuntu as a context-dependent convergence of various interests, rather than a universal maxim. This novel thus introduces the possibility of thinking intersubjective and communal relations as clusters that change over time and that might have to be discarded in favour of new groupings – a notion that is complicated and refined by the analysis of *Age of Iron.*

Before the second transit section, however, I will refer back to the TRC's reliance on ubuntu in its envisioning of a new kind of community during the transition period from apartheid to a democratically oriented South African society. The use of ubuntu as a way of constructing a common past that needs to be recovered will be taken as a

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2 In the light of the discord between these two writers on the relation between aesthetics (specifically literature) and politics, some readers might be surprised to find them grouped in the same chapter. In *The Literature Police*, Peter McDonald lucidly explains that the main difference between Gordimer and Coetzee hinges on the role they ascribe to literary realism in a politically charged field. In the case of Gordimer, this role is based on a preoccupation with Lukácsian realism, which results in the interpretation of literature as a sub-discourse to the larger discourse of history, whereas Coetzee argues that "the anarchic and necessarily illimitable space of the literary" cannot be instrumentalised in any straightforward way. From Coetzee's perspective the emphasis on realism undermines literature's productive ability to create its own world, with its own rules (McDonald 210, 207-211). Apart from their differences with regard to the function of literature, however, their perspectives on relationality are particularly relevant for the topic at hand here. Since this chapter deals with the relevance of the notion of transition for the concept of ubuntu, however, it does not supply further room for a discussion of the considerable aesthetic debate between Gordimer and Coetzee. For an insightful analysis of this debate and its position in the broader developments and tendencies in the South African literary field, see McDonald, especially Part I, Chapter 3.

starting point for re-assessing ubuntu not as a future perfect, which would imply an attitude towards the future that constructs it as a specified location yet to be reached, but rather as a future anterior, which takes the unknowability of both past and future into account and looks for a basis of responsible action in these conditions of uncertainty.

The second transit section, then, discusses the difficulties of actively negotiating a convergence of interests, especially when these are not automatically or easily aligned. *Age of Iron* directly speaks to some of the problems that a "radical open-endedness" poses for the possibility to act responsibly for its protagonist, Mrs. Curren; it is exactly the lack of any notion of a common (discourse on the) past that problematises her relations with the people around her. Like Gordimer's novel, although perhaps more acutely, *Age of Iron* deals with the question of how a transition from one (set of) discourse(s) to another jeopardizes human relations, but allows room for change as well. Reading parts of this novel through Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the author-hero relation will further theorise the notion of open-endedness as well as the possibility of formulating some kind of response when uncertainty seems to be the only reliable aspect of living in South Africa's State of Emergency.

The final section in Gordimer's novel is called "arrival," but I have renamed it "arrival/departure" here in order to emphasise that arrivals (and conclusions) also always imply new journeys (and beginnings). In this concluding section I will tie the different strands of possible re-articulations of ubuntu together by describing how the different ways of looking at ubuntu brought up in this chapter interrelate and contribute to its reshaping. By doing so I hope to point out one of its possible new routes.

Transit I: Ubuntu as a Convergence of Interests in Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*

Gordimer's novel is set just before the first democratic elections in South Africa. The State of Emergency, the troubling and excessively violent juncture of the final years of apartheid, has come to an end, anti-apartheid movements have been unbanned, and political prisoners have been released. The country is preparing itself for drafting a new and groundbreaking constitution. Against this background, the novel centres on Vera Stark, who is successful and healthy, with two grown children and a husband who adores her. In addition, she has a couple of close friends and is respected by her colleagues at the law firm where she is a senior partner. Her subsequent financial independence as well as the fact that the Maqomas are her friends – an association

that posits her as an anti-apartheid sympathizer – serve her well in getting around and about (both spatially and socially) in the country after apartheid.[3] Instead of continuing to rely on her close personal ties, however, she increasingly invests herself in her job, removing herself from any kind of social life that is not related to work. The reader thus encounters an increasingly independent woman with a distinct sense of responsibility towards her job and what seems to be the momentum of the transition-phase in South Africa, but who hardly takes any responsibility towards her direct surroundings.[4]

Vera is first introduced to the reader when cleaning up some old papers. Vera comes upon a photograph that she sent to her husband when he was away at war. It was meant to inform him, rather coldly, of her new relationship with her lover Bennet:[5]

> Vera Stark, lawyer-trained and with the impulse to order that brings tidiness with ageing, came upon a photograph she had long thought thrown out with all she had discarded in fresh starts over the years. … What was written on the back of the photograph was not her message. Her message was the inked ring round the face of the stranger: this is the image of the man who is my lover. I am in love with him, I'm sleeping with this man standing beside me; there, I've been open with you. (3-4)

3 Although Vera Stark is clearly the protagonist in *None to Accompany Me*, parts of the book revolve, in minute detail, around the effect of change on the social and familial relations of the Maqomas. For the purpose of this analysis, however, I will focus on how Vera Stark creates "new" relations and will not consider her relation to the Maqomas beyond this point.

4 A number of Gordimer's heroines display similar characteristics and Dominic Head (in an article dating from 1995, written only one year after *None to Accompany Me* was published) suggests that Vera might very well be the last in this line of women for whom the key issue is "how a public role can be allied to personal needs and expression" (49). Other characters mentioned by Head are Helen Shaw from *The Lying Days*, Rosa Burger from *Burger's Daughter* and Hillela from *A Sport of Nature* (Head 53-4). Indeed, although traces of this type of heroine are detectable in Julie in *The Pickup* (2001) and Lindsay in *Get a Life* (2005), who both feel the need to start "new" lives, the conundrum of how to negotiate public and private seems to have shifted to how to negotiate individuality and responsibility to others on a less overtly political scale.

5 What war Vera's first husband was fighting is not specified. It is mentioned that Vera sells the house she obtains through the divorce after living in it for 45 years by the time apartheid is over, so she must have acquired it somewhere in the late 40s or early 50s. It is most likely, then, that her husband was drafted in the Second World War. For South Africa's military and strategic role in the allied war effort in World War II, see Beck (120-123).

The fact that Vera is described as someone who "throws out" things and makes "fresh starts" already suggests that she is capable, or considers herself to be capable of cutting ties. The use of the plural here furthermore implies that she has done so more than once. Vera's capability or perhaps need to make fresh starts, then, suggests a certain fluidity with regard to the relations in her life, which seems to be at odds, however, with the symbolic resonance of her last name. Etymologically, "stark" comes from the German word for strong and is also used to denote a sense of intense contrast, often related to unpleasantly sharp differences that are impossible to ignore. It thus implies a certain rigidity, stiffness and incapability to move (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Despite these associations of rigidity, the way Vera moves about is indeed rather fluid, especially with regard to the social boundaries presumably in place at the time she implies to her husband that she is leaving him, which can be deductively pointed out as somewhere in the late 1940s or early 1950s. Her husband, however, fails to understand her message: "Her husband had read only the text on the back. When he came home he didn't understand it was not to her" (4). As a result of the subsequent divorce, Vera ends up with the spacious house, which will be her base for the next forty-five years. She marries her lover Bennet after the divorce, but when her first husband comes round to collect his things, they sleep together one more time. Even though her first child is the result of that occasion, Vera fails to impart this piece of information to either her lover-now-husband Bennet or the biological father.

Vera's negligence with regard to taking the feelings of both of her husbands into account is significant. Over the course of the novel it becomes increasingly clear that Vera is peculiarly unconcerned about the people around her. While being involved in an extra-marital love affair during her second marriage, for instance, she does not once contemplate the effects this might have on her family. Only later, when she is older, does she realise she has completely missed out on her daughter's puberty because of her preoccupation with this affair. Besides not telling Bennet about it, she also does not take extensive precautions to hide it. In fact, when the affair makes her realize her sexuality is her own and cannot be claimed by anyone but herself, it fills her "with a sense of pride and freedom rather than betrayal" (63). When she eventually does start to see it that way, the affair ends only because her lover moves back to Germany.

The contrast with Vera's behaviour in her professional life is indeed stark. Being an irreplaceable cogwheel in the machinery of the legal foundation, she drowns herself in work, doing all she can to assist the people that appeal to her for help. When she hears on the radio that there have been skirmishes in the region where one of her clients lives, she drives out immediately to see if he is all right. When one of her colleagues is mortally wounded during a hijacking (in which Vera, too, sustains injuries) she

constantly visits him in his comatose condition and, after he succumbs to his injuries, drives out to his distant hometown to attend the funeral on behalf of the foundation. When she is invited to join the committee that will draft the new South African constitution, she hesitates because she feels she can be of more use at the foundation and is concerned it will function less efficiently without one of its senior staff members. She eventually accepts the position, while keeping up most of her work at the foundation, excluding any sustained form of social life that is not work-related.

Vera, increasingly involved in her work, speaks to Bennet less and less and they slowly drift apart, without Vera in the least attempting a transformation of her relation with her husband by involving him in her internal landscape. Instead, towards the end of the novel, she almost casually discards their life together. She bluntly sells the house while Bennet is staying overseas with her first-born son, who lives in London. The external narrative voice that dominates the novel describes their different attitudes towards the marriage as follows:

> Ben believes their marriage was a failure. Vera sees it as a stage on the way, along with others, many and different. Everyone ends up moving alone towards the self. (306)

Clearly, Vera considers her life to be a journey. The formulation of her thoughts about the marriage implies that she has to go through certain stages in order to reach her life's destination, a stage described by Louw, as noted in the Introduction, as "personhood." The phrase "along with others" could be interpreted as referring to these different stages, but also, in the light of the relationality implied by ubuntu, to other people. Vera's contention, however, that everybody moves towards the self "alone" implies that other people are a peripheral ("along") rather than an integral part of the stages on the way. Vera thus seems to simply detach herself from the relations that determine a particular phase in order to continue her journey towards another one.

This idea of people moving towards the self is also stressed by Antjie Krog, who, as we have seen in Chapter 1, replaces the word ubuntu with that of "interconnectedness-towards-wholeness," but leaves a central part of the concept of ubuntu intact, namely that relationality is inevitable if you want to realize the "full potential" of being human:

> Interconnectedness-towards-wholeness … is more than just a theoretical knowledge that all things in the world are linked, it means both a mental and physical awareness that one can only "become" who one is, or could be, through the fullness of that which is around one – both physical and meta-

> physical. [It is] a process of becoming in which everybody and everything is moving towards its fullest self, building itself; one can only reach this fullest self though, through and with others which include ancestors and universe. ("This Thing" 355)

With this definition, Krog significantly broadens the scope of relationality to both ancestors and the universe, and links the development of individual selves to a larger process of becoming in which "all things in the world are linked." As such, Krog's movement towards the self contrasts with that of Vera, who also focuses on this self as an end, but not on its integration with other developments. However, the subsumption of becoming, movement and process, whether alone or with others, to the attainment of a "fullest self" insinuates finality in both conceptions and, especially in Krog, belies an assumption that a self can, indeed, be whole. In both cases, the process of becoming whole implies a sense of linear development and predetermination that impedes the possibility to think of the formation of relations beyond the notion of progression.

On the one hand, Vera's focus on the self and her subsequent approach to the people around her, especially her negligence in communicating her decisions to those closest to her, which, in an ubuntu-inspired logic, concern them deeply, seem to be rather opportunistic and sometimes even cold. On the other hand, however, her attitude provides an alternative angle on what it means to relate to other people that includes the notion of terminating social bonds. Indeed, Vera's life, it seems, revolves around passing through several networks of people and forging relationships according to where she is located in her journey, rather than sticking to the people that she already knows and developing those relationships further.

A similarly contingent and pragmatic approach to relationality emerges from the work of Manuel DeLanda, especially his *A New Philosophy of Society* (2006). In this book, DeLanda argues that assemblages, "being wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts," can function as a model for all sorts of entities (5).[6] Societies, for instance, work in ways that are roughly similar to the solidifications of rock or the aggregation of molecules (see also DeLanda "Geology"). According to

[6] DeLanda, in using the term "assemblage," leans heavily on the work of Gilles Deleuze (and Félix Guattari), but aims to develop an assemblage theory that is not preoccupied with what DeLanda calls "Deleuzian hermeneutics." Instead he argues: "I give my own definitions of the technical terms, use my own arguments to justify them, and use entirely different theoretical resources to develop them" (3-4). Since this dissertation deals with the topic of ubuntu, there is no room to go into the Deleuzian notion of the assemblage or its precise relation to DeLanda's work here.

DeLanda, "persons always exist as part of populations within which they constantly interact with one another," a notion that resonates strongly with the position of the individual in ubuntu theory (32). DeLanda envisions interacting assemblages of social life from small (singular individuals) to larger levels (the nation state), in which small assemblages interact to form larger assemblages, which in turn interact with other assemblages to form yet bigger ones, and so on (5-6).

From this perspective, people appear as cogwheels in the larger whole of society, or even of the universe (there seems to be no limit to the size of an assemblage). Such an idea is also present in ubuntu, for instance in Tutu's claim that a person with ubuntu "has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole" and that any damage to any part of this whole automatically also damages the relationally bound person (35). It also resonates with Krog's contention that individual development towards the self takes place against the background of an all-encompassing "process of becoming" ("This Thing" 355). DeLanda's model, however, is more explicitly contingent:

> Conceiving an organism as an assemblage implies that despite the tight integration between its component organs, the relations between them are not logically necessary but only contingently obligatory: a historical result of their close coevolution [sic]. (11-12)

The emergence of assemblages, then, is dependent on the ways in which different components come together in space and time – a convergence of different components that is all but static. Unlike Tutu's conception of ubuntu, DeLanda's notion of the assemblage acknowledges that the relations that exist within the assemblage are not, despite their "tight integration," taken for granted and emphasises their changeability. Indeed, an assemblage can cease to exist altogether when one particular component falls away or even slightly changes its function within the whole – a change that also allows these components to merge into yet other assemblages.

This perspective is particularly illuminating with regard to Vera's contrasting behaviour in her personal and her professional life, which is mostly described in the transit section of the novel. This transition from one assemblage to the other is, however, not an exclusively solitary experience. Even though Vera considers herself to be on a journey by herself and even though she seems content to live in the large house alone when Bennet is in London, it is also a move towards participation in a larger community. After all, she becomes increasingly involved in the effort of reshaping South Africa during the phase of transition. In this sense, the increasing alignment

of Vera's personal development with South Africa as a society in the making suggests that both this society and Vera are working out new ways to relate to others that move away from the familial, at least the familial as Vera knows it.

One of the ways in which Vera manages to do this is reflected by her increasing closeness to one of her former clients, Zeph Rapulana. Their relation is described as containing a level of tranquillity, "neither sexually intuitive nor that of friendship" and as if "they belonged together as a single sex, a reconciliation of all each had experienced, he as a man, she as a woman" (122-3). Although they come from completely different backgrounds, they are also completely comfortable with each other:

> They sat in unnoticed silence for a while, closer in their difference than they might have been in agreement, with others. (261)

Contrary to what is suggested in this quote, however, the differences between them are only partially what seems to attract Vera to her newfound bond. It contrasts strongly with her relation of dependence with Bennet, who feels (and tells her) he cannot live without her. Vera, however, whose attraction to Bennet was sexual from the start, is filled with "a wave of anxiety" when she asks herself "what shall I do with that love?" (132). This is a question that does not arise in her bond to Zeph, a bond to which both Vera and Zeph come "from a base of sexual and familial relations to a meeting that had nothing to do with any of these" and which is described as extremely profound:

> Vera had never before felt – it was more than drawn to – involved in the being of a man to whom she knew no sexual pull. (123)

Along the lines of ubuntu, then, Vera feels fundamentally involved in Zeph's "being," yet, contra ubuntu, revels in her solitude when Bennet is in London, spending her evenings absorbing news bulletins:

> An exaltation of solitude would come over her. It was connected with something else: a freedom; an attraction between her and a man that had no desire for the usual consummation. (305-6)

As this quote suggests, Vera's comfort at releasing her familial and sexual ties and her joy of being by herself are not the only things that provide her with an exalted sense of freedom. It is the fact that she relates to someone else, in a *different* way than she is

used to, that rivets her. In an interview, Gordimer emphasises the importance of this alterity of the connection between Vera and Zeph:

> What I was looking at there [in the relation between Vera and Zeph] was the narrowness of the emotional connections that we know. We are born; we are children in connection with mother and father. We grow up; we make friends; we have that other relationship. We then have lovers; we then have husbands or wives. And you can count these relationships on the fingers of one hand. We regard that as the limit of what they can be. But just as the human brain, we are told, has possibilities that we don't use at all (we only use a very small part of it), who knows what other forms of human connections and emotions there may be? (Bazin and Gordimer 576)

Although Gordimer's repeated use of the word "we" raises questions with regard to who is assumed to be included in this description, it is the formation of relations beyond the familiar nodes of the familial and the sexual that is important here. Zeph and Vera are both described as coming from ties that are indeed familial and sexual, and both of them, especially Zeph, do not altogether relinquish those ties, but they find in each other something that is different from what they know about relating to others. In Zeph, Vera has found someone who is busy with his own development and goals (from schoolmaster to successful businessman) and who, from his own perspective, can relate to and needs Vera's inside perspective on emerging government policies. The historical co-evolution that brings Vera and Zeph together, to speak with DeLanda, cannot be predicted, but results in the growing closeness of their relationship because, as time wears on, their interests continue to and increasingly coincide in a way that deeply involves Vera and Zeph with each other.

As such, the novel, when read through DeLanda's theorisation of the assemblage, stages the opening up of possibilities of relating to others beyond the familiar forms of the sexual and the familial (although, as in many of Gordimer's narratives, not beyond the political). In contrast to the structure of the novel, there arises an image of Vera not as someone on a linear journey to the self with a starting point, a transition, and a designated end, but as someone who moves from assemblage to assemblage in a way that is perpetually transitory, only maintaining those ties that suit her interests best – interests that are, for a large part, simultaneously directed at the benefit of a wider community.

The final pages of *None to Accompany Me* underline this image of somewhat random movement, collision and subsequent detachment resulting in a fleeting grati-

fication. The novel ends after Vera has moved into the annexe of Zeph's house.[7] One night, she is in the house looking for pliers because one of the pipes in the annexe has burst. Because of the intense darkness, she accidentally collides, in the hallway, with a woman who is presumably Zeph's lover on her way to the bathroom. They remain standing "breast against breast, belly against belly" because neither wants to move in fear of acknowledging this somewhat uncomfortable meeting. Although it could just as well have been a sexual moment, the narrator makes clear that Vera has no such interest in the woman. Standing against the naked body of the other woman she cannot see feels like touching "an injured bird," "a living substance" (323). As in many instances in the novel, what this meeting feels like for the woman Vera touches is foreclosed by the persistent dominance of Vera's focalisation, through which the intimacy shared in this moment is described as their being "tenderly fused in the sap-scent of semen that came from her" (323). Significantly, then, the last image of Vera is staged just after a final confirmation of the fact that, for Vera, sex has nothing to do with her relation to Zeph, although the residual scent of his sexual activities is presented as the binding factor in the accidental meeting of the two women, rather than any sense of closeness (whether physical or not) between the women themselves.

The emphasis on Vera's general perception of the body as a "living substance" rather than a vehicle of sexual intimacy gives way to the final scene, in which Vera backs away from the other woman and goes back outside:

> Vera came out into the biting ebony-blue of winter air as if she dived into the delicious shock of it. … Cold seared her lips and eye-lids; the frosted arrangement of two chairs and table; everything stripped. … A thick trail of smashed ice crackling light, stars blinded her as she let her head dip back; under the swing of the sky she stood, feet planted, on the axis of the night world. Vera walked there for a while. And then took up her way, breath scrolling out, a signature before her. (323-4)

Both the solitude and the cold elicit excitement, even exaltation, in Vera, who is standing "feet planted, on the axis of the night world" in an image of closure and control. This cold, dark and solitary moment in the garden emanates a sense of pleasurable achievement and arrival because of the climactic image of Vera, who is, with her head dipped back, blinded by the stars. The description of Vera taking up her way after

7 Vera's move is a symbolical relinquishment of property, since the annexe on South African properties is often a small separate building that was traditionally used as the servant's quarter.

walking in the garden for a while, however, simultaneously alludes to the idea that this arrival is also a departure. Although the phrasing suggests that she knows where she is going, "to take up one's way" automatically implies a sense of direction (and obviously there is still a burst pipe flooding her house that needs her attention), the new possibilities implied by this departure are open-ended. On the one hand, the closing passage thus presents a scene of calm dominance, centrality and control, reflected in an active authoring gesture: "breath scrolling out, a signature before her." On the other hand, however, this breath signature is extremely fleeting and temporal, and underlines the fluid and evanescent nature of Vera's position.

The persistence of sexual references in the novel's closing, like the scent emanating from the woman in the hallway and the climactic depiction of Vera's solitude, seems to suggest that, despite the narrative's apparent insistence that relations can be shaped outside this familiar way of organising them, they continue to influence the formation of new ones. Although it is exactly the conception of a person's infinite capabilities to create new assemblages and make new connections that makes DeLanda's model constructive in relation to ubuntu, the novel's final staging of the persistence of old relations also makes clear that it is not sufficient to think of ubuntu merely as a convergence of different interests with a DeLandean fluidity, openness and contingency. Such a convergence of interest emerges from Vera's attitude towards her surroundings, especially towards her family and husband, as inevitably opportunistic, pushing a concept like altruism to the background and reducing social action to a pursuit of gratifying the needs of the self. What is more, the fact that any assemblage ultimately depends on which components come together and under what circumstances they do so, runs the risk of reducing the formation of any assemblage to its circumstances. This, in turn, complicates a recognition that relations can also be formed *despite* the specificities of their historical co-evolution and that these formations do not necessarily have to serve a specific purpose that is reduced to the function of the whole.

In other words, reading the idea of the assemblage in conjunction with the attitude of the protagonist from *None to Accompany Me* underlines the need to negotiate the way different interests come together, since these interests do not always align as automatically and fluently as they do in the case of Vera and Zeph. In the above, for instance, the convergence of interests is staged from the perspective and persistent focalisation of a woman in control; as a successful lawyer, Vera is provided with a "natural" social authority as well as with financial independence. In addition, her association with the Maqomas, who were mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, places Vera on the side of political allegiance in the country's past that is installed

in a position of power after the end of apartheid. This liberal association with anti-apartheid sentiment further ensures her manoeuvrability in the post-apartheid era.

In the novel I will discuss in the second transit section, on the other hand, the protoganist, Mrs. Curren, finds herself in a position of acute vulnerability towards her surroundings and has to deal with the complications of living in a present that is hostile to the relational norms and values that she holds dear. This leads to a re-evaluation of the way power seeps through Mrs. Curren's relations to the people around her, even if her attempts at shaping these relations are based on the best of intentions. In the discussion of Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, therefore, I will investigate the relational work involved in balancing different interests that do not automatically converge, as well as the role of power relations in the negotiations that do arise as a result. In order to think these aspects of ubuntu when it is approached from the perspective of transition, it will first be necessary to further excavate ubuntu's mediating role between the past and the future.

The Future Anterior: Ubuntu and the Mediation between Past and Future

Ubuntu's relation to the past is crucial for thinking about this term as a transitory negotiation of different interests. As I have mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, this is not merely the case because the notion of transition automatically invokes a starting point as well as a direction, but also because of the way ubuntu functioned in the period of transition in South Africa, more specifically in the context of the discourse of reconciliation and nation-building that emerged after the end of apartheid and from which it emerges as a mediation between the past and the future.

In his book *Complicities: Intellectuals under Apartheid*, Mark Sanders explains that ubuntu, with its emphasis on responsibility for and openness towards the other, fulfils a very specific role in periods of transition. In the transition from apartheid to democracy, he argues, ubuntu was consistently articulated in terms of its loss. For instance, the formulation of ubuntu in the passage from the interim constitution that would later become the legal basis for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as discussed in Chapter 1, "implies that reconciliation will come about not only when there *is* ubuntu, but when a state of ubuntu has been *restored*" (*Complicities* 120, emphasis in original). Similarly, Mrs. Ngewu's attitude towards the murderer of her son from which the notion of ubuntu as a negotiation of interests was first inferred in Chapter 1, is emphatically organised around the idea that the murder has not only robbed

Christopher Piet of his life, but has damaged or even completely destroyed the humanity of the other people involved. This includes Mrs. Ngewu herself, but also Christopher Piet's murderer, and their humanity has to be recovered through the act of forgiveness.

According to Sanders, this logic is characterised by the fact that a "time is posited when there *will have been* ubuntu" (*Complicities* 120). Ubuntu, then, refers to a past that is constructed in hindsight as an ideal and harmonious state that was interrupted by apartheid (and, in some conceptions, by colonialism) and projects this past into the future as in need of recovery:

> [T]he strength of the concept of ubuntu is its ability, by inventing memory in the future perfect, to generate stability at a time of transition and to stage recovery at a time of loss. (121)

Ubuntu thus manages to create both a common memory and a common purpose by staging this memory as an ideal state yet to be achieved. Despite the implications of fallibility, subjectivity and constructiveness that are related to memory, however, Sander's reference to this particular use of memory as invented in the "future perfect" implies a rigid stasis; it paradoxically refers to a future action that is already imagined, thus positing the future as a predetermined goal and end to which ubuntu forms the means.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses the imagining of the past in service of the future when she refers to the Sioux ghost dance in the context of her discussion of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.[8] The Ghost-Dance Religion emerged in response to the white expansion in North America at the end of the 19th century and is a circular dance intended to reunite the living with the spirits of the dead in order to achieve unity and peace amongst Native American Peoples. Spivak describes the Sioux effort as an attempt "to be haunted by the ancestors rather than treat them as objects of ritual worship, to get behind the ritual to make a common multinational figured past return through the ghostly agency of haunting so that a future can dictate action as if already there as 'before'…" (70). This turn to the past in order to find inspiration for the future in being haunted by it resembles Sanders' discussion of the function of ubuntu during moments of crisis, but, even more so than the semi-determinedness of the assemblage and Vera's journey, emphasises the possibility of an open end, both for the future and the past. Spivak writes:

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8 Spivak relies on the description of the Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890 provided by James Mooney in 1896.

> [T]he "end" of the ghost dance – if one can speak of such a thing – is to make the past a future, as it were – the future anterior, not a future present, as is the case with the "end" of most narratives of social justice. (70)

As in Sanders' description of ubuntu as a future perfect, the future present of "most narratives of social justice" employs the past in order to formulate one particular "end." The future anterior, however, revolves around the effort to compute "with the software of other pasts rather than [to] reference one's own hallucinatory heritage" (70).

Although both Sanders and Spivak claim that a past that is projected into the future was "not necessarily once present" and that a group of people's perception of a common past is an "invented memory," Spivak emphasises the importance of recognizing one's own past as constructed and imaginary (even "hallucinatory") and of trying to synchronise this past with other, alternative pasts, both one's own and that of others (70; Sanders, *Complicities* 121). Whereas Sanders' concept of ubuntu starts out from one common past, Spivak brings to the fore the necessity to include multiple pasts in a conception of the future. The "end" of the future anterior is thus a staging of the past (and the future) as open-ended rather than as already realized or, in the case of Sanders' analysis, as predetermined.

This emphasis on both the past and future as indeterminable and multiple is, according to Spivak, crucial:

> The ghost dance can never "work" as the guarantee of a future present. Yet it is the only way to go at moments of crisis; to surrender to undecidability (since the "agent" is the ancestral ghost, without guarantee) as the condition of possibility of responsible decision … (71)

Rather than opting for the stability of the future perfect (or present), the reliance on the undecidability of the anterior emerges – by deliberately seeking to be haunted – as "the condition of possibility for responsible decision." In the case of ubuntu's use in the TRC's discourse of reconciliation, this responsibility is reflected, not in the undecidability of the past and the future, but in the circumscribed, mapped out common goals located in this future. Likewise, the community that is to be realised through the exercising of ubuntu discourse in the TRC process – clustered around a unitary concept of the new South Africa – is determined in advance.

However, as became clear from Vera Stark's trajectory through different assemblages in South Africa's transition period, the way in which relations are formed and between whom they develop is in constant flux and depends on how different inter-

ests converge. I will further read this approach to ubuntu as a convergence of interests through Spivak's formulation of undecidability, which takes into account that both past and future can develop in unpredictable ways – a reading that aims to emphasise and put to use the relevance of temporality and changeability for the concept of ubuntu, while simultaneously thinking through what Spivak calls the possibilities of responsible decision.

Transit II: Embracing the Unknown in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*, which was first published in 1990, explores some of the effects of the undecidability of past and future on the construction of intersubjective relations and communities.[9] However, it does not do so through a staging or exploration of different versions of the past. On the contrary. Although the protagonist, Mrs. Curren, often remembers scenes and incidents from her own background and tries to imagine those of the other characters she comes into contact with, the possibility of thinking of any past, or combinations thereof, as a common denominator shared between the different characters is actively foreclosed. The background of most of the characters, even a considerable share of that of the main character, is unknown and can only be gleaned from how they interact with each other in the present. What is more, most characters actively resist disclosing their past. This makes a proverbial performance of a ghost dance as a group activity impossible, since the characters are explicitly dealing, each in their own way, with different, undisclosed "ghosts."

Instead, the novel shows, in extension of Spivak's suggestion, how complex the effort to synchronise the effects of alternative pasts with present discursive norms and values can be, whether these pasts and values are one's own or someone else's. At the same time, it stages a protagonist who manages to become part of a kind of community, which wells up from unexpected places and despite the unrelenting animosity between the characters. As such, *Age of Iron* provides a radically different setting from that of *None to Accompany Me*, where Vera, unlike Mrs. Curren, does not come up against any sustained resistance as the changes in her life take shape. Almost echoing Spivak's claim that "to surrender to undecidability" is "the only

9 *Age of Iron*'s publication year (1990) represents an important junction in South African history because even though Nelson Mandela's release from prison and the end of apartheid were announced on 2 February 1990, the political violence of the Emergency period had not disappeared and would continue to shake the public sphere for several more years (*South African History Online*).

way to go at moments of crisis," *Age of Iron* abounds with moments that express the distressing effects of contingency, disharmony, exclusion, and, most of all, indeterminacy. This pervasiveness of misunderstandings and conflict between the characters against the backdrop of chaos as the State of Emergency runs its course seems to suggest that, especially in times of great social upheaval and change, indeterminacy is omnipresent. One has to embrace it in order to relate to anything or anyone around one.

The title of the book, in its reference to Hesiod's myth about the Ages of Man, where the Iron Age is the final of five stages of civilisation, also suggests chaos. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the age of iron is characterised by turmoil, lawlessness, and depravation. Social contracts between parents and children, guest and host, and even comrades have ceased to exist: "when fathers and sons have lost all harmony / when relation of comrade to comrade fails, and of host to guest" (Hesiod ll. 183-4). This failing of familiar social bonds is, as will be discussed in what is to follow, central to the novel's treatment of the influence of undecidability on intersubjective relations. Hesiod's reference to comrades turning against each other is particularly pertinent in relation to South Africa's State of Emergency, during which the struggle against apartheid forked into complicated conflicts that went far beyond "pro" and "against," and where comrades could also turn out to be traitors.[10]

Against this backdrop of utter social chaos, Mrs. Curren, the protagonist and narrator of *Age of Iron*, is dying of cancer, for which she refuses treatment, apart from accepting increasingly large doses of painkillers from her physician. The body of the text consists of a long letter that Mrs. Curren writes during her final weeks, starting on the day she finds out about her terminal disease, and that she intends to forward to her emigrated daughter, but only *after* she dies. The epistle is thus a one-way conversation and the reader never learns whether the letter ever reaches its intended reader. The narrative is focalised exclusively through Mrs. Curren, whose experience is the centre of all action: minute descriptions of how she spends her time are alternated with lengthy ponderings and monologues directed at her daughter, all rendered in an intimate and confessional tone.

Because the reader, as Carrol Clarkson poignantly points out, *overhears* this confessional rendering of Mrs. Curren's final weeks, the amount of implied information is substantial (62). There is no way for the reader to gain access to any circum-

[10] As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, the State of Emergency was characterised by extremely violent social conflicts where it became increasingly difficult to discern warring factions, the biggest of which were represented by the government, the ANC and other UDF members, and the IFP. Informers were common in all organisations.

stances or perspectives beyond their description by Mrs. Curren. At the same time, however, the confessional and at times embarrassingly intimate tone of the address creates a relentless sense of voyeurism that can only be averted by not finishing the novel. On the one hand, the limited access on the part of the reader to Mrs. Curren's surroundings further enhances the chaos and indeterminacy of the setting, while the excessive openness of Mrs. Curren's thoughts, on the other hand, augments the distressing effect of witnessing, from up close, yet without being directly addressed, an oncoming death under excruciating social circumstances. In this way, the narrative technique foreshadows the novel's preoccupation with the desire to relate to what one cannot know and the problem of having to relate to what offends one's sensibility and relational convictions.[11]

One of the few things that are clear from the outset, is that the old, white classics professor stays on in her spacious suburban house with her cats and decides to continue living there until the end draws near. Apart from her domestic help Florence, she does not hire any help, medical or otherwise. It is also clear that although Florence has worked for Mrs. Curren for years, no love is lost between the two women. Their relation could be described as tense and laborious at best. This tension is further intensified when Florence, who lives in the domestic quarters on Mrs. Curren's property during the week, decides to bring her two small daughters there to protect them from the dangers of Guguletu township, which has turned into a battlefield.[12] Later on, her teenage son Bheki and his friend John join them and it turns out that Bheki, having fallen under John's influence, has become involved in the fighting going on in the township. Mrs. Curren is conflicted about offering shelter to the boys, especially to Bheki's arrogant and militant friend, but lets them stay on all the same. It becomes increasingly clear, however, that Mrs. Curren has completely different opinions on issues like violence and property than Florence and the two boys.

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11 For an account of the relation between physical disgust and *botho* (the Tswana variant of ubuntu) in Botswana, see Julie Livingston's insightful "Disgust, Bodily Aesthetics and the Ethic of Being Human in Botswana."

12 As Ena Jansen argues in "From Thandi the Maid to Thandi the Madam: Domestic Workers in the Archives of Afrikaans Literature and a Family Photograph Album," employing black women became increasingly expensive in the sixties because industrial expansion, the industrial minimum wage and the increased legislation on "influx-control" (which refers to the fact that black women were from the fifties onwards also obliged to carry passes and people employing "illegals" were fined). As a result, the layout of most homes also changed (113-4). Mrs Curren's property, from this perspective, is traditional in the sense that it still contains an out-building section. For an extensive treatise on servants in South African literature, and the role of Florence in *Age of Iron* in particular, see Jansen's forthcoming book *Soos Familie*.

One day, in the garden, John scolds a homeless man named Vercueil, who has unexpectedly taken up abode in the alleyway next to Mrs. Curren's house, for his incessant drinking.[13] Vercueil hits him and they get into a fight. The boys, teaming up, lash out at the older man already lying on the ground. They do not heed Mrs. Curren screaming down from the balcony for them to stop until Florence enters the scene and tells them off. When Mrs. Curren, enraged by the boys' behaviour, questions John's right to be in her garden, Florence insists that the boy is no ordinary stranger, but a visitor, cleverly playing into Mrs. Curren's notions of courtesy. The boys make it abundantly clear, however, that the underlying problem is not merely a question of hospitality, but of property and authority as well:

> "Must we have a pass to come in here?" said Bheki. He and his friend exchanged glances. "Must we have a pass?" They waited for my answer, challenging me. …
> "I did not say anything about passes," I said. "But what right does he [John] have to come here and assault this man? This man lives here. It is his home."
> Florence's nostrils flared.
> "Yes," I said, turning to her, "he lives here too, it is his home."
> "He lives here," said Florence, "but he is rubbish. He is good for nothing." …
> "He is not a rubbish person," I said, lowering my voice, speaking to Florence alone. "There are no rubbish people. We are all people together." (Coetzee 47)

By referring to the pass laws, Bheki conflates Mrs. Curren's exertion of authority over her garden with the menacing forms of policing associated with the apartheid system, thus turning her private actions into a more general political issue.[14] Bheki's question clearly challenges Mrs. Curren's right to decide who can and cannot stay

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13 Mrs. Curren's relation to this man, whom she first encounters on the day she receives the news of her terminal condition in the opening scene of the novel, will be discussed later on.

14 With the installation of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, which was passed in 1923, it became obligatory for all non-white males in South Africa to carry a pass with them at all times, in order to justify their presence outside of the homelands. The discriminatory effects of this law were further aggravated by the passing of the Pass Law Act in 1952, which broadened the obligation to carry a pass to all black persons over 16. Not being able to produce a pass could lead to imprisonment. Bheki's question has a particular sting because the protests against these laws were crucial in much anti-apartheid resistance. One of the protests against the pass laws escalated in the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960, where South African police opened fire on an unarmed crowd of protesters, killing 69 people (see Thompson, Beck, Ross, or *South African History Online*).

at the suburban property and implicitly challenges the notion of ownership that she relies on. Mrs. Curren's refusal to be associated with the pass laws, and her subsequent insistence that Vercueil should be left alone because he lives on the property and thus has as much right to be in her garden as Florence and her children, particularly enrages Florence ("Florence's nostrils flared"). Florence, who has lived in the house in the garden that was often used as the servant's quarters for years, is insulted that Mrs. Curren questions her right to determine who is a stranger and who is a guest. By describing Vercueil as rubbish, she implies that she has as much right to decide who belongs and who does not. Mrs. Curren's claim that "we are all people *together*" (emphasis mine), on the other hand, references a larger community of common humanity that is strongly reminiscent of the ubuntu-inspired notion of inherent relationality and seems to advocate equal rights for all to the suburban property, even if she has just questioned John's presence there. At the same time, as also became clear from the earlier discussions of the notion of humanity in ubuntu, the imposition of Mrs. Curren's humanitarian discourse paradoxically reflects an authoritative positing of precisely the moral standards that this positing is supposed to undermine. As a result, her appeal encounters opposition from the others, who, in the process of wresting the right to determine who to include in any notion of community from Mrs. Curren, violently exclude Vercueil from the category of respectable humanity.

The fact that Mrs. Curren, despite her appeal for inclusiveness, is also not considered to be part of this community becomes clear when she criticises Florence afterwards for not correcting the boys' violent behaviour in the garden, suggesting that this equals shirking her responsibilities towards them.

> "No," said Florence. "That is not true. I do not turn my back on my children." … "These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them." … I waited for her to say more. But there was no more. She was not interested in debating with me.
> Children of iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. The age of iron. … How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? … "We are proud of them." We. Come home either with your shield or on your shield. (50)

In this passage, Mrs. Curren clearly distinguishes between her own moral values and those embodied by Florence and her children. She compares them to iron, while lamenting the loss of the softer ages of clay and earth, thus combining the Iron Age from Hesiod's five stages of man with an almost mystical reference to an imaginary

circular temporality. From her privileged position as a white suburban dweller whose comforts are based on the violent oppression of others in the age that is coming to an end in the novel, however, such a lament for a return to former times comes across as ironic, since, as Mrs. Curren and Florence also discuss, it is the violence of apartheid that generates this reactionary violence in the children. As was the case with ubuntu as a future perfect in Sanders' work, then, Mrs. Curren, who disavows her complicity in apartheid by claiming the moral high ground in this conversation, projects a (mythical and imaginary) past as a desirable event in the future – a gesture that works against Spivak's observance that it is important to consider alternative pasts next to "one's own hallucinatory history" (70).

Florence claims, on the other hand, that Bheki and John are, in fact, "good children," fighting for their own rights and those of their community. Her assertion that "we are proud of them" furthermore suggests that they have the support, not only of Florence, but of an entire group, a "we" that does not share Mrs. Curren's opinion. Mrs. Curren wants to engage Florence in a conversation about the topic, but Florence, she notes, is "not interested in debating" with her. As she tells Vercueil, who somewhat unwillingly becomes her confidant, much later: "Florence does not even hear me. To Florence what goes on inside my head is a matter of complete indifference, I know that" (163). It is also clear, however, that Mrs. Curren wishes things were different. Mrs. Curren confesses that she seeks comfort in Florence's presence in vain: "What I want from Florence, I cannot have" (41). Despite the obvious hostility of Florence, however, who is described as "having an air of barely contained outrage about her," Mrs. Curren keeps on trying to overcome the rift between them (54).

This confession of Mrs. Curren's desire for rapprochement between her and Florence further elucidates the exact nature of their argument quoted above. Mrs. Curren's claim that Florence denies her something she wants to have is not based on the fact that they disagree. Instead, Mrs. Curren is so invested in the conversation because her conviction springs from an outrage with the system that she shares with Florence. Later in the novel, Mrs. Curren pinpoints this problem as follows:

> A crime was committed long ago. … so long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it. … Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name. I raged at times at the men who did the dirty work… but I accepted too that, in a sense, they lived inside me. So that when in my rages I wished them dead, I wished death on myself too. (Coetzee 164; see also Marais, *Secretary* 95 for this selection)

As this passage clearly shows, Mrs. Curren has an acute sense of her complicity in the repression of apartheid. As such, Mrs. Curren's claim to the moral high ground in her argument with Florence is deeply rooted in her disgust with the system, but is unable to transcend its repressive discourse and thus to gain acknowledgment of these sympathies from Florence.

This need to communicate, to be understood, to be recognized as another person suitable for conversation, but of being shut out by the hostility and indifference of the people around her, is also present in Mrs. Curren's interactions with the other characters that come into her life and take up abode in her house or garden, like the boys and the homeless Vercueil. Eventually and slowly, Mrs. Curren relinquishes authority over her property: "So this that was once my house … becomes a house of refuge, a house of transit" (136). As the use of the word "transit" suggests, she comes to realise that relations, whether to people or to places, are neither static nor organised around some sort of internal logic. Mrs. Curren is forced to acknowledge, to speak with DeLanda, the historical co-evolution of her own life with that of people she does not love and who do not love her, largely because of these selfsame historical circumstances.

When John is seriously injured because a van (supposedly driven by the security police) chases him down the street where he is cycling and he crashes, she tries to provide first aid and makes sure he is brought to hospital, although her dislike for him is overwhelming. Visiting him in the hospital later in order to try to talk some "sense" into him, she remarks again that he leaves her cold:

> I did not like him. I do not like him. I look into my heart and nowhere do I find any trace of feeling for him. As there are people to whom one spontaneously warms, so there are people to whom one is, from the first, cold. That is all. (77)

This is a radically different position from the one that Vera Stark starts out from. Her relationship with Zeph is based on her immediate interest in him and a sense of profound involvement in his being. Despite her dislike for John, however, Mrs. Curren still tries to get through to him about the damage war can do, relying on a sense of common humanity that needs to be respected despite animosity:

> "If you had been in my Thucydides class," I went on, "you might have learned something about what can happen to our humanity in time of war. Our humanity, that we are born with, that we are born into." (80)

Notwithstanding the good intentions of this little lecture, it shows that Mrs. Curren's appeal to a common humanity is, to a certain extent, absurd. How would John ever have been able to attend one of Mrs. Curren's classes in the first place? Has John not just experienced first hand, after being chased down and sustaining a serious head injury as a result, what war is doing to *his* humanity? Mrs. Curren's reliance on a common humanity, which bears a remarkable resemblance to the respect for common humanity present in ubuntu, and her insistent attempts at realizing some sort of understanding between them is effectively patronizing because it disregards the distribution of power relations in the circumstances under which she is trying to relate to John.

Similarly, the many conflicts that structure the relation between Mrs. Curren and Vercueil lend visibility to the issue of how one can relate to other people if one's assumptions about ethical and responsible behaviour are undermined by them. As Derek Attridge points out in his authoritative work on ethics in Coetzee's writing, Vercueil is "unaffected by the obligations of human relationship or community; a man so removed from the structures of social and political life that he even appears to have escaped the grid of racial classification on which apartheid rests" (95). Although this is not entirely accurate – John and Bheki's fight with Vercueil arises after the boys accuse him of being a drunkard who could spend his time better ("They are making you into a dog!" (45), a phrasing that suggests that he is, like Bheki and John, also pitted against a "they" and thus probably not white (see also Attridge 95 n4)) – his detachment from the social structures and obligations that seem to affect the other characters is indeed remarkable.

In a particularly telling scene, Vercueil abandons the gardening job Mrs. Curren suggests he does for her in exchange for money. In offering him the job, she assumes that this will serve both of their interests; Mrs. Curren cannot tend her garden anymore and Vercueil is in obvious need of funds. When she pays him for the little work done and suggests he has to do something to earn his money because they "can't proceed on the basis of charity" (21), Vercueil reacts as follows:

> Taking the notes, folding them, putting them in his pocket, looking off to one side so as not to look at me, he said softly, "Why?"
> "Because you don't deserve it."
> And he, smiling, keeping his smile to himself: "Deserve… Who deserves anything?"
> Who deserves anything? In a quick fury I thrust the purse at him. "What do you believe in then? Taking? Taking what you want? Go on: take!"

> Calmly he took the purse, emptied it of thirty rand and some coins, and handed it back. Then off he went, the dog jauntily at his heels. In half an hour he was back; I heard the clink of bottles. (21)

Mrs. Curren's assumption that giving Vercueil a job in her garden would represent a convergence of their interest is at loggerheads with her statement about the other garden scene invoked earlier, where she makes the egalitarian claim that "we are all people together." The implication of Mrs. Curren's behaviour towards Vercueil here is that apparently charity, rather than being a completely altruistic act, has its limits and has, at one point, to be replaced by a system of exchange which serves the interest of both parties. By refusing both her charity (which is based on giving) and her proposition of labour (based on exchange), Vercueil effectively refutes Mrs. Curren's "authoring" of him as a homeless man in need and counters the racialised dominant discourse of exchange that underlies her reasoning: a (presumably non-white) man is being paid for his services by the white lady of the house. As Mike Marais points out, "in reducing Vercueil to a term in a power relationship, Mrs. Curren does the same to herself" (*Secretary* 100). As such, the scene does not merely represent the view that power relations under apartheid debase all of its citizens, but that the individual, by being acted upon by historically determined relations, is inspired to deform him/herself (Marais, *Secretary* 100). Again, as in the case of Mrs. Curren's relation to John, her interaction with Vercueil suggests that she seems unable to escape the norms and values attached to the discourse that formed her and these norms, even though they are well intended in this case, still oppress the people to whom she communicates her convictions.

Mrs. Curren is, however, quick to realize what is going on; she immediately confronts Vercueil with the question: "What do you believe in then?" As usual, however, Vercueil does not verbally respond when Mrs. Curren addresses him. Indeed, throughout the novel, he hardly ever speaks of his own accord, does not really answer any questions and replies to Mrs. Curren's extensive monologues with short remarks that trigger her into yet more digressions and confessions. Mrs. Curren is not even sure Vercueil is his actual name (Coetzee 37) and the name she knows him by sounds a lot like "*verskuil*," which means "hidden" or "concealed" in Afrikaans, as has been duly noted by several critics (Marais, "Standpoint" 236; Parry 153; Attwell 176).[15] As such, Vercueil seems to actively guard himself against her inquisitions.

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15 Naming is also an issue in Mrs. Curren's relation to the other characters. She is sure, for instance, that "Florence" is not Florence's real name, and this observation is extended to

In a more general analysis of silent characters in Coetzee's fiction, Benita Parry suggests that because the narrative authority in *Age of Iron* lies exclusively with Mrs. Curren, and "discursive skills" are withheld from the dispossessed characters in the novel, the classic colonial distribution of narrative voice, "where voice is correlated with cultural supremacy and voicelessness with subjugation," is reiterated (158). In this way, Parry argues, Coetzee fails to address the conditions of oppression that inflict this silence on people. In the case of Vercueil, however, this is not entirely accurate. The fact that Vercueil speaks very little does not mean he does not have communicative agency in the novel. As the interaction about the garden job explicitly shows, Vercueil is perfectly capable of making a point in the face of Mrs. Curren's claims to the moral high ground. As such, I tend to agree with David Atwell, who has responded to Parry's argument by claiming that something else, besides the subjugation of the voiceless, is at stake in the character of Vercueil, namely that "there is also a minor polemic about how alterity is to be weighed and understood in context" (Attwell 170). Indeed, Vercueil's silence and reticence, from this point of view, opens up discussion as to what it means or can mean to write about others as we try to relate to them. A discussion that is all but minor considering Vercueil's central role in the novel.

In order to further investigate Mrs. Curren's authoring gesture in relation to Vercueil's relative silence, I will turn to a text by Mikhail Bakhtin, who, in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," written in the early 1920s, lays out a model of the relation between the author of a text and the main character which is subsequently broadened in scope to self-other relations in general. Bakhtin's approach hinges on the impossibility of creating a complete picture of oneself. He states, for instance, that:

> [A] person suffering does not experience the fullness of his own outward expressedness in being; he experiences this expressedness only partially,

Florence's little girls and to John. The only name she seems to be certain of is that of Florence's son Bheki, whose charm she prefers over John's moroseness. As I will discuss in relation to the issue of naming in Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* in Chapter 3, to avoid using a person's given name is a marker of respect in some African cultures, like Zulu culture (see De Kadt). Although replacing "African" names with more "European" ones because they are often difficult to pronounce for people who do not speak the language is common (see Jansen 103), in the case of Florence and her children it seems to function more as a marker of Mrs. Curren's exclusion from the community defined by Florence. Given the fact that Mrs. Curren likes Bheki best, naming here can be equated with sympathy and belonging. Paradoxically, however, Mrs. Curren's daughter remains unnamed throughout the novel.

> and then in the language of his inner sensations of himself. He does not see the agonizing tension of his own muscles, does not see the entire, plastically consummated posture of his own body, or the expression of suffering on his own face. He does not see the clear blue sky against the background of which his suffering outward image is delineated for me. (25)

There are certain parts of the subject – and it must be emphasised that Bakhtin is speaking about the body as the representation of how someone exists in time and space and that he prioritises the importance of seeing "the entire package," so to speak, over the psychological and emotional functions of this body – that remain inaccessible to it. For instance, I cannot see my own face or the expression on it and I cannot see how I exist in relation to what is around me in a spatial and temporal sense.

In other words, because I cannot see myself in my spatial and temporal context, I am not able to form an image of myself that exceeds the realm of "our creative imagination… our dreams or fantasies about ourselves" (Bakhtin 28). In line with Spivak's insistence that one needs to get beyond one's own hallucinatory past, the subject is, for a more complete picture of the self, dependent on the other as a person who can see you the way you yourself cannot. This "excess of seeing," then, is what leads people to seek contact with others.

> In short, we are constantly and intently on the watch for reflections of our own life on the plane of other people's consciousness, and, moreover, not just reflections of particular moments of our life, but even reflections of the whole of it. (Bakhtin 16)

Only by the impression I make on others and how this impression is reflected in *their* "outward expressedness of being" (which I can see, but they themselves cannot) can I reciprocally gather information about my own place in the world. As Mrs. Curren writes to her daughter:

> Six pages already, and all about a man you have never met and never will. Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written. (Coetzee 9)

This notion of writing, and the return to the private sphere in which Mrs. Curren reflects on the events of the day as she lives through them, is a crucial aspect of Bakhtin's model:

> After looking at ourselves through the eyes of another, we always return – in life – into ourselves again, and the final, or, as it were, recapitulative event takes place within ourselves in the categories of our own lives. (17)

Failing to return to "the categories of one's own life" would suggest, for Bakhtin, an overdetermination of the self by the other, resulting in a catastrophic finalisation and complete "consummation" of the subject's capability to act:

> If I am consummated and my life is consummated, I am no longer capable of living and acting. For in order to live and act, I need to be unconsummated, I need to be open for myself – at least in all the essential moments constituting my life; I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be, someone who does not coincide with his already existing makeup. (13)

Bakhtin refers to this crucial argumentation for the importance of openness (both with regard to others and to oneself) in other terms when he speaks of elements in life that are *given* and elements that are set as a *task*. Open-ended life, so to speak, is always set as a task; it is directed towards what is yet-to-be, which, in the case of Bakhtin, resembles a future anterior more than a future perfect, since a reiteration of an already lived past would imply a coincidence with our given. This is why, for Bakhtin, as Ann Jefferson points out, "death is a form of aesthetic finalisation of the personality" (Bakhtin qtd. in Jefferson 158). According to Jefferson, however, Bakhtin's theory of the hero requires too passive an attitude from him/her. She finds it hard to believe that the hero would not be filled by a desire to revolt, "to refuse to play the role of hero" (Jefferson 158).

The agency Jefferson ascribes to the fictionalised hero is an important point to raise in the context of *Age of Iron*, even if it results in a conflation of the author-hero and other-subject models that Bakhtin takes considerable pains to avoid.[16] Through this framework we can read the scene about the garden job as an act of resistance

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[16] Bakhtin is strict in his distinction between the different planes of what he calls "the ethical, social event of life" (10) and that of the fictional work: "… the whole of the author and the whole of the hero belong to different planes – different in principle; the very form of the relationship to an idea and even to the theoretical whole of a world view is ignored" (9-10).

on the part of Vercueil to the dominant discourse with which Mrs. Curren delimits and consummates Vercueil's potential to be otherwise from Mrs. Curren's authoring of his character from the outset of their acquaintance. Vercueil emphatically resists being authored as an odd-job man whose services Mrs. Curren can buy as it suits her. As Bakhtin's model suggests, however, one cannot help being authored to a certain extent, since every person relies on the reflection of the self in others.

Indeed, Mrs. Curren writes all sorts of things about Vercueil in her letter, but Vercueil, by his evasive behaviour, significantly complicates her attempts at gauging his Bakhtinian "outward expressedness of Being." Certainly, this reticence makes it difficult for her to articulate a response to Vercueil; she sees him against his temporal and spatial background, but his unresponsive body closes itself off from interpretation. He is literally unauthorable in the Bakhtinian sense, although his reluctance to reveal himself simultaneously enables Mrs. Curren to impose her own imagined inscription on him. In her letter to her daughter, she reserves a symbolic language for the vagrant, including that of the angelic, animalistic, and mythic, and she makes repeated references to Virgil's *Aeneid* when she is talking about herself in relation to Vercueil (see especially 85 and 192).[17]

Vercueil's unauthorability returns us to Atwell's remark that *Age of Iron* contains a polemic about alterity that involves the question of "how alterity is to be weighed and understood in context" (170). As became clear from the above, the extreme and differentiating circumstances of South Africa's State of Emergency during the 1980s as represented in *Age of Iron* severely complicate the issues of what is "right" and what is "wrong," which discourses are considered "valid" and which are not. As a result, there is no common interpretation of the past to fall back on that prescribes which forms of relationality are to take precedence over others – an undecidability that is emphatically underlined by the disagreements between Mrs. Curren and Florence and her children, and further aggravated by Vercueil's apparent desire to remain unfathomable and thus other. Because Vercueil resists Mrs. Curren's interpretation, he also complicates, besides the image she tries to form of herself, the norms and values of the society that has shaped her. In line with Spivak's argument, the attitude of the

17 All of these references are already present in the stunning opening scene of the novel, where Mrs. Curren, returning from the doctor's office with the devastating news of her terminal cancer, finds Vercueil in the alley next to her house. She describes him as an "annunciation," but also as "the first of the carrion birds" (5) with "carious fangs" (3). The animalistic references will, as the novel progresses, come to include, amongst others, comparisons to insects and dogs (14, 56). The description of Vercueil as a "derelict" in the opening pages (4) eventually flows into Mrs. Curren description of herself as Circe (85) and Vercueil as a shipwrecked sailor, possibly Aeneas (186).

characters to which Mrs. Curren tries to relate suggest that there are several interpretations and versions of the past over which one can bicker, but Vercueil's resistance to the Bakhtinian excess of seeing suggests, more radically, that access to such a historical context is foreclosed altogether. As such, the character of Vercueil presents Mrs. Curren with a fundamental problem of undecidability, not only concerning her own past and that of the people around her, but also with regard to how the discourses about these pasts could possibly teach her how to behave towards them in the present.

Gradually, this is what Mrs. Curren learns to see. The circumstances of her final weeks, in which her physical pain increasingly prevents her from going about her daily life, force her to rely on and give in to the unpredictable and unreliable course of events that exceed her control. Against her wishes, Mrs. Curren, as an elderly and seriously ill woman who lives alone in a large house with a garden, needs some sort of caretaker and companion in the face of death. Vercueil can resist all he wants, but remains, basically, someone in need of shelter. The quiet alley next to Mrs. Curren's house, which does not have a dog in it and thus is less hostile to the vagrant than other properties, happens to be perfect for his needs. As such, Mrs. Curren and Vercueil come to some sort of understanding in which they provide for each other's needs as the narrative progresses. Likewise, Mrs. Curren's garden and servant's quarters offer protection to Florence and her children when circumstances force them to leave the townships, a fact that Mrs. Curren will have to accept if she is to keep Florence in her service.

From the perspective of ubuntu as a convergence of interests, the relations that evolve in the novel exist only because they are "contingently obligatory" (DeLanda 11). This tiny and unlikely community is based on the characters' fortuitous positions in and around the suburban house, and emerges because of that proximity. The longer the characters share the particular space of Mrs. Curren's property, the more they succeed in negotiating and aligning their needs, and the more they enter into some sort of interaction (even if unwillingly). The repeated conflicts over issues of authority in this community, which are entwined with the political struggle of the Emergency era, force Mrs. Curren to re-evaluate her norms of relation in favour of a more pragmatic bond to her surroundings.

The fact that Mrs. Curren does not merely negotiate this situation from a pragmatic perspective, however, is obvious when she writes to her daughter as follows:

> One must love what is nearest. One must love what is to hand, as a dog loves. (Coetzee 190)

Mrs. Curren increasingly starts to direct her capability to love to the people who are near her, rather than to those who are similar to her or who she feels "belong" to her. Although she does not altogether relinquish it, Mrs. Curren stops relying on her daughter's affection, which is permanently located on the other side of the Atlantic and invests increasingly in her relation to Vercueil. This idea that love is related to location, even if this location is hostile, forms, one could say, the basis of Mrs. Curren's growing desire for indiscriminate love as an erasure of inequality between people. By referring to this localised perspective on love in terms of a dog's love, the narrative, at this point, closely relates to Emmanuel Levinas' description of the dog that accompanied him when he was detained during the Second World War:

> And then, about half way through our long captivity, for a few short weeks, before the sentinels chased him away, a wandering dog entered our lives. One day he came to meet this rabble as we returned under guard from work. He survived in some wild patch in the region of the camp. But we called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men. (Levinas qtd. in Herron 467-8)

As Tom Herron points out, the enthusiastic response of the dog towards the inmates confirms their humanity in a way that their subordinate social position as Jews did not allow for. As such, it is the reference to the animalistic, more specifically to the dog, that makes visible Mrs. Curren's renewed opinions on how she wishes to relate to her surroundings, which, besides including the fluctuating influence of the contingent, also refers to the need to involve non-human beings in notions of relationality.

Although much has been written about the relation between animals and ethics in the work of J.M. Coetzee, especially in relation to *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *The Lives of Animals*, this perspective is still somewhat neglected in interpretations of *Age of Iron*. Since the space of this chapter does not allow for a detailed analysis of the interrelation between these themes, I will restrict myself to claiming that the image of a dog's love functions as a crucial sign of Mrs. Curren's increasing reliance on undecidability and the emergence of community in unlikely places, which lies at the heart of the novel. The fact that the novel is a letter composed by Mrs. Curren to her daughter, which she only intends to have mailed for her after she dies, initially seems to foreclose further dialogue, since the daughter will not have the chance to respond to her mother's parting notes. However, this is not a matter of enforcing her dying perspective on

her daughter, even if Mrs. Curren has a particular point to make with the letter. Before she passes on, Mrs. Curren brings her insights, which have been forged by an unrelenting questioning in the dying days of apartheid by the people around her, into practice. She asks Vercueil, the phlegmatic and unreliable drifter, to function as a messenger and to post the letter to her daughter after she dies. As Mrs. Curren herself remarks: "Why this crooked path to you?" (82). After all, she is extremely aware that even if he says yes, Vercueil will do whatever he pleases, especially after she is gone:

> He will make no promise. And even if he promises, he will do, finally, what he likes. Last instructions, never enforceable. (32)

Then why ask him anything? According to Attridge, it is a matter of trust (98). Indeed, Mrs. Curren seems to rely on what, in a Derridean line of thought, could be called absolute trust. If one is sure the trust is placed in the right place, it is not trust. Trust can only be given when someone cannot be relied on. Mrs. Curren, the undeterred classics professor, tries to transmit to her daughter one last lesson, namely that, as Attridge notes, trusting the other is "to put the relationship to the other under the rubric of the future," in a way that cannot be programmed and embraces what cannot be known (104):

> If Vercueil does not send these writings on, you will never read them. You will never even know they existed. A certain body of truth will never take on flesh: my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place. …
> If not, there is no trust and we deserve no better, all of us, than to fall into a hole and vanish.
> Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him. (Coetzee 129-30)

But if Vercueil can, indeed, not be trusted, then the transition Mrs. Curren has lived through and witnessed during her final weeks has turned out to be useless and her truth – how she lived in these times, in this place – will not matter. The small community, forged through contingency and despite animosity, will come to naught and there is no lesson to learn.

The fact that Mrs. Curren's daughter is unwilling to return to South Africa until apartheid has come to a violent end (she will come back only when apartheid supporters are hanging from the lampposts to dance in the streets (75)) constructs her return as a future perfect, rather than as a future anterior; it will only take place under conditions that have been specified in advance. This way, the daughter forecloses any

possibility of witnessing a peaceful transition. The apparently tiny gesture of asking Vercueil to post the letter thus turns out to be, in fact, a dramatic expression of hope for an alternative future for South Africa: if the undecidable cannot be trusted, if, in moments of crisis, past and future are predetermined and foreclosed, then there is no "condition for responsible decision" with regard to the community yet to be developed.

Despite this ethical gesture, however, the novel remains ambiguous to the end:

> Vercueil stood on the balcony staring out over a sea of rustling leaves. I touched his arm, his high, peaked shoulders, the bony ridge of his spine. Through clattering teeth I spoke: "What are you looking at?"
> He did not answer. I stood closer. A sea of shadows beneath us, and the screen of leaves shifting, rustling, like scales over the darkness.
> "Is it time?" I said.
> I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. ... He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had. (198)

This closing passage can be read as Mrs. Curren's final moments. When the screen of leaves covers the darkness, Mrs. Curren wonders if her time has come. The reference to the tunnel suggests oncoming death as well. Finally, in an intimately violent yet tranquil scene, Vercueil seems to squeeze the life out of Mrs. Curren. Her final remark that the embrace does not warm her, however, implies that even though she has learned to accept undecidability, this embrace is not necessarily benevolent, or pleasing. The coldness that pervades the closing scene (clattering teeth, cold sheets, no warmth) seems to suggest that an embrace, and in extension, the formation of a community, can just as easily be cold or opportunistic.

Thus, *Age of Iron* traces an old woman's last weeks during South Africa's State of Emergency, surrounded by hostility, unreliability and chaos. The protagonist learns to relinquish the mores and values she grew up with in favour of a more open stance towards the people who have contingently collected around her. During this process, it becomes clear, however, that, no matter her attitude, her interpretations and significations of the world around her remain inscribed not only with the authority of her past social status, but with the colonising gesture of interpretation itself. Vercueil's

resistance to Mrs. Curren's authoring, for instance, makes visible aspects of intersubjectivity that are pushed to the background in ubuntu as a discourse of reconciliation, namely that the subject, at the price of interaction, can bridle at the prospect of being authored or included and can refuse to comply with being interpellated by whatever system imposing itself. As Bakhtin acknowledges in the excess of seeing model described above, it is necessary to return to "the categories of our own lives" if our open-endedness is not to be consumed by the perspective of the other (17). This is true both for Vercueil and for Mrs. Curren. However, Vercueil's response underlines the importance of power relations and the fact that authority is as much a part of intersubjectivity and ubuntu as, for instance, an altruistic yet possibly patronizing reliance on the idea of common humanity. This is emphasized even more explicitly by John's continuous hostility towards Mrs. Curren. He openly rejects any opinion Mrs. Curren might have on anything, casting her as an unequivocal exponent of the apartheid system that has made Mrs. Curren's life possible (and his impossible) for so long.

In this way, the disruptions, misunderstandings and conflicts in the relations between the characters in this novel greatly complicate the centrality of the assumption in most thinking on ubuntu and in Bakhtin's model that it is possible to know the other, or even to remotely estimate what others need. The characters in *Age of Iron* come from such completely different backgrounds that the notions of a common past, as explicated by Sanders in relation to ubuntu, and of a communication of alternative pasts, as suggested by Spivak, are complicated. Nonetheless, the fact that all characters find themselves in a certain place, at a certain time, together, underlines Mrs. Curren's ubuntu-inspired claim that they "are all people together," whether they like it or not. As the novel progresses, they all have an interest in their co-evolution and more or less learn to align their needs. They must resign themselves to relate to what is nearest in order to coexist in "livable" ways.

In her dealings with the people around her, Mrs. Curren learns that in order to negotiate the different interests at stake, she has to rely on what Spivak suggests is paramount in moments of crisis, namely the undecidable. Entrusting her parting words to the unreliable Vercueil and yielding to his embrace leads to the greatest certainty yet uncertainty of all: death. The question remains whether her death indeed sets in motion the dramatic ethical gesture directed at her daughter and, by implication, the readers of Coetzee's novel.

Arrivals/Departures: Ubuntu as an Open End

In this chapter I have tried to extend my reading of ubuntu as a convergence of a set of different interests as it came to the fore in the previous chapter by analysing how the transition from one (set of) discourse(s) to another influences the ways in which the protagonists in Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* and Coetzee's *Age of Iron* relate to their surroundings. This reading, although it is dependent on the use of ubuntu in the context of the TRC, tries to construct an interpretation of ubuntu that prevents a reiteration of consolidated points of view aimed at achieving delimited goals. More specifically, this chapter has taken the backdrop of transition, of which the TRC's ubuntu discourse forms a significant part, as a starting point from which ubuntu as a convergence of interest can be developed.

Through my reading of the case of Cynthia Ngewu in the previous chapter, it came to the fore that Mrs. Ngewu's attitude towards the perpetrators that killed her son was, although decidedly admirable, also partly infused with the discourse of reconciliation that her statement, in turn, helped to construct. Her demonstration of forgiveness thus represented a subsumption of her incommensurable responses and needs to a broader set of interests, namely that of national reconciliation in South Africa after apartheid. Zapiro's cartoon, moreover, foregrounded the attempt to bridge this gap of incommensurability by the work of ubuntu. The reading of ubuntu as a convergence of interests is meant to reflect how this process might work: the interests of several people come together at a particular moment in time, forming a moment of ubuntu in which both the interests and needs of the individual and that of other individuals or the community in which it exists, wants to exist, or imagines it will exist, are met.

As is suggested by Manuel DeLanda's theory about the assemblage, though, such a confluence is necessarily temporary. At a certain moment, the different interests will stop adding up and the different particles that make up the assemblage will change, fall away, and form new assemblages. Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* presents the reader with a protagonist who lives her life in just such a confluent way. On the one hand, Vera seems to become peculiarly detached from the people who one normally would consider closest to her. On the other hand, however, she moves away from one social assemblage in favour of another in order to engage in important political work that ultimately is meant to benefit a wider community. In this sense, Vera seems to be driven by historical necessity. In the process, she finds profound ways to relate to others besides the possibilities offered by her familial and sexual relations.

In this sense, thinking of ubuntu as a convergence of interests opens up an interpretation of the concept that counters the presentation of ubuntu as a future perfect,

in which the insistent reference to ubuntu and common humanity as "lost" posits it as a reference to an idealized past and the need to recover it as a projection of this past into the future. Spivak's reference to the Sioux ghost dance suggests that such a unifying approach to past, present, and future closes off the possibilities of what she calls a "responsible decision." By curtailing past and future, their valuable undecidable and indeterminate factors, which can lead to new, other ways of living, and that prevent the subject from coinciding, in Bakhtinian terms, with their given, are lost. During moments of crisis, however, ubuntu's use as a future perfect crucially creates social stability at a time when most frames of reference come to stand on shaky ground.

Coetzee's *Age of Iron* presents the reader with a balancing act that is the result of these two different attitudes towards the future. On the one hand, as is the case with Florence, the ossification of communal boundaries that persistently exclude Mrs. Curren, seems to be the result of a clear sense of the past, present, and future situation in South Africa. Despite Mrs. Curren's continuous attempts at rapprochement, or, at the very least, at starting a dialogue, Florence continues to place Mrs. Curren on the side of the system that so rigidly and structurally disenfranchises Florence and her family. Even when Mrs. Curren slowly starts to see, as a consequence of the continuous conflicts with the people around her, that her views on relating to others are associated with discourses of oppression, and are, as such, not considered as viable for engagement by them, a dialogue with Florence remains foreclosed. On the other hand, however, the novel also shows that animosity can be redefined towards a feasible relationality despite chaos, conflict, and the impossibility of access to a common past. This is the case with Mrs. Curren's relation to Vercueil, which takes the shape of a complete reliance on undecidability. Mrs. Curren will never really "know" who Vercueil is, where he came from, or whether he will be around when she wakes up in the morning. Nor can she be sure that he will post her letter after she dies, but she learns to rely on him and they do find a way of living that seems to suit both their needs.

Age of Iron also presents an important refinement of Spivak's notion of the future anterior: the ability, need or desire to communicate with other perspectives on the past besides one's own interpretation of it is actually dependent on social privilege. From a structurally marginal social position, like that of Florence and her family, a strategic circumscription of moral values and the relations formed around them can be of vital necessity in formulating resistance to oppressive discourses. *Age of Iron* is thus indeed centred on the problem of undecidability, but this undecidability only seems to thwart the protagonist's familiar attempts to relate to her increasingly alienating surroundings and does not seem to be on either Florence's or Vercueil's agenda, who seem to seek

out alienation as way to effect resistance. This resistance remains sketchy, however, since the narrative technique of the novel forecloses an analysis of their perspectives.

The problem of alienation is much less of an issue for the main character of *None to Accompany Me*. Vera's authority is never challenged and even, although temporarily, enhanced at the close of the book. Whereas Mrs. Curren literally embraces undecidability as she moves closer to death after realizing that this is the only way in which she can negotiate the different interests at stake, and thus relinquishes her role as an authoring instance, Vera Stark, standing firmly on the axis of the world, actively seeks out a dark and cold solitude. This decisive solitude, however, also influences her capabilities to author policy in a society that is shifting its moral ground and thus also make it possible to act responsibly to her wider community. Nonetheless, despite its definite authority, the final scene of the novel shows the transient nature of any authoring gesture: the evaporative quality of the breath signature is undeniable. Irrespective of this delusion of grandeur and her role in the transitional phase, then, communal assemblages will be formed, will fall apart and re-emerge with a different function; after all, Didymus was discarded by the Movement when his function in it had become redundant.

Both novels thus refine the articulation of ubuntu as a convergence of different interests with its focus on fluidity, open-endedness and undecidability with a more nuanced view on the role others play in the life of the subject. Especially the depiction of Mrs. Curren's relations to Vercueil and Florence in *Age of Iron* underlines the importance of power relations for the formation of intersubjective relations, communities and even notions of humanity. This pervasiveness of power is a valuable supplementation with regard to ubuntu, but the fact that Mrs. Curren remains unable to arouse Florence's interest throughout the novel also implies that the complication of relations by notions of authority and the division of power can produce gaps and divisions that will perhaps never be bridged.

Unlike Vera Stark, Mrs. Curren, with her continuous insistence on the importance of learning to live together, despite unlikely odds, however, also underlines the possibility to regard ubuntu as a counter-move to the problems of authority and temporality. Even though the outcome of Mrs. Curren's efforts are uncertain, her reliance on a shared humanity does point to a more lasting community that stays intact precisely because it dares to rely on the instability of the bridge that joins people together. Her bold move of imparting her final letter to Vercueil implies that converging interests are difficult to negotiate, especially when high stakes are involved, but it also suggests that ubuntu can – taking into account the importance of fluidity, contingency and undecidability – be formulated as an open-ended possibility for the future that allows

for a view on relationality that coincides with a Bakhtinian task. That is to say, it offers a perspective on relationality that aims to go beyond the existing makeup of given familial, sexual or historical forms of relating.

Carving out such possibilities, however, needs to be done with great care. Although the emphasis on undecidability and its accompanying notions of flux and contingency in ubuntu as a convergence of interests is important to give room to what cannot be predicted in how subjects come together, this approach does not yet account for the issue of responsibility, even if Mrs. Curren's letter seems to gesture in a possible direction. As became clear from this chapter, the positing of a delimited notion of community can be a necessary strategic move in the face of dominant discourse, but the fact that moments pass, and that, as such, our place in them does too, demands a continuous evaluation and re-evaluation of our surroundings and our relation to it. The complications of this perpetual (re)adjustment will be discussed in the next chapter, where I will focus more explicitly on how the undecidability of ubuntu as a convergence and negotiation of interests relates to issues of responsibility, a juncture where an ethics of ubuntu could be located.

Chapter 3

Facing Others: Towards an Ethics of Ubuntu

Introduction

> The South African of the future will live comfortably with uncertainty because uncertainty promises opportunity, but you have to be robust about it, you have to be thoughtful about it, you have to contemplate it to get the full richness of it… We need to develop the ability to embrace the uncertainty from a position of intelligence and imagination. The more of us admit to our vulnerabilities in the face of uncertainty, the more trusting the public space, because all of us have put our bona fides there. (Ndebele, "Nelson")

The emphasis placed by South African academic, essayist and novelist Njabulo S. Ndebele on the potential value of uncertainty as a starting point for devising new ways of organizing leadership and the South African public sphere is as admirable as it is optimistic. Critics would be right in claiming that his statement relies on no more than an implied assumption that people are willing to "admit to [their] vulnerabilities in the face of uncertainty" in the first place. In addition, he also relies on a supposition that the projection of this vulnerability would actually lead to "a more trusting public space" and that, because people contribute their vulnerability to the public sphere in good faith, the creation of such a space automatically involves a sense of responsibility, guaranteeing that all the various vulnerabilities would be respected. What happens, though, if one has to negotiate such vulnerabilities on a daily basis? If visibility within this public space means you are on the line, whether you want to be or not, because it fails to recognize you as someone with rights and needs, as a person? If vulnerability is not something that can be invested in the public sphere, because being recognizable as vulnerable results in a daily struggle to be able to live some form of safeguarded life in the first place?

Indeed, as became clear from Chapter 2, the focus on contingency and undecidability in intersubjective relations is an important part of evaluating one's continuously shifting position in relation to others – a focus that was formulated as a response to articulations of ubuntu specifically aimed at achieving unification through the staging of a universally acknowledged relational normativity. In some historical and social circumstances, however, giving oneself over to the unknown and the precarity that results from this attitude is not always feasible. Relinquishing the solid ground of a delimited notion of community with certain norms and values can result in a vulnerability that is not sustainable in practice. An over-emphasis on contingency thus runs the risk of obscuring that responsible action in ubuntu cannot always be formulated in terms of a notion of undecidability that invariably casts an unconditional openness to

the other as ethical. In this chapter, I aim to explore the possibility of thinking an ethics of ubuntu from the perspective of responsibility, which in the case of ubuntu is divided between, on the one hand, what has emerged as ubuntu's call for a practice of openness and inclusiveness towards others based on undecidability, and, on the other, the influences of internal cohesion, responsibility and obligation that are also part of ubuntu.

In order to address these issues of responsibility, I will first discuss some of the work of South African photographer Zanele Muholi, whose work delineates the need for achieving an emancipation of the subaltern group of black queers within the larger society of South Africa, where their rights are protected by law, but often trampled on in practice.[1] In the face of this repression, Muholi aims to lend a positive visibility to black queers and in this way strategically seeks to counter dominant images of violence by positing a circumscribed place of "black queerness" within the larger community of the South African nation. This call for emancipation takes the form of the representation of a symbiotic relation between black queer individuals and their community. This representation functions, as I will argue, as a kind of ethical injunction that arises from the relation between the portraits and their viewer. I will relate this discussion to what French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has described as the "call of the Other," which represents the perception of an ineluctable and absolute

1 It is important to point out that everyday practices surrounding LGBTI issues around the globe are often referred to in a discourse that suggests a unity of experience. It must be emphasized, however, that these experiences, practices and discourses exist in a highly specific context that makes it difficult to compare them, despite the similarities and solidarities made possible by globalization. In order not to read Muholi's work in the context of dominant discourses on LGBTI issues, keeping these differences in mind is all the more important. As Amanda Lock Swarr (2009) points out in her article "'Stabane,' Intersexuality and Same-Sex Relationships in South Africa," in Soweto, for instance, people engaging in same-sex relationships are regarded as "stabane," people who have both a penis and a vagina. Although this is usually not the case, some stabane create the impression that they have intersexual bodies. The notion of homosexuality is thus complicated by the biased assumption that some form of gender difference is necessarily present in any kind of sexual relation. See also Graeme Reid's short story in *At Risk* (2007) for a glimpse of his doctoral research project amongst the gay community in Wesselton township in Ermelo, Mpumalanga. As Drucilla Cornell has pointed out in her reading of Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's autobiography in her lecture "Rethinking Ethical Feminism Through uBuntu" (2011), concepts of "trans" with regard to certain sangomas' relation with their primary ancestor are complicated by different conceptions of the body itself. In the case of Nkunzi, for instance, her bodily characteristics change, depending on what ancestor possesses her most dominantly at the time, resulting in her being primarily male one week, and primarily female in another. For an enlightening impression of gay life in the predominantly coloured community of District Six, see Jack Lewis' documentary *A Normal Daughter: The Life and Times of Kewpie of District Six*.

responsibility for the Other by the subject and which emerges from the face to face moment that takes place between them.[2] Muholi's response to the violence befalling her direct community, apart from being an attempt to trigger a sense of individual responsibility, is particularly relevant in the context of ubuntu because it approaches individuals as both *a priori* relational and as related to several others at the same time. As such, Muholi's work can be useful in providing an ubuntu-oriented alternative in relation to the problem of multiplicity as it comes to the fore in the work of Levinas, who describes the face to face moment as an originary relation, one that brings community into being.

In the second section I will discuss how the problem of "the third," which problematises the idea of absolute responsibility and raises the issue of complicity in Levinas' theory, helps us to delineate more clearly where ubuntu can be said to diverge from a Levinasian responsibility and to show how this difference foregrounds the value of and necessity for a concept like ubuntu as a convergence of interest. However, this moment of inevitable complicity, as it comes to the fore in the analysis of the problem of the third, also suggests that the very notion of responsibility is not possible without it.

The third and concluding section will consist of a discussion of Njabulo Ndebele's novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, my reading of which exemplifies that the notion of inevitable complicity is in need of constant re-negotiation. Ndebele's narrative carefully balances out the effectivity of a Levinasean responsibility to the other with the drawbacks that are part and parcel of this selfsame logic. The novel revolves around a group of women who, through the formation of an ubuntu-inspired community, manage to find agency despite their stifling responsibility towards others. As I will suggest in my reading of this work, they only manage to do so because their newfound community allows them to perform a re-negotiation of their "allegiances" to their surroundings, in other words, by tactically re-evaluating their complicity in the dominant relations that already determine their everyday lives. This novella is pertinent here because it posits a view on community construction that takes, like Ndebele's quote given as the epigraph of this chapter, undecidability into account, without

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2 As Sean Hand points out, this term is "variously written as Other or other, to denote the French terms *autre*, *Autre* and *Autrui*" (Hand 39). Respectively, these terms translate as the metaphysical other, the absolute Other and the Other as Stranger. The distinctions relate to Levinas' contention that "an exemplary ethical relation between same and other, in which the other remains transcendent, actually involves the language we use" (Hand 40). In my description of ubuntu the other is not transcendent, but very much present in a convergence of different interests. I will therefore continue to write "other" and avoid capitalization in order to express an attempt to read self and other on an equal footing.

losing sight of the regenerative potential of communality and the responsibilities implied in maintaining the ties that bind.

Zanele Muholi: Strategic Visibility in *Faces and Phases*

Zanele Muholi is a South African photographer who describes herself as a black lesbian visual activist. In an interview with Lisa van Wyk from the *Mail & Guardian*, Muholi explains that her work responds to the "harsh realities and oppressions (which includes rife murders and 'curative rapes')" faced by black lesbians in South Africa, despite their supposed constitutional protection (Van Wyk n. pag.). As the 2011 Human Rights Watch' report on violence against black lesbians and transgender men in South Africa makes clear, the threat of violence is prevalent and dominates the lives of black queers, but perpetrators often escape justice, since these hate crimes are "going unrecognised by the state and unpunished by the legal system" (Kelly n.pag.; see also Hunter-Gault). In the same interview with Van Wyk, Muholi explains:

> Young black lesbians suffer from triple-stigmatisation, where they are prejudiced against for being black, for being women, and for being gay. And it [is] a class issue too, and that cannot be ignored. These crimes are [not] happening in Sandton [Johannesburg's business district]. They happen in the townships. And when they happen, those women, because they are poor, are unable to do anything about it. They cannot afford adequate representation. They cannot access justice. (n. pag.)

Black lesbians are thus violently stigmatised in four ways, namely in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation and class. According to Muholi, there is a "lack of material" that provides information regarding the issues faced by these women and transgender men in South Africa on a daily basis and her photographs are, therefore, intended to start dialogues on issues around prejudice regarding HIV/Aids, sexuality, rape and hate crimes (Van Wyk). Here, I will primarily discuss work from one of Muholi's series entitled *Faces and Phases*, which is an ongoing project started in 2006 that, when it was published in catalogue form in 2010, consisted of 76 black and white portraits.

Creating this large group of portraits is one way in which Muholi seeks to correct the lack of material that depicts black queers, and black lesbians particularly, through positive imagery. In her artist statement, Muholi explains that the series is meant to "commemorate and celebrate the lives of the black queers" as well as to express "the

collective pain we as a community experience due to the loss of friends and acquaintances through disease and hate crimes" (*Faces* 7). According to the artist statement that accompanies the portraits on Muholi's own website, the series was created in two phases. The first part of the series was shot in Gauteng townships in South Africa and is the result of "a journey of visual activism to ensure that there is black lesbian visibility, to showcase our existence and resistance in this democratic society, to present a positive imagery of black lesbians" ("Faces & Phases I"). The second part is denoted with the word "siyafana" (meaning "we are the same") and negotiates "the similarities and differences within our 'black' race" ("Faces & Phases II"). These photos were taken both inside and outside South Africa, and the series here broadens its scope from black lesbians to black queers: "from women to transmen to 'whatever'" ("Faces & Phases II"). The images thus created are, as Muholi says, a kind of visual activism with an archival function that is aimed at raising awareness in the spectator of what Muholi calls the black queer community.

In response to Muholi's work, South African poet Gabeda Baderoon has pointed out that the lack of positive imagery around black lesbian lives indeed poses a huge problem. Visibility "proper" comes at an immense cost for black lesbians in South Africa and Baderoon argues that this risk has resulted in a hyper-visibility that "has been used to violate lesbian lives through a sensationalistic focus on suffering that has simultaneously made it possible to ignore that suffering" (n. pag.). Although made in a different context, Theresa Jefferson's observation that the experience of black lesbians in the United States reveals an invisibility/hyper-visibility paradox is insightful here. She argues that "the tools of invisibility and hyper-visibility serve the same purpose – the legitimation of dominant cultural control" (264). In other words, the two appear as opposite, but are in fact two sides of the same coin: "Invisibility and hyper-visibility compliment each other. They act in concert, as a dual cultural strategy of distortion, suppression, and punishment" (Jefferson 264). It is exactly this "acting in concert" of hyper-visibility and invisibility that Muholi's work addresses in trying to re-direct the way in which black queers are represented and made visible in South African society.

Muholi's emphatic foregrounding of the issue of visibility, however, points towards a reliance on experience as a form of knowledge production that is potentially problematic. Following Joan W. Scott's argument in her article "The Evidence of Experience," to uncritically align visibility with transparency can seriously impede the effectivity of the argument made by Muholi. Since understanding or knowing something does not logically or causally follow from visibility or seeing something, as Muholi's insistence on visibility seems to suggest, Muholi's visual activism could be subjected to Scott's criticism of the way normative history has usually been (unsuccessfully) challenged, even

if it triggers sorely needed debate about issues concerning hate crimes in South Africa. From this perspective, Muholi seems to aim for "an enlargement of the picture, a correction to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision," but such an extension of the existing framework is problematic because, like normative history, it "has rested its claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience..." (Scott 776). As Scott points out:

> [T]he project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual /heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause. (778)

The fact that the series *Faces and Phases* is meant to commemorate and archive a black queer community in South Africa, which, following archive theory, should be considered not as a random collection, but as a selective and authoritative grouping of texts, objects and people, only seems to reinforce the categories of representation referred to by Scott. In the series, the 76 people photographed are being actively grouped under a certain label, namely that of a general "black queerness," which is based on the experiences they share and their communal associations. This is, of course, no more than reasonable, since the violence befalling queer individuals is dealt out to them through the failure to recognise the legitimacy of these selfsame experiences on the part of their surroundings and the normative values imposed on them.

As Spivak has suggested, the positing of a common experience as formative of group identity is in danger of leading to a practice of identity politics that loses its transformative edge, and ends up stuck with nothing but its essentialism.[3] Some situations, however, and Muholi's justified claim for queer rights surely belongs to this category, call for a so-called strategic essentialism, which would allow a group to cluster their heterogeneous interests in order to achieve a specific and common goal. In

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3 Identity politics can be roughly defined as a "wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). It has been the subject of heated academic and political debate. One significant problem has to do with the fact that identity politics often arises out of grievance with a repressive system and thus remains dependent on this system as well as on the affect of its grievance, as noted by Wendy Brown (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Another problem is that identity politics can posit its own boundaries too rigidly and thus runs the risk of effecting forms of exclusion it seeks to avoid.

her analysis of the work of the Subaltern Studies group, Spivak claims that the work of this group is valuable precisely because it displays "the *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" ("Subaltern Studies" 205, emphasis in original). As I have already pointed out in both Chapters 1 and 2, such an alignment of political interests needs to be temporary if it wants to prevent the exclusionary consolidation of relational ties. As such, strategic essentialism is rendered "most effective as a context-specific strategy, but … cannot provide a long-term political solution to end oppression and exploitation" (Morton 75).

A crucial aspect of strategic essentialism in relation to the work of Muholi is that her politics is oriented towards two different discourses. In the face of the violence that befalls the queer community, Muholi's approach is not meant to achieve an inclusion into the norm from which one is excluded (heterosexualism, for instance), but at gaining acknowledgment in terms of the differences that caused exclusion in the first place ("we are not heterosexual"). In this sense, the series functions as a strategic circumscription of its own space in the face of the dominant discourse that produces this position. Potentially, this emphasis on a shared experience within the queer community also sets up a boundary for exclusion, creating a situation in which two discourses that define their own space in terms of what is not included in their circumscription face each other as diametrically opposed. However, the other aim in battling this violence is directed at actualising what is supposed to be the hegemonic authority of the Constitution that claims, but sorely fails to protect the equal rights of all of South Africa's citizens. From this perspective, and contrary to what Scott suggests, Muholi's project also manages to implement the insistence on a common experience tactically; it poaches on the national space in order to effect change within this space.

One of the examples of Muholi's strategic rather than tactical positing of what she describes as the black queer community is reflected in the way in which she organised her photographs in the exhibition *…For Those Who Live In It*, in the MU in Eindhoven, the Netherlands in June 2010. On the left side of the wall (the starting point of its "reading" direction if you will), there was a photograph of a woman's heavily bruised and stitched up face. On reading the material surrounding this photo (a newspaper article containing an interview with the woman), the viewer soon learns that she has fallen victim to a hate crime and has been repeatedly attacked and "correctively" raped by the same man from her direct environment, because he did not accept her as gay. The outrageous lack of protection suffered by this woman is, of course, exactly Muholi's point. However, her strategy here sits uncomfortably with what Baderoon found so commendable in Muholi's photography, namely that it works against the reinforcement of black lesbian hyper-visibility defined in terms of violence. By framing the

image in this explicit way, Muholi effectively communicates the message of oppression, but it becomes fairly impossible to look at the photo beyond the determination of the artist's framing of it. This goes for the subsequent images on the wall in Eindhoven as well. Although all of them had their own things to say and not all of them were from the *Faces and Phases* series, it was rather difficult to "read" them outside of the theme of violence created by the first haunting photo on the left.

Similarly, the coherence of the *Faces and Phases* series as represented in its catalogue form is constructed by the explicit community-oriented framing in the preface (which one can, of course, choose not to read), prior to the perception of relations on the part of the viewer. This overdetermination of the "authorial intention" forecloses an interpretation based on the agency of the artwork itself or on the activation of different frames of reference. Through a closer analysis of the portraits, it becomes clear that despite the way Muholi's work is framed, the photographs themselves do not reinforce an underlying monolithic insistence on a unitary experience. In fact, the collection of portraits effectively negotiates the relation between visibility and understanding as it comes to the fore in the above discussion, precisely because it manages to display a large diversity that results in the considerable absence of common visual markers that are supposed to make the people in the photographs visible/recognisable as "queer." As such, the photographs disrupt the unifying gesture of Muholi's grouping. If anything, the series makes it abundantly clear that "queerness" is not a fixable or fixing category and performs a balancing act between the notions of similarity and difference, visibility and invisibility, that reflects a response both to dominant notions of vision and perspectives that treat queerness as a visible attribute, and to Muholi's own circumscription of what she labels a black queer community.

Take, for instance, the photo of Nomonde Mbusi, taken in Berea, Johannesburg in 2007.[4] On the Michael Stevenson website as well as in the book, this picture features as the first in the series. It depicts someone looking straight into the camera. The light skin contrasts with the much darker background, bringing out the figure with emphasis. Apart from a headscarf of a slightly lighter shade than the fabric that serves as background, there are no attributes. The background too, is inconspicuous. Nothing in the photo seems to draw the eye away from the face (more specifically from the eyes), located slightly to the left of the centre of the photograph. The portrait is of the upper part of the body of a slender figure, cut off at the chest. The figure is, as far as we

4 All images were provided by the Michael Stevenson gallery with the kind permission of Zanele Muholi. The Michael Stevenson gallery in Cape Town generally features Muholi's new work. See www.stevenson.info.

Figure 6. *Nomonde Mbusi, Berea, Johannesburg, 2007.*

can see, naked. Initially, one is struck by the sense of vulnerability that emanates from this light, slender person, posing so tentatively before the camera. However, although vulnerable, Nomonde Mbusi is by no means (im)passive. The look is directed straight at the camera and does not seem shy or withdrawn. Rather, it could be described as containing a kind of guarded engagement. As Kobena Mercer has suggested in relation to African studio photography in general, and to the studio portrait "The Blavo Twins" by Ghanaian photographer James Barnor in particular, the "formal yet relaxed posture of his sitters conveys a dignified self-possession, reflecting the fact that photographer and subject share control over the apparatus of representation" (n. pag.).[5] Although Nomonde Mbusi's pose could hardly be described as "formal," it does speak of self-possession towards the viewer/photographer. The fact that Nomonde

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5 I draw the somewhat pan-African line to African studio photography here, because the extensive use of cloth in Muholi's portrait of Nomonde Mbusi suggests a resemblance to earlier work from the African studio tradition, with Seydou Keïta, Malick Sidibé and James Barnor as major contributors. In other portraits from the series, Muholi also often uses cloth to create a studio effect, like in the portraits of Bakhambile Skhosana (see fig. 8), Refilwe Mhalaba (Muholi, *Faces* 77), and Thandi "Mancane" Selepe (Muholi, *Faces* 72). On the other hand, the fact that Nomonde Mbusi seems to be naked, is not explicitly posing, and stands in front of a cloth that is rather

chooses to pose in the first place (which entails the risk of exposure as a black queer person and thus violation) and the direction of the gaze straight into the camera suggest, furthermore, that there is, indeed, a sense of shared control.

Admittedly, there are other things to notice about the portrait that could detract attention from the centrality of the eyes and the face: the clavicles, for instance, or the little bit of hair that escapes from under the headscarf, or, when looking more closely, the small birthmark on the chest, just beside the right arm. Also, there are creases in the cloth that is used as background. Embedding this photo in the series, however, it soon becomes clear that the face, and specifically the frontal pose, plays a crucial role in the series as a whole, but specifically in the portrait of Nomonde. Of the more than 70 portraits, only 5 people do not look at the camera. However, Nomonde is the only one posing without visible clothing. Manucha, for instance, has bear shoulders, but is wearing some sort of flamboyant feathered accessory that might be part of a dress and that distracts the glance of the spectator from the face (fig. 7). Most other photographs, furthermore, have some sort of distraction in the background, with the photo of Bakhambile Skhosana serving, perhaps, as the most extreme example (fig. 8). This photo also emphasises the importance of clothing in the series, as does the photo of Teleka Bowden (fig. 9), which contrasts with some of the series' photographs depicting more masculine clothing styles (fig. 10). Another recurrent theme is that of scarring. Although the scope of this chapter does not allow for a discussion of the relation of scarring to visibility and its link to violence in this series, it is necessary to point out that scarring, in a sense, also distracts the viewer's attention from the gaze of the poser, as, for example, in figure 11.

The combined effects of Nomonde Mbusi's vulnerable "bareness," engaging look and the emphasis on the face and eyes, thus remain, especially in comparison to the other photos in the series, central to the photograph and turn the tables on the viewer. Directly aimed at the spectator, the look suggests that it is the viewer, not the subject of the photograph, who is being regarded with curious interest. The viewer is not merely a passive spectator, but is, in fact, addressed by the look. Or rather, by the glance, understood by Norman Bryson as "the involved look where viewers are aware of and bodily participating in the process of looking," a process in which the viewers are engaged in "interactions of various kinds, putting themselves at risk" (Bryson qtd. in Bal, *Double* 264). The viewer is not only engaged in an active looking, but is being looked at, appealed to and seemingly addressed with a question. This way, the

inconspicuous contrasts with the African design cloths and official poses used by Keïta and the more exuberant posing and curious accessories of Sidibé's work.

Figure 7. *Manucha, Muizenberg, Cape Town, 2010.*

Figure 8. *Bakhambile Skhosana, Natalspruit, 2010.*

Figure 9. *Teleka Bowden, Toronto, 2008.*

Figure 10. *Marcel Kutumela, Alexandra, Johannesburg, 2008.*

Figure 11. *Eulander Koester, Gugulethu, Cape Town, 2008.*

object is able to protect itself against visual invasion and objectification. In the lee of Muholi's strategic essentialism, then, my reading of the portrait of Nomonde Mbusi allows for the staging of a particular relation between the viewer and a photographed subject demanding to be taken into account.

This relation between viewer and photograph takes the form of the kind of shock to our automated ways of perceiving others that has been theorised by Emmanuel Levinas, who relates it to the ethical demand as it emerges in the face to face moment. This representative moment of the ethical relation between self and other, this sensation of being addressed, is, in Levinas, also explicitly related to the simultaneous experience of vulnerability and resistance:

> The face is inviolable; those eyes, which are absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, none the less offer an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation to murder is inscribed: the temptation of absolute negation. (Levinas, "Ethics and Spirit" 8)

The face to face encounter in Levinas' thinking, then, is represented as an ambiguous moment caused by the vulnerability of the other. On the one hand, the vulnerability of the face tempts us to destroy it ("absolute negation"), but on the other hand it also places us under a moral obligation. Vulnerability, therefore, forms an occasion for violent temptation, but also for the protection of the other.

In this moment, in which we are addressed by the other with an unconditional ethical demand, the subject is placed under the authority of the other. We are placed, quite literally, under allegiance to the other (Levinas, *Entre Nous* 174). Levinas writes:

> According to my analysis, on the other hand, in the relation to the Face, it is asymmetry that is affirmed: at the outset I hardly care what the other is with respect to me, that is his own business; for me, he is above all the one I am responsible for. (Levinas, *Entre Nous* 89)

Who is this other to whom we carry an infinite responsibility? In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas writes that the I and the other cannot form a totality: "He and I do not form a number" (*Totality* 39). There can be no question, then, of unity, of one-ness, of wholeness. The other is unknowable and falls outside any sort of system that might signify him/her for the subject. Levinas clarifies this by referring to the other as a stranger: "Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger…" (*Totality* 39). The only way to produce a relation to this stranger that does not form a totality is if it proceeds "from the I to the other, as a *face to face*…" (*Totality* 39, emphasis in original).

The notion of the "face" does not just refer to the physical presence of the human face. As Levinas clarifies in the interview "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," "the Face is definitely not a plastic form like a portrait" (89). Instead, the call of the other seems to come from behind the physiological instance of the face:

> From behind the bearing he gives himself – or puts up with – in his appearance, he calls to me and orders me from the depths of his defenceless nakedness, his misery, his mortality. (*Entre Nous* 174)

As this quote already suggests, the Levinasian face is "the face understood as human suffering, as the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation" and

does not strictly refer to a physiological countenance (Butler, *Precarious* 144).[6] In her analysis of Levinas' theorisation of the relation between art and the ethical demand of the other, Benda Hofmeyr underlines the unrepresentability of the ethical demand Levinas attaches to the face to face moment. Art, for Levinas, is a representation of "the meanwhile," an eternally frozen moment that will never develop into a future and is thus, closed off, yet never finished; it is a monstrosity that is evacuated of any responsible engagement beyond itself. So even though art can mark "a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity" that is similar to the "the very impact of the face," it ultimately cannot install in the subject the overwhelming and undeniable responsibility for the suffering of the other that arises from the face to face moment (Levinas, "Reality" 119; Hofmeyr, "Isn't Art").

From the formulation of the hold of art over the subject as a "fundamental passivity," however, it is also possible to infer that despite Levinas' insistence that the appeal of the other does not take a plastic form and despite his subordination of art and aesthetics to the importance of ethics as a first philosophy, art is still related to this ethical moment. After all, it is the radical passivity that "incapacitates our egotistical (unethical) inclinations" and makes room for ethical agency on the part of the subject, who is overcome by the other (Hofmeyr, "Radical" 152). As Hofmeyr so elegantly puts it, ethical action for Levinas takes place once "we have become re-sensitized - awakened through a kind of paralytic shock - paralysed into action, as it were" ("Isn't Art"). In this sense, Muholi's photograph of Nomonde, through its emphasis on the figure's nakedness and vulnerability, but also by the very medium of photographic portraiture, where it is possible to look someone in the face and be touched without actually encountering her, actively engages the viewer by overtly referring to "the precariousness of life" that is central to Levinas.[7] This precarity is, as became clear from Chapter 1, also crucial to ubuntu's focus on a creation of common humanity through suffering as it came to the fore in the TRC process. There are, however, a number of crucial differences between a Levinasian focus on difference and responsibility on the one hand, and the relatedness implied in the creation of Muholi's work on the other that foreground the possibility to intersect ubuntu's unifying gestures of communal obli-

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6 A few pages before this reference, Butler also points out that the face in Levinas does not exclusively refer to the human face (141). This refers back to the ethical position that Mrs. Curren formulates in *Age of Iron* through her reference to the necessity "to love as a dog loves" (Coetzee 190).

7 For the effectiveness of photography in touching the viewer, see, of course, Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, where he discusses the notion of punctum. Punctum is described as an aspect of the photograph that affectively "wounds" the viewer: "this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (26).

gation and responsibility (as in the TRC for instance) with its aspects of fluctuation and contingency. As such, these differences between the notion of the face in Muholi's work and Levinas' theory provide occasion to start thinking about the ethics of ubuntu.

In the artist statement that accompanies the *Faces and Phases* series online, Muholi points towards a possible interpretation of the face in her work. Like Levinas, she emphasises that the face imparts meaning beyond its usual description:

> Aside from the dictionary definition of what a "face" is (the front of the head, from forehead to chin), the face also expresses the person. For me, *Faces* means me, photographer and community worker, being face to face with the many lesbians I interacted with from different Gauteng townships such as Alexandra, Soweto, Vosloorus, Kathelong, Kagiso… ("Faces and Phases")

For Muholi, then, the word "faces" in her title refers to a being face to face with the subjects of her photos. Like Levinas, she explicitly points towards the importance of this moment. Unlike Levinas, however, Muholi emphasises the fact that she is talking about interaction, which implies a sense of reciprocity not present in Levinas' conception of the ethical relation. As Henriette Gunkel points out in her article on images of gender and female sexuality in contemporary South Africa:

> Muholi knows the women she is visualizing and that she portrays. The women are her friends, her colleagues or women she meets within her work as an activist: "These are not only subjects, these are my people, this describes the person I am." (Gunkel 85)

The referentiality of Muholi's work, then, does not include facing an other that falls outside all categorization, since she takes photographs (in this series) of people she already conceives of as being part of the same community, as relating to herself in some way; Muholi's photographs are a direct result of her active search for engagement with black lesbians in South Africa, a community she explicitly identifies with and simultaneously creates in the process of working on the series. As such, the face to face, in this case, leads to a strengthening and construction of intracommunal ties, to a sense of belonging and wholeness that is constitutive of the self, like in ubuntu: "these are my people, this describes the person I am."

Indeed, this phraseology is strongly reminiscent of the bond between individual and community that has become such a familiar representation of ubuntu: by taking

photographs of the people from her community, Muholi is also portraying herself. In addition, the word "phases" in the title suggests a sense of development with regard to the people she is portraying that relates to the idea that ubuntu is also about flux and "becoming" (Krog, "This Thing" 355; Ramose 326). As a whole, the series thus seems to be based on a relational premise, which is reflected in its form.

The captions that accompany the photographs in the catalogue, for instance, give each individual's name and mention the neighbourhood, city and the year in which the photograph was taken, thus explicitly embedding the person in their surroundings in time and place. The names, too, are crucial, since they seem to suggest how the photographed individuals see themselves, or are seen by their social surroundings. Furthermore, instead of making group portraits, Muholi highlights both the individual subjects and their community by grouping individual portraits in relation to each other under the common denominator of "black queerness." The fact that this plurality is mediated in the form of a series that is potentially open-ended undermines this unifying gesture even further.[8] On the other hand, the project consists of portraits that are placed exclusively within the larger coherence of the queer community and are not brought in relation to a broader or different grouping. In this way, it does not exceed the narrow description of black queerness, and reinstalls the unifying and strategic gesture that undermines the series' claim for equality.

What is crucial about this grouping, though, even if the diversity and relationality of the series seems to be somewhat delimited, is that the individuals in the portraits are not encountered as blank and isolated others that come face to face with the self, as Levinas' conception of the face to face seems to suggest, but as communally situated subjects. The photographs exist both as individual portraits and as parts of a larger group that creates meaning on the basis of their sameness and difference from the other portraits. The representation of this communally located subject, then, potentially activates a face to face moment that differs from, or perhaps, adds to the Levinasian encounter, which is exclusively based on a response to the face of absolute otherness.

Read in this way, Muholi's work shows that the face to face moment can be approached not only as a meeting between two individuals that is constructive of their subjectivity, but also as an exchange in which individuals are already considered to be part of a community that existed prior to this moment. As in Levinas' theory, then, every subject is relationally constituted, but from the perspective of ubuntu this subject cannot be in relation to someone else as singular. In other words, in line with

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[8] For a discussion of the role of seriality in identity, see Esther Peeren's chapter on versioning in *Intersubjectivities and Popular Culture*.

ubuntu as a convergence of interests or changeable assemblage, as I reformulated it in the previous chapter, the face to face encounter under discussion here is indeed constructive of new social bonds but simultaneously occurs in a matrix already determined by existing relations.

Complicity: Ubuntu and the Problem of the "Third"

At face value, the point of the articulation of this difference might not be immediately clear. Indeed, the similarities between ubuntu and the Levinasian face to face actually seem to be rather substantial, especially with regard to the sense of unrelenting responsibility for the other, which is often bracketed with a presumed willingness to please on the part of the subject. In this section I will argue that such willingness, even if it is aimed at avoiding violence, discursive or otherwise, cannot be seen as unproblematic. The notion of ubuntu as a convergence of interests, which, as I have argued in Chapter 2, is based on the idea that assemblages of people are at least partly dependent on their historical co-evolution, complicates the idea of infinite responsibility as described by Levinas, as well as the possibility of a concept of the unknown other; interests, whether of the self, the other, or a combination of the two, are subject to their historical locatedness, and so is the subsequent possibility of an ethical encounter between them.

In the case of Muholi's work, the framing that leads to the foregrounding of the ethical moment is rightfully intended to counter the excessive negative and violent imagery around the lives of black queers in South Africa. However, this does not mean that the ethical encounter will take place or that this message actually arrives. As I suggested earlier with regard to Muholi's framing of *Faces and Phases* in exhibitions and catalogue form, no artist statement can ever be determinate of viewers' responses. Indeed, it depends on the spectator whether an ethical moment actually occurs. The polemical reactions to Muholi's work amply illustrate this point. Besides receiving heated responses, especially to another series entitled *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture*, Muholi's digital archive was reported stolen in May 2012 in a burglary explicitly targeted at Muholi's work rather than at other valuables in the house (Muholi, *Enraged*; Reynolds).[9]

[9] See, for instance, Muholi's short documentary *Enraged by a Picture* on the responses to her series *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture* and the examples given by Henriette Gunkel in her article on Muholi, "Through the Postcolonial Eye: Images of Gender and Female Sexuality in Contemporary South Africa" (80).

Another negative response was that of minister of culture Lulu Xingwana to the art exhibition *Innovative Women*, which took place on Constitution Hill in 2009 in Johannesburg, where art by Zanele Muholi and 9 others was displayed.[10] The minister was supposed to open the exhibition with a speech, but left before delivering it because, she claimed afterwards, some of the works on display, especially those by Muholi (fig. 11), were "immoral, offensive, and going against nation-building," the irony being, of course, that the minister's own department had contributed considerable funds to the exhibition in question (Evans).

Figure 12. *Triptych* from Muholi's series *Being*, 2007.

Outrage understandably ensued from the minister's response and her baffling statement. The department of culture having a "mandate to promote social cohesion and nation-building" is questionable in itself, to say the least, and the minister's response further suggests that funds are available only for projects that adhere to this authorization (Evans). Thus, her response basically subjects the "exhibitionality" of art to the wishes of the state and implies that (intimate) images of black lesbians are somehow considered to be immoral and against nation-building, whatever may be intended by the latter phrase.

In an open letter to minister Lulu Xingwana in the *Mail & Guardian* of 9 March 2010 with the telling title "On Looking and Not Looking," Gabeda Baderoon condemns the minister for missing the point of the art on display:

10 The exhibition contained the following artists: Dineo Bopabe, Zanele Muholi, Nandipha Mntambo, Ernestine White, Ingrid Masondo, Nontobeko Ntombela, Usha Seejarim, Senzeni Marasela, Lerato Shadi and Bongi Bengu ("Innovative Women").

> During your brief glance, you may have mistaken the intimacy in Muholi's images for pornography and the erudite allusions in Mntambo's work for carelessness about sexual violence, but that mistake can only be sustained if you don't truly look at their art. If you stood in front of Muholi's photographs, you would see lesbian lives outside of the narratives of violation and pornography through which they are more commonly presented to us. (Baderoon)

The minister's mistake is caused, Baderoon claims, by the fact that she did not look at the photographs "properly," which suggests that the photographs are assumed to speak for themselves to such an extent that anyone who simply stands before them understands what is clearly there to see. In this way, Baderoon assumes that Muholi's photographs have only one meaning, which is immediately revealed to anyone who looks at them in the right way, and thus this statement about the relation between artwork and spectator mirrors the self-evidence of the impossibility of ignoring the other's vulnerability in the ethical moment as described by Levinas. Despite the fact, then, that the women in *Triptych* look emphatically away from the camera, Baderoon seems to take their effect on the spectator for granted and refers to a Levinasian face to face between artwork and spectator by lamenting its *not* taking place.

To be sure, by walking out of the exhibition and claiming that Muholi's photos go against "nation-building," the minister disregards the ethical injunction so resolutely indicated by Baderoon and sends out a signal that sorely confirms Muholi's concerns regarding equal rights of black queers in South Africa. The minister's response literally frames the women in the photographs as undesirable citizens, by suggesting that their depiction undermines the norms and values embodied by the state. In short, by turning away, by not looking at the art on display she practices a rejection of the face to face moment that repeats these women's practical exclusion and ensures that they continue to be perceived on a basis of inequality.

In addition, the minister's reaction also suggests that this face to face can only take place between people who are somehow already included in a certain conception of the subject. "Properly" or "truly" looking at photos, as suggested by Baderoon, becomes possible only if the other is already in some sense visible in his/her capacity to belong to the norm. Although to think of the other as more of the same implies issues of incorporation and appropriation, Muholi's work, at the same time, demonstrates the poignant need to emancipate from absolute otherness and to be included in the norm in order to be able to lead a safe and acknowledged life. So, whereas Levinas could be criticised for working with a notion of the other that is not "other"

enough because it does not exist outside of the parameters of the subject's conception of his/her world, the relationality as it comes to the fore in Muholi's work discussed here presupposes that otherness should indeed be respected, but not considered as strictly autonomous.[11]

Nonetheless, this difference in the approach of the other has not prevented, as the close association of ubuntu with hospitality discussed in the Introduction also makes clear, interpreters from equating ubuntu with the notion of the other as radically unknowable:

> If set out in terms from Levinas, … as an ethics of responsibility, ubuntu captures how the relation to the other is prior to the selfhood of the self, how that relation is a condition of possibility for the selfhood of the self. One becomes who one is in responding to, and for, the other. (Sanders, *Complicities* 126)

Although I agree with Sanders that "the other is prior to the selfhood of the self" in both conceptions – in the case of ubuntu one only has to be reminded of the dictum: I am a person through other persons – he glosses over the crucial difference in how the other is conceived of. This difference becomes clear from the minister's response to Muholi's work, but also arises from ubuntu when it is articulated as a convergence of interests, which suggests that ubuntu should be regarded not so much as a static worldview, but rather as the continuous negotiation of the convergence of different interests in a particular time and space.

The emphasis on negotiation in this formulation represents a notion of otherness that diverges from Levinas, because it does not rely on radical difference. Ubuntu, since it revolves around the idea that the interests of others can converge and are negotiable if they do not come together "naturally," focuses on creating and maintaining interaction with these others, both in their similarity and in their difference, rather than on a notion of an unknowable and absolute other under whose allegiance the subject ineluctably falls. In principle, according to what DeLanda has called historical co-evolution, these assemblages are open and temporary and can include anybody, even if these assemblages can be problematically clustered around exclusion in unitary and communitarian interpretations of ubuntu. Ubuntu as a convergence of interests is thus similar to Levinas in its openness to the other, but differs from

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[11] For a critique of Levinas' conception of the Other, see, for instance, Irigarary (69-70).

Levinas in its focus on this other as a partner in the convergence of interests, rather than a singular and unknowable other that calls for absolute responsibility.

Indeed, arguing from the perspective of ubuntu as a localised negotiation of different interests and that of Muholi's negotiation of similarity and difference within her rendering and construction of a black queer community, relationality without some form of sameness seems hardly possible. As Thomas A. Carlson points out, such an emphasis on similarity would be extremely problematic from a Levinasian perspective, since absolute difference may not, if the other is to be respected, be reduced to common ground: "it is solely in the difference or alterity of the other that my obligation emerges" and this obligation "derives from the radical lack of any such common ground" (63). As such, the Levinasian framework does not provide for a discussion of relations that are not based on a radical difference, or for any kind of interaction with more than one other.

The problem from a Levinasian perspective is, of course, that even if one were able to exercise complete responsibility for one other person, it is impossible to relate to everyone in this way. In "Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other," Levinas describes the matter as follows:

> But then what about humanity in its multiplicity? What about the one next to the other – the third, and along with him all the others? Can that responsibility toward the other who faces me, that response to the face of my fellow man ignore the third party who is also my other? Does he not also concern me? (*Entre Nous* 174)

From within the reasoning of the Leviansian face to face, the problem of this third party constitutes a betrayal of one's absolute responsibility that coincides with the emergence of justice in society. In order to spread responsibility amongst as many others as possible, society needs a concept of justice, even though it is impossible to compare one particular other with another other (see Levinas, *Entre Nous* 174; Derrida, "Adieu" 28). The introduction of law and justice in the ethical relation is vindicated, however, by the possibility that a responsible or ethical action towards one person might inadvertently wrong the next (Levinas, *Entre Nous* 16). According to Derrida, this presence of the third and its disruption of the face to face relation is as ineluctable as the subject's absolute responsibility. They are both part of the same ethical moment: "For the third does not wait; it is there, from as early as the 'first' epiphany of the face in the face to face" ("Adieu" 25). From this perspective, we are doubly complicit, because we are responsible for any eventual violence that befalls the

other, but have to betray this first responsibility for the sake of a system that aims to do justice to this selfsame concept, but never will:

> In the very name of the absolute obligations towards one's fellow man, a certain abandonment of the absolute allegiance he calls forth is necessary. (Levinas, *Entre Nous* 174)

The multiple stigmatisation of black lesbians as foregrounded by Muholi's work foregrounds this jarring discrepancy between "conditional" and "absolute" justice. In the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution the equality clause (chapter 2, statute 9) reads that "Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law." In statutes 3 and 4 of clause 9 it is, furthermore, expressly stated that neither the state nor any person "may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone" (ss 4) on grounds "including race, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth" (ss 3). The fact that "everyone has the right to have any dispute that can be resolved by the application of law decided in a fair public hearing before a court" does not, unfortunately, resolve the class issue that this equality clause evades, namely that poor and/or stigmatised people in practice have, as Muholi points out in her interview with Van Wyk, great difficulty in accessing these rights. The discrepancy is further augmented by sub-statute 4 from the same equality clause, which prescribes that "National legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination." Muholi's activism makes clear that the introduction by the law of the problem of the third does not only constitute a (necessary) betrayal of the unique, but that problems regarding the accessibility and enforcement of law further complicate the issue of complicity.[12]

Nonetheless, the betrayal of the other is considered a necessity by Derrida not only because it is, as was mentioned above, paradoxically "owed" to the other, but also because it protects the individual from an all-consuming responsibility:

> The third would thus protect against the vertigo of ethical violence itself. For ethics could be doubly exposed to such violence: exposed to undergo it but also to exercise it. Alternatively or simultaneously. It is true that the protecting or mediating third, in its juridico-political role, itself also violates,

[12] For an extensive overview of the role of ubuntu in South African legislation, see Drucilla Cornell's edited volume *Ubuntu and the Law*.

> at least potentially, the purity of the ethical desire devoted to the unique. Whence the terrible ineluctability of a double constraint... ("Adieu" 27)

The constraint thus translates as a bind between having to protect the subject from being completely consumed by "the purity of the ethical desire devoted to the unique," and of being complicit in the betrayal of this ethical injunction. In this way, the self-interest of the subject is re-introduced in the face of the initially primary interest of the other and effectively invites a negotiation between the two that foregrounds the value of thinking of ubuntu as a temporal convergence of interests, where several interests are merged for an appropriate span of time, until they merge in a different way in a different time and place.

In his book *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*, Mark Sanders discusses the inescapable complicity of the individual in the context of the extreme circumstances created by apartheid. In his introduction, he proposes a distinction between two kinds of complicities. On the one hand, there is an acting-in-complicity, in which acts are subjected to a system of accountability (read: a repressive system like apartheid) and on the other there is a responsibility-in-complicity, which entails a sense of complicit awareness with regard to this system. The latter notion of complicity is derived from the idea that the TRC, as it acknowledges in its final report, did not take personal responsibility sufficiently into account during its hearings. The report, Sanders reminds us, claims it should have devised some way to deal with the "little perpetrator" in each of us, since the existence of apartheid shows the individual potential for exercising both discursive and physical violence (*Complicities* 3).

These two conditions of acting in concert with the system and being aware of one's responsibility in doing so are interrelated, in the sense that they make each other possible (*Complicities* 11). The system is not only a condition for acting responsibly towards it, the very notion of responsibility, the notion that subjects are potentially complicit and thus personally responsible, also makes such a system of accountability possible. In other words, there can be no responsibility without acknowledging the system (of operation or thought) one is part of or agitating against. From this more general frame of complicity, Sanders' Levinasian reading of ubuntu as an ethics of responsibility that I have alluded to earlier makes it possible to formulate ubuntu not just as a convergence of interests that needs to be negotiated, but more specifically as a responsible negotiation of one's complicity with the discourses that make up the system.

In ubuntu as a negotiation of converging interests, then, this bind of complicity is not a betrayal of one's responsibility but, rather, its actualisation. Being unique is not to be equated with being alone. In fact, someone is unique only by virtue of his/her

relation to others. When considering the subject as always already relationally positioned, as suggested by Muholi's photography, the constraint lies not in being inevitably complicit to a betrayal, but in regarding someone as an isolated instance or entity to which I am fully responsible. The fact that the subject is involved in multiple relations (including those to the system, as suggested by Sanders) is exactly what actualises him/her. In ubuntu as convergence, it is not possible, in the strictest sense of the word, to think of the subject without the ties to his/her surroundings. It is also not possible to think of an isolated subject-other relation. Rather, it is the shift in regarding the individual as multiply related, as being part of not one, but several constellations that makes ubuntu such a potentially valuable ethical concept. Negotiating the distribution of responsibility is, rather than problematic, precisely the point of a theorisation of ubuntu as convergence.

In the last section of this chapter, I will explore, through an analysis of Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, some of the ways in which such a negotiation of interests can take place. The novella shows how a re-evaluation of the characters' position in the dominant relations that determine their lives leads to a responsible shifting of how they face the restrictive allegiances to their surroundings. In this sense, the novel takes up the discussion of the notion of discursive responsibility as it came to the fore in Antjie Krog's vision of forgiveness in Chapter 1, where forgiveness was described as an acknowledgment of one's complicity in how discourse interpellates others. In Krog's case, renewal and agency is located in the use and creation of a humanitarian language, which aims to address others differently and aims to prevent the subject of being othered by a new discourse rising to prominence. In the novella under discussion in the next section, such a shift in attitude towards dominant discourse is primarily located in the regenerative potential of community, which allows for an emancipation from imposed otherness and points towards a possible formulation of an ethics of ubuntu.

"Hold Back and Observe:" Waiting Differently in Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*

In Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* the (re)negotiation of the responsibilities to others plays a fundamental role in the development of the novella's characters. Rather than focusing on complicity from the angle of the subject who is absolutely responsible for the other, as is the case in the work of Levinas, and, to a certain extent, Sanders and Derrida, the novella provides an alternative perspective on responsibility

from the point of view of the development of a subject that is made other by historical circumstances, in this case apartheid. The characters in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* emancipate from otherness, in the sense that they emerge from a subaltern position through a reformulation of the relations that are restrictive for the individual characters. Crucially, this emancipation takes place through a common effort. I will trace how the formation of a community based on common experiences of waiting forms a way out of the deadlock the characters find themselves in. Their interaction with each other leads to a re-invention of the parameters of their lives and a possibility to find their bearings in a future that was initially foreclosed. The novella seems to reflect the possibility to think of a way to deal with ubuntu's call for a practice of openness and inclusiveness based on undecidability without "damaging" the self, while also maintaining the emphasis on harmony and social cohesion in unifying formulations of ubuntu without effecting rigid communal boundaries. In this sense, the novel seems to reflect a possibility of thinking ubuntu ethically.

Against the grain of all expectations raised by the title of Ndebele's 2003 novella, this book is not about Winnie Mandela. At least, not in the strict sense of the word. It does not exclusively or even primarily deal with the controversial figure Winnie Mandela has become, although thematically speaking, the main characters are grouped around her. As Antjie Krog has noted in her review of the book, Ndebele's use of Winnie's name in the title differs from the way she has referred to herself ever since her divorce from Nelson Mandela, namely as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. Krog poignantly observes that:

> By ignoring that, the writer was saying that this story was about the absence of that hyphenated space; about having had to live a life, to forge a life, within that famous, yet confined, name. ("Penelope" 55)

With this remark, Krog touches on one of the most important themes of the novel, namely the deconstruction of conventions around the notion of the exemplary female figure through a thematisation of naming and responding, in this case during apartheid and its immediate aftermath.

Apart from Winnie, there are five more main characters in this short novel: four unknown South African women and another well known woman, Penelope. The novel opens with a chapter title that frames all five South African women within the boundaries of that particular woman's story: "Penelope's Descendants." Set against the theme of Penelope waiting for Odysseus, Ndebele constructs five different narratives of South African women waiting for their husbands. Some of the men have gone to work in the

mines, overseas to study, or into politics and as a consequence into prison and exile, while others have passed away or are never at home because they sleep around all the time. The endless waiting on the part of the women has caused a state of indeterminate suspension. Unlike Homer's *The Odyssey*, however, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* focuses on the women and on the consequences of the state of waiting that dominates their lives, rather than the plights of their husbands. As such, Ndebele's novella allows for the formulation of a subaltern perspective based on the experience of "others."

This activation of the "Penelope paradigm" – described by Betine van Zyl Smit as the traditional perception of Penelope as the "image of the constant wife … the paradigm of the good woman" (394) – sets up a comparison between Penelope and Winnie Mandela. Indeed, the latter is described by one of the other women as the "ultimate public symbol of women-in-waiting" (Ndebele, *Cry* 61). Although circumstances have forced the women in Ndebele's novel into a state of waiting, not all of them are as "constant" as Penelope. This is especially true for Winnie, who remains dedicated to the cause of the struggle against apartheid, but is also accused of having committed adultery and of having masterminded several crimes against human rights, as discussed in Chapter 1.[13] Whereas Penelope represents the "self-possessed" wife, who remains loyal and composed, Winnie is the rebel, the troublemaker, the unruly wife turned ruler.[14] What the women have in common, however, is that they are subjected to a particular set of repressive measures. The way Penelope is represented in the opening chapter of the novella portrays her as being forced to articulate herself as constant, loyal, and true because of social pressure (Ndebele, *Cry* 3). Similarly (apart from what she did and did not do), social pressure demands that Winnie Mandela behaves like a waiting wife, a leader in the struggle and a loving mother, all at the same time. With precedents like these and from within the context of a repressive system of government, it is, therefore, extremely difficult for the four South African women in Ndebele's novella to articulate a perspective that is not determined by their racial, economic, and gendered repression.[15]

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13 During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing on the Mandela United Football Club, the Commission found Winnie Mandela to be responsible for sanctioning and/or taking part in the carrying out of gross human right violations by the Football Club (*TRC Report Vol. 5* 243-4; see also the online hearing transcript).

14 Penelope's epithet depends on the translation used and varies even within translations. The translation of *The Oddyssey* used here is by Robert Fagles, published by Penguin in 1996. For "self-possessed", see for instance, Agamemnon's famous praise of Penelope (394).

15 This repression takes at least two shapes: many black women were subjected to apartheid's social and economic ramifications. In addition, they were not only subjected to these two

All the women in the novella struggle to come to terms with their state of waiting, but in the second part of the novel, Mamello and the three other "South African descendants" start to devise ways in which they can come to grips with their circumstances. Rather than remaining individually weighed down by their endless waiting, they start to meet regularly to talk about their experiences. This weekly meeting is termed *ibandla labafazi*, which translates roughly as a gathering of women.[16] One of the women further specifies this name, suggesting both "gathering of waiting women" and "gathering of women in mourning" (Ndebele, *Cry* 42). Significantly, some of the women's names are revealed only after the *ibandla* is formed. In the first part, some of them voluntarily share their names when they tell their stories, but their chapters are headed by numbers (i.e. "The First Descendant"). The headings in the second part are formed by each woman's full name. In line with the premise of ubuntu that the individual is created through his/her relations with other people, this suggests that the women only come into their own, or, at least, only become discernable as subjects, after the formation of the small communal group.

Within this group, the issue of naming is a predominant theme. The women (including Winnie) all address each other in different ways, according to their respective social standing with regard to the person they are addressing. As Elizabeth de Kadt points out in her description of linguistic practices in Zulu, avoiding the use of someone's given name is a fundamental part of paying respect that is tightly interwoven with social status (182). The showing of respect, denoted by the verb *hlonipha*,

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factors, but also to the influence these ramifications had on the lives of their husbands, who were forced, during apartheid, to migrate to other parts of the country to look for jobs, to go into exile to save their lives, or to go abroad for an education not available to them in South Africa. In a similar strain, Dorothy Driver, who reads *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* through Ndebele's negotiation of the dialectic between Europe, the West and Africa, points out that before colonisation, such a thing as the nuclear family did not exist for many South African people. However, once the concept of the nuclear family had settled into South Africa's social makeup, the apartheid system threw it into disarray again by the instalment of separatist laws in the 1950's ("Premises" 6). One such instance is the Immorality Act, which made it illegal for people of different colour to have sex, marry or live under the same roof. In addition, the many chaotic and violent dislocations of townships during apartheid tore many nuclear families apart.

16 According to Dorothy Driver, *ibandla* is "the Xhosa / Zulu term for a formal group" ("Premises" 5). An online African glossary defines it as the Zulu word for a tribal council, an assembly, and the members of such an assembly: http://africanhistory.about.com/library/glossary/bldef-iBandla.htm, accessed on May 18, 2007. In Southern Ndebele it means "church people" or "company of people" (http://www.websters-online-dictionary.com/translation/xhosa/ibandla, accessed on May 18, 2007).

is then reciprocated by an attitude of ubuntu, which de Kadt merely translates as "humanity," and which is meant to express the notion that "any person deserves respect, in so far as any person embodies the central quality of *ubuntu*" (183). Mamello, for instance, is reluctant to call Winnie by her first name and refers to her in many ways, varying from formal to informal. Once she even calls her "*nkos'yam*" which roughly translates as "my chief" (Ndebele, *Cry* 54). Delisiwe, on the other hand, uses Winnie's Xhosa first name "Nomzamo" and calls her "*ntombi*", which means girl, girlfriend or young lady and can also be a pet name used by parents for a daughter (42). Mamello calls Delisiwe "aunt," whereas Marara uses "sis" meaning "sister" (40, 67).[17] In this way, the women's relative (and shifting) positions towards each other are reflected in the way they address each other.

As Mamello remarks when she speaks to Winnie: "Africans are unable to exchange names outside of a framework of social positioning" (Ndebele, *Cry* 54). Every act of naming (or asking for a name) thus takes places in an extremely fixed social field that is hierarchically organised and in which ubuntu comes to the fore as a reciprocation of being granted initial respect by someone in a "lower" social position (de Kadt 183). At the same time, however, the social positioning that is attached to African practices of naming as described by Ndebele implies that people are treated with respect and recognition:

> The formality of titles and last names must have something to do with recognising, acknowledging, and honouring strangeness. There is a democracy behind the formality of titles. Everyone is accorded initial respect and recognition. The formal address is a universal place of temporary refuge, offering recognition and equality. (Ndebele, *Cry* 54-55)

Thus, the practice of asking for someone's name, rather than merely locking people in a certain social bond, also makes it possible for them to meet their questioner on a level of equality, which is contrary to Derrida's claim that the revelation of or asking for the name turns a person into a subject of the law, presupposing his "social and familial status" (*Of Hospitality* 23). From the perspective of ubuntu as a convergence of interests, as was the case with the double bind of complicity in the discussion of the problem of the third, the social positioning that results from this structure of naming does not reflect an imposition on the subject, but his or her activation as an acknowledged and welcomed member of the community. The fact that one can resort to a

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17 http://isiZulu.net, accessed on 29 June 2012.

number of names further implies that a name can be in flux and that it can change along with someone's age and status. In other words, someone's name is dependent on his/her position in the social assemblage.

That this assemblage is similar to ubuntu has been duly noted by Dorothy Driver, who considers Ndebele's novella to be a dramatization "of the process of ubuntu in his techniques of characterisation" in which the autonomy of each character is ensured, but is also placed in "the defining context of the group" ("Premises" 12). Indeed, Ndebele has, in both parts of the book, accorded each character her own chapters, which are focalised exclusively through the woman in question. Only in the first and the last chapter does the reader encounter an external narrator. Significantly, the women's names, which reflect their relation to each other and which are described as a "universal place of temporary refuge, offering recognition and equality," are used in the context of the formation of the women's *ibandla*, which functions as a psychological and spiritual resource for the women and provides them with a space for self-questioning and redefinition (see also Driver, "Premises" 11-12). By meeting with others who have suffered from a similar painful waiting, the women find ways to look at themselves anew.

This notion of community is underlined when Mamello gives her reasons for inviting Winnie into their *ibandla*:

> I want us to ponder the departures, the waitings, and the returns in her life. Were they not ours too? I'm just looking for a way we can look at ourselves. A way to prevent us from becoming women who meet and cry. Or if we do meet and cry, that we do so out of choice. (Ndebele, *Cry* 40)

The fact that Mamello describes Winnie's waiting as "ours too" refers to an ubuntu-oriented notion of identification, reciprocity and interconnectedness similar to Muholi's claim that taking photographs of her community automatically implies the project is also about herself (Gunkel 85). What happens to Winnie touches the other women as well, and vice versa. As also came to the fore in the analysis of relationality in the work of Muholi, the women's lives are conceived of as interrelated, even before Winnie Mandela actually materializes in the women's midst and undermines the Levinasian ethical moment as a meeting between two singular subjects. The fact that one's circumstances have to meet the conditions of womanhood and waiting, and that one has to be invited into this community suggests, however, that the *ibandla* is also a fenced off territory that is reminiscent of de Certeau's rendering of dominant discourse as strategic and that repeats the excluding aspects of ubuntu as discussed

in the Introduction and Chapter 1. However, as in Muholi's photography, this community of women comes about because of a former exclusion from a larger community. Exclusion here almost appears as a side-effect of a previous exclusion. As suggested by the earlier designation of identity politics as a strategy, it seems as if this group first has to seclude itself in order to establish a community that is not determined by the exclusion effected by the larger community. This kind of strategic response to oppression is not taken into consideration in Levinas' theorisation of the ethical moment, or in Derrida's reading of the problem of the third.

However, the individual attempt at regeneration through the creation of community is rather similar to the betrayal in the Levinasian face to face. As we have seen in Derrida's interpretation of Levinas, the betrayal exists as a paradoxical constituent of the subject. On the one hand, the subject is constructed through its relations with others (just like in ubuntu), but on the other, and simultaneously, these relations constitute a betrayal of a complete responsibility to the other, the unconditionality of which, in turn, threatens to consume and annihilate the subject. Something similar seems to be the case in the ubuntu-inspired formation of the *ibandla* in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. The women have continued to wait for their loved ones to come home, despite the possibility that they might not return. Nonetheless, knowing themselves to be inextricably bound up with them, they manifest complete responsibility towards these relations. As their stories attest, however, this waiting wreaks havoc on the lives of the women, robbing them of agency and preventing them from adjusting the relational constellations in their lives to their changed positions. In the case of Mamello, for instance, the unending waiting has resulted in her suffering several nervous breakdowns. The women's lack of betrayal, one might say, thus has a devastating effect on their lives. It seems, then, that deciding the ambivalent struggle between interests that lies at the heart of the ethical moment in favour of this other has dire consequences for those who are not in a position of power. Indeed, what room for manoeuvre does someone in a subaltern position have when it comes to making oneself recognizable as a person, if one is restricted by the idea of responsibility for the other as primary?

It comes as no surprise, then, that Mamello's remark about the *ibandla* cited above signals a desire to regain a form of agency with regard to the women's suffering. Even though the concept of the *ibandla* might not change (the women still meet and cry, grieve and mourn together), their attitude towards the pain that caused its formation will: at least they will *choose* to meet and cry. In Mamello's ubuntu-inspired reasoning, then, agency and a re-articulation of the self can be claimed by sharing experiences in a delimited, exclusive, and, most importantly, safe space. In addition,

by inviting Winnie into their midst, the re-articulation of their former oppression by the paradigms of apartheid and of Penelope finds a way to stage itself; each woman is given the opportunity, apart from rendering the dramatic plot of her story, to enunciate the emotional and psychological consequences of her enforced articulation to a "new member." Since Winnie does not know their stories yet, the women can articulate a newfound agency through the choices they make in the narratives directed at her. No longer a number, no longer just one more waiting woman, another instance of the economic, political and social consequences of apartheid, but a member of a supportive community, this *ibandla*, through the creation of its own conventions, norms and values (one instance being the rigid rituals of their tea drinking), provides each woman with a set of self-controlled possibilities in relation to which they can begin the process of re-articulation.

'Mannete Mofolo seems particularly successful in this respect. Her husband left Lesotho to find work in the mines, only to come home and send money less and less often. At first, 'Mannete is extremely concerned and travels to South Africa to look for him, but cannot find him anywhere. What 'Mannete never learns is that, in the meantime, her husband has started another family in South Africa. At a certain point, however, 'Mannete stops waiting for her husband. Unlike Penelope, who stands at the base of the paradigm of the waiting woman, 'Mannete does not wait for her husband infinitely, does not keep his seat warm, or defend his property against a herd of suitors through wily tricks. Instead, 'Mannete takes control of the household, opens a store next to her house and is thus able to provide for her children and pay for their education. The only question that has remained after his many years of absence is the following: "what would I do if my husband returned tomorrow, or walked in just now as I'm speaking?" (Ndebele, *Cry* 80).

When her children are old enough to take care of themselves and her primary concerns have lifted, 'Mannete gains an important insight. She realises that if her husband were to return home, he would not be walking back into her life straight away, but will have to start returning by entering *her* home. Instead of succumbing to the obligation to embrace their husbands on the advent of their return, 'Mannete urges the other women not to respond to this imposed social demand:

> Hold back and observe. Keep those arms folded over the cushion of your breast. Don't even ask where he has been. Ever ... If you ask him where he has been, your question will become his door to his house. And you're finished, my girl. That's when you begin the great response. Responding to him as you slowly enter his house until you are completely swallowed up by it. (Ndebele, *Cry* 81)

In this line of reasoning, not to respond equals holding on to one's options, which allows 'Manette to prevent herself from becoming "completely swallowed up" by the obligations imposed on her by her husband, a phrasing particularly reminiscent of Derrida's "vertigo of ethical violence" caused by the primacy of the other's interest ("Adieu" 27). She is adamant that the negotiations of her husband's return would occur under her own conditions, which are significantly described as a strategic claiming of ownership over the house. However, the fact that 'Mannete does not refrain from referring to her husband as a possible returnee also suggests that she does not negate the paradigm of the waiting woman completely. She is still, despite her statement to the contrary, waiting for him.

At the same time, though, she is also re-evaluating her attitude towards the relations in her life by consciously preventing an unconditional allegiance to the other as described by Levinas. She still welcomes him, but also forces her husband to accept, from the moment he walks through the door, that he is a guest in the literal and metaphorical home she has constructed during his absence. The obligations of welcome, hospitality and responsibility are still in place, but 'Mannete has radically altered her attitude towards them by redefining her complicity in how they are put into practice.[18] In this sense, 'Mannete's response is, despite the strategic claiming of space, also a tactical one, that is, what Ross Chambers has called "oppositional": "it avoids overt challenges to the prevailing situation and concentrates instead on personal or, at least, nonsystemic transformations of its features into something more congenial to individual or group needs and purposes" (7). Her shift in attitude towards the situation turns the dominant and strategic imposition of social obligations into a practice that suits her needs and changes their repressive effect.

The last chapter of the novella affirms the regenerative initiative of the formation of the *ibandla* and 'Mannete's tactical re-articulation of the moment of her husband's homecoming. It opens optimistically with the image of the five women in a van taking a leisurely trip. By now, Winnie has materialised in the midst of the *ibandla*, which suggests that once one is invited into the community of women, it is taken for granted that one accepts. They have rented a car, a trailer, and a driver and are heading out

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18 Although an assertion of agency, then, this interpretation by 'Mannete also confirms Mireille Rosello's observation in *Postcolonial Hospitality* that "no discussion of hospitality can ignore the troubling elimination of the female figure from the primordial guest-host pair and how hard it is for women to be treated as guests" (119). As this chapter has shown by discussing the perspective of subjects who are not in a position of power and control, women, especially black women might also have a different relation to the Levinasian face to face moment, a relation that is different, yet again, for black lesbian women in South Africa.

of Johannesburg, the site of so much strife. As Meg Samuelson makes clear, they are "eschewing the home – and thus their roles as waiting widows – in favour of a new found mobility. ... The novella's conclusion, then, can be read as an attempt to map out future social and cultural directions" (Samuelson 223). Having left behind their attitudes of anticipation, they are now able to drive through a country that imposed so many restrictions on identification and travel before. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in this final chapter, circumstances point to the fact that apartheid has ended. The country of restriction and hostility has become (in this fictional view) a country of hospitality and possibility.

It is significant that Penelope, too, is encountered as a character during these final scenes. The women literally pick her up on the side of the road, offering her a lift. Meg Samuelson acutely notices that the "happenstance of their meeting emphasises the contingency of the grouping they form and avoids the foundational fictions that may suggest an essential and ahistorical shared female identity" (227). As such, Penelope as the figure of "the stranger" (which is also the name of the last chapter) represents the importance of approaching ubuntu from the perspective of a temporary and contingent convergence of interests in which the other is recognizable as a potential guest and that is open to change because it creates and determines, each time anew, its own modes of interaction.

When Winnie guesses who the woman is, Penelope explains that, unhappy about Odysseus' lack of sensitivity as he returned to Ithaca, she is travelling around the world in an attempt to make amends for the stifling social bonds she has imposed on women, thereby emphatically acknowledging her complicity in the creation of the "Penelope paradigm":[19]

[19] In Homer's original, Odysseus performs cleansing rituals in his own home after killing the suitors. There is no public ceremony as suggested by Penelope in Ndebele's novella. The morning after Odysseus has slain the suitors, it is not even known to the outside world that the lion's share of Ithaca's young nobility is dead. In the morning, Odysseus wakes Telemachos and the swineherd and goes to his father's orchard outside the city: "But now I must be off to the upland farm, / our orchard green with trees, to see my father, / good old man weighed down with so much grief for me" (Homer 23: 406-409). There is no mention of public cleansing rituals, merely a suggestion that Odysseus desires to see his father again. This much becomes clear, too, from their reunion in the orchard. When the fathers of the suitors find out their sons have been killed, they come to look for Odysseus on his father's land. It is there, at the end of book 24, that Odysseus and the noblemen hurl themselves into another fight. When the first men have fallen, Pallas Athena intervenes one last time: "Athena ... cried out in a piercing voice that stopped all fighters cold, / 'Hold back, you men of Ithaca, back from brutal war! / Break off – shed no more blood – make peace at once!'" (Homer 24: 582-585). This is how the strife is ended. Ndebele's version is a re-writ-

> I'll travel on, seeking out key moments in the growth of the world's consciousness, and to lay at each such moment the imprint of my message. Affirming new ways of experiencing relationships wherever they emerge. (Ndebele, *Cry* 120)

The fact that Penelope appears at this particular point in the novel suggests that the phrase "key moments in the growth of the world's consciousness" refers to the women's psychological move, represented by their reconfiguration of the relations in their lives. It is important, too, that Penelope imprints her message only after she is offered a ride in the women's van. Only after the other women have taken the stranger into their midst does Penelope recount her story and identify herself, much like the way hospitality comes to the fore in *The Odyssey*.[20] As such, the women's act of hospitality – an act of openness to a stranger who is yet also recognizable – makes possible the fleeting meeting of all of the six women that forms the balanced closure of the novella. Through communality with Penelope, Winnie, and themselves, the women have succeeded in disconnecting themselves from a gendered and racialised waiting. They have released themselves from restricting and stifling conventions and are driving towards a more leisurely future that is no longer defined by a single obligation.

Concluding Remarks

Although the analysis of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* given above certainly favours a loosening of rigid interrelational ties, this does not suggest that it is particularly

ing of the end of *The Odyssey* that portrays Odysseus as preferring public matters over private ones, which supports Ndebele's description of the tensions between the public and the private (a tension so abundantly clear in the lives of Winnie and Nelson Mandela) throughout the book.

20 In *The Odyssey*, a guest is welcomed into the house of the host without being asked for a name or a reason. Only after the guest (more often than not, male) has been provided for (by women) in the form of physical care (food, drink, bath), is he or she expected to reveal his or her identity (i.e. Homer 3: 77-79). In Homer's text it is considered wise to be hospitable towards strangers since they could very well be a god or goddess in disguise. Inhospitality may thus be severely punished. Furthermore, making friends through hospitality (known as guest friendship) implies that a good host will be received with similar care when returning the visit. This is also pointed out by Rosello: "Isn't a guest always implicitly an equal, who could, presumably, reciprocate at a later date, in a different space, at a different time?" (9). In Homer it seems, however, that the guest is treated less as an equal than as a (possible) superior. For a Christian interpretation, see Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels in disguise" ("Hebrews" 13:2).

responsible or helpful to "hop" from one community or social cluster to the next, nor to re-align one's interest or shed one's responsibility whenever this seems convenient; what the reading of the novella emphasises is a notion of community that reflects on and allows for fluctuation. Exclusion as a catalyst for community formation is key here – if one is not excluded or threatened, there seems to be little reason to forge new relations. Both Muholi's photographs and Ndebele's novel show that the positing of a self-identified, delimited and, as such, strategically formed group gives formerly excluded individuals access to safety and self-empowerment in the face of a larger excluding community. However, the problems attached to identity politics, as discussed in relation to Muholi's work especially, also forewarn against the consolidation of these ties. In this sense, both the photography and the novella, discussed here in relation to Levinas' ethical injunction, call for an approach along the lines of ubuntu as convergence and negotiation.

As we have seen, the analysis of Muholi's work makes clear that the ethical moment does not take place between the two isolated (and thus circumscribed) instances of subject and other, but, rather, that those who are present in the face to face encounter are, prior to this moment, already part of relational constellations. Through her insistence on showing positive images (with an emphasis on the plural, a plurality that is related through seriality), Muholi simultaneously manages to nuance her unifiying gesture of grouping different people under the banner of "black queerness." Because the plurality is mediated in the form of a series that is, although stolen and interrupted, potentially open-ended, this unifying gesture is undermined even further. As such, the notion that one leading norm should be extended to include as many individuals as possible is both firmly posited in order to achieve equality for all South African citizens but also reformulated in order to reflect respect for diversity within this community. In this way, Muholi's work reflects a face to face relation that is based on the need to relate to more than one other simultaneously and opens up an alternative to the Levinasian ethical encounter by allowing for a reading of the deadlock of complicity as an activation of the responsibility of the multiply related subject, rather than as a betrayal of any of these relations.

My reading of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* further signals a need to remain critical towards these ties in order to keep them flexible. What is more, the novella suggests that the main characters, through re-staging themselves in their newfound community, find possibilities for travelling towards an openness in the future, rather than waiting for one single predetermined prerogative. Especially 'Mannete Mofolo displays an employment of the imagination that offers a possibility to formulate change: instead of merely responding to the implications of responsibility as a waiting

for the other, she changes her attitude towards the situation and invites the other into her experience of this alteration.

The novella also shows, however, that change is not a matter of what came first: the chicken or the egg. On the one hand, it is suggested that the creation of community leads to freedom, the end of apartheid and to the key moment in history that is the obtained liberation of the women. On the other hand, it is precisely the end of apartheid that enhances the development of their *ibandla*; if apartheid had not ended, Winnie's prohibition to move around freely could not have been lifted and the women could probably not have rented a car. So, in turn, this change of paradigm makes it possible for them to put their re-imagined possibilities into practice and helps them to articulate and perform their newfound freedom.

Together, then, the relations between these two objects, ubuntu, and Levinasian theory show that being multiply related does not form a threat to ethical "purity." Instead, multiplicity actualises the relationality of both subjects and communities because it opens up the need for a continuous negotiation of different interests, or, if you will, responsible complicities. This negotiation is necessary in order to create a sense of community that takes the notion that people and their relations are per definition not static or independent into account.

With regard to Ndebele's call that uncertainty might provide a responsible way to construct relations and solutions in the public sphere, it is important to emphasise that the way people are positioned relationally, but also historically, discursively or economically, affects their ability to rely on a notion like uncertainty. As I have mentioned in Chapter 2 and have more extensively discussed in this chapter, both in relation to the work of Muholi and that of Ndebele, it can be necessary to strategically position oneself first before any abandonment to uncertainty or responsibility to others becomes possible. The ethical pull of ubuntu as a convergence of interests that are located in a particular time and space and that need to be responsibly negotiated as such can help to give shape to the way we are related and actively relate to others.

In the next chapter, the focus will shift to more explicit expressions of ubuntu in the public domain, where different interests and their location in time and space are explored in how ubuntu is "used" in everyday practice. More specifically, I will focus on ubuntu's uses in "market-oriented" approaches, which seem to have become an increasingly dominant feature of ubuntu's dissemination globally. In these everyday practices, ubuntu's aura of responsibility and inclusion is strategically used in order to serve a very particular interest, namely that of profit. This might sound cynical. However, when investigating the possibilities of opening ubuntu up as a concept, it is absolutely necessary to look not only at the term's conjugations with idealistic and

ethical associations, but also at the specific role these associations play in the way ubuntu is used in issues regarding economy and property. By exploring those relations, I want to further excavate what I perceive to be the potential of ubuntu's negotiation of fluid communal boundaries safeguarding the lives of individual subjects in how to think of relationality in the public sphere.

Chapter 4

“The Ubuntu Strategy”: Commodification and the Affective Politics of Ubuntu

Introduction

The main title of this chapter was taken from a commercial aired in South Africa in 2009, when South Africa organised the Confederations Cup in order to prepare the country for the enormous task of hosting the soccer World Cup in 2010. During this time, British Petroleum (BP) aired a series of three commercials that won the Loerie Award, the South African award for best brand communication, the year it was released ("Winning Entry"). Each commercial depicts a soccer match between two stereotypical groups from South African society that are, because of the nature of the game, automatically in opposition. All three matches end in a tie, however, which allows for the same happy ending in each separate commercial represented by a group photo full of smiling people. One match pitches the divas against the taxi drivers, in another the car guards take on the boytjies, and in the last one the mamas play the café owners (see Ogilvy, "Divas," "Car Guards," and "Café Owners").[1]

At first sight, the commercials seem to be rather harmless, resembling a remake of Monty Python's soccer game between German and Greek philosophers more than anything else.[2] In all three commercials, however, because stereotypes are placed opposite each other, several identity categories are made to intersect in a problematic manner. In the case of the car guards versus the boytjies, for instance, the car guards are represented by a team of predominantly black, small and scruffy looking men, whereas the boytjies seem to be well groomed, muscular and mostly of a light skin colour, thus lending an unequal economic and racial dimension to the match.[3] In the commercial that features the café owners playing against the mamas, intersections of race and class are extended to the issue of gender and reflected, crucially, by the mamas main plan of attack, explicitly called "the ubuntu strategy" by the commentator (Ogilvy, "Café Owners").[4] This invocation of ubuntu in the context of a humorous staging of a strategy to communally achieve a certain goal crucially reflects on the

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1 "Boytjie" is Afrikaans slang for "jock," but can also mean "little boy." It can be used as a term of endearment, but is sometimes also used derogatorily when referring to black men.

2 This sketch was first aired in the second episode of the two Monty Python episodes broadcasted in Germany in 1972: *Monty Python's Fliegender Zirkus* ("Monty").

3 It is easy to imagine what this relation would look like in "real life," with one of the car guards offering to watch one of the boytjies' cars for a couple of rand.

4 In this commercial, all the mamas are black, but in South Africa the word "mama" is more generally used (mostly by black people) to respectfully refer to older women, both black and white. See also the discussion of naming in Ndebele's novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* in Chapter 3.

Figure 13.

Figure 14.

Figure 15.

Figure 16.

Figure 13-16. Screenshots from "The Café Owners vs The Mamas."

term's continuing development, especially its increasing commodification, which is the topic at hand in this chapter. I will, therefore, first analyse the use of ubuntu in this commercial, before outlining the arguments that flow from this use at the end of the introduction.

The "ubuntu strategy" consists of a circle formed by the mamas that tries to manoeuvre the ball towards the opponents' goal (fig. 13). As such, it associates ubuntu with a common effort that, symbolically, keeps the opponents on the outside of the circle and the ball on the inside, preventing the other team from coming anywhere near it and repeating ubuntu's potential for exclusion. Initially, the strategy fails because the circle of mamas pushes over some of the café owners. Despite, or perhaps because of substantial protest from the mamas, this results in a booking by the referee (fig. 14). The second time the strategy is deployed, however, it succeeds and we can clearly see how one of the mamas, by way of the famous cultural practice of carrying things on your head, breaks out of the circle that has allowed her to approach the opponent's goal to score the game-tying goal (fig. 15).

When the commercial's tagline "Beyond 2010, there's a nation united" appears on screen, it turns out, however, that the stereotypes and "the ubuntu strategy" are used not just for comic effect, but also to communicate a message of national unity (fig. 16). In short, no matter who you are or what group of people you belong to, the common effort of hosting a successful World Cup crosses all boundaries. The use of the word "beyond" projects this spirit of camaraderie into the future. The World Cup is thus implicitly presented as a catalyst for national cohesion that does not yet exist, but is intended to last, long after the catalyzing spark has expired. This "feel good" sentiment is subsequently extended to the two brands depicted in the final frame: FIFA and BP (fig. 17). The two final frames of the commercial thus reveal an overt linking of the fate of South Africa as a nation with the implicit interests of one of the biggest multinationals in the world. In other words, South African national unity is made to serve the commercial interest of sponsorship.

Figure 17. Screenshot from "The Café Owners vs The Mamas."

As Alan Bairner notes in his study of the relation between sport, nationalism and globalization, "there is little point in seeking to deny the extent to which global capitalism has affected the ways in which sport is played, administered, packaged, and watched throughout the world" (176). Indeed, "the flagships of the global sporting economy," like the Olympic Games and the soccer World Cup, result in a mutually constitutive relation between nationalism and globalization, in which the localized events of different nations battling each other would not be possible without global sponsorship and vice versa (176).[5] However, no matter how heavily sponsored an event is or how dominant the

[5] Silk, Andrews and Cole, in *Sport and Corporate Nationalisms*, even argue that "the nation and national culture have become principal (albeit perhaps unwilling) accomplices" within the process of global capitalism's attempts to "capitalize upon the nation as a source of collective identification and differentiation" (7). On the role of sport in the creation of national unity, see Hobsbawm and Ranger's volume *The Invention of Tradition*, especially Hobsbawm's chapter dealing with the relation between sport and nationalism between 1870 and 1914 (290-1 and 297-302). A pertinent example in the context of South Africa is the representation of Nelson Mandela's political use of the social cohesion achieved by South Africa winning the 1995 rugby World Cup in the film *Invictus* (2009).

"emergence and consolidation of a global sporting political economy involving the sale of merchandise, sponsorship, labor migration, and so on," fans rarely "wave the colors of sport's major sponsors, except when their names appear on the shirt of a club or a national team" (Bairner 176, 2). From this perspective, the most effective way to sell one's brand would be to put it on merchandise that sports national or club colours.

BP's plan of action, however, is different. By attaching its name to a message of soccer-oriented national unity, BP manages to tap into not one, but two positive associations related to the anticipation of hosting the World Cup. These associations have to do not only with the South African national team being able to participate in the World Cup in the first place, but also with the circumstances: the World Cup was expected to create job opportunities, to bring money into the country through tourism, and, most importantly, to provide South Africa with another opportunity to achieve its long awaited national unity through the common effort of making the World Cup a success.[6]

During and after the World Cup, it would turn out, however, that these expectations were not to be fulfilled. For instance, the contracts with the labourers needed to build stadiums all over the country were not prolonged after the buildings were finished and South Africa loses money on these stadiums every single day because they lack alternative lucrative purposes ("Trademark 2010"). Furthermore, the message of national unity and progress is a particularly bitter pill to swallow for the people carelessly grouped under the stereotypes reiterated in the commercial by FIFA, the organiser of the World Cup. FIFA denied contracts to small entrepreneurs and members of South Africa's "informal economy" represented here by the café owners, but more specifically by the mamas who are depicted with a "mealie-" stand. So-called "unofficial" retailers were not allowed to come anywhere near the World Cup sites and were removed if they did not or could not adhere to FIFA sales regulations ("Trademark 2010"). This economic reality, which intersects with a racial divide, underlines the irony of the FIFA/BP sponsored call to rally behind a common cause.
The fact that the "ubuntu strategy" is brought to bear on a team of café owners who are referred to by Greek family names further complicates this economic divide, because it makes use of the stereotypical idea that South African café owners are usually of Greek origin and notoriously racist. The depicted ubuntu strategy, then, is specifically aimed at excluding a group of people who are generally not considered to

6 For a similar logic, see the World Cup commercial by the First National Bank (FNB), which was aired during the preparations of the World Cup and features people at an airport arguing about the need to think positively in order to make the World Cup a success ("2010 FIFA").

be "real" South Africans and subtly reiterates the exclusionary and homophobic claim that foreigners are "stealing" business opportunities from "real" South Africans. This constitutes a repeat of the way Zapiro's cartoon, with which this dissertation opened, critiques uses of ubuntu that aim to delineate who should be included and excluded in an already determined community – a delineation that is echoed in the circle formed by the mamas, which keeps the ball in and the opponents out.

In this commercial, then, ubuntu is no longer staged as a promotable ethical stance towards one's fellow human beings, but as a conscious strategy to achieve a certain goal in an antagonistic field. Would it, for instance, not have been more reflective of ubuntu's qualities of reconciliation and hospitality to have the two opposing teams come together as one, rather than to stage ubuntu as something that takes place within and benefits only a certain group? By restricting the use of the ubuntu strategy to the mamas, the commercial stages it as something only African women do, which both racialises and genders the concept. This use is familiar from the TRC context described in Chapter 1, where, although efforts were made to broaden the scope of ubuntu, its most exemplary proponents were often black African women who acted as representatives of the violence that befell their children and husbands. In the light of the FIFA sales regulations mentioned above, the restriction of ubuntu to the mamas is also a matter of class.[7]

In this sense, the World Cup itself comes to replace the function ubuntu had shortly after the end of apartheid, namely to mark a nationalism that strives for the common good of all citizens through unison. The commercial utilizes a similar unifying gesture for the promotion and branding of national sentiment and also promotes the company that sports this sentiment in the process. The deliverance of this message is achieved through a humorous presentation, or, more specifically, a tongue in cheek

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7 The problematic foregrouding of issues of race, gender and class is also present in the case of the "Reitz 4," a group of students from the University of the Free State who made a YouTube video in which they parodied their historically "white" university's integration policy being extended to student residences. If their university residence is to be open to everyone, the video reasons, then the new additions need to keep up with the standards of the residence. Therefore, the (white) group tests the ability of the (black) housekeepers and gardeners from the Reitz student residence to go through student initiation rituals, which includes playing rugby, drinking excessively and eating food that was made to appear as if it had been urinated upon. The employees afterwards sued the students for the video. The contents were deemed racist and disrespectful in court. For a detailed analysis see Soudien's "'Who Takes Responsibility for the Reitz Four?' Puzzling Our Way through Higher Education Transformation Policy in South Africa."

reinforcement of the stereotypes of certain people from South African society as well as those related to ubuntu as a concept.

As Rosello has pointed out in *Declining the Stereotype*, the arrival of the message of stereotyping is, of course, closely related to its effects on the recipient:

> The paradoxical violence of stereotypes uttered in public is that they are often presented as a chance to make us prove our loyalty to the speaker but also as an opportunity to be accepted as part of a group. Here is an open invitation to belong, to be welcomed by a supposedly unanimous community. (Rosello, *Declining* 11)

The use of ubuntu in the commercial, therefore, besides positing ubuntu as an attribute of the gendered and racialised stereotype of the "mama," who is allotted a certain social class, also (re)creates another stereotype that is familiar from the TRC context, namely that of the responsible, caring and positive South African citizen. The viewer of this commercial is interpellated as, or, at least, encouraged to become someone who prioritises national unity and effectively subjects the achievement of racial, gender and economic equality to this bigger purpose. As such, it is exactly through the supposedly humorous staging of ubuntu in relation to and as reinforcement of certain stereotypes in South African society that the full impact of what I mean by "the ubuntu strategy" most forcefully emerges.

The title of this chapter, then, does not merely signify the soccer tactic used by the mamas, even as this tactic reveals an attachment of ubuntu to race, gender and class. It also refers to the use of or reliance on ubuntu as a sentiment that triggers the consumer's sense of responsibility in promoting certain commodities. The fact that this series of commercials, which advertises nationalistic sentiment and activates such a sentiment in its viewer, won a prestigious national award shows that, apparently, nationalism's exclusionary baggage has become acceptable and available for commodification. It is this move to commodify a certain sentiment that I refer to when using the phrase "the ubuntu strategy." However, my use of this phrase also explicitly refers back to my earlier description of strategy and tactics in terms of de Certeau. That is to say, in the face of the dominant concern that the concept of ubuntu will be diluted and "spoiled" by its commercial use, I propose to approach these strategic uses of ubuntu by identifying and analysing what they reveal about the term in order to pinpoint a possible location within these strategies from which a tactical response becomes possible.

But what does it mean to designate ubuntu as either a strategy or a tactic? Primarily, describing ubuntu as a strategy highlights the power relations at play in the ways the term has been used "on the market" in recent years. At the same time, however, following de Certeau, aligning ubuntu with the term "strategy" implies that we are talking about a circumscribed use of the term that might close off ubuntu's potential for open-ended itineraries. In this sense, it seems more constructive to think this potential as a tactic because the latter's focus on "the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop" allows us to look at the excess of signification that is inherent to inhabiting any system (de Certeau xviii).

The aim is to find out, by tracing some of the effects of the popularity of ubuntu, what these excesses tell us about the concept, its potential for social and communal cohesion, and the role affinity and affect can play in the (re)interpretation of ubuntu in the context of commodification. In the first section of this chapter, therefore, I will further explicate the relation between strategies of group formation and affect by bringing Sara Ahmed's formulation of the circulation of affect, which functions much like circulation in economic systems, to bear on the commercial that I have analysed above.

The role of what could be called the affective aspects of ubuntu in the marketing of products will be discussed in the second section by analysing the way in which the fair trade product Ubuntu Cola is marketed. This analysis feeds into a discussion about what seems to be a general reliance in marketing and management discourses on the implementation of ubuntu as a strategy that is supposed to enlarge a particular company's competitive advantage. This is, understandably, the point where critiques of the commodification of ubuntu are located, resulting in an attempt to separate ubuntu as a concept from its implementation in the market. I argue, however, that ubuntu in its capitalist guise is not necessarily at odds with other interpretations of the term and analyse how this intersection reveals ubuntu's hidden reference to the notion of private property, exactly because of its dominant associations of sharing and group solidarity.

The issues of property and sharing are taken up in the third section, where I analyse another ubuntu product, namely Ubuntu Linux, which is an open-source software system based on a concept of sharing and co-operation that claims to evade and oppose commercialisation. As is the case with Ubuntu Cola, ubuntu, in the implementation of this product, serves as an ethical veneer that obscures relations of materiality and power. The proclaimed openness and co-operative quality of the relations between people who are making use of and are working on the development of

the Linux operating system effectively conceal the material conditions related to the product as well as the hierarchical make-up of the company. As I will argue throughout this chapter, however, the relations between things are inextricably bound to and made possible by relations between people.

In the fourth section, I will take this premise of the unavoidable connection between things and people and try to find points of entry from which to begin an analysis of how ubuntu can serve as an invitation to re-think how people can effect and affect these alignments in their dealings with each other. Since ubuntu has been repeatedly interpreted as a survival strategy amongst South Africa's poorest people, I will do so through the lens of Hardt and Negri's theorisation of what they have called "the poor." This leads me to the final section and last case study of this dissertation, which deals with the politics of Abehlali baseMjondolo, better known as the Durban Shack Dwellers Movement. This movement can be read as a combination of Hardt and Negri's theory of the creation of the common through politically organising the poor with an ubuntu-inspired model of consensus politics. I will argue that this movement, which operates on the local level and aims to adapt its form and actions to the issues at hand, performs a potentially constant re-negotiation of the power relations that come to the fore in the ways different interests intersect, and thus provides at least one way in which to imagine what could be called a politics of ubuntu as the convergence of interest.

Strategy and Stickiness: Affect and Group Formation

In the BP commercial, the supposedly humorous staging of stereotypes results in what Rosello calls "an open invitation to belong" (*Declining* 11). I argue that it is exactly the humour in the commercial that aims "to effect a pleasurable sense of togetherness" and invites the viewer to attach the positive association of having laughed at this commercial to its message (11). In this section I will elaborate on the role affect plays in the mechanics of how such invitations are offered and start to outline how the analysis of these mechanics influences ubuntu as a term, where its moments for redefinition are located and how we can begin to think about staking out some of the possibilities of the use of ubuntu in effecting change in the face of repressive discourses.

Sara Ahmed has, from the perspective of cultural studies, extensively researched the role of affect in the formation of groups and communities. In this chapter, I will use the term "affect" along the lines delineated by Ahmed in the introduction to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, where she relies on the word "impression" in order to

describe the role of emotion in her work. The most important aspect of "impression," Ahmed claims, is that it allows her to "avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be 'experienced' as distinct realms of human 'experience'" (6). Reading "affect" through Ahmed's description of "impression," it acquires the following meanings: to make an impression on someone, to be under an impression, to create an impression or to leave an impression. The most important aspect of these layers of meaning is that it "allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace. So not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression; they impress me, and impress upon me" (6). I insist on translating these qualities of the word "impression" to the word "affect" for several reasons that have to do with emphasizing aspects of the latter word. Firstly, "affect" is about the experience of being related to or coming into contact with other "surfaces." Secondly, this experience is, as Ahmed points out, not restricted to emotion or bodily sensation, but also involves cognition. Thirdly, these two points taken together emphasize that "affect" is about doing something, about acting, and that, in some cases, such an action can be consciously "affected," in the sense that it can be a performance put on to achieve a certain goal. Read in this way, the word "affect" is to be understood as always already containing both relationality and a strategic and tactical potential.

In both *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* and her article "Affective Economies," Ahmed aims to describe "how affect functions to align some subjects with some others and against other others" ("Affective" 117; see also *Cultural* 122). According to Ahmed, it is the movement between signs that determines how "affective" they are. Emotion is "economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement" ("Affective" 119). Ahmed is arguing for an approach to affect and emotion that does not rely on the characteristics usually associated with them. In evolutionary theory, for instance, emotion is often taken as a sign of mankind's "prehistory" and is associated with passivity and weakness. It is considered to be inferior, or at least, located "beneath" or "behind" the intellect (*Cultural* 3). Ahmed displaces this binary between intellect and emotion by pointing to the fact that some emotions are considered to be socially appropriate and acceptable but others are not (*Cultural* 3). Finally, she deconstructs the assumption that emotions are either inherent to, or caused by qualities inherent to certain subjects or objects by demonstrating that, instead, emotions are the product of how these subjects and objects circulate amongst each other and of how this circulation or movement affects them (*Cultural* 10).
From a Marxist perspective, Ahmed describes affect not as the drive to *accumulate* value, power or meaning, but as something that *is accumulated* over time:

> Some signs … increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to "contain" affect. ("Affective" 120)

The analogy that Ahmed draws here is with commodity fetishism: "'feelings' become 'fetishes,' qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation" (*Cultural* 11). In this way, "feelings [seem to] appear in objects, or indeed *as* objects with a life of their own" ("Affective" 120). Ahmed argues for a model of affect that takes these conditions of "production and circulation" into account. In the context of the role of love in discourses surrounding the nation state, Ahmed remarks that by looking at processes of affect rather than focusing on affect as an inherent quality of a certain subject or object, we can create "the understanding that love comes with conditions however unconditional it might feel" and that by thinking this way "we can perhaps find a different kind of line or connection between the others we care for, and the world to which we want to give shape" (*Cultural* 141).

This kind of attention to the processes of circulation of affect can be helpful to trace the effects of ubuntu's commodification on the investigation of possible (re) inscriptions of the term. Ahmed's claim, however, that we need to find "connections between the others we care for," in other words, between those we already consider worth caring for, seems to contradict her deconstruction of the notion of love as based on identity (*Cultural* 122-143). In fact, it takes us back to the ambivalence that comes to the fore in many uses of ubuntu as well, namely that the injunction to practice ubuntu towards others often results in a process of exclusion whereby ubuntu remains reserved for others "like me." It bears repetition that, as became clear from my analysis of Zapiro's cartoon on the role of ubuntu in the outbursts of xenophobic violence in South Africa in May 2008, to profess a love for others, which in the case of ubuntu is often translated as generosity, hospitality, friendliness, care, compassion and sharing, can also be a boundary marker for belonging (Tutu 34).

The circulation of affect takes place according to what Ahmed calls their "rippling effect" ("Affective" 120). Feelings move sideways, depending on the associations created by the movement between objects, as well as backwards, since the way affect circulates at least partly depends on the historicity of these objects ("Affective" 120). In other words, the way we experience affect "may depend on histories that remain alive insofar as they have already left their impressions." As a result, feelings "may stick to some others, and slide over others" (*Cultural* 8). Ahmed calls this double effect (of side-ways and backward movement) the metonymic slide of affect as it functions to create

relations of resemblance between figures. This slide creates the characteristics that are considered to belong to any particular body, subject, object, or groups of these and functions to cluster certain groups of subjects in opposition to others. In the words of de Certeau, these associations strategically create "the place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it" (de Certeau xix).

To return to the example of the outbursts of xenophobic violence during 2008, one can see how this kind of affective sticking would work in practice. The targeted foreigners (black Africans not from South Africa) are accused of encroaching on the job opportunities, health care benefits and even women to which "real South Africans" are entitled by virtue of their citizenship. The economic difficulties of South Africa after apartheid are here explicitly associated with a concept of "the stealing foreigner," even though there is no "real" causal connection. The stickiness between them is the effect of the movement between the signs of "economic difficulty" and "foreigner," of how these two signs rub off on each other under certain historical and economic circumstances.

Nigel C. Gibson, an activist and philosopher active in the UK and in South Africa, has suggested that this movement is purposefully created by South Africa's policies regarding immigration and repeated in "media hostile to 'illegal immigrants'" (701). As Gibson remarks, "One cannot escape the 'primary economics' (as Fanon calls it) in the new South Africa, where the poor *are continually told* that African 'aliens' are to blame for their situation and the ruin of their country" (703, emphasis mine; see also Neocosmos 588-90). The alignment according to citizenship is actually formulated along the lines of ethnicity, where poor black people are "being apprehended by the police for being 'too dark' or 'walking like a black foreigner'" (702). This "ethnicity" of South African citizenship, fuelled by a discourse of "South African exceptionalism" with regard to the rest of Africa, as noted by Neocosmos, turns into what Arjun Appadurai calls predatory identities, "whose social construction and mobilization require the extinction of other, proximate social categories, defined as threats to the very existence of some group, defined as we" (Neocosmos 590; Appadurai 51; see also 83). The more the majority's fear of becoming minor – in numerical, cultural or, in this case, economic terms – attached to a certain group of bodies is reiterated, circulated and moved around, the more affective, and I would add, tangible and "real" this connection becomes.[8]

[8] As Appadurai argues, the dynamics of stereotyping and identity contrast is crucial in this process. Rosello accords a peculiar resilience to stereotypes that she calls their iterativity: "Because of their strong iterative force, they travel from mouth to mouth, from text to text, from discipline to discipline without losing much of their original shape and strength, as if, parasites

In the Zapiro cartoon from the Introduction, one can see how language and representation function and fluctuate in this process. By presenting the word "ubuntu" as a boundary marker for national belonging, Zapiro foregrounds the fact that the positive affect formerly associated with ubuntu can come to function in opposite ways under different circumstances. This change in affect, although still related to the same sign, results in a different alignment with a certain group of bodies. Whereas the former concept of ubuntu was aimed at overcoming the demarcation of certain affects to certain bodies, its representation by Zapiro suggests that it can also function to make the bodies of certain others appear as hateful. As in Ahmed's example of discourses current in white supremacist circles, these bodies "are assumed to 'cause' injury to the ordinary white subject such that their proximity is read as the origin of bad feeling: indeed, the implication here is that the white subject's good feelings (love, care, loyalty) are being 'taken' away by the abuse of such feelings by others" ("Affective" 118; see also chapter 6 in *Cultural*).

Thus, it becomes clear how the circulation of affect can become a strategic tool for glueing people together in clusters that serve very specific ends. As shown in the pogroms in South Africa in 2008, the grouping that takes place as a result of a particular circulation of affect can result in a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that can have fatal consequences. It is, therefore, important to realize how people, objects, theories and texts are stuck together in certain formations to achieve certain ends. In other words, there is a need to look at the strategic circumscription not only of space, but more broadly of what de Certeau has called the "*proper*" (xix). One of the ways to go about this is to look critically at how things are presented to us, but also at how we can interpret these things that address us. As was mentioned with regard to Krog's use of forgiveness in Chapter 1, and as Rosello also mentions with regard to responding to stereotypes, we are not always responsible for how we are addressed, but we can at least try to determine how to respond to the ways in which we are being spoken to (*Declining* 18). We can negotiate "the legacies of usage that constrain and enable that speaker's speech" (Butler, *Excitable* 27).

While doing so, while looking, to speak with de Certeau, for the tactical response to the strategies of power that are prevalent in everyday life, we need to keep in mind that Ahmed's "stickiness" is not limited to "big" affectations like hate and fear.[9] In the

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themselves, they need not worry about the deterioration other statements suffer from circulation and transmission processes" (*Declining* 35).

9 In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* Ahmed also discusses, apart from hate and fear, affectations of pain, disgust, shame and love. More recently, she has worked on the concepts of joy, happiness and willfulness.

case of the BP commercial, for instance, what appears at first sight as a harmless and merely funny series of commercials – pointing out the derisive use of stereotypes can easily be interpreted as lacking a sense of humour – in fact tells us a great deal about how relations between stereotypes, commerce and nationhood can be organized. At the same time, the notion of "belonging to a nation united" as sported at the end of the commercial, is reinforced, perhaps even made possible, by the purportedly humorous re-iteration of certain stereotypes, because the message of national unity gets stuck to the positive association of laughter. Keeping the stickiness of emotions in mind, this commercial invites the viewer to relate the future cohesion of the nation to a sponsored event through affecting amusement, thus re-circulating a desire for national cohesion. This latter affect, finally, "naturalizes" the link between "a nation united", the soccer event and its sponsors. This link, we have seen, is not a causal one at all and is, to say the least, problematized by the effect of the World Cup on the people who are grouped in this commercial along the lines of stereotyping. As Ahmed suggests, affect here functions to invest the nation and the event with value "through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation" (*Cultural* 11).

The frequency with which ubuntu has come to the fore in both the market and politics in recent years underlines the need to critically consider this circulation. As in the BP commercial, the sticking of ubuntu's "feel good" sentiment to certain services or products has become increasingly common. Of course, this trend is a strategy in itself that focuses on the consumer in a certain way. I argue that if the intention is to investigate the possibilities of responding to being addressed, to be tactical about the kind of relations we would like to give shape to, to avoid being grouped and, perhaps most importantly, to recognize our complicity in the groupings that appear as problematic to us, attention to the history of production and circulation of signifiers, objects, subjects, theories and texts is necessary. In what follows, I will start by investigating the mechanics of how ubuntu is strategically implemented with regard to commodification and business management.

Ubuntu on the Market: Affect in Commodifications of Ubuntu

One of the most telling examples of ubuntu's commodification is the fair trade product Ubuntu Cola, which was launched in the United Kingdom in 2007.[10] Ubuntu Cola

[10] Ubuntu Cola is also distributed in Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and online.

explicitly combines the "feel good" sentiment attached to buying fair trade products with an interpretation of what ubuntu supposedly is all about. This link consequently serves to enhance the distinction of this cola from other colas on the market: of course, it supposedly tastes better than any other, and when you buy it, at least 15% of the profits goes to "support[ing] the sugar producers and their communities" in Malawi and Zambia from whom Ubuntu Cola sources its sugar ("We Are Ubuntu"). The money is also intended to encourage projects "showing real entrepreneurship and creative ways to tackle poverty" ("We Are Ubuntu"). By buying the cola, you are not only helping individuals in Malawi and Zambia to build better lives for themselves, you are helping their communities as well. Hence, one of the punchlines on the Ubuntu Cola website reads: "So the more you enjoy our great tasting, thirst quenching Ubuntu Cola, the better things should get. That's what it's all about" ("Our Fairtrade Cola").[11] Tellingly, the use of the verb "to enjoy" here is a euphemism for "to buy." This linking of the notion of practicing ubuntu to a system of commodity exchange is even more obvious in what could be described as the company's mission statement: "Our idea is to base our company on the concept of Ubuntu – each person participates so that each benefits" ("We Are Ubuntu").

Although most defenders of ubuntu theory will strongly oppose the idea that benefits, in whatever form, are a prerequisite for the functioning of ubuntu and that ubuntu has nothing to do with selling products, the similarities between what is commonly known as ubuntu and this product's explicit centralisation of commodity exchange are hard to miss. The idea that when someone buys Ubuntu Cola they are doing something "good" for both themselves and others resonates strongly with particular aspects often re-iterated in the context of ubuntu, like the importance of participation and sharing. In addition, the way this product is marketed explicitly relates to one of ubuntu's central premises, namely that one's own well-being (in this case, feeling good through purchasing certain items) is *directly* tied to the well-being of others.

This emphasis on the direct, concrete effects of one's actions as a consumer is characteristic of fair trade and should, according to Jérôme Ballet and Aurélie Carimentrand, be regarded as its main ethical impetus and value: "it humanizes the process of trade and brings consumers in the North and producers in the South closer together" (319). This closeness is intended, of course, to achieve fair trade's main goal:

[11] With this tag line, Ubuntu Cola also leans in on the positive associations the Coca Cola brand has related to drinking coke from as early as the 1960s, reflected in their slogan "Things are better with Coke" ("60s Coke Commercial").

more equality in the market (see, for instance, Ballet and Carimentrand 318; Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance 67; *FLO*; *EFTA*). What Ballet and Carimentrand emphasise, however, is the "relational" aspect of fair trade. They are concerned that the institutionalisation of fair trade under labels (FLO or EFTA, for example, which are institutions situated in between the individual producers and the buyers of the "raw" materials) only extends the commodity chain and results in a depersonalization of the fair trade process. It prevents consumers from giving a "human face to the target of their action in favour of development" (319). Other scholars point out, however, that the institutionalization of fair trade is a pragmatic solution to one of the paradoxes inherent to the phenomenon, namely that "if the fair trade movement really wishes to support Southern producers, it must focus on volume, without which results remain marginal and insignificant" (Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance 69).

In order to achieve a bigger share in the market, these fair trade labeling organizations rely on a convergence of interests with the "traditional" commercial players "for the lasting success of our common objectives" (Transfair, qtd. in Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance 69). One of the strategies used to achieve this is to "construct a public image of quality and trust regarding fair trade" through branding (Transfair, qtd. in Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance 69). In the case of coffee, for instance, fair trade labels associate themselves with well-known brands of coffee roasters or sellers in order to enlarge their distribution and improve their image on the market. This process of labeling, branding and association is why fair trade has become increasingly mainstream. As a result, the influence of the fair trade model has increased and has caused a "systemic shift away from commodity fetishism and towards a reconnection between producer and consumer" (Nicholls 249). Ubuntu Cola, in both its name and its market strategy, reflects this move towards relationality in the market.

The effects of this shift, however, remain unclear. Although the effect of fair trade on the market as well as on Southern producers seems reasonably tangible and beneficial, there is more to this adjustment to traditional exchange than meets the eye (Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance 74-5). For instance, does the emphasis on the reinforcement of the position of Southern producers, although the movement keeps on growing and as such seems to improve their position in the market (see *FLO*), not deepen the inequalities on which the capitalist system is based? As Gendron, Bisaillon and Otero Rance also point out, what happens to the food security within the countries where fair trade producers are located if they are mainly oriented towards export and if the demand for fair trade products keeps growing (74)? And what consequences does the increased distribution of food products (which need to be transported quickly) to consumers on the other side of the globe have on the environment (75)?

Finally, one wonders whether the development of what fair trade labels insist on calling "Southern producers" is only to be measured in terms of trade?

Slavoj Žižek has also noted the shift in how commodity fetishism functions in current capitalism and points out another problematic. As he argues in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, it is the experiences commodities provide us with, the ways they affect us, that form the basic constituent of the current, cultural capitalistic economy:

> [W]e primarily buy commodities neither on account of their utility nor as status symbols; we buy them to get the experience provided by them, we consume them in order to render our lives pleasurable and meaningful. (52)

In the current capitalist system, commodities are no longer interesting because of what we can do with them or because of the status they provide us with. Instead, consumers rely on commodities to make their lives meaningful. Žižek's famous example is Starbucks Coffee (a product that relies heavily on its fair trade status), the slogan of which – "It's not what you're buying. It's what you're buying into" – is particularly apt (53). Similarly, Ubuntu Cola aims to capitalize on the experience provided by their product: namely and quite literally, the quenching of what Žižek calls "ethical need" (54):

> The point is that, in buying [these products], we are not merely buying and consuming, we are simultaneously doing something meaningful, showing our capacity for care and our global awareness, participating in a collective project… (54)

Impact research quoted in Ballet and Carimentrand substantiates Žižek's observation by claiming that "most Fair Trade consumers have a feeling that their actions really do affect the situation of producers" (319).

In this sense, Žižek is right when he proposes that cultural capitalism seems to relate to a reversion of Marx's formulation of commodity fetishism, in which, traditionally, relations between people appear as relations between things:

> [I]n a way, one is tempted to turn Marx's formula on its head: under contemporary capitalism, the objective market "relations between things" tend to assume the phantasmagorical form of pseudo-personalized "relations between people." (142)

This also seems to be the case with Ubuntu Cola. The relation between the producers of the cane sugar and the consumer is mediated by the product that links them, raising the question whether either the product or the relation is primary in this process, or whether they function in unison. Following Žižek, it seems that the product is indeed crucial, since the other relations mediated by it – those between producer, buyer, distributor and seller, for instance – are not part of the Ubuntu "feel" of the product as presented on their website.[12] As such, the reversal of the traditional notion of commodity fetishism and its apparent shift towards relationality is, indeed, phantasmagorical (Nicholls 249); apparently, Ubuntu Cola is not, or at least not only, about the actual relations created by the product, but mostly about how the imagined *directness* of the relation to the producer, mediated through economic behaviour, affects the consumer. Ultimately, then, Ubuntu Cola seems to revolve around the gratification of self-interest of the consumer by a relationality that functions by proxy. As such, Ubuntu Cola reveals itself as a product that reflects a kind of ubuntu strategy in which relations are strategically organised in order to fulfil the interests involved. In this case, the ubuntu strategy comes to stand, if not for fair trade in the strict sense of the term, at least for a promotion of fairer trade, which is, if not perfect, better than nothing.

Many critics, though, have noticed and expressed their concern about ubuntu's increasing fraternisation with commodification. As we have seen in Chapter 1, this "overuse" has even led to claims, for example by Krog, that ubuntu has become impossible to use critically, if at all. Dorothy Driver has remarked that the normalisation and especially the commodification of ubuntu "refuses the incessant strangeness of the process of opening up to an 'other'" that allows for ubuntu's "continual and subtle transformations of notions of 'self'" ("Truth" 226). One of the most thorough and articulate of these critiques is that by global development analyst David McDonald, who, in his article "Ubuntu Bashing: The Marketisation of Ubuntu Values in South Africa," provides a critical overview of the ways in which ubuntu has been "misused"

[12] One wonders as to the "fairness" or equality of these relations, too. It is still the company selling the cola that decides how much money goes to which communities and, partly, what can be done with it. The company determines which community projects qualify as "real entrepreneurship" ("We Are Ubuntu") and thus which are eligible for funding and which are not. Another question that arises is what happens to the other 85% of Ubuntu Cola's turnover. Finally, Ubuntu Cola does not "sport" openness with regard to the rest of its commodity chain. It focuses exclusively on producers. Thus, the distribution might still occur through traditional channels.

in post-apartheid South Africa.[13] Unlike Krog, however, McDonald examines the possibilities of reclaiming ubuntu for South Africa's Left in a constructive fashion.

Overall, McDonald approaches the marketised "revitalization of *ubuntu* theory and language" in terms of systemic conflict, and, as such, approximates de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics (140). McDonald considers ubuntu's current surfacing as

> part of a larger discursive effort on the part of the South African state and capital to convince South Africans that market reforms are democratic and egalitarian, while at the same time serving to defuse opposition to underlying neoliberal change. (140)

He distinguishes three major ways in which ubuntu has been "appropriated by pro-market interest groups" (139): national branding, "ubuntu capitalism" (in which ubuntu is taken up as a marketing strategy to create a competitive advantage for South African businesses), and, finally, the use of ubuntu in South African public policy:

> From housing to health care to waste management, there has been a downloading of the fiscal and physical responsibility of post-apartheid work on to the backs of low-income households in the name of "community." (146)

This process of inciting people to participate in schemes for the common good, even when doing so might be extremely disadvantageous for them, is rather similar to the processes signalled and described by McDonald as national branding. Indeed, as we have seen in Chapter 1 with regard to the TRC process, ubuntu's potential to make people stick to a certain goal for the sake of the common good is one of its lurking problems.[14] The sentiment created around the organisation of the World Cup in 2010, as discussed above, is another example. In other words, both in national branding and the implementation of public policy, ubuntu can come to stand for a deferral of benefits on the part of low-income households grounded in the ethical injunctions to sacrifice and work for the betterment of one's community.

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13 McDonald's title is a pun on the idea of bush or bundu bashing, which involves an adventurous and rather destructive drive through the bush, usually with a four-wheel drive.

14 In particular, see the discussion of Christopher Marx's claim that ubuntu, during this period, functioned as an "Africanist version of integral nationalism" (58).

Besides these processes of state intervention, McDonald offers an overview of attempts to "marry" ubuntu to capitalism, resulting in what he terms (after Visser) "ubuntu capitalism" (143-4). McDonald's concern for the welfare of ubuntu as a term is, as we will see, well-founded, but he leaves two interrelated issues out of the equation. The first is that he does not look at commodities per se. He looks at policy, both in a governmental and a business setting, but not at specific products and what they tell us about ubuntu. As became clear in the case of Ubuntu Cola, the strategic use of the combination of ubuntu with the fair trade model is not exclusively problematic. There is something to gain – namely, fairer trade – from this process as well. The second and related point is that McDonald considers these capitalist developments to be inherently at odds with ubuntu philosophy. In light of the discussion of Žižek's (phantasmagorical) reversal of Marx' commodity fetishism and the orientation towards relationality in the market, however, I would say that the developments McDonald describes are actually integral to how ubuntu is unfolding globally. In other words, it is not that ubuntu is inherently at odds with neoliberal ways of thinking, as McDonald suggests, but, rather, that ubuntu is extremely suitable for neoliberal use – a suitability that has to do with ubuntu's "hidden" reliance on property, which I will discuss below. Consequently, ubuntu itself has become aligned with the capitalist system and needs to be analysed as such, rather than painstakingly divorced from it.

An insightful example here is McDonald's referencing of the King Report, which was first published in 1994 and aims "to provide a voluntary 'Code of Corporate Practices and Conduct' for post-apartheid corporate governance" (143). According to McDonald, this report, which relies heavily on ubuntu values and "the African worldview," captures "the essence of attempts by South Africa's corporate world to import *ubuntu* concepts into new management philosophies" (143). Indeed, in the context of the incorporation of ubuntu in company policies, most managerial publications focus on the integration of basic cultural attitudes with the demands of business management (Prinsloo 281). Much like the fair trade discourse, this synergy of African values and corporate governance is aimed at creating a competitive advantage (a term that is much used, but little defined by those who rely on it for their argument) through a "more people-centred style" of conducting business (Visser qtd. in McDonald 144).

In *Ubuntu: The Spirit of African Transformation Management*, management gurus Lovemore Mbigi and Jenny Maree claim, for instance, that competitive advantage in South Africa can only be achieved "through creating and doing something that has never been done before, with customers, in terms of production and management practices" (4). In order to do this, businesses in Africa (not just South Africa) will have to rely on the continent's spiritual and social heritage. It is through social innovation

along the lines of ubuntu, which will unleash "the energy and collective solidarity" of the members of a community, that Africa can "win in the global arena" (4). According to Mbigi and Maree, ubuntu is "a universal concept that can be applicable to all poor communities" (1). This concept – which is universal, yet restricted to "all poor communities" – can be more specifically described as a survival strategy:

> Ubuntu is a metaphor that describes the significance of group solidarity, on survival issues [sic], that is so central to the survival of African communities, who as a result of the poverty and deprivation have to survive through brotherly group care and not individual self-reliance. (Mbigi and Maree 1)

In this description of ubuntu as a strategy for survival, poverty is represented as the catalyst for the "brotherly group care" that characterises Mbigi and Maree's approach to management. However, although Mbigi and Maree are not alone in describing ubuntu as a survival strategy, their designation of ubuntu as a metaphor for survival is rather problematic, not only because it implies that there is no differentiation in the way people deal with poverty – and crime rates suggest that not all poor people are necessarily interested in solidarity and sharing – but also because it pins ubuntu down in an undifferentiated formulation based on lack.[15] Ubuntu's humanitarian values of sharing and group solidarity are then directly related to a shared interest in addressing this material lack communally. As I have pointed out in the Introduction with regard to the role of reciprocity in ubuntu, in this system, one's social position could potentially be measured in terms of one's contribution to solving this communal problem. In other words, the meaning of ubuntu and a reliance on its values are explicitly related to an absence of property, which rigidly casts the term as a strategy of obtaining it – a strategy that, as I have suggested above, is well-aligned with the neoliberal trends in the global economy.

The implementation of ubuntu as a management strategy, as set out by Mbigi and Maree, more generally relies on the notion of brotherhood. Other key values related to ubuntu are group solidarity, conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity and collective unity (2). By sticking to these concepts, Mbigi and Maree suggest, the strategy can be successfully implemented, resulting in employees being more comfortable and feeling more appreciated in the workplace. This sense of comfort and appreciation, in turn, will result in group loyalty and an intrinsic motivation to contribute and

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[15] Other scholars who have described ubuntu in terms of a survival strategy are Allister Sparks and Monica Wilson (see Introduction).

commit to common goals (see also Mangaliso and Damane 25; Lundin and Nelson).[16] In the long run, this is good for profits. To what extent, however, even a successful integration of ubuntu on the shop floor effectively re-structures businesses as long as the demand for competitive advantage and the current notion of private property remains unchanged is doubtful.

In his attempt to formulate a business theory that is "consistent with our common nature" (313), David W. Lutz argues, from the perspective of business ethics, that the aim of business management needs to be redirected from the primacy of "owner-wealth-maximization" (313) towards "globalisation for the common good" (Mofid qtd. in Lutz 325). This theory approaches the firm as a nurturing community in which managers strive for the common good, rather than as a collection of individuals geared towards the benefits of the stakeholders. Such an ideal management environment is to be achieved through producing and selling "goods or services that are genuinely good for the customers, not merely whatever they can persuade customers to purchase" (Lutz 325). Lutz is adamant about the necessity of prioritizing the good of the community (which sadly remains unspecified) over "the provision of goods or services as a means to maximizing a financial variable," which is management-speak for ultimate profit (325).

Unfortunately, Lutz does not reflect on the rather crucial question of who eventually knows, judges or gets to decide what is "genuinely good." As we have seen in the case of fair trade, attempts to resolve structural economic inequality under the guise of cultural capitalism could be said to reinforce the inequalities they are intended to alleviate. A similar process seems to be at work in the case of the marketisation of "African values" in post-apartheid South Africa. According to Mbigi and Maree, the problem of Africa's poverty should be tackled by increasing the continent's competitive advantage through the utilization of the solidarity and transformative energy that played such a major role in the struggle against apartheid (4). However, in 2008, some 15 years down the line from Mbigi and Maree, who wrote just after the end of apartheid, Nigel Gibson is able to point out that the transition from apartheid to democracy has mostly revolved around national and multinational interests, the

[16] Mangaliso and Damane even argue that group solidarity is crucial and beneficial for companies and should be encouraged. They consider ubuntu's emphasis on the importance of kinship ties within organizations "to be a plus" (25). Rather than reflecting a sense of nepotism, hiring relatives ensures a reliable workforce as well as "a layer of emotional and psychological support to workers" (25). Lutz, on the other hand, warns against the negative side effects of stressing the importance of the group in a work environment because it might result in "defective communalism and a discouragement of individual initiative" (324).

result of which has been that the dire needs of the mass movement that made the end of apartheid possible in the first place have largely been ignored (700). Although post-apartheid inequality is now at least no longer primarily organised around race, the divisions between classes have become increasingly apparent, and the group that bears the brunt of this shift has remained strikingly similar.

Instead of being put to a more ubuntu-oriented use, Gibson rightly claims that the solidarity that was the backing of the anti-apartheid striving for freedom and liberation "ha[s] been reduced to the freedom and liberty of the narrowly defined 'self' that competes in the market" (697).[17] In this situation of "corporate Black Consciousness" (700), the notion of class struggle becomes completely obscured in post-apartheid South Africa's focus (represented by financial institutions like IMF as well as by corporations, government and NGO's) on the ideology of the self-as-commodity:

> Here the self-as-commodity is presented not only as the ideology of the rising petit bourgeoisie but also as the only possible way for the poor to raise themselves out of poverty. Socioeconomic inequality is thus dismissed as the old discourse of class politics, and the poor is understood simply as people who need to become entrepreneurs, responsible for their own self-exploitation as human capital. (Gibson 697)

In terms of Gibson's reading, then, the "African values discourse" as it comes to the fore in management literature is not considered as an alternative to capitalism, but emerges as a way to enhance the system. The focus on competitive advantage has not changed, or rather, is regarded as the only way in which the common good can be served; the problem of poverty (in general) can only be tackled through the improvement of entrepreneurial skills, whether individually or in cooperation with others – a logic that is familiar from the analysis of Ubuntu Cola. As I have mentioned, such a stance towards the synergy of ubuntu and business management is not necessarily "un-ubuntu," as McDonald has claimed. In ubuntu theory, entrepreneurship can hardly be undesirable as long as it does not diminish others or relations to them. Instead, the problem comes down, once more, to questions of determination: who determines what the common good is, what and whom communities consist of and how their interests are served best?

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[17] See also Deborah Posel's article "Races to Consume: Revisiting South Africa's History of Race, Consumption and the Struggle for Freedom," where she reflects on how, during apartheid, "the desire and power to consume was racialized" and how the subsequent notion of consumption came to be interrelated with "varied and contested imaginings of 'freedom'" (160).

When attempting to provide some necessarily provisional answers to such questions in the form of considering a tactical approach to the strategic impositions made on consumers and ubuntu as a term alike, one always runs the risk of turning the tactics aimed at remedying the ways in which the responses to such interpellations take place into strategies themselves. The question arises under what conditions and circumstances "poaching," to use de Certeau's term for tactics, on territory demarcated by someone else is still different from appropriating space, especially under the consideration that tactics, since they are directed at making the hostility of dominant systems inhabitable, both oppose and enhance this system. As the cases of Ubuntu Cola and ubuntu-centred management discourse suggest, what is considered to be a striving for the common good (in this case, the attempt to address the huge issue of poverty on the African continent) could very well result in perpetuating or even aggravating the existing situation.

This section has been an attempt to think about some of the ways in which affects circulate in commercial discourses and where complicity in this circulation could be located. It is an approach that rests, perhaps too heavily, on the premise that locating affective alignments might suggest ways in which to think about ubuntu beyond a unifying grouping that nonetheless takes the provision of safety and security that community offers into account. Keeping in mind that the distinction between strategies and tactics is not always straightforward, the next section aims to discuss how ubuntu-related strategies could be re-negotiated, even though this is a question that must remain partly unresolved in order to prevent a theorisation that delimits a set destination for the meaning and potential of ubuntu.

Tactics: Ubuntu as a Space for Redefinition

As becomes clear from the above and as McDonald's title suggests, "ubuntu bashing" is easy to do, but a more pertinent approach would be to look for the space of redefinition offered by this situation. One of the products that is often considered to do just that is Ubuntu Linux, an open source operating system that, supposedly, works better than Microsoft's Windows and provides a "prettier feel" than Apple's Mac OS. Most importantly, however, its premise, as well as its promise, is that it must be accessible to and usable by everyone. In other words, it will always be free and it will always function in combination with any given hardware. In the sense that the product functions as an alternative for consumers who do not want to invest in companies that exploit both consumers and workers, it is similar to the fair trade initiative discussed in the previ-

ous section. Yet, Ubuntu Linux avoids some of the direct compromises attached to fair trade products like Ubuntu Cola (think, for instance, of the problem of distribution or the consequences of fair trade on national food situations in the global South), exactly because it is directly available from the Internet and completely free for its users. Since the circulation of the product itself is thus freed from direct exchange-value, it seems that Ubuntu Linux, in terms of de Certeau, is tactically manoeuvring in a strategic capitalistic field.[18] It seems to be poaching on the possibilities offered by other players in the market, which develop operating systems and software that result in direct profit.

How is ubuntu utilized in this process? The operating system's most ubuntuesque feature is the fact that its free availability is geared towards a notion of unconditional sharing. As long as you have a computer and an Internet connection, you can obtain it. Secondly, the product relies on a sense of reciprocity, because users have the ability to benefit from and contribute to the development of the system. Improvements and additions to the system and its applications are developed and monitored by the so-called Ubuntu community, which consists of employees of the company that hosts the Ubuntu Linux platform (its infrastructure, so to speak) and its user community. Ideally, Ubuntu is thus created and maintained in common with individuals from all walks of life with different requirements, skills, expertise and, of course, interests. They create a product, as well as the communications and relationships that make the product possible. Thirdly, this development takes place against the background of the community's Code of Conduct, which prescribes a compliance to ubuntu values, like practicing consideration and respect for others and putting collaboration and the good of the project first in all actions related to it ("Code of Conduct"). Indeed, the product's references to notions of humanity, respect for others and sharing associated with ubuntu philosophy seem spot on ("The Ubuntu Story").

The Ubuntu OS, however, is not as open and flexible as this comparison might initially suggest. First of all, the company's logo points us back in the direction of the dynamic between inclusion and exclusion that has come to the fore in every chapter so far and that was also visible in the ubuntu strategy conducted by the "mamas" in the BP commercial: it consists of three abstracted people standing in a circle holding hands and facing each other, thus creating the image of an inwardly oriented circuit. Versions of the logo that have people in them usually consist of an "ethnically correct," smiling group. Some of these logos suggest multicultural and happy families, while others, like the one depicted below, seem to be relatively neutral, relationally speaking:

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18 Advertising and other venues of securing profit are left out of the equation here because I do not have the space or the expertise to analyse these aspects properly.

Even though the people in the photo all look at the camera, which is located outside of their circle (and above them; they are not looking at someone or something at their own level), the circle itself remains closed. On the other hand, however, the image also suggests that the spectator is invited to become part of the enticing circle, even if the suggestion that it will close itself after being enlarged by more hands being joined remains unaltered. As such, the image underlines the point made in chapter 3, where I argued that ubuntu negotiates the need for hospitable openness with the need to posit a safe space for individual development.

Figure 18. Ubuntu Linux logo, taken from the sleeve of the 8.04 desktop edition.

The very make-up of Ubuntu Linux, however, suggests a different dynamic. Like the Microsoft and Apple operating systems, Ubuntu has its own user interface. As one would expect, not being used to this interface makes it more difficult to navigate the system. In the case of Ubuntu, which is less widespread and standardised than Windows, and less "user friendly" than Apple, this means that, as in any other community, one has to get acquainted with its language first in order to be able to "work the system."[19] What Ubuntu users have in common, *must* have in common, in order to work together is therefore also exactly what differentiates them from others. To those who do not share this property, besides the literal property of access to a computer and the Internet, Ubuntu Linux is useless and its community remains closed-off.

Within the Ubuntu community itself, the notion of sharing and community-oriented development is made practicable by both the code of conduct and the governance guidelines. However, the restricting interaction between these two principles also compromises the effect of ubuntu. Despite the fact that Ubuntu is an open community, which is governed by both a "Community Council" and a " Technical Board," the founder and, significantly, sponsor of the project, Mark Shuttleworth,

[19] This is even more ironic when one considers that Ubuntu Linux is a simplified version of "regular" Linux distributions that do not rely, at least not exclusively, on "clickable" interfaces, but require considerable knowledge of Linux's programming language.

has a casting vote in the nomination of the members that serve on both the council and the board. Quite literally, the man who holds the stakes and has jokingly called himself the SABDFL (self-appointed benevolent dictator for life) decides which ideas and problems tabled by the council and the board will be pursued for further development by Canonical, the company that provides Ubuntu's platform ("Governance"). This company is termed "the leader" of the Ubuntu project, because it has, as Ubuntu's main developer, ultimate knowledge of its functioning ("Ubuntu and Canonical"). The obvious discrepancy here is that the "actual" leader is not Canonical, but the stakeholder who tells them what to do.

The problem I want to flag is not so much that a project like Ubuntu Linux seems to be in need of leadership. As has become repeatedly clear earlier in this dissertation, especially in the case of King Moshoeshoe and that of Desmond Tutu, leadership and authority can be both restricting and enabling. In both these cases, and this is of course also true for the leadership of Nelson Mandela, the way in which leadership is practised can serve as an inspiration for change. The problem here is, rather, that this leadership is formulated in terms of ownership.

Although the governance site explicitly labels the Ubuntu project as a meritocracy rather than a democracy, it does not mention any of the required merits on the basis of which participants in the project can be assigned certain responsibilities or projects ("Governance"). The only merit needed, apparently, is the ability to bring money to the table. This set-up amounts to a provisional community, one whose interests can be put on hold. The community provides ideas and solutions to problems, but does not have a material stake in the company. At the same time, the entire Ubuntu community is subject to Ubuntu's Code of Conduct, which is meant to ensure that ideas of "humanity towards others" and "a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity" remain central to the "way the Ubuntu community collaborates" ("Code of Conduct"). Thus, the emphasis on collaboration and sharing allows for an incongruous governance set-up that is decidedly community-oriented in form, yet stakeholder-led in terms of decision-making processes. In the way Ubuntu Linux is presented, the focus is shifted towards the ubuntu-inspired and humane way in which work is conducted, and deflected from how property circulates in this process.

What do we make of this somewhat problematic prioritizing of intracommunal relations that simultaneously obscures the property-oriented relations within the project? Again, Žižek is helpful. As discussed in relation to Ubuntu Cola, Žižek claims that under current capitalism, the mechanism of Marxist commodity fetishism seems to have been reversed. Although this could be regarded as a troubling development in capitalism's ability to reinvigorate itself, it is also a point of redefinition, in the sense

that it is, quite literally, a return to the original definition of commodity fetishism by Marx. Žižek underlines that "the objective market 'relations between things'" remain unaltered and that the reversal, though tempting to make, really is phantasmagorical:

> Here, more than ever, it is crucial to remember the lesson of the Marxist dialectic of fetishization: the "reification" of relations between people (the fact that they assume the form of phantasmagorical "relations between things") is always redoubled by the apparently opposite process, by the false "personalization" ("psychologization") of what are effectively objective social processes. (141-2)

In other words, the "relations between things" re-assert themselves all the more pertinently because they appear as their opposite, namely as relations between people. This detachment of the circulation of things, or what Žižek paradoxically calls "objective social processes," from relations between people can have an immense benefit:

> [T]he displacement of the fetishism onto "relations between things" de-fetishizes "relations between persons," allowing them to acquire "formal" freedom and autonomy. (142)

Such a de-fetishisation and, in a sense, de-mystification of relations between persons implies that they cease to be obscured as such. Instead, we can now see this fetishistic relation for what it "really" is, namely phantasmagoric. This de-fetishisation, then, allows for the perception of relations between people as containing a "formal" freedom and autonomy. According to Žižek, this formal freedom, in which we recognize ourselves and are recognized as being, even if in a limited sense, free from our ties to things, offers us a potential frame for re-definition because it is a precondition for "actual" freedom:

> In order to experience this antagonism between my freedom and the actuality of my servitude, however, I have to be recognized as formally free: the demand for my actual freedom can only arise out of my "formal" freedom. (143)

In other words, if relations between people become recognizable as phantasmagoric, they also become de-constructable and, finally, redefinable. Changing the system from within is only possible through this recognition of "formal" freedom.

Promising as this may sound, one problem asserts itself at this point regarding Žižek's premise that relations in current capitalism exist between things, but appear

to us as if they were dependent on relations between people. I would argue, following Ahmed's formulation of the circulation of affect and the analysis of Ubuntu Cola, that relations between people are mediated by relations between things, since, from a market perspective, things cannot circulate without human relations taking shape around them. As such, the two types of relationship, described by Žižek as discernibly separable, are inextricably bound up with and mutually dependent on each other. So, even though Žižek seems to recognize that "formal" freedom is just that, since it exists in antagonism with the "actuality of my servitude" (which I take to refer to the entwined nature of the two relations) he ends up constructing an argument as if their separation were a possibility.

In the course of this argument, Žižek accuses Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri of overlooking the importance of "objective social processes" and of relying too much on the logic of relations between people. They fall into what Žižek calls the "trap" of reversed commodity fetishism: "what they celebrate as the direct 'production of life' is a structural illusion of this kind" (142). Hardt and Negri claim, however, that these relations are actually the most productive point of dissent within capital and consider them to be a possibility for the system's undoing. In the development of capitalism's increasing reliance on the products of what Hardt and Negri term social labour, they glimpse the potential of formulating a political project that "cuts diagonally across these false alternatives – neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist – and opens a new space for politics" (*Commonwealth* ix). In the next section, I will further explore how the unavoidable connection between people and things can serve as a way to think a new space for politics along the lines of ubuntu. In order to do so, it will first be necessary, since ubuntu has been repeatedly described as a survival strategy amongst the poor in South Africa, to further define Hardt and Negri's use of the concept of "the poor."

A New Space for Politics: Ubuntu and "the Poor"

According to Hardt and Negri, a new space for politics will rise from and will be located in "the common," which is both produced by and productive of change.[20] They

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[20] Hardt and Negri's reference to the common needs to be distinguished from what is usually called "the commons." As David Harvey points out in "The Future of the Commons," the commons is generally thought of as a cluster of open resources that nobody owns, but that everyone can access and is associated with natural resources. Yet, the commons is also an ambiguous term that is often thought in relation to restrictive lines of enclosure and private property. Hardt and Negri's formulation is meant to move away from "the logic of scarcity" and

stress that the common should be understood in terms of communication: "we can communicate only on the basis of languages, symbols, ideas, and relationships we share in common, and in turn the results of our communication are new common languages, symbols, ideas, and relationships" (*Multitude* 197). The common, thus, does not only refer to material property, but is, rather, based on the perception that forms of labour in the capitalist system have evolved towards a notion of work that increasingly involves the production of "cooperation or the construction of social relationships and networks of communication" (131). From this perspective, Hardt and Negri claim, it is no longer accurate to speak of a working class; the concept should be extended to that of the "multitude," since the shift in the nature of labour has created a new form of "becoming common, which tends to reduce the qualitative divisions within labor" (114). The multitude needs to be distinguished from both the collective and "the undifferentiated unity of the people" (99). It is an active social subject, "which acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common," yet relies on the differences between them:

> The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or, much less, indifference) but on what it has in common. (*Multitude* 100)

This acting and being in common consequently serves the multitude's main purpose and main revolutionary potential, namely to fulfil the "desire and demand for global democracy" and "an alternative global society" through self-rule (xvi, xvii).

One point of critique that immediately comes to mind in relation to the conception of the common and the multitude as described by Hardt and Negri is how they imagine a globally organised multitude will work in practice.[21] They seem to offer very little as to a theorisation of the formation and maintenance of this group, apart from the fact that it forms itself through an alignment of the common desire for change. Contra Ahmed, who argues for the visibility of the mechanics of grouping through affect and, hence, for the contextualization of such groupings, Hardt and Negri claim that:

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exclusion, and looks for redefinition in the field of what could be a "cultural common," which is more dynamic than the first (Harvey 103).

21 See Warren Montag (2005) for an analysis of the concept of the multitude in Spinoza. In strongly simplified terms, Montag points out that Negri glosses over the fact that the multitude is, in fact, an ambiguous concept that revolves around the fear it instills in those who rule it. In this sense, the multitude constitutes the limits of Empire.

> The multitude has no reason to look outside its own history and its own present productive power for the means necessary for its constitution as a political subject. (*Empire* 396)

Susan Ruddick takes issue with this formulation of the multitude, because it forces different kinds of labour into one affectively defined category. In other words, it collapses “the open-ended possibilities of desire onto the sameness of a particular vision of labor” (33). Ruddick is concerned that tying affect to labour alone, and, furthermore, presenting this labour as an undifferentiated category, represents a move that forecloses any kind of critical reflection on the possibilities of desire, and, in extension, on the constitution as well as the object of the multitude. In this sense, the formulation of the multitude as a tactics to effect change within Capital can easily become a measure equally prescriptive to the system it aims to poach upon.

Another problem concerns Hardt and Negri’s claim that an internally differentiated social subject should focus on what it has in common. Again, Ruddick aptly argues that an excessive focus on commonality begs the question of how one responds to a difference that is truly unsettling, as described, for example, by Emmanuel Levinas (34). This critique not only concerns Hardt and Negri’s formulation of the multitude, but also resonates in the context of ubuntu, especially in its guise as a conflation of self-interest with that of the other as discussed with regard to Tutu’s definition in Chapter 1. What happens if the multitude, or a group of people “practicing” ubuntu, is internally divided about what it wants? What if it does not just want to work for the liberation from capital in its current form? Maybe it wants all sorts of different things, at different times, and in different places?

The concept of ubuntu as a convergence of interests, which revolves around the negotiation of various interests that come together because of historical contingency, precisely aims to address this problem by allowing for a temporal conglomeration of components that are not aligned by a common and unifying desire, but rather, by how they can manage to function in concert with each other in a particular place and time. This function may or may not be structured around desire and does not serve a predetermined goal. By formulating ubuntu in this way I seek to think beyond, as I have explained in Chapter 2, the idea of ubuntu as a future perfect, in which ubuntu becomes a lost treasure of social cohesion from an idealized past that is projected into a communally imagined and connected future. Ubuntu as a convergence of interests is intended to attest that such an idealized imagination of the future as a common enterprise of interconnected individuals forecloses the open-ended potential of the fact that the alignment of different interests (whether negotiated or contingent) is

always subject to their necessarily temporarily historical co-evolution and might, as such, change along the way. As I have argued in Chapter 3, a strategic positing of a common purpose can be politically pertinent, but simultaneously demonstrates the need to constantly assess the conditions that make such formations possible.

Indeed, the practical formation of the multitude is problematic, precisely because Hardt and Negri locate it in relation to the dubiously objectified category of "the poor." Like Mbigi and Maree have done in relation to the application of ubuntu in business management, Hardt and Negri uncritically attach humanitarian values of solidarity as a strategy of survival to a common experience of poor people. A construct that forms the basis of Hardt and Negri's reading of solidarity as a re-politicisation of love, which they define as something that is anything but "spontaneous or passive":

> To understand love as a philosophical and political concept, it is useful to begin from the perspective of the poor and the innumerable forms of social solidarity and social production that one recognizes everywhere among those who live in poverty. Solidarity, care for others, creating community, and cooperating in common projects is for them an essential survival mechanism. (*Commonwealth* 180)

Although the fact that Hardt and Negri's insistence on regarding "the poor" in the light of their "powers of invention and production" is, in a sense, refreshing compared to a more common definition of this group through lack, it is also problematic because the category of the poor is relentlessly described as a group of people who are unequivocally enthusiastic about poverty as an opportunity to realize the common or a global re-distribution of wealth.[22]

In their chapter "The Multitude of the Poor," for instance, Hardt and Negri claim that different "kinds" of property produce different subjectivities. According to them, private property creates a kind of subjectivity that is both individualistic, because it is aimed at extending property in direct competition with others, as well as unified, because it clusters subjectivities in groups that aim to protect their property from those that do not have anything: the poor. This way, class difference is created. The poor, in turn, are characterized by "a production of social subjectivity that results in a radically plural and open body politic, opposed to the individualism and the exclusive,

[22] The re-distribution of wealth is, in South Africa, inextricably bound up with the problems around the re-distribution of land after the end of apartheid, when the first democratic government was confronted with the task of formulating successful policies in dealing with the loaded and intricate social entanglements that resulted from centuries of systematic dispossession.

unified social body of property" (*Commonwealth* 39-40). From this perspective, differences are caused by certain *attitudes* towards property. Being "poor," then, no longer refers to not "owning" anything, but to maintaining an attitude towards poverty that is aimed at producing property in common with others in the multitude. As such, "poverty" seems to become a metaphor that functions to encourage people to define themselves as "poor" depending on how they *feel* about capitalism.

Again, several objections come to the fore. To begin with, this theoretical construct romanticizes "the poor" as a group of people who are interested in re-distributing wealth rather than in aiming to become part of those who relish in private property and the kind of subjectivity it makes possible. Taking the outbursts of xenophobic violence as a case in point, poverty obviously does not merely produce solidarity and political love, as Hardt and Negri insist, but also produces enormous amounts of "love gone bad" – to stick to their terminology – in the form of fear, hate and frustration (*Commonwealth* 195). Secondly, by claiming that poverty revolves around attitudes towards property, one basically suggests that being poor is a sort of lifestyle, whereas what this re-casting of class blatantly leaves out is that it is extremely difficult to be regarded as productive and valuable, to be recognizable as such in the first place, if one cannot inscribe oneself into the dominant property logic, simply because one is structurally rendered incapable of doing so by socio-historical circumstances. Rather than cutting "diagonally across [the] false alternatives – neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist" and opening up a "new political space," then, the description of poverty as attitude-dependent merely re-inscribes it as a metaphor (*Commonwealth* ix). As I have suggested with regard to Mbigi and Maree's notion of ubuntu as the solidarity of the poor, the use of ubuntu/poverty as a metaphor, by grouping different interests, strategies and circumstances under a single term, problematically glosses over differences that exist among poor people in favour of an opaque grouping of these differences along the lines of affect, in this case, solidarity as a re-politicisation of love. Although these are indeed serious impediments to the effectivity of Hardt and Negri's argument, I will, in the next section, focus on the productive side of considering "the poor" as a group in search of change in the public sphere by analysing the politics of Abehlali baseMjondolo, better known as the Durban Shack Dwellers Movement.

Strategic Tactics and Tactical Strategies: Ubuntu as Politics in Abahlali baseMjondolo (The Durban Shack Dwellers Movement)

Against the backdrop of the pogroms of May 2008, some of the critiques on Hardt and Negri voiced above need to be reconsidered. The development of an organisa-

tion called Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), also known as the Durban Shack Dwellers Movement, suggests, for instance, that responses to poverty can indeed be organised through the "powers of invention and production" of "the poor" as a group, rather than through a fixed conception of the poor as "generally useless, dirty … and the shack-dwellers as a mindless, instinctual, antisocial mass" (*Commonwealth* 180; Gibson 704). Gibson explicitly relates the rise of this movement to the riots:

> Both [the development of the pogroms and of *Abahlali*] have arisen as responses to increasing pauperization and spatial and political exclusion, but the pogroms are also a consequence of the criminalization, repression and the depoliticization of shack revolts by the police and governmental authorities. (704)

As Gibson points out, the xenophobic attacks were not only triggered by the dire circumstances of large parts of the South African population, but also by the way in which these people have been treated by governmental authorities. In those settlements, however, where the shack dwellers movement had a large presence, there were significantly fewer attacks (705; Neocosmos 593; Pithouse, "May 2008 Pogroms").

AbM is a movement that focuses on a local politics of improving the material circumstances of poor people living in shacks, but aims to do so through a reformulation of the South African political framework at the local level. As Gibson points out, AbM is horizontally organized and has worked out a politics that avoids a reliance on representative democracy as much as possible, because these conventional channels proved unfruitful (704; see also Bryant 59).[23] The movement has grown out of (and has known a steady growth of members and affiliates ever since) the protests by a group of shack dwellers from Kennedy Road, Durban, that resulted in an agreement with the city of Durban, which planned to relocate the community to the city's outskirts as a result of the "slum clearance programme" that came into effect as of 2001. The planned relocation to the rural outskirts of Durban would make it insurmountably expensive and difficult for the inhabitants to provide for their own livelihoods. After extensive campaigning, the city agreed to not clear the area, but, instead, invest in the improvement of the quality of living conditions in the settlement as it was.[24] However,

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[23] For an account of how elections and meetings are conducted within AbM, and for information on the political affiliations of the members of the movement in Kennedy Road that started AbM, see Bryant's "Towards Delivery and Dignity: Community Struggle from Kennedy Road."

[24] Many people in informal settlements do not have money to pay for transport into town, so despite the fact that the current dwellings are located next to a dumpsite and rife with the

promises were not kept, and more resistance emerged, especially because the decisions taken by the municipality were not discussed with the community in question (Bryant 53-4; Hsiao and Lim 314; see also Pithouse, "Struggle"). The members of AbM have been adamant ever since that poor people should be visible and, thus, knowable and recognizable as political agents in the decisions that concern them.

The politics of AbM, which its elected president S'bu Zikode has described as a "politics of the poor," combines a Hardt and Negrian approach to the poor as productive of social change with an emphasis on the importance of ubuntu (Zikode qtd. in Pithouse, "Politics" 82). As Zikode elucidates in one of his interviews, AbM is based on the premise that it is "common sense that everyone is equal, that everyone matters, that the world must be shared" (*Revolutionary Ubuntu* 34). Zikode adds:

> My understanding is that this common sense comes from the very new spirit of *ubuntu*, from the spirit of humanity, from the understanding of what is required for a proper respect of each person's dignity, of what they are required to do. (*Revolutionary Ubuntu* 34)[25]

By applying ubuntu to the case of the shack dwellers in this way, Zikode effectively outlines the drive behind the movement's social cohesion: according to Zikode, ubuntu means that every person needs to be heard and respected, but this also implies that social engagement is both necessary and expected. This train of thought is reflected in the form of the movement. Since it was founded as a result of many poor people's frustration with the ANC's failure to deliver constructive change at a local level – in other words, with elected leaders that are supposed to represent their community, but do nothing or very little to actually improve their lot – AbM is structured with as little representation as possible. Where in a representative democracy the decision-making process is delegated to those voted into power, direct democracy, or rather, the *more direct* democracy of AbM is meant to ensure that its members are involved in the making of decisions during community meetings. These meetings are

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problematic consequences of high unemployment rates and poverty, "the settlement is a hopeful place: near to town and to employment, near schools where children can learn English, and in a middle-class neighborhood where even casual employment out pays anything available in most rural areas [sic]" (Bryant 53).

25 It is striking that Zikode describes the spirit of ubuntu as "very new," which contradicts basically every other opinion on the subject. It also contradicts another part of the interview where he talks about ubuntu being taught in schools and being part of Zulu education during the State of Emergency and the period of transition (*Revolutionary Ubuntu* 23).

based on the idea that issues will be discussed until consensus is reached and only in the case of those issues on which consensus cannot be reached does the movement resort to decision making through majority rule by putting them to the vote. These decisions are then communicated to the executive committee by the committees that represent the different settlements (Bryant, esp. 61, 66).[26]

The striving for consensus is a form of internal politics that is consistent with what Dirk Louw has described as "African traditional democracy" and equates with ubuntu. According to Louw, ubuntu accords primary importance to "agreement or consensus":

> Although there may be a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, every person gets an equal chance to speak up until some kind of an agreement, consensus or group cohesion is reached. ("Assessment" n. pag.)

From this perspective, besides the obvious presence of a president, the movement's form further underlines, as also became clear from the analysis of Ubuntu Linux, that ubuntu and notions of leadership and authority often work in tandem. More specifically, it suggests that hierarchy is a part of decision-making processes in ubuntu thought because someone obviously has to decide what counts as consensus and when it is reached. This notion of consensus is, of course, diametrically opposed to Jacques Rancière's use of the term in his theory of politics, which is based on the notion of difference and which works against the unifying practices of "the police." In "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics" Rancière writes:

> Consensus does not simply mean the agreement of the political parties or of social partners on the common interests of the community. It means that the givens of any collective situation are objectified in such a way that they can no longer lend themselves to a dispute, to the polemical framing of a controversial world within the given world. (48)

Bringing the notion of traditional consensus up against Rancière's notion of the term is crucial, because it makes visible that AbM indeed relies on a unifying gesture internal to its movement, but that it does so in order to actually formulate a "polemical framing of a controversial world," and thus to effect difference. Through consensus it aims at forming a more effective political body which expresses dissent in the face of

[26] Ironically, this structure is very similar to that of the ANC. Just like the ANC, AbM as of 2008 also has a Women's League ("AbM Women's League") and a Youth League ("Abahlali Youth League").

government policies that take the serious form of what could be called a post-apartheid variant of "forced removals." In other words, it is exactly in this unifying gesture – which, it must be added, is formed on the basis of a possibility for the attendees of the community meetings to speak for themselves and to come up with their own solutions – that AbM's tactical move becomes most visible. AbM's decision-making process is based on different views, but is unified to a single course of action which is thus strategically formed by its members (in the sense that it creates a circumscribed space in which action can be formulated), but implements this action tactically in a political field in which the movement fights for making the dominant system, literally, inhabitable for poor people. As such, this movement makes visible, through a reliance on ubuntu, that strategy and tactics, as formulated by de Certeau, cannot be strictly separated, and can even exist and function simultaneously within certain practices.

In the case of AbM, the relations between strategy and tactics never take definite shape because, as Zikode explains, AbM's policy is reflected in and dependent on, one could even say united with, the movement's form, which is always in flux:

> Therefore learning Abahlalism demands, in its nature, the form that it takes. It doesn't require one to adopt some ideas and approach from outside. When you pull all the different people together and make sure that everyone fits in, that it is everyone's home, that's when it requires a different approach from normal kinds of politics and leadership. By the nature of its demand it requires a direct flexibility of thinking, able to deal with its uniqueness. It gives us the strength to support each other, to keep thinking together, to keep fighting together. (*Revolutionary Ubuntu* 34)

The social cohesion of Abahlali, in other words, both comes from and depends on the need to "make sure that everyone fits in" – an effort to make potentially everybody at home in the movement that underlines ubuntu as hospitality towards a stranger that is other and different, yet recognizable as a potential guest. The equal recognition of and respect for every person requires "a flexibility in thinking" that adapts to the uniqueness of every situation. In line with the idea of ubuntu as a convergence of interests, the way people relate to each other is in flux and depends on what is at stake in these relations. As such, a politics that defines itself through ubuntu, if it aims to be vigilant about power relations and different interests, needs to constantly renegotiate the bonds that make its decisions possible. It is this effort itself, Zikode suggests, that is produced by and productive of the movement's social cohesion. Like Hardt and Negri elucidate in *Commonwealth* in relation to love as a political force (see 189-199,

esp. 195), Zikode stresses that this is a kind of political practice that does not come naturally. It needs to be acquired through education, by "learning Abahlalism" in the struggle for equality itself, rather than by imbibing externally imposed knowledge. This is why the movement also refers to itself as the University of Abahlali ("University of AbM").

The notions of constant renegotiation of different opinions and interests and of education in what it means to form a social movement are also present in Hardt and Negri's concept of political love. In *Commonwealth*, they specify their concept in opposition to how it is most commonly represented and thought of, namely as "spontaneous or passive" (180). Instead, they argue:

> It does not simply happen to us, as if it were an event that mystically arrives from elsewhere. Instead, it is an action, a biopolitical event, planned and realized in common. (*Commonwealth* 180)

Especially the relation of political love to the common is crucial in Hardt and Negri's conception, who describe political love as "a process of the production of the common and the production of subjectivity" (180). Similar to the focus on the importance of relations in ubuntu theory, as well as to Zikode's application of the term, Hardt and Negri emphasise that this process "is not merely a *means* to producing material goods and other necessities but also in itself an *end*" (180). Following Spinoza's concept of love, they describe it as "the increase of our power to act and think, together with the recognition of an external cause" (181). Love is a way of forming a relation to the cause of our joy that seeks to repeat and expand it, which, at the same time, results in "new, more powerful bodies and minds" (181). As such, political love can be said to both produce and hold together the common.

As we have seen, however, in the context of Ahmed's conclusion that objects, subject, or terms are pitted against others through the circulation of affect, love is not an unambiguous process. Indeed, Hardt and Negri also note that it is "deeply ambivalent and susceptible to corruption" (182). Productive love can easily be distorted by a problematic association with sameness, where love for the same (identitarian love) or love as becoming the same (love as a process of unification) result in forms of love that create, as de Certeau would put it, their own "proper," their own delineated in- and outside (Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth* 182-3). Indeed, as we have seen in the case of the outburst of xenophobic violence repeatedly referred to above and Ahmed's analysis of the circulation of affect, love and solidarity within one group often leads to the

projection of hate on its externalised other. This leads Ahmed to conclude, as I have mentioned, in one of the last chapters of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, that

> There is no good love that, in speaking its name, can change the world into the referent for that name. But in the resistance to speaking in the name of love, in the recognition that we do not simply act out of love, and in the understanding that love comes with conditions however unconditional it might feel, we can find perhaps a different kind of line or connection between the others we care for, and the world to which we want to give shape. (141)

So, it is only through an awareness of the circumstances and circulation of the conditions of love, Ahmed suggests, that there might be a possibility to imagine a different way of relating to others. It is striking, however, as I mentioned earlier, that she proposes we redefine our relations to "the others we care for," which emphasises the bonds to those already close to us, whereas Hardt and Negri would surely insist on deeming such a perspective on love equally identitarian to the one Ahmed is trying to get away from.

Indeed, as Hardt and Negri claim, such a notion of corrupted love can only be countered by formulating the concept of love as something that can be influenced through an active engagement with it:

> When we think of the power of love, we need constantly to keep in mind that there are no guarantees; there is nothing automatic about its functioning and results. … The struggle to combat evil thus involves a training or education in love. (*Commonwealth* 195)

To be sure, the distinction that Hardt and Negri make between "love" and "evil" is not as clear-cut as they suggest here, but their take on the concept of love is potentially productive. Indeed, love is subject to specific socio-historically determined circulations of affect, as suggested by Ahmed, but this also implies it is subject to change. Exactly because affect circulates, or rather, in terms of Hardt and Negri, because love is not a given, but a corruptible process that can "go bad," the positive and productive side of political love becomes visible. Despite the problematic construction of their argument through the notions of the common, the multitude and, especially "the poor," then, the way some of their concepts come to the fore in the organisation of AbM also suggests there is something that we can take away from Hardt and Negri's

attempt to actively formulate a tactical response to how people who appear to have no voice are interpellated by authority and/or Capital.

Indeed, in his ecosocialist manifesto *The Enemy of Nature*, Joel Kovel regards AbM, with its demand that resources are made public and shared, as an attempt to recreate the Commons, in which materials are regarded in terms of usage rather than ownership (251-2). Although the terms "public" and "ownership" still raise the question as to what and who this kind of social organisation does and does not include, AbM's struggle for "a new emancipatory structure where we are not stakeholders but people; where land is for everyone and where resources are shared rather than fought over" has also won them something, like not being relocated and offering the ability to people from all walks of life to become politically involved in the issues of the community (*Revolutionary Ubuntu* 5). In this sense, the example of AbM recasts the critique formulated against Hardt and Negri's treatment of poverty as a matter of attitude rather than of material lack in positive terms. Although Hardt and Negri's approach remains a one-sided one, in which the generalizing move of describing the poor as a group of people with a certain attitude towards the redistribution of property sidesteps the consequences of their material or cultural diversity, Abahlali's organisation and results suggest that an ubuntu-based politics could work by continuously adjusting the form and content of its politics according to the specific issues that poverty and property raise in certain places.

If anything, AbM demonstrates, contra the critique on Hardt and Negri voiced above, that "the poor," or at least, some poor people, actually are interested in a common striving for the redistribution of wealth and of developing themselves actively, rather than "just" relying on and becoming part of the system. The movement shows that they are political agents in dire need of and actively striving for emancipation. What is more, AbM does so through addressing very specific, local issues that concern both the material conditions in which its members live, as well as the way these issues are addressed by the authorities. On the other hand, one could also say that they strive for these changes exactly so that they can more fully access what society has to offer them in its current structure. All the same, they do so through a redefined political process of engagement, based on the notion of ubuntu, in which differences within the body of the members are not glossed over, but are integrated in the decision-making process. Because AbM functions through a notion of consensus which engages with opposing opinions, but simultaneously uses these differences to strategically form a unified form of action, a structure emerges that respects difference and negotiates it until consensus is reached with regard to how the convergence of different interests is served best. As such, the movement does not seem to be about

achieving unity per se, but, rather, about constantly and tactically repositioning itself – through an ubuntu-inspired form of communication – according to the issues that arise amongst its members.

Concluding Remarks

In recent years, ubuntu has structurally emerged in a new kind of "marketised" guise. This is reason for optimism, because the spread of a term like ubuntu all over the globe carries with it an emphasis on the integrity of human relations on all levels of daily life. At the same time, the ways in which it has travelled have also caused concern. As we have seen in the analysis of the BP commercial, ubuntu has come to the fore as something that only certain stereotyped people adhere to (in this case, black, African women, especially mothers). The positive affect released through the humorous use of ubuntu only serves to reinforce the stereotypes that carry this message and recasts the word as a notion chained to certain racial, gender and class assumptions. In addition, we have seen that the positivity that almost all uses of ubuntu seek to emphasise has come to be aligned with a cultural capitalistic need for ethical action. However, aligning or sticking the affects of solidarity, respect and sharing that are present in ubuntu with or to certain products that alleviate the consumer's negative feelings about his or her complicity in the scope of capitalism, potentially serves to deepen the divisions already present in this economy – an economy of affect as well as of material lack. What is enlarged through the circulation of affect, after all, is not only affect itself, as pointed out by Ahmed, but also the differences on which it is based.

Even so, the reliance on ubuntu as a possibility to improve the ways in which people relate to each other and the ways in which affects circulate comes to the surface again and again. In the case of Abahlali baseMjondolo we have seen that this affect attached to ubuntu can function as an incentive for change as well. AbM's premise that every person is equal, important, and should be respected leads to a different way of conducting and governing daily affairs, which, in the case of AbM, is based on and aimed at rethinking property along the lines of sharing rather than those of private ownership. Like Hardt and Negri's notion of the multitude, this movement aims to effect change through a redefinition of what poverty means and of installing agency in those who are poor. If AbM sticks to its current course and continues to effect success in their daily struggle, this is cause for hope that change can indeed be initiated from within a system that has a hold over all of those who live in it.

The biggest loophole here, to be sure, is that both the pragmatic politics of AbM and the theory of Hardt and Negri, with their emphasis on solidarity and political love, pit their argument against a common enemy: neoliberal societal structures and the people that maintain them. Unfortunately, then, as successful and ideal as both these strategies of thought and action may sound, they bring us back to what seems to be the eternal problem of community formation as formulated by Arjun Appadurai, namely that any social formation needs an external, negatively defined factor, established "through the dynamics of stereotyping and identity contrast," against which the coherence of the community in question can be positively constructed (50). This might be a problem that can only be tackled in the same way it is produced, namely through a reflection on the conditions of its production and the role affect plays in the conditions of coherence.

As became clear from AbM's internal structure, cohesion depends on flux and the continual renegotiation of relations between people in the achievement of a common goal. This results in a politics in which goals are not delimited and guarantees do not exist because the goal, like the course of action, changes along with the fluctuation of relationships on which these matters depend. One can be sure, however, that this, too, is not an unambiguous process. The line between strategy and tactics is paper-thin, which is to say that one cannot exist without the other. Tactics need a system to poach upon, whereas the system that is strategically imposed is made stronger by the fact that tactics make this system livable. In all likelihood, AbM's format should be considered constructive for some who feel safe and appreciated by its politics, yet repressive for others, who might have alternative views on how politics functions. Looking for a use of ubuntu as a tactic thus involves the attempt to avoid falling into the trap of becoming strategic in a repressive and authorative sense, even if this movement also underlines what also became clear from Chapter 2 and 3, namely that a conceptual and material strategy of circumscription and unity can provide a secure and safe space from which to relate to others more effectively.

In the case of Ubuntu Linux, the very focus on a respectful and collaborative work environment, in other words, on the importance of practicing ubuntu in one's labour-related actions as an improvement of the current capitalistic approach to labour relations, simultaneously obscures the circulation of commodities and capital in this process. Žižek argues that such an apparent shift in focus from commodity fetishism (relations between things) to relations between people reinforces commodity fetishism and thus strengthens the capitalist system. According to him, the separation of these two relations from each other is thus necessary in order for people to think the possibility of their freedom from this capitalistic system.

It has been repeatedly argued here, however, especially by reference to Ahmed's argument concerning the circulation of affect, that an individual's materiality cannot be thought separately from his or her relational circumstances. Hardt and Negri's insistence that a change in the attitudes towards others and material conditions (especially property) can result in new ways of organizing global politics helps to think this entwinement of relationality and materiality, despite, or rather because of the fact that their approach throws into relief the serious problem of glossing over differences amongst people, their circumstances and their opinions. As Ruddick convincingly argues, Hardt and Negri's one-sided approach seriously delimits the possibilities of affect in a political context. Tactically speaking, then, the most promising instance of what could be called "applied ubuntu" seems to be that of AbM, which, as a movement, seems to recognize that as far as negotiations go, there can be no blueprint for relations. In a very concrete sense, this demonstrates that ubuntu as a concept cannot possibly remain stable or the same, not even in one place, except, perhaps, as a reflection of the desire to respect difference when faced with various and colliding interests and to achieve their convergence.

Afterword

Figure 19. Ubuntu Security sign in Pretoria, South Africa.

This photo, which was taken in Pretoria in the summer (South African winter) of 2011, rather surprisingly and succinctly ties together the main issues that have come to the fore in the exploration of ubuntu undertaken in this dissertation. At the time, it merely struck me as ironic that a sign with the word "ubuntu" on it would be posted to communicate a message of warning and threat as well as of protection, but as this project drew to its provisional end, I became increasingly familiar with such an ambiguous use of the term. Meaning kept accumulating on this particular image.

First of all, it reiterates the dynamic between inclusion and exclusion that was evident in all of the preceding chapters. So far, this is the most explicit image I have encountered, however, where the word ubuntu functions like a boundary marker, in the sense that it is actually *stuck to* a boundary, posted as it is to a gate surrounding private property that literally circumscribes and fences this property off from the outside world.

As such the image calls up the association with the role of private property in how ubuntu has been appropriated for use on the market, in management and in business policies. As became clear from Chapter 4, the focus on human relations in ubuntu can obscure the fact that what is actually at stake is not the quality of these relations, but the enhancement of competitive advantage and the protection of acquired property. Alternatively, ubuntu is referred to as a survival strategy common amongst poor people, who through sharing and group solidarity, attempt to counter the deprivation caused by material lack. In both these uses of the term, ubuntu is posited as a strategy of accumulation.

In the above image, the word "ubuntu" is, of course, directed at those inside the fence and refers to ubuntu's emphasis on intersubjective harmony. It extends the idea that, in ubuntu thought, people take care of each other and support each other, to the promise of reliable and unconditional service in case of emergency reflected in the phrase "24 hour response." The way ubuntu is communicated to those outside the fence is, of course, decidedly different, although not immediately evident from the use of the word. Will the burglar be apprehended in a humane fashion? Does ubuntu security mean that the intruders will not be hurt? Or does it mean that the property will not be protected at all because it serves the common good to loot the house? As such, this image also foregrounds the possibility of pervertibility of the notion of ubuntu as a convergence and negotiation of interests that I have developed in this dissertation.

This notion of pervertibility calls to mind the issue of responsibility. On the one hand, responsibility in ubuntu has come to the fore as a necessity to take an interest in the common good of whatever community one belongs to, from which ubuntu emerges as a decidedly moralistic value. In this guise, ubuntu can come to function, as it did in the TRC, as a future perfect, where a particular view on an imagined common past is projected into the future as an idealized goal, in this case, reconciliation and national unity. On the other hand, the issue of responsibility in ubuntu was also conceived, related as it is to the notion of hospitality, as a radical openness to what is "strange" or "foreign" to the community. From this perspective, responsibility emerges as an attitude from the perspective of which not knowing what to do is actually a condition for what Spivak has called responsible action in her description of the

future anterior, where the past, present, and future are all undecidable and marked by uncertainty.

With regard to Ndebele's call that such uncertainty might provide a responsible way to construct relations and solutions in the public sphere, it is important to emphasise that the ways people are positioned relationally, but also historically, discursively or economically, affect their ability to rely on a notion like uncertainty. In ubuntu, especially in its formulation as a convergence of interests, responsibility comes to the fore as a negotiation of the interests at play, but also of the dynamic between receptivity and closed fences. In this sense the phrase "ubuntu security" is particularly relevant, because it brings to the fore the fundamental problem of safety and security. Not having a door to open, not having access to a safeguarded existence, not having the security of communal networks, all seriously impede the possibility to partake in ubuntu's call for openness and respect for otherness, an otherness that is, as I have repeatedly argued, not absolute, but rests on the observation that, in ubuntu thought, an other is always recognizable as someone to whom the subject can relate, in terms of hospitality, or otherwise.

To formulate ubuntu as a staking out of one's own relational position with a sense of receptiveness that invites others into the subject's experience is thus not intended to strike a happy medium. The relating subject is influenced by contingent factors that cannot always be placed in a shared frame of reference. Yet, at the same time, the unsharability of experience is sometimes exactly what ties people together and in this way, what is uncertain or undecidable is also an opportunity to reformulate given familial, sexual or historical forms of relating. Recognising this double stance as the subject's activation in any relational matrix is a dire necessity that flows from the recognition that the actualisation of hospitality towards others is always dependent on a distribution of power that has to be negotiated, even if the different uses of ubuntu invariably emphasise a universalistic pull towards unconditional openness and a pursuit of harmony. As such, it becomes possible to think of ubuntu as a recognition and emancipation of other people from absolute otherness to strangers, who are different in their specificity, but still very recognizable as guests. If this seems a position formulated from a perspective of assumed authority (and property), I would like to reiterate, keeping Krog's poetry in mind, that ubuntu's conundrum of negotiating the absolute with the specific can only be navigated through an awareness that the subject and its very capability to relate to others emerges in the negotiation of different experiences within particular discursive fields.

The above also makes clear, however, that such a phrasing of ubuntu is itself not free of issues of authority and domination. As has been repeatedly emphasised in this

dissertation, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint where a strategic use of discourse ends and a tactical one begins. The distinction is really a matter of perspective dependent on where authority is located. As such, this distinction has helped to lend visibility to the hierarchical dimensions of ubuntu and the vectors of power within its discourse. I have tried to thematise issues of authority in specific situations, most notably in the case studies about Zanele Muholi, the commodifications of ubuntu and ubuntu's political use in the TRC, but also in the Durban Shack Dwellers movement, in order to assess when ubuntu's drive for peaceful solutions might be considered politically productive in the emergence and maintenance of open and inclusive relations, but also when it hampers the development of such relations or, alternatively, constructs these bonds as restrictive and repressive for the people in them. By making the underlying, often power-related elements of ubuntu visible, I have tried to show that ubuntu's most important and perhaps most ethical value is that it can be a concept that allows us to think relational openness and close(d)ness critically.

Speaking of closeness, notions of intimacy and the body have played a significant role in the arguments I have made with regard to most of the case studies in this dissertation, specifically those of Krog, Gordimer, Coetzee, Muholi and Ndebele. These notions are important because they underline the embodied aspects of relating to one's surroundings and point towards the question of how relationality is *mediated*, while acknowledging the fact that this mediation is, at the same time, constructive of relationality. In two particular case studies, namely that of Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and Muholi's *Faces and Phases* series, the question of mediation and its relation to ubuntu has been particularly pronounced, if not exhaustively discussed.

In *Age of Iron*, the narrative technique of the novel proved to be vital for the interpretation of the plot. The narrative voice is overwhelmingly confessional and, as such, draws the reader in through a suggestion of overhearing that borders on voyeurism, but at the same time alienates because of an, at times, overpowering intimate candour that makes the reader wince. As such, the narration does not merely reflect the protagonist's problems to relate to her surroundings, but, more generally, raises the issue of *how* we do this. It places emphasis on the norms and values we disseminate when we relate to others, verbally or otherwise, and, by revealing the selective and exclusive qualities of these values, foregrounds the difficulties and problems involved in extending sympathy and openness to others that may offend one's sensibility.

In the case of Zanele Muholi's photography the issue is slightly different. There, the specific question arises whether photography is capable of triggering what Emmanuel Levinas has called the ethical injunction. Can a photograph trigger a sense of responsibility in its viewer? Levinas claims it cannot because representation dilutes the

originary ethical meeting that takes place in the face to face between self and other. The analysis of Muholi's work, however, suggests it can. By relying on the power of the grouping of individual portraits to create awareness in the viewer for the plight of black queers in South Africa, Muholi aims for a political effect. In this sense, both case studies deal with the effect of representation on how ubuntu and relationality can be perceived and point towards the possible political importance of thinking the interrelationship between mediation and relationality.

By way of conclusion I would like to return to the image of "Ubuntu Security," which succinctly depicts the fine line that this dissertation traces in ubuntu thought between a need for personal security through mechanisms of exclusion and the possibility and necessity of extending such security to others by opening up set boundaries. More precisely, it shows how ubuntu revolves around finding the balance between enclosure and openness, inclusion and exclusion, and security and insecurity. It foregrounds the possibility to perceive elements that are often thought of as diametrically opposed as interrelated, interdependent and mutually constructive. Based as it is on the notions of personhood and humanity, ubuntu, as it has emerged from this study, recognises that the concept of an essentially shared common humanity is both deeply problematic and absolutely necessary in the creation and maintenance of more equal and caring relations. This irreducible critical tension posits ubuntu as a continuous negotiation of people's various interests and, thus, as a constant re-invention of the category of the "human" and the "humane."

In any case, ubuntu in all its guises – whether these be strategic, tactical, or both – even if some of these guises run the risk of turning into a repressive morality themselves – offers the opportunity to acknowledge and to give shape to the unavoidable interdependence of human relations on all levels of daily life. In this way, it also offers ways to make repressive systems inhabitable. To think about ubuntu is to face the circumference of one's own norms and values about what it means to relate to others as a human being. It is this aspect of ubuntu and its ability, to paraphrase de Certeau, to (re)organize spaces, languages, relations or material realities, whether on a minute or a vast scale, that I would like to emphasise as I close.

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1

tussen jou en my
hoe verskriklik
hoe wanhopig
hoe vernietig breek dit tussen jou en my

soveel verwonding vir waarheid
soveel verwoesting
so min het oorgebly vir oorlewing

waar gaan ons heen van hier?

jou stem slinger
in woede
langs die kil snerpende sweep van my verlede

hoe lank duur dit
hoe lank vir 'n stem
om 'n ander te bereik

in dié land so bloeiende tussen ons

2

in die begin is sien
sien vir eeue
die kop vul met as
geen suurstof
geen spriet
by sien word eindelik woord gevoeg
en die oog stort af in die woedende wond

hoor! hoor die opwel van medemenselike taal
in haar sagte weerlose skedel
en hoor die stemme
die talige stemme van die land
almal gedoop in die lettergreep van bloed en hoort
be-hoort die land uiteindelik aan die stemme wat daarin woon
lê die land aan die voete van verhale
van saffraan en amber
engelhaar en kwets
dou en eer en draad

3

woordeloos staan ek
waar sal my woorde vandaan kom?
vir die doeners
die huiweraars
die banges
wat bewend-siek hang
aan die geluidlose ruimte van ons onherbergsame verlede

wat sê 'n mens?
wat de hel dóén 'n mens
met dié drag ontkroonde geraamtes, oorsprong, skande en as

die land van my gewete verdwyn sissend
soos 'n laken in die donker

6

die liggaam beroof
die blind gefolterde keel
die prys van die land van verskrikking
is die grootte van 'n hart

verdriet draal so alleen
as die stemme van die angstiges verdrink op die wind

jy gee nie op nie
jy trap 'n voetpad oop met seer versigtige stappe
jy sny my los

in lig in – liefliker, ligter en kraniger as lied

mag ek jou vashou my suster
in dié brose oopvou van 'n nuwe enkele medewoord

(a)

between you and me
how desperately
how it aches
how desperately it aches between you and me

so much hurt for so much truth
so much destruction
so little left for survival

where do we go from here

your voice slung
in anger
over the solid cold length of our past

how long does it take
for a voice
to reach another

in this country held bleeding between us

(b)

in the beginning is seeing
seeing for ages
filling the head with ash
no air
no tendril
now to seeing speaking is added
and the eye plunges into the wounds of anger
seizing the surge of language by its soft bare skull
hear oh hear
the voices all the voices of the land
all baptised in syllables of blood and belonging
this country belongs to the voices of those who live in it
this landscape lies at the feet at last
of the stories of saffron and amber
angel hair and barbs
dew and hay and hurt

(c)

speechless I stand
whence will words now come?
for us the doers
the hesitant
we who hang quivering and ill
from this soundless space of an Afrikaner past
what does one say?
what the hell does one do
with this load of decrowned skeletons origins shame and ash
the country of my conscience
is disappearing forever like a sheet in the dark

(g)

this body bereft
this blind tortured throat

the price of this country of death
is the size of a heart

grief comes so lonely
as the voices of the anguished drown on the wind

you do not lie down
you open up a pathway with slow sad steps
you cut me loose

into light – lovelier, lighter and braver than song
may I hold you my sister
in this warm fragile unfolding of the word human

Summary

This study investigates how ubuntu – which is generally conceived of as an interpersonal dynamic that emphasises qualities like generosity, hospitality, friendliness, compassion, a willingness to share and an interest in the common good – is continuously (re)shaped in contemporary South African cultures. The aim is to trace some of the historical contexts and objects that ubuntu has already encountered, but also to create contact with contexts and concepts pertaining to relationality, intersubjectivity and community that have not been related to it as of yet. These links between ubuntu and other concepts are actively created in order to keep essentialising gestures, both with regard to possible meanings of ubuntu and the division between Africa and the West that often accompanies it, at bay.

Such relations, whether old or new, are, however, not neutral. Even a brief glance at the history of South Africa suffices to raise awareness of the sites of contestation – by which I rather broadly mean colonialism and apartheid – and the violence that resulted from the asymmetrical power relations on which they are based. It is in such contexts of violence and conflict that ubuntu's crucial value as a drive for peaceful solutions comes to the fore most forcefully. These contexts also make clear that ubuntu, like any other concept, is itself also invested with certain power relations and is "never simply descriptive, but rather, programmatic and normative" (Bal, "Working" 8). This is why this dissertation relies on a discursive approach of ubuntu, which, through its acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of power in everyday practices, is pre-eminently suitable to think critically about the acknowledgment, and as such about the provision of space in which to give shape to the inevitable embedding of people in their surroundings, whether social, cultural, environmental, historical, political, or all of the above.

The starting point of this study's analysis of the various and widespread appropriations of ubuntu is the fraught context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The way ubuntu comes to the fore in the TRC's implementation of a discourse of reconciliation and national unity offers a crucial opportunity to see the term "at work" and foregrounds the necessity to think of ubuntu as a specific discourse with a distinct working practice. Although ubuntu existed long before this process of dramatic political and social transition was initiated, its link to the notion of forgiveness in the TRC's discourse of reconciliation has brought ubuntu to the

forefront in a specifically dominant way that resonates in many subsequent uses and investigations of the term.

The first chapter sets out to explicate the use of ubuntu that emanated from the Commission's directive, before moving on to a discussion of how ubuntu became interrelated with forgiveness as the preferred mode of interaction between victims and perpetrators in the process of reconciliation and nation-building. From Desmond Tutu's autobiographical work and his influence on some of the Commission's most "famous" hearings, forgiveness is staged as exemplary in the achievement of reconciliation and the creation of new communal bonds. From this staging ubuntu emerges as caught between two highly entangled discursive strategies: one in which it facilitates the rehabilitation of the dignity of victims of human rights violations in an individualized and psychological dynamic, and one in which it promotes an adherence to this dynamic as beneficial, even necessary, for the nationalistic project of reconciliation. The interrelation of these stagings, I argue, revolves around a contradictory use of the notion of common humanity that is claimed to be all-inclusive yet installs, at the same time, a benchmark for a moral standard.

It is from within this double bind of ubuntu in the TRC process that alternative formulations also become possible. Through a discussion of a number of poems from "land van genade en verdriet," a group of poems by South African poet, journalist and scholar Antjie Krog, forgiveness is read not strictly as a tool for nation-building, but more generally as a subjection to the norms and values in light of which forgiveness is asked for. Krog's vision on forgiveness, and especially its link to the idea of a "humane" language that recognizes people's vulnerability to (discursive) violence, makes clear that forgiveness can represent an uncritical acceptance of the discourse one is subjected to, but can also be a locus from which it becomes possible to change, or at the very least, act upon a dominant discourse while being positioned in it. This double position of the subject in language and discourse is then brought to bear on the formulation of forgiveness in one of the TRC meetings surrounding the Guguletu Seven case, which allows for a reading of ubuntu, not as an essentially shared humanity that is taken for granted, but rather one that posits ubuntu as a constant re-invention, through the negotiation of people's various interests, of what could be considered "human."

Chapter 2 further investigates ubuntu as a convergence and negotiation of interests that emerged from ubuntu's double function in the TRC's discourse of reconciliation. This discourse promoted openness towards others, but simultaneously delimited this openness in order to provide social cohesion and stability in South Africa's transition period from apartheid to democracy, a time defined by a search for new frames

of reference. The chapter revolves around the questions of how, from the perspective of intersubjective relations, such a transition from one (set of) discourse(s) to another takes place and how the notion of transition influences these relations.

In order to do so, the chapter discusses two novels: Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* and J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. *None to Accompany Me* introduces the possibility of thinking intersubjective and communal relations as clusters that change over time and that might have to be discarded in favour of new groupings. The novel underlines the influence of contingency and formulates profound ways to relate to others besides the possibilities offered by familial and sexual relations. These findings make it possible to think of ubuntu as a convergence of interests that counters the presentation of ubuntu as a future perfect, in which the insistent reference to ubuntu and common humanity as "lost" posits it as a reference to an idealized past and the need to recover ubuntu as a projection of this past into the future. The reliance on contingency introduces the notion of the future anterior, which takes the unknowability of both past and future into account and looks for a basis of responsible action in these conditions of uncertainty.

Coetzee's *Age of Iron* confronts the reader with a balancing act that is the result of these two different attitudes towards the future. Although it shows that animosity between the characters can be redefined towards a feasible relationality despite chaos, conflict, and the impossibility of access to a common (discourse on the) past, it also clearly depicts that the ossification of communal boundaries in the novel result from a system that structurally disenfranchises the majority of its characters. As such, the notion of the past and the future as undecidable and open-ended is crucially refined by the suggestion that the ability, need or desire to relinquish a unified position and to communicate with other perspectives on the past besides one's own interpretation of it, is actually dependent on social privilege. On the other hand, the protagonist's bold reliance on hostile factors beyond her control as she moves closer to death suggests that converging interests are indeed difficult to negotiate, especially when high stakes are involved, but also foregrounds the importance of fluidity, contingency and undecidability in shaping relations to others in the absence of a shared frame of reference. From this perspective, ubuntu is posited as an open-ended possibility for the future that aims to go beyond the existing makeup of given familial, sexual or historical forms of relating.

The third chapter traces what happens to the effectiveness of undecidability when the vulnerability it causes threatens the position of the subject in the public sphere on a daily basis. If contingency and undecidability are to be taken into account as serious values when signalling the need to focus on undecidability in ubuntu, what happens

to influences like responsibility and obligation? Through a focus on responsibility this chapter explores the possibility of thinking ubuntu as ethics. It investigates the emancipation of a certain subaltern group within the larger society of South Africa, whose rights are protected by law, but often trampled on in practice. In Zanele Muholi's photograph series *Faces and Phases* this call for emancipation takes the form of the representation of a symbiotic relation between black queer individuals and their community, which functions as an ethical injunction towards its viewers. Muholi's response to the violence befalling her direct community, apart from being an attempt to trigger a sense of individual responsibility, is particularly relevant in the context of ubuntu because it portrays the ethical moment not as a concurrence between the two isolated (and thus circumscribed) instances of self and other, but, recognises that those who are present in the face to face encounter are, prior to this moment, already part of relational constellations.

Thus, it forms an ubuntu-oriented alternative to the ethically vertiginous responsibility in Levinas, for whom any relation besides the absolute responsibility to the other represents complicity in a betrayal of ethical purity. This difference between ubuntu and Levinasian responsibility foregrounds the value of and necessity for a concept like ubuntu as a convergence of interests because it approaches this complicity as an activation of the individual's relation to his/her surroundings rather than as a paralyzing contradiction that jars the individual's agency. A reading of Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* makes visible that the notion of inevitable complicity is in constant need of re-negotiation, which takes the shape of a tactical re-evaluation of the character's involvement in the dominant relations that already determine their everyday lives. This novella is pertinent here because it posits a notion of community that reflects on and allows for fluctuation, yet also keeps track of the regenerative potential of communality and the responsibilities implied in maintaining relational ties.

Since the idea of ubuntu as a convergence of interests, which are located in a particular time and space and which need to be responsibly negotiated, can help to give shape to the way we are related and actively relate to others, the focus shifts, in the fourth chapter, to explicit expressions of ubuntu in the public domain. The aim is to find out, by tracing some of the effects of the popularity of ubuntu, what these uses tell us about the concept and its potential for social and communal cohesion. Chapter 4 argues that affect plays a crucial role in the interpretation of the use of ubuntu in "market-oriented" approaches, which seem to have become an increasingly dominant feature of ubuntu's dissemination globally. Through a discussion of the role of affect in the way the fair trade product Ubuntu Cola is marketed and a critique of what seems to be a more general reliance in marketing and management discourses on the imple-

mentation of ubuntu as a strategy that is supposed to enlarge competitive advantage, I argue that ubuntu contains a hidden reference to the notion of private property, exactly because of its dominant associations of sharing and group solidarity.

As becomes clear from the analysis of the Ubuntu Linux computer operating system, relationality can come to be regarded as separated from material relations. Through a discussion of Žižek's interpretation of commodity fetishism, I argue that the relations between "things," however, are inextricably bound to and made possible by the relations between people. This premise of the unavoidable connection between things and people is used to find points of entry from which to begin an analysis of how ubuntu can serve to think how people can effect and affect these alignments between relationality and materiality in their dealings with each other.

The final section and case study of this dissertation deals with the politics of Abehlali baseMjondolo, better known as the Durban Shack Dwellers Movement. This organisation can be read as a combination of Hardt and Negri's theory of the creation of the common through politically organising the poor with an ubuntu-inspired model of consensus politics. I will argue that this movement, which operates on the local level and aims to adapt its form and actions to the issues at hand, continuously opposes the strategic discourse of dispossession and relocation that is imposed on its members by making this system, literally, inhabitable and workable for one of South Africa's most disenfranchised social groups. In doing so, constantly re-negotiates the power relations that come to the fore in the ways different interests intersect, and thus provides at least one way in which to imagine a politics of ubuntu.

In combination the chapters show how the ever shifting meaning of ubuntu is based on a balancing act between openness and close(d)ness, inclusion and exclusion, and security and insecurity. More precisely, they show how ubuntu revolves around finding the balance between these polarities and foreground the possibility to perceive of elements that are often thought of as diametrically opposed as interrelated, interdependent and mutually constructive. Ubuntu, as it emerged from this study, recognises that the concept of an essentially shared common humanity is both deeply problematic and absolutely necessary in the creation and maintenance of equal and caring relations. This seems to be a critical tension that is impossible to solve, but it does foreground ubuntu as a continuous negotiation of people's various interests and, thus, as a constant re-invention of the category of the "human" and the "humane." To think about ubuntu is to face the circumference of one's own norms and values about what it means to relate to others as a human being. In this sense, any investigation of ubuntu also reflects on, mediates between and actively constructs relations between people.

Samenvatting

Deze studie onderzoekt hoe ubuntu – een term die hier wordt gelezen als een oriëntatie op het bestaan die erkenning inruimt voor de verschillende manieren waarop mensen in hun omgeving zijn ingebed – continu en telkens opnieuw vorm vindt in hedendaagse Zuid-Afrikaanse culturen. Het doel is om vanuit een aantal van de historische contexten en objecten waar ubuntu al mee geassocieerd wordt nieuwe verbanden te leggen met contexten en concepten die relevant zijn voor de theoretisering van relationaliteit, intersubjectiviteit, gemeenschap en samenleving. Deze nieuwe associaties zijn bedoeld om afstand te nemen van de polarisatie tussen Afrika en het Westen die vaak met het gebruik van het woord ubuntu gepaard gaat.

Dat wil overigens niet zeggen dat de verbanden die hier worden getrokken, of deze nu oud of nieuw zijn, neutraal zijn. Zelfs een vluchtige blik op de geschiedenis van Zuid-Afrika schetst een beeld van geweld, veroorzaakt door de verschillende spanningsvelden en de daartoe behorende asymmetrische machtsverhoudingen. De cruciale waarde van ubuntu in het formuleren van mogelijke, vreedzame oplossingen voor conflicten wordt juist duidelijk vanuit deze spanningsvelden. Tegelijkertijd maakt deze context van conflict en geweld ook zichtbaar dat ubuntu, net als andere concepten, zelf ook gevormd wordt door bepaalde machtsverhoudingen en nooit "simpelweg beschrijvend kan zijn, maar juist een programmatische en normatieve werking heeft" (Bal, "Working" 8, mijn vertaling). Om deze reden leunt dit onderzoek op een discursieve benadering van ubuntu, die gestoeld is op de alomtegenwoordigheid van machtsrelaties in het dagelijks leven en het dus mogelijk maakt deze relaties, en hoe ze gevormd worden, inzichtelijk te maken.

De beladen context van de Waarheids- en Verzoeningscommissie (WVC) die in de jaren '90 na het eind van de apartheid in Zuid-Afrika is ingesteld, vormt het beginpunt van de analyse van de verschillende en wijdverspreide toepassingen van ubuntu. De manier waarop ubuntu naar voren komt in de implementatie van het discours van verzoening en nationale eenheid van de WVC biedt een unieke kans om de term "aan het werk" te zien en vestigt de aandacht op de noodzaak om ubuntu te zien als een specifiek discours met een eigen werkpraktijk. Hoewel ubuntu al veel eerder bestond dan dit proces van politieke en sociale verandering, is de manier waarop het functioneert in de dynamiek van de WVC van significante invloed op de verdere betekenis en het gebruik van de term. Deze periode van politieke overgang is dus een belangrijk

uitgangspunt, waarbij ook zal worden gekeken naar manieren om over ubuntu na te denken die door dit dominante gebruik juist in de verdrukking zijn gekomen.

Het eerste hoofdstuk traceert het gebruik van ubuntu, zoals dit uit de richtlijnen van de Commissie voortvloeide, en bekijkt vervolgens hoe het verbonden is geraakt met hun visie op vergeving als *de* manier om interactie tussen slachtoffers en daders een plek te geven binnen het proces van verzoening en nationale eenheid. Uit het autobiografische werk van Desmond Tutu en diens invloed op een aantal bekende hoorzittingen wordt duidelijk dat vergiffenis wordt opgevoerd als het ultieme voorbeeld van verzoening en het scheppen van nieuwe banden binnen gemeenschappen. Dit performatieve gebruik van ubuntu beknelt de term tussen twee verschillende, maar sterk met elkaar verweven discursieve strategieën. Aan de ene kant rehabiliteert ubuntu binnen een grotere sociale dynamiek de menselijke waardigheid van individuele slachtoffers wiens mensenrechten zijn geschonden. Aan de andere kant spoort het mensen ook aan deze dynamiek als de enige heilzame en noodzakelijke oplossing te beschouwen voor de toekomst van Zuid-Afrika, terwijl de sociale problematiek in deze periode oneindig veel gecompliceerder en genuanceerder is. Uiteindelijk resulteert het samenspel tussen deze strategieën in een tegenstrijdig gebruik van "medemenselijkheid" dat voor iedereen toegankelijk heet te zijn, maar tegelijkertijd een normatieve maatstaf voor moreel gedrag in stelling brengt.

Vanuit dit dilemma komen echter ook alternatieve formuleringen van ubuntu naar voren. In de bespreking van een aantal gedichten uit Antjie Krog's "land van genade en verdriet," wordt vergeving gelezen als een instrument voor het scheppen van nationale eenheid en in bredere zin als een onderwerping aan de normen en waarden in het licht waarvan om vergeving wordt gevraagd. Krog's visie op vergiffenis, en in het bijzonder het verband tussen vergeving en het idee van een "(mede)menselijke" taal – die oog heeft voor de kwetsbaarheid van mensen ten opzichte van (discursief) geweld – maakt duidelijk dat vergiffenis aan de ene kant een klakkeloze acceptatie van een dominant discours is, maar ook een creatieve plek kan zijn van waaruit een handelen ten opzichte van dit discours, waarin men onvermijdelijk gepositioneerd is, mogelijk wordt gemaakt. Deze dubbele positie in taal en discours wordt vervolgens toegepast op de formulering van het concept vergiffenis in één van de zittingen omtrent de Guguletu Seven zaak. Hierdoor wordt het mogelijk om ubuntu niet te zien als een essentiële en universele menselijkheid die voor lief wordt genomen, maar eerder als een continue heruitvinding van wat het betekent om mens te zijn door verschillende individuele belangen af te wegen.

Hoofdstuk 2 gaat dieper in op de formulering van ubuntu als een samenkomst en onderhandeling van verschillende belangen. Hoewel het WVC-discours openheid

jegens anderen probeerde te bevorderen, heeft het deze openheid ook belemmerd om sociale cohesie en stabiliteit in de overgangsperiode te realiseren. Het hoofdstuk gaat over de vraag hoe een dergelijke politieke en sociale overgang van een bepaald discours naar een ander plaats kan hebben alsook om de vraag hoe transitie de begrippen intersubjectiviteit en relationaliteit beinvloedt.

Om dit te bewerkstelligen behandelt het twee romans, namelijk *None to Accompany Me* van Nadine Gordimer en *Age of Iron* van J.M. Coetzee. De lezing *None to Accompany Me* introduceert intersubjectieve en gemeenschappelijke relaties als clusters die onderhevig zijn aan veranderingen en die misschien zullen moeten worden losgelaten ten behoeve van nieuwe groeperingen of verbindingen. De roman benadrukt de invloed van een zekere historische contingentie en formuleert hieruit voortvloeiende manieren waarop men zich tot anderen kan verhouden naast de mogelijkheden die door familiale en seksuele relaties worden ingegeven. Deze bevindingen maken het mogelijk om een alternatieve interpretatie van ubuntu te geven. Binnen het WVC-discours werd ubuntu gebruikt als een voltooid toekomende tijd, in die zin dat referenties naar ubuntu en medemenselijkheid altijd in termen van verlies zijn geformuleerd en deze dus werden opgevoerd als een geïdealiseerd verleden dat in de toekomst zal worden hersteld. De notie van contingentie introduceert echter het idee van de toekomende tijd als onvoltooid, een tijd die rekening houdt met de onkenbaarheid van zowel het verleden als de toekomst en een basis voor verantwoordelijk handelen zoekt in deze onzekere omstandigheden.

Coetzee's *Age of Iron* confronteert de lezer met een balansoefening die voortvloeit uit deze twee verschillende houdingen ten opzichte van de toekomst. De vijandelijkheid tussen de personages kan worden omgevormd tot een soort werkbare relationaliteit, ondanks de in het verhaal heersende sociale en morele chaos, de aanhoudende conflictsituaties en het ontbreken van een gemeenschappelijk discours over zowel heden als verleden. Tegelijkertijd blijkt de verharding van gemeenschapsgrenzen het resultaat van een samenleving die op systematische wijze het grootste deel van de personages uit hun rechten ontzet. Het idee dat het verleden en de toekomst onbeslisbaar en open zijn, wordt dus op cruciale wijze genuanceerd door de suggestie dat de mogelijkheid, behoefte of het verlangen om een eenheidspositie los te laten en met alternatieve perspectieven op het verleden te interacteren eigenlijk afhankelijk zijn van sociaal privilege. Het hardnekkige vertrouwen van het hoofdpersonage op de vijandige factoren in haar omgeving suggereert ook dat, als een gedeeld kader ontbreekt en verschillende belangen bijzonder moeilijk te verenigen zijn, flexibiliteit, contingentie en onbeslisbaarheid van onschatbare waarde zijn in het vormen van relaties met anderen. Dit hoofdstuk positioneert ubuntu dus als een open houding ten

opzichte van de toekomst die verder probeert te kijken dan de bestaande matrix van familiale, seksuele en historische relaties.

Het derde hoofdstuk traceert hoe bruikbaar het idee van onbeslisbaarheid precies is als de kwetsbaarheid die ermee gepaard gaat het subject in de openbare ruimte bedreigt. Als contingentie en onbeslisbaarheid serieus moeten worden genomen als waarden, wat gebeurt er dan met verantwoordelijkheid en verplichting? Door middel van een focus op verantwoordelijkheid verkent dit hoofdstuk de mogelijkheid om ubuntu als ethiek te benaderen.

Zanele Muholi's fotoserie *Phases and Faces* behandelt de emancipatie van een subalterne groep in de Zuid-Afrikaanse samenleving, waar de rechten van deze mensen door de wet beschermd worden, maar in de realiteit met voeten worden getreden. Deze representatie laat de symbiotische relatie tussen zwarte queers en hun directe gemeenschap zien. Het antwoord dat Muholi middels haar fotografie op het geweld dat haar gemeenschap ten deel valt formuleert, is bijzonder relevant omdat het een verantwoordelijkheidsgevoel probeert te bewerkstelligen in de toeschouwer. Bovendien beperkt dit ethische moment zich niet tot een gebeurtenis tussen twee geïsoleerde en (dus beperkte) instanties van zelf en ander, maar benadrukt het juist dat mensen, voordat ze überhaupt in dit ethische moment belanden, al onderdeel uitmaken van relationele constellaties.

Als zodanig kan de serie dus worden gezien als een door ubuntu geïnspireerd alternatief voor de ethisch gezien duizelingwekkende verantwoordelijkheid zoals deze naar voren komt in het werk van Emmanuel Levinas, voor wie elke relatie tot de ander niet alleen een absolute verantwoordelijkheid voor deze ander impliceert, maar ook een onvermijdelijke medeplichtigheid in het verraad van deze ethische puurheid vormt. Het verschil tussen ubuntu en deze absolute verantwoordelijkheid onderstreept de noodzaak om ubuntu als een samenkomen en afweging van verschillende belangen te zien. Vanuit het perspectief van ubuntu wordt het door Levinas geformuleerde "verraad" als de activering van de relatie van het individu tot haar omgeving gezien, in plaats van als een verlammende contradictie in het ethische verkeer dat de handelingsvrijheid van het individu onder druk zet. De lezing van Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* die hierop volgt, maakt vervolgens inzichtelijk dat onvermijdelijke medeplichtigheid aan continue herdefiniëring onderhevig is en de vorm aanneemt van een tactische evaluatie van de betrokkenheid en deelname van de personages aan de relaties die hun dagelijks leven domineren. Deze novelle is van belang omdat zij een beeld schetst van gemeenschap dat ruimte maakt voor fluctuatie en reflectie zonder het heilzame effect van gemeenschappelijkheid en de verantwoordelijkheden die daarmee gepaard gaan uit het oog te verliezen.

Aangezien ubuntu – geïnterpreteerd als een samenkomst van verschillende belangen die in een bepaalde tijd en plaats gelokaliseerd zijn en op een verantwoordelijke manier moeten worden afgewogen – kan helpen om de manier waarop we ons actief tot anderen verhouden vorm te geven, verschuift de focus in het vierde hoofdstuk naar meer expliciete uitdrukkingen in de publieke sfeer. Het doel is na te gaan wat het effect is van ubuntu's populariteit en wat deze toepassingen prijsgeven omtrent de betekenis van het begrip en haar potentieel voor sociale en gemeenschappelijke eenheid.

Hoofdstuk 4 stelt dat affect cruciaal is voor de manier waarop ubuntu op de markt wordt toegepast, een verschijnsel dat een steeds dominanter kenmerk van ubuntu's verspreiding over de wereld lijkt te worden. Door de rol van affect in de marketing van het fair trade product Ubuntu Cola onder de loep te nemen, kritiseer ik een meer algemene trend in marketing en management discoursen die ubuntu uit winstoogmerk als strategie toepassen. Aan de hand van deze analyse beargumenteer ik dat ubuntu vaak een verborgen referentie naar privé eigendom bevat, juist omdat het expliciet leunt op associaties met groepssolidariteit en de noodzaak om te delen.

De bespreking van het Ubuntu Linux computerbesturingssysteem maakt duidelijk dat de relatie tussen mensen soms los wordt gezien van de materiele verbanden en omstandigheden die die relationaliteit mogelijk maken. Leunend op Žižek's lezing van warenfetisjisme, laat ik zien dat de relatie tussen "dingen" onlosmakelijk verbonden is en mogelijk wordt gemaakt door de relatie tussen mensen. Deze premisse van het onvermijdelijke verband tussen dingen en mensen wordt vervolgens gebruikt als vertrekpunt voor een theoretisering van ubuntu waarin aandacht wordt besteed aan de vraag hoe mensen dit verband tussen relationaliteit en materialiteit actief in kunnen zetten in de manier waarop zij met elkaar omgaan.

Het laatste gedeelte van deze dissertatie gaat over de politiek van Abehlali baseMjondolo, een beweging die beter bekend staat als de Durban Shack Dwellers Movement. Deze organisatie kan worden gezien als een combinatie van Hardt en Negri's theorie over het creëren van de *common* en een door ubuntu geïnspireerd model van consensuspolitiek. AbM opereert op een lokaal niveau en stelt zich ten doel haar vorm en acties aan te passen aan de problematiek waar zij mee geconfronteerd wordt. Op deze manier probeert zij continu het strategische discours van onteigening en gedwongen verhuizingen waar haar leden mee te maken krijgt te bestrijden door dit discours "bewoonbaar" en werkbaar te maken voor Zuid-Afrika's meest benadeelde en arme gemeenschappen. De machtsverhoudingen die telkens weer naar voren komen zodra verschillende belangen elkaar beginnen te doorkruizen, worden dus constant opnieuw benaderd en bieden in feite een concrete manier waarop over de politieke toepassing van ubuntu kan worden nagedacht.

Samengevat maken de verschillende hoofdstukken duidelijk hoe de altijd verschuivende betekenis van ubuntu gebaseerd is op het uitbalanceren van open- en geslotenheid, insluiting en uitsluiting, en zekerheid en onzekerheid. Ubuntu gaat in feite over het vinden van een balans tussen deze verschillende polariteiten en maakt zichtbaar dat elementen die tegenstrijdig lijken met elkaar verweven zijn, van elkaar afhangen en door elkaar mogelijk worden gemaakt. Zoals in deze studie naar voren komt, erkent het concept dat een essentiële en universele menselijkheid tegelijkertijd diep problematisch maar ook absoluut noodzakelijk is in het creëren en onderhouden van gelijkwaardige en zorgzame relaties. Dit is een kritische spanning die onoplosbaar lijkt, maar die ubuntu positioneert als een doorgaande afweging van verschillende belangen en als zodanig ook als een constante heruitvinding van de categorieën "menselijk" en "menselijkheid." Over ubuntu nadenken is het onder ogen zien van de horizon van je eigen normen en waarden over wat het betekent om je als mens tot anderen te verhouden. Elk onderzoek naar ubuntu is een reflectie over, een bemiddeling tussen en tevens een actieve productie van relaties tussen mensen.