Ubuntu strategies in contemporary South African culture

Stuit, H.H.

Publication date
2013

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Introduction

Ubuntu¹ 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

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 commu-
nal 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 (Riyiyegura).

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. 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 situa-
tions 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 some-
where 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 distingui-
shing 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 relation-
ship 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 acknowl-
edges 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”

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 ethnosophistry 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. 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).

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. 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; Gnanan), jen and loob philosophy from China (Gnanan), 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.
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.

Figure 2. Ubuntu liquor store in Soweto, Johannesburg.
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.

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).
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

Figure 4. Ubuntu cola.
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 plea-
sure 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 inter-
section 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 rela-
tionship 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

---

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). 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). 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:

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)

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. 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 translation17). 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 periodic 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-reciprocal 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. Render 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,

---

\(^{21}\) 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 Abahlali 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.