Ubuntu strategies in contemporary South African culture

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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.”
CHAPTER 1

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). 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 occurred 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 particulars 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 effectively 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.” 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?”

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). 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-

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. 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

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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. One could say, therefore, that, in this case at least, the specific truth finding and revelation of suffering on the part of the

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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...

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).
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 homogeneous 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. 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

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.  

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. 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.

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).

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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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
daaglikse – ’n duisend woorde
skroei my tot ’n nuwe tong

ek is vir altyd verander. Ek wil sê
ergewe my
ergewe my
nergewe my

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

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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 verwonderde” 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-

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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. 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.

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). 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

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

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 sé"). 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:
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. 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.

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 complicit-

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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. 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 verwondeste” 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

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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 verwonde,” 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)

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 PW. 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-
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.

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.

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.

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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 incomensurable response.

The implications of Mrs. Ngewu’s tactical decision to accept a certain level of incomensurability 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 “vanweé 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?