Ubuntu strategies in contemporary South African culture

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Chapter 2

Ubuntu in Transit: From Divisive Pasts to Open Futures
Baggage: Introduction

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

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

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1 As Isidore Diala has pointed out in his “Interrogating Mythology: The Mandela Myth and Black Empowerment in Nadine Gordimer’s Post-Apartheid Writing,” references to Nelson Mandela are only made indirectly in *None to Accompany Me* (42).
cited passage describes the row Didymus and Sibongile have the evening this shift takes place. Sibongile is angry with Didymus because of his resigned attitude and feels he should be upset about being betrayed by his comrades.

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

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

The focus on the notion of transition in relation to ubuntu refers to two specific moments. One is historical and pertains to the period of transition after the end of apartheid. Historian Leonard Thompson has described this period as “the political transition,” which he dates between 1989 (the year in which negotiations between
Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk were initiated, leading to Mandela’s release in 1990 and 1994 (the year in which South Africa’s first democratic elections took place). The transition period, however, does not have such a delimited end, since the final Constitution was not in place until 1996 and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was an essential part of the transition period, remained active until as late as 2001. These specifications lead to the question what transition is, what it is one is transitioning away from and, consequently, where transition leads. When is transition supposed to be over? Does it ever really end?

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

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

In the transit sections of this chapter, each of which revolves around the analysis of a novel, two such itineraries will be discussed. The first section analyses the main protagonist from None to Accompany Me (1994), Vera Stark, who befriends the Maqomas
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from the opening scene during apartheid, while the second section focuses on Mrs. Curren from J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990). Neither narrative is about ubuntu in the strict sense of the word, but each is set in the transition period in South Africa and deals with some of the issues the changes associated with it raise with regard to the ways in which the protagonists, as white middle-class women, are used to deal with the people around them. They find that with political transition, the familiar relational organisation of their lives becomes either obsolete (as in the case of Vera Stark) or untenable (as in the case of Mrs. Curren).²

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gordimer’s novel is set just before the first democratic elections in South Africa. The State of Emergency, the troubling and excessively violent juncture of the final years of apartheid, has come to an end, anti-apartheid movements have been unbanned, and political prisoners have been released. The country is preparing itself for drafting a new and groundbreaking constitution. Against this background, the novel centres on Vera Stark, who is successful and healthy, with two grown children and a husband who adores her. In addition, she has a couple of close friends and is respected by her colleagues at the law firm where she is a senior partner. Her subsequent financial independence as well as the fact that the Maqomas are her friends – an association
that posits her as an anti-apartheid sympathizer – serve her well in getting around and about (both spatially and socially) in the country after apartheid. Instead of continuing to rely on her close personal ties, however, she increasingly invests herself in her job, removing herself from any kind of social life that is not related to work. The reader thus encounters an increasingly independent woman with a distinct sense of responsibility towards her job and what seems to be the momentum of the transition-phase in South Africa, but who hardly takes any responsibility towards her direct surroundings.

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

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

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

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

What war Vera’s first husband was fighting is not specified. It is mentioned that Vera sells the house she obtains through the divorce after living in it for 45 years by the time apartheid is over, so she must have acquired it somewhere in the late 40s or early 50s. It is most likely, then, that her husband was drafted in the Second World War. For South Africa’s military and strategic role in the allied war effort in World War II, see Beck (120-123).
The fact that Vera is described as someone who “throws out” things and makes “fresh starts” already suggests that she is capable, or considers herself to be capable of cutting ties. The use of the plural here furthermore implies that she has done so more than once. Vera’s capability or perhaps need to make fresh starts, then, suggests a certain fluidity with regard to the relations in her life, which seems to be at odds, however, with the symbolic resonance of her last name. Etymologically, “stark” comes from the German word for strong and is also used to denote a sense of intense contrast, often related to unpleasantly sharp differences that are impossible to ignore. It thus implies a certain rigidity, stiffness and incapability to move (Oxford English Dictionary).

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

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

The contrast with Vera’s behaviour in her professional life is indeed stark. Being an irreplaceable cogwheel in the machinery of the legal foundation, she drowns herself in work, doing all she can to assist the people that appeal to her for help. When she hears on the radio that there have been skirmishes in the region where one of her clients lives, she drives out immediately to see if he is all right. When one of her colleagues is mortally wounded during a hijacking (in which Vera, too, sustains injuries) she
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constantly visits him in his comatose condition and, after he succumbs to his injuries, drives out to his distant hometown to attend the funeral on behalf of the foundation. When she is invited to join the committee that will draft the new South African constitution, she hesitates because she feels she can be of more use at the foundation and is concerned it will function less efficiently without one of its senior staff members. She eventually accepts the position, while keeping up most of her work at the foundation, excluding any sustained form of social life that is not work-related.

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

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

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

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

Interconnectedness-towards-wholeness ... is more than just a theoretical knowledge that all things in the world are linked, it means both a mental and physical awareness that one can only “become” who one is, or could be, through the fullness of that which is around one – both physical and meta-
physical. [It is] a process of becoming in which everybody and everything is moving towards its fullest self, building itself; one can only reach this fullest self though, through and with others which include ancestors and universe. ("This Thing" 355)

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

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

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

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6 DeLanda, in using the term “assemblage,” leans heavily on the work of Gilles Deleuze (and Félix Guattari), but aims to develop an assemblage theory that is not preoccupied with what DeLanda calls “Deleuzian hermeneutics.” Instead he argues: “I give my own definitions of the technical terms, use my own arguments to justify them, and use entirely different theoretical resources to develop them” (3-4). Since this dissertation deals with the topic of ubuntu, there is no room to go into the Deleuzian notion of the assemblage or its precise relation to DeLanda’s work here.
DeLanda, "persons always exist as part of populations within which they constantly interact with one another," a notion that resonates strongly with the position of the individual in ubuntu theory (32). DeLanda envisions interacting assemblages of social life from small (singular individuals) to larger levels (the nation state), in which small assemblages interact to form larger assemblages, which in turn interact with other assemblages to form yet bigger ones, and so on (5-6).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As this quote suggests, Vera’s comfort at releasing her familial and sexual ties and her joy of being by herself are not the only things that provide her with an exalted sense of freedom. It is the fact that she relates to someone else, in a different way than she is
used to, that rivets her. In an interview, Gordimer emphasises the importance of this alterity of the connection between Vera and Zeph:

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

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

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

The final pages of *None to Accompany Me* underline this image of somewhat random movement, collision and subsequent detachment resulting in a fleeting grati-
fication. The novel ends after Vera has moved into the annexe of Zeph’s house.7 One night, she is in the house looking for pliers because one of the pipes in the annexe has burst. Because of the intense darkness, she accidentally collides, in the hallway, with a woman who is presumably Zeph’s lover on her way to the bathroom. They remain standing “breast against breast, belly against belly” because neither wants to move in fear of acknowledging this somewhat uncomfortable meeting. Although it could just as well have been a sexual moment, the narrator makes clear that Vera has no such interest in the woman. Standing against the naked body of the other woman she cannot see feels like touching “an injured bird,” “a living substance” (323). As in many instances in the novel, what this meeting feels like for the woman Vera touches is foreclosed by the persistent dominance of Vera’s focalisation, through which the intimacy shared in this moment is described as their being “tenderly fused in the sap-scent of semen that came from her” (323). Significantly, then, the last image of Vera is staged just after a final confirmation of the fact that, for Vera, sex has nothing to do with her relation to Zeph, although the residual scent of his sexual activities is presented as the binding factor in the accidental meeting of the two women, rather than any sense of closeness (whether physical or not) between the women themselves.

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

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

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

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7 Vera’s move is a symbolical relinquishment of property, since the annexe on South African properties is often a small separate building that was traditionally used as the servant’s quarter.
walking in the garden for a while, however, simultaneously alludes to the idea that this arrival is also a departure. Although the phrasing suggests that she knows where she is going, “to take up one’s way” automatically implies a sense of direction (and obviously there is still a burst pipe flooding her house that needs her attention), the new possibilities implied by this departure are open-ended. On the one hand, the closing passage thus presents a scene of calm dominance, centrality and control, reflected in an active authoring gesture: “breath scrolling out, a signature before her.” On the other hand, however, this breath signature is extremely fleeting and temporal, and underlines the fluid and evanescent nature of Vera’s position.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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8 Spivak relies on the description of the Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890 provided by James Mooney in 1896.
The "end" of the ghost dance – if one can speak of such a thing – is to make the past a future, as it were – the future anterior, not a future present, as is the case with the "end" of most narratives of social justice. (70)

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

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

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

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

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

However, as became clear from Vera Stark’s trajectory through different assemblages in South Africa’s transition period, the way in which relations are formed and between whom they develop is in constant flux and depends on how different inter-
CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

9 Age of Iron’s publication year (1990) represents an important junction in South African history because even though Nelson Mandela’s release from prison and the end of apartheid were announced on 2 February 1990, the political violence of the Emergency period had not disappeared and would continue to shake the public sphere for several more years (South African History Online).
way to go at moments of crisis,” *Age of Iron* abounds with moments that express the distressing effects of contingency, disharmony, exclusion, and, most of all, indeterminacy. This pervasiveness of misunderstandings and conflict between the characters against the backdrop of chaos as the State of Emergency runs its course seems to suggest that, especially in times of great social upheaval and change, indeterminacy is omnipresent. One has to embrace it in order to relate to anything or anyone around one.

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

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

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

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10 As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, the State of Emergency was characterised by extremely violent social conflicts where it became increasingly difficult to discern warring factions, the biggest of which were represented by the government, the ANC and other UDF members, and the IFP. Informers were common in all organisations.
stances or perspectives beyond their description by Mrs. Curren. At the same time, however, the confessional and at times embarrassingly intimate tone of the address creates a relentless sense of voyeurism that can only be averted by not finishing the novel. On the one hand, the limited access on the part of the reader to Mrs. Curren’s surroundings further enhances the chaos and indeterminacy of the setting, while the excessive openness of Mrs. Curren’s thoughts, on the other hand, augments the distressing effect of witnessing, from up close, yet without being directly addressed, an oncoming death under excruciating social circumstances. In this way, the narrative technique foreshadows the novel’s preoccupation with the desire to relate to what one cannot know and the problem of having to relate to what offends one’s sensibility and relational convictions.11

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

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

12 As Ena Jansen argues in “From Thandi the Maid to Thandi the Madam: Domestic Workers in the Archives of Afrikaans Literature and a Family Photograph Album,” employing black women became increasingly expensive in the sixties because industrial expansion, the industrial minimum wage and the increased legislation on “influx-control” (which refers to the fact that black women were from the fifties onwards also obliged to carry passes and people employing “illegals” were fined). As a result, the layout of most homes also changed (113-4). Mrs Curren’s property, from this perspective, is traditional in the sense that it still contains an out-building section. For an extensive treatise on servants in South African literature, and the role of Florence in Age of Iron in particular, see Jansen’s forthcoming book Soos Familie.
One day, in the garden, John scolds a homeless man named Vercueil, who has unexpectedly taken up abode in the alleyway next to Mrs. Curren’s house, for his incessant drinking. Vercueil hits him and they get into a fight. The boys, teaming up, lash out at the older man already lying on the ground. They do not heed Mrs. Curren screaming down from the balcony for them to stop until Florence enters the scene and tells them off. When Mrs. Curren, enraged by the boys’ behaviour, questions John’s right to be in her garden, Florence insists that the boy is no ordinary stranger, but a visitor, cleverly playing into Mrs. Curren’s notions of courtesy. The boys make it abundantly clear, however, that the underlying problem is not merely a question of hospitality, but of property and authority as well:

“Must we have a pass to come in here?” said Bheki. He and his friend exchanged glances. “Must we have a pass?” They waited for my answer, challenging me. ...

“I did not say anything about passes,” I said. “But what right does he [John] have to come here and assault this man? This man lives here. It is his home.” Florence’s nostrils flared.

“Yes,” I said, turning to her, “he lives here too, it is his home.”

“He lives here,” said Florence, “but he is rubbish. He is good for nothing.” ...

“He is not a rubbish person,” I said, lowering my voice, speaking to Florence alone. “There are no rubbish people. We are all people together.” (Coetzee 47)

By referring to the pass laws, Bheki conflates Mrs. Curren’s exertion of authority over her garden with the menacing forms of policing associated with the apartheid system, thus turning her private actions into a more general political issue. With the installation of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, which was passed in 1923, it became obligatory for all non-white males in South Africa to carry a pass with them at all times, in order to justify their presence outside of the homelands. The discriminatory effects of this law were further aggravated by the passing of the Pass Law Act in 1952, which broadened the obligation to carry a pass to all black persons over 16. Not being able to produce a pass could lead to imprisonment. Bheki’s question has a particular sting because the protests against these laws were crucial in much anti-apartheid resistance. One of the protests against the pass laws escalated in the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960, where South African police opened fire on an unarmed crowd of protesters, killing 69 people (see Thompson, Beck, Ross, or South African History Online).
at the suburban property and implicitly challenges the notion of ownership that she relies on. Mrs. Curren's refusal to be associated with the pass laws, and her subsequent insistence that Vercueil should be left alone because he lives on the property and thus has as much right to be in her garden as Florence and her children, particularly enrages Florence (“Florence’s nostrils flared”). Florence, who has lived in the house in the garden that was often used as the servant’s quarters for years, is insulted that Mrs. Curren questions her right to determine who is a stranger and who is a guest. By describing Vercueil as rubbish, she implies that she has as much right to decide who belongs and who does not. Mrs. Curren's claim that "we are all people together" (emphasis mine), on the other hand, references a larger community of common humanity that is strongly reminiscent of the ubuntu-inspired notion of inherent relationality and seems to advocate equal rights for all to the suburban property, even if she has just questioned John’s presence there. At the same time, as also became clear from the earlier discussions of the notion of humanity in ubuntu, the imposition of Mrs. Curren’s humanitarian discourse paradoxically reflects an authoritative positioning of precisely the moral standards that this positioning is supposed to undermine. As a result, her appeal encounters opposition from the others, who, in the process of wresting the right to determine who to include in any notion of community from Mrs. Curren, violently exclude Vercueil from the category of respectable humanity.

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

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

In this passage, Mrs. Curren clearly distinguishes between her own moral values and those embodied by Florence and her children. She compares them to iron, while lamenting the loss of the softer ages of clay and earth, thus combining the Iron Age from Hesiod’s five stages of man with an almost mystical reference to an imaginary
circular temporality. From her privileged position as a white suburban dweller whose comforts are based on the violent oppression of others in the age that is coming to an end in the novel, however, such a lament for a return to former times comes across as ironic, since, as Mrs. Curren and Florence also discuss, it is the violence of apartheid that generates this reactionary violence in the children. As was the case with ubuntu as a future perfect in Sanders’ work, then, Mrs. Curren, who disavows her complicity in apartheid by claiming the moral high ground in this conversation, projects a (mythical and imaginary) past as a desirable event in the future – a gesture that works against Spivak’s observance that it is important to consider alternative pasts next to “one’s own hallucinatory history” (70).

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

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

A crime was committed long ago. ... so long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it. ... Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name. I raged at times at the men who did the dirty work... but I accepted too that, in a sense, they lived inside me. So that when in my rages I wished them dead, I wished death on myself too. (Coetzee 164; see also Marais, Secretary 95 for this selection)
As this passage clearly shows, Mrs. Curren has an acute sense of her complicity in the repression of apartheid. As such, Mrs. Curren’s claim to the moral high ground in her argument with Florence is deeply rooted in her disgust with the system, but is unable to transcend its repressive discourse and thus to gain acknowledgment of these sympathies from Florence.

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

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

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

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

“If you had been in my Thucydides class,” I went on, “you might have learned something about what can happen to our humanity in time of war. Our humanity, that we are born with, that we are born into.” (80)
Notwithstanding the good intentions of this little lecture, it shows that Mrs. Curren’s appeal to a common humanity is, to a certain extent, absurd. How would John ever have been able to attend one of Mrs. Curren’s classes in the first place? Has John not just experienced first hand, after being chased down and sustaining a serious head injury as a result, what war is doing to his humanity? Mrs. Curren’s reliance on a common humanity, which bears a remarkable resemblance to the respect for common humanity present in ubuntu, and her insistent attempts at realizing some sort of understanding between them is effectively patronizing because it disregards the distribution of power relations in the circumstances under which she is trying to relate to John.

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

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

Taking the notes, folding them, putting them in his pocket, looking off to one side so as not to look at me, he said softly, “Why?”
“Because you don’t deserve it.”
And he, smiling, keeping his smile to himself: “Deserve... Who deserves anything?”
Calmly he took the purse, emptied it of thirty rand and some coins, and handed it back. Then off he went, the dog jauntily at his heels. In half an hour he was back; I heard the clink of bottles. (21)

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

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

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

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

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

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Florence’s little girls and to John. The only name she seems to be certain of is that of Florence’s son Bheki, whose charm she prefers over John’s moroseness. As I will discuss in relation to the issue of naming in Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* in Chapter 3, to avoid using a person’s given name is a marker of respect in some African cultures, like Zulu culture (see De Kadt). Although replacing “African” names with more “European” ones because they are often difficult to pronounce for people who do not speak the language is common (see Jansen 103), in the case of Florence and her children it seems to function more as a marker of Mrs. Curren’s exclusion from the community defined by Florence. Given the fact that Mrs. Curren likes Bheki best, naming here can be equated with sympathy and belonging. Paradoxically, however, Mrs. Curren’s daughter remains unnamed throughout the novel.
and then in the language of his inner sensations of himself. He does not see
the agonizing tension of his own muscles, does not see the entire, plastically
consummated posture of his own body, or the expression of suffering on
his own face. He does not see the clear blue sky against the background of
which his suffering outward image is delineated for me. (25)

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

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

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

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

Six pages already, and all about a man you have never met and never will.
Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he
gives me I see myself in a way that can be written. (Coetzee 9)
This notion of writing, and the return to the private sphere in which Mrs. Curren reflects on the events of the day as she lives through them, is a crucial aspect of Bakhtin’s model:

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

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

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

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

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

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16 Bakhtin is strict in his distinction between the different planes of what he calls “the ethical, social event of life” (10) and that of the fictional work: “… the whole of the author and the whole of the hero belong to different planes – different in principle; the very form of the relationship to an idea and even to the theoretical whole of a world view is ignored” (9-10).
on the part of Vercueil to the dominant discourse with which Mrs. Curren delimits and consummates Vercueil’s potential to be otherwise from Mrs. Curren’s authoring of his character from the outset of their acquaintance. Vercueil emphatically resists being authored as an odd-job man whose services Mrs. Curren can buy as it suits her. As Bakhtin’s model suggests, however, one cannot help being authored to a certain extent, since every person relies on the reflection of the self in others.

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

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

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17 All of these references are already present in the stunning opening scene of the novel, where Mrs. Curren, returning from the doctor’s office with the devastating news of her terminal cancer, finds Vercueil in the alley next to her house. She describes him as an “annunciation,” but also as “the first of the carrion birds” (5) with “carious fangs” (3). The animalistic references will, as the novel progresses, come to include, amongst others, comparisons to insects and dogs (14, 56). The description of Vercueil as a “derelict” in the opening pages (4) eventually flows into Mrs. Curren description of herself as Circe (85) and Vercueil as a shipwrecked sailor, possibly Aeneas (186).
characters to which Mrs. Curren tries to relate suggest that there are several interpretations and versions of the past over which one can bicker, but Vercueil’s resistance to the Bakhtinian excess of seeing suggests, more radically, that access to such a historical context is foreclosed altogether. As such, the character of Vercueil presents Mrs. Curren with a fundamental problem of undecidability, not only concerning her own past and that of the people around her, but also with regard to how the discourses about these pasts could possibly teach her how to behave towards them in the present.

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

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

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

One must love what is nearest. One must love what is to hand, as a dog loves.
(Coetzee 190)
CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

Although much has been written about the relation between animals and ethics in the work of J.M. Coetzee, especially in relation to Disgrace, Elizabeth Costello and The Lives of Animals, this perspective is still somewhat neglected in interpretations of Age of Iron. Since the space of this chapter does not allow for a detailed analysis of the interrelation between these themes, I will restrict myself to claiming that the image of a dog’s love functions as a crucial sign of Mrs. Curren’s increasing reliance on undecidability and the emergence of community in unlikely places, which lies at the heart of the novel. The fact that the novel is a letter composed by Mrs. Curren to her daughter, which she only intends to have mailed for her after she dies, initially seems to foreclose further dialogue, since the daughter will not have the chance to respond to her mother’s parting notes. However, this is not a matter of enforcing her dying perspective on
her daughter, even if Mrs. Curren has a particular point to make with the letter. Before she passes on, Mrs. Curren brings her insights, which have been forged by an unrelenting questioning in the dying days of apartheid by the people around her, into practice. She asks Vercueil, the phlegmatic and unreliable drifter, to function as a messenger and to post the letter to her daughter after she dies. As Mrs. Curren herself remarks: “Why this crooked path to you?” (82). After all, she is extremely aware that even if he says yes, Vercueil will do whatever he pleases, especially after she is gone:

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

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

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

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

The fact that Mrs. Curren’s daughter is unwilling to return to South Africa until apartheid has come to a violent end (she will come back only when apartheid supporters are hanging from the lampposts to dance in the streets (75)) constructs her return as a future perfect, rather than as a future anterior; it will only take place under conditions that have been specified in advance. This way, the daughter forecloses any
possibility of witnessing a peaceful transition. The apparently tiny gesture of asking Vercueil to post the letter thus turns out to be, in fact, a dramatic expression of hope for an alternative future for South Africa: if the undecidable cannot be trusted, if, in moments of crisis, past and future are predetermined and foreclosed, then there is no "condition for responsible decision" with regard to the community yet to be developed.

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

Vercueil stood on the balcony staring out over a sea of rustling leaves. I touched his arm, his high, peaked shoulders, the bony ridge of his spine. Through clattering teeth I spoke: "What are you looking at?"

He did not answer. I stood closer. A sea of shadows beneath us, and the screen of leaves shifting, rustling, like scales over the darkness.

"Is it time?" I said.

I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. ... He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had. (198)

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

Thus, _Age of Iron_ traces an old woman’s last weeks during South Africa’s State of Emergency, surrounded by hostility, unreliability and chaos. The protagonist learns to relinquish the mores and values she grew up with in favour of a more open stance towards the people who have contingently collected around her. During this process, it becomes clear, however, that, no matter her attitude, her interpretations and significations of the world around her remain inscribed not only with the authority of her past social status, but with the colonising gesture of interpretation itself. Vercueil’s
resistance to Mrs. Curren’s authoring, for instance, makes visible aspects of intersubjectivity that are pushed to the background in ubuntu as a discourse of reconciliation, namely that the subject, at the price of interaction, can bridle at the prospect of being authored or included and can refuse to comply with being interpellated by whatever system imposing itself. As Bakhtin acknowledges in the excess of seeing model described above, it is necessary to return to “the categories of our own lives” if our open-endedness is not to be consumed by the perspective of the other (17). This is true both for Vercueil and for Mrs. Curren. However, Vercueil’s response underlines the importance of power relations and the fact that authority is as much a part of intersubjectivity and ubuntu as, for instance, an altruistic yet possibly patronizing reliance on the idea of common humanity. This is emphasized even more explicitly by John’s continuous hostility towards Mrs. Curren. He openly rejects any opinion Mrs. Curren might have on anything, casting her as an unequivocal exponent of the apartheid system that has made Mrs. Curren’s life possible (and his impossible) for so long.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Unlike Vera Stark, Mrs. Curren, with her continuous insistence on the importance of learning to live together, despite unlikely odds, however, also underlines the possibility to regard ubuntu as a counter-move to the problems of authority and temporality. Even though the outcome of Mrs. Curren’s efforts are uncertain, her reliance on a shared humanity does point to a more lasting community that stays intact precisely because it dares to rely on the instability of the bridge that joins people together. Her bold move of imparting her final letter to Vercueil implies that converging interests are difficult to negotiate, especially when high stakes are involved, but it also suggests that ubuntu can – taking into account the importance of fluidity, contingency and undecidability – be formulated as an open-ended possibility for the future that allows
for a view on relationality that coincides with a Bakhtinian task. That is to say, it offers a perspective on relationality that aims to go beyond the existing makeup of given familial, sexual or historical forms of relating. Carving out such possibilities, however, needs to be done with great care. Although the emphasis on undecidability and its accompanying notions of flux and contingency in ubuntu as a convergence of interests is important to give room to what cannot be predicted in how subjects come together, this approach does not yet account for the issue of responsibility, even if Mrs. Curren's letter seems to gesture in a possible direction. As became clear from this chapter, the positing of a delimited notion of community can be a necessary strategic move in the face of dominant discourse, but the fact that moments pass, and that, as such, our place in them does too, demands a continuous evaluation and re-evaluation of our surroundings and our relation to it. The complications of this perpetual (re)adjustment will be discussed in the next chapter, where I will focus more explicitly on how the undecidability of ubuntu as a convergence and negotiation of interests relates to issues of responsibility, a juncture where an ethics of ubuntu could be located.