Ubuntu strategies in contemporary South African culture

Stuit, H.H.

Publication date
2013

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 3

Facing Others: Towards an Ethics of Ubuntu
Introduction

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

The emphasis placed by South African academic, essayist and novelist Njabulo S. Ndebele on the potential value of uncertainty as a starting point for devising new ways of organizing leadership and the South African public sphere is as admirable as it is optimistic. Critics would be right in claiming that his statement relies on no more than an implied assumption that people are willing to “admit to [their] vulnerabilities in the face of uncertainty” in the first place. In addition, he also relies on a supposition that the projection of this vulnerability would actually lead to “a more trusting public space” and that, because people contribute their vulnerability to the public sphere in good faith, the creation of such a space automatically involves a sense of responsibility, guaranteeing that all the various vulnerabilities would be respected.

What happens, though, if one has to negotiate such vulnerabilities on a daily basis? If visibility within this public space means you are on the line, whether you want to be or not, because it fails to recognize you as someone with rights and needs, as a person? If vulnerability is not something that can be invested in the public sphere, because being recognizable as vulnerable results in a daily struggle to be able to live some form of safeguarded life in the first place?

Indeed, as became clear from Chapter 2, the focus on contingency and undecidability in intersubjective relations is an important part of evaluating one’s continuously shifting position in relation to others – a focus that was formulated as a response to articulations of ubuntu specifically aimed at achieving unification through the staging of a universally acknowledged relational normativity. In some historical and social circumstances, however, giving oneself over to the unknown and the precarity that results from this attitude is not always feasible. Relinquishing the solid ground of a delimited notion of community with certain norms and values can result in a vulnerability that is not sustainable in practice. An over-emphasis on contingency thus runs the risk of obscuring that responsible action in ubuntu cannot always be formulated in terms of a notion of undecidability that invariably casts an unconditional openness to
the other as ethical. In this chapter, I aim to explore the possibility of thinking an ethics of ubuntu from the perspective of responsibility, which in the case of ubuntu is divided between, on the one hand, what has emerged as ubuntu’s call for a practice of openness and inclusiveness towards others based on undecidability, and, on the other, the influences of internal cohesion, responsibility and obligation that are also part of ubuntu.

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

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

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

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

---

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

Zanele Muholi: Strategic Visibility in *Faces and Phases*

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

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

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

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

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

Muholi’s emphatic foregrounding of the issue of visibility, however, points towards a reliance on experience as a form of knowledge production that is potentially problematic. Following Joan W. Scott’s argument in her article “The Evidence of Experience,” to uncritically align visibility with transparency can seriously impede the effectivity of the argument made by Muholi. Since understanding or knowing something does not logically or causally follow from visibility or seeing something, as Muholi’s insistence on visibility seems to suggest, Muholi’s visual activism could be subjected to Scott’s criticism of the way normative history has usually been (unsuccessfully) challenged, even
if it triggers sorely needed debate about issues concerning hate crimes in South Africa. From this perspective, Muholi seems to aim for “an enlargement of the picture, a correction to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision,” but such an extension of the existing framework is problematic because, like normative history, it “has rested its claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience…” (Scott 776). As Scott points out:

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

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

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

---

3 Identity politics can be roughly defined as a “wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). It has been the subject of heated academic and political debate. One significant problem has to do with the fact that identity politics often arises out of grievance with a repressive system and thus remains dependent on this system as well as on the affect of its grievance, as noted by Wendy Brown (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Another problem is that identity politics can posit its own boundaries too rigidly and thus runs the risk of effecting forms of exclusion it seeks to avoid.
her analysis of the work of the Subaltern Studies group. Spivak claims that the work of this group is valuable precisely because it displays “the strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (“Subaltern Studies” 205, emphasis in original). As I have already pointed out in both Chapters 1 and 2, such an alignment of political interests needs to be temporary if it wants to prevent the exclusionary consolidation of relational ties. As such, strategic essentialism is rendered “most effective as a context-specific strategy, but ... cannot provide a long-term political solution to end oppression and exploitation” (Morton 75).

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

One of the examples of Muholi’s strategic rather than tactical positing of what she describes as the black queer community is reflected in the way in which she organised her photographs in the exhibition ...For Those Who Live In It, in the MU in Eindhoven, the Netherlands in June 2010. On the left side of the wall (the starting point of its “reading” direction if you will), there was a photograph of a woman’s heavily bruised and stitched up face. On reading the material surrounding this photo (a newspaper article containing an interview with the woman), the viewer soon learns that she has fallen victim to a hate crime and has been repeatedly attacked and “correctively” raped by the same man from her direct environment, because he did not accept her as gay. The outrageous lack of protection suffered by this woman is, of course, exactly Muholi’s point. However, her strategy here sits uncomfortably with what Baderoon found so commendable in Muholi’s photography, namely that it works against the reinforcement of black lesbian hyper-visibility defined in terms of violence. By framing the
image in this explicit way, Muholi effectively communicates the message of oppression, but it becomes fairly impossible to look at the photo beyond the determination of the artist’s framing of it. This goes for the subsequent images on the wall in Eindhoven as well. Although all of them had their own things to say and not all of them were from the *Faces and Phases* series, it was rather difficult to “read” them outside of the theme of violence created by the first haunting photo on the left.

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

Take, for instance, the photo of Nomonde Mbusi, taken in Berea, Johannesburg in 2007.4 On the Michael Stevenson website as well as in the book, this picture features as the first in the series. It depicts someone looking straight into the camera. The light skin contrasts with the much darker background, bringing out the figure with emphasis. Apart from a headscarf of a slightly lighter shade than the fabric that serves as background, there are no attributes. The background too, is inconspicuous. Nothing in the photo seems to draw the eye away from the face (more specifically from the eyes), located slightly to the left of the centre of the photograph. The portrait is of the upper part of the body of a slender figure, cut off at the chest. The figure is, as far as we

---

4 All images were provided by the Michael Stevenson gallery with the kind permission of Zanele Muholi. The Michael Stevenson gallery in Cape Town generally features Muholi’s new work. See www.stevenson.info.
can see, naked. Initially, one is struck by the sense of vulnerability that emanates from this light, slender person, posing so tentatively before the camera. However, although vulnerable, Nomonde Mbusi is by no means (im)passive. The look is directed straight at the camera and does not seem shy or withdrawn. Rather, it could be described as containing a kind of guarded engagement. As Kobena Mercer has suggested in relation to African studio photography in general, and to the studio portrait “The Blavo Twins” by Ghanaian photographer James Barnor in particular, the “formal yet relaxed posture of his sitters conveys a dignified self-possession, reflecting the fact that photographer and subject share control over the apparatus of representation” (n. pag.).

Although Nomonde Mbusi’s pose could hardly be described as “formal,” it does speak of self-possession towards the viewer/photographer. The fact that Nomonde

---

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

---

Figure 6. Nomonde Mbusi, Berea, Johannesburg, 2007.
chooses to pose in the first place (which entails the risk of exposure as a black queer person and thus violation) and the direction of the gaze straight into the camera suggest, furthermore, that there is, indeed, a sense of shared control.

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

The combined effects of Nomonde Mbusi’s vulnerable “bareness,” engaging look and the emphasis on the face and eyes, thus remain, especially in comparison to the other photos in the series, central to the photograph and turn the tables on the viewer. Directly aimed at the spectator, the look suggests that it is the viewer, not the subject of the photograph, who is being regarded with curious interest. The viewer is not merely a passive spectator, but is, in fact, addressed by the look. Or rather, by the glance, understood by Norman Bryson as “the involved look where viewers are aware of and bodily participating in the process of looking,” a process in which the viewers are engaged in “interactions of various kinds, putting themselves at risk” (Bryson qtd. in Bal, Double 264). The viewer is not only engaged in an active looking, but is being looked at, appealed to and seemingly addressed with a question. This way, the inconspicuous contrasts with the African design cloths and official poses used by Keïta and the more exuberant posing and curious accessories of Sidibé’s work.
Figure 7. Manucha, Muizenberg, Cape Town, 2010.

Figure 8. Bakhambile Skhosana, Natalspruit, 2010.

Figure 9. Teleka Bowden, Toronto, 2008.
CHAPTER 3

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

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

The face is inviolable; those eyes, which are absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, none the less offer an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation to murder is inscribed: the temptation of absolute negation. (Levinas, “Ethics and Spirit” 8)
The face to face encounter in Levinas' thinking, then, is represented as an ambiguous moment caused by the vulnerability of the other. On the one hand, the vulnerability of the face tempts us to destroy it ("absolute negation"), but on the other hand it also places us under a moral obligation. Vulnerability, therefore, forms an occasion for violent temptation, but also for the protection of the other.

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

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

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

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

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

As this quote already suggests, the Levinasian face is "the face understood as human suffering, as the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation" and
CHAPTER 3

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

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

---

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

7 For the effectiveness of photography in touching the viewer, see, of course, Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, where he discusses the notion of punctum. Punctum is described as an aspect of the photograph that affectively “wounds” the viewer: “this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (26).
igation and responsibility (as in the TRC for instance) with its aspects of fluctuation and contingency. As such, these differences between the notion of the face in Muholi’s work and Levinas’ theory provide occasion to start thinking about the ethics of ubuntu.

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

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

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

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

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

Indeed, this phraseology is strongly reminiscent of the bond between individual and community that has become such a familiar representation of ubuntu: by taking
CHAPTER 3

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

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

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

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

---

8 For a discussion of the role of seriality in identity, see Esther Peeren’s chapter on versioning in Intersubjectivities and Popular Culture.
ubuntu as a convergence of interests or changeable assemblage, as I reformulated it in the previous chapter, the face to face encounter under discussion here is indeed constructive of new social bonds but simultaneously occurs in a matrix already determined by existing relations.

Complicity: Ubuntu and the Problem of the “Third”

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

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

---

9 See, for instance, Muholi’s short documentary *Enraged by a Picture* on the responses to her series *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture* and the examples given by Henriette Gunkel in her article on Muholi, “Through the Postcolonial Eye: Images of Gender and Female Sexuality in Contemporary South Africa” (80).
Another negative response was that of minister of culture Lulu Xingwana to the art exhibition *Innovative Women*, which took place on Constitution Hill in 2009 in Johannesburg, where art by Zanele Muholi and 9 others was displayed. The minister was supposed to open the exhibition with a speech, but left before delivering it because, she claimed afterwards, some of the works on display, especially those by Muholi (fig. 11), were “immoral, offensive, and going against nation-building,” the irony being, of course, that the minister’s own department had contributed considerable funds to the exhibition in question (Evans).

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

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

---

10 The exhibition contained the following artists: Dineo Bopabe, Zanele Muholi, Nandipha Mntambo, Ernestine White, Ingrid Masondo, Nontobeko Ntombela, Usha Seejarim, Senzeni Marasela, Lerato Shadi and Bongi Bengu (“Innovative Women”).
During your brief glance, you may have mistaken the intimacy in Muholi’s images for pornography and the erudite allusions in Mntambo’s work for carelessness about sexual violence, but that mistake can only be sustained if you don’t truly look at their art. If you stood in front of Muholi’s photographs, you would see lesbian lives outside of the narratives of violation and pornography through which they are more commonly presented to us. (Baderoon)

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

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

In addition, the minister’s reaction also suggests that this face to face can only take place between people who are somehow already included in a certain conception of the subject. “Properly” or “truly” looking at photos, as suggested by Baderoon, becomes possible only if the other is already in some sense visible in his/her capacity to belong to the norm. Although to think of the other as more of the same implies issues of incorporation and appropriation, Muholi’s work, at the same time, demonstrates the poignant need to emancipate from absolute otherness and to be included in the norm in order to be able to lead a safe and acknowledged life. So, whereas Levinas could be criticised for working with a notion of the other that is not “other”
enough because it does not exist outside of the parameters of the subject’s conception of his/her world, the relationality as it comes to the fore in Muholi’s work discussed here presupposes that otherness should indeed be respected, but not considered as strictly autonomous.\footnote{For a critique of Levinas’ conception of the Other, see, for instance, Irigarary (69-70).}

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

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

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

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

\footnote{For a critique of Levinas’ conception of the Other, see, for instance, Irigarary (69-70).}
Levinas in its focus on this other as a partner in the convergence of interests, rather
than a singular and unknowable other that calls for absolute responsibility.

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

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

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

From within the reasoning of the Levinasian face to face, the problem of this third
party constitutes a betrayal of one’s absolute responsibility that coincides with the
emergence of justice in society. In order to spread responsibility amongst as many
others as possible, society needs a concept of justice, even though it is impossible
to compare one particular other with another other (see Levinas, Entre Nous 174;
Derrida, “Adieu” 28). The introduction of law and justice in the ethical relation is
vindicated, however, by the possibility that a responsible or ethical action towards
one person might inadvertently wrong the next (Levinas, Entre Nous 16). According
to Derrida, this presence of the third and its disruption of the face to face relation is
as ineluctable as the subject’s absolute responsibility. They are both part of the same
ethical moment: “For the third does not wait; it is there, from as early as the ‘first’
epiphany of the face in the face to face” (“Adieu” 25). From this perspective, we are
doubly complicit, because we are responsible for any eventual violence that befalls the
other, but have to betray this first responsibility for the sake of a system that aims to do justice to this selfsame concept, but never will:

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

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

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

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

---

12 For an extensive overview of the role of ubuntu in South African legislation, see Drucilla Cornell’s edited volume *Ubuntu and the Law*. 
at least potentially, the purity of the ethical desire devoted to the unique.
Whence the terrible ineluctability of a double constraint... ("Adieu" 27)

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

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

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

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

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

“Hold Back and Observe:” Waiting Differently in Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*

In Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* the (re)negotiation of the responsibilities to others plays a fundamental role in the development of the novella’s characters. Rather than focusing on complicity from the angle of the subject who is absolutely responsible for the other, as is the case in the work of Levinas, and, to a certain extent, Sanders and Derrida, the novella provides an alternative perspective on responsibility
from the point of view of the development of a subject that is made other by historical circumstances, in this case apartheid. The characters in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* emancipate from otherness, in the sense that they emerge from a subaltern position through a reformulation of the relations that are restrictive for the individual characters. Crucially, this emancipation takes place through a common effort. I will trace how the formation of a community based on common experiences of waiting forms a way out of the deadlock the characters find themselves in. Their interaction with each other leads to a re-invention of the parameters of their lives and a possibility to find their bearings in a future that was initially foreclosed. The novella seems to reflect the possibility to think of a way to deal with ubuntu’s call for a practice of openness and inclusiveness based on undecidability without “damaging” the self, while also maintaining the emphasis on harmony and social cohesion in unifying formulations of ubuntu without effecting rigid communal boundaries. In this sense, the novel seems to reflect a possibility of thinking ubuntu ethically.

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

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

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

Apart from Winnie, there are five more main characters in this short novel: four unknown South African women and another well known woman, Penelope. The novel opens with a chapter title that frames all five South African women within the boundaries of that particular woman’s story: “Penelope’s Descendants.” Set against the theme of Penelope waiting for Odysseus, Ndebele constructs five different narratives of South African women waiting for their husbands. Some of the men have gone to work in the
Chapter 3

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

This activation of the "Penelope paradigm" – described by Betine van Zyl Smit as the traditional perception of Penelope as the "image of the constant wife ... the paradigm of the good woman" (394) – sets up a comparison between Penelope and Winnie Mandela. Indeed, the latter is described by one of the other women as the "ultimate public symbol of women-in-waiting" (Ndebele, *Cry* 61). Although circumstances have forced the women in Ndebele's novel into a state of waiting, not all of them are as "constant" as Penelope. This is especially true for Winnie, who remains dedicated to the cause of the struggle against apartheid, but is also accused of having committed adultery and of having masterminded several crimes against human rights, as discussed in Chapter 1.13 Whereas Penelope represents the "self-possessed" wife, who remains loyal and composed, Winnie is the rebel, the troublemaker, the unruly wife turned ruler.14 What the women have in common, however, is that they are subjected to a particular set of repressive measures. The way Penelope is represented in the opening chapter of the novella portrays her as being forced to articulate herself as constant, loyal, and true because of social pressure (Ndebele, *Cry* 3). Similarly (apart from what she did and did not do), social pressure demands that Winnie Mandela behaves like a waiting wife, a leader in the struggle and a loving mother, all at the same time. With precedents like these and from within the context of a repressive system of government, it is, therefore, extremely difficult for the four South African women in Ndebele's novella to articulate a perspective that is not determined by their racial, economic, and gendered repression.15

---

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

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

15 This repression takes at least two shapes: many black women were subjected to apartheid's social and economic ramifications. In addition, they were not only subjected to these two...
All the women in the novella struggle to come to terms with their state of waiting, but in the second part of the novel, Mamello and the three other “South African descendants” start to devise ways in which they can come to grips with their circumstances. Rather than remaining individually weighed down by their endless waiting, they start to meet regularly to talk about their experiences. This weekly meeting is termed *ibandla labafazi*, which translates roughly as a gathering of women.¹⁶ One of the women further specifies this name, suggesting both “gathering of waiting women” and “gathering of women in mourning” (Ndebele, *Cry* 42). Significantly, some of the women’s names are revealed only after the *ibandla* is formed. In the first part, some of them voluntarily share their names when they tell their stories, but their chapters are headed by numbers (i.e. “The First Descendant”). The headings in the second part are formed by each woman’s full name. In line with the premise of ubuntu that the individual is created through his/her relations with other people, this suggests that the women only come into their own, or, at least, only become discernable as subjects, after the formation of the small communal group.

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

¹⁶ According to Dorothy Driver, *ibandla* is “the Xhosa / Zulu term for a formal group” (“Premises” 5). An online African glossary defines it as the Zulu word for a tribal council, an assembly, and the members of such an assembly: http://africanhistory.about.com/library/glossary/bldef-ibandla.htm, accessed on May 18, 2007. In Southern Ndebele it means “church people” or “company of people” (http://www.websters-online-dictionary.com/translation/xhosa/ibandla, accessed on May 18, 2007).
is then reciprocated by an attitude of ubuntu, which de Kadt merely translates as “humanity,” and which is meant to express the notion that “any person deserves respect, in so far as any person embodies the central quality of ubuntu” (183). Mamello, for instance, is reluctant to call Winnie by her first name and refers to her in many ways, varying from formal to informal. Once she even calls her “nkos’yam” which roughly translates as “my chief” (Ndebele, Cry 54). Delisiwe, on the other hand, uses Winnie’s Xhosa first name “Nomzamo” and calls her “ntombi”, which means girl, girlfriend or young lady and can also be a pet name used by parents for a daughter (42). Mamello calls Delisiwe “aunt,” whereas Marara uses “sis” meaning “sister” (40, 67). In this way, the women’s relative (and shifting) positions towards each other are reflected in the way they address each other.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The fact that Mamello describes Winnie’s waiting as “ours too” refers to an ubuntu-oriented notion of identification, reciprocity and interconnectedness similar to Muholi’s claim that taking photographs of her community automatically implies the project is also about herself (Gunkel 85). What happens to Winnie touches the other women as well, and vice versa. As also came to the fore in the analysis of relationality in the work of Muholi, the women’s lives are conceived of as interrelated, even before Winnie Mandela actually materializes in the women’s midst and undermines the Levinasian ethical moment as a meeting between two singular subjects. The fact that one’s circumstances have to meet the conditions of womanhood and waiting, and that one has to be invited into this community suggests, however, that the ibandla is also a fenced off territory that is reminiscent of de Certeau’s rendering of dominant discourse as strategic and that repeats the excluding aspects of ubuntu as discussed
in the Introduction and Chapter 1. However, as in Muholi’s photography, this community of women comes about because of a former exclusion from a larger community. Exclusion here almost appears as a side-effect of a previous exclusion. As suggested by the earlier designation of identity politics as a strategy, it seems as if this group first has to seclude itself in order to establish a community that is not determined by the exclusion effected by the larger community. This kind of strategic response to oppression is not taken into consideration in Levinas’ theorisation of the ethical moment, or in Derrida’s reading of the problem of the third.

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

It comes as no surprise, then, that Mamello’s remark about the *ibandla* cited above signals a desire to regain a form of agency with regard to the women’s suffering. Even though the concept of the *ibandla* might not change (the women still meet and cry, grieve and mourn together), their attitude towards the pain that caused its formation will: at least they will *choose* to meet and cry. In Mamello’s ubuntu-inspired reasoning, then, agency and a re-articulation of the self can be claimed by sharing experiences in a delimited, exclusive, and, most importantly, safe space. In addition,
by inviting Winnie into their midst, the re-articulation of their former oppression by
the paradigms of apartheid and of Penelope finds a way to stage itself; each woman is
given the opportunity, apart from rendering the dramatic plot of her story, to enunci-
ate the emotional and psychological consequences of her enforced articulation to a
“new member.” Since Winnie does not know their stories yet, the women can articu-
late a newfound agency through the choices they make in the narratives directed at
her. No longer a number, no longer just one more waiting woman, another instance
of the economic, political and social consequences of apartheid, but a member of a
supportive community, this ibandla, through the creation of its own conventions,
norms and values (one instance being the rigid rituals of their tea drinking), provides
each woman with a set of self-controlled possibilities in relation to which they can
begin the process of re-articulation.

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

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

Hold back and observe. Keep those arms folded over the cushion of your breast.
Don’t even ask where he has been. Ever ... If you ask him where he has been,
your question will become his door to his house. And you’re finished, my girl.
That’s when you begin the great response. Responding to him as you slowly
enter his house until you are completely swallowed up by it. (Ndebele, Cry 81)
In this line of reasoning, not to respond equals holding on to one’s options, which allows ‘Manette to prevent herself from becoming “completely swallowed up” by the obligations imposed on her by her husband, a phrasing particularly reminiscent of Derrida’s “vertigo of ethical violence” caused by the primacy of the other’s interest (“Adieu” 27). She is adamant that the negotiations of her husband’s return would occur under her own conditions, which are significantly described as a strategic claiming of ownership over the house. However, the fact that ‘Mannete does not refrain from referring to her husband as a possible returnee also suggests that she does not negate the paradigm of the waiting woman completely. She is still, despite her statement to the contrary, waiting for him.

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

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

---

18 Although an assertion of agency, then, this interpretation by ‘Mannete also confirms Mireille Rosello’s observation in *Postcolonial Hospitality* that “no discussion of hospitality can ignore the troubling elimination of the female figure from the primordial guest-host pair and how hard it is for women to be treated as guests” (119). As this chapter has shown by discussing the perspective of subjects who are not in a position of power and control, women, especially black women might also have a different relation to the Levinasian face to face moment, a relation that is different, yet again, for black lesbian women in South Africa.
of Johannesburg, the site of so much strife. As Meg Samuelson makes clear, they are “eschewing the home – and thus their roles as waiting widows – in favour of a new found mobility. ... The novella’s conclusion, then, can be read as an attempt to map out future social and cultural directions” (Samuelson 223). Having left behind their attitudes of anticipation, they are now able to drive through a country that imposed so many restrictions on identification and travel before. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in this final chapter, circumstances point to the fact that apartheid has ended. The country of restriction and hostility has become (in this fictional view) a country of hospitality and possibility.

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

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

19 In Homer’s original, Odysseus performs cleansing rituals in his own home after killing the suitors. There is no public ceremony as suggested by Penelope in Ndebele’s novella. The morning after Odysseus has slain the suitors, it is not even known to the outside world that the lion’s share of Ithaca’s young nobility is dead. In the morning, Odysseus wakes Telemachos and the swine-herd and goes to his father’s orchard outside the city: “But now I must be off to the upland farm, / our orchard green with trees, to see my father, / good old man weighed down with so much grief for me” (Homer 23: 406-409). There is no mention of public cleansing rituals, merely a suggestion that Odysseus desires to see his father again. This much becomes clear, too, from their reunion in the orchard. When the fathers of the suitors find out their sons have been killed, they come to look for Odysseus on his father’s land. It is there, at the end of book 24, that Odysseus and the noblemen hurl themselves into another fight. When the first men have fallen, Pallas Athena intervenes one last time: “Athena … cried out in a piercing voice that stopped all fighters cold, / ‘Hold back, you men of Ithaca, back from brutal war! / Break off – shed no more blood – make peace at once!’” (Homer 24: 582-585). This is how the strife is ended. Ndebele’s version is a re-writ-
CHAPTER 3

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

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

Concluding Remarks

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

20 In The Odyssey, a guest is welcomed into the house of the host without being asked for a name or a reason. Only after the guest (more often than not, male) has been provided for (by women) in the form of physical care (food, drink, bath), is he or she expected to reveal his or her identity (i.e. Homer 3: 77-79). In Homer’s text it is considered wise to be hospitable towards strangers since they could very well be a god or goddess in disguise. Inhospitality may thus be severely punished. Furthermore, making friends through hospitality (known as guest friendship) implies that a good host will be received with similar care when returning the visit. This is also pointed out by Rosello: “Isn’t a guest always implicitly an equal, who could, presumably, reciprocate at a later date, in a different space, at a different time?” (9). In Homer it seems, however, that the guest is treated less as an equal than as a (possible) superior. For a Christian interpretation, see Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels in disguise” (“Hebrews” 13:2).
responsible or helpful to “hop” from one community or social cluster to the next, nor to re-align one’s interest or shed one’s responsibility whenever this seems convenient; what the reading of the novella emphasises is a notion of community that reflects on and allows for fluctuation. Exclusion as a catalyst for community formation is key here – if one is not excluded or threatened, there seems to be little reason to forge new relations. Both Muholi’s photographs and Ndebele’s novel show that the positing of a self-identified, delimited and, as such, strategically formed group gives formerly excluded individuals access to safety and self-empowerment in the face of a larger excluding community. However, the problems attached to identity politics, as discussed in relation to Muholi’s work especially, also forewarn against the consolidation of these ties. In this sense, both the photography and the novella, discussed here in relation to Levinas’ ethical injunction, call for an approach along the lines of ubuntu as convergence and negotiation.

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

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

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

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

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

In the next chapter, the focus will shift to more explicit expressions of ubuntu in the public domain, where different interests and their location in time and space are explored in how ubuntu is “used” in everyday practice. More specifically, I will focus on ubuntu’s uses in “market-oriented” approaches, which seem to have become an increasingly dominant feature of ubuntu’s dissemination globally. In these everyday practices, ubuntu’s aura of responsibility and inclusion is strategically used in order to serve a very particular interest, namely that of profit. This might sound cynical. However, when investigating the possibilities of opening ubuntu up as a concept, it is absolutely necessary to look not only at the term’s conjugations with idealistic and
ethical associations, but also at the specific role these associations play in the way ubuntu is used in issues regarding economy and property. By exploring those relations, I want to further excavate what I perceive to be the potential of ubuntu’s negotiation of fluid communal boundaries safeguarding the lives of individual subjects in how to think of relationality in the public sphere.